

Doctoral Thesis (PhD) Title and Details of Submission:

Issues in Social Work Communication with Parents who are Christian: An Empirical Study Under-laboured by Critical Realist Principles

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Abstract

This empirical study uses critical realist principles in an under-labouring role to inquire what communicative tensions might lie beneath social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. The first empirical stage - 'thick description' - used qualitative methods within an intensive case study design to generate data of *both* the substantive event of social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication (the 'speech-act') *and* agential meanings of such action signifying contextual and experiential understanding:

1. A Forum Theatre performance to a volunteer sample of 31 qualifying and qualified social workers
2. Unstructured qualitative interviews with a sample of 12 volunteer social work service users (parents self-identifying as practising Christians) to create the basis for the performance script.

The second stage used critical-realist-appropriate analytic tactics from Grounded Theory (1967) to conduct the retroductive analysis. Key findings identified Christian parents being so mistrustful about revealing ontological commitments to their Christian living/parenting praxis that they altered their language - a wariness worsened by the social workers' absenting of Christian belief-talk through using formulaic strategies. The explanation tentatively outlined empirical, utilitarian, romanticist, and secularist structural inclinations, emanating from the profession's own Post-Enlightenment worldview commitments, as promoting instrumental moral reasoning and dissuading dialogue about personal spirituality. The study recommends changes in social work education and presents an example of a pedagogic method and some practical communication skills. The study fills in gaps within an under-researched field. Despite Britain's religious, spiritual, secular diversity, and despite national legislation and policy (England) directives, there appears a lack of specific UK empirical research investigating social workers *actual communication-in-action* with Christian parents during statutory parenting assessment. Further, wider *related* knowledge identifies social workers' communication about religious beliefs as largely ineffective and academics/practitioners holding preconceptions of Christian identity/beliefs/practices.

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