Chapter 16
Post-Qualifying Practice: Implications for Social Workers with a Spiritual Approach to Practice

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ABSTRACT

A spiritual approach to social work practice is gaining recognition. This chapter considers the implications for practitioners who draw on spirituality in their work and the requirements for post-qualifying practice or Continuous Professional Development (CPD). Key terms are defined drawing on research and publications relating to CPD, and spiritual worldviews and their influence on social work are discussed. A case study illustrates how practitioners may choose to reflect on their own spiritual worldview in order to be better equipped when working with clients for whom the spiritual or religious dimension is important. It is suggested that this helps the practitioner to establish good working relationships across cultures and beliefs, and it consequently increases the chances of successful interventions. A second case study provides an example of how the social work practitioner, through involvement in a creative project, drew on spirituality in order to promote her own self-care.

INTRODUCTION

There are many expressions of spirituality and I consider that it is now widely accepted that a spiritual approach to practice can be an appropriate, sustaining, and creative dimension for social workers and service-users. Accordingly, this chapter addresses spirituality as potentially a sustaining and creative dimension for social workers with their need for self-care and reflects on its implications for those who use their services. Writing about spirituality and social work in a Continuous Professional Development (CPD) environment means taking the discussion beyond the, by now familiar, introductory level. I will, therefore, be considering how social workers with a spiritual stance may respond to the task of “maintaining and developing the professional identity of social work, be it [their] own or a colleagues [which] is an important part of [their] professional development as a Social Worker” (Australian Association of Social Workers [AASW], 2012/13, p. 7). In

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order to contextualise this discussion, key terms are defined and relevant research and publications are covered.

The Search Strategy

The literature search has been guided by several criteria, with most sources being published within the last ten years. Key words and phrases were spirituality, social work, “community gardening”, “environmental social work”, “accreditation standards”, and “continuing professional development”. A deliberate policy of using free access literature where possible was adopted. Recent literature spanning books, journal articles, and websites suggests that authors and researchers have increasing confidence in asserting a place for a spiritual dimension in social work theory and practice (Canda & Furman, 2010; Crisp, 2010; Gale & Dudley, 2013; Gardner, 2011; Holloway & Moss, 2010; Nash & Stewart, 2002; Walsh, 2011; Wong & Vinsky, 2009). Practical applications and the cultural significance of spirituality derived from research and practice show how practitioners and clients may work together, drawing on their diverse spiritual strengths and insights to achieve mutually agreed goals. It is acknowledged that there is ongoing, probably endemic, diversity in how spirituality is defined in the context of social work.

Definitions

Social Work

According to the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2012a),

... the social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work. (Definition)

The principle of human rights and human dignity recognises the link between social justice, human rights, and respect for people’s spiritual and religious beliefs, stating that “social work is based on respect for the inherent worth and dignity of all people, and the rights that follow from this. Social workers should uphold and defend each person’s physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being” (IFSW, 2012b, 4.1. Human Rights and Human Dignity).

Respect is being paid here to spiritual integrity but exactly what this means is not spelled out. In each cultural environment, practitioners must take time to sensitively discern it. In this chapter, social work is inclusively defined to recognise that within the conventional definition there is room
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