Critical spirituality and social work practice

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Introduction

This chapter begins by exploring the impetus for developing a framework for including spirituality in practice, called ‘Critical Spirituality’. The framework was influenced by my experiences as a practitioner, social work educator and trainer, and from research with health and social care professionals who wanted to actively include the ‘spiritual’ in their professional practice. The process of articulating underlying theory and values from practice contributed to the formation of principles for practice outlined here. The chapter finishes by giving examples to ground understanding of how these principles might influence practice.

My interest in this was triggered by several experiences as a beginning social work academic. One of the students, who I will call Sarah, expressed her frustration in a seminar group with the attitude of her ‘fundamentalist Christian church’ (her words) to her sexuality. She wanted to remain part of this church community, which in other ways had supported her and her family through many crises, but felt undermined and despairing about their attitude to her as a lesbian. What Sarah (and I) found challenging was the attitude of several members of her seminar group; they simply could not understand where she was coming from. Instead they saw the answer as simply to remove herself from the church: they asked with genuine concern and incredulity, ‘why would you want to stay somewhere that made you feel like that?’ This effectively silenced Sarah, who felt her desire to explore the complexities of her situation were simply not being heard.

When I pointed out to the class that they might be working with someone in the same situation as Sarah who wanted them to understand what this meant for her, the class members had quite different reactions. Some felt a client’s religious background was irrelevant, connected to their private life, not relevant to practice. Others expressed confusion about how they could understand religion when it wasn’t part of their experience. Somehow it was possible to stand in the shoes of another person, or at least attempt to, with other life experiences, but not when it came to religion. Some students reacted from the pain of their own church experience, which meant they had also rejected religion. Conversely, some of the students who could understand about the desire for religious connection were also members of religious traditions negative about homosexuality and struggled to accept Sarah being same-sex attracted. Two said that they...
thought someone’s religion was an important part of who they were even though they saw themselves as spiritual rather than religious.

So how to make sense of this experience in training social work students for professional practice? It seemed there were some key themes:

- the value of a broad and inclusive definition of spirituality that people with such different views could connect with
- the subjectivity of the spiritual experience and the challenge of generating mutual understanding
- the strength of people’s different views and emotions related to spirituality
- the value of understanding how your own and the broader social context and history influenced views about spirituality
- being able to actively reflect critically on these
- the importance of the spiritual community.

I began to explore this more in other classes but also in practice, related research and workshops with practitioners. For part of this time, I worked half a day a week at a faith-based agency as a social worker in relationship counselling. Two research projects were particularly relevant: the first (the Pastoral Care Networks Project) involved developing training for those working and volunteering in palliative care to foster inclusion of spirituality in practice. Another (Health Promoting Palliative Care) encouraged communities to increase their comfort in supporting those who were dying and their families, which often related to understanding what was meaningful in people’s lives. Similarly, in workshops called Spirituality and Work, it became clear that there was a need to make more explicit some ideas about working with spirituality. In critical reflection workshops, professionals affirmed the importance of unearthing what really mattered to them related to underlying values. The themes elicited from my teaching example were reinforced by these later experiences. Practitioners, as well as students, were struggling with what it meant to include the spiritual in practice. While many affirmed the value of this in principle, in practice, they agreed it was challenging and potentially divisive.

Development of a framework

The difficulties expressed by students and practitioners in including the spiritual in practice led to the development of a framework ‘Critical Spirituality’, which can be used to argue for the integration of the critical, the reflective and the spiritual into a coherent approach to practice that is holistic, inclusive and addresses issues of social justice. More specifically, ‘Critical Spirituality’ means seeing people and communities holistically, seeking to understand where they are coming from and what matters to them at a fundamental level; the level that is part of the everyday but also transcends it. The expectation is to combine postmodern valuing of the diversity of individual and/or community spiritual experience with a critical perspective that asserts the importance of living harmoniously and respectfully at an individual, family and community level (Gardner 2011).

In beginning to develop the framework, the first issue to be addressed was how spirituality was to be defined. It was clear that there were many definitions in the literature and little agreement (Swinton 2012). This has a positive aspect; Cobb et al. (2012: 487) say spirituality ‘rejoices in ambiguity and by avoiding simple resolutions maintain the elusive qualities of the human condition’. Similarly, practitioners varied in their reactions to language and definition; some responded negatively to the word spiritual or wellbeing, seeing these as too vague, but equally,
others reacted against pastoral care or religion, saying these evoked narrow and unhelpful ways of being that only suited some of their clients. What seemed to be important in reaching agreement was to talk through what was meant and to have a broad and inclusive definition that could encapsulate all of these possible meanings. What I decided to use is spirituality defined as ‘that which gives life meaning that includes a sense of something beyond or greater than the self’ (Gardner 2011: 24), a definition that can clearly include religious traditions. The critical aspect of critical spirituality makes it explicit that this sense of meaning is understood to be influenced by the broader social context. As Kamitsuka (2007: 22) says, ‘spirituality can (not) be abstracted from embodied and cultural experience’, while Sorajjakool et al. (2010: 170) suggest religion and culture ‘constantly modify each other’.

Second, in the process of developing the framework, it was helpful to articulate the many theoretical perspectives that underpinned the workshops, training and research. What I found was that there were two overlapping sets of theories: those that related specifically to spirituality and religion and those that underpinned the critical reflection approach I had used in all of the areas of practice and research. Critical reflection is both a theory and process that fosters deeper understanding of the links between:

- a specific experience
- the emotions, thoughts and actions related to that experience
- the meaning of that experience, including underlying assumptions and values
- the influence of social context and history both individually and collectively with an expectation that this will lead to socially just change.

(Gardner 2014: 24)

In the first stage of critical reflection, the person whose experience it is might explore such questions as: how did I react and why? What underlying values, beliefs, assumptions were there for me? What sense of meaning is there? How does this connect to my family history and social context and to the society in which I live? Similarly, these questions might be explored (in theory) from the perspective of others involved. In the second stage, they would ask, given my new understanding of this experience and why it matters, how would I react differently now; what would I change or do differently?

Theories

The four theories combined in critical reflection are outlined as follows, combined with their connection to spiritual and religious thinking. Making these links explicit reinforced their connections to practice and the value of including the spiritual in practice, for practitioners as well as their clients. As one practitioner said, ‘I can use critical reflection to be aware of my own deeper meaning and spirit, so that my spirit feeds my practice’.

Critical social theory and liberation theology

The critical in critical spirituality relates to critical social theory, which links liberation theology and critical social work practice. Critical social theory makes explicit how individuals and communities are influenced by their social, economic, historical and political context both individually through internalising social expectations and structurally in institutional arrangements. Both of these theories analyse the world in terms of power and oppression, critiquing the structures that embed social, political, economic and more latterly, environmental injustice and seeking a
more socially just, accepting and inclusive world. This is not to suggest that there is agreement about how to do this, but more that it is important to do it (Brookfield 2005). Both see the combining of individual experience and political understanding as central whatever the starting point is – being of different religious background, class, sexuality or gender or a combination of these.

Critical social theory is particularly helpful in identifying how what we take for granted as important is internalised, i.e. unconsciously influenced by the prevailing ways of thinking in our society. This might include such assumptions as everyone should conform to prevailing secular norms or that certain religions are accepted but not others. Brookfield (2011: 6) points out that these kinds of assumptions are ‘particularly hard to uncover, precisely because these ideologies are everywhere, so common as to be thought blindingly obvious and therefore not worthy of sustained questioning’. Therefore, he suggests ‘part of critical thinking is making sure that the actions that flow from our assumptions are justifiable according to some notion of goodness or desirability’, including the spiritual. The challenge then in professional practice is to be aware of the dominating ideologies and how we and those we work with are unconsciously influenced by these, make them conscious and to actively choose the values we want to operate from that reinforce a ‘good’ and socially just approach.

Postmodern understandings of spirituality and practice

The development of postmodernism as a reaction to modernism has influenced Western culture significantly and, in turn, both spiritual expression and professional practice. Modernist expectations still also permeate the culture: valuing of scientifically determined objectivity, the belief there is one right solution to every issue and the prevalence of dichotomous thinking, so that ideas, people, values are perceived in polar opposites – spiritual or not, religious or not. In a more traditional or even a more modernist perspective, communities would have been more likely to share the same religious convictions, but now each community is likely to have a variety of beliefs from atheist to religious and those who are religious might range across a continuum from fundamentalist to mystical. This reflects a more postmodern way of thinking about the spiritual, what Heelas and Woodhead (2005) describe as a move for many people from the religious institution providing an external form of authority to valuing of subjective experience, with the inner authority of the self. This, they suggest, might be expressed through religion but equally through holistic healing or practices such as yoga.

However, I also want to explicitly avoid here the modernist trap of polarised thinking such as spirituality versus religion. It is important to recognise that much religious writing is about being spiritual and affirms there are many paths. This might be in what are often called stages of faith or religious development (Wilber 1996), which can be connected to development of professional practice (Trelfa 2005), such as the movement from a more literal and concrete perspective to a more reflexive and inclusive understanding of self and others. Fox (1991: 18) identifies four spiritual paths, which again can relate to professional practice, from the via positiva, the seeing of God in everyday life to the via transformativa: ‘in the combating of injustice … and in the celebration that happens when persons struggling for justice and trying to live in mutuality come together to praise and give thanks.’

In professional practice, postmodern thinking reinforces that there are many ways of seeing things, many ways of being rather than the ‘one way’ of modernist thinking. This can feel both inspiring and challenging to professionals expected to move from a sense of finding the ‘right’ path to the lack of clarity of many paths. As Larney (2003: 39) says, ‘the postmodern condition into which we have been ushered is characterized on the one hand by ephemerality and
uncertainty – a situation that has been criticized by many – and on the other hand by endless possibilities for new ways of being’. He suggests valuing both what is common in our experience of the spiritual and what is different, which fits with the postmodern valuing of diversity.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity reinforces the importance of understanding the individual’s subjective sense of how to express their spirituality, encouraging us to ‘identify and challenge our own underlying assumptions with the theoretical, cultural and psychological positions of others in mind’ (Bager-Charleson (2010: 2). Critical reflexivity then means questioning the connections to our own social context and history, understanding the links between the two: how does our own individual and family history interact with the broader social context to influence our reactions to spirituality? This suggests the centrality of reflexivity in articulating where you are coming from, but then standing back from it so that this is not assumed to be the same for others. Sneed (2010: 179) points out that as a gay, black Christian, what is most challenging in the church community for him is being gay; that is where he feels least accepted, but the church sees being black as the central issue. He questions liberation theology’s assumption of oppressor and oppressed, suggesting this is an unhelpful binary and what is more helpful is advocating an ‘ethic of openness’ or ‘human flourishing’.

Reflection or reflective practice and experiencing the spiritual

Finally, reflective practice makes explicit the value of building knowledge from experience. This reinforces both the professional wisdom aspect of professional practice, and also the learning that comes from the experiential nature of spirituality. This theory encourages articulating underlying assumptions that influence practice and the importance of ensuring that what we espouse as our values is what we are actually using in practice. Reflective practice validates intuitive and creative responses to the person, working in ways that value their uniqueness.

Combined, these theories encourage spiritually sensitive practice that ‘respects the diverse religious and nonreligious forms of spirituality by working within the clients’ systems of meaning and support and helping them to achieve their highest potential for development’ (Robbins 2005: 387). Moving beyond the either/or of religion and spirituality means that people are redefining what the spiritual means for themselves in a more subjective, but also more complex way that can combine the two:

Many contemporary spiritualties, even alternative ones, draw on certain traditional religious elements or historical precedents mixed with new secular and global concerns, such as the pressing environmental and ethical issues affecting the whole planet; other forms of spirituality are primarily geared to the discovery of the personal self.

(King 2008: 119)

What this means for professionals, then, is the need to understand the complexity of each person’s sense of meaning, which may or may not include the religious. This is challenging in practice: it means developing the capacity to engage across a wide spectrum of beliefs, preferences and understandings from the more traditional religious observance across religious traditions to those whose sense of what matters means respecting their values about relationships, activities, connections with nature. What emerged to provide a framework was the development of key aspects of critical spirituality and principles for practice. Given what students and practition-
ers have expressed about engaging with spirituality, I have combined each principle with an example based on my experience to make explicit what they might mean in practice. Note that details have been changed to ensure anonymity.

First, the key aspects critical spirituality were identified as:

- recognising the influence of context, particularly history and culture on spiritual and religious experience for individuals and communities
- actively celebrates diversity of spiritual expression with the exception of any form of violence to individuals or communities
- requires a critically reflective attitude, the capacity to explore personal experience and reactions and the implications for practice
- means working holistically: seeing and appreciating the person as a whole, including their spirituality.

**Principles for practice**

*Spirituality is part of each person’s experience and therefore needs to be seen as an integral part of practice*

For Pat, who described herself as a sceptical atheist and worked in mental health, this was challenging. What helped was seeing spirituality and particularly religion as similar to cultural difference. Given that she had no trouble being interested and constructively curious about the influence of culture on a client’s life, she could see that she could approach spirituality in the same way. She recognised that some of the general questions she asked such as ‘what helped you get through other times like this?’ sometimes evoked answers that reflected the person’s spirituality. Previously she had ignored these; now she felt she would follow them up and ask the person to say more.

*The influence of context needs to be recognised for individuals, families and communities in exploring spirituality*

Ray and Daphne, both from Catholic backgrounds, came for relationship counselling. After six months, it became clear that Ray’s struggles with alcohol use were significantly undermining their relationship, their financial position and their care for their children and that he wasn’t ready to change. Daphne then wrestled for several months with whether to separate from Ray to provide more stability for their children. She felt this was abandoning her commitment to marriage for life and so betraying her faith, which sustained her.

When we explored these conflicting feelings, I used some critically reflective questions to explore with Daphne her family context and history and that of the community she belonged to, including what, if anything, had changed over time. She acknowledged that in her family of origin, there had been a very strong assumption that marriage must be for life, no matter how bad the experience. As she talked about one of her aunts whose husband had been consistently violent, she said how much better things were now, that in the community generally as well as in the church, it was more often made explicit that family violence was not acceptable. I asked her when she thought about her aunt’s situation now, how would she want things to be for her? She responded that she would want her aunt to be able to leave if her husband couldn’t or wouldn’t change: ‘there’s a limit to what people should have to put up with’ and ‘I don’t believe that God would want her to stay there.’ That made it easy to ask, using her language: ‘so
what’s the limit for you? Where would God be for you?’ When she reflected more on this, she made explicit for herself the need to separate the church from her faith and experience of God. Her perception of God was of a loving God who would not expect her to continue in what felt like an abusive and undermining relationship and would particularly not want that for her children. She remembered too hearing from a friend that in some ways the church, although still upholding the assumption of marriage as for life, was changing in its attitude to those who were separating; things were no longer quite so clear cut. She decided to go and see her priest and explore this with him and eventually was supported in her decision to separate.

**Each person is unique and their experience of their spirituality is their own**

A young couple, David and Maree, came to see me as a social work relationships counsellor struggling with conflict about life priorities, money and values in caring for their children. They had come to a Catholic agency because they felt their spiritual selves were important; neither had belonged to a religious tradition, but they saw their use of colours, crystals and tarot cards as expression of their spiritual practice. Although they had mentioned these several times in the first session, I was conscious afterwards that I hadn’t paid any attention, because, I realised, I felt I knew so little about the expressions of spirituality. As part of the next session, I asked them about what really mattered to them, what they saw as their most fundamental values and how this connected to their spiritual practices. What emerged was a complex and comprehensive mix of ways of trying to articulate core values and to live them out. For Maree, using colours was a way of paying attention to her state of mind and to be emotionally and spiritually present to her children and to David. For David, using the tarot cards encouraged him to constantly ask, what am I doing and why? How does this fit with what really matters? Once I understood this, we could work together much more effectively, including exploring how to have their individual practices work together to strengthen their relationship.

**Practitioners need to constantly maintain consciousness of awareness**

Mark is a practising Buddhist and he sees his faith is a significant and sustaining influence in his working life. As a family law court mediator he works hard at hearing all points of view, encouraging people to reach agreements and trying to be fair in recommendations to the family law court. As part of ensuring he is aware of his own reactions and how his assumptions might influence him, he participates in a monthly critical reflection group in his agency. The agency sees this as part of fostering a culture of being critically reflective: having an attitude to all of their work that embraces the expectation of reflexive and reflective awareness (Gardner 2014).

Each month, practitioners take it in turns to bring an experience and the aim is for the group to enable them to understand more deeply what this experience means for them. Mark brought a particular experience to critically reflective supervision where he felt torn between the opposing preferences of family members. As he explored this further, he identified part of the tension came from his assumption that he should be able to find solutions that pleased everyone. Underpinning this was his belief that as a Buddhist he should be loving to everyone. When asked if loving the person means you can’t disagree with their preference, he could see that he needed to modify his assumption to ‘I want to be loving to everyone but also combine love with truth when needed’. From this assumption, it was easier to see how to make the recommendation to the court: the fairest answer was clear, but would not make everyone equally happy. He could also acknowledge that this assumption wasn’t helpful either and reminded himself to apply an existing assumption: spiritual life is about growth and can be painful.
Explicitly valuing difference as well as what is common in expression of spirituality

Hazel, a hospital social worker in a rural community, was shocked to realise she had made assumptions about how religious traditions responded to death and dying. She came from a Protestant Irish background and was used to families being able to sit with the body of a family member after death for sometimes several days, with the funeral being up to a week after death. When the Jewish mother of a client named Julia died, Hazel assumed proceedings would be the same. When Julia instead explained the need for the ceremony to be within 24 hours, Hazel realised how slow systems were to respond and was concerned about the distress this caused the family. She decided to document the death traditions of all the religious and cultural backgrounds in the rural community and to negotiate with hospital management processes and policies that would mean other people would have a better experience that validated their religious and cultural experience.

Accepting not knowing and uncertainty

Pam, who worked in palliative care, was conscious that she often avoided conversations with clients about dying because she found it so hard to live with uncertainty herself. She assumed that anyone who was dying would also find this difficult and would want definite answers from her that she would be unable to give. One day one of her clients told her that one of the joys for her of not knowing was that it encouraged her to live in the moment. She saw this as a spiritual practice she had always struggled with but was now coming to value. Another, Joan, who had been a nurse, felt that her specialist was avoiding her because he thought she wanted definite answers. Instead she wanted to know what was known and what was unknown. She also wanted to be able to express how she felt without necessarily expecting answers, just good empathic listening. These two responses changed Pam’s assumptions for clients and challenged her to think about her own need for certainty given that she knew at least intellectually that certainty was simply often not possible. This connected for Pam to valuing being as important as doing.

Valuing being with as important as doing

Pam was aware another assumption was that the most important aspect of her work was to get things organised for clients, meaning coordinating service providers to minimise disruption, ensuring family were kept informed, etc. Joan also challenged this assumption, saying to her one day: ‘you know if you ever had time to sit and let me talk, just be with me, that would be more use for me than all those other arrangements. They’ll happen if they need to.’ When Pam did sit and listen, she realised that many of the arrangements she thought were important really didn’t matter to Joan; what she wanted was deeper connection about her thoughts, fears, experiences and hopes.

Recognise your limitations

Greg, a social worker in a health care facility for older people, expressed himself as spiritual but not religious. When one of his clients asked him about his beliefs about the resurrection, and the implications for life after death, he realised he was out of his depth. He admitted to the client his lack of knowledge and suggested that he contact the pastoral care worker and introduce her. The patient was pleased to have the connection made and continued to work with both practitioners on different aspects of his life.
Conclusion

This chapter has explored a framework for critical spirituality developed from the interactions of theory related to spirituality and religion as well as that underpinning critical reflection. The framework has also been influenced by students, practitioners and research participants seeking to include the spiritual in their practice. Implicit in many of the examples is how the principles of this framework might influence practice and the processes that can sustain approaching practice in this way. Partly, this means each practitioner being aware of their own spirituality and how this might influence them. However, given that our assumptions and values about the spiritual are often deeply embedded and challenging to make conscious, it can also help to use critically reflective processes to articulate them. Depending on what is possible in a given organisational and social context, this might be through individual reflection, journaling or in individual, mutually supportive pairs or group supervision. The hope is that the framework will foster practice that is spiritually inclusive and socially just as well as more deeply restoring and meaningful for both clients and workers.

References