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Spirituality and sexuality

Exploring tensions in everyday relationship-based practice

Janet Melville-Wiseman

Introduction

Contemporary social work practice in the United Kingdom is characterised by inherent tensions, whether at the heart of decisions about removing children from abusive situations, or depriving people with mental health needs of their liberty if they pose an unacceptable risk to themselves or others. Perhaps less obvious tensions exist for social workers at the intersection of religion or spirituality and sexuality.

It would be strange if such tensions did not exist in social work given that they exist and present apparently insurmountable problems in wider society. For example, the largely unresolved schism in the Anglican Communion about same-gender marriage or lesbian or gay clergy has taxed some of the most eminent theologians and thinkers including the current Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby, and his predecessor Dr Rowan Williams. However, faith leaders have a specific duty to lead their congregations and to discern the meaning of religious texts, whether popular or not. On the other hand, social work, as a profession, has greater freedom to position itself wherever it thinks fit in these debates, with certain limitations.

In reality social workers in the UK are trained to follow the law and to practice within the professional values of inclusion and anti-oppressive practice. But that means towards all people at all times including towards people who may be homophobic; people of a similar or opposing faith to individual practitioners; and people who may have perpetrated gender- or child-based violence that disturbs and upsets us. In essence social workers work equally with people who may hold a range of diverse views and values that the profession itself may not share. In that sense there are permanent tensions and challenges for social workers in their relationships with people who need services. However, tensions at the interface between religion and sexuality have not been well explored.

There have been advances in our understanding of the interface between religion and sexuality through studies that examine what it is like to be Christian and gay (Subhi and Geelan 2012), critiques of therapy designed to change people from gay to straight (Sacks 2011) and the distinctions between different religions and their attitudes to sexuality (Moon 2014). However, to date there has been very little specific insight or guidance for social workers on how to resolve such tensions in their everyday practice or how to train them in order to address such tensions.
Janet Melville-Wiseman

(Melville-Wiseman 2013). One reason for lack of recognition of the need for expertise in this area may be the increased secularisation of the profession (Furman et al. 2005). In this study the authors looked at differences in views between members of the British Association of Social Workers in the UK and the National Association of Social Workers in the US in terms of the role of religion and spirituality in practice and education. The majority in each group indicated a lack of inclusion of spirituality and religion in their education and training. However, social work as a profession has a long and distinguished history underpinned by religious or faith-based values.

The move to secularisation in social work

Early founders of social work in the UK often brought their religious-based values to their ideas and work. For example, Elizabeth Fry, who reformed the prison service, was a Quaker; Octavia Hill, who transformed social housing, was inspired by her Anglicanism; and Eileen Younghusband, who developed social work education, was influenced by her membership of the congregation of St Martins-in-the-Fields in London at a time when social reform was an intrinsic part of the preaching there (Jones 1984). Boyd (1982) emphasises these intrinsic links in her biography of Octavia Hill:

The spirituality which directed this life of great activity and its almost incredible record of accomplishments was deep and, though free from inner conflicts, highly complex. Octavia Hill was a born pantheist. In the beauty of the countryside at Finchley, she saw the spirit of God: flowers, trees, and other objects of the created world she perceived as tokens of a transcendent reality. At the same time her affections taught her that spiritual reality is conveyed as authentically through human relationships as in the mystic’s vision. When she and her family moved to London and undertook the responsibility of working with and for the poor, she found in the Anglicanism of E.D. Maurice a theology that gave concrete form to her strongly felt but dimly articulated views on the value of community and service.

(Boyd 1982: 121)

However, in contemporary social work practice and social work education there is little evidence that religion or spirituality and their consequential values are influential drivers. Instead, the profession is dominated by its professionalisation, the search for empirical evidence and the management of care (Furman et al. 2005). One perhaps inadvertent consequence of this shift is that social workers do not develop their skills and knowledge base to address everyday spiritual tensions in practice or in their relationships with people who need services (Melville-Wiseman 2013).

Relational work

Our personal sexual and spiritual identity can shape and influence the way we understand the sexual and spiritual identity and needs of others. In social work this can happen at many levels including at an interpersonal level with individual service users; how services are planned, shaped and delivered; and our choices of research areas and knowledge development for the profession. However, at an interpersonal level, social workers are more often driven by imperatives to address physical risk and potential harm than by concerns about relational risk or need (Melville-Wiseman 2012).
Spirituality and sexuality

Relationship-based social work is increasingly recognised as a discrete area of study, knowledge and skills but it is often based on a psychodynamic theoretical perspective (Ruch et al. 2010). This can be useful in terms of understanding some aspects of relational work but it can also lead to a negative or pathologising view of conflicts or tensions such as those in relation to sexuality and spirituality. If opposing views are in conflict then that equates to a problem in or for one side that has to be solved. An alternative perspective is given that we are a diverse group, diversity and the ensuing conflict and tensions could in fact be relationship enhancing (Spamo and Koenig 2007).

Recourse to legal intercession

The UK Equality Act came into force in 2010. The aim of the legislation was to bring together and enhance all previous laws relating to discrimination in an attempt to protect individuals from unfair treatment, harassment and victimisation (Equality Act 2010). The provisions of the act cover nine protected characteristics: age; disability; gender reassignment; marriage and civil partnership; pregnancy and maternity; race; religion or belief; sex; and sexual orientation (usually listed alphabetically). Within the Equality Act, religion and belief (including no religion or belief) and sexual orientation (including heterosexuality) are equally protected by the law. However, more than any other combination of characteristics, these two have come into direct conflict with each other where a particular religion or belief teaches that homosexuality is wrong.

As a consequence there has been a steady stream of UK case law to determine whose rights take precedence. In general terms rulings have supported the position that the right to hold a religion or faith-based view that homosexuality is wrong does not extend to the translation of that view into a refusal to provide equal goods and services. For example, an owner of a hotel was deemed to have discriminated against a gay couple by not permitting them to share a double bed. The owners argued that, based on their religious views that the only acceptable sexual relationships are within heterosexual marriage, they would not have permitted a non-married heterosexual couple to share a double bed either. However, they still lost the case.

Within social work practice the law may help to determine some solutions but it does not necessarily help practitioners to resolve the real world tensions in such situations or to use them transformationally to enhance their practice. The following real life case vignette provides an opportunity to explore an alternative approach.

Case example

A recent much-publicised case in the UK involved Eunice and Owen Johns, who wished to return to foster caring for Derby City Council. To summarise, the couple were applying to become short-term respite foster carers. Eunice Johns was a retired nurse and the couple, who had brought up four children of their own, had previously fostered 15 children. They had applied to return to fostering but when the assessing social worker identified that they were Evangelical Christians, and that they had indicated that they believed homosexuality was wrong, their application was not taken forward. The couple then sought judicial review in the High Court of this decision and the approach of the council towards their religion. Their application was refused and the judges in the case stated:

While as between the protected rights concerning religion and sexual orientation there is no hierarchy of rights, there may, as this case shows, be a tension between equality
provisions concerning religious discrimination and those concerning sexual orientation. Where this is so, Standard 7 of the National Minimum Standards for Fostering and the Statutory Guidance indicate that it must be taken into account and in this limited sense the equality provisions concerning sexual orientation should take precedence.

*(Johns & Anor, R (on the application of) v Derby City Council & Anor [2011] EWHC 375: para. 93)*

The couple had been interviewed several times by the assessing social worker and had indicated that, should it arise, they would be compelled by their religious belief to tell a child, should they ask, that homosexuality was wrong. This was therefore adjudged to indicate that the couple would not be able to meet the local authority’s requirements to safeguard and promote the welfare of the child.

The case raises several questions in terms of how social workers can practice at the interface and tensions between religion or spirituality and sexuality. For example, it is not unlawful in the UK to belong to a religion or faith that simply preaches that homosexuality is wrong or to raise children in that faith. However, once a child comes into the care of a local authority, different standards for their protection and welfare apply. This is to ensure that any previous harm to a child, which has led to the local authority becoming the parent, is neither replicated nor increased by their new care setting.

In theory, if all foster carers can meet the standards, any child could be placed with any foster carer. In practice this does not happen, and is not expected to happen. Significant resources are usually invested in the often lengthy processes of ‘matching’ children with specific foster carers. The criteria for matching has traditionally been based on finding carers who are similar to the child in terms of background, culture or ethnicity. The ideal of matching children with alternative carers of similar identities, or the idealism that underpins this approach, has to be weighed against the need to place a child with someone who is available and approved, sometimes at short notice. Inevitably decisions are often made on the basis of the best available person or family to care for the child.

The outcome of the previous legal determination is important for the couple involved and the social work team who were involved in the assessment of the couple. However, there are many problems involved in relying on such a legal judgement to guide practice. Instead, a broader approach may support a more comprehensive exploration of the risks and possible benefits of taking one approach or another. Risk in this context refers to aspects of relational care that are not simply based on narrowly defined assumptions about what good enough care looks like. Instead it describes the limitations that we create when we do not look and look again for better solutions beyond what or who is right or wrong. In addition there may have been many potential benefits in the Johns’ case that were never fully explored as the case faltered on the single dimension of the tension between spirituality and sexuality.

The anti-discriminatory imperative is well established in social work practice. However, it has been argued previously that a claim to have achieved that in full can only ever be partial *(Melville-Wiseman 2012)*. The reasons are that we have yet to know all there is to know about discrimination and how it affects individuals, groups and yet to emerge marginalised groups. One of those yet to be fully understood groups may be children who are struggling to understand their religion or how to give meaning or a spiritual dimension to their lives alongside fearing that they may be homosexual or even homophobic. It is highly likely that all those involved in the case described here, including the social workers, the couple and the judges, had some aspects of their attitudes that were, albeit unconsciously, discriminatory.

The context of social work practice, and the provision of alternative care for children, is ever
changing as society develops new approaches to such personal and crucial aspects of our identities. Until as late as 2003, local authorities in the UK (who provided foster care) were prohibited from promoting homosexuality by Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988, which stated:

A local authority shall not—
(a) intentionally promote homosexuality or publish material with the intention of promoting homosexuality;
(b) promote the teaching in any maintained school of the acceptability of homosexuality as a pretended family relationship.

(Office of Public Service Information 1988: c.9 Section 28 1a & b)

During this time many children and young people struggling with their sexuality were left with no support from their teachers, social workers or foster carers for fear that their employment could be terminated by the local authority under this section. Foster carers who were approved before 2003 have had to make a seismic shift in their care of foster children to ensure that they were compliant with the law and are now compliant with the law that states the opposite.

Risk and benefit assessment framework

Using the Johns’ case as an example, and thinking about it in relational terms, it is possible to look at a number of possible risks and benefits.

Recruitment of carers

First, by denying the application the council risked losing potential foster carers from the Christian faith. This was at a time when there was a shortage of foster carers and when they could not predict whether any children requiring care would be from the same faith or benefit from care grounded in that faith. In the legal hearing, Derby Council argued that Mr and Mrs Johns were applying to be respite carers and they did not currently have a shortage of such carers so did not need to take a more inclusive approach. However, it was inevitable that such a case would attract much publicity and possibly deter other Christians, or people from other faiths or no faith, from coming forward to provide other types of foster care. We know that Mr and Mrs Johns were unambiguously honest about their views and their values, and the surrounding negative publicity and refusal of their application may encourage other applicants to be far less candid. This carries risks in terms of those carrying out assessments not truly knowing applicants but also diminishes the possibility of difference, and conflict within difference, being seen and modelled in a positive way.

The role of personal and professional identity

The decision also calls into question how much those who work directly with children should be expected to disclose of their own personal information and for what purpose. For example, it is not a requirement for applicants for places on social work training courses to disclose either their sexuality, their religion or faith, or their attitude to people of the same or different sexuality or faith. The profession prides itself on inclusivity and is predicated on an assumption that a diverse workforce can best meet the needs of diverse service users. Social workers work directly and indirectly with children and may have many conversations with them about their concerns relating to either sexuality or spirituality. It is assumed that training will ensure that individual
social workers will know how to practice in an anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory way. However, it is still not a requirement for social workers to abandon their faith or religion in order to practice effectively. The need for effective training and more robust selection may be even more significant for foster carers who provide 24 hour care as opposed to social workers who may only occasionally meet with children; but are such dual standards reasonable or necessary?

The importance of religion, spirituality and sexuality

Next, this decision could be viewed as giving primacy to the struggles looked-after children may have with their sexuality over concerns about their religion or their spiritual lives. Social workers and other statutory bodies may need to intervene where children may be harmed in the context of a religion such as sexual abuse by clergy or lay leaders in the church or where children may be encouraged to mistreat others as a result of their faith. However, understanding the emerging or already formed spiritual needs of children is equally important.

In a study to measure the correlation between spirituality and happiness, Holder et al. (2010) found that, as with adults, spirituality enhanced the happiness of children especially in the areas of individual and personal meaning and meaningful relationships with others. This suggests that foster carers need to be skilled at supporting spiritual growth and experience for children especially where they may have been through experiences that make them doubt their personal worth or meaning. In a recent report on the ‘matching’ process for permanent alternative care for children, the Children’s Rights Commissioner for England consulted several young people who had experienced the matching process. They were asked their views on the following:

When looking for a placement, how important is it to match young people and carers on the basis of religion, race and culture etc?

(Office of the Children’s Rights Director 2013: 12)

The group were asked to vote on this issue and unanimously agreed that those factors were not as important as feeling cared about by the foster carers or adopters; however, it should not be assumed that they are completely unimportant (Office of the Children’s Rights Director 2013).

Faith-based views about sexuality

The decision by the court was based primarily on the imperative of foster carers to promote diversity as enshrined in the national minimum standards for foster care (Department for Education 2011). However, it was accepted by the court and Derby Council that foster carers of a particular religious faith, working for a private agency, could positively discriminate and agree to only foster children of the same faith. The reason for this is that the Equality Act 2010 placed an overarching equality duty on the provision of goods and services by local authorities. However, a distinction was also drawn between whether the decision to not allow Mr and Mrs Johns’ application was based on their objection to homosexuality or their religious views. Either way it appears that they were subject to high levels of scrutiny once their religious views were known. The court maintained though that the local authority was entitled to probe the couple once their views about sexuality were known and would in fact be negligent if it had not done so. In return the couple argued that they should not have been so highly scrutinised and judged other than in relation to a specific child and a specific potential placement with them. This was also rejected by the court. However, this approach and the judgement carries additional
risks, specifically for a potential foster child who may also believe that homosexuality is wrong, and that view may be based on their own religious views. How could that child receive the right level of support that they need if placed with foster carers who may have been approved specifically because they believe that homosexuality is not wrong?

The assessment of the suitability of foster carers

Another risk from the judgement is that local authorities appear to not be able to accommodate a pluralistic approach to either spirituality or sexuality. The judgement has indicated that foster carers cannot hold views that homosexuality is wrong however careful or sensitive they may be about how or where that view is expressed. The couple were subjected to intensive scrutiny, including being asked to comment on different possible scenarios. The assessing social worker informed the court:

Mrs Johns stated, “I will not lie and tell you I will say it is ok to be a homosexual. I will love and respect, no matter what sexuality. I cannot lie and I cannot hate, but I cannot tell a child that it is ok to be homosexual. Then you will not be able to trust me. There has got to be different ways of going through this without having to compromise my faith.”

(Johns & Anor, R (on the application of) v Derby City Council & Anor [2011] EWHC 375: para. 11)

An alternative option could have been for the council to focus additional support or training on the couple to give them tools they needed to provide the right care without compromising their beliefs. For example, telling a child that homosexuality is wrong is quite different to telling a child that people have many different views about homosexuality and it happens to be the case that their faith teaches them that it is wrong – but that is just one view and they are happy to support them to speak with people who believe it is right. It appears that Mr and Mrs Johns were looking for a solution to the conflict but that the social workers were not able to go beyond the legal interpretation of the policy and guidance.

The Anglican Church has recently published guidance for Church schools on how to tackle homophobic bullying (Church of England Archbishops’ Council Education Division 2014) and this could have helped in this case. This advisory policy recognises the need for an inclusive approach, i.e. that faith-based views about sexuality have to accommodate alternative views if homophobic bullying is to be eradicated in schools. This guidance may have provided a useful tool for both the council and the couple.

Conclusions

The fundamental challenge for social work practitioners remains one of understanding how far it is a social work task to discern seriously-held religious belief or whether we should instead be skilled at discernment of the complex tensions when working at the interface between religion, spirituality, heteronormativity and sexuality equality.

The case example given in this chapter provides an opportunity to explore alternative ways of resolving sexuality and spirituality tensions in everyday practice. Key points include the following.

• Such conflicts and tensions could provide unique opportunities for transformation of individuals and services.
However, this means looking for alternative solutions that are not just driven by interpretations of policy and law.

Children are diverse and of changing identities and characteristics. As such they need adults, including social workers and foster carers, to model diversity, to be comfortable with diversity and to have the temerity to work with tensions and conflicts that may arise between people and in relationships until they can alight on common ground.

Finally, there are decisions to be made by the social work profession including those charged with judging the suitability of others to work in the field in terms of the sexuality and spirituality tensions described here. If we require openness and transparency by foster carers in terms of their faith-based views on sexuality then perhaps those assessing them should also be encouraged to be completely open. The reasons to do this would not be to subject them to the type of legal scrutiny that befell Mr and Mrs Johns, but instead to support the possibility of transformation of their practice and, ultimately, services. This is best achieved not by getting rid of tensions and conflicts inherent in difference, but by embracing them to deepen our understanding of individual experience.

The societies in which we live change, and sometimes they change rapidly. In the UK, during the eight years between the repeal of Section 28 of the Local Government Act 1988 and the Johns case in 2011, social workers have had to transform their practice from not being permitted to promote homosexuality to pro-actively ensuring that the needs of lesbian and gay people of any age are fully supported. It is inevitable that some people will adjust more quickly than others. However, it would be a shame if we did not pause to ensure we take all those interested in the care of vulnerable people with us through supportive training and a relational focus rather than harsh and excluding processes or proceedings. In that way we may also reclaim some of the authentic spiritual reality of Octavia Hills’s vision of human relationships.

References


