A spiritual approach to social work practice

Ann M. Carrington

Introduction

There has been much debate regarding spirituality’s role in social work over the past three decades. The dust has settled and there appears to be a general acceptance now that not only can there be a role for spirituality in social work, but that it is an important inclusion in order to work with the whole person. However, when it comes to guides to, or consensus on, how one should practice when integrating spirituality, gaps remain. In order to contribute to the discipline’s attempts to address such gaps, a research journey was embarked upon. The research explored different spiritual paradigms, theories and practices with a view to establishing the contribution these may provide in the process of, not only including spirituality in social work practice, but doing so from an authentic spiritual perspective (see publications from this research program: Carrington 2010a, 2010b, 2013, 2014).

This chapter suggests a spiritual approach to social work practice reflective of one of the key overarching findings of this research programme – the importance of linking paradigmatic positioning with practice (Carrington 2010b). Before we explore the approach, it is important to examine the current context of spirituality in social work and some of the relevant discussions unfolding in this arena.

Spirituality and social work

Although social work has its historical roots firmly planted in religion, specifically Judo-Christian (Lynn and Mensinga 2015; Senreich 2013), social work successfully engaged in a process of marginalising and excluding religion and spirituality in response to the scientific modernist agenda (Lynn and Mensinga 2015; Martinez-Brawley and Zorita 2007; Rice and McAuliffe 2009). In an attempt to be recognised as a professional discipline, it opted to conform with the scientific push that began with the Enlightenment and became focused on empirical, evidenced-based practice, informed by a positivist secular and modernist paradigm (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita 2007; Rice 2002), excluding other ways of knowing and doing in the process (Barker and Floersch 2010; Hodge 2009). We now see a resurgence of interest in the religious and spiritual dimensions within social work (Crisp 2008), but there are many tensions (Edwards 2002; Gilham
Ann M. Carrington

2012; Rice 2002) in attempting to bring a dimension of spirituality and other ways of knowing back within the fold of social work.

This shift again to embrace religious or spiritual dimensions has tended to be assisted by a focus more on spirituality than on religion (Barker and Floersch 2010; Senreich 2013; Wong and Vinsky 2009). Given the historical context, and the links between religion and colonisation processes across the world, spirituality, it seems, is more palatable to the new modernist and secular social work (Lindsay 2002; Wong and Vinsky 2009). To this end, as social work looks to re-embrace a spiritual dimension, there has been a distinction made between religion and spirituality (Barker and Floersch 2010), although Wong and Vinsky (2009) suggest that this distinction may well reproduce colonial othering and marginalisation. While many (Holloway and Moss 2010; Lindsay 2002; Senreich 2013; Tacey 2000) have engaged in the debate and process of defining both religion and spirituality, the definitions provided by Canda and Furman (2010) tend to be those that have become the cornerstone of this discussion. The key distinction is that religion is a pattern of beliefs or rules shared by communities or groups that are transmitted or reinforced over time, while spirituality is experienced at a more individual level in relation to the creation of meaning and purpose. Further, there is recognition that there is, or can be, a level of overlap between religion and spirituality as some may house their spiritual experience within the construct of an organised religion (Barker and Floersch 2010; Hodge 2015).

In an effort to further remove itself from past mistakes, social work seems to be focusing on the argument that spirituality should be included because it is important to some clients and meets clients’ needs with little consideration being given to the practitioner’s position or needs (Buckey 2012; Crisp 2008; Gilham 2012; Hodge 2015; Senreich 2013). This was often argued as a form of anti-oppressive practice (Gilham 2012; Lynn et al. 2015; Wong and Vinsky 2009) and has been found in the past predominantly within the area of culturally appropriate practice (Hodge 2015; Rice 2002; Rice and McAuliffe 2009). Although it now seems to be expanding to a more general or broader position, spirituality still seems to be associated mostly in working with ‘others’ (Rice and McAuliffe 2009; Senreich 2013).

Despite some authors mentioning the importance of including spirituality in acknowledgement of the practitioner’s spiritual dimension, this has not been a central focus of the argument (Gilham 2012; Rice and McAuliffe 2009). In fact, this seems to be one of the key ethical concerns for many as there is a fear that practitioners will use their position as a social worker to indoctrinate, impose upon or convert vulnerable clients to their specific religious ideology, directly contravening client self-determination (Gilham 2012; Rice 2002; Sheridan 2009). It is interesting, however, to recognise that within such arguments there is little acknowledgement that such a process is already occurring in regard to imposing secular ideologies and beliefs upon practitioners, clients and the discipline. This, for the most part, continues to go unquestioned and is illustrative of the secular’s position as the dominant and unchallenged norm (Hodge 2009). This chapter begins to challenge this position by putting forth an approach to practice that focuses on the practitioner’s spiritual paradigmatic positioning as the foundation of a spiritual approach to social work practice.

A paradigmatic chasm

The pressure to conform to the dominant discourse is not specific to social work and has occurred across the board; as Wilber (2006) argues, the spiritual perspectives have been the largest casualty of this process, as the spiritual perspectives were in direct opposition to that of the secular. As the secular humanist perspective’s view of reality and what can be known is limited only to that which exists within the temporal and tangible physical world, all ontological, epis-
temological and methodological methods, measures and practices that fell outside of this were delegitimised (Hodge 2009). With the scientific secular discourse positioning itself as the valid authority and ‘owners’ of the ‘truth’ (Hodge 2009), social work fell in line with its demands and made every attempt to satisfy requirements with a keen focus on evidence-based practice (Rice 2002; Rice and McAuliffe 2009). This process not only rejected spirituality but largely discarded ‘the art’ of social work in the form of tacit knowledge and practice wisdom (Martinez-Brawley and Zorita 2007; Osmond 2006).

It is perhaps this pressure to align with the dominant discourse that has created the chasm between spiritual paradigm and spiritual practice. As social work has endeavoured to include spirituality, many practitioners and scholars have done so with a focus on practice, with little consideration of the paradigmatic foundations that inform these practices. Further, in attempts to make such techniques palatable and valid within the current context of the secular, scientific discourse, there has been, I would suggest, a conscious tendency to strip away the underlying spiritual beliefs and theories. As Lynn et al. (2015) highlight, this has led to a process of secularisation of spiritual practices such as ‘mindfulness’. This process of secularisation extends to the process of evidencing the effects of such practices by applying secular scientific methods and measures within research, in order to establish it as a viable practice, again further distancing it from its origins within the Buddhist tradition. Although research shows that this process has positive effects (Birnbaum and Birnbaum 2008; Holzel et al. 2011), the rationale regarding such outcomes are now couched in psychological neurological terms rather than understood and experienced in spiritual terms.

**A spiritual approach to practice is paradigmatic**

The spiritual approach to practice put forth in this chapter is not a complicated model or framework but rather a call for that which already guides practice to be acknowledged – one’s individual paradigmatic position! All practice is guided by the individual social worker’s paradigmatic positioning. It is these paradigmatic values, beliefs and worldview that inform an individual’s overall practice, how they engage with clients and from which theory and practice models they draw. This is not only inescapable but something that, as educators, we strive to foster in students before they enter practice. Assisting students and new practitioners to identify, articulate and implement their individual professional practice framework is a core component of social work education. Therefore, in order to achieve this, students and new practitioners are encouraged to identify their paradigmatic position or worldview and to recognise how this links with theory and practice models from which they draw – exploring not just the alignment between their paradigmatic position and theory and practice, but also in understanding any tensions and how their paradigmatic position aids in negotiating such tensions.

Critical reflection (Fook 2012; Gardner 2011) is a core component of this process and an essential skill in social work practice, as supported by the research of Barker and Floersch (2010). Perhaps the key difference here, as illustrated in a further example that will follow, is that, within the secular scientific environment of academia, there is an assumption students will articulate their practice frameworks drawing from secular paradigms, ideologies, theories and practices. This practice is not only acceptable, but core to basic practice, with ethical concerns only arising if alternative paradigms and ways of knowing and doing, such as the spiritual, are included.

A truly spiritual approach, therefore, is paradigmatic – resolutely positioned within and informed by a spiritual perspective. It is not spiritual practice techniques that have been secularised and made palatable to the secular, such as ‘mindfulness’ (Lynn et al. 2015; Lynn and
Mensigna 2015), or secular practices labelled as ‘spiritual’ under the guise of culturally appropriate practice. A truly authentic spiritual approach to practice is just that: practice informed by a spiritual perspective, steadfastly and foundationally, not something that can be picked up or left out, depending on the client or the circumstances. A spiritual approach is unapologetically guided by the ontological, epistemological and methodological understandings of the spiritual paradigm and recognises its value and validity irrespective of the dominant discourse’s attempts to undermine, exclude and marginalise.

The foundations of any spiritual practice or spiritual approach to social work is one’s paradigmatic positioning. Conversely, this argument would suggest that if one is practicing from a spiritually paradigmatic position, then secular practice methods could be drawn upon and executed from a spiritual perspective. Although some might argue that one cannot draw practice from that which are ideologically or paradigmatically opposed, others would hold to the above argument, suggesting that the paradigmatic perspective influences how one executes the practice. For the purposes of this chapter, it does not matter upon which side of the argument one may fall. What is essential is the recognition that paradigmatic positioning directly impacts and influences practice, whether this be via electing only to work from theory and practice models aligned with one’s paradigmatic position, or by applying theory or practice models through the lens of one’s paradigmatic positioning. This affirms that any form of spiritual practice starts with paradigmatic positioning, whether utilising secular theory and practice, and spiritualising it through the paradigmatic lens, or whether utilising spiritual practices in their authentic form.

A paradigmatic approach in practice

To illustrate the importance of paradigm to practice, I will demonstrate how the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm (Carrington 2010a, 2010b) that is the foundation of my professional practice framework has influenced my practice as a social worker. It is hoped that drawing on my experiences in practice may help others, who may be grappling with tensions, to help guide a practice approach that has a level of authentic spirituality within it and to allow them to practice authentically.

Before exploring the experiences from practice, it is important to outline the basic paradigmatic assumptions of the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm. The Integrated Spiritual Paradigm holds the ontological position that there are multiple physical and spiritual realities of which the ultimate reality is the sum. Physical reality is a reflection of the spiritual. Epistemologically, it holds that knowledge is understood via the varying existing perspectives. They all exist at once and each reflects aspects of the ‘Ultimate Truth’. Methodologically, the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm aims to discover, remember or unite with God or the absolute truth through the acknowledgement, exploration and integration of all aspects of reality, both physical and spiritual (Carrington 2010b). As supported by these foundational beliefs, the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm draws from methods of knowing both physical and spiritual; however, it values the spiritual over the physical. It is, therefore, important to mention the spiritual methods that are seen as valid from this perspective. They include: pure rationale, knowing and intuition guided by pure consciousness, drawn from spiritual positivism; sensing, feeling and intuiting, from spiritual constructivism; and being, contemplation and experience, drawn from the conscious spiritual (Carrington 2014).

To begin the illustration of how the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm informs a spiritual approach within my practice, I will first articulate my professional practice framework, absent of the spiritual component. My professional practice framework consists of feminist, critical and postmodern ideologies, theories and practices. These are the foundation that informs other theories
and practices from which I draw and how I implement them. Others from which I draw include cognitive and behavioural theories and psychodynamic theories. Additional specific practice models I utilise include expressive therapies, narrative and strengths. This framework is entirely secular and I would suggest could be implemented without question within most mainstream organisations. Looking at this framework, it is fairly easy to see connections between most of these components and to appreciate that, although some level of tension exists between different aspects, overall there is a level of internal consistency present. The assumption here, also, is that each of the components of this framework are secular and hold to secular principles as highlighted earlier when discussing the development of students’ practice frameworks. There is an absence of the spiritual dimension – perhaps with the exception of the expressive therapies, which allude to such a dimension.

When the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm is introduced as the foundation, it changes the lens through which each of these components is interpreted and therefore applied. For example, gender analysis is a key component of feminist theory (Dominelli 2002; Payne 2014) and practice and, although I utilise a gendered analysis in my work, the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm reminds me that ultimately there is no distinction between genders, that we are all one and that we each hold both masculine and feminine qualities. This has helped me to respond to gender issues present within social and political structures and in the lived experience of individual clients in a form aligned with critical and feminist theory, yet which has encouraged me to recognise a bigger picture beyond gender and this moment in time. This has helped me not to fall into the trap of polarising the genders, although at times, when immersed in the theory and sector, this has been somewhat difficult to maintain.

Critical and feminist principles have also influenced my spiritual practice by encouraging me, not only to work with people to raise consciousness (Dominelli 2002; Payne 2014) in regard to gender or structural issues, but also to work with people to raise consciousness about that which is not physical. For example, with women who have experienced sexual assault or domestic violence, in addition to raising consciousness regarding gender and structural issues, I have encouraged them to find something higher than themselves to support them through the trauma and ongoing associated difficulties, e.g. dealing with police, court system, etc. I do not impose a view of what this might be but I encourage them to identify what it is for them. Those who do not have specific religious or spiritual beliefs, or who may identify as atheists, I invite to explore where or what makes them feel safe, strong and nurtured. I have often found that when encouraged to explore this, many of those who do not identify as having religious or spiritual beliefs will identify nature as a place in which they feel the presence of something bigger, higher or other than themselves. With others, I have encouraged them to find that part within that is wise and untouchable, that is a well of peace and strength.

My foundational paradigmatic positioning has also influenced the types of practice approaches and models I use. I draw from the expressive therapies (Pearson 2004; Pearson and Nolan 2004), as they work with that which is beyond the mind; in my view, the spiritual. They allow space for the person to connect with inner or spiritual parts of themselves and yet do not require them consciously to engage in this process, while still reaping the rewards of such practices. This approach allows me to bring in the spiritual component within practice more authentically, supported by an approach that has a level of mainstream acceptance.

Yet even cognitive and behavioural therapy, which is strongly situated within the secular scientific or positivist paradigm (Payne 2014), aligns with aspects of the spiritual foundations of my professional practice framework. In the most basic sense, it aligns with the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm because the paradigm itself recognises all that exists and that different people at different times will require different approaches. In addition, it aligns because the spiritual paradigm
recognises that it is the mind which causes disconnection from the Divine or ‘Ultimate Truth’
and that, if the mind is controlled or managed, the ‘Ultimate Truth’, God or whatever the label
may be, can be found. Therefore, by learning to control the mind, even if using psychology
methods as opposed to spiritual techniques, still allows the person the opportunity, should they
choose to, to engage at a spiritual level.

This is somewhat in contradiction to arguments I have previously made, where I have said
paradigm is important because meditation, taken out of the spiritual context, will not reap the
spiritual results intended, which, overall, I still believe to be true, as often meditation within the
secular is actually visualisation and relaxation rather than an attempt to commune with God.
My argument here is that the spiritual that has been secularised and enacted from a physical or
secular perspective has limitations pertaining to meeting spiritual goals. However, the same is
not true in reverse. If the secular is practiced from the spiritual perspective, the methods can
yield the physical result but also allow an opening for further spiritual movement because they
are enacted from a spiritual perspective.

Further to this, the methods through which such practices are engaged are also guided by
the spiritual paradigm. In the case of the Integrated Spiritual Paradigm, all those methods men-
tioned (Carrington 2014) previously are at the disposal of the practitioner. For me, my practice
was strongly guided by intuition in every moment. I would rarely have a plan in advance for
a client session as I would respond to the person in the moment, as guided by my intuition.
What was discussed, and different practice exercises, were allowed to develop within each
individual session rather than having a pre-established session plan. This approach required me
to trust in the knowledge and skills I had and to allow them to be drawn upon as needed in the
moment, rather than through some false intellectual process or timeline outlined in a text book.
Sometimes this meant saying something that made no sense to me but that not only resonated
with the person, but was integral to their journey. This could be linked to tacit knowledge or
practice wisdom, something that has a long and valuable history within social work (Martinez-
Brawley and Zorita 2007; Zeira and Rosen 2000). If so, perhaps spiritual practice is really not as
far from social work’s grasp as some would believe.

This predominantly is the spiritual approach I have taken in practice and am suggesting
here that if practice is informed by a spiritual foundation then everything about one’s practice
becomes spiritual. Although this is not explicitly so now, one day, when the space is created, this
too may change. This spiritual approach is not explicitly about meeting client needs, or being
culturally appropriate; it is about practicing authentically by not only integrating my founda-
tional spiritual paradigm, but by allowing it to guide my understanding and application of other
ideological and theoretical understandings attained through social work education. As with the
use of intuition, this overall approach may not be as foreign to social work as one might expect.
It strongly aligns with a Rogerian client-centred approach that recognises the relationship
between worker and client directly impacts outcomes and that dissonance, disingenuousness or
internal conflict within the worker may negatively impact this relationship (Payne 2014).

Having said that, perhaps some of the limitations and restrictions present are required in order
not only to maintain ethical social work practice, but also to ensure clear roles are maintained.
As social workers, we can draw from spiritual theories to inform our practice with clients to aid
in the therapeutic process, but is there not a line that, once crossed, means you are no longer
acting in the role of a social worker? Perhaps for those wishing to cross this line, there is another
calling to which they need to respond, one that takes them on a journey towards becoming a
spiritual or religious practitioner and not a social worker? Although as a social worker my prac-
tice may be guided by a spiritual paradigm, and I may utilise spiritual theories and practices, or
even discuss spiritual or religious concepts with people, it is not within my role to give spiritual
A spiritual approach to social work instruction. For that I would suggest there is a need for appropriate referral to a suitable spiritual practitioner.

Reflecting further, I see that much of this approach relies on spiritualising the secular due to the current scientific secular context in which we practice. However, there were some spiritual practices I was able to include and remained authentically spiritual because the foundational paradigm guiding the practice was spiritual, rather than the secularised version often seen in practice today under the guise of culturally appropriate practice. These included the use of spiritual visualisation, energy work, working with the breath and the present moment, cleansing processes, prayer and calling in or upon the Divine. Although these practices remained spiritual, they did not impose a spiritual or religious ideology onto clients. For example, the spiritual visualisations worked either with the spiritual symbology clients had already identified, or encouraged them to connect with their ‘inner selves’, however that presented for them. In terms of cleansing processes, prayer and calling in the Divine, this was my practice for me, done before and after seeing each client, where I asked for the presence of God to guide my practice, or I used incense, oils or other methods to cleanse the room.

I would suggest that conscious (Carrington 2010a) or critically reflective practice (Gardner 2011) is of paramount importance in applying this spiritual approach to practice as it allows for the exploration and management of tensions or ethical issues. In fact, conscious reflection is a core component of my spiritual practice that goes beyond critical reflection and encourages me to be ever present in practice and in life and to maintain a constant reflective or ‘mindful’ stance.

The following questions are put forward as an aid in the process of adopting such a spiritual approach to social work practice, ethically and consciously.

1. What is your spiritual paradigm and what are the values, beliefs and assumptions it holds?
2. Is your spiritual paradigm foundational to your professional practice framework or simply a component of it?
3. How does your spiritual paradigm inform other paradigms, ideologies, theories and practice approaches within your framework?
4. What tensions are present and how do you deal with these?
5. How does your paradigm inform how you are with people interpersonally?
6. Do the values and beliefs of your spiritual paradigm conflict or cause tensions with social work values, ethics and standards?

Conclusion

We do not explicitly practice secularly, or try to coerce, recruit or indoctrinate clients into believing or following our secular paradigms and ideologies that guide our individual practice; why, then, would we do so with spiritual paradigms? Some would argue that we do, in fact, do this and that, because the secular is the dominant discourse, this goes unchallenged as the norm. If this is so, then should not the spiritual be allowed the same freedom? Or further still, should individuals be allowed to have self-determination or free will, as ascribed to by social work values, and select workers based on being informed explicitly of the worker’s practice framework? Is it not more dangerous to have workers implicitly or unconsciously allowing their spiritual or religious beliefs to inform their practice?

If spirituality is included as a valid component of one’s practice framework within the discipline, individual practitioners will be able to engage in conscious or critical reflection in regard to their spiritual paradigm and their practice, assisting in ensuring ethical best practice. I would suggest that introducing such a reflective process in the classroom (Barker and Floersch 2010;
Buckey 2012; Senreich 2013) and then continuing it in practice through professional supervision (Gilham 2012) would aid greatly in addressing the valid ethical concerns that have been raised within social work. One’s personal paradigms, values and beliefs inform practice, whether we like it or not. By bringing this aspect out of the shadow, we can not only start to ‘manage’ it ethically, but we can begin to learn and develop new practices from this ‘silenced knowledge’ (Osmond 2006).

References


