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Eileen Oak

## Western representations of childhood and the quest for a spiritual social work practice

*The article examines the social constructions of childhood in the West over the past century, to illustrate how they stem from adult-centric perspectives and how they continue to shape policy initiatives about children's rights and welfare. Such perspectives are underpinned by discourses which pre-date the Enlightenment era and continue to have implications for generating child-centred, welfare policies and practice. It will explore these discourses in the context of the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCORC), and various social policies to address child abuse. This is to contend that, without a new sociology of childhood approach underpinning these policies, they will continue to fail to address children's welfare and protection needs, and be implicated in their continued marginalisation. In making this assertion, it argues for a more holistic model of childhood, characterised by the new sociology of childhood combined with a form of secular humanism. Such a synthesis of ideas can offer a more empowering child protection praxis, one which promotes children's agency and »childhood« as an autonomous stage in the life-cycle.*

*Key words: spirituality, child protection, sociology of childhood, secular humanism, Convention on the Rights of the Child, social policy.*

Eileen Oak is an assistant professor at the School of Social Policy, Social Work & Social Justice, University College Dublin, Ireland. Contact: eileen.oak@ucd.ie.

### Zahodne reprezentacije otroštva in iskanje duhovne prakse socialnega dela

*Avtorica preučuje družbene konstrukcije otroštva na Zahodu v preteklem stoletju in ponazori, da izhajajo iz perspektiv odraslih in da še vedno oblikujejo politične pobude, ki zadevajo pravice in blaginjo otrok. Takšne perspektive krepijo diskurzi, ki segajo v obdobje pred razsvetljenstvom in še kar naprej vplivajo na oblikovanje socialnih politik in praks, ki se osredotočajo na otroka. Avtorica preučuje te diskurze v kontekstu Konvencije Združenih narodov o pravicah otrok iz leta 1989 in različnih socialnih politik, ki obravnavajo zlorabo otrok. Pričakovati je, da brez nove sociologije otroštva, na kateri bi te politike temeljile, ne bomo uspešni pri zadovoljevanju potreb po varstvu in blaginji otrok ter bomo prispevali k nadaljnjemu marginaliziranju otrok. Zato si avtorica prizadeva za bolj celosten model otroštva, ki bi bil v sozvočju z novo sociologije otroštva, kombinirano z obliko posvetnega humanizma. Takšna sinteza idej lahko zagotovi zaščito otrok, ki bi dala otrokom večjo moč ter bi promovirala agendo otrok in »otročvo« kot avtonomno stopnjo v življenjskem ciklu.*

*Ključne besede: duhovnost, zaščita otrok, sociologija otroštva, posvetni humanizem, Konvencija o otrokovih pravicah, socialna politika.*

Eileen Oak je profesorica na Šoli za socialno politiko, socialno delo in socialno pravičnost na University College Dublin na Irskem. Kontakt: eileen.oak@ucd.ie.

### Introduction: the Western liberalisation of childhood

The aim of the article is to examine the adult-centred discourses underpinning much, contemporary, Western legislation, or legislation influenced by Western hegemony, including the *UN Convention On the Rights of the Child (UNCORC)*, adopted by the UN on 20th November 1989 (UNHROHCORC, 1989). It is argued that such discourses pre-date the Western Enlightenment period and consequently have serious implications for policy initiatives in promoting children's civil and welfare rights. Furthermore, rather than address these rights, they marginalise children through constructions of »childhood« which

deny children's autonomy and access to decision-making processes. What is required therefore, to address this problem, is a more contemporaneous conceptualisation of childhood, which recognises the contested and multiple nature of childhood in a globalised society. To that end, it is suggested that combining the »new sociology of childhood« (Prout, 2011) with a form of secular humanism has the potential to render a more holistic model of childhood, one which recognises children as autonomous, social actors and promotes their inclusion.

A trawl of the international literature on childhood would seem to suggest that Western societies have always had a somewhat ambivalent attitude to childhood. From the medieval idea that children are the product of original sin and thus, are born »bad« and in need of control, to the Enlightenment idea that children are born »good«, the embodiment of innocence, in need of protection from a corrupt world; the two competing ideologies have pulled Western child welfare policies in contradictory directions. Although such simplistic ideas belong to a bygone era, they have their corollaries in more modern discourses about child wellbeing, embodied in the debate between the children's rights and the children's welfare lobbies (James & James, 2004; Kitzinger, 2015). The contradictions in the conceptualisation of childhood are exacerbated by the fact that childhood historians such as De Mause (1974) and Ariès (1962) differ in the extent to which they characterise late modernity as the more liberal approach to children's rights.

### **A brief history of childhood**

De Mause (1974) asserts that within Western societies the past two thousand years have been characterised by six distinct phases in child rearing practices which he terms »psychogenic modes« and which are tantamount to the abuse and neglect of children, at least up until early modernity, when he contends that more nurturing child rearing practices evolved. From the practice of child sacrifice and infanticide engaged in by the Carthaginians, Phoenicians, and early European tribes, to abandoning children to the mercies of medieval clergy, to the repression of child sexuality in the sixteenth century, and the more socialising approaches of the Enlightenment period; Western society has developed various overt and more subtle, covert methods to control and construct childhood.

In contrast, Ariès (1962), reaches a different conclusion from De Mause, by arguing that traditional childhood from the Middle Ages to the eighteenth century was a happy time, because the notion of »childhood« as a distinct period in life, was virtually unknown and children were treated no differently from adults. Thus, depending on their situation, they were afforded opportunities to mix with people from diverse classes and ages. Ariès contends that it was only during the eighteenth century that "childhood" was invented in the sense that people from the aristocratic and middle classes began to think of children as being a distinctly different group from adults, and to separate children from the adult world: "The family and school together removed the child from adult society" (Ariès, 1962, p. 413). Therefore, only in modernity

does it become distinct from adulthood in that there begins to be a focus on the centrality of childhood, childhood regulation and increased recognition on the importance of education:

Nowadays our society depends ... on the success of our education system ... This preoccupation was unknown to medieval civilization because there was no problem for the Middle Ages; as soon as he has been weaned, or soon after, the child became the natural companion of the adult. (Ariès 1962, p. 411)

To examine the subtle nuances of De Mause's and Ariès' arguments and the critiques of their representations of the history of childhood is beyond the remit of this article. However, it is possible to consider critically, the claim that modernity represented a more enlightened mode in terms of child rearing practices. A key criticism levelled at both, by historians, anthropologists, sociologists, and academics of childhood studies, is that within modern society (in keeping with previous epochs) childhood, and children's experience of it, are differentiated by factors such as age, gender, ethnicity, wealth, poverty, class, status, education, and locality.

### **A Brave new world of children's rights?**

So what evidence exists that late modernity is a more enlightened period in the treatment of children? The inauguration of the United Nation's Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCORC) in 1989 was ratified by 191 nations including many of the advanced industrial nations, except for the US. However, contrary to De Mause's assertion (1974) that modernity represents a period of more humane and child-centred approaches to childhood, there is abundant evidence to contradict this. Notwithstanding the fact that the practice of child sacrifice has ceased, other forms of child abuse persists, such as infanticide (Spinelli, 2004), child slavery (Hodge, 2008; Carver, 2011; Alvarez & Alessi, 2012; Miller, Decker & Silverman, 2007; Oram, Stockl, Busza, Howard & Zimmerman, 2012) and global child physical and sexual abuse and neglect (Beckett & Schubotz, 2014; Stoltenborgh, 2016), child sex trafficking and sexual exploitation (Pearce, 2011; Brayley & Cockbain, 2014; Thorburn, 2015).

The question of the prevalence of child physical and sexual abuse and neglect, relates to the controversy surrounding children's exploitation and the debates concerning their rights and capacity for agency. This in turn, is inextricably linked to the controversy surrounding their competence and is reflected in the competing discourses on childhood. On the one hand, children are regarded as active constructors of meaning, and on the other, as passive objects of social change; the subject of governmental and professional intervention geared to their protection and well-being.

These competing discourses about children's rights and agency still underpin many international policy initiatives on child protection and children's rights, particularly within the context of child protection risk assessments. These include: the Common Assessment Framework in the UK (Brandon, Howe,

Dagley, Salter & Warren, 2006), the Tuituia Assessment Framework in New Zealand, the Children's Action Plans in Australia (Oak, 2015), the Structured Decision-Making Model or the "ACTION" risk assessment framework developed by child protection services in the US (Miyamoto, Romano, Putnam-Hornstein, Thurston, Dharmar & Joseph, 2017). Kitzinger (2015, p. 147) criticises these discourses and social constructions of childhood as put forward by what she terms as "the child protection »lobby«, asserting that the notion of childhood as a time of innocence, characterised by a-sexual behaviour is problematic, because »innocence« becomes a sexual commodity for abusers as the popularity of »kiddie-porn« illustrates. Moreover, it stigmatises the »knowing« or precocious child, as abusing the knowing child is somehow deemed a lesser offence than violating an innocent child. She also highlights how, under the guise of protecting childhood innocence, adults repress children's sexuality and control over their own bodies (for example, the Gillick campaign to stop girls under 16 obtaining contraception from GPs) and in seeking to »shield« children from the horrors of incest or child abuse, they keep them ignorant of the dangers which may place them at risk.

A further adult-centred discourse underpinning child protection approaches, is the idea of protecting-the-weak. It is taken as a universal »truth« that in adult society children are weak and in need of adult protection, but very little analyses focuses upon the social structures and socio-legal process that disempower children and secures their marginalisation. This protectionist approach to children, results in children's freedom being curtailed, for example, parents are encouraged not to let them out at night, and to engage in increased surveillance on children. Likewise, the paternalistic nature of many child protection campaigns, which characterises abuse as »stranger-danger« ignore the fact that much child abuse goes on in the so called »bosom« of the family by their very protectors, i.e. (usually) fathers, step-fathers, brothers, uncles, etc. who are supposed to be children's protectors (Kitzinger, 2015).

This discourse negates the agency of children in challenging their abuse by feeling faint, running away, or by avoiding abusive situations altogether (for example, the girl who took to regular churchgoing to avoid pressure to get into her father's bed (Kitzinger, 2015, p. 149) or children who deliberately neglect their hygiene in order to appear undesirable to the abuser. Moreover, when these strategies fail to stop the abuse these strategies are regarded as the symptoms of abuse, such as PTSD, which undermines children's agency (Kitzinger, 2015)

Kitzinger (2015) refers to new approaches to child protection which seek to reassert children's agency and control over their own bodies such as the "Say No" campaign in the UK. However, she contends that what is needed is a wholesale change of the very structures, social process, and legislative protocols which mask the adult power in society and which reinforce children's low social status. She suggests that to reduce children's marginalisation and begin to empower them, adults need to acknowledge to themselves and explain to children, the ways social structures privilege and maintain adult power and control, and to reflect upon the ways adults, wittingly or unwittingly, collude in children's powerlessness by obfuscating their own power and control.

Ironically, the attempts to address these structural inequalities to empower children in the form of the 1989 United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCORC), are equally imbued with these marginalising discourses, which relegate children's self-determination and status, relative to adults (James & James, 2004). Both national and international law influence constructions of childhood because nation-states determine the key components of childhood identity, such as the age of majority and criminal responsibility. Van Bueren (1998) argues that though definitions of childhood are not universal, the early twentieth century saw the evolution of a more coherent approach to childhood issues manifest in the policy approaches of the UN, however, it is debatable whether UNCORC simply reflects Western hegemony (Dominelli, 2010).

The trouble with this Convention is that in its efforts to escape accusations of cultural relativism, it has developed a definition of childhood that is too universal and is often at odds with the political and cultural context of a given nation state:

The fundamental weakness in the philosophy underpinning the UNCORC in spite of its attempts to eschew any philosophy of children's rights, many adults (especially adult politicians) may find the political implications of such a perspective impossible to reconcile within the cultural policies of childhood within their own societies. (James & James, 2004, p. 82)

In addition, there exist contradictions within the principles of UNCORC, for example, giving children the same rights as adults, but at the same time, recognising children as a special category of non-adults in need of protection. This causes several problems; firstly, their need for protection is reflected in the "best interest" principle of the Convention, however, "best interests" have proved extraordinarily difficult to define beyond the individual child, while adult voices dominate the debate about children's best interests (James & James, 2004). Secondly, by categorising children as distinct from adults, the Convention implicitly highlights children's lack of power relative to them, and lastly; it seeks to develop a needs-based approach to rights which then leads to a perception that such needs are developmental and hence, are to be defined or moderated by political or cultural considerations within a given nation-state. Moreover, the problem with universalising a right to education, is that it simultaneously reinforces the role of the state and its power over children in the form of education policy, law, and child welfare practices. It is through these legislative processes that different childhoods are imposed upon children within different cultures. Moreover, this notion of educational rights in the Convention, reflects the failure of the UN to monitor and regulate child labour (Oak, 2009).

This adult power is exemplified in the failings of the 2002 UN Special Session on Childhood to draft a declaration on *A World Fit for Children*. Progress was hampered by opposition from the US and other governments linked closely to what James & James (2004, p. 84) term "Christian or Islamic interests" who were opposed to: any reference in the declaration to abortion, sex education, family planning or reproductive health and any reference to the extension of children's rights, on the basis that it is the parents' job to bring

up children. Several delegates were opposed to any reference to »family« that was outside heteronormative frames of reference, and there was opposition from the US delegation to any reference seeking to limit the use of corporal punishment (James & James, 2004). This concerted attempt to retain adult control in determining the extent of children's rights via UN Conventions and Special Sessions is succinctly summed up by Pupavac (2001, p. 9):

... proposals to empower children through children's rights does not represent a move towards children having greater self-ownership. Rather the enshrinement of children's rights mean state officials or authorised professionals instead of parents deciding what is in children's best interests. The paternalism underlying the children's rights approach is underscored by recent trends in legislation that impose more regulation and protective measures on young people ...

### **Children's marginalisation within social work practice**

Various international studies attest to the ineffective implementation of the UNCRC in England (Murray & Hallett, 2000; Hutchfield & Corens, 2011), in Wales (Leeson, 2007), in Norway (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan & Thomas, 2011), in the Netherlands (van Nijnatten & Jongen, 2011) and in Australia (Bagshaw, 2007), as well as in the ways children are marginalised within social work practice. These studies highlight children's exclusion from discussions on parental separations and divorce. Though some of this research identified improvements in terms of a greater acknowledgement of children's rights and participation (Thomas, 2005), there was still a considerable gulf between the rhetoric of human rights and the UNCRC principles of participation. Repeated feedback from these studies was that although they were often consulted, children felt they were not properly informed about their parents' divorce/separation, not kept up to date with the process of proceedings, or kept informed over contact, or placement issues, or, when they were consulted, many felt their wishes and feelings were ignored (Bagshaw, 2007). Moreover, study by Vis, Strandbu, Holtan & Thomas (2011) study identified several barriers to social workers' capacity to involve children. These included: communication difficulties, the fact that adults did not deem children's participation necessary or, that participation was considered inappropriate because it might be harmful to the child; or the social worker lacked the necessary skills and confidence to engage children. The researchers suggested that these attitudes towards children's participation were exacerbated by the competing discourses on childhood, particularly those discourses that constructed children either as active constructors of meaning or as objects of social change (Vis, Strandbu, Holtan & Thomas, 2011).

Winter (2011) highlights the challenges presented by the UNCRC to social workers with reference to the *Munro Review of Child Protection* (Munro, 2010) in the UK. This report expressed concern about the paucity of social workers' ability to enhance children's participation in decisions about their welfare. Munro (2011) highlighted the decline in direct client-contact time and its correlation with the lack of meaningful relationships between client/

service users and practitioners, she also made recommendations for the development of a more child-centred system underpinned by the key elements of the UNCORC. Furthermore, she cited several key professional barriers to children's participation, such as: professional assumptions about children's behaviour, capacity, and competence and notions of their best interests, an over-reliance on parents' views rather than children's views of their best interests; limited opportunities for personal encounters with children; and an over-reliance on the part of practitioners, on rigidly applied age-related frameworks drawn from developmental psychology. These resulted in a tendency to underestimate what children could do. To offset these barriers she suggested that social workers should adopt the concept of »evolving capacities«, exemplified in Article Five of the UNCORC, when assessing children's competence (Munro, 2011).

### **The new sociology of childhood**

Reflecting upon Kitzinger's (2015) suggestion that adults need to make explicit to children the sources of adult power and control in a way that they can understand, prompts consideration of how the new sociology of childhood (NSC) (James, Jenks & Prout, 2007; Prout, 2011) can be utilised to achieve this, and in so doing develop a more child centred approach to practice. Prout (2011) suggests that though the NSC is not yet a fully-fledged paradigm, it has the potential to be, if it can create space for »childhood« as a source of study, within sociological discourse. To do this, as an intellectual endeavour, it needs to confront the contemporary phenomena of childhood as a dynamic, destabilising, contradictory and conflicting phenomenon.

An NSC approach is necessary, because the old sociology of childhood as a product of late modernity, with its universalising concept of socialisation, had become obsolete because it lacked the conceptual frameworks to account for the rapid changes in, and manifestations of, global childhoods in the twenty-first century. Whether it evolved from post-modernity or late modernity, like many forms of social science of the late twentieth century, the NSC was a reaction to the meta narratives like Functionalism, with its concept of socialisation, to explain childhood. The key features of the NSC are that: it adopts an interactionist perspective, which reasserts children's agency, it embodies a critique of the concept of socialisation to explain the universalism of childhood, it argues for the historical and temporal specificity of childhood, it focuses on the constructions of childhood through various discourses and, above all, it opposes the biological determinism of universal models of child development (James, Jenks & Prout, 2010).

For advocates of the NSC, the main weakness of the old sociology of childhood is that it seeks to understand childhood via three of modernity's key dichotomies; agency/structure, nature/culture and being/becoming. Each of these dichotomies have inherent weaknesses in accounting for the multiplicities of childhood forms that have developed in the twenty-first century and thus, underpin effective child-centred welfare policies.



The agency/structure dichotomy regards childhood as a fairly fixed entity within nation-states (as exemplified in conceptualisations of »need« in the UNCORC) and so, ignores the impact of globalisation and global migration in creating a plurality of childhoods. In addition, children are regarded as being structurally determined, as it ignores children's capacity for some degree of agency in the construction of their own childhoods.

The biological reductionism implicit in the nature/culture dichotomy is reflected in the fact that it does not acknowledge the ways both childhood and adulthood are relationally produced i.e. both childhood and adulthood are "effects produced within discursive acts" (Prout, 2011, p. 7). It also fails to recognise that childhood as a hybrid. In contrast, the NSC challenges the idea of »childhood« as a natural, universal stage of human development.

In terms of the being/becoming dichotomy, the NSC criticises the idea of childhood as an »in-between« stage on the road to adult maturation. It argues that childhood and adulthood are both in states of maturation, a constant stage of »becoming« within the human life-cycle. Also, the dichotomy between being/becoming is becoming meaningless with changes in employment and the family (Alanen, 2001). This dynamic affects children's experiences of the maturation process. It is this dichotomy which creates problematic conceptualisations for social workers when seeking to address questions on children's competence and notions of »best interest«.

### **Which new sociology of childhood?**

The main weaknesses of this type of NSC however, is its over-emphasis on children's capacity for agency, its preoccupation with discursive analyses, and hence, its tendency to ignore the material dimensions which also influence the ways childhood is produced within any given society. However, Prout's NSC approach suggests a framework to address these and the other problems generated by the old sociology of childhood's adoption of dichotomies. The three key concepts that make up Prout's NSC are; the concept of the »excluded middle« (the space between these dichotomies which result in hybrids of childhood), the application of actor-network theory (ANT) to examine the networks which produce various childhoods, and the co-construction of generational relations.

As a theoretical framework, the »excluded middle« is the space that produces various manifestations of childhood and Prout (2011) argues the process by which these manifestations occur can be usefully explored by linking them to various concepts like, symmetry, networks, mobility, and generational relations. Whilst advocating an interdisciplinary approach to childhood because it is such a complex phenomenon, Prout (2011, p. 9) also suggests the use of symmetry, i.e. understanding how different versions of childhood emerge from the symmetry of networks; natural, discursive, and hybrid materials. Using the concept of networks that is conceptualising childhood as series of different and conflicting orderings, he suggests, actor-network theory can be used to avoid the opposition of dichotomies, like agency/structure, or nature/culture, which then enables us to see childhood and adulthood as

hybrids which straddle these key dichotomies. Also, actor-network theory enables us to recognise the rise of new networks which produce new forms of childhood. When using actor-network theory to identify and understand new constructions, Prout (2011) suggests it is useful to ask: what new networks produce new forms of childhood?

Mobility also influences the bodily construction of childhood i.e. the result is transnational childhoods and mobility of information such as through the internet, social network sites and the media. These all provide a mobile, and steady flow of images, knowledge, values, and ideologies which all influence the various constructions of childhood.

Generation relationality refers to the concept of generational relations and links well to the notion of the “excluded middle”, because it shifts from seeing childhood as an essentialised category (reduced to biological or developmental stages) towards seeing it as being produced within a set of social relations between various generations, such as the »Baby-Boomer« generation of adults constructing the childhoods of their children in the 1970’s and 1980’s. Thus, it is concerned with the practices that are involved constructions of childhood and allows for hybrid characters of childhood.

Using the model of the NSC as developed by Prout (2011), practitioners are more likely, not only to recognise the contradictory and contested nature of children’s agency in different contexts, but also to recognise the multiplicities of childhoods constructed by adults that result in their marginalisation. This has the potential not only to render a more critical application of the principles of UNCORC, but also to develop new ways to engage children in decisions regarding their welfare and protection. This approach coupled with a more humanistic or spiritual approach to social work practice has the potential to reassert the place of children as autonomous social actors, in the construction of their own childhoods.

### **Secular humanism and social work practice**

Any discussion on secularism or humanism usually entails a discussion of their relationship to religion and spirituality, and this relationship is difficult to conceptualise, because all these terms have multiple and competing definitions and are contested. To begin with, what is meant by the term secularism? Critics of secularists such as Dawkins (2009) and Hitchens (2007) argue that they tend to argue for a clear separation of religion and state which does not exist in many Western countries, and it is highly debatable as to the extent to which any nation is truly secular, because dimensions of religiosity are hard to measure (Holloway, 2007; Crisp, 2008; Jensen, 2011). Many authors prefer to talk about a post-secular (Habermas, 2006) or post-Christian (Crisp, 2008) society when discussing religious behaviour in their own countries. In addition, secularism stands accused of amplifying the place of religion in politics (Asad, 2003). Other critics (Said & Barsamian, 2003; Mahmood, 2006) assert that secularism is simply another form of Western ethnocentric hegemony, which is often used to criticise Islam as a backward, introspective, and authoritarian

religion and to justify Western (and in particular, US) foreign policy in the Middle East. Mahmood (2006) goes even further in her critique, arguing that secularism represents an attempt to control religious subjectivities in the public sphere, while both Bowpitt (1998) and Jansen (2011) question its »rational« and scientific credentials, pointing to its origins in the Western Enlightenment era, with its strong Christian underpinnings and notions of liberty, spirituality, and assumptions about the place of religion in society.

There is even controversy about secular humanism amongst secularists, due partly to the way the secular humanist movement evolved. In the US for example, it developed in the nineteenth century from two strands: the Evangelical free-thinking movement, which reacted to religious orthodoxy on the one hand, and the atheist movement on the other. As late as 1933 the American Humanist Association was still referring to »religious humanism« in its manifesto for social change and it was not until 1973 in the *Secular Humanist Manifesto II* that the word »religious« was removed (Cimino & Smith, 2007). This was despite the fact that, in 1912, the US Supreme Court declared secular humanism to be a religion. This removal, in turn led to a schism between free-thinkers and atheists and led in 1980 to the establishment of the US Council for Secular Humanism which, in a departure from its predecessor, advocated a greater role for science and technology in society, a concern with ecological issues and population control, a preoccupation with addressing global poverty and enhancing democracy (Cimino & Smith, 2007).

Despite the initial optimism, secularists had regarding the inevitable triumph of secularism over religion, the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, has witnessed the rise of religious fundamentalism, particularly in the US, with the rise of the Christian Right, which has placed the US Secular Humanist Society on the »back foot«. Ironically in response to this, the Council for Secular Humanism and other secular and atheist groups have adopted the tactics of the Christian Right in an attempt to recruit »believers« into the fold (Cimino & Smith, 2007, p. 411)

Notwithstanding these criticisms, it is possible to explore how secular humanism can be used to develop a spiritual social work practice, depending upon how one views secular humanism, and considers the extent to which secularism exists in society. Common features of secular humanism are: a concern with collective responses to human welfare, promotion of democracy, the pursuit of human justice and the assertion that any ethical and moral principles to govern behaviour do not require religious precepts (Hitchens, 2007).

### **Religion and spirituality in social work**

There is increasing recognition of the importance of spirituality in social work, not simply in the belief that it contributes to holistic forms of well-being such as the WHO, Quality of Life WHOQOL (Power, Bullinger & Harper, 1999) assessment tool used in health settings, but also because the promotion of spirituality is instrumental in achieving effective anti-oppressive practice with clients with a multitude of religious and spiritual beliefs and affiliations (Crisp, 2008;

Holloway, 2007). Furthermore, Article 27 UNCRC identifies a child's right to religious and spiritual freedom, and to have opportunities to exercise those rights (Taylor, 2017). There is increasing evidence of practitioners drawing upon spiritual and religious beliefs both in training and post-qualifying (Lloyd, 1997; Canda, 1998; Holloway, 2004; Canda & Furman, 2010). The precise impact of this trend is difficult to gauge, because (as stated earlier) dimensions of religious behaviour are difficult to measure. Holloway (2004) suggests that dimensions of religiosity or religious behaviour can be classified into four types which are useful for understanding how both practitioners and clients make sense of spirituality. Firstly, there is the fundamentalist who engages in strict adherence to a prescribed set of religious beliefs and practice to the exclusion of all other religious and non-faith-based belief positions; secondly, »to cleave tightly« that is a person who has respect for, and draws upon certain elements of a religious tradition without espousing its precepts; thirdly, a religion without a religion – where a person identifies with a religious culture, but where religious faith is not of great significance, and lastly, »homeless-humanism«, which is similar to secular humanism, which is where a person subscribes to humanistic beliefs devoid of any specific religious creed (Holloway, 2007, p. 266).

These different forms of spiritual behaviour reinforce the complexity of defining spirituality. Crisp (2008) suggests that a trawl of international literature demonstrates that definitions of spirituality can be regarded on a continuum, with those which define spirituality by assuming that it necessarily involves a relationship with a deity, at one end, to those definitions which expunge any notion of a supreme being or higher power, from all epistemological considerations, at the opposite end of the continuum. However, common to several definitions of spirituality found in literature, is the search for meaning and purpose in life, and focus away from material considerations (Furman, Benson, Canda & Grimwood, 2005; Staude, 2005). Rolheiser (1999) asserts that all humans are intrinsically spiritual, in the sense that they are either in harmony with the "self", others, the wider environment, or experiencing alienation from these phenomena. For Crisp (2008), spirituality in social work relates to the need for humans to make connections to others to enhance the quality of life. Holloway (2007, p. 278) suggests that it is a search for meaning, and answers to questions, or problems that are not amenable, or reduceable, to therapeutic techniques.

Despite the increasing importance of spirituality in social work, Holloway (2007) highlights how in the UK social work academia has been reluctant to include it within the social work curriculum. Part of this resistance might be due to social work's anathema to religion, having evolved in the evangelical tradition of the nineteenth century Charities Organisation Society and its Victorian preoccupation with separating the »deserving« from the »undeserving« poor (Lewis, 2010). At the same time, social work was keen to establish its professional credentials by embracing the new social sciences (Bowpitt, 1998). Nonetheless, Holloway (2007 p. 275) points out that many dimensions of spirituality being developed in social work take their inspiration from the great religious traditions, and she cautions against decoupling spirituality from religion, otherwise it is in danger of becoming a life-style choice, which

thus, removes it (and possibly, the people in most need) from the business of social work.

In contrast, Crisp (2008) contends that it is possible to develop a secular, or post-Christian form of spiritual social work. The framework of spirituality she proposes does not use religious language or concepts, so can be used with clients who have little or no religious experience. This model of spirituality is constituted by four dimensions; spirituality as lived experience, spirituality as creativity, spirituality as ritual, and spirituality through connection with place or space. Spirituality as lived experience is concerned with practitioners and clients, attending to their lived experience as authentically as possible by paying close attention to the feelings associated with it. For social workers, this includes acknowledgement that for many clients, the pain and trauma of child abuse or domestic violence for example, manifests itself bodily, not simply in the form of physical injury, but also in the ways it impairs capabilities and a sense of agency and spiritual development. It means acknowledging and supporting clients through this pain and suffering and helping them to foster hope, not by “romanticising the hurt” (Chopp, 1995, p. 68) with glib conceptualisations of resilience, but by recognising the tough »journey« they have made towards a more hope-filled existence.

Crisp (2008) asserts that hope is an important aspect of any spiritual social work practice, because it has transformative capacity to move people from mere survival or subsistence to a meaningful existence. Similarly, spirituality as creativity can take many forms and is not confined to the visual or creative arts. It is immaterial whether clients regard themselves as creative or not, creativity in this sense, refers to the utilisation of imagination, whether in work, acting as a parent, engaged in advocacy or involvement in social justice. Creativity is crucial in helping children and promoting their spiritual development. This could be something simple along the lines of practitioners creating a safe space for children to play, to be curious, to let loose their imagination and to develop a fascination with life (Crisp, 2008, p. 369).

A ritual in the sense of something that is sacred, has great significance within different religions. However, such rituals can also refer to everyday objects or artefacts that might be of emotional or spiritual significance to the person. This is spirituality as ritual. People may have objects or personal rituals that connect to their spiritual well-being, and even though they are not considered sacred, they still hold meaning. Crisp suggests that such rituals may have great significance for the individual because they are connected to a loved one, or a time of happiness, or contentment, or an opportunity to remember the loss of someone or something, or to grieve, and as such, have the potential to:

Transform the mundane into a space in which people are made to feel special or important, rather than a cog in a piece of machinery... (Crisp, 2008, p. 369)

Spirituality as place or space reminds social workers that they cannot ignore the significance of temporality or location in people’s lives, particularly if

clients have experienced dislocation and relocation due to diaspora. Just as relocation offers the hope of a new future, conversely it can be a powerful reminder of loss of homeland, community, and family. It is through connection to places that human beings derive their sense of identity. Place is also important to spirituality, as Sheldrake (2006, p. 43) notes, there is: “a vital connection between place, memory and human identity”. Space, on the other hand is distinguishable from place, because it can be temporal, and can represent a source of freedom, or a situation devoid of accountability. It can also take the form of time away, not just physical space, from pressures, responsibilities, stress inducing situations, and thus, it can enhance well-being.

Using this framework for a spiritual social work is important when working in a secular context because it can be used in work with clients, either with or without a religious affiliation:

Considering spirituality in terms of lived experience makes intrinsic sense, particularly when working in a secular context with service users and carers who may have little or no experience in reading or discussing issues of religion or spirituality. It can also enable discussion of spiritual issues to be incorporated into social work practice when either practitioners or service users have no religious background or affiliation (or no shared religious background), taking care to minimize the use of explicitly religious language. Importantly, it provides a way of beginning conversations in which spiritual issues and values and beliefs may surface, and by opening up discussion on these topics, service users may choose to respond by discussing specific religious practices or beliefs which are important to them. (Crisp, 2008, p. 368)

## Conclusion

In advocating for a spiritual child protection practice, which combines new sociology of childhood with a humanistic approach, this article has demonstrated how Western constructions of childhood are drawn from adult-centric perspectives, which in turn are underpinned by discourses which pre-date the Enlightenment era. It has shown how such discourses underpin both the UNCRC and the initiatives generated by the Western »Child Protection lobby« (Kitzinger, 2015) and how such initiatives fail to address children’s protection needs, and contribute to their continued marginalisation. By engaging in a comparison of the old and new sociologies of childhood, it has offered an alternative approach to child protection practice by illustrating how the old sociology of children, with its epistemological roots in modernity, was ill-equipped to address the rapid shift in the changing, destabilising and contradictory, manifestations of childhood that have occurred, because of globalisation and global migration. It has highlighted how the new sociology of childhood could address the short-comings of old sociology of childhood’s dualisms, its biological reductionist models of maturation, its structurally deterministic models of socialisation, and in addition, shows the failings of its universal model of child development, which continue to underpin much social work practice.

In discussing Prout's application of actor-network theory and the »excluded middle«, it has presented childhood as: multiple, contradictory, and hybrid; while the concept of generational relations, reinforced the idea of social work as a relationship-based profession. This led inevitably, into a discussion of the importance of a spiritual dimension for social work in order to address the challenge of generating empowering anti-oppressive practice. In conceptualising spiritual social work practice, it interrogated secularism and humanism, both for their ethnocentric dimensions, and their origins in the Judeo-Christian tradition, and for secularism's insistence on a clear delineation between secular and religious states, which in many Western nations, has proved to be illusory.

Drawing upon Crisp's (2008) model of a spiritual social work for secular society, it has demonstrated that it is possible to develop a framework for a spiritual social work practice which can be easily integrated into praxis with children, owing to its concepts of lived experience, creativity, ritual, and a spirituality of place and space. This spiritual framework, linked to concepts such as: actor-network theory, networks, and generational relations, can be combined to render a more coherent approach to childhood and to generate greater empowerment of children as autonomous social actors, while recognising the dialectical nature of their agency. In making the case for this type of spiritual social work, the article was not arguing for the exclusivity of a secular spiritual model, but merely identifying the important contribution it could make to empowering child protection praxis.

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