

Embedding spirituality and religion in social work practice: A socially just approach

Fiona Gardner

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I was drawn to Fiona Gardner's work having explored the subject of faith and spirituality in social work for many years, both in my social work practice and in the practice teaching domain. I was interested to read if there were any further thought-provoking developments around this topic. I was not disappointed in this regard. The premise of "embedding" spirituality and religion into social work was an easy capture for my interest as I have long believed we are holistic beings with spiritual foundations.

In reviewing Fiona Gardner's book I found myself in a parallel process, being challenged to "listen deeply and with humility" (an attitude she espouses) as I engaged with her thoughts and process while she unfolded her objective to encourage the embedding of spirituality and religion in social work practice. It is a book with a logical and elegant flow taking the reader through the chapters in a way that answers questions as you go. As I read, I found myself musing at times "yes, but what about ...?", then going on to have that musing responded to. Clearly, this is a topic which the author has grappled with for a long time and in many settings and her coherent thesis demonstrates her willingness to explore it in depth.

The introduction is a wonderful capture of the book's central themes which effectively orientates the reader towards appreciating the insights to come. Initially, a succinct summary of all the chapters gives a handy

overview and allows the reader to select areas of special interest. I found this section useful as it was easy to return to a chapter to re-visit topics I wished to explore more. For a social worker lecturer, this would be a helpful repository, allowing them to select topics pertinent to their teaching.

From chapters 1-3, under Part 1, the author gives clear context and theoretical structure on which to build her premise, then clearly develops capacities and processes for embedding spirituality and religion in social work in Part 2, chapters 4-6. Page 61 presents a critical spirituality framework in diagram form, for embedding spirituality in practice. This is brought to life by an accompanying case example. The framework is a clear structure allowing the reader to expand their critical thinking around this topic while integrating the learning from the preceding chapters. The author makes regular use of case examples throughout her work, a method which mirrors her intentions around the embedding of spirituality in practice.

Her theoretical base referenced a variety of well-known sources who have contributed strongly to this topic: Canda and Furman (1999), Crisp, (2014) and Hodge (2001)) to name a few. The intentional inclusion of First Nations and green perspectives gives the reader an interesting application to Aotearoa New Zealand. This book is Australian and, while it starts a conversation around First Nations' beliefs and ways of being, in an Aotearoa New Zealand context the

conversation may have different emphases from a Tangata Whenua point of view. This would be a good area of expansion for an Aotearoa New Zealand writer.

Part 3 presents the reader with numerous carefully considered questions, a good preparation for the practice ideas to follow. One I particularly liked was "... how does your physical environment influence you?" This probe uncovered for me the strong connection with my own faith and belief in the created natural environment and my physical environment generally. In consistent social work fashion, in chapter 8 the author examines the place of spirituality, not just in individual and family interactions (as covered in the prior chapter) but also at community, organisational and policy levels. It delves deep into the various scenarios that can arise using illustrative case studies. This helps to enliven the book and again leads to the reader connecting with how they might relate to such a situation.

The final chapter brought to culmination the dilemmas that arise with this topic and bravely stepped into the ethical debates that accompany it. This section sought to elucidate common areas of challenge in the involvement of spirituality in practice. While it remained strongly connected with the professional responsibilities for the social worker and — did indeed address faith and belief from the worker's point of view—I believe there is still potential for further exploration in relation to a social worker's deeply held values. The key questions of identity (who we are), and what are we about (i.e., our underlying drivers and values), may not necessarily be up for negotiation, and while the author presents critically reflective peer review as a way of

making sense of interactions with clients by challenging the social worker's assumptions, there is still room in this section for further exploration. All human interactions ebb and flow taking account of the "other" and, as a professional social worker, there are more restraints and boundaries at work that regulate that interaction. The question may be, "How do I hold on to my own values, integrity and authenticity as a person of faith and spirituality while appreciating the client's to the fullest extent possible?"

This book fulfils an important place in the available literature related to social work and spirituality. The author has synthesised many of the discussions and topics that have been explored over the last few decades and skilfully created a work which is both thought-provoking and practically applicable. For someone in social work practice or teaching, I believe this book would assist in coming to grips with the importance of working with people, communities and organisations in a holistic way, seeking to understand the spiritual and religious influences in, and on, people's lives. Its clear descriptions of ways in which social workers can engage more effectively in this area would lend strength to anyone wishing to deepen their practice and teaching skills. I believe it encourages a more competent approach to this topic and achieves its stated aim of placing it confidently and legitimately within the social work practice setting.

References

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- Hodge, D. (2011). Spiritual assessment: A review of major qualitative methods and a new framework for assessing spirituality. *Social Work, 46*(3), 203–214.

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