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Can religious social workers practice affirmatively with LGBTQ service recipients? An exploration within the regulatory context

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ABSTRACT

Tensions between religious freedoms and lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) rights have evolved from debates about sinful deviance to competing equality claims. There is a growing debate, originally in the US, but emerging in the UK, about whether religious social workers, particularly those holding fundamentalist Christian beliefs, can deliver affirmative, anti-oppressive services to LGBTQ people. This is important because over two-fifths of social workers identify as Christian and almost a quarter of UK charities, including those running community and residential care services for older people, are religious organisations. These concerns have been highlighted in a recent judicial review involving a social work student, Felix Ngole, who was expelled by the University of Sheffield for making homophobic comments on his Facebook page. The Court of Appeal ruled the University's decision was procedurally flawed and had conflated religious prejudice with discrimination. This paper considers 70 online responses to a *Community Care* article written by Ngole, which highlight divided opinions within the social work profession. It critically interrogates, within regulatory contexts, whether it is possible to be both deeply opposed to LGBTQ people's lives and yet work affirmatively and anti-oppressively with them. An urgent research agenda is proposed.

KEYWORDS

LGBTQ; sexuality; transgender; religion

Introduction

Tensions between religious freedoms and LGBTQ rights remain an enduring dilemma (Eskridge and Wilson 2018). The major world religions are closely implicated in prejudice (Allport 1966) including towards lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans and queer (LGBTQ) people (Herek and McLemore 2013, Hunt 2016) and in LGBTQ oppression worldwide (Gerber *et al.* 2021). In the UK, with increased legal protections for LGBTQ people, there are 'juridically competing equality claims' (Cooper and Herman 2013, p. 62), with many religious individuals feeling that they are now the oppressed minority.

Not all branches of religion nor all religious individuals are intolerant of LGBTQ people, some of whom are religious themselves (Brennan-Ing *et al.* 2013, Westwood 2017). Christianity is divided on the issue, however Christian fundamentalist dogma holds 'that homosexuals are bad, diseased, perverse, sinful, other, and inferior' (Barton

2010, p. 465). The Christian Institute, a leading UK ‘heteroactivist’ (Nash and Brown 2020) organisation, describes same-sex marriage as ‘not real marriage’, ‘blasphemous’ and ‘sinful’ (Christian Institute 2017, p. 22), while claiming ‘A transsexual is living in defiance of their Creator and “sex change” surgery desecrates a God-given body’ (Christian Institute 2016, p. 3). Christian Action, Research, and Education (CARE) funded a UK report, whose advisory group included leading UK Christian, Catholic, Muslim, Hindu, and Sikh religious bodies (Orr 2016). It claimed there is an ‘ongoing erosion of religious liberty’ in the UK (p. 17) citing the closure of Catholic adoption agencies (which only placed children with heterosexual couples) as an example of ‘the damage that equalities legislation can inflict on society’ (p. 13).

There is increasing concern about whether some religious views – especially those of Christian evangelicals and fundamentalists – are compatible with social work values, such as anti-oppressive principles (Dessel and Bolen 2014). Religious organisations and staff play a key role in the UK voluntary sector. 23% of the charity sector’s income (£16.3bn) in England and Wales is received by faith-based charities (Bull *et al.* 2016). Over 2,000 UK residential care and nursing homes are run by religious organisations (Collinge 2020), as well as day care centres and community support services. The leading providers include: Methodist Homes Association (MHA), the Catholic Orders of St John Care Trust (OSJCT), the Salvation Army, and Jewish Care. 42% of social workers in England identify as Christian (Social Work England 2021).

In the US and Canada, social work professionals, students and educators affiliated with a religion, generally Christianity, are more likely to hold negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people (Chonody *et al.* 2013, Jaffee *et al.* 2016, Lennon-Dearing and Delavega 2016, McCarty-Caplan 2018, Atteberry-Ash *et al.* 2019, Messinger *et al.* 2020). This is compounded by religiosity, namely the frequency and depth of religious participation. However, there is virtually no research on whether and/or how these negative attitudes inform practice (Westwood, 2022).

These issues are under-addressed in the UK, being ‘an “uncomfortable” subject which is often ignored in analyses of health and social welfare diversity policies’ (Carr 2008, p. 113). Schaub *et al.* (2017) recently examined UK social workers’ beliefs and values about sexuality, observing that:

... inherent tensions between religious beliefs and sexual morals divided opinion ... the profession of social work has not adequately addressed this tension for people with conservative religious views; these views cannot be easily reconciled with critical thinking about the sexual and gender norms that can restrict many clients’ everyday lives and personal relationships (p. 440).

These tensions were highlighted in the UK case involving Felix Ngole, a Christian fundamentalist social work student. Originally from Cameroon, Ngole was expelled by the University of Sheffield because of comments he posted on his public Facebook page in support of a Christian US registrar jailed for refusing to issue marriage licences to same-sex couples. Ngole wrote in these posts that:

‘... [S]ame sex marriage is a sin whether we accept it or not’

‘... Homosexuality is a sin, no matter how you want to dress it up’

‘... [O]ne day God will do away with all diseases and all suffering... But remember that He will also Judge all those who indulged in all forms of wicked acts such as homosexuality’¹

Ngole also quoted several Bible passages, including ‘... If a man lies with a male as with a woman both of them have committed an abomination. Leviticus 18:22’.²

The University instigated disciplinary proceedings and eventually expelled Ngole as unfit to practise. Ngole sought judicial review³ arguing that his Article 9 and 10 rights under the European Convention of Human Rights (ECHR) were interfered with, and that the decision was arbitrary and unfair. His initial claim was dismissed but was allowed on appeal.⁴ The Court of Appeal held that the University’s disciplinary proceedings were ‘flawed and unfair’,⁵ its approach exceeded professional codes of practice, and it had been disproportionate in expelling Ngole. Although the Court accepted that Ngole had been ‘intransigent’ in response to the University’s concerns, it held that this was ‘an understandable reaction’⁶ to being told ‘something that he found incomprehensible, namely that he could never express his deeply held religious views in any manner on any public forum’.⁷ The Court concluded that the University had ‘wrongly confused’⁸ Ngole’s religious views with discrimination, observing ‘it does not necessarily connote that the person expressing such views will discriminate on such grounds’.⁹ The ruling was heralded by some for its protection of free speech, while condemned by others for undermining social work professional standards (Mason *et al.* 2020, Foster 2021).

Ngole (2016) published an article in *Community Care*, a leading social work and social care professional journal. He wrote,

Just because I disagree with a homosexual lifestyle, it doesn’t mean to say that I won’t act in a professional, kind and compassionate way when dealing with homosexuals (Ngole 2016).

The article received 75 comments, many from practising UK social workers, expressing very mixed opinions. These are analysed here, located within UK regulatory contexts. The relationship between Christian fundamentalist beliefs and anti-oppressive social work practice is discussed, and an urgent research agenda proposed.

Background

Tensions between religion and LGBTQ rights play out in the UK partly in terms of competing claims under the ECHR, namely articles 8 (private and family life), 9 (freedom of thought, conscience and religion), 10 (freedom of expression), and 14 (prohibits discrimination in the interference of other ECHR rights). This is also seen in the Equality Act 2010 (EQA), which includes sexual orientation, ‘religion or belief’, and gender reassignment among its protected characteristics.¹⁰ The Act provides protection from direct and indirect discrimination, harassment and victimisation. However, sexual orientation and ‘religion or belief’ are exempt from protection from harassment in the provision of services and public functions,¹¹ disposal and management of premises,¹² in schools, where gender reassignment is also exempt,¹³ and in associations.¹⁴

Liberty and the British Humanist Association raised objections to the exemptions in their submissions to the Joint Committee on Human Rights’ Equality Bill consultation (JCHR 2009), the JCHR taking the view that they represented ‘a significant gap in the

protection against discrimination offered by the [Act]' (para. 114). The exemptions have been criticised for under-protecting LGBTQ people from religious-based harassment beyond the workplace (Clucas 2012, O'Kinneide and Liu 2015).

Religious speech is protected under the Public Order Act 1986 (POA), wherein it is an offence to incite hatred on the grounds of religion or sexual orientation. The Act explicitly protects free speech related to 'religions or the beliefs'.¹⁵ It states that 'the discussion or criticism of sexual conduct or practices or the urging of persons to refrain from or modify such conduct or practices'¹⁶ and 'any discussion or criticism of marriage which concerns the sex of the parties to marriage'¹⁷ should not be taken alone to be threatening or intended to incite hatred.

In terms of case law, successive courts have established that services to LGBTQ people may not be refused on the grounds of religious belief, in relation to: bed and breakfast accommodation¹⁸; participating in fostering and adoption panels considering applications from same-sex couples¹⁹; civil registrars performing civil partnerships²⁰; and Relate counsellors.²¹ A Pentecostal couple unsuccessfully claimed religious discrimination when considered unsuitable as foster carers because they believed homosexuality to be wrong.²² In 2019, a Christian doctor dismissed for refusing to refer to trans people by their correct pronouns failed in his claim for unfair dismissal.²³ However, in *Lee v Ashers*,²⁴ the 'gay cake' case, the Supreme Court held that it was not discriminatory to refuse to make a product for someone, if the message on the product was contrary to one's religious beliefs. According to Lady Hale, 'the objection was to the message, not the messenger, and that was permissible in law'.²⁵ The ruling was controversial. Some claimed that it was 'a modest step forward for religious liberty' (Hambler 2018, p. 156) while others thought it was 'the Court's worst equality ruling in recent decades' (Cousins 2019, p. 223), allowing a non-religious organisation to discriminate against LGBTQ people on the grounds of its owners' religious conscience (Fredman 2020).

There have also been cases related to social work. In 2020, a Christian school worker failed in her religious discrimination claim after being dismissed for posting on social media her opposition to LGBTQ-inclusive teaching at her school (Morris 2020). A 2021 ruling held that Cornerstones, a Christian fostering and adoption agency, could lawfully restrict its recruitment to Christian families, but could not, as it had intended, exclude same-sex couples.²⁶

Local authorities (the main employers of social workers) are required by the Care Act 2014 to deliver non-discriminatory services (DHSS 2021, S 2.45), and various social work regulatory bodies prohibit discrimination, such as the Health and Care Professions Council (Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) 2016), which regulates social workers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, and Social Work England (2022). Anti-discriminatory practice involves 'tackling or reducing' immediate discrimination, whereas anti-oppressive practice focuses on challenging structural and systemic discrimination (Cocker and Hafford-Letchfield 2014). The British Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (British Association of Social Workers (BASW) 2021), binding on all its members, explicitly requires anti-oppressive practice. It states that social workers have a responsibility to 'challenge oppression'²⁷ and 'the social conditions that contribute to oppression, social exclusion, stigma or subjugation'.²⁸ The Code also asks members to 'identify and question their own prejudices and consider how these could be experienced as oppressive by the people with whom they are working'.²⁹

Many authors question whether there are irreconcilable differences between social work and conservative religious views (Chonody *et al.* 2013, Dessel and Bolen 2014, McCarty-Caplan 2018), and in particular, whether a Christian fundamentalist social worker who believes they have access to absolute truth can support others to explore values and make choices which conflict with that ‘truth’ (Dinerman 2003). Social workers with religious-based negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people claim that they can still work effectively with them, by compartmentalising their personal beliefs and their professional practice and exercising Christian tolerance (Dessel *et al.* 2017). However, critics of tolerance argue it involves sufferance and forbearance (Oberdiek 2001), moral superiority towards an abject other (Brown 2009) and ‘mere civility’ (Bejan 2017) rather than full respect (Adenitire 2020). Respect is foundational to an ethic of care (‘Care is not possible without respect’. Barnes 2012, p. 118) and social justice theories of recognition (Fraser *et al.* 2003).

Tolerance underpins much of UK equality and human rights laws, with an ‘agree to disagree’ approach to promote social cohesion (Fredman 2020). However, this is complicated by the issue of compelled speech (Adenitire 2020), when one’s professional role requires the articulation of values and principles which are contrary to one’s religious beliefs. For example, as in social work practice which requires approval, validation and affirmation towards LGBTQ people (Mendoza *et al.* 2020). Upholding values contrary to their religious beliefs is likely to create stressful ‘identity incongruence’ (Héliot *et al.* 2020) for some social workers and an inauthentic experience for service recipients (Henrickson 2017).

Those religious social workers who hold negative beliefs about LGBTQ people may reveal this in microaggressions, those ‘subtle forms of discrimination, often unintentional and unconscious, which send negative and denigrating messages to various individuals and groups’ (Nadal *et al.* 2015, p. 147). Microaggressions, often intersecting with other social locations – e.g. gender, race, ethnicity – have a detrimental impact on LGBTQ health and wellbeing. They are revealed in: discomfort and/or disapproval when in the company of LGBTQ people; assuming LGBTQ deviance/pathology; denial of anti-LGBTQ prejudice and oppression; language/assumptions which discount/devalue LGBTQ relationships; misgendering trans people; and the ‘love the sinner, detest the sin’ approach (Nadal *et al.* 2016, Lomash *et al.* 2018, Clucas 2019). Religious microaggressions have added impact because of their perceived moral and spiritual authority and, for some, their association with rejection by religious family members (Clucas 2017). These harms can be further compounded by social workers’ positions of power and authority (Byers *et al.* 2020).

Discrimination law is primarily interested in whether a thing is done, rather than how well it is done: ‘As long as you meet the legal standard ... the law will not intervene: it has little interest in whether you just scrape into legality or whether you are with the angels, flying far higher than the legal minimum’ (Herring 2021, p. 6). This may miss the subtleties of relational services such as counselling, psychotherapy, healthcare, social care, and social work (Howe *et al.* 2018), which involve the intentional ‘use of self’ (Sewell 2020, p. 9). In such services, the quality of the professional interpersonal relationship will determine whether the service is delivered *equally well* to all. However, although this is an equality issue, the Equality Act is not currently calibrated for this level of subtlety.

The concern, then, is that some religious social work practitioners with negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people may, at best, apply a tolerance approach which may: be insufficient to authentically deliver an affirmative, anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory service; involve microaggressions which undermine effective social work relationships and cause LGBTQ service recipients harm; and produce unequal service delivery not picked up by the insufficiently subtle registers of current equality legislation.

Methodology

The internet offers new and rich opportunities for qualitative social science research (Lichtman 2013), including studying asynchronous online communications such as blogs, newspaper articles, online comments and reviews (Schiek and Ullrich 2017). The research reported here analysed moderated comments posted on an open access forum (Community Care 2022) in response to Ngole's *Community Care* article (Ngole 2016). The conceptual lens was intersectional, relational and anti-oppressive.

Data and analysis

Ngole's article was published on 10 March 2016. There were 75 comments posted between 10 March 2016 and 13 March 2016 (with no further comments thereafter) of which 73 were full posts and 2 were corrections. The comments were posted by 68 different people. Some used pseudonyms, some gave their full names. For this project, the posts were downloaded, cross-referenced with other comments, and anonymised (separate code for each different respondent). Then the original data, including all names that had been published, whether pseudonyms or otherwise, were deleted. Content analysis was undertaken, with responses read closely, coded inductively, and collated into pragmatic categories (White and Marsh 2006) to identify key themes and associated tensions. Themes were identified by: frequency, significance, particularity, saliency and significance (Buetow 2010).

Findings

Five main themes were evident in these data: personal beliefs and professional social work practice; professional codes of practice; LGBTQ affirmative service provision; competing claims of discrimination; the importance of reflective dialogue. Each are considered in turn.

Personal beliefs and professional social work practice

A key area of contestation in the literature is whether conservative religious practitioners can compartmentalise their personal beliefs in professional contexts (Dessel and Bolen 2014). This was reflected in the comments. Those who thought it was possible, referred to professionalism:

Felix is entitled to his own opinion and it doesn't not mean that he will not respect other people's decisions and choices ... I believe that when he helps his clients he will make decisions based on the client's needs not on his beliefs. (COM62)

I have personal opinions that may conflict with my social work values. For example, I am anti-abortion but this has never altered how I work with women who have had terminations or are planning them. We can hold personal views and successfully work from a professional value base. (COM19)

The following commentators cited examples of religious practitioners who were thought to be working effectively with LGBTQ service recipients:

I also know of Christian, Jewish and Muslim social workers who are out there supporting gay and lesbians whether in their housing or mental health issues and many other social problems, even though their religion considers homosexuality as sin. (COM68)

I work with Christian and Muslim social work colleagues and some are also in my team. Despite their faith, they do not hold any homophobic views or discriminate. (COM37)

These claims to non-discrimination may be valid, however it is not known how LGBTQ service recipients experience those social workers' practice nor whether it is affirmative and anti-oppressive, even if non-discriminatory.

The Appeal Court in Ngole's case held that negative views about LGBTQ people do not inevitably lead to discrimination. Several commentators made a similar distinction:

How can people be so blind not to see that disagreeing with somethings is not the same as hating a person who does it? If parents hate that a kid did something they disagree with it does not mean that they will hate the kid. What evidence is there that if Felix states that he disagrees with homosexuality it will mean that he will refuse to provide proper service to homosexual clients? (COM14)

The 'love the sinner not the sin' approach reflects much of the conservative Christian discourse about LGBTQ people, however it is understood as religious microaggression by several authors (Lomash *et al.* 2018).

This commentator thought that Ngole might not be discriminatory:

As a gay man I feel that if he fosters acceptance and unconditional positive regard within his work then that is all we can ask for. Although different I often work with paedophiles and sex offenders and still deliver a service to the level as I would anyone else ... (COM29)

This gay man's claim about 'unconditional positive regard' goes to the heart of the debate over respect and affirmative services (Mendoza *et al.* 2020). While he thought it was possible, the following commentator disagreed:

His views are not compatible with social work, by quoting that homosexuality is an abomination. Even if it doesn't sit comfortably with you, expressing such strong discriminatory views about a marginalised minority group throws the profession into disrepute ... I met a nurse with similar views who their colleagues could no longer trust to work in a professional manner. (COM64)

This commentator raises an important point, which is that religious practitioners' attitudes towards LGBTQ people impact not only service recipients, but colleagues too (Stonewall 2015). Other commenters felt Ngole's views were incompatible with social work's emancipatory role:

Social workers are 'agents of change'. We fight all forms of inequality and injustice ... By expressing your personal opinions about homosexuality publicly, you already took your position to condone widespread discrimination, persecution and violence against gay individuals and groups. (COM2).

As a profession, social work must never accept anyone who is prejudiced against any disadvantaged group. It is their duty to help ELIMINATE such prejudice, not to accept or promote it. (COM65)

For these commentators, there is a fundamental tension in reconciling religious views perceived to be prejudiced and discriminatory with social work's anti-oppressive values, as has been raised in the literature (Dessel and Bolen 2014, Dessel *et al.* 2017).

There was a heated exchange about whether social work is task-focussed or something more:

Would you say that a plumber could not provide a safe and efficient service to someone who is homosexual on the grounds that they believe marriage to be a union between a man and a woman? Or a car mechanic, or a solicitor, or a footballer, or a dinner lady? (COM32)

Other commenters objected to these analogies:

Your comparisons with plumbers, car mechanics are moronic. What legal power does a mechanic or plumber have to make decisions about the lives of children or the vulnerable? (COM33)

AAAArrrrggghhhh! We are talking about SOCIAL WORK – it's not a bloody trade!! (COM4) [Original capitals]

These competing views highlight the different ways social work is viewed, as a commodifiable trade or a relational profession (Barnes 2012, p. 106) with considerable power and authority (Howe *et al.* 2018). As this commentator observed:

... It is my experience that the one thing my clients have wanted from me is to be genuine in my support of them; that what I believe, who I am, is consistent with how I am with them. How can anyone hold strong views on gay marriage or abortion and not have them colour (I originally wrote 'taint', which is, I think, more apposite) their interactions with their clients? It's hypocritical and dishonest on the deepest level and any therapeutic relationship will be rotten at its core. (COM20)

This view highlights the importance of the social work relationship, and of LGBTQ service recipients needing to be assured that they have their social workers' wholehearted approval of them as people, if not of all their actions (Henrickson 2017). It also raises issues of (in)authenticity and (in)congruence (Héliot *et al.* 2020) and microaggressions (Nadal *et al.* 2016), echoed in the literature.

Professional codes of practice

Several commentators appealed to professional standards to object to Ngole's stance:

Read the British Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics. You'll find that 'challenging discrimination' and 'recognising diversity' are principles that social workers are expected to share. (COM19)

... I am astounded that you think you've done nothing wrong. You were training to be a social worker – have you not read the ethics and values embedded into your chosen profession?? (COM36)

These views speak to professional rules as a means of codifying anti-discriminatory practice. They question Ngole's ability to be proactively anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive, situating it in the context of professional ethics. However, many fundamentalist Christians prioritise Biblical rules, a view expressed here:

[I] accept and anticipate intolerance and persecution for the convictions I hold as a Christian but we will not bow under popular opinion and political correctness. It is apparent to me that any views held regardless are accepted bar the convictions of believing in God. I know Christians are being muzzled in the workplace and I am in agreement with Félix's judgment that Christians who are in hiding need to come out and own up to their convictions. (COM67)

So, for this commenter, there is a systematic silencing – and hence oppression – of Christians in social work. For some, this silencing, this oppression, was understood to be racialised:

Perhaps like me as an African man we can all begin to prepare to return to our native lands and enjoy greater religious liberties. They have stopped us from disciplining our children, they've said its OK to kill a child in the womb and now they want to silence us altogether and so let us return to our homes and fight a different fight. I am sick and tired of Africans being treated as second class citizens and as if we will forever be subjected to the dominion of others. (COM67)

This is a complex issue. Ngole (2016) wrote in his article that he wanted to come to the UK because he believed it to be 'a nation that protects freedom of speech, religion and our ability to be who we want to be'. However, the above commentator felt that British liberalism was oppressing his cultural values, highlighting the normative clash which can be experienced by migrants arriving in the UK (Harris *et al.* 2017).

The (sometimes unanticipated) price of migrating to find greater tolerance is it also involves tolerating those of whom we disapprove (Fredman 2020), as this commentator observed:

I'm a social worker and a practice educator ... I feel it would be unfair to subject homosexual service users and clients to the kind of intolerance that resides in this individual ... yes great Britain is a sanctuary [quoting from Ngole's article], BECAUSE we don't tolerate views such as yours ... (COM17) [Original capitals]

This commentator made a similar argument, drawing parallels with racism (Herek and McLemore 2013):

Not all that long ago, a lot of people thought mixed-race marriages shouldn't be allowed, and many even claimed their religion justified this view. Whether they are claiming religious justification or not, would you accept racist bigots like that as social workers? Never. By the

same principle that the profession excludes racist bigots, it must also exclude homophobic bigots too . . . You can't pick and choose to fight some bigotries and let yourself think that others are "ok". (COM65)

Racialised discourse was also present here:

Striking him off the course is wrong. Having worked amongst social workers that have been practicing for years and when I hear the comments that I can only describe as prejudice, racist and stereotypical of Black people, then I would say other social workers need to be struck off the list because of their views, comments and offensive language, which they express openly in an office as they are the majority. They are white middle class, whilst there are just two Black social workers, who are obviously the minority. (COM54)

This comment serves to complicate the narrative which suggests Ngole's attitudes would tarnish social work's high values, when, as established in the literature, they are already compromised by racism (Lavette and Penketh 2014, Obasi 2022).

LGBTQ affirmative service provision

Delivering effective services to LGBTQ people requires an understanding of their identities, experiences and concerns (Mendoza *et al.* 2020). Some commentators felt Ngole demonstrated a lack of such an appreciation:

. . . I feel the rhetoric and language he has used such as an 'abomination' is borderline extremism. This is what irks me the most. This doesn't seem to represent an ounce of understanding into both the nature and culture of LGBT . . . (COM30)

Several commentators engaged with 'lifestyle' rhetoric:

He's not denying your right to the life you have chosen to live (COM9)

. . . many LGBT people that feel if other folks don't agree with their lifestyle then they are homophobic, which is wrong and isn't true in many cases (COM54)

The objections to this "lifestyle" were strenuous:

I'm a lesbian, and I'd be horrified to learn that my social worker believed my right to marriage should be revoked, and that he disagreed with my lifestyle (would that be the lifestyle of having a job? Seeing my friends? Knitting for a hobby? Looking after my cat? Or do you mean that you disagree with my sexuality, and with me being open about it in public? Cos I think it's the latter) (COM1)

Quite what you [Ngole] mean by a 'homosexual lifestyle' is beyond me. Sexuality is not a lifestyle choice – it is a choice about who you are in a relationship with, who you love. It is everyone's right to choose that for themselves and is as basic a right as you can get. (COM 64)

Excuse me, but what 'choices' are you referring to? Sexuality is an aspect of personhood and entirely unconnected to choice or belief. (COM63)

The reason 'lifestyle' discourse is so important, is that it enables fundamentalist Christians to give legitimacy to negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people by saying it is not them personally they disapprove of but their lives. This echoes the stance of religious organisations which "accept" gay people so long as they refrain from having

sex. However, ‘choice’ narratives are deeply offensive to LGBTQ people, many of whom understand their identities in essentialist terms. This discourse also underpins conversion therapy, which has harmed many LGBTQ people (Clucas 2017).

The limitations of tolerance were also raised:

... To say he can “act in a professional, kind and compassionate way when dealing with homosexuals” is demeaning to LGBT people, his use of terminology shows a lack of understanding. I doubt his ‘kindness’ and ‘compassion’ is what people want; it implies there is something wrong with them ... (COM57)

This echoes the literature which frames tolerance as abjection (Brown 2009) and insufficient for full LGBTQ inclusion (Cooper and Herman 2013).

Competing claims of discrimination

Competing claims of discrimination in the literature were also reflected in the comments.

Are LGBT people less entitled to freedom from discrimination because of others’ faith? No. (COM63)

This commentator felt that discrimination towards LGBT [sic] people was being permitted under the umbrella of religious rights. Analogies were also drawn again with racism:

I think as Social Workers we really need to challenge our prejudices and reflect on our discriminatory views before we can go out and practice effectively. I wonder how he might have felt if he were a service user being assessed by a racist – and learned that social worker had openly expressed racist views on social media? (COM4)

Would it be okay for me to say that a Black person should not be able to marry a white person due to some religious or personal view? No of course not. That would be seen as totally racist which it would be – and no-one would tolerate in a social worker. There can be a hierarchy of discrimination and “tolerance” of his view is an example of just that. (COM26)

The first comment highlights how social media has complicated the lines between personal and professional self-expression, while both comments drew parallels with racial prejudice and discrimination.

By contrast, other commentators argued that those comments opposing Ngole’s views were themselves prejudiced:

Wow! I am shocked by the intolerance from so many replies to this story concerning this guys opinion. That’s what it boils down to. His opinion means he doesn’t agree with sodomy. That doesn’t make him homophobic or a bigot. (COM41)

Why can’t we disagree without being called homophobic, this man has explained this in his article! (COM9)

The thing is this gentleman viewed his opinion based on HIS RELIGION. He believes in Jesus Christ which is what he said, and his beliefs come from the bible which talks about homosexuality. He is therefore standing by his beliefs. He didn’t write the Bible did he?? (COM54) [Block capitals in original post]

These commentators seek to justify religious opposition to ‘homosexuality’ as legitimate, and not a form of prejudice because it is based on the Bible (Jowett 2017).

The issue of free speech was also reflected in several comments:

Britain is a tolerant nation but that doesn’t mean we should all be clones and afraid to speak our minds when it comes to disagreeing with issues that are important to us. (COM9)

It is legal to have abortions in this country. Is it wrong to express the opinion that abortion is wrong? It is illegal to commit euthanasia in this country. Is it wrong to express the opinion that euthanasia should be permitted? ... It is illegal to have more than one spouse in this country. Is it wrong express an opinion in support of that? (COM49)

This person (responding to COM1 – who commented ‘I’m a lesbian, and I’d be horrified to learn that my social worker believed my right to marriage should be revoked ...’) thought minority sexual rights were being privileged over religion:

If you believe in your being a lesbian as a right to yourself, why can’t someone have a different view as opposed to yours as their own rights? (COM8)

Here, identity and beliefs have been conflated, as the following commentator observed.

It is possible ... to be against abortion but not be morally judgemental about people who have one ... However, as soon as you become judgemental about how other people live their lives or about whom they choose as a partner then your position is incompatible with the values of the profession. (COM28)

There were heated counterclaims where commentators felt that to accuse people with faith-based objections to LGBTQ lives of prejudice was itself prejudiced:

The legal recognition for people to enter into a same-sex marriage relationship is about a microsecond old in the grand history of human sociology – and it is still not recognised in the overwhelming majority of the world’s political jurisdictions. To think that someone is incapable of being a competent, compassionate social worker because they happen to hold a view that is held by the vast majority of people for the vast majority of human history is pure prejudicial bigotry. (COM49)

So do you think Christians are wrong, bigoted, narrow minded or should just keep quiet about everything, politics, sex and religion ... even not professing Jesus as Lord and Saviour? If so you prove yourself to be bigoted, narrow minded, and just as ‘phobic’ as you say this chap is! (COM9)

The language of bigotry is being used here as a defence by people who themselves are being accused of bigotry and are denying religious anti-LGBT prejudice (Jowett 2017).

The importance of reflective dialogue

The literature highlights the importance of reflective dialogue (Vinjamuri 2017). This was echoed in these comments:

Many social workers hold personal views and beliefs that contrasts with the values and ethics of social work practice. I prefer to know those that hold intolerant views so that it can be challenged, debated and [so] develop reflective conscientious practitioners. (COM40)

There were many people on my course with homophobic views and they are in practice now. I think if we react like this then we will just drive people's views underground and we would not be able to challenge them. In effect this is barring anyone that is deeply religious from being a social worker, or is it a case of we won't ask if you don't tell? (COM29)

Here, concerns were expressed that without open dialogue about personal views and beliefs, they will be concealed, rather than explored and reflected upon. Several comments observed the importance of dialogue in social work education:

While he was still a student, I might have been inclined to say 'you're here to learn, now tell us what you've learned' and maybe let him continue on the basis of his response. But for all I know they probably did that and found an intransigent person who could not learn and could not adjust his thinking to more closely match the expectations of the profession and the role he aspires to. That is certainly the impression of himself this article presents. (COM11)

This person both promotes dialogue and questions its potential efficacy. The literature suggests that Christians who regard the Bible as an absolute truth are less likely to respond favourably to reflective dialogue (Joslin *et al.* 2016). An interaction between two commentators with differing viewpoints reflects these potential challenges:

I expect students of social work to do more than say "Because the bible says so" when judging a particular behaviour or way of life to be an "abomination". I would expect any social work programme worthy of the name to expect students to be able to present reasoned arguments for their views. There are all kinds of evil being perpetrated around the world, justified by some quote from a holy book. Social work students need to be able to produce reflective, evidence based and considered views. If we are expected to respect views based on religion, there needs to be something worthy of respect. (COM38)

In response to this call for reflection and critical interrogation of holy texts, another commentator replied:

The Bible in and of itself is worthy of respect, just as the position of a social worker. It does not have to justify itself for it is the very words of God. Now I know that you will deny this but as a Christian man, this man's life will be based on "Because the Bible says so." It wasn't that long ago when the nation as a whole recognised this. It's also a sad indictment of where we are that social work has a Christian foundation. Look where we are now. A person can't even express their views on such things without the thought police and the intolerant coming down like a ton of bricks. (COM39)

This is one of the fundamental tensions for faith-based practice and social work practice. For those people of faith who take a literal interpretation of their holy texts, in this case the Bible, then there can be no critical interrogation of their beliefs, including those which run counter to professional norms and values (Dessel and Bolen 2014).

However, several Christian social workers made comments on Ngole's interpretation of the Bible:

[I] do not believe that it has been conclusively proven that the Bible has a definitive position on same sex relationships ... this is still a topic for debate, given that the justification for denying others equity is based on interpretation of texts that have been translated from originals to fit the morals and values of those translating the text (COM66)

Please don't quote the Old Testament to represent Christian values. Jesus is the lens through which a Christian reads the rest of the Bible; and Jesus modelled perfect social work. Christianity and the Social Work Code of Ethics are compatible. (COM48)

Jesus did not preach against gay union. He simply did not. (COM64)

These comments highlight the schism among Christians in relation to LGBTQ issues. The following comments suggest that there might be a similar schism within social work:

There are many Christian Social Workers standing with you [to Ngole]. I am one of them. Isaiah 54:17. (COM56)

[NB 'No weapon that is formed against thee shall prosper; and every tongue that shall rise against thee in judgment thou shalt condemn. This is the heritage of the servants of the LORD, and their righteousness is of me, saith the LORD.' Isaiah 54:17 Modern King James Version of the Bible].

As for hoping he won't remain in social work – of course he will – you seriously saying he is alone?!! (COM16, responding to another commentator who said Ngole did not belong in social work).

Discussion

The comments engage with notions of tolerance in a range of ways: as achievable (by compartmentalisation), as not achievable (due to oppressive religious beliefs and/or microaggressions), as in/sufficient for professional standards and anti-oppressive social work (depending on whether understood as task-based or relational), as falling short of LGBTQ affirmative practice, and as insulting and/or a source of abjection (Brown 2009). Some of this discourse suggests that tolerance may be sufficient for the delivery of certain types of services, but not relational ones. However, for several of the commentators on Ngole's article, any tolerance is intolerable.

The comments are striking in their frankness, revealing views unlikely to be expressed in a formal social work research project, where social desirability bias would likely prevail (Larson and Bradshaw 2017). They suggest a schism among social workers, involving some seemingly non-negotiable beliefs, and considerable partisan discourse. Even the minimal tolerance threshold of 'agreeing to disagree' seemed difficult to imagine for some commentators.

Eleven- years ago, Brown and Cocker (2011) asked, writing about UK social work, 'How do we get beyond the "love the sinner, hate the sin" mantra, or the personal values versus professional standards quagmire?' (p. 80). As the data show, this question is still relevant today and the quagmire endures. The literature, supported by these data, shows linkages between religious beliefs, religiosity and negative attitudes towards LGBTQ people. Crucially, however, there is a lack of empirical evidence about whether/how this *actually* impacts practice.

The following vignettes, influenced by recent literature, highlight some practice areas which might be challenging for a religious social worker who disapproves of LGBTQ people and/or their lives:

- (1) Doing life story work with an old bisexual woman with memory loss, going through her photo album with her and validating her long life and her relationships with her previous successive partners, both male and female.
- (2) Supporting – and celebrating – a physically disabled gay man in fully participating in his same-sex marriage ceremony.
- (3) Empathising with a distressed lesbian service recipient whose partner has just died.
- (4) Fighting with conviction for the rights of a trans woman who has been waiting too long for gender reassignment surgery.
- (5) Championing the cause of a gender non-binary child whose parents are trying to make them conform to one of the gender binaries.
- (6) Empathising with a gay child in foster care subjected to homophobic bullying at school.
- (7) Educating a junior colleague about minority stress, religious microaggressions, and their impact on LGBTQ mental health.
- (8) Proactively supporting an older gay man with AIDS in ways which would mitigate his sense of stigmatisation.
- (9) Advocating on behalf of a pregnant trans man excluded by cisnormative ‘maternity’ services.
- (10) Making a complaint on behalf of an older lesbian who has been told by her religious care worker that it was not too late for her to repent.
- (11) Attending the opening of LGBTQ supported housing, in the company of celebrating LGBTQ activists, and affirming their celebrations.
- (12) Responding authentically to a service recipient, a gay man, who asks ‘Do you believe that because I have sex with men I am going to hell?’

In each of these examples, the concern is not that a Christian fundamentalist social worker – or any other social worker with deeply held anti-LGBTQ religious beliefs – would refuse to perform such duties. To do so would be against the law. The concern is that they would do so *under duress* and that this, as a minimum, would be expressed via microaggressions of discomfort/unease (Nadal *et al.* 2016), with a detrimental impact on the service delivered (Henrickson 2017). Ngole’s intention to ‘act in a professional, kind and compassionate way’ (2016) would simply not be enough for these scenarios, falling short of understanding, affirming, validating, and championing LGBTQ people, their lives, their relationships, and their rights.

The comments highlight racialised elements of the debate. Many LGBTQ people are from racial/ethnic minorities themselves, with complex experiences of intersectional discrimination, sometimes within their religious families (Ghabrial 2017). People from Black, Asian and minority ethnic backgrounds and/or migrant workers are disproportionately represented in UK care and social work sectors (Skills for Care 2020). Many migrant social workers are from countries which lack LGBTQ legal protections,³⁰ and where LGBTQ people are systematically oppressed, as in Cameroon, Ngole’s country of

origin (Nordberg 2011). Migrant workers from such countries can experience a profound culture clash when they begin living and working in the UK (Harris *et al.* 2017), while also being subject to institutionalised racism (Stevens *et al.* 2012), including in social work contexts (Lavette and Penketh 2014, Obasi 2022). Hafford-Letchfield *et al.* (2018), reporting on a UK research project involving LGBTQ community members delivering training to care home staff, found ‘persistence of ingrained homophobia and partial tolerance of LGBT individuals ... animated by tensions between religious beliefs and sexuality’ (p. e317). They observed:

It is unsurprising that staff from societies where sexual and gender difference are outlawed and/or attract severe moral condemnation should express hostility or unease but we believe, in principle and in the interests of good practice, that such attitudes require challenge. (p. e317)

The rhetorical silencing about these ‘uncomfortable’ issues in UK policy contexts (Carr 2008), precludes much-needed reflective dialogue (Vinjamuri 2017). There is no guarantee that it would produce change, indeed research suggests highly religious individuals are resistant to it (Joslin *et al.* 2016), but it must be the starting point.

In terms of professional regulation, how these issues are dealt with in practice needs to be explored. BASW’s Code of Ethics requirement that social workers ‘identify and question’ (S2.2.2) their own prejudices is problematic for those social workers who think their religious objections to LGBTQ people/their lives are legitimate. The requirement that they reflect on their oppressive practices is equally problematic among those like Ngole who advocate for the very LGBTQ oppression (such as opposition to same-sex marriage) that they are supposed to, as social workers, oppose.

The Equality Act’s under-protection of LGBTQ people from harassment and the protection of religious speech regarding sexual minorities under the Public Order Act 1986 (POA), are concerning, as is the issue of compelled speech since the Ashers case. Anti-oppressive social work requires proactive support for LGBTQ rights and the challenging of systemic and structural LGBTQ oppression, to which Christian fundamentalism itself contributes. The two are diametrically opposed. When the Equality Bill was going through parliament, the JCHR (2009), among others, suggested that there should be a different threshold for harassment (and fewer exemptions) for those in ‘closed’ care contexts (for example, schools, hospitals, care homes, and prisons). It can also be argued that the Act should be more finely calibrated for religious-based harassment and indirect discrimination in the form of microaggressions, when it comes to the delivery of relational services to LGBTQ people, including social work.

Conclusion

As this analysis has shown, these issues are highly significant to UK social work, and, by implication, other relational services (Westwood 2022). There is an urgent need for dialogue, and for empirical research which examines *both* religious social workers’ attitudes towards LGBTQ people *and* whether/how they inform practice. Methodologically, research techniques need to be employed which can account for social desirability bias. How these issues are addressed in UK social work training and post-

qualifying supervision require exploration. So too do the implications for the Equality Act, in terms of ensuring the equitable delivery of services in the liminal space between functional task performance and anti-oppressive relational practice.

Notes

1. R (Ngole) v The University of Sheffield [2019], para. 10.
2. Ibid., para. 11.
3. Ibid.
4. The Queen (on the application of NGOLE) (Appellant) v The University of Sheffield (Respondent) [2019] EWCA Civ 1127.
5. Ibid., para. 6.
6. Ibid., para 8.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid., para. 10.
9. Ibid.
10. S149(5)(b).
11. Equality Act (EQA) 2010 29(8).
12. EQA S33 (6), S34(4), S35(4).
13. EQA S85(10).
14. EQA S103(2).
15. Public Order Act (POA) 1986 S29J.
16. POA 29 JA(1).
17. POA 29JA(2).
18. Bull and Another v. Hall and Another [2012] EWCA 83.
19. McClintock v Department of Constitutional Affairs [2008] IRLR 29.
20. Ladele v LB Islington [2009] IRLR 154 (EAT); [2010] IRLR 211 (CA); Eweida and Others v. UK [2013] ECHR 37.
21. McFarlane v Relate Avon [2010] IRLR 196 (EAT); [2010] IRLR 872(CA); Eweida and Others v. UK [2013] ECHR 37.
22. Johns v. Derby City Council [2011] 1 FCR 493.
23. Dr David Mackereth v (1) The Department for Work and Pensions (2) Advanced Personnel Management Group (UK) Ltd, Case Number: 1,304,602/2018.
24. Lee (Respondent) v Ashers Baking Company Ltd and others (Appellants) (Northern Ireland) [2018] UKSC 49.
25. Ibid., para. 22.
26. R. (on the application of Cornerstone (North East) Adoption and Fostering Services Ltd) v Chief Inspector of Education, Children's Services and Skills (Ofsted) [2021] EWCA Civ 1390.
27. S2.2.1.
28. S2.2.2.
29. S2.2.2.
30. In which British imperialism and colonialism are implicated (Lalor 2021).

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