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Title: Social work communication with parents who are practising Christians: An empirical study

[1]*Johanna Woodcock Ross and [2]Andrew Wright

[1] Dr Johanna Woodcock Ross, Lecturer in Social Work, University of Kent, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, Chatham Maritime, Kent. ME4 4AG.

[2]Professor Andrew Wright, UCL Institute of Education, University College London, 20 Bedford Way, London. WC1H.

*Correspondence to be sent to: Dr Johanna Woodcock Ross, Lecturer in Social Work, University of Kent, School of Social Policy, Sociology and Social Research, Chatham Maritime, Kent. ME4 4AG. Email: J.WoodcockRoss@kent.ac.uk

Abstract

Given Britain's religious, spiritual, and secular diversity, and national legislation and policy directives such as The Children Act 1989 and Working Together to Safeguard Children, this empirical study addressed the lack of specific research investigating social workers actual communication-in-action with Christian parents during statutory parenting assessment. The research deployed the two complementary theoretical frameworks of critical realism and worldview studies to generate deep understanding of communication. Thick descriptions of the communication-act, social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication, and the attendant meanings attributed to this event by study participants, were generated from substantive data obtained from a) a Forum Theatre performance delivered to 31 volunteering qualifying and qualified social workers, and from b) unstructured qualitative interviews with 12 volunteering Christian parents. Analytic tactics from grounded theory were deployed to conduct the retroductive analysis. Key findings identified some shared social-worker-with-Christian-parent understandings. However, generally, Christian parents were 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.

Key words: Parents, communication skills, religion, adoption, fostering

1. Introduction

Specific empirical research investigating social workers actual communication-in-action with parents of practicing religious faith during statutory parenting assessment is lacking. Related knowledge, comprising literature reviews and small scale qualitative and quantitative studies show diversity among the attitudes of qualifying and qualified social workers towards religion and belief, and integration in their practice, with social workers lacking the knowledge and confidence to communicate with parents about matters of religious belief (Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Oxhandler *et al.,* 2015; Briggs and Whittaker, 2018). Increasingly, researchers emphasise the "legitimate and pressing" need for social work to talk and think informatively about the enduring but also evolving traditional forms and diversifying mixes of religious, spiritual, and secular belief preferences within Britain and other European and Western societies, so that in contrast to social work's prevailing presumptive lens of secularist irrelevancy, knowledge is required of the complex, contested nature of religion, spirituality and secularity (Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Holloway and Moss, 2010; Dinham, 2018, p.86). Taking the example of Christian affiliation, the Christendom of the UK has declined but beliefs are growing globally. Recent survey-data of Western Europe (The Pew Research Center, 2018) shows a summary picture that is "varying secular but also Christian and plural" (Dinham, 2018, p.86).

Social work's traditional anti-oppressive purposes uphold human rights and social justice and warrant working in a person-centred manner that respects peoples' own self-descriptions of their varying beliefs and values (BASW *Code of Ethics,* 2014). The most recent Global Statement of Ethical Principles (IFSW, 2018) specifically endorses the treatment of people as "whole persons" whose lives have "biological, psychological, social, *and spiritual dimensions*" (italics added); and that social workers should recognise and challenge discrimination and institutional oppression towards "religion" and "spiritual beliefs".

In specific regard to parenting assessment in Britain, national legislation and policy (England) directs social workers to identify how religious/non-religious and spiritual/non-spiritual beliefs, practices and networks (as 'contextual safeguarding influences') connect

with other bio-psycho-social-structural influences to potentially motivate aspects of family life and parenting capacity (The Children Act 1989, s22(5)(c); HM Government, 2018). Yet, with little empirical study of such relationships between religion, parents' motivations, and parenting practices (Phoenix and Husain, 2007), studies indicate such influences as either protective in affirming children's identity, strengthening families, and fostering safe and secure relationships for wellbeing such as providing meaning for life experiences, or offering a value system for parenting (Shor, 1998; Horwath *et al.,* 2008; Smith *et al.,* 2013), or as potentially increasing vulnerability to child maltreatment, with the term 'faith-based abuse' used, such as in relation to unregistered religious settings where children might not be adequately supervised and/or in circumstances where children are perceived to be witches or 'evil spirit-possessed' (Briggs and Whittaker, 2018). It is concerning that social workers' lack of communication agency could cause such positive or negative influences to be overlooked. In the absence of a research base, and social work curricula (Crisp and Dinham, 2019) there is a danger of misinformed assumptions and stereotyping, of hearing about religion and belief only when things go wrong, and of 'Othering' those whom make their beliefs visible. Studies have noted generalised assumptions and stereotyping about 'being a Christian', and a lack of discernment of differences, such as *between* traditions (such as Orthodoxy, Protestantism, Roman Catholicism), or *within* Christianity, such as denominational differences or varying individual positions to particular issues (variations of closed/traditional/exclusive to open/ /inclusive) (Canda, Furman and Canda, 2019).

This paper reports on an empirical study that aimed to critically explore what might be going on within such social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication contexts that is creating barriers and preventing communication agency.

2. Context

The profession has a conflicted history regarding the integration of religious and spiritual concerns in social work practice and education in highly secularized countries such as the UK. Researchers highlight social work's history of professionalising as a Post-Enlightenment Western idea – a secular-liberal-humanist project on behalf of a secular-liberal state that

sought to negate its residual confessional Christian heritage, and embraced psychological and social scientific epistemologies to secure its modern bureaucratic identity (Gray, 2008). The influence of religion became reasoned through an epistemic distinction between objective religious facts and subjective religious beliefs, bracketing out issues pertaining to that which cannot be observed by the senses or rationally argued by the human mind (such as, for example, 'transcendence')(Wright, 2013). Moreover, within a rise of reflexive liberal individualism and a social landscape of increased religious diversity, claims made by people to a way of living that is committed/obligated to an ordered metanarrative(s) are questioned for imposing oppressive, prescriptive relations, and restricting personal 'liberating' lifestyle choices (Gray, 2008). A 'spiritual-but-not-religious- discourse' has gained visibility by acknowledging spiritual sensibility as intrinsic experience (a universal form acceptable to a diversity of religious and secular inclinations) or as subjectively-constructed, eclectically-patterned spirituality/spiritualties understood as (or relativised into) identity and lifestyle choice (Gray, 2008; Shaw, 2016).

Where does this leave Christian parents, whose worldviews contain realist commitments to living-out transcendental purposes (metanarratives)? If the terms of communicative engagement are set by one party, might there be a potential danger of an inadvertent colonization/misinterpretation/absenting of realist-worldview-orientated parenting praxis of the second (Christian) party? The research reported here adopted two complementary theoretical frameworks designed to generate deep understanding of communication capable of grappling with the aforementioned complex and contested nature of religion arising from its diversity whilst avoiding the reduction of understanding of religious belief to a relativist level of lifestyle choice.

1. The philosophy of Critical Realism challenges the dominant Cartesian pursuit of epistemic certainty (that generated a dualistic distinction between relatively secure verifiable knowledge and relatively insecure unverifiable belief) as fallaciously reducing reality to solely our knowledge of reality, so that, for example, in our current world the realm of nature appears more 'real' as a consequence of the success of natural science, whereas the realms of morality and aesthetics appear less 'real' as a

consequence of the reduction of notions of goodness and beauty to the level of personal taste. Critical Realism asks the more circumspect question 'What must reality be like for us to experience it in the ways we do?' *Ontological realism* affirms that there is a deeply layered reality 'out there' – an open system - that exists largely independent of our ability to know it. Properties and powers of structural entities at a deep strata, the domain of the Real (such as religious doctrine/metanarratives), are potentially enacted through interplay with agential entities (such as social workers and Christian parents, their beliefs and projects) to produce events/effects (such as communication action, parenting praxis) in the domain of the 'Actual'. Only a portion of Actual occurring events/effects are potentially conceptually experienced (at an 'Empirical' level/domain) (Archer, 2003). Indeed, *epistemic relativism* affirms that though our knowledge of reality is often substantial it is always incomplete and at times mistaken. J*udgemental rationality* affirms the possibility of moving from less truthful to more truthful understandings of the reality we indwell (Wright, 2015). Critical realist Margaret Archer (2003) recognises the dynamic interplay between structures and agents – the macro-micro-linkage - and the consequent need to avoid conflating the two so that either structures are reduced to the sum total of individual agential actions, or agential actions are reduced to mere replications of structural wholes (such as the Cartesian surface-level portrayal of social workers operating within a secular framework of objective knowledge engaging with their Christian clients operating within a religious framework of subjective belief).

2. Worldview studies, in fields such as anthropology, comparative literature, philosophy, philosophy of science, theology and history, is driven by a concern to understand and assess fundamentally different ways of making sense of ourselves and the reality we indwell. Worldview theorists recognize that it is part of the human condition to ask primal questions of identity and existence, with the living out of the answers in the normative day-to-day life of a given culture, generating and constituting a given worldview, as evidenced by shared stories, symbols, institutions and praxis. A

worldview may be defined as "the foundational cognitive, affective, and evaluative assumptions and frameworks a group of people makes about the nature of reality which they use to order their lives" (Hiebert, 2008, p.25). Whilst the nature of reality (ontological realism) assumed by a particular worldview appears self-evident to its participants, outsiders inhabiting alternative worldviews may find them strange and even incredulous (epistemic relativism), resulting in a dissonance generating a variety of responses such as direct opposition, attempted colonization and concerns to empathise and understand the 'Other' (judgemental rationality). Worldviews are complex, dynamic and fluid entities: there is enormous diversity within any given worldview and the boundaries between differing worldviews are rarely clearly demarcated. Worldview participation is frequently implicit and tends to become explicit whenever alternative worldviews become apparent. Even when made explicit, they still tend to function as self-evident norms: thus secular references to 'all faiths and none' could be understood to function to ring-fence religious worldviews as dependent on extra-normative 'faith' and privilege secular worldviews as simply normative, despite the fact that all worldviews are dependent on non-foundational primal commitments.

At the risk of over simplification, and pointing the reader to relevant current debates in religious education (Wright, 2015), the dominant secular worldview consists of a matrix of naturalism, secular humanism and secular liberalism: naturalism affirms the natural order as the self-generating, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating bedrock of reality; secular humanism affirms human beings as the greatest known entities to have evolved from the bedrock of nature; secular-liberalism affirms the freedom of individuals to do as they choose by virtue of their status as the greatest living entities to have evolved from nature, tempered only by the requirement to tolerate those who choose to exercise their freedom in alternative ways. In sometimes sharp contrast, the Christian worldview identifies God as the self-generating, self-sustaining and self-perpetuating bedrock of reality: not the abstract omnipotent and omniscient God of philosophical reflection, but the personal Trinitarian God who in loving humanity unites himself with them in the incarnation of Jesus Christ. Christian

humanism affirms the dignity of human beings, created in the image of a God who elects to embrace their humanity. True freedom for the Christian lies, not in the exercise of personal autonomy *per se*, but rather in the exercise of personal autonomy in obedient response to the love of God extended to them (Wright, 2013).

These two theoretical frameworks, Critical Realism and Worldview study, do not provide answers to the question of the relative truth or falsity of alternative worldviews. Rather, they act as under-labourers, providing heuristic tools capable of providing deep understanding of the communicative praxis at work in interactions. Indeed, we recognise that it is from this context of contested worldview accounts that theoretical disputes wrestle with the nature of 'religion/religious phenomena' and whether religious or non-religious traditions have status as meaningful social facts/entities (as 'wholes') that can structure individuals' everyday decisions/living (as 'parts') or they are socially and culturally (artificially) constructed systems, the accidental sum of the 'parts' of diverse, individualised spiritualties, and therefore human constructs 'in name only' and a matter of personal lifestyle choice (Wright, 2008). In contrast, the worldview framework heuristically equips religious and non-religious worldview traditions to present their central focus (their instantiation by ontological reality claims) as not grounded in individualised or systemic reified abstractions. Rather it views their religious or non-religious events/objects/propositions/agential-actioned-projects as meaningful 'parts' (bearing claims to ontological substance) that co-mingle with the 'whole' of cohesive narratives, so that in such "webs of significance" ontological substance can be understood as "going all the way down" (Geertz, 1973, p.5). Thus, for example, when adherents make belief statements, these are claimed not merely as random, abstract propositions of personal lifestyle choice or individualised spirituality, but communication acts given meaning ('meaningful parts').

3. Methodology

The qualitative empirical research sought to achieve 'thick descriptions' (Geertz, 1973) of both the substantive event of social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication and the meanings attributed to it by individual agents (social workers and Christian parents). Case

study design (in-depth investigation of phenomena within their 'real-life' contexts - Simons, 2009) sought to expose the interplay of social mechanisms and illuminate the individual agential perceptions (Barron, 2013). Two different qualitative methods were used to produce two complementary data sets:

1.   Data from a sample of volunteer social work service users (parents self-identifying as practising Christians), generated by unstructured qualitative interviews

2.   Data from a sample of qualified social workers and final stage qualifying social work students, generated by the Forum Theatre method.

(1) Interviews with Christian parents. Twelve parent volunteers (five men, seven women) were recruited through their membership of Service User Consultative Groups in the South East of England. Ten were white British and two Asian-British. The majority were aged between 30 to 55 years, owner-occupiers and in part-time or full-time employment. All self-defined as 'practising Christian' (six charismatic/evangelical, three Anglican/evangelical, one Baptist, one Pentecostal), were weekly churchgoers and involved in weekday activities such as Bible study. All had received Tier 3 or 4 statutory social work Children's Services assessment and support: seven through foster and adoption processes, two through child protection processes, and three through crisis-intervention services to parents of children with disabilities. Given the sensitive topics of religious faith and social work intervention (Lee, 1993) the 'high risk' ethical protocols of the researchers' University institution were followed throughout (Kings College London SSHL Research Ethics Committee: reference number is SSHL/11/12-1).

The hour long interviews, conducted, recorded and transcribed by the first author, followed Archer in seeking to draw out, in a "receptive" and "non-directive" manner, the parents' "reflexive deliberations" and individual reasoning for actions as grounded in their "inner conversation" (Archer, 2003, p.161-162). The author's use of communication skills to encourage the verbal and non-verbal expression of thoughts and feelings, as well as reflexively recording those evoked in herself, was commensurate with Archer's conversational approach (Woodcock Ross, 2016). Analysis rooted in grounded theory and

informed by critical realism sought to establish a best-possible retroductive explanation of the data (Oliver, 2012). We note that the compatibility of Grounded Theory and critical realist enquiry has been subject to ongoing inquiry (see Fletcher 2017 for example) but we were persuaded by Oliver's (2012) argument of induction being better understood as a process of *abduction*, and that abduction concords with the critical realist premise for an iterative critically reflexive process of seeking increasing understanding of phenomena. A reflexive diary was maintained and discussed in monthly supervisions with the second author. This enabled a continual etic (external) questioning of the first author's emic (insider) perspective as a social worker and Christian parent. A two-stage process of open coding was used (Strauss and Corbin, 1998): a) sentence-by-sentence abductive analysis designed to identify words or phrases that particularly encapsulated sentiments being expressed and encourage the researcher to go beyond the blinkers of her familiarity with the data and/or personal/professional interpretations; b) a broader analysis questioning provisionally coded meanings by looking at individual sentences in the context of the surrounding pre- and post-commentary.

(2) Forum Theatre performance with social workers. Boals' (1979) Forum Theatre method of audience-participation, community-based 'street' theatre, though rarely utilized in social work research, has the potential to provoke participants' conscious recognition and reflection upon pre-existing structurally induced problems occurring within practice situations and develop realistic and dialogue-based (reflexive) strategies that identify/combat oppressive structural relations (in this case strategies that identify/advance communication capacity/agency) (Woodcock Ross, 2016). As it was ethically inappropriate to stop social workers' real-life interactions during parenting assessment, interviewing a sample of service users (parents), to provide the bases for the script, enabled their (service user) voices to be centrally positioned (not silenced) and social workers the safety to openly reflect and experiment with actions.

The two-hour Forum Theatre performance took place at a city-based University in the South East of England. The first author wrote the script in the light of her interviews with Christian parents and oversaw rehearsals with four paid professional actors. Three played out the

scenario of a social worker meeting with two married Christian parents undergoing assessment to be adoptive parents, whilst the fourth acted as a facilitator prompting audience interaction with the actors. The audience comprised thirty-one qualified social workers (practice educators) and final stage social work students at the brink of qualification, all with practice experience of statutory Children's Services. The first author video recorded the performance, as well as her own reflections of the dynamics of the performance.

Beginning first with trust games to relax the social worker audience, Part 1 of the performance involved the social worker audience watching the dramatised script without active participation, enabling them to 'take in', and be 'provoked' by the parental perspectives of social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication. In Part 2 the script was re-performed, but this time with the social worker audience encouraged by the 'Facilitator' to call out to 'freeze' the action, reflect upon/discuss the communication dynamics, and then to participate in communicative action strategies to alter it. The forum theatre method showed strength in 'provoking' social worker reactions and reflexions across the whole group straightaway and without much encouragement. Having articulated their reflexions, they then took over the role of the parent or social worker within the drama and went about changing the dramatised dialogue. The Facilitator then sought audience reflexions upon whether and how the altered action was successful. Transcriptions of the video recording were analysed using the same two-stage method employed on the interview data.

The methodology offered a degree of triangulation. Having one data-set followed by the other gave the opportunity to question researcher interpretation of the representations claimed by the parents (of their social workers and their actions) for it was possible to see if those representations were played out (or not) within the social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication action and reflexions. The limitation was in there being less depth of *individual* social worker reflexions that might potentially reveal how particular responses or 'absences' related to individual personal characteristics.

4. Findings

All the parents acknowledged that their faith commitments motivated their parenting relationships. They stated responsibility in wanting the best for their children and sought to provide them with a hospitable, safe, and accepting environment in which they could flourish. However, they also: (a) affirmed the intrinsic value of their children as persons created by and gifted to them by God; (b) acknowledged a vocational calling to live out their faith by provide loving care; (c) insisted on the freedom of their children to establish a relationship with God in a non-coercive manner consistent with the Biblical narrative.

> David: With a foster child in our care we recognise that they are a guest….our job is hospitality towards them. I have temporary guardianship of that foster child, and so I want to care for all the needs that that child wants me to. So as they see our family and they ask questions about why we do what we do, my job is to explain that in an even handed way and let the child take it or leave it, basically because a key element of the Christian faith is the opportunity to choose… No one can force anyone to have engagement with God because part of the deal is that God gives freedom to human beings.

Whilst many parents affirmed the church environment as inclusive, enjoyable, entertaining and relevant, most encountered assumptions on the part of social workers that churchgoing was enjoyment-sapping, rule-based and indoctrinatory. Many reported an interrogative questioning of their beliefs and values as abstract principles 'added-on' to normal life, rather than an empathetic exploration of their parenting as an outworking of their holistic faith commitments.

> Iona: And it was also like "Well the children are going to be bored"… Our church isn't like that. I suppose you have a picture in your head of people in pews, with an organ and sit still and shut up. Ours' is the complete opposite of that and there's a band and the kids have a great time in classes and you know all [police-checked] people.

> Gary: The impression you get is that if you are a Christian it raises a flag. Therefore so you've got to look out for this, this and this. I think that at no point did we get the impression that they thought that it was a positive thing. It wouldn't give them any

comfort at all about what sort of people you were or how you did things. It just alerted them to potential dangers.

> Isobel: And this particular social worker came out and she was asking the normal kind of checking questions and she started saying, "Well about the faith, well, if your child came home and told you they were homosexual what would you say? What would you do?" We said, "We'd love them". We would! What else would you say? And the next question was, "If your child came home and the only invitation they'd ever received was to a Halloween party, what would you do then?" It was all very like, "If this happened, if this happened."

An alternative/additional reading to the social workers' use of hypothetical questions is that it reflected the social worker's role to consider what it might be like for a foster or adoptive child to come into a particular family. The Prospective Foster Carer Report Form (*Form F (England)*, Coram BAAF, 2018, p.6) requires questioning about the circumstances of possible parenting dilemmas and areas for possible conflicts. However, additionally, for the parents in this sample, the perceived lack of specific relevance to their parenting circumstances gave the impression that they were being questioned on their beliefs *per se*, and whether or not such beliefs were appropriate to being a parent. The selection of particular extreme hypothetical scenarios reinforced the parents' impression that their faith was being treated as 'problematic'. Furthermore, from the parents' perspective, such negative perceptions generated fear and resignation, and they consequently resorted to various counter-strategies: treating questions with mistrust and vigilance, avoiding revealing too much of their authentic beliefs, seeking a balance between being open but not too open to social worker questioning, stressing superficial rather than deep spiritual benefits of church experience, and employing politically-acceptable rather than explicitly Christian terminology in their answers. Such strategies tended to perpetuate the cycle of anxiety, confusion and misunderstanding.

> Lewis: I remember feeling a sense of disquiet about where this was going in relation to faith, issues around sexuality, and with issues around proselytisation. It was that

area of questioning that probably caused me the most discomfort or disquiet, probably because a lot of the time, I am trying to work out what's behind the question so that I can work out their start point and not necessarily what is being spoken about at the time.

David: I can understand why Christians sometimes get themselves in a bit of a mess trying to explain their spiritual experience when they don't share that vocabulary or understanding. So you know if someone says 'I felt God tell me to do this', if I am a social worker without that experience I'll think this person is hearing voices….I think it's not that anyone is trying to hide the truth, we are just trying to find a way to help someone else from a different community understand what we are doing.

In contrast to these negative experiences, two of the Christian parents relayed warmth and depth of understanding shown by their social workers. For example, Ellen (whose daughter suffered with multiple health difficulties) described her social worker not just showing interest in the challenges of her everyday parenting experience, but also capacity to reflectively listen to the *meaning* that Ellen ascribed to her circumstances. She recalled one specific instance of the social worker understanding "the struggle you have with suffering when you are a Christian" through comprehending the Christian significance of 'suffering' in relation to the overall Biblical narrative/Story. The display of religious literacy was not just through a preparedness to use the terminology, or recognition of the significance of its ingredients (such as the tensions raised concerning suffering) but her perception of the display of the Story in the affirming actions of the social worker herself. These demonstrated a valuing of her daughter's existence and their parent-daughter relationship, notwithstanding the tremendous difficulties.

However, generally, the parents were aware of asymmetrical power relations: the authority of social workers to curtail their parenting loomed large. They perceived the social worker's role as enacted within communication (officious and procedurally focused) and linked to their personal presentation (whether friendly, or insufficiently knowledgeable, or seemingly prejudiced). Thus, the data revealed parents exercising their agency by making intentional

choices about what they would communicate to social workers about their parenting based on the latter's formal responsibilities and personal priorities.

The Forum Theatre performance data revealed social workers' expectations of value-conflict, and varying levels of uncertainty, ambivalence and resistance when dealing with issues of Christian faith. They tended to replace reflective listening with formulaic responses whenever (role playing) parents used explicitly Christian language, employing exaggerated body language and projecting friendly smiling overtures, rather than seeking to discuss issues directly. For example, one social worker took the stage and responded positively when a (role-played) mother disclosed feelings about her own father's rapidly declining physical health, adjusting her body language and enacting the skill of articulating feelings into words to demonstrate 'reflective listening' (Woodcock Ross, 2016): "Oh that's brilliant that you've got that close relationship". However, when the mother went on to explain how it was more her church family that provided an emotional and practical support system, the social worker reverted to the formula of signalling in a friendly manner for the mother to continue by smiling, nodding and simply saying 'yeah'. When the mother went on to use explicit Christian belief terminology ("Yeah, so I feel like we're very blessed, in that respect"), the social worker floundered and sought ideas from the audience, which were not forthcoming.

The social workers repeatedly referred to Christian faith as 'the church issue'. Encouraged by the Facilitator to find ways to explore the parents' enactment of Christian faith in everyday life, one social worker focused repeatedly on the practice of 'going to church'. The parents responded by emphasising that 'church' was their 'family' not merely a place they 'attended'. However, the social worker missed the opportunity to explore this and focused instead on the issue of choir membership.

> Facilitator: Specifically what we are looking at today is the fact that they have a faith and how is that faith managed and discussed and talked about within that assessment. Can I encourage you to come and find a way to do this? (looks around the audience)

Social worker 13: (steps onto the performance area) So is your wider family involved in going to church as well? (quieter voice, leans forward, head slightly to the side, smiling)

Phil (Father): Very much so, my Mum is an active member of her church, the children are involved as well, that's where we met, yeah

Social worker 13: So a lot of family history of going to church?

Phil (Father): Our church is our family as a whole. Everybody mucks in together. Everybody is there to lend a hand. Lots of different things for young children to participate in.

Ruth (Mother): I run a youth group on a Sunday for 4 to 11 year olds so,

Phil (Father): We're trying to get our sixteen year old to lead the choir as well, so…

Social worker 13 (interjects, moves head forward towards them): Does she do a lot of singing?

Faced with this lack of listening, the parents (actors) became more guarded. One social worker asked whether the parents anticipated including their future adoptive children in church-based children's activities. Despite its warm and inquiring tone, the social worker appeared to either disregard or fail to notice both the parents' positive correlation of children's flourishing and church-based activities and their insistence that their Christian faith was not an optional 'lifestyle choice' but the fundamental basis of their daily life and parenting. Further, the social worker appeared sceptical that the children would actually choose to participate, thereby assuming the probability/possibility of a conflict of interest between parents and children. However, a presumption of coercion does not equate with the structurally-mediated expectation for freedom of choice arising within the Christian worldview – stipulated in the Biblical narrative:

David: So as they see our family and they ask questions about why we do what we do, my job is to explain that in an even handed way and let the child take it or leave it basically because a key element of the Christian faith is the opportunity to choose…

No one can force anyone to have engagement with God because part of the deal is that God gives freedom to human beings...

Alternatively, one might read this social work communication as checking out whether a child would have the freedom of choice and an absence of coercion, testing out whether the prospective parent has experience of dealing with a situation where one of their children might not want to go to church, and how they might deal with such a situation. This questioning is expected within the liberal framework to social work practice, and we would therefore expect to see questions about freedom and non-coercion within the data. Indeed, the practice context of high numbers of placement breakdown, and social workers being vigorously questioned by fostering and adoption panels about how they have addressed such matters about freedom with parents might explain why such issues seemingly dominated social workers' communication with the parents, such that they missed opportunities to show reflective listening and encourage elaboration. This concurs with findings from the Forrester *et al.,* (2008) and Ferguson (2014) studies regarding the less emotionally warm, instrumentally-driven dialogue of some social workers with parents during the tension of child protection assessment.

However, additionally, in this Forum Theatre research sample there was an assumption demonstrated by some social workers that the parents were overly idealistic and unrealistic, to the extent that they perceived need to dispel idealistic thinking and for belief-talk to warrant less exploration and empathy with the parents. Though the social workers did not refer overtly to being in a position of power to offer, instigate or remove services, they took the lead in directing the interview according to their own agenda.

5. Discussion

The empirical data revealed social workers avoiding specifically Christian language referencing the parents' understanding of what was 'really real' to them about their place/responsibilities in the ultimate-order-of-things ('faith in God') in favour of language referencing their cultural practices ('going to church'). This avoidance of contentious beliefs reflects the invoking of a universalism in which all beliefs are considered equally valid

provided they respect the twin values of freedom and tolerance. Consequently, their parenting suitability was assessed in relation, not to the understanding of human flourishing that flowed from their deeply-held ontological convictions, but rather to the levels of freedom and tolerance endemic in their 'life-style' practices. It is not especially surprising that social workers, acting as agents of a secular-liberal-humanist professional project, employ liberal strategies to reduce difference and promote freedom and tolerance; nor is it surprising that Christian parents faced with such translation adopt reactive defensive strategies; and neither is it surprising that communication breaks down when fundamental ontological issues are removed from the agenda seemingly without recognition or discussion.

The deeply rooted nature of the social workers' secular-liberal-humanist professional assumptions seemed evidenced in their apparent failure to respond empathetically to the parents' attempts to correction: church is a family not a place you attend, faith is far more than a mere life-style choice. This mirrors the parents' perceptions of an inherent prejudice on the part of the social workers. For them, concerns about enforcement and indoctrination make no sense when (according to their worldview) one worships an all-loving non-coercive God.

Yet, the agential actions of the Christian parents show that religious worldviews cannot be simply sidestepped. Avoiding communication about fundamental beliefs does not make such beliefs disappear. Rather, in those moments of 'absence', the parents were sufficiently guarded and alert to take the tack of pro-actively altering their language to align with politically correct expressions of liberal toleration (particularly 'valuing diversity' and 'freedom of belief')(Wright, 2015). The parents were agents with deeply vested interests and seemingly recognised that they were in asymmetrical relationships of power with the social workers. Indeed, their presentation in the forum theatre data of being guarded appeared to behaviourally manifest what the parents in the interview data described as apprehension and fear. Those Christian parents described the collateral damage for any potential misunderstanding as simply too high (not being able to continue to parent/foster/adopt). What was going on that made them so seemingly aware of the power dynamics and so distrustful of the social workers' capability to adequately understand their parenting praxis as

meaningfully living out their integrated worldview (such that they adopted vigilant, diversionary tactics)?

A part-explanation recognises that social-worker-with-Christian-parent-communication takes place across contested worldviews. The Christian parents, by virtue of themselves living-out an ontologically motivated integrated worldview, could see the operation of a different set of faith commitments/worldview (the secular-liberal-humanist worldview) in the communication action of the social workers. Moreover, the parents could see that the social workers (as corporate agents) came to the communication with assumptions that their professional secular-liberal-humanist standpoint was both normative and neutral. Philosophers such as Habermas (1991) and MacIntyre (1984), highlight the importance for recognising that communication action always signifies something - that underpinning all communication action are essentially faith and/or political commitments/Stories. This includes the secular-liberal-humanist (post-Enlightenment) worldview that, ostensibly, tells its own narrative/Story that it is the sole provider of secure (hegemonic naturalistic) knowledge foundations for neutral, rationalistic communication. For MacIntyre (1984, p.22) however, there can be no certain knowledge foundations beneath communication (and therefore no neutrality) because there are no secure knowledge foundations. To believe that there are is the product of the post-Enlightenment worldview; and is itself a faith commitment. Thus, parental recognition of the social workers' corporate communication agency seems partly what underlay the parents' strategies of diversion away from detailing/defending Christian motivations to their parenting praxis.

Scratching even further beneath the surface of the contextual deliberations, what are the awkwardness, prejudicial assumptions, and formulaic responses even more deeply communicating about, or 'absencing'? Taken together, what might actually have been communicated was an awkward tentative awareness of the discussion actually being about transcendent 'truth' – the 'real' ultimate-order-of-things – in that at a personal than social work agential level, the social workers potentially shared similarities with the parents in having primal concerns of common humanity to face ultimate-questions-of-being-and-purpose. Perhaps (for some) the communication was about a heightened personal

awareness of their inner conflicts and positions to such primal, existential and/or transcendent matters? Herein, possibly, in such existential awareness, was a realisation that the Other was no longer so Other. Also uncomfortably similar was the same non-legitimising discourse that this time became applied to oneself, but yet for reasons of being professionally illegitimate (secularly 'off the menu') for communication action, remained invisibly present in tense, awkward interchange. This tentative idea does not seem inconceivable in the light of the diversity of religiosity in the UK - that transcendent/existential matters were referenced even among those categorised as neither believing in a religious worldview nor belonging to a religious community.

If what was being communicated was an awkward tentative awareness of the discussion actually being about the ultimate-order-of-things, and this was at a personal agential level (because it triggered personal existential questioning) and not solely at a social work agential level (because it was professionally-normatively 'non-legitimate'), then this sheds light on the second strategy that the social workers seemingly adopted when they encountered uncertainty of how to respond to the belief-based language of the parents: to seek reliance upon the formulaic communication action of adopting a (solely) friendly, smiley, relational style. If the social workers' communication action incorporated sharp sentience of conflicting emotions within their personal inner space, as well as the tense, irritated, awkward feelings of the immediate socio-cultural space, then what the social workers may have been doing was to rely more on the authority of their own inner-directed and private experience of how to communicate. Yet, this raises questions about whether such crude emotions are/should always be deemed 'correct enough' to rely upon, and whether/how agential strategies should be employed to simultaneously engage in critical reflexivity over their appropriateness.

6. Conclusion

A critical realist approach appears to have worked well in exposing some deep-rooted critical assumptions and communicative tensions in talking about ambivalent and contested matters of ontological reality. Social-work-with-Christian-parent-communication takes place across

worldviews: the profession's mainly secular-liberal-humanist worldview commitments appear to promote instrumental moral reasoning and dissuade dialogue about personal spirituality. To reiterate, this 'deeply-worldview-aware' argument does not negate the liberal framework for social-worker-with-Christian-parent communication - the social worker's role is to ensure potential parents fully understand the risks and difficulties, and a child has the right to this being done with diligence. But what the research is considering here is the potential for additional/deeper understanding of the tension in the communication and dangers of miss-communication in circumstances when worldview meaning is closed down *before exploration* - leaving both the Christian parent and social worker in a precarious situation for the parenting assessment. By this we mean that the Christian parent is less able/empowered to have the ontological depth of their communication of their motivations grasped and recognised as legitimately available for dialogue (whether 'felt' or abstractly reasoned), and the social worker has to make judgments about safe parenting without the potential for having full (if any) communicated understanding of the meaningfulness of those motivations. For the social worker this presents a situation of difficulty and potential dangerousness – inadequate communication means that a full assessment of the potential protective, resilience-building influences or vulnerability, harmful influences of the parents' worldview-orientated parenting praxis is obstructed.

Moreover, social work's traditional ethical allegiance to social justice appears to temper the authoritarian tone. Yet, in the uncertainty of how to respond to the belief-based language of the parents, and in the presence of internal conflicting emotions, as well as the tense, irritated, awkward feelings of the immediate socio-cultural space, any such agential action to rely on the authority of their own inner-directed and private experience of how to communicate is risky, if not dangerous. Moreover, worryingly, for all the time that matters of conflicting theories of ontological truth remain 'off the menu' of professional social work education and practice, then critical reflexivity of such emotional responses will not happen (well, not in any pastorally/professionally supported and tutored way), and the risks of idiosyncratic, and potentially harmful practice to its practitioners and service users may ensue. In order to enable dialogue that is not distorted, social workers will need to take steps

to grasp another's narrative. To do this, they have to recognise that they also have a narrative.

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