

Article

Therapeutic but Not Therapy: Using Critical Spirituality to Engage with Traumatic Experiences

Fiona Gardner 

Social Work, Rural Health School, La Trobe University, Bendigo 3550, Australia; f.gardner@latrobe.edu.au

Abstract: Participants in critical reflection workshops and peer supervision often comment that the process feels therapeutic, enabling them to engage with challenging experiences, even although it is clearly not therapy. This reflective article explores these comments, particularly how the processes of critical reflection embedded in critical spirituality can foster a deep exploration of traumatic experiences that undermine the sense of self and the ability to act with agency. While spirituality is broadly defined as that which gives life meaning including a sense of the transcendent, the 'critical' aspect includes the influence of the person's own and the broader social context. Using two participant examples for illustration, key aspects of the process are identified: unearthing and naming deeply held, limiting and often longstanding assumptions influencing the person's sense of who they are and how they operate. Next, understanding the prevailing social context can generate liberating new perspectives. Asking what is meaningful and why given the person's spirituality can foster new, freeing and enabling assumptions, values and beliefs and experimenting with new ways of being and acting. What often emerges is that participants come to recognise the depth of meaning that transforms their perception of their experience and sense of themselves.

Keywords: critical reflection; critical spirituality; meaning; therapeutic



Citation: Gardner, Fiona. 2022.

Therapeutic but Not Therapy: Using Critical Spirituality to Engage with Traumatic Experiences. *Religions* 13: 786. <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel13090786>

Academic Editors: Heather Boynton and Jo-Ann Vis

Received: 8 April 2022

Accepted: 24 August 2022

Published: 26 August 2022

Publisher's Note: MDPI stays neutral with regard to jurisdictional claims in published maps and institutional affiliations.



Copyright: © 2022 by the author. Licensee MDPI, Basel, Switzerland. This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) license (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>).

1. Introduction

Over many years of facilitating critical reflection and critical spirituality workshops and peer supervision groups, I have been intrigued by occasional comments from participants about what they name as the therapeutic nature of the process. Typical comments include: *I know this isn't therapy, but it feels therapeutic; or is this meant to feel therapeutic?* Sometimes, if timing is right, we have explored this as a group, teasing out why. This article is my reflective exploration of what these comments might add to understanding the interconnections in critically reflective processes embedded in critical spirituality. Critical spirituality is essentially about understanding how the social context influences experiences of the spiritual and religious. Related critically reflective processes identify the underlying meaning of particular experiences partly by enabling the surfacing of unconscious or taken for granted assumptions, values or beliefs. Critical reflection is often experienced as transformative when reflecting on events that are not identified as traumatic, but perhaps irritating, puzzling or frustrating. It seems that for some participants some of the time, reflection on an event they name as traumatic means the process is also transformative in a way that feels therapeutic. The aim of this article then is to identify what it is about this approach that enables changed perception of a traumatic experience to liberate a more enabling way of being connected to fundamental meaning. Depending on the person and their experience this may relate to their understanding and perception of their spirituality and/or religious beliefs: assumptions about values and/or beliefs that really matter to them.

2. Theoretical Background

There continues to be debate in the literature about how to define spirituality and the place of religion (Crisp 2020), so much so that Swinton (2014, p. 164) suggests it is more helpful to think in terms of spiritualities: ways of 'orienting one's self to the world'. While in practice, these categories overlap, you could compare those who identify with a religious tradition, those who would see themselves as 'spiritual but not religious' searching 'for the sacred in a fluid, eclectic manner' (Fuller and Parsons 2018, p. 26) that may or may not include religious teachings and those who might see themselves as agnostic or secular, but identify key values and possibly a sense of transcendence or wonder as what makes life meaningful (Schneider et al. 2014). A helpful broad definition of spirituality is "the way individuals seek and express meaning and purpose, and the way they experience their connectedness to the moment, to self, to others, to nature and to the significant or sacred" (Puchalski et al. 2014, p. 463). Religious traditions usually have more formal organizational structures, a mutually supportive community with shared beliefs and ways of expressing what spiritually means for them. However, for Canda et al. (2020, p. 236), spiritual and religious perspectives "have a remarkable similarity in the core of their values with regard for service. The commonalities imply possibilities for finding common ground. The differences provide many insights for various helping strategies in social work". Additionally, "the experiential nature of the spiritual can provide a useful bridge in understanding what is shared across the spiritual and religious" (Gardner 2022, p. 14). This could be a sense of transcendence, something greater than the self, perhaps expressed in a feeling of deep interconnectedness, of awe or wonder or of deeply shared values or emotions.

This complexity of understanding underpins critical spirituality which can relate across these religious and spiritual perspectives. More specifically, the critical in critical spirituality and critical reflection is a reminder of the influence of the structural, of history and social context, both at a personal or family level and a broader societal level. This is not a value-free approach: focusing on the critical in this way means "analyzing commonly held ideas and practices to the extent that they perpetuate economic inequity, deny compassion, foster a culture of silence and prevent people from realizing a sense of common connectedness" (Brookfield 2016, p. 19). Critical spirituality is also underpinned by an integrated framework where common themes from First Nations worldviews, green and relational social work are complemented by critical and postmodern thinking. These together emphasize, from some spiritual perspectives and some religious traditions such as liberation theology or dark green religion (Taylor 2010), the interconnectedness of all beings, the importance of relatedness and community and seeing the self in the context of history and social structures (Gardner 2022). The implications are to "work with what is meaningful in the context of enabling a socially just, actively inclusive society. It also implies working in a spirit of openness and the ability to manage uncertainty and work with contradictions" (Gardner 2011, p. 77).

Critical reflection is integral to critical spirituality providing processes to articulate underlying meaning while taking into account the influence of context for yourself and the other. The use of reflective practice and reflexivity are also important here, the capacity to reflect on your reactions and identify assumptions as well as to see how the whole of the self is relevant to how you practice. Hunt (2021, p. 57) affirms that "the *practice* of reflective practice offers keys to personal and social transformation in ways that encompass both the pragmatic and the transcendental.

3. Process of Critical Reflection

The critical reflection model I use is based on that developed by Fook and Gardner (2007); Gardner (2014) used in critical reflection workshops or supervision groups. Each participant brings a specific example from their practice that has felt significant to them in some way, a troubling, uncomfortable, undermining or at least puzzling experience, something the person seeks to understand more deeply. In workshops participants are

asked not to choose one that is significantly challenging given that they are using it primarily to learn the process. The aim is to help participants tease out their reactions—their feelings, thoughts related to the experience, their underlying assumptions, values or beliefs and how these are influenced by their family history and community as well as the broader social context.

The process is often particularly powerful in unearthing assumptions: what the participant is taking for granted about how things are or should be. While some assumptions need to be more fully and consciously affirmed, others are often unhelpful in some way, i.e., detrimental to the person's well-being and ability to act with agency. In these settings, the focus is on meaning for participants as workers given this is part of a supervision process—or part of learning how to use critical reflection. However, there is a degree of unpredictability in the process; a relatively straightforward example can unearth unexpected reactions. Participants come to see that their assumptions influence how they live, not only how they work. Some perceive how assumptions have been developed and consolidated by what feel like traumatic experiences in early family, work and/or community life, so that they are truly taken for granted and deeply, but unconsciously influential. For some participants this can feel like a helpful, but challenging invitation to move beyond an unhelpful binary of the personal and professional. Others would suggest that supervision of this nature can provide “a foothold towards the elusive concept of self-actualization, or perhaps more specifically, to understand and reach our personal potential in professional development. In essence, we are referring to the therapeutic nature of clinical supervision and reflective practice, something . . . debated in much health care literature” (Freshwater 2011, p. 107).

It is vital that the culture of critical reflection groups is established explicitly before sharing of experiences begins. As well as validating a confidential and mutually respectful space, this culture must clearly include both nonjudgmental acceptance and willingness to explore to the degree to which each participant feels able. Perhaps the most essential part of this is being able to hold together what might seem paradoxical: that how the person reacted was completely reasonable in their context at that time as well as that there are always other possible perspectives and reactions.

In critical reflection, the first stage of the process focuses on deconstructing the experience, teasing out thoroughly how the participant sharing felt, related thoughts and assumptions. After the participant has explored their own reactions, if it seems helpful, the perspective of another person involved in the experience is also explored. While this is speculative—the participant and group cannot be sure about this—the process of exploring what *might be* often frees up the participant to perceive the other person and their reaction differently. The second stage focuses on reconstruction and change: given what I understand now, what assumptions or values do I want to affirm, which do I want to change? What are the implications of this for how I might perceive and/or act differently? In this process, participants may come to explore the fundamental meaning of life for them which they may or may not identify as spiritual. In coming to know the self and the influence of past experience, Ginwright (2018, p. 6) sees critical reflection as a “lens by which to filter, examine, and consider analytical and spiritual responses to trauma . . . These are not cognitive processes, but rather ethical, moral and emotional aspects of healing centered engagement”.

4. What I Mean by Trauma, Therapy and Therapeutic

Before I give two examples to illustrate this, I need to clarify how I am using the terms trauma, therapy and therapeutic. Generally, trauma refers to a physical and/or emotional reaction to a particular event or series of events over time, which can cause a long term harmful effect. Essentially, “traumatic events are recognised as such because they have disrupted, overwhelmed and destroyed a person's or community's sense of well-being and safety and capacity to cope as before” (Harms 2015, p. 7). What is significant is the person's subjective perception of the experience as one that has elements of this:

something perceived as traumatic by one person might be dismissed by another. For some, a traumatic experience is all pervasive, affecting how they interact with others and their orientation to life. It may have the potential to generate an existential crisis about the meaning of life generally, force questioning about the nature of suffering, or of good and evil, of assumptions about their view of the world (Farley 2007). This will be influenced by the person's underlying theoretical preferences: "right-based approaches" emphasise that traumatic events violate a fundamental sense of social justice, control and agency" (Harms 2015, p. 7) whereas psychodynamic approaches focus on the "emotions of trauma—shame, guilt and anger, for example—and both the unconscious and conscious expressions of anxiety" (Harms 2015, p. 17). However, social workers in the West at least, rarely discuss spirituality as part of trauma interventions (Boynton and Vis 2017). Ho et al. (2016, p. 782) contrast this with what they see as a more Eastern approach which assumes that having a spiritual attitude to trauma includes being able to accept suffering as an inevitable aspect of life and to use it "to construct and reconstruct meaning" and redirect energy to transformation and personal growth.

This fits well with what I am suggesting is 'therapeutic' about critical reflection and with what participants are expressing. Ideally, the therapeutic is healing, restorative and transformational, enabling new ways of seeing and being—which reflects what the critical reflection process can be. What is therapeutic is also subjectively experienced: what one person finds therapeutic, another may not. Schneider et al. (2014, p. 72) assert that the therapeutic process "can be a springboard to a larger view, an inexhaustible, continually replenishing view of wonder, discovery, and awe. And it can provide some of the core religious sensibilities—humility, uplift, connection". They reinforce that there are many routes to the spiritually enriched life and the centrality of personal experience is part of that. First Nations communities are explicit about how their own knowledge, in which the spiritual is embedded, is therapeutic seeing the "self as a dynamic flow of connections" and affirming that it is through "the telling of the story that therapeutic benefits can be achieved" (Dudgeon 2017, p. 252) taking into account the particular culture and context (Bhagwan 2017, p. 69). Some writers would emphasize the collaborative nature of what is experienced as therapeutic, that it is also often a "collaborative exploration . . . a continuous reflection between me and my clients" (Hall 2012, p. 56) where "the client's expertise was sought and equally valued (Dean 2012, p. 84). In peer group critical reflection and workshops, there is a similar experience of working together, mutually supporting each other's learning and unearthing of meaning.

5. Scenarios

These two scenarios have been selected from my experience in working with peer supervision groups but adapted and amalgamated to ensure anonymity.

5.1. Scenario One: George's Experience

George's experience presented to his well-established supervision group in a faith-based agency was of not being heard by a manager when he suggested a possible change for his team. He felt his furious internal response to this was out of proportion and feared how he might react externally if it happened again. Gradually, as he explored his feelings and related thoughts, he realised his underlying assumption was: *your opinion is not valued* and further *you are not important*. George was surprised at the strength of his emotional reaction and of these assumptions. He saw himself as having a strong Christian faith, an affirming sense of Christ's presence, well supported by his faith community. When asked about where he thought these undermining assumptions came from, he slowly acknowledged his experience as a child of feeling unrecognised and unwanted after his parents separated and he tried unsuccessfully to express how he felt. Although he wanted to live with his father, the court ruled he live with his mother. In that relationship, the assumption was: *you will be affirmed only if you act according to my preferences or experience emotional abuse and neglect*. He then denied his own emotions and desires so strongly, it became challenging to articulate

them. This was something he continually wrestled with personally and professionally. Part of the frustration of the work experience was having finally expressed his views about a strong preference, he again felt dismissed and unrecognised.

George's experience could well be seen as traumatic in that he had a long lasting, detrimental emotional reaction to a particular life experience. The critical reflection process enabled George to name the feelings, thoughts and perhaps most powerfully the assumptions from the experience that continued to influence him negatively. He also used the process to explore his mother's reaction and where she might have been coming from given the social context. Because this was initially difficult for George, the group, with his permission, brainstormed where his mother might have been coming from, her assumptions about herself, George and the world. From this, George could see from an adult perspective, that the divorce affected his mother's already fragile mental health. Her way of managing was to become increasingly rigid in her expectations about being socially and culturally successful. She also assumed that 'fitting in' would be better for George.

Moving to stage two for George partly meant integrating his religious experience: his assumption of Christ's unconditional love for him and so his fundamental sense of worth and wellbeing. It also meant actively noticing where he felt valued now, internalising feeling valued in his relationships with his partner and children, with friends and in his church life. He also acknowledged the unhelpful influence of the broader social context in general and his church community in reinforcing traditional assumptions of how to be male: the expectation of not expressing emotions. He came up with some new assumptions he felt he would have to grow into: *I am fundamentally worthwhile; my opinions and what I want are equally valid, I can express my feelings constructively and be heard*. At this point that George asked is this process supposed to be therapeutic? While he had previously had counselling somehow the articulating of fundamental assumptions felt more internally powerful in shifting his perceptions of himself and others. When asked how his behaviour might change George said practising being more aware of his feelings and thoughts, asking trusted family and friends to help him name these initially, then asserting and expressing these with others. To remember this, he chose: *I want my voice to be heard*. He also decided to return to his manager and to express his frustration at not being heard and ask that his suggested plan be taken seriously.

5.2. Scenario Two: Clara's Experience

Clara brought to her supervision group an experience where a social worker (Jo) she supervised expressed her frustration with Clara's 'micro management' saying she felt powerless and not trusted to do anything. Clara used a specific example where Jo had agreed to a supervised child protection access with a parent which Clara vetoed. When asked about her feelings, what was most significant, Clara felt particularly upset by Jo's use of the word trust, not feeling trusted. Although she did not see herself as spiritual, Clara identified how important trust was for her as a value and that it was essential for her well-being to live according to her values. The assumptions she teased out initially were: *how I approach my work is based on building trust, trust is fundamental to all that I do, I am a trustworthy person*. The word 'trustworthy' had a strong emotional resonance for Clara. The group worked with her to draw out what that meant which led to:

- *Trust means protecting people from harm*
- *Being trustworthy is about being predictable and ensuring a predictable environment*
- *Risk is opposed to trust, risk is to be avoided especially for those who are vulnerable.*

The focus then moved to exploring where Jo might be coming from which elicited:

- *I have enough experience to be trusted*
- *I am not feeling trusted to make decisions*
- *I am not feeling valued- Clara thinks I'm hopeless*
- *Being too risk averse means nothing changes, it's disempowering.*

For Clara, these were quite confronting assumptions—both her own and Jo’s. When asked what really matters to you, what is fundamentally important, she answered, trust is really important to me and feeling valued, I thought I made people feel I trusted and valued them. I do not want to convey a power over message. Next, she was asked, so how does this relate to family, to your own history and social context? Clara had an ‘aha’ moment remembering an incident when she was a social work student; she had agreed to visit a parolee at home, and he told her she was naïve and overly trusting. Her supervisor reinforced the potential harm of this, and Clara felt very foolish and shamed. She then became more cautious in trusting others, focusing on risk rather than being open to change. This had permeated other parts of her life; she had taken to heart the comment about being naïve and defended herself from being accused of this again.

This was helpful in moving to stage two: Clara identified that she did not want to be the cautious and risk-fearing person, the disempowering micro-manager that Jo identified. She wanted to let go of her student experience that she had not realised was still influencing her so strongly and pervasively. She could also see how the current neoliberal context influenced her as a manager and her organisation to be risk-averse and the perhaps Western value of having to be ‘right’, strong in her family of origin where making mistakes was seen as shameful. Her fundamental desire was to live from more life affirming choices—even if she was sometimes wrong, to live from the possibility of joy. Her new assumptions were, *I can fundamentally trust and have conversations as needed about risk; it is ok for me and members of my team to make mistakes so long as I/we learn from them. Essentially, I can live expecting joy.* Part of marking this change meant talking with Jo about her new understanding and the implications. It also meant exploring in other contexts what difference this might make in other aspects of her life.

6. Further Reflections and Analysis

So, what do these examples share about the potential of working with critical spirituality/critical reflection to identify what is meaningful and how this can lead to change related to trauma? George and Clara both identified an event they had experienced as traumatic in retrospect: something undermining and deeply held that influenced fundamentally and negatively how they saw the world over an extended time. Both were able to reach a significantly different way of orientating themselves internally, and so to seek related external change. Each of them did experience as Schneider, Miller and Sperry name it a transformation of how to live, a ‘larger view’ which came with a sense of positive astonishment. The process was therapeutic in that it was healing and restorative: it led to a more holistic sense of self, grounded in what each identified as fundamental meaning. While George was embedded in a religious tradition and Clara would describe herself as not spiritual, both encapsulated Ho et al.’s (2016, p. 782) ‘spiritual attitude to trauma’ reconstructing meaning and seeking transformation and growth.

One of the key aspects of the process was eliciting the feelings and thoughts related to the experience and how these linked to underlying assumptions and values. The process clarifies how an experience can leave an unconscious, but deeply held residue of emotion connected to expectations or assumptions about how the person sees themselves or about how others will see or treat them. Alternatively, assumptions are made that this is how things are, this is how the world operates, often, as Fook (2017, p. 28) says about ‘the big, ultimate questions’ that relate to integrity and a sense of self. Often, these are expressed as very simple, basic beliefs that are spiritual in the sense of underlying or fundamental meaning. The critical reflection process unearths these so they can be more consciously considered, assessed and generally for those connected to a traumatic experience seen as undermining and in need of rejection or at least modification. Sometimes, a constructive assumption is unearthed that has been forgotten or underused which can then be affirmed. For both George and Clara, the emotional strength of the connections to past events was surprising as well as the assumptions that related to them. The challenge of naming these

assumptions was a key aspect of recognising how much they had been affected by past experience, an aha moment that was liberating.

Secondly, in unearthing these assumptions of meaning and making a connection to the critical or contextual, both Clara and George came to see how they had been influenced by a significant experience in a relationship which then influenced them with family, friends, those at work and, for George, in the church community. Wrestling with where the 'other' person in this experience might be was also liberating for both Clara and George. This way of engaging reflexively encouraged them "to identify and challenge [their] own underlying assumptions with the theoretical, cultural and psychological positions of others in mind" [Bager-Charleson \(2010, p. 2\)](#). Participants are sometimes reluctant to explore where the other might be coming from, given that the person is not there to speak for themselves. However, provided this is done in a respectful spirit of exploration and curiosity, creatively imagining where someone might be coming from can free up a participant's assumptions about the motivations or actions of the other. It can also facilitate seeing what really matters to them, the essence or spirit of who they are. The emergence of different ways of seeing the same scenario at least reminds the participant that there are other perspectives. From George's perspective it was enlightening to see that perhaps his mother was simply doing all that seemed possible at the time given the social context. For Carla, it was confronting to have Jo express the fundamental values she shared but was not living from.

The process made explicit that these relationships and how they operated were in turn influenced by the broader social context: the assumptions and values in the broader community again a link to the critical and the need for social change ([Brookfield 2016](#)). Articulating these connections was also important in moving to new assumptions. At a conscious level, George and Clara rejected many of the influences they named: the need for men not to show emotion or the neoliberal, risk averse culture, but recognising how they had internalised these was helpful in letting them go. For George, there was an increased awareness of how his church community reinforced some of those norms in ways that did not fit with his spiritually based social justice values; for Clara, a sense that the broader culture discouraged identifying key values linked to acting with integrity. Similarly, [Beres \(2014, p. 9\)](#) points out the danger of a 'neutral stance' in a therapeutic setting which "will reinforce mainstream cultural and professional discourses" and the need to "assist people in reflecting on taken-for-granted discourses and cultural expectations that may have limited their options, and support them in reconnecting to their own personal preferences and values for life". Critical reflection by its nature affirms the value of moving to a more informed and socially just position, seeing the influence of the social context on the experience of trauma, not only the individual's response.

What also helped was bringing an explicitly spiritual perspective to this: asking what really matters, what is fundamentally meaningful, what values George and Carla wanted to live by. The pressures to be active and achieve goals in organisational contexts and in Western culture means these questions are not generally asked. As [Boynnton and Vis \(2017, p. 196\)](#) point out the "process of transcendent meaning making involves delving into deeper intuitive understandings researching the event" so that it becomes "both a restorative and creative response to traumatic, life altering experiences". The critical reflection process can provide a space that encourages this greater exploration of depth and meaning, using the specific experience as a way in to underlying revitalising and more liberating influential beliefs. For George, this included more actively integrating religious beliefs that had nurtured him: the desire to act from a loving spirit as well as taking seriously that this also meant loving himself. For Clara this was more a spiritual position that what mattered was to live in the expectation of joy, rather than of fear. This had a sense of transcendence for her, a feeling of connection to something greater, which [Ginwright \(2018\)](#) would see as a spiritual response to trauma, engaging with the moral and ethical in a way that is transforming. For each of them, naming the desire to live from this place of their new explicit meaning was freeing and enabling.

The second stage of the critical reflection process, as well as moving to new assumptions carries the expectation of change in assumptions, perceptions and/or actions. Both Clara and George wanted to explore what difference this new orientation would make and how they could do something to embed this learning. Clara's initial decision was to talk to Jo, as well as to find ways to explore her inner shift more broadly to change her family and friends' perception of her. In the workplace, she sought to balance the need to be protective, but now also to more actively exploring what might be possible: to name the values she thought were important and challenge the risk averse culture of the organisation and its funders. George's plan was to talk to family and friends, including those in his church community and to ask their support in this inner change, to consolidate it and to be more explicit about changing traditional expectations of men and emotions. He also explored how he might raise his original suggestion more assertively with his manager.

The collaborative nature of this process is also important and perhaps part of how it is therapeutic. I am working from examples chosen from peer supervision groups and workshops and critical reflection can also be used in mutual peer supervision in pairs as well as in individual supervision and in work with individuals and families. The mutuality of each person being prepared to contribute their experience in peer supervision can encourage deeper sharing. As a workshop facilitator, I begin with the group helping me work through an example of mine to help shift the power dynamic and reinforce that we are all participants in this process. The mutuality of the process also validates that each of us has experiences we struggle with, that it is 'normal' to have, as [Ho et al. \(2016\)](#) describe, 'suffering or misfortune' to which we could add to make mistakes or be less than perfect. Having other people contribute to exploring other perceptions opens up possibilities for new ways of being. [Saleebey \(2009, p. 1\)](#) sees the collaborative process as honouring "the innate wisdom of the human spirit, the inherent capacity for transformation of even the most humbled and abused" through focusing on "interests, capacities, motivations, resources and emotions in the work of reaching their hopes and dreams". Arousing hope in seeing that other ways are possible is an integral part of this. Using a white board to write key notes and brainstorming ideas reinforces working together and the value of shared knowledge and experience.

Exploring how to embed change for the self and in the environment is also a key part of the process. Having ongoing supervision groups or mutual supervision pairs can be a way of managing this, providing opportunities to check how the meaning in new experiences reinforces, complements or challenges what has emerged. Clara and George were both aware their environments would expect their 'old' versions. Each was explicit about talking to those in important relationships about what had changed and what that would mean. For both, it was vital to remember the underlying assumptions, to take a phrase that would remind them of what was fundamental. It was also important to recognize that change in the environment was also needed. A resilient spirituality would emphasize the inclusion of social justice, so that as well as working with individuals to overcome adversity, the aim would be to transform aspects of that diversity, i.e., the "social conditions that impede human flourishing" ([De Breda 2019, p. 274](#)). Critical spirituality and reflection can encourage a sense of agency, the ability to bring about change both personally and contextually.

7. Conclusions

What helps people who have experienced trauma? My experience in working with people like George and Clara affirms the value of actively including the spiritual in the sense of what gives life meaning. Critical spirituality and the processes of critical reflection provide a framework that can enable those with traumatic experiences to delve deeply into the meaning that has become associated with those experiences and the related feelings, thoughts and actions. The critical aspect of this enables participants to see how their spirituality, their values and beliefs, are influenced by their social context. For some people this includes a religious tradition, for others, the spiritual which may be expressed in the

values that provide meaning in their lives. Seeing the influence of the social context on both the person themselves and others involved fosters seeing the experience from a different perspective. It then becomes more possible to ask: is this the meaning I want to live from or are there other beliefs and values, other aspects of what matters to me that are now more restoring and revitalising? For some people at least, this enables them to lessen or relinquish the power of that experience and to find a liberating sense of what will engender greater spiritual flourishing.

Funding: This research received no external funding.

Institutional Review Board Statement: Not appropriate.

Informed Consent Statement: The scenarios used in this article have been adapted from a number of examples to ensure anonymity.

Conflicts of Interest: The author declares no conflict of interest.

References

- Bager-Charleson, Sofie. 2010. *Reflective Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy*. Exeter: SAGE Publications.
- Beres, Laura. 2014. *The Narrative Practitioner*. Macmillan: Education.
- Bhagwan, Raisuyah. 2017. The sacred in traditional African spirituality Creating synergies with social work practice. In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Spirituality and Social Work*. Edited by Beth R. Crisp. London: Routledge, pp. 64–72.
- Boynton, Heather Marie, and Jo-Ann Vis. 2017. Spirituality: The missing component in trauma therapy across the lifespan. In *The Routledge Handbook of Religion, Spirituality and Social Work*. Edited by Beth R. Crisp. London: Routledge, pp. 193–201.
- Brookfield, Stephen. 2016. So What Exactly is Critical About Critical Reflection? In *Researching Critical Reflection Multidisciplinary Perspectives*. Edited by Fook Jan, Collington Val, Ross Fiona, Ruch Gillian and West Linden. Abingdon: Routledge, pp. 11–22.
- Canda, Edward R., Leola Dyrud Furman, and Hwi-Ja Canda, eds. 2020. *Spiritual Diversity in Social Work Practice The Heart of Helping*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Crisp, Beth R. 2020. Charting the Development of Spirituality in Social Work in the Second Decade of the 21st Century: A Critical Commentary. *British Journal of Social Work* 50: 961–78. [CrossRef]
- De Breda, Adrian. 2019. Reclaiming Resilience for Social Work: A Reply to Garrett. *British Journal of Social Work* 49: 272–76. [CrossRef]
- Dean, Ruth G. 2012. Becoming a Social Constructionist: From Freudian Beginnings to Narrative Ends. In *Social Construction and Social Work Practice*. Edited by Stanley L. Witkin. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 72–102.
- Dudgeon, Pat. 2017. Australian Indigenous Psychology. *Australian Psychologist* 52: 251–54. [CrossRef]
- Farley, Yvonne R. 2007. Making the Connection, Spirituality, Trauma and Resiliency. *Journal of Religion & Spirituality in Social Work: Social Thought* 26: 1–15. [CrossRef]
- Fook, Jan. 2017. Finding Fundamental Meaning through Critical Reflection. In *Practising Spirituality*. Edited by Beres Laura. London: Palgrave, pp. 17–29.
- Fook, Jan, and Fiona Gardner. 2007. *Practising Critical Reflection: A Resource Handbook*. Maidenhead: Open University Press.
- Freshwater, Dawn. 2011. Clinical Supervision and reflective practice. In *Critical Reflection in Practice Generating Knowledge for Care*. Edited by Rolfe Gary, Jasper Melanie and Freshwater Dawn. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 100–26.
- Fuller, Robert C., and William B. Parsons. 2018. *Spiritual but Not Religious in Being Spiritual but Not Religious: Past, Present, Future(s)*. Edited by William B. Parsons. Abingdon: Taylor and Francis, pp. 15–29.
- Gardner, Fiona. 2011. *Critical Spirituality: A Holistic Approach to Contemporary Practice*. Farnham: Ashgate.
- Gardner, Fiona. 2014. *Being Critically Reflective*. Palgrave: Houndmills Basingstoke.
- Gardner, Fiona. 2022. *Embedding Spirituality and Religion in Social Work Practice A Socially Just Approach*. Abingdon: Routledge.
- Ginwright, Shawn. 2018. The future of healing: Shifting from trauma informed care to healing centered engagement. *Occasional Paper* 25: 25–32. Available online: <http://kinshipcarersvictoria.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/08/OP-Ginwright-S-2018-Future-of-healing-care.pdf> (accessed on 1 April 2022).
- Hall, J. Christopher. 2012. Honoring Client Perspectives Through Collaborative Practice: Shifting from Assessment to Collaborative Exploration. In *Social Construction and Social Work Practice*. Edited by Stanley L. Witkin. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 38–71.
- Harms, Louise. 2015. *Understanding Trauma and Resilience*. London: Palgrave.
- Ho, Rainbow T. H., Cheuk Yan Sing, and Venus P. Y. Wong. 2016. Addressing holistic health and work empowerment through a body-mind-spirit intervention program among helping professionals in continuous education: A pilot study. *Social Work in Health Care* 55: 779–93. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Hunt, Cheryl. 2021. *Critical Reflection, Spirituality and Professional Practice*. Cham: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Puchalski, Christine M., Robert Vitillo, Sharon K. Hull, and Nancy Reller. 2014. Improving the Spiritual Dimension of Whole Person Care: Reaching National and International Consensus. *Journal of Palliative Medicine* 17: 642–56. [CrossRef] [PubMed]
- Saleebey, Dennis. 2009. *The Strengths Perspective in Social Work Practice*, 5th ed. Boston: Pearson/Allyn and Bacon.

-
- Schneider, Kirk J., Lisa Miller, and Len Sperry. 2014. Enchanted Agnosticism, Awe and Existential-Integrative Therapy. *Spirituality in Clinical Practice* 1: 71–73. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Swinton, John. 2014. Spirituality-in-Healthcare: Just Because it May Be “Made Up” Does Not Mean That it is Not Real and Does Not Matter (Keynote 5). *Journal for the Study of Spirituality* 4: 162–73. [[CrossRef](#)]
- Taylor, Bron. 2010. *Dark Green Religion: Nature, Spirituality and the Planetary Future*. Berkeley: California University Press.