'River! that in silence windest'[1] **The place of religion and spirituality in social work assessment: sociological reflections and practical implications**

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Introduction

This paper explores the place of religion and spirituality in social work assessment. Place represents a topographic or locational concept that suggests an embeddedness within a physically bounded space, implying here that religion and spirituality are centrally important to the lives of many people and therefore necessarily part of the social work relationship between practitioners and their clients or service users.

A range of concepts and implications arising from the idea that religion and spirituality form a necessary part of quotidian social work practice require some discussion. First of all we must recognize that religion and spirituality are often seen as synonyms and we must first discuss this and suggest discrete definitions of each concept.

We also need to discuss assessment itself in social work, recognising the power relations and potential for the normative imposition of unspoken and taken-for-granted assumptions in making judgements about vulnerable people's ecologies and psychologies. This is problematised further when we consider questions of vulnerability – a contested term in itself; who makes someone vulnerable, is it a quality or characteristic or does it reflect something structural, or both? Social work may be considered as a locally contextualized set of processes or moral practices that make statements about assumed vulnerabilities. We are taking this further by asking about religion and spirituality as one aspect of this collection of processes. This may project social work as both homogeneous, transferable and globally understood, an idea we will need to debate.

Accepting that all these concepts may be contested and problematic we can move forward to consider ways in which religion and spirituality may be assessed in social work, making reference predominantly to UK and US social work whilst being tentative in making any normative assumptions about this exploration. A number of models will be introduced, drawing out some of the potential meanings and consequences of these for interpersonal relationship and also for people's spiritual perspectives. A case example of the exclusion of religion and spirituality, notably Christianity, from UK social work in the recent past will be provided. This background prepares us for moving towards a sociological analysis of the state of play.

Defining religion, religiosity and spirituality

Wuthnow (1988) indicates that religion cannot be understood as a set of disembodied, abstract ideas and beliefs, but needs to be seen as a lived and social experience that reflects communal bonds and a sense of moral belonging. Along with Marx, Durkheim and Weber, Wuthnow also sees all faiths as concerned with three core elements: ultimate values, sacredness and transcendence.

The importance of assessment in social work practice and its problematic status

We have argued elsewhere that social work assessment represents a ubiquitous, although differentiated, activity across the world (Parker et al., *under review*). Assessments are varied, completed with diverse groups of people or clients, and are undertaken for

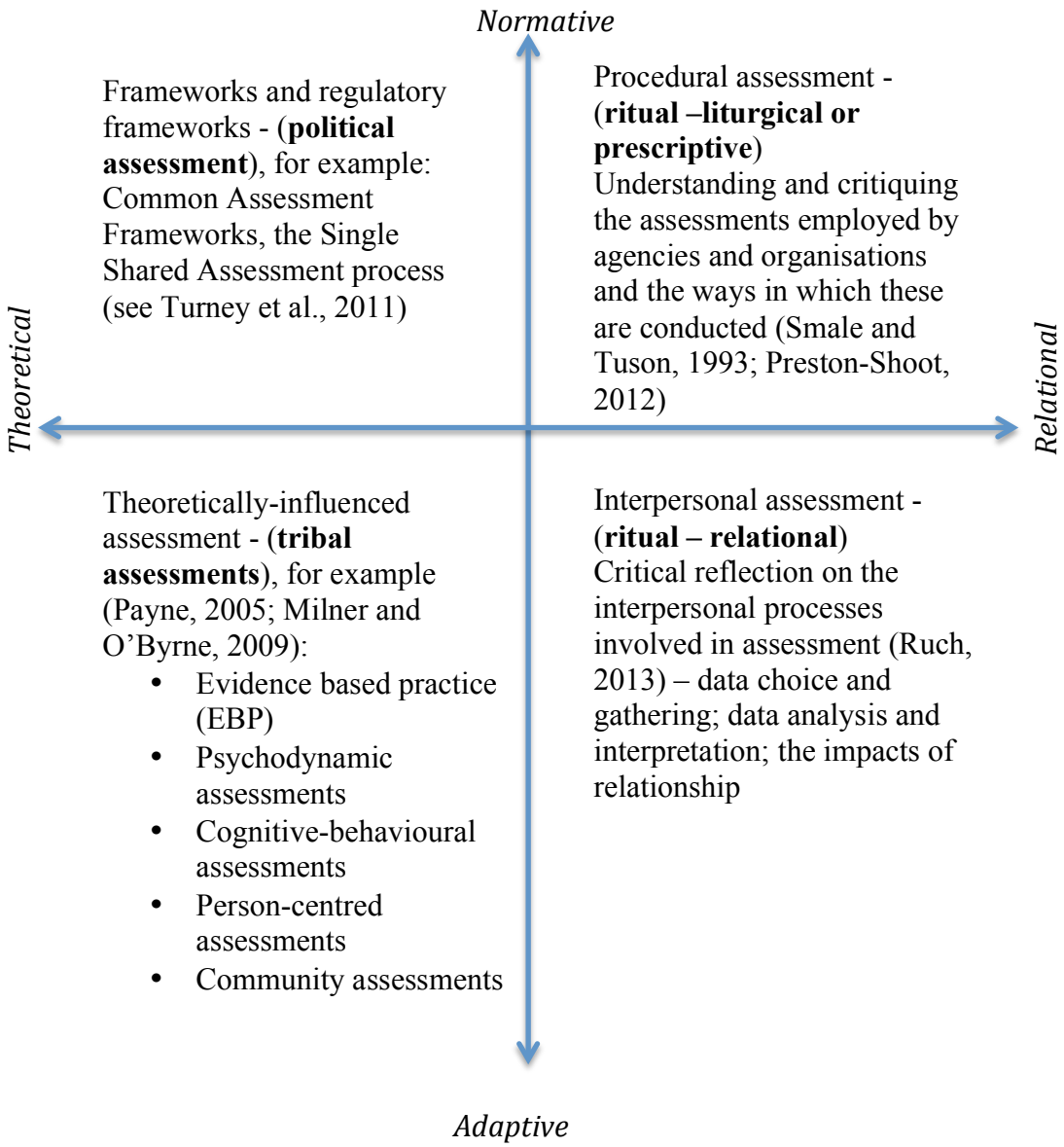
[1] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *To the River Charles*

different purposes. Assessments are 'akin to an exploratory study which forms the basis for decision-making and action' (Coulshed and Orme, 2006, p. 26). Describing social work assessment as 'a focused collation, analysis and synthesis of relevant collected data pertaining to the presenting problem and identified needs' (Parker and Bradley, 2014, p. 17), portrays it as purposeful and professional filling the interstices of complex human lives with tasks designed to populate a planned social work process. Assessments such as these may also be driven by social regulatory frameworks, spoken or unspoken, and promulgate governmental or received societal norms at a practice level. They may also be led by different disciplinary approaches or political purposes such as helping at individual or community levels, forming various plans for action, and even promoting praxis by participatory involvement. They need to be critiqued rather than accepted as a given since they weigh and evaluate settings, circumstances, people and/or events as part of a broader discourse of need, power and values, often reflecting a presumed or possible legitimacy or illegitimacy of those assessed.

Because of the ecological, social and political contexts in which social work assessments are undertaken and the many purposes to which they are put, all forms of assessment practice run the risk of inducing normative behaviour: following the rules prescriptively as though they represent unquestionable 'givens'. Therefore, social work assessments need to be 'troubled' and subjected to critical analysis (Parker, 2015).

Grouping social work assessments around particular purposes can help illuminate the meanings constructed in the acts of assessment and identify impacts that assessment may have on individuals. The following model clusters social work assessments around the following types: prescribed and political approaches, 'tribal' allegiances fostered by theoretical ideologies, and processes or rituals involved in the 'dance' or inter-relational conduct of assessment (Parker and Bradley, 2014; Parker, 2015; Parker et al., *under review*).

Fig 1 Meanings of assessment in social work (Source adapted from Parker, 2015)



Religious and spiritual assessment in social work - an overview
According to Rana Jawad (2009) religious welfare organisations in the Middle East, focusing particularly on Lebanon, retained control in deciding the needs of those requesting assistance whilst those who did apply did so in desperation and with passivity. This she considered is tied to the social, political and geographical characteristics of the region.

In Lebanon the Ministry of Social Affairs is an administrative intermediary between applicants and religious welfare organisations (RWO) so it is at the level of the RWO that a full assessment of needs and eligibility is undertaken.

It is the RWO that is considered expert in defining problems and deciding how best these should be treated. Assessment is unidirectional (Jawad, 2009). This is because those who request assistance or services are not considered to have sufficient insight and no doubt there is a gendered perspective to this in that the majority of clients are dependent women. This situation remains for many RWOs including Emdad, Dar al Aytan and Caritas. However, Caritas is changing its philosophy to one of enablement and is becoming somewhat more reflexive whilst still retaining its 'expert' role to define needs.

Importantly, in Lebanon the RWOs are geographically specific and applicants tend to be religiously homogeneous meaning that patterns of entitlement are geographical and sectarian (Jawad, 2009).

Ashencaen Crabtree et al. (2008), focusing on Islam specifically, acknowledge that spirituality and religion is recognised is UK social work assessment it is still pushed to the margins. Holloway and Moss (2010) draw upon a wide literature from health and social care and focus on spirituality as a wider concept than religion. They identify four approaches to the assessment of spirituality that are relevant to social work. These comprise:

1. A generic approach that acknowledges the importance of spirituality in a person's life
2. The systematic measurement of the degree and significance of spirituality for the person, including spiritual need and as a coping mechanism
3. A biographical approach concentrating on personal narratives
4. Holistic approaches including overlapping domains of the person's ecology

Generic approaches: recognising spirituality:
This generally includes an open-ended assessment allowing an individual to identify issues of spirituality but it does require the practitioner to be personally aware of their own spirituality (see Thompson, 2007).

Measuring spirituality:
These derive form the US and are not often employed win the UK. McSherry and Ross (2002) review a range of these measures and instruments in the context of nursing practice. This approach uses lists of indicators that provides a 'score' of spirituality or religiosity.

Spiritual narrative:
This approach is recognised in the US and promoted by Hodge (2001; 2005) in particular (Parker and Bradley, 2014). Narrative approaches are qualitative in nature but can move

from open-ended approaches through to stage theories reflecting a spiritual journey towards maturity. The approach allows the individual to present a storied approach to spirituality that reflects the importance of spirituality in quotidian and transcendent life. Furness and Gilligan (2010) describe the use of spiritual histories, life maps, ecomaps and ecograms to seek religious narratives from people. Parker and Bradley (2014) add cuturagrams to this mix.

The domain approach:
Skalla and McCoy (2006) identify an approach that considers various ecological domains and dimensions presenting the Mor-VAST model which covers the importance of spirituality in terms of:

- Moral authority – self-management
- Vocational – life purpose
- Aesthetic – beauty and creativity
- Social – relatedness to others
- Transcendent – sense of awe and sacred

Furness and Gilligan (2010) focus on religion primarily rather than spirituality bringing religion to the fore in UK social work practice. They identify a range of models of cultural competence that set the backdrop from which religiosity and the importance of religion in the lives of clients can be assessed. These include (a) Howell's (1982) four-stage model of development and learning moving from unconscious incompetence to conscious competence, (b) Cappinha-Bacote's (1999) ASKED (awareness, skills, knowledge, encounter and desire) model, promoting sensitivity to one's own beliefs and developing through a reflective cycle to other aspects of sensitivity, (c) the transactional model of cultural identity (Green, 1999) seeks to move beyond traits and characteristics to a relational understanding of diversity and complexity, (d) awareness and sensitivity to difference (Papadopoulos, 2006) represents a four-stage model to examine own beliefs and the impact of these on others. The four stages of the latter comprise promoting cultural awareness, gaining cultural knowledge, becoming culturally sensitive, and demonstrating cultural competence.

Furness and Gilligan (2010) also identify a range of models that aid cultural competence when directly assessing religion and religiosity. They recognise the importance of open-ended questioning which allows individuals to express themselves as they wish, and also recognise the differences and variations inherent within religions as well as between them. The rationale for assessing religion and spirituality is because daily practices and routine activities may be profoundly influence by these beliefs and therefore require understanding and to do so involves careful and sensitive questioning.

Furness and Gilligan (2010) provide a framework for assessing the significance or religion and belief recognising, as Ashencaen Crabtree et al. (2008) the paucity of such in the UK. Their model is constructed around a person-centred and strengths perspective that requires a reflexive and sensitive questioning.

They recognise the importance of integration into existing assessment frameworks such as the Single Assessment Process (Department of Health, 2002) or the Framework for Assessment of Children on Need and their Families, Common Assessment Framework (2006) in which cultural and religious differences are recognised as important. Furness and Gilligan's (2010) framework includes the following:

- awareness and reflexivity about one's own religious or spiritual beliefs or their absence
- asking whether people have sufficient opportunities to discuss their religious and spiritual beliefs
- asking whether the social worker listens sufficiently
- inquiring where a person's expertise in respect of self is recognised
- questioning whether the social worker is open and willing to revise assumptions
- asking if the social worker is building a trusting relationship that is respectful and willing to facilitate the wants of the person
- probing the capacity of the social worker to be creative in response to an individual's beliefs
- ensuring the social worker has sought sufficient information and advice about religious and spiritual beliefs

A case study example in education - an example of inverted oppressive practice

A mature student undertaking a Master's degree in social work at the University of Hull approached one of us (Parker) in the late 1990s. I had delivered a lecture on social work practice, assessment, power and the potential for oppression and she had been struck that I had mentioned religion and spirituality. My comments had resonated with her understanding that such matters were generally excluded from discussion in social work at the time, almost being archived under the label of older oppressive constructs. It was interesting to develop the conversation to examine the centrality of respect for diversity, multiculturalism and multi-faith worlds that privileged new age belief systems, Islam, Hinduism, Sikhism and recognised the toxicity of anti-Semitism but aligned Christianity to the order of oppression. The student was herself a practicing Christian and felt under some degree of obligation to keep quiet her beliefs and as though they were something to be frowned upon and, bizarrely, anti-Social Work.

Towards a sociological understanding of religious and spiritual assessment in social work practice

The importance of spiritual and religious assessment in social work is increasingly acknowledged and frameworks are being developed. The rationale employed for this growth in interest, awareness and practice concerns the multi-faith composition of our communities, recognition of difference and acknowledgement that religion and/or spirituality reflects a central component in the lives of many people. Except for a continued focus on reflexivity there is little still on the centrality of religion and spirituality in the lives of social workers and human service workers themselves.

Sociologically, there are a number of ways we can begin to understand this turn towards religion and spirituality including: concepts of super-diversity, normativity and power, labeling theory, deviance and social problem construction and ideas from sociology of religion.

Super-diversity:

Super-diversity was used in 2007 by Vertovec (2007a, b) as a summary term in the context of global changing migration patterns, indicating that changes are wider than expanding numbers of ethnicities, languages and countries of origin, but including:

> a multiplication of significant variables that affect where, how and with whom people live. In the last decade the proliferation and mutually conditioning effects of a range of new and changing migration variables shows that it is not enough to

> see 'diversity' only in terms of ethnicity, as is regularly the case both in social science and the wider public sphere. In order to understand and more fully address the complex nature of contemporary, migration-driven diversity, additional variables need to be better recognized by social scientists, policy-makers, practitioners and the public. These include: differential legal statuses and their concomitant conditions, divergent labour market experiences, discrete configurations of gender and age, patterns of spatial distribution, and mixed local area responses by service providers and residents. The dynamic interaction of these variables is what is meant by 'super-diversity'. (Vertovec 2007a: 1025)

Vertovec (2014) highlights that over 300 publications have employed the term super-diversity since 2007. Use has been global, spanning many different disciplines and used in many different ways from expanding focus on ethnicities to complex and multilayered concerns with contemporary society. Indeed, at the University of Birmingham there is a research institute, IRiS, dedicated to studies of super-diversity (http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/research/activity/superdiversity-institute/index.aspx).

The multi-layered complex concept of super-diversity helps us in understanding the turn to assessment of religion and spirituality in seeing culture of social work breaking from a more traditional emphasis on professionalism that bounds it within its own closed system and moving towards a complex, understanding of diverse groups of peoples presenting perhaps at a macro and meso level particular religious and spiritual beliefs whilst sporting multi-layered variations within those at familial and individual levels.

It shows, furthermore, that social workers are becoming more aware of the impact of religion, spirituality and differences in belief systems that have been dismissed in times when atheistic humanism held sway over assumed outmoded theistic and, indeed, non-theistic faith systems. What the concept of super-diversity also does is to demand awareness of the complex, nuanced aspects of belief that require acceptance, at times, of a lack of or a requirement for further knowledge of those systems of belief within a context of respect, i.e. acknowledging the importance of those beliefs to the individual and to their daily lives.

Normativity and power:
The UK is nominally a Christian country although church attendance has decreased in Anglican and non-denominational churches. Church attendance has increased, however, in Roman Catholic churches reflecting some of the changing patterns of migration in the early years of the twentieth century. Judaism was once the second most common religion in the UK, stemming, predominantly, form widespread Jewish immigration from Eastern Europe at the beginning of the twentieth century and less so from people coming in around the time of World War II. Today, Islam is the fastest growing religion and second largest religion in the UK, again reflecting migration trends. However, these changes are not solely concerned with migration but with changes in daily practices and associated concern with these belief systems within those communities most likely to be associated with them.

Unspoken, take-for-granted assumptions are made about the UK being a Christian country, with a prevailing view that, should one be asked about religion, the forthcoming answer would be one of a ubiquitous non-thought-through 'C of E', almost a religious monogram for 'no religion'. The accepted and assumed status of the Church of England as a figurehead that commands little respect and devotion acts normatively in influencing

many social workers' attitudes and approaches. Of course, the preceding sentence could be construed as reflecting a normative bias in itself suggesting that UK social workers are White British Church of England Christians, whilst reality is far different and the profession diverse. However, the assumptions of the UK hold and influence many in powerful ways that unless revealed permeate practices and thoughts about those practices. Thus it is imperative for social workers to understand their potential complicity in biased assessment of religiosity and spirituality and concomitant demand for critical awareness and reflexivity as called for by Furness and Gilligan (2010).

Labels, deviance and social problem construction:
One of the enemies of critical reflexivity and acknowledgement of the complex intersection of a super-diverse society is a culturally occluded consideration of the characteristics and 'essential' features of various religions and belief systems. Thus, for example, there is great potential for the labelling of all Pentecostal Christians as fervent believers in the importance of violent exorcism in children with ADHD, of all Jews as Zionist Israeli sympathizers, of all Muslims as radicalized terrorist sympathizers, and all Buddhists as sandal-wearing chanters of strange hippy-like mantras. Of course, some people in these religions may reflect exactly those caricatured types but diversity of belief, the intersection of other differences and variation within individuals will quickly disabuse such thinking if an open, inquiring and sensitively questioning mind is fostered.

The labels that reflect some of the assumed stereotypes may result in presumptions of deviance and by some a secondary deviance displayed as a result. For instance, assumptions that the Roman Catholic priesthood are associated with long-standing child abuse and implicated within a conspiracy to hide the 'truth' of this may have such an impact on a social worker that she or he finds it difficult to accept, listen to and work with the priest who sets up and works directly with a youth organization to steer children and young people in pro-social activities in an area once known for crime.

Surinder Guru (20XX) also indicates how the families of, Muslim, men arrested and or charged with terrorist offences have been labeled as deviant themselves by wider society and treated as such. This identifies a social problem construction that reflects some of those unspoken assumptions and influences the thoughts and behaviours of people, including social workers, to the accepted problem. The general public, which it must be remembered is diverse, multiethnic, and multifaith, has been informed of the problem of the radicalization of Muslim youth, this has been accepted, almost uncritically leading to Home Office attempts to increase the securitization of Muslim families in particular. This in itself is something that social workers maybe should challenge in accordance with their commitment to social justice and values. However, not only is this securitization being accepted but it is something that is beginning to make reporting and monitoring demands on social workers themselves who potentially become complicit in making groups deviant. So, an awareness and sensitive approach to understanding a person's religion and spiritual beliefs is something that accords with social workers wanting to retain integrity and promote social justice. It also allows social workers to be part of that spiritual and religious world and to move beyond the atheistic presumptions of late twentieth century social work in the UK.

Sociology of religion:
There has been a growth in approaches to the sociology of religion (Clarke, 2009). Whilst religion has fascinated sociological thought since the times of Durkheim, Weber, Marx and so forth it is today when recognition of the centrality of religious and spiritual beliefs

is increasingly accepted that sociology of religion offers much to our understanding of and approaches to the world. This is no less the case for social work practice. The fluid, multilayered understandings of religion signal its complexity and the need for care in assessing and working with people's religious beliefs. There is no room for a complacent unquestioning acceptance that religious belief can be 'essentialised' and understood by reference to known traits and characteristics. There is, however, a call in the contemporary world for observing and understanding how religion and spirituality influences the everyday behaviours, activities and practices of individuals. In social work, this requires critical reflexivity and openness if individuals using social work services are to be responded to with the appropriate respect and sensitivity demanded of a profession boasting its social justice, human rights credentials and value-base.

Workshop - questions (45-50 mins)

Do social workers assess the importance and/or meaning of religion and/or spirituality in people they are working with in social work organisations in your country?

How is this undertaken?

Are there any guidelines from academics, practitioners, organisations, governments to help with religion and spirituality assessments?

What do you think are the important factors to consider if you are assessing a person's religiosity and spirituality?

Do you think it is important to assess the significance and meanings of religion and spirituality in the people with whom social workers practice?

What should happen in future social work assessments if religion and spirituality is to represent a core feature of that assessment?

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