

Can Spirituality "Save" Social Work?



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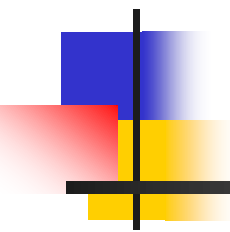


Abstract:

Given the current economic and political climate, the profession of social work is arguably experiencing a “crisis” and is in need of “saving”. The presenter invites you to contemplate this possibility and to explore ways in which the concept of spirituality might serve to influence this crisis and social work practice in general.

Biography:

Maxine Gibson, MSW is a Field Education Coordinator and Sessional Instructor at the University of Victoria, Victoria, B.C. Maxine holds a Social Work Diploma from Red Deer College, Red Deer, Alberta, a Bachelor and a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Victoria, Victoria, BC. Maxine previously worked as a child protection social worker with the communities of Sunchild First Nations and Rocky Mountain House, Alberta. These experiences inspired her exploration of how the concept of spirituality impacts social workers and their ability to help others.



Social Work code of ethics
Personal spiritual values
Realities of Practice

Disillusionment

Despair

Exhaustion

Leading to:

Exploration of Spirituality and Social Work

Discovery of Social Work Scholars naming "crisis"

Social work needs "saving"

Coincides with:

Explosion of interest



Methodology

- Combination of methodological perspectives consistent with feminist social research and discourse analysis
- Incorporation of personal feelings, experiences and opinions
- Discourse analysis – study of relations between discourse, power, dominance, social inequality and position of discursive analyst
- Critical analysis of how spirituality is informing debates about power
- Modes of Exclusion



Method: 19 journal articles over 10 years (1994-2004)

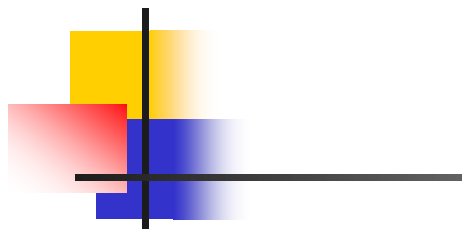
Questions:

1. How do the authors define/discuss spirituality?
2. What are the problems spirituality is seen to address?
3. What are the solutions to these identified problems as perceived by the authors?

The Social Work Crisis

- New code of ethics
- Conflicting roles:
caring vs. social
control
- Bureaucratic,
restrictive & hostile
- Social worker stress
& burn-out





Construction of the Social Worker



- Powerlessness & frustration
- More than technical activity
- Depictions in Media
 - Modern Day Dodo Birds
 - More Deaths Waiting to happen
- Enabler, broker, advocate, mediator, activist, educator
- Dancer, artful improviser
- Happy, yet passive & self-sacrificing
- 29 different theories



Construction of the client

- Poor, disadvantaged, disenfranchised & oppressed
- All people, all ages, socio-economic levels & spiritual groups
- Individuals, groups, communities, society as a whole
- Just a drunk, damned by the courts
- Expert in their own lives
- Abusers, killers
- No child should be left in my care
- Enemy of the social worker



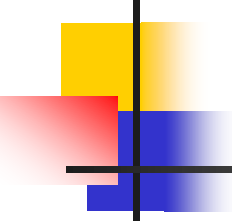
Excluded Voices of Women

- Voices of women historically excluded
- Exploration of personal accounts
- Exposed assumption that social reform movement had uniform agendas as false
- Curious about their resistance and their incorporation of spiritual values
- Resisted priorities to impose Christian beliefs



Themes

- Importance of Structural Issues
- Emphasis on Social Action
- Institutional Restraints
- Resistance to Convention
- Disillusionment & Exhaustion



Spiritually aware vs. Traditional approach

- Supportive environment enhanced by physical setting or revealed in social worker's action and words.
- Sensitive to spiritual contributors of client's strengths or deficits
- Willingness to place self at emotional risk in dealing with problems for which there may be no ultimate answer.



The Identified Problems

- Marginalization & Neglect
 - distancing of spiritual knowledge, experience and insight viewed as significant problem for social work
- Lack of Ethical Guidelines & Education
 - urgency expressed for wide dissemination of spiritual education & guidelines



The Proposed Solutions

THEMES:

- Educational Preparation & Guidelines to address spirituality in both social & academic discourse & clinical practice
- Spirituality as a resource & technique
- Creation of spiritually self aware social workers



What Surprised Me

- What they didn't say:
- The Crisis in Social Work
- Maintenance of Status Quo
- Little allowance for social justice/change
- Excluded issues of power & difference
- Spirituality as Resistance – the historical connection



Where to from here?

- Necessity to acknowledge complexities of practice and unrealistic expectations
- Agency, community, societal awareness: changing discourse
- More research to explore how spirituality might upset current power relations on a collective and systemic level to create more significant impact on social work as a whole
- Provision of guidelines & education



Our professional spirituality

- The collective inspiration derived from the ideal of human compassion or well-being that drives us to advance our cause. Social workers may have individual aspirations and interests, but there is a sense of unity in working toward an ultimate goal, which includes some transformation of society. (Sermabeikian, 1994, p. 182)



Questions to consider:

- Is Social Work in a state of “crisis”?
- Could social worker “burn-out” be impacted through a spiritual (vs. traditional) approach to practice?
- Can we work collectively to upset current power relations and positively impact social work practice and education?

