

The "Social" in Social Work Practice  
Shamans and Social Workers

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#### Abstract

By neglecting the religious dimension, social work practice has not only negated its social roots, but also deprived both client and worker of a valuable source of help. Chinese shamanic healing is contrasted with casework practice and implications are drawn for re-establishing the "social" dimension in social work practice.

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#### **The “Social” in Social Work Practice**

The origins of social work in the nineteenth century arising from the charitable organizations in England and the USA are a familiar tale. Goldstein (1990:32) regarded the “social” in social work to be an expression of the profession’s commitment to “charity, philanthropy, and caring...”. Human suffering was addressed in the form of charity work, social reform and social action. The onslaught of the 'psychiatric deluge' in the early years of the twentieth century, however, anchored social work problems onto personal psychopathology. Subsequent development as shaped by leading figures like Hamilton (1940), Perlman (1957), and Hollis and Woods (1981) established social casework as a psychosocial process of helping effected through the relationship between the caseworker and the client, targeting individual change. Re-dress made to this narrowing of attention to the psychological person occurred in the late nineteen fifties and sixties, in the form of the inclusion of family members in the process of helping.

Nevertheless, such an expansion on the stage of helping did not seem to stop the continuing focus on the individual. From the 1980s, social work practice with individuals, families, and small groups came to be called “clinical social work” (Bisman, 1994: 7), and social workers as psychotherapists, denoting a strong focus on the inner psyche, such that

the client's environment received less and less attention. Casework practice had lost sight of its heritage, the perspective of person-in-environment so wisely propounded by Richmond (1917).

### **Religion and Social Work**

While religious charity gave birth to social work, the religious foundations from which it sprang did not fare better in social work practice. As Bullis (1996:6) puts it, "For the most part spirituality in social work literature is conspicuous only by its absence". Loewenberg (1988) cited the reasons for such neglect: the anti-religious orientation in the psychoanalytic movements, the atheistic orientation of social workers, and the rivalry between religious professionals and secular social workers. Historically, the profession's eagerness to become scientific (Heineman, 1981) rendered religion a taboo subject. Neither the elusive world of the gods and spirits nor the individual's concerns with his or her own soul fit into the positivistic worldview. This position lasted until very recent times, when epistemological debates in social work resulted in the acceptance of alternative paradigms (Reamer, 1993).

In the literature, a distinction is often made so that religion is associated with the institutional aspects of organized systems of beliefs and practices, while spirituality refers to the inner feelings and experiences of the immediacy of a higher power (Joseph, 1987; Prest and Keller, 1993). This paper takes the inclusive position so that the religious or spiritual dimension refers to the various expressions of people's faith in a higher being(s),

faith being “an internal system of beliefs and values which relates one to the transcendent or ultimate reality and orients one’s life and behaviour accordingly” (Joseph, 1987:14). Further, the constructivist perspective (Dean, 1992/3) is also taken, the view that reality cannot be known apart from our constructions of it. Being social actors, we construct a world of meaning that is culturally situated, embodied in people’s beliefs and actions. A client’s religious framework is thus an essential part of his/her beliefs and therefore cannot be omitted in the discourses between the worker and the client.

The following instance of Shamanic healing as an example of the importance of religion for people who may also be social work clients and hence for social work is taken from a Society, Hong Kong, where religious rituals and events are readily available from a variety of religious personnel within and outside of institutions.

### **Shamanic Healing**

Shamanism is the belief that certain individuals can influence spiritual entities to perform healing services for clients (Eliade, 1963). Walsh (1990:11) considered it as the most ancient of human services, and defined it as “the family of traditions whose practitioners focus on voluntarily entering altered states of consciousness in which they experience themselves or their spirit(s), travelling to other realms at will, and interacting with other entities in order to serve their community”. A shamanic worldview is thus cosmic, transcending heaven and earth and the underworld (Canda, 1983).

## **Chinese Shamanic Healing – The case of “Beating the Little People”**

At least a quarter of the population in Hong Kong are frequenters of the traditional temples (Hui, 1988). The services provided in the temples include a) cleansing rituals for changing the wheel of fortune in life, b) thanksgiving, c) asking blessings of the gods, and d) rituals for the dead. Rituals may also be performed in street corners or at home, they also differ in the degree of involvement of the clients in the proceedings. A very popular ritual called literally “Beating the little people” will be used to illustrate the kinds of experience a temple-goer may have. The reasons for choosing this particular ritual, amongst many others available, are that it is relatively brief and simple, and apparently primitively superstitious to unsympathetic professionals.

The purpose of the ritual is to ward (beat) off enemies of all kinds - the "little people". To request the ritual, anyone can walk into a temple, or go to a particular street corner where temporary small altars have been set up by shamans who are usually older women. The incantations of the ritual to be presented are translated and abridged from a recording of the ritual performed in the street.

### **a) Preparation**

A sand basin with incense sticks and candles serves as an altar. A client first buys a package containing joss sticks, paper images of human figures, ghosts in chains, green horses, a wheel of fortune, and paper money.

### **b) The ritual**

The ritual begins with the Shaman asking for the name of the client who sits next to her throughout the ritual, and performs actions whenever called upon to do so. The Shaman then goes into a rhythmic incantation:

#### **I) Invocation of the gods and presentation of the client**

/Offering once, offering twice/XXX (name of client) begging the gods for good fortune/For dispersion of the little people/That you (client) may run into good luck/Business being prosperous, all things be well/Wishing all is harmonious and smooth/Every step be unhampered that you meet with the noble one/.../The ugly be sent far, far away/The noble one is met/Begging for the strength of the gods/Begging the gods for good fortune...

II) Beating the little people

Using an old canvas shoe, the shaman starts beating vigorously the several paper figures of humans, now placed on the ground, while continuing chanting in rhythm with the beating:

/Beating the little people/Sending away the little people/Saying good-bye to the little people/Male, female, old, young little people/Red eyes, green eyes little people/Little people who stir up trouble and conflicts/Little people gossiping/There dissolving there dispersing/There leaving there detaching/ (Calling on the little people in all shapes and sizes from all corners of the universe)/Begging the gods for good fortune/Beating the little people/Punishing the little people/All little people...

III) Dissolution of evil things

The incantation stops temporarily, the shaman asks if the client belongs to a church organization, if yes, she skips the following action of circling and waving a packet of paper offerings over the client's head while continuing the chant:

/There dissolving there dispersing/There leaving there detaching/Sending the little people faraway/Meeting the noble one/Green horse supporting/That everything wished for will come true/That you stride in good luck...



IV) Praying for good fortune

/Man begging for the gods' power/Begging the gods for good fortune/All things go well...

V) Offerings

The beating of the paper figures stops. The shaman burns the figures together with the other images, paper money and the wheel of fortune, saying:

/Sincerely, sincerely asking/

More incense sticks are placed in the sand basin and rice grains are dispersed over it.

VI) Confirmation

The ritual ends with the shaman throwing onto the ground the divination blocks, two half moon-shaped wooden blocks with one flat side and one curved side. Endorsement from the gods is indicated when two different sides show up after the blocks are thrown, to which the shaman says:

/Good sign, good sign, all things go well/

The client pays the shaman a small sum of money and the whole ritual is concluded. The ritual lasts about fifteen to twenty minutes, with a temple ritual being longer.

c) *Analysis of the ritual*

This ritual may be regarded as a piece of superstition by the educated, yet believers seek it out throughout the year. One family member can request the ritual on behalf of another, or of the whole family. Some may request it as a preventive measure to bring them good fortune. There is no restriction as to the kinds of problems needing amends; these may range from broken-hearted love affairs to business failures and interpersonal squabbles - problems faced by the anxious or the depressed.

To understand the ritual, one must assume the shamanic worldview. Many cultures have some form of beliefs in spirit possession, in that a person can be disturbed by an enemy through the guise of an evil eye or evil spirits (Maloney, 1976). A person may be possessed, or his/her enemy may be possessed, thus acting in a harmful way towards the person. In either case, harm results from the intrusion of malevolent spirits. In *Beating the Little People*, the solution is for the shaman to call upon the gods to beat off evil. Harmony for all is the aim ("Wishing all is harmonious and smooth"), with the evil beings banished rather than destroyed, and good luck is brought by good spirits as symbolised by the green horse as the messenger between heaven and earth. Changing of one's luck is effected in the burning of the paper wheel of fortune, thus bringing hope for a new beginning. The efficacy

of the whole ritual is ensured by a series of symbolic actions - the chanting for the presence of the gods and their benevolence; the beating of the enemies, and the thoroughness with which they have been rounded up; the offerings made in the name of the client; and the final endorsement of right actions performed as confirmed by the divination blocks which proclaim the will of the gods.

What is the psychological and social work relevance of the ritual?

### **Chinese Shamanic Healing as Therapy**

Walsh (1990) regarded shamanic healing to involve skilful psychotherapeutic techniques like suggestion and expectation in a variety of rituals, all of which may elicit powerful placebo effects. Hufford (1993) found that the beliefs of individuals who subscribed to religious healing are not only rationally ordered but also empirically founded. Similarly McClenon (1993:117) found beliefs in shamanic healing to be based on experiential "proofs" the client gains from the experience of a religious ceremony. In other words, shamanic healing makes rational sense to the believers. Hsu (1976) has long ago analysed the tradition of Chien Drawing (drawing lots) in Chinese temples and found the practice to give hope, eliminate anxiety, strengthen self-esteem, and reinforce adaptive social behaviour for the believer. As Kleinman (1980) argued, the believers may have a different explanatory model of their troubles from that of the therapist. Without knowledge of these models the professional work performed entirely within Western theoretical concepts becomes ineffective.

Seen from a psychological perspective, Chinese shamanic healing embodies several therapeutic features. In the believer's world, it is the gods who heal through the shaman's actions. Limitations of the human agent are immediately overshadowed by the power and authority commanded by the gods. Further, performance efficacy is ensured by the execution of careful rituals. A relative may also represent a client, or treatment may be rendered according to the convenience of the client or his/her representatives whether on their way to the market or to work. There are no constraints posed by an appointment system. As healing rituals are performed in full view of other temple visitors or passers-by in the street, confidentiality is a non-issue, in contrast to the enormous importance it plays in psychotherapy.

With regard to the healing itself, this is delivered in the common language and expressed in terms of popular beliefs shared between the client and the shaman. Examples are the attribution of problems to evil elements, as in the case of "Beating the Little People", or in other rituals, ill fate or infringement of the rights of the gods and spirits (Ng, 1995). As the formulation of problems is phrased in terms rooted in everyday conversations, there is no need to employ a special scientific language as in psychotherapy, a language that is more familiar to the worker than to the client. There is no talk about tangled up emotions in terms of the Oedipus Complex or the client's conditioning history.

Of further importance is that healing is extended beyond the client to the community, ultimately restoring all participants to peace and harmony with society, indeed with the universe. Such a holistic approach is grounded in a social, culturally constructed,

reality. The therapeutic effects are generated through the reintegration of people into a supportive religio-social network. The performance efficacy of the gods is also annually reaffirmed in festivals where thanksgivings from believers, particularly people who have received favours, are elaborately displayed, with the whole community taking part in the events. One good example is the Cheung Chau Bun Festival held in May each year in Hong Kong (Chamberlain & Lambot, 1990). Such an approach contrasts sharply with the therapeutic goals aiming at satisfying the needs of the individual, often through the lone efforts of a social worker as in much of individual casework, where the modern sufferer is seen as emotionally drowning in an alien world. Table 1 below summarises these characteristics in Chinese shamanic healing as compared to casework.

**Table 1 Comparison of Casework Practice and Chinese Shamanic Healing**

<b>Analysis</b>	<b>Casework</b>	<b>Shamanic Healing</b>
<b>1) Nature of Problem</b>	Problem phrased mainly in emotional terms	Wide range of problems – health, conflicts, business, future
<b>2) Explanation of Problem</b>	Bio-social, psychological	Demonology, taboo breaking, fate
<b>3) Source of Knowledge</b>	Theoretical, scientific	Everyday explanations
<b>4) Service Delivery</b>	By appointment, time-limited, fees	Walk in at any time, perform at will, non-commercial (low fees)
<b>5) Nature of contact</b>	Contractual	Non-contractual
<b>6) Atmosphere</b>	Formal, artificial, begins from zero contact, private, office-bound	Informal, a part of life, public
<b>7) Participation</b>	Staged talking cure, analytic, between person and person	Rituals (actions), holistic, between person and gods
<b>8) Therapist- client relationship</b>	Supportive, non-directive, special language skills	Supportive, directive, language embedded in culture
<b>9) Value</b>	Self - actualisation	Restoration of harmony for all

## **Social Work Implications**

What can social workers learn from shamans? The shaman's call for harmony for all is a good starting point. Expanding one's horizon from the individual and the family, through to the community, and indeed the cosmos is a challenging thought. Harner (1987:16) writes:

The experiences that come from shamanism tend to foster a great respect for the universe, based on a feeling of oneness with all forms of life. By getting into harmony one has much more power available to help others, because harmony with the universe is where the true power comes from. Then one is much more likely to lead a life that emphasizes love rather than hatred, and which promotes understanding and optimism.

The understanding and optimism that Harner (1987) speaks of could well be a plea for tolerance of religious diversity. Recall the shaman's endorsement of a client's possible church affiliations in the conduct of her ritual. Harner's (1987) call also provides a much-needed balance to re-dress the obsession with the private individual in casework practice. Not only do shamans provide a natural support system that is ancient in origin, the practice prompts us to reconsider issues like the artificiality of "scientific" therapy in its delivery of service, the language used, the limits of confidentiality, and most important, the goals and values implicit in the practice.

What relevance does the spiritual/religious dimension have for international social work? As social work core values include “the dignity and worth of the person”, and social workers are to be sensitive to cultural and ethnic diversity (National Association of Social Workers, 1999:1), this entails that all that encompasses an individual is valued, including his or her religious beliefs, and the right to have those beliefs valued in the social work process. Furthermore, as Kleinman (1980) argued, there are three overlapping sectors of health care in any cultural context: the popular section (individual, family or community beliefs and activities), the folk sector (folk medicine, shamanism and ritual curing), and the professional sector of which social work is a part, and any client may move across the three sectors in search of cure, bringing about what Kleinman (1980:53) called the “central hermeneutic problem”, meaning there are different interpretations of clinical reality regarding illness and cure. Over the years, awareness of the relevance of the practice wisdom of traditional healers has been mounting in social work practitioners working with clients who are ethnically or culturally different, and whose beliefs about the nature and causes of illness and other problems are vested in spirits and supernatural powers, as against that of the mainstream physical-medical, or psychological explanations so ingrained into social workers through their training. For example, over two decades ago, Delgado (1977) already recommended closing the gap between social workers and spirit mediums frequented by Puerto Rican clients by learning about the beliefs and practices of the Puerto Rican community or even conferring with a medium. Berthold (1989) also expressed similar views. More recently, Paulino (1995) wrote of a Latino client who went to a spiritist for help while attending counseling sessions. She found such dual utilization of services complemented each other. Puerto Rican spiritism aside, shamanistic practices in fact



permeate many other cultures, such as the Peruvian or Mexican curanderos (Jilek, 1994); the Hispanic and African American santiguando, santeria and vodoun (Paulino, 1995); the Cambodian krou kmer, the Hmong spirit medium, the Korean mudang (Canda, 1988; Canda, Shin & Canda, 1993); and Chinese shamans in Hong Kong and Singapore (Elliot, 1955; Myers, 1975; Ng, 1995; Topley, 1967), making an international array of indigenous healing traditions, and social workers must be cognizant of these on facing clients from diverse backgrounds.

But how may the religious dimension be made relevant in practice? On shamanistic practices, Delgado (1977) and Berthold (1989) wanted social workers to respect, learn about, or even confer with, spirit mediums. Canda (1988) emphasized self-inquiry in social workers to prepare them in interfaith practice, and suggested a comparative approach in social work education to encompass various religious perspectives (Canda, 1989). More recently, he argued for creating a spiritually sensitive context for practice based on five guiding principles which underlie all forms of helping relationship and context: value clarity, respect, client-centeredness, inclusivity, and creativity (Canda & Furman, 1999). In integrating spirituality into clinical social work, Bullis (1996) sees assessments and interventions as being relevant areas. He suggested the taking of a spiritual history to get an understanding of a client's spiritual territory; for interventions, he recommended encouraging clients to participate in spiritual groups, exploring spiritual elements in dreams and using spiritual meditation with clients. He also gave very specific criteria for using shamanic elements in social work practice, these include knowing the shamanic techniques and the shaman's reputation in the community, knowing how the

shaman sees the role of a social worker, cultivating a useful working relationship with the shaman, assessing the consistency of the assessment and intervention of the shaman, and ensuring the well-being of the client.

While there are many ways the religious dimension may be incorporated into clinical social work through the assessment and intervention process (Abramowitz, 1993; Klass, 1992; Prest & Keller, 1993), how may the social worker be trained to learn of the vast varieties of faith and practice? Dudley and Helfgott (1990) recommended that religious content can be infused in existing major foundation and advanced courses such as social work practice and Human Behavior and the Social Environment, or in specialized courses like Death and Dying, whereas in field practicum, including content on belief systems would facilitate field instructors to address issues relating to spirituality and indigenous beliefs. Consultation with community healers in the treatment of clients is also seen as desirable. In a collaborative project between the training institution and a community-based counseling agency, Tolliver (1997) developed a psychospiritual approach to train African American and Latino students to work with clients of African decent.

Despite the array of efforts made in incorporating the religious dimension in social work education, the issue still remains in that how is it possible for any student, or indeed, any practitioner, to learn, or just to learn of, all the different systems of faiths and practices across all ethnic groups and cultures? Given that from the believers' point of view, the experience of religious healing is founded on rational and experiential grounds (Hufford, 1993; McClenon, 1993), it is here argued that by placing religious beliefs at the same level

as all other beliefs which make up the world and actions of social workers and their clients, the impact of religion can be understood in the same way as all other kinds of issues within the social work process. Fundamentally what is needed is a development of the social workers' understanding of the role of beliefs, rules, and rituals in the world of the clients and also in themselves. Religion should be seen from the "active viewpoint of believers" (Paden, 1992: 70), and through the believers' descriptions of what they are doing and why, since "the truth that the real existence and character of the sacred object appears to be irrelevant in the generation of human religion except as the sacred is perceived through the medium of human belief" (Clarke & Byrne, 1993:52). By accepting what Clarke and Byrne (1993:51) called "methodological agnosticism", meaning understanding believers' actions without any commitment to the existence or non-existence of a real sacred object being made, the world of gods becomes amenable to study as are any other social contexts a client may be in. Based on such a rationale, Ng and Kvan (1998) outlined the content of a course on religion and clinical practice, leading students to examine the growth and maintenance of religious beliefs within a much wider social context to include both humans and non-humans, and to explore the subsequent impact of beliefs on people's actions. Expanding the social dimension in social work, to include all actors on the side of the clients, humans, spirits and gods, can only be regarded as befitting the vision embraced by the pioneers of the profession - serving the person-in-environment, but now in a fuller sense never envisaged by them.

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