Faith, hope and love in social work practice

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Raised in a Christian family, I was regularly told as a child about the importance of faith, hope and love. I had not thought about it in much depth until I recently heard a sermon about hope. It preached that wisdom can be gained from the endurance of suffering, and that the most important thing that people need in the endurance process is hope. It resonated with me because an influential part of my decision to train as a social worker came from my experiences as a Samaritan listening volunteer, whereby providing a listening ear, the aim is to offer hope when nobody else is there. On the day after this sermon I was in a lecture on Criminal Justice Social Work and it became clear to me that hope, along with faith and love, are important aspects of social work that are rarely mentioned. Here I'm going to talk about hope and love because although I think faith is important, it is more subjective, personal and difficult to define in general social work practice.

As social work students, we are often reminded that the average working life of a social worker is relatively short. This is explained through reference to a combination of the frustration of working with complex cases, where balancing care while minimising risk seems impossible, and bureaucratic systems that take social work far away from its origin as a caring profession. The lecture on Criminal Justice Social Work reminded me of the importance of having hope that people can change. I can only imagine that after a few years of working in the criminal justice sector, having repeatedly come across service-users who do not change, then it would be easy to adopt a disillusioned view of the people you are working with, and thus give up on future service-users before they've even had a chance. If I am to cope in this profession, then I will need an intrinsic hope

that the people I am working with have the capacity for change, and that things can improve. Social workers are in an incredibly privileged position in that they have influence over the quality of people's lives, often when they are at their lowest point. Because of this, social workers can perhaps provide a service-user with hope in a way that few others can. I think an idea of hope could be applied to social work training by teaching students about the power and influence you can have on people's lives if you maintain hope that those lives can improve.

Mentioned less than hope is love. The love I refer to here is 'agape', which in the New Testament translation, can be understood as goodwill and benevolence; it is not used to describe brotherly or romantic love. I'm not convinced love has ever been mentioned within my social work training and it almost seems a taboo concept. Understandably so, perhaps, as it can be regarded as unprofessional and I think part of the explanation for that is because 'love' as a word becomes conflated with romantic love in the English language. Like Kantian deontology, acting out of agape focuses more on the intention rather than the consequence of an action, while hoping that the consequence will be positive anyway. Therefore, as in Kantian deontology, what makes the doctrines of faith, hope and love so important and useful is their universal application. Social work is full of frameworks which are used to assess risk and advise action. Frameworks are useful but there are cases where following a framework becomes inappropriate because you cannot fit the complexities of people's lives into narrow systems. If agape were to underpin the action of a social worker, then I believe social workers could be more flexible in how they work with individual cases, while knowing that they are working with positive intent. I also think that not only would it help form genuine relationships with service-users, but it would mean social workers base their decisions on what they think is best for the service-user in the long-term, rather than merely following legislative and procedural rules.

Social workers in state settings can often be seen to represent surrogate parents because they have the statutory power to take children away from their biological parents, and to detain those with serious mental illness. Some of the legislation in place for social workers is centred around an idea of care. To me that is like giving a new mother a handbook on how to care about her child. I worry that bureaucracy is trying to control care because of the fear of risk. Because of various inquiries into child deaths, risk management has become a dominant part of the social work profession. Fears of repeated mistakes from the past and the fear of blame have led social work down a bureaucratic path of trying to control something that cannot be controlled. Care cannot be controlled by legislation; care cannot be managed by ticking boxes. The importance of love and care for other people in the world is downplayed in social work training. Many people who have access to social workers feel unloved, including children in the care system, isolated elderly people and those alienated by their mental health illness or disability. More than anything these people would benefit from

love and care. Protecting them from risk is important but if the job becomes too focused on risk management, then what is important gets lost. It may even be possible that risk could be reduced through love because it is likely that a bit more love in social work could help build stronger relationships between service-users and social workers. If this were used to build up a relationship of trust and positive communication, one might imagine that risk would decrease. In a strong relationship, the service-user would feel more comfortable discussing risk with the social worker and the social worker would feel more confident that they can adequately assess that risk.

In terms of applying this to social work teaching, I think more emphasis could be put on how a social worker could use goodwill and benevolence to guide their actions and do what is best for the service-user. Instead of social work training being about following frameworks, perhaps it could look at case scenarios where students can discuss what they, guided by goodwill and benevolence, might wish for a service-user in the long-term and what they, as a social worker, could do to help them towards this goal. A student might also be encouraged to think about what the service-user might want in the long-term and what role the social worker might play, again guided by goodwill and benevolence, to help them achieve this, what might be thought of as coproduction. Of course, there are times when the wishes of a service-user and what the social worker thinks is best for them may come into conflict. Part of social work training would also have to look at how goodwill and benevolence can help balance such tensions. As somebody starting out in social work, my perception of the profession is not overly positive and I have many reservations about my future career. I hope that I can keep doctrines of faith, hope and love in mind during my career. I hope that when I am working with a service-user who feels that all hope is lost, that I can bring some hope back to them by having faith and hope that their situation can change and by my acting on goodwill and benevolence to build a relationship of trust. Without this, social work seems like an extremely pointless profession.

About the author

Hannah Ravalde is a current second year student on the Masters of Social Work at Edinburgh University. Previously, Hannah studied Philosophy at the University of York.