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Religious competence in social work practice: The UK picture

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1   Introduction

A key concept that characterizes the modern societies is diversity. Discourse, education, research and practice have all focused on diversity and equal related implementations. Diversity is a term that has been described by many scholars over the past three decades (Meister 2011). The word diverse means different and varied. In every community, whether large or small, people are different and vary in several ways. Some of the categories in which people differ from each other are gender, age, ethnicity, culture/subculture, class and religion. Each category refers to specific characteristics in terms of distinguishing it from the others. That said, religion, even though it has been given many definitions and understandings, is a person's system of faith and worship.

Religious diversity is a regular feature of the modernized world and its complex societies (Stackhouse 2011). Prior to that outcome though, one should realize that this type of diversity has been a fact throughout the whole world history, which is characterized by religious traditions and interactions (Aries 1974).

Furthermore, religious diversity is one of the parameters utilized within social work education, regarding diversity awareness and training. The social work profession is by its nature respectful to all aspects of human diversity. The Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) identifies that social work education and practice should reflect nondiscrimination acts when it comes to religious issues. Additionally, both the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) and the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) Codes of Ethics are opposed to discrimination based on religion and hold expectations that social workers will seek education and understanding of religious diversity, in order to become more competent.

2   Religious diversity in the UK

The Office for National Statistics' Integrated Household Survey (IHS) April 2010 to March 2011, showed that 68.5% people in the UK have a religious affiliation with Christianity, 4.4% were affiliated with Islam, and 23.2% of the people who participated in the survey, referred to themselves as non affiliated to any religion (Table 1).

Table 1: Religion by country, April 2010 to March 2011

Religions	Great Britain			Percentages
	England	Wales	Scotland	Great Britain
Christian	68.5	66.1	69.6	68.5
Buddhist	0.4	0.3	0.3	0.4
Hindu	1.5	0.5	0.3	1.3
Jewish	0.5	0.1	0.1	0.4
Muslim	4.9	1.2	1.3	4.4
Sikh	0.8	0.1	0.1	0.7
Any other religion	1.1	1.2	1.1	1.1
No religion at all	22.4	30.6	27.2	23.2

Source: Office for National Statistics

In the UK alone the 2011 Census identified over 170 religions present. Of course those are hard to list in a table and in a short paper, however are valid to refer to as the fact points out the variety of sub-religious groups within wider ones as well (e.g. Christian Orthodox vs. Christian Protestants). Based on these facts, one may though be misled to misunderstandings about what is religion today in the UK and what its meaning is in the contemporary and constructivist society.

Woodhead and Catto (2012) have elegantly analyzed and explained the significant changes that have taken place in today's society regarding religious issues and variance. Such analyses highlight the variety and diversity in the UK but also lead to the concepts of a secular world and a secularized society that still believes, but decides not to belong (Bruce 2011).

3   Secular, Secularism and Secularization

"...religion...is my personal affair. The state has nothing to do with it. The state would look after your secular welfare, health, communications, foreign relations, currency and so on, but not your or my religion. That is everybody's personal concern!" – Mahatma Gandhi

Secular is a meaning that suggests choice. It means without religion. People, who decide to run secular lives, are running lives without religion. This meaning may be applied to more than just individuals; a government may be secular, which in these terms indicates that the government runs along humanistic lines.

Secularisation has multiple meanings, while it may be approached both as a theory and as a historical process and development. Swatos and Christiano (1999) provided a discussion and an analysis of the secularization debate to the end of 1990s. The authors have mainly elaborated on secularization as a historical process, or as "religious historiography during the nineteenth century."

The process of secularization leads to the privatization of religious matters (Green 2011; Bruce 2011; Erdozein 2012). As Meister (2011) has described, there has been a shift in the relationship between the public and religion. Religion has become a private matter that is not socially acceptable in the public discourse. This process is the product of what I referred to

earlier, modernization. Through immigration, enculturation and acculturations, societies became mixed and sowed new needs that have to be met for their well-being. Modernized societies often refer to the multi-complex situations that led their members to adopt secular beliefs (Taylor 2007). It also refers to the process of transmitting from a traditional to a modern society, where all the social sectors in life differ and the members are required to provide more skills and knowledge in order to survive to all of them. The complexity of such a situation led, as Woodhead and Catto (2012) explained, to a secular society, which withdraws from religious matters, due to the need for adaptation to the circumstances of the contemporary society. In other words, religion has become an unmentionable matter in the British society, same as sex in Gorer's work (1955) *The Pornography of Death*.

4 Social work in a secular society

Social workers are bound to build rapport with the people they work with. The competence level one demonstrates depends a lot on the knowledge that has been received on several matters. Nowadays the knowledge that is crucial for any professional practitioner, and social workers as well, derives from the multicultural, multi-ethnic, and multi-faith societies we live in. Based on the theory of secularization, societies have become multi-faith (Woodhead & Catto 2012). The variety of religious and/or nonreligious beliefs that are represented by the clients/patients is tremendous. It is also significant that as social workers we understand the importance of the variety, have self-understanding of our own unique religious or spiritual beliefs and values, and also have an understanding of the beliefs and values of our clients/patients, and the disparities between the last two.

Being religiously competent is an add-on skill and competency for social workers in the UK. The UK Cencus 2011 showed that the percentage of people who do not belong to a certain religion arose by 15% (25%) since 2001. It is inevitable to avoid the changes that are taking place in the society where social work practice takes place in, and it is also unavoitable to consider those changes and take actions related to the enhancement of the social work profession.

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