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Psychology's Potential for Reconciliation with Spiritual and Religious Traditions:

Caveats and Recommendations for Social Workers

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Introduction

What I will do in this presentation is suggest, as a historian and philosopher of Psychology, some partial answers to three interrelated questions that I trust will have some meaning for social workers who are seeking to retrieve spirituality and religion for their community or clinical practice. My first question is, what has been Psychology's historical position as a science and a profession vis-a-vis spirituality and religion? Secondly, what is Psychology's current position re: spirituality and religion? Thirdly, what are the intellectual and disciplinary challenges that scientific and professional psychologists face, when they attempt to reconcile their scientific traditions with their buried, metaphysical, spiritual, and religious roots? My hope is that in considering my answers to these questions you might continue with your own attempts to resuscitate worthy foundational inclinations in social work, while you simultaneously keep a skeptical eye on psychologists' overt or covert claims to any special or even superior insights about spirituality and religion. I will conclude with some cautions and recommendations for social workers.

Exploring psychologists' historically conflictual relations with spirituality and religion can prove instructive for social workers, because one well-trodden, academic pathway to professional social work has been exposure to scientific Psychology in undergraduate education as a minor or major area of

concentration. In the conventional regimen of undergraduate Psychology, as many of you know from your own experience, students are indoctrinated in a worldview of Psychology as a legitimate natural science that is essentially different from other bodies of human knowledge, including literature and myth. I will argue, however, that academic psychologists have repressed the philosophical, spiritual, and religious heritage of science and Psychology, much of which, if uncovered and embraced, could enhance the development of psychological knowledge about human nature and about life-enhancing therapeutic interventions.

Relevant Definitions

Given the current rise in popularity of religion and spirituality in the professions and sciences, it is important that I make clear to you how I use certain key terms. My definitions are drawn from a variety of sources, especially Joel Kovel (1991) and Andrew Samuels (2002).

By "religion" I mean an ideological and organizational system of belief, ritual, and ethics centred around some notion of transcendence. To be "religious" is not necessarily to be spiritual or soulful, as one could simply participate in a religious congregation for materialistic and egotistical motives. Although a religion can be the institutional expression of spirituality, it also can be split from spirituality. Many North Americans, for example, are drawn to "New Age" spirituality but are not church congregants.

"Spirituality" can refer to both subjective individual practices, some of which involve performing rituals, and socially-based activities that are oriented to developing sensitivity to spirit and soul and that challenge conventional notions of spirituality as exclusively internal to the person. Thus, when people unite to engage in social action, for example for environmental protection or global justice initiatives, their collective effort can foster spirituality. Another type of “social” spirituality is the struggle many of us face in attempting to balance work and life so that one can nurture her or his spirituality.

Spirituality also can be a process of moral courage, entailing both denunciation of social relations of domination and annunciation of relations of equality (Kovel, 1991). Spirituality in this democratic sense is motivated by radical egalitarianism, as exemplified by the historical Jesus (Crossan, 1994) and connects directly with environmental, economic, and social justice. Spirituality also encompasses sexuality in its mystical as well as orgasmic forms in the sense that one’s body with all its warts is the grounding for one’s soul, spirit, and spirituality, as the English, mystical poet William Blake knew.

"Spirit" is an everlasting life-force giving purpose and guidance to the person, existing outside the realm of immediate sensory perception and connecting the self to the universe. "Soul" refers to the particular spiritual form taken by the individual self, while ego functions are the non-spiritual form of the self (Kovel, 1991).

Psychology’s Historical Position vis-a-vis Religion and Spirituality

Psychology as a Natural Science

For over a century, Psychology in North America has prided itself on its presumed natural-science foundations. Psychology as a science is almost universally taught as if it were a completely objective natural science of prediction and control that is scientifically equivalent to physics and that long ago subdued the subjectivities of philosophy, spirituality, and religion. Meanwhile, the mainly European traditions of Psychology as a human science that emphasizes understanding the social historical context of human experience are marginalized, discounted, or totally ignored in Psychology curricula.

Natural-science psychologists' virtual knee-jerk antipathy to spirituality and religion can be observed readily in the textbooks that psychologists use to "train" their students in the discipline. In the undergraduate course that is intended to present the complete picture of a genuine, unified natural science, namely, the history of Psychology, textbook authors: [1] marginalize or eradicate the spiritual and religious practices of famous scientists who in fact laid the foundations for Psychology; [2] ignore the significance for psychologists' culture of their vigilantly policing their scientific boundaries against such "superstitious" practices as parapsychology; and [3] neglect the spiritual embeddedness of culturally diverse, indigenous psychologies, e.g., aboriginal knowledge, that operate on rather different metaphysical and epistemological assumptions. I will analyze each of these systematic distortions in turn.

As they construct a compartmentalized narrative of Psychology as a natural science, not a human science, history of Psychology authors clearly demarcate Psychology from philosophy, theology, religion, and spirituality. In doing so, they create the false impressions that objective Psychology emerged independently of these "subjective" disciplines and practices and allegedly was dependent only on the scientific "revolutionaries" of the late 16th and 17th centuries, such as Francis Bacon, Thomas Hobbes, Rene Descartes, John Locke, and Isaac Newton. The mission of textbook authors, like their colleagues who dominate the discourse of academic Psychology, is to hammer home the notion that Psychology constitutes the latest and the best of scientific thinking in linear progression since the time of the great early-modern scientists (Walsh-Bowers, 2005).

Yet, authors of history of Psychology textbooks ignore the fact that the natural scientists who laid the epistemological foundations for Psychology actually wrote about and practiced metaphysical philosophy, spirituality, and religion (Walsh-Bowers, 2000). Newton, for example, actually spent more time practicing alchemy than he did mathematics or physics. He regarded his scientific labours as demonstrating God's harmonious plan for creation, and he dedicated the last decades of his life to understanding just one book of the Hebrew Bible (White, 1997).

Although conventional historical discourse characterizes the emergence of scientific Psychology in the US as founded by Wundt at Leipzig, Germany, and then by William James at Harvard, the US founders, such as John Dewey and G. Stanley Hall, were firmly planted in religion. Religion, science, and philosophical psychology had been co-constructed disciplines in the 19th century, being US offshoots of the Scottish system known as common sense realism (Spilka, 1987). Inductive science then was believed to demonstrate the hand of God at work in the world (Davis, 1936). Nevertheless, for natural-science psychologists, who have ruled the intellectual roost in North American Psychology since the late 19th century, there is only "objective science" and "subjective non-science." No wonder, then, that the authors of history of psychology textbooks bracket the spiritual and religious practices of famous figures in Psychology to convey the message that the natural sciences hold dominion over religion and spirituality.

Actually, there are many remarkable anomalies in the history of Psychology that illustrate the persistent tensions between objectivity and subjectivity in this putative natural science. Describing how psychologists have dealt with two bodies of human knowledge with their origins in 19th century beliefs and practices – spiritualism and psychoanalysis – can aid us in understanding the limits to the potential for natural-science Psychology's reconciliation with spirituality and religion (Walsh-Bowers, 2000).

During the 19th century, so-called "pseudo-sciences" of mesmerism, phrenology, and psychic phenomena and spiritualism emerged in European societies. These popular social movements reassured

people in the face of a frightening universe, offering plausible insight into the unknown side of human nature and hope of salvation in this world in an epoch of triumphal atheistic science (Leahey, 2005). The twin spectres of spiritualism and psychic phenomena particularly disturbed the founding materialist psychologists and threatened their secular faith in science (Coon, 1992). For most North American psychologists, the psychological and the physical were parallel and separate, not causally related.

Now, if we understand Psychology as operating on the contested boundary between the natural and the supernatural, we can appreciate how anxious founding psychologists were to legitimize their disciplinary claim that their inquiries into psychological phenomena were as truly objective as any natural science. The fact that the esteemed William James explored the paranormal only intensified his contemporaries' anxiety. After initially dismissing psychic research and spiritualism to preserve Psychology's scientific reputation, early psychologists studied "mediums" and "[ESP] sensitives" in the hope of uncovering fraudulence or of explaining these phenomena naturalistically. Then they shifted to arguing that spiritualism and psychic experiences were consequences of deception and suggestibility.

So, what attention do today’s psychologists give to these historically-based intellectual tensions between objectivity and subjectivity? Textbook authors and instructors take great pains to convince their student audiences that psychic phenomena are outside the terra firma of genuine science and merely reflect primitive superstition. Most textbook authors ignore the discursive significance of psychologists’ vigilantly policing their scientific boundaries against such practices as parapsychology; rather, they reproduce the standard narrative of Psychology vanquishing the dragon of subjectivity in a kind of unending war against the terrorism of superstition (Walsh-Bowers, 2005).

However, the Native students to whom I taught introductory Psychology from 1993 to 1999, for most of whom spirituality is ever-present, found scientific psychologists' position on spirituality culturally alien (Walsh-Bowers & Johnson, 2002). Many aboriginal students can freely recount numerous, vivid experiences of the paranormal, which they regard as pathways to the spirit world, and they shake their heads in disbelief at psychologists' objectivistic rejection of psychic phenomena. In fact, in Native North American science, knowers honour their subjectivity, that is, their feelings and intuition. Spirituality is the very foundation of aboriginal knowledge. Consequently, the goals of Native science are to understand why things happen the way they do and to experience harmony, balance, and peace with all of the created world (Colorado, 1988). Within this framework, prediction and control are culturally irrelevant scientific goals. Traditional European, linear, hierarchical thinking and practices, as evidenced in modernist science and conventional Christianity, have been dangerous for aboriginal peoples, because they have contributed to cultural domination.

From my own limited experience with the paranormal and from ample experience with my intuition, I understand the aboriginal position. Moreover, when natural-science psychologists ignore the spiritual embeddedness of culturally diverse, indigenous psychologies, they despiritualize indigenous knowledge and perpetuate intellectual colonialism.

Psychology as a Profession

Natural-science Psychology, however, is not just an academic pursuit of stereotypical nerd scientists obsessively-compulsively pursuing their hobbies in the labyrinthine hallways and cubicles of their laboratories. Natural-science Psychology is also a profession, manifest most popularly as clinical psychology, which in North America always has been committed to the natural-science ideal. Yet, clinical psychologists have had to work subordinately with psychiatrists and to cooperate, however well or poorly, with social workers, among other professional groups. In those

professions, psychoanalysis in its various forms was the dominant clinical perspective. Thus, another field of protracted combat and conflictual relations between psychologists and those they regarded as pseudo-scientists is psychoanalysis. (As an aside, the Jungian-inspired literature on spirituality has had little impact on mainstream Psychology, because Jungian psychoanalysis is even more subjective and "mystical" than the other forms of psychoanalysis.)

Historically, psychologists' initial response to psychoanalysis was quite positive and included constructive criticism of it (Hornstein, 1992). When the founding psychoanalysts did not take psychologists' diplomatically phrased evaluations seriously, but rather reacted patronizingly by contending that only those who themselves had been analyzed were qualified to evaluate psychoanalysis, psychologists expressed their irritation with increasingly direct vigour. The terrain of psychoanalysis – unconscious irrationality and potentially chaotic desires and feelings, all patently subjective phenomena – constituted anathema for experimental psychologists. The threat that psychoanalysis posed to psychologists' claim to objectivity was so great that experimental psychologists subsequently became even more defensive about the experiment, even more focused on "observable variables."

When World War II ended, the popular culture and media confused psychoanalysis with objective Psychology. In response, academic psychologists launched a barrage of experimental tests of specific analytic concepts for decades. Psychologists claimed that they had demonstrated the invalidity of the enemy discipline, despite the reality that their findings produced mixed evidence. When psychologists recognized that they were losing the war for the hearts and minds of the American public, which remained infatuated with psychoanalysis, psychologists accommodated by incorporating in their natural science and profession what they found useful in psychoanalysis. Thus, authors of introductory Psychology textbooks appropriated the concepts but provided insufficient and pejorative explanations of psychoanalytic theory.

Clinical psychology, however, consists of much more than psychological applications of psychoanalysis. Ever since the establishment of the virtual industry of clinical psychology in the post-World War II era, graduate students enculturated in the lore of clinical psychology learned that spiritual and paranormal experiences, visions, and transcendental phenomena were symptomatic of psychopathological processes. For decades, the most "scientific" of personality tests, the MMPI, included test items that scored affirmation of such experiences as hard signs of psychotic processes. Generations of clinical psychologists learned to distrust spirituality and religion, which could not help but contaminate their approaches to religious or spiritual clients.

Then in 1980 Allen Bergin published a landmark paper in which he criticized clinical psychologists' historical antipathy to religion and recommended some specific ways that psychotherapists' should respect their clients' religious values. Ever since, clinical psychologists have been inching their way toward a healthier response to religion and spirituality in their clients' lived experiences, although still within the natural science framework.

Psychology's Current Position

Nowadays, natural-science psychologists deal with spirituality and religion as quantifiable, demographic variables that are attributed to an individual, on par with gender, occupational status, ethno-racial status, etc. (Zolner, 2005). For example, in social psychology, psychologists treat religion as a measurable "attitude" and they subject it to correlational and experimental studies, manipulating variables.

Or, if psychologists identify with the field of cognitive neuroscience, they attempt to explain spirituality and religion reductionistically, as if these subjective phenomena were “hidden in our brains.” Psychologists in thrall to materialist science reduce religious concerns and spirituality to something that they can understand, namely, brain activity. They conceive of spirituality as re-sculpted neural tissue in the left prefrontal cortex, based on functional magnetic resonance imaging that shows the brain’s dynamic processes in real time. Psychologists of this persuasion, however, do not understand spirituality as “a source of energy or a way of knowing or a tie to a metaphysical philosophy that informs people about who they are, individually and as a culture, as well as how to live in community with each other and raise their children” (Zolner, 2005, p. 11).

Another popular approach of contemporary natural-science psychologists is to relate the nature and role of spirituality and religion to coping and health, and there is now a large literature in this domain of interest. For example, Gall, Charbonneau, Clarke, Grant, Joseph, and Shouldice (2005) in the current issue of Canadian Psychology developed a conceptual model of the role of spirituality in coping. In natural-science Psychology fashion, these authors regard the literal quantitative and figurative pathway from sources of stress to well-being as marked by five psychological dimensions: primary and secondary appraisals (e.g., God attributions), person factors (e.g., religious orientation and beliefs), spiritual coping resources (e.g., connection to nature), spiritual coping behaviour (e.g., prayer), and giving meaning to one’s experience of stressful events (e.g., spiritual reappraisal). The authors clearly state that their investigative agenda is “testing of various pathways of effect between spiritual coping and resources and well-being,” because their intention is “to focus on the identification of potential mediators and moderators in the process of spiritual coping” (p. 98).

Other psychologists strive to understand health, mental health, healing, and wellness in relation to spirituality and religion from multiple perspectives, biopsychosocially and culturally. They argue that pastoral care, nursing, occupational therapy, as well as Psychology, can show the usefulness of integrating biomedical, psychological, and spiritual points of view (e.g., Meier, O’Connor, & VanKatwyck, 2005).

Psychology's Challenges

Now, what in my opinion are the challenges that face those psychologists who are seeking reconciliation of their discipline with spirituality and religion? Over the years as I periodically renewed my lecture notes for the history of Psychology course, the historical roots of psychologists' antipathy to spirituality became increasingly clear (Walsh-Bowers, 2000). Scientific Psychology seemed like a fundamentalist religion, at the least threatened by and at the worst hostile to subjectivity. The more I learned about the socially constructed origins and nature of the psychological enterprise the more dubious were the discipline's assumptions, concepts, and language, and the more obvious was the worship of objectivistic investigative traditions (e.g., the taken-for-granted hierarchical relationship between researchers and participants) and the report-writing prescriptions of the Publication Manual, known as “APA style.”

It became very apparent to me that the denial of the roots of Psychology in spirituality and religion, as evident in history of Psychology textbooks, is a consequence of psychologists’ unconscious adoption of the quasi-religion of scientism and psychology’s identity as a natural science on par with physics. "Scientism" is the virtually religious conviction that the one and only form of true knowledge is scientific. Thus, "Truth" is defined according to scientific achievements and scientific rules. In other words, scientism is science's belief in itself (Habermas, 1971). The consequences of this distortion of science are a religious-like obsession with objectivity and defensive blindness to the social context and

human interests saturating all scientific activity. In our scientistic society, science and scientists are elevated to God-like status far above mere mortals, beyond reproach. In evidence at least since the time of Francis Bacon in the 16th and 17th centuries, scientism became prominent when science as the new "idol of the tribe" replaced organized religion's hold on modernist society. In adopting the quasi-religion of scientism, natural-science psychologists have repressed the spiritual and religious heritage of Psychology to project a public image of their discipline as a purely objective natural science.

So, the first obstacle toward psychologists' full reconciliation with spirituality and religion is their scientism. Modernist natural-science Psychology, by self-definition, excludes human spirit. Unless natural-science psychologists shift toward a human science vision of their science and profession, unless they embrace subjective methods that are always tempered by social historical context and can only offer a partial perspective on "reality," psychologists will remain on the periphery of understanding the subjective phenomena of spirituality and religion. In other words, Psychologists' historically-rooted worship of the experimental model, technology, scientific progress, and materialist conceptions of the soul are at the heart of their problematic relationship with religion and spirituality. Psychology is not merely misdirected, as if we psychologists simply have to focus on a new area of research; rather, standard Psychology is misconceived, an intellectual abortion. Nothing less than a metanoia or conversion to human-science psychology will solve the problem. Psychology must be balanced by a reorientation that subverts despiritualized Psychology and reconnects it with the sacred (Brown, 1997).

As a fugitive from natural-science Psychology, I am on a sojourn to infuse soul and wisdom in my secular discipline, partly inspired by feminist visions of reframed scientific objectivity, spirit, soul, sin, community, ecology, and religion (e.g., Ruether, 1992, 1993). Looking back on the 20th century, I perceive psychologists as having focused almost exclusively on disembodied, soulless "psychological" processes of behaviour, cognition, and emotion. This Cartesian dualism separated mind from body, privileged the rational ego, and compartmentalized human experience. What psychologists need instead is dialectical integration of all human systems: body, mind, heart, and soul, contextualized in changing relationships, which in turn are embedded in historically changing social structures, myths, and ideologies. We cannot create, however, a new Psychology that overcomes splitting the subjective from the objective, emanates from the union of spirituality with the created world, and expresses the sacred in science, if we persist in the worldview that the earth has no spirit and that our responsibility is to dominate nature, and if we reduce subjectivity to mere cognitive neuroscientific processes, interpreted by a mechanistic information-processing metaphor.

Moreover, if psychologists are serious about restoring soul to Psychology, then an ethical, epistemological, and even aesthetic vision is required that would encompass every facet of human life. For example, a spirit-filled moral framework for Psychology would be centred on the primacy of soulful, interdependent connectedness with all creatures and all creation within egalitarian relationships. That is, the feminist principle of relationality would prevail (Jordan, 1991; Wine, 1989). As aboriginal elders and feminist scholars advise, justice, love, and soul are interconnected. Love is true only when it is "combined with a just praxis of giving that empowers the Other" (Kovel, 1991, p. 223).

A second major obstacle toward psychologists' reconciliation with spirituality and religion is found in the growing movement among some contemporary and very prominent physicists and cosmologists, such as Charles Townes who co-invented the laser and Stephen Hawking, to show how science, on the one hand, and religion and spirituality, on the other hand, unite at the level of the material structure of the universe, that is, within a completely objectified, knowable universe. However, according to Christian traditions at least, God has two aspects: the Creator and the Redeemer. The current scientific movement to reconcile science and religion is focused on God the Creator, while it ignores God the

Redeemer. If psychologists join the natural-science bandwagon to reduce the divine to the rational, final equations that can explain the structure and function of matter and the universe, they would be missing the point of spirituality and religion, namely, personal experience of the divine as the grounding of faith and personal commitment to creating a just and compassionate society.

Recommendations for Social Workers

Erich Fromm considered the complementary needs for transcendence, such as a religious faith, and for community as central to human life. But, in my view, these fundamentals can be broadened to incorporate the emancipatory role of what many cultures call spirit.

The challenge for social workers becomes whether you can connect not only with religious movements, groups, and institutions but also with spirituality. Your own professional sojourn toward religion can only be tentative until you confront your profession's ambivalence about notions of subjectivity and objectivity that are embedded in your theory and research and practice. You will not fulfill your profession's social ethical values of empowerment and social justice, until you spiritualize social work and develop a balanced conception of intersubjectivity.

Concretely, in spiritualizing social work you might do the following. Theory would transcend the ecological, empowerment, and social justice models. For example, ecology has served as a heuristic framework for facilitating community development. Yet, as the proliferation of community gardening in urban areas attests, ecological relationships also mean that we are sustained by being grounded literally in caring with others for the created world. Have social workers connected the ecological metaphor with a spiritual base? In addition, we social scientists and interventionists have understood empowerment as psychological, political, or both, but always as secular. From aboriginal and radical Christian perspectives, empowerment also arises from within the person, emanating from and sustained by spiritual development.

Furthermore, social work research and action would embrace an intervention and research relationship of radical egalitarianism, meaning shared research roles between citizens and researchers, and a personalized, intersubjective mode of report-writing, in which the human context of the inquiry is central and the investigators' learning and growth are as acknowledged as the participants'. The human-science, action-science goal then becomes understanding situated, contextualized, and partial, inter-subjective knowledge, not developing generalizable, universalized laws, based upon the principles of prediction and control, like natural-science psychologists.

In a spiritualized profession, social workers could restructure undergraduate and graduate education in social work to reflect critical education rather than "training," as social work scholar Amy Rossiter (1995) is fond of distinguishing. Social work professors would overcome paternalistic practices with students and patriarchal ideology. Classroom and mentorship relationships would be restructured, and students would have genuine power in the form of student governance in programmes. Course content would be opened up to recognize the socially constructed nature of social work, to respect the diversity in different cultures' experiences of subjectivity and objectivity, and to incorporate explicit discussion of the meaning of religion and spirituality not simply for community residents but for students and faculty alike.

To conclude, I will paraphrase the infamous nuclear physicist, Robert Oppenheimer, of atomic bomb notoriety, when he addressed the American Psychological Association in 1955 and admonished psychologists not to emulate an outmoded Newtonian physics of prediction and control. In my view, the

worst of all possible misunderstandings would be for social workers in their quest to integrate their theory and practice with spirituality and religion to emulate an outmoded natural-science Psychology. Honour your own history and cherish your own capacities as social workers as you develop a spiritualized human-action-science and profession.

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