Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ) as a Model for Improving Social Worker Decision Making in Meeting the Needs of Children, when Faith or Religion is a Feature of the Case.

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Abstract

In social work today, there is a lack of openness and discussion concerning issues of faith and religion, often resulting in poor decision-making and unfair treatment of service users. One major step forward would be to encourage and empower social workers to recognise their own positionality, but this begs the question of: how?

This paper examines the extent to which a recently introduced model called Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ) can assist those responsible for making decisions that impact the lives of children recognise their own positionality and, thus make fairer, more non-discriminatory decisions.

To achieve this, a collective case study methodology was employed, to explore particular themes in relation to the significance of faith and religion in social work practice. Data was collected from semi structured interviews with a purposive sample of professional social workers, all of whom had been responsible for decisions in cases involving religion and the care of children. The resulting analysis identified four major themes which demonstrate that EPPJ can significantly improve decision-making in a social work context, by helping social workers understand their own positionality, and how their personal biography can affect their attitudes, values and worldview.

The principal limitation of the study was the sample size (n=6), which limits the generalisability of the findings. The paper's conclusions are, therefore, best considered to be a contribution to the literature on faith and religion in social work.

Keywords: cultural humility, decision-making, faith, religion, social work practice,

Introduction

This article was inspired by a curiosity as to why social work education tends to shun the subjects of faith and religion. After all, social work is a profession which exists to serve the needs of individuals, families and communities in a manner which is not only anti-discriminatory and inclusive, but which should promote the idea

of cultural humility. As faith and religion are central components of many people's cultural identity, one could be forgiven for thinking that these are topics which would be integral to the principles of social work education. Instead, however, they are stigmatised.

This observation is not new. Several studies have found that there is a stigma associated with religion and spirituality in UK social work education. Research by Gilligan and Furness (2006), for example, found that there is a clear need for social work educators and practitioners to prioritise religion and spirituality (RS) to ensure cultural humility in practice, while another study, by Holloway and Moss (2010), described social work and spirituality as 'uneasy bedfellows'. Yet, despite the fact that the British Association of Social Workers (BASW 2021) Code of Ethics emphasises the importance of respecting clients' self-determination, which includes their faith and religion, things seem to be changing very little, if at all. Although one study (Carlisle, 2016) reported that the UK social work profession has begun to show 'signs of some interest' in spirituality, the same study also acknowledged that it (social work) still remains 'reluctant to engage' with the topic of faith. According to Oxhandler et al. (2015), there is still stigma associated with religion and spirituality in social work education, even though these areas are acknowledged as significant factors in service-users' cultural practices.

This situation needs to be addressed with some urgency, as the stigmatisation of the issues of faith and religion impact social work service delivery at both the macro and the micro level. At the macro

level, it can shape a professional's advocacy for policy (Carlisle, 2016, Canda & Furman, 2010; Furman 2004), and affect their engagement with process. At a micro level, a social worker's faith is part of their positionality: integral to their identity, values and worldview (Weekes 2023, Peña et al., 2015). As such, it can radically affect their interactions with service users. The question then becomes: how can this be achieved? How can the social work profession be encouraged to engage more openly with issues of faith and religion? One way forward is to encourage and empower social workers to recognise their own positionality. Again, however, the question is: how? This is the focus of this article. We will look briefly at the theoretical basis of a recently-introduced personal awareness model called theory of Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ) and then discuss how it can be used as a practical tool for helping social workers recognise their own positionality.

Developed and introduced by the author of this article (Weekes, 2021), EPPJ has at its core, the idea that it is not possible to avoid the biases of the human cognitive processes; we can only hope to detect and minimise them. This means that all decision-making is susceptible to the effects of our personal biographies and, therefore, any suggestion that we, as human beings, are instinctively and naturally objective and non-judgemental is fundamentally flawed.

Of course, the observation that achieving truly objective attitudes can prove an elusive goal has been made before. Felix Biestek (1912 – 1994), for example, a priest and professor of social

work, wrote extensively on the effects of a judgmental attitude, but, despite the long-standing general awareness of the importance of objectivity, and the difficulties involved with achieving it, there have been few attempts to develop practical tools which address the issue in today's professional social work environment. While - as the author of this article asserts that - being non-judgemental is impossible for social workers to achieve, this should not stop us striving for non-discriminatory or anti-oppressive practice. This is how EPPJ can help at a micro level, by helping social workers recognise their own positionality, when working with service-users, while promoting social unity, community engagement and social justice at a macro level.

Such an aim is entirely consistent with the British Association of Social Workers' (BASW, 2018) Professional Capabilities Framework (PCF). The nine pillars (domains) of this framework, emphasise the importance of recognising diversity and applying anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive principles in practice (PCF 3). Similarly, Social Work England Standards (2021) emphasise acknowledging diversity, challenging disadvantage, and considering cultural and social factors in resilience and issues like loss and uncertainty (Standards 1.5, 3.14). They also highlight the need to address bias in decision-making, resolve ethical dilemmas (Standard 3.7), and reflect on the impact of personal values on practice (Standard 4.8). The British Association of Social Work's Code of Ethics (2021) echo these principles, focusing on self-determination,

diversity, and professional judgment, all underscoring a commitment to human rights, social justice, and professional integrity. Social workers are expected to promote the rights, strengths, and well-being of individuals, families, and communities.

It has been clear to me throughout my career in social work that this lack of openness about positionality, and especially aspects such as faith and spirituality, has a negative influence on professional decision-making practice. My desire to explore it through research was particularly fuelled by two recent experiences. The first of these experiences was when, during an opening speech for a conference I had organised during Ramadan, I explained to the audience that, although I was a practising Christian, I had provided space for Muslim attendees to pray, plus 'goodie bags' for those who required them. A week later I was informed that a Christian colleague had complained about my 'preaching to attendees'. The second occasion was a month or so later, when an ex-colleague (who had attended the same conference) remarked that he had noted that I had mentioned my faith, and added that 'we don't talk about religion'. When I asked why we could talk about sexuality (knowing that he was gay) yet not faith, he could give no answer, save to grimace. It was at that point that, as module leader for Ethics and Human Rights, and Understanding Equalities and Diversity, that I decided to formally explore the subject with practitioners.

This study is based on the accounts of registered SWE social workers who worked with service-users from six main world faiths, exploring key aspects of decision-making in relation to children and families, and whether faith/religion played a part in those decisions. In the context of these accounts, the EPPJ model was retrospectively used to examine whether it could be used as a way to address and train professionals, by helping them understand why their personal biographies cannot be ignored in their decision-making, and whether application of the model does, in reality, improve decision-making.

Literature review

Faith is personal trust in God(s), involving a deep relationship, daily worship, prayer and hope in the afterlife. While personal faith can be independent, religion historically structures it with rules, rituals, and laws, often requiring regular worship, scripture reading, and adherence to practices. The relationship between faith and organised religion is interdependent and context-dependent. Understanding major world religions is crucial for engaging with service users respectfully. Since the 19th century, influential sociologists like Karl Marx (1818–1883), Max Weber (1864–1920), and Émile Durkheim (1858–1917) have studied religion, offering differing perspectives on its role and significance in society. Their views illuminate religion's functions, social implications, and relationship with societal structures, helping to shape current understandings.

Over recent decades, both theory and practice has strongly supported the contention that the recognition of spirituality and religion can play a significant role in helping to ensure fair and effective decision-making in professional social work. Here, we look at some of the relevant literature, and discuss how EPPJ can contribute to promoting this recognition. Due to the dearth of UK-based research and literature on religion and faith, we will draw significantly on sources from the United States. However, there are experiences and themes that are similar in the US and the UK, which contribute to our growing understanding of faith and religion in social work practice.

The human decision-making process, of course, is a complex one, influenced by many factors. These factors tend to fall into one of three categories: individual, social and environmental. At the individual level, cognitive abilities such as intelligence and attention can enhance information processing, leading to more rational decisions (Stanovich & West, 2000), while emotions such as anxiety can prompt risk-averse behaviour (Lerner & Keltner, 2001). Personality traits also shape decision styles, as conscientious individuals tend to make more deliberate decisions, while extroverts may favour spontaneity (Roberts et al., 2009). Cognitive biases, such as confirmation bias, overconfidence and availability bias (over-reliance on recent experience), often result in simplified decision-making that may neglect critical details, thus impacting the quality of decisions (Moore & Healy, 2008).

Social factors, too, such as social norms, group dynamics and cultural values, can also profoundly shape decision-making processes. Social norms define acceptable behaviours within a society or group, influencing decisions through the need for social acceptance (Cialdini & Goldstein, 2004), while group dynamics, such as groupthink, can lead to poor decision outcomes, as the desire for harmony suppresses dissenting opinions (Janis, 1972). Cultural values also play a significant role - for example, in individualist cultures, personal autonomy is prioritised, while collectivist cultures emphasise group harmony and consensus (Triandis, 1995).

Decision-making is also impacted by environmental factors, including situational context, economic conditions and technological advancements. The situational context, such as time pressure, often forces individuals to rely on heuristics (cognitive short-cuts), leading to quicker but potentially less thorough decisions. Economic conditions, both at the macro and micro levels, also influence decision strategies: stable conditions encourage risk-taking, while economic uncertainty typically promotes caution (Mian & Sufi, 2014). Technological advancements have also helped to transform decision-making by providing access to vast amounts of information, though this can also lead to information overload, complicating the decision-making process (Brynjolfsson & McAfee, 2014).

Collectively, these factors make the process of understanding individual decision-making a difficult one. However, over the years, a number of persuasive theories and models have emerged, such as

rational choice theory, bounded rationality and dual-process theories, all of which offer plausible and practical frameworks for understanding decision-making. Rational choice theory, for example, proposes that individuals make decisions by weighing costs against benefits to maximise utility (Becker, 1976). At the intuitive level, such a basis for decision-making sounds reasonable, but numerous studies have shown how cognitive shortcuts can lead to errors in probability judgments – i.e., that 'bounded' rationality has a real and measurable effect. Dual-process theories, suggest that individual decision-making involves two cognitive systems: (a) a system which is fast and intuitive, and (b) a system which is slow and analytical. Each system suited to different types of decisions (Kahneman, 2011).

Decision-making is not always confined to the individual level. It is often a collective, or group, process. In organisations, decision-making is influenced by hierarchical structures, organisational culture and stakeholder interests. Centralised decision-making, which consolidates authority at higher levels, can ensure consistency but may stifle innovation, while decentralised decision-making promotes autonomy and flexibility, though it may lead to coordination challenges. Organisational culture, defined by shared values and practices, play a critical role in shaping decision-making behaviours: cultures, for example, that promote openness and learning encourage innovative decisions, while risk-averse cultures may hinder creativity and responsiveness (Schein, 1992).

Overall, then, it is clear from the literature that, whether at an individual or organisational level, arriving at fair, non-discriminatory decision is a significant challenge. Yet doing so is desirable in all walks of life, and especially in social work, where, as we have noted, it is integral to the aims of the profession. There is a considerable body of evidence which supports the idea that the recognition of faith and religion can play an important, even pivotal, role in the decision-making process within the social work environment.

Some of this evidence, for example, dates back almost two decades, to a study which demonstrated that recognising and addressing RS is essential to ensuring effective cultural humility, especially where there is a lack of education among social workers and students (Gilligan & Furness, 2006). Such research aligns closely with the ethical pillars of the EPPJ model, which defines faith and religious inputs as aspects of children's needs, and is supported by a further study (Streets, 2008) which showed that religion is a significant a factor in the process of satisfying children's needs, and that social workers should remain professionally neutral and focus on the client's self-determination, with open dialogue, to support them in making decisions. Another early study (Knitter, 2010), which reflects the EPPJ focus on the need for open dialogue in decision-making processes when addressing a child's needs, found that social workers supported service users most effectively when they allowed themselves to become fully immersed in their clients' religious beliefs.

Despite, the clear need for social work practitioners to integrate service-users' religion and faith into practice, such integration seems to be rarely attempted. This is for a number of reasons. A study by Oxhandler & Pargament (2014), recognised that whilst faith should be a key feature in the decision-making process, are RS has the potential to influence clients' lives significantly and most social workers are not equipped with adequate education and skills to deal with such issues effectively. This finding was enhanced by a later study by Oxhandler et al. (2015), which examined how licensed clinical social workers (LCSWs) approach the issue of religion and spirituality with clients. According to the authors, while LCSWs maintain positive attitudes and have confidence in their ability to integrate RS into practice, this usually fails to translate into actual practice, due to the social workers' intrinsic religiosity and lack of education or training in the area. These insights suggest that EPPJ could contribute significantly through its focus on the enhancement of training, and efficacy of social workers, in decision-making where faith or religion is involved.

Although the evidence seems to suggest a major, and radical, reform of social work education is required, in order to include more and better training in the area of faith and religion, it would be wrong to assume that no work is being undertaken in this area. A study by Waldon (2017), for example, used discourse analysis of education materials from accredited programmes, to explore the inclusion of religion in US social work education. The study found that RS was

included in three important ways: as a resource, as a cultural aspect, and as an assessment factor. This is expected to influence ways in which future social workers will approach religion in their practice, especially when responding to the needs of children within religious or spiritual contexts.

This growing inclusion of RS in US social work education is also reflected in the 2015 introduction of the RSIPAS (Religious/Spiritual Integrated Practice Assessment Scale). Designed as a measurement instrument for assessing the extent to which social workers integrate clients' religious and spiritual beliefs into their practice, it is particularly relevant in contexts where RS issues are significant to clients' lives and well-being. Although mainly used in the US, it is also suitable for use in the UK and elsewhere, and a study by Oxhandler (2019) found that it is increasing being used outside of social work, by professionals such as psychologists, nurses, marriage guidance counsellors and family therapists.

Within the past three years, research on the issue of recognising faith and religion within social work has also begun to explore specific aspects of the issue. One study (Woodcock & Wright, 2021), for example, examined how effective communication with religiously affiliated parents can impact statutory assessments, arguing that an understanding of, and respect for, beliefs can assist social workers in making more informed and fairer decisions. Again, this could be supported by EPPJ, which could help to increase the quality of decisions through addressing religious dimensions in

parenting. Another study (Westwood, 2022), explored the tensions between religious freedoms and LGBTQ rights, finding that strongly held spiritual beliefs may precipitate various forms of conflict when working within social work values, raising concerns regarding the effective support of LGBTQ clients, while research by Sheridan (2022) again emphasised the importance of including religion and spirituality in social work practice when making decisions affecting children.

The current situation concerning the integration of faith and religion in social work practice in England is accurately summarised by a recent study by Pentaris (2023). The author argues that practitioners implement avoidant or utilitarian approaches because of the diversity of religiously oriented beliefs and highlights the need for improved training and education so that social workers can engage appropriately with each element. This is consistent with the EPPJ model, which considers decision-making where faith or religion is concerned to be a vital issue.

EPPJ

As noted earlier, being open about issues of faith and religion, when dealing with service users, requires social workers to understand and acknowledge, both to themselves and others, their own positionality. However, understanding one's positionality is part of a broader issue concerning awareness of the self – namely, understanding one's personal biography. This is the purpose of the EPPJ model. Introduced

in 2021 by the author of this article (Weekes, 2021), the EPPJ framework is designed to enable individuals to better understand their personal history, and how it shapes their values, attitudes, worldview and biases. To facilitate this, EPPJ measures two continuous variables (consciousness and constructiveness) for each individual. This leads to four categories of person:

a) High consciousness, high constructiveness. These individuals engage in ongoing self-reflection, which positively impacts their actions.
b) Low consciousness, high constructiveness. These individuals set aside their personal histories to maintain professionalism, sometimes leading to a detached approach.
c) Low consciousness, low constructiveness. Such individuals are often weighed down by their past, negatively affecting their decisions and limiting their self-reflection.
d) High consciousness, low constructiveness. These individuals are rare, but generally effective unless adversely affected by specific triggers.

At the core of EPPJ is the contention that biases (both conscious and unconscious) are an inherent part of human reasoning, making true objectivity impossible. This is not a personal failing but a natural aspect of human decision-making. Thus, the focus should be on

recognising and minimising these biases, rather than totally eliminating them.

Methodology

The purpose of the study was to investigate the ability of the EPPJ model to help social workers (or any professional) make decisions in a way that recognises, and takes account of, the issues of religion and spirituality. To achieve this, a qualitative methodology was used, consisting of a collective case study approach, as described by Stake (1995), which is a technique frequently used in qualitative research to explore a particular phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2009). The 'data' for these case studies was collected from semi-structured interviews, as described by Braun and Clarke (2006), with six social work professionals. The interviews were designed to explore particular themes, in relation to the significance of faith in social work practice.

To select participants, a "convenience and purposive" sampling approach was employed (Kumar 2011). Effectively, this meant inviting participants who were easily accessible to the researcher, but who also fulfilled specific criteria relevant to the research aim (i.e., they had deep religious affiliations and/or dealt with service users with similar affiliations). This approach combined practicality with the opportunity to collect rich, relevant and diverse information about the topic in question.

Before each interview, participants were advised of the study's purpose and ethical guidelines, according to recommendations by (Kumar 2011), and no incentive was offered. Participants were also advised that the results would be fully anonymous. Each interview was recorded (with the permission of the participant) on video and explored how each social worker addressed issues of faith in their social work practice and decision making.

Another important issue which needed to be addressed was reflexivity – i.e., the possibility that the personal beliefs and experiences of the researcher might introduce bias (Strauss and Corbin, 1998). This was a significant concern in this case, as the researcher was a practicing Christian, social work academic and manager, conducting research on faith and religion in social work practice.

While it may not be possible to eliminate the possibility of reflexivity entirely, several steps were taken to mitigate it. After each interview, for example, the researcher considered her potential biases, and how they might impact interpretation of the data. This helped to track how her perspectives might influence the research. Further, the researcher's cultural background, religious beliefs and professional role has been clearly stated in this report, so readers can assess how/if these factors might affect her approach to the research.

In order to collect relevant data, each interview was designed to encourage the participants to focus on specific instances of their experience where faith and religion has been a clear and prominent

issue in providing effective care for children. It was hoped that, by analysing the case studies from the transcripts of the six interviews, patterns and themes could be identified which would provide a broader appreciation of the role of faith and religion in social work practice and decision-making.

Case Studies

1. Buddhism

A 15-year-old boy, a practicing Buddhist, was placed in foster care following a breakdown in his relationship with his parents. When the young person moved from a previous placement to a new foster home, managed by a single female foster carer who had extensive experience, some of the boy's belongings - including a Buddha statue - were left behind. When, some weeks later, these items were delivered, the foster carer (a practising Christian) objected to having the Buddha statue in her home, claiming she was unaware of the boy's Buddhist faith before his arrival. Soon after, during the Looked After Child review meeting, attended by the foster carer, the young person's social worker, and the IRO (Independent Reviewing Officer), it was evident that the foster carer's objection has created significant tension. Despite efforts by the social worker and IRO to mediate and address the foster carer's concerns about religious differences, the foster carer initially refused to change her mind. However, the social worker reminded the foster carer of the importance of respecting the young

person's religious beliefs and the necessity of accommodating his needs, as outlined in her training, and a compromise was eventually reached, in which the statue was allowed to remain in the young person's room only. The placement continued, and the foster carer and the young person developed a positive relationship. The foster carer agreed to keep the young person long-term, and further work was planned to address any ongoing issues regarding religious tolerance and understanding.

2. Christianity

The case concerns a single Polish mother, a Jehovah's Witness, living in a socially and economically disadvantaged area of London with her two sons, aged 21 and 16, who shared a small, cluttered bedroom. The age difference between the boys created significant tension, as the younger son needed to sleep early for school, while the older son stayed up late playing computer games. This lack of sufficient physical space exacerbated their conflicts, culminating in a violent altercation, in which the older brother assaulted the younger one. This resulted in police involvement and the older son being charged with assault. The mother's strong faith shaped the household environment, where celebrations like birthdays and Christmas were strictly forbidden, leading to a dull atmosphere with little stimulation for the boys. The cramped conditions and the mother's refusal to change it, added to the stress. This rigidity in religious practices and the lack of

personal space contributed to the boys' disengagement from their mother's faith, raising concerns about how the mother's strict enforcement of her beliefs impacted their well-being. The social worker involved faced challenges due to the mother's refusal to allow a male worker into the home, leading to the involvement of a female colleague. Eventually, a long-term support plan was put in place and the case was transferred to a female social worker, respecting the mother's religious requirements.

3. Hinduism

The child, a 15-year-old girl, disclosed that the spiritual leader (who had created his own sect of Hinduism) was physically and sexually abusing her, but later retracted the statement, claiming it was a dream. On a visit to the parent's home the social observed a picture of the religious leader in a large frame covering the fireplace the parents stated it was mandatory to have a picture of the spiritual leader in the home for worship.

The family lived in poverty, with no recourse to public funds, the father worked illegally, thus they were reluctant to have any involvement with social care. The child's older sister and brother were part of the spiritual leader's household, where they would do cleaning tasks. The spiritual leader would use Snapchat to record the girls' activities, which mother believed was a way to protect their blessings. However, after an assembly on signs of sexual abuse and grooming, the girl disclosed this information to her mother, who dismissed it.

Initially due to the local authority was running a pilot programme called Social Work in Schools, which allowed the child to work in the school without third-party referrals. However, given the parents prioritisation of their faith over the safeguarding of the child, a section 47 investigation was undertaken the child was placed [voluntarily] under section 20, Children Act 1981, but the family member withdrew their consent due to pressure from the family, leading to an interim care order. A separate Local Authority Designated Officer (LADO) investigation was instigated on the spiritual leader where it was discovered housing benefit fraud, opening bogus accounts and using false names within his congregation.

4. Islam

This case, involving a young Kurdish Muslim boy from an asylum-seeking family, came to light during my time working for a London Council. As a Practice Educator, I co-supervised a newly qualified social worker who was unfamiliar with the procedures pertaining to, age assessments, which we had to conduct as the family had not provided accurate information about the boy's age. The head teacher at the boy's school made a referral after the boy disclosed that the Imam at his mosque had been physically abusing him during Quran lessons. This abuse involved being struck with a belt, and slapped across the face, whenever he made mistakes in his recitations. Given the seriousness of the disclosure, we involved the Local Authority

Designated Officer (LADO) and ensured that proper child protection measures were taken. The social worker needed guidance on her role in assessing the boy, including the determination of his age and understanding the family dynamics. This last point was especially important, since the boy's mother, who had limited English skills, relied heavily on him for communication. There was also uncertainty about whether the man living with them was the boy's father. The close-knit nature of the Kurdish community, and concerns about jeopardising their asylum status, made it difficult for them to report the abuse, which had likely contributed to the delay in addressing the issue.

Conferences were held, and the case was escalated to senior managers, who took over the investigation, particularly into the organisation where the abuse occurred. The boy, who was vulnerable and under immense pressure, struggled with why the abuse was happening, yet he was eager to be a good student. Unfortunately, the abuse continued for some time before appropriate action was taken. After the case was handed over, I transitioned into a role focused more on training, reflecting on the challenges and complexities of working with this community, so did not get to know the outcome of the case.

5. Judaism

An Independent Fostering Agency had a parent and child placement involving a Jewish mother who had given birth the day before the

placement. The mother's faith was of paramount importance to her, and shaped her view on how she wanted things to be managed within the placement. Her primary concern was ensuring that her son was circumcised within seven days of his birth, in accordance with her religious beliefs, and – as she was very knowledgeable about her faith – she took all necessary steps to follow religious procedures. She began by consulting with the foster carer, clearly communicating her intentions and the religious significance of the circumcision. She also informed the child's social worker, providing detailed information about the certified rabbi she had arranged to perform the circumcision. However, despite the mother's thoroughness of preparation, in ensuring that all relevant parties were informed, the situation became complicated due to the social work team's lack of awareness regarding the cultural and religious importance of circumcision in the Jewish community. The social worker and the manager expressed concerns, with the social worker equating the circumcision to abuse, similar to female genital mutilation. This misunderstanding led to a referral accusing the foster carer of allowing abuse by permitting the circumcision. The local authority, police and other key players became involved. Ultimately, however, the police concluded that circumcision in the Jewish community was legal and not abusive. The incident highlighted a significant lack of awareness among social workers about religious practices and the importance of respecting parental responsibility in a parent and child placement. The mother, feeling that her religious rights were being

challenged, expressed deep distress, claiming that it was she who was being abused by the system, rather than her child.

6. Sikhism

This case involves a British-Indian Sikh family with three children: a girl who was later found to be hearing-impaired, and her two younger brothers. The family came to the attention of social services after the mother, who had limited family support in the UK, was found in a vulnerable state, threatening to end her life by a river. She was under the influence of alcohol at the time and was temporarily hospitalised before being discharged back to her family. During an initial assessment, the mother downplayed the severity of the situation, acknowledging struggles but declining early help. Subsequently, issues arose, particularly with the children's school attendance, leading to a referral to children's social care. It became evident that the mother had significant alcohol problems, which the family had been trying to conceal. As the situation deteriorated, the parents separated, with the father's family initially providing support. It was not long, however, before the father's own substance misuse issues came to light, further complicating the situation. The grandparents, who were elderly and had health concerns, were unable to provide long-term care for the children, so the children were placed into foster care. The children were eventually placed with an Indian family, though not of the same Sikh faith; the foster family was Hindu. This

cultural and religious mismatch led to tensions, especially concerning religious practices such as the Sikh tradition of not cutting one's hair, which the foster carer appeared to challenge. Despite the foster carer's good intentions and efforts to maintain cultural continuity through language and food, these religious differences created ongoing conflicts, particularly between the birth family and the foster carer. The eldest child, due to her hearing impairment, was enrolled in a school for the deaf, a decision facilitated by social services, as the parents had not addressed her needs. The foster carer, who resided in a neighbouring borough, found it challenging to manage the logistics of school transportation, further complicating the situation. Discussions were held about transferring the children to a school closer to the foster carer's home, balancing the children's needs with logistical practicality. The case also involved discussions about the father's progress. He had shown improvements, including passing random drug tests and working towards a stable environment, raising the possibility of the children being returned to his care. By the time the social worker handling the case was leaving, the eldest child had begun spending some weekends with her father, as he appeared to be on a path to recovery, while the mother remained unable to care for the children due to ongoing alcohol issues.

Findings and discussion: applying EPPJ.

1. Muslim: High Consciousness and High Constructiveness

The Practice Educator (PE) in this case reflected deeply on her personal experiences, values and beliefs, especially her commitment to responsibly safeguarding the child. With high consciousness, she was highly aware of both her internal values and external influences, particularly her mother's experience of being abandoned as a child and being a minority. Her high constructiveness enables her to process information, drawing carefully on past discussions and training to make well-considered decisions. By maintaining open, honest communication, and setting clear boundaries, the PE could provide the newly-qualified social worker with the guidance to respect the family's religious beliefs, practices, and autonomy, while ensuring the young person's safety. This balanced approach allows the PE to protect the child, while supporting the student social worker's growth and independence.

2. *Buddhist: High Consciousness and High Constructiveness*

The Independent Reviewing Officer (IRO) was aware of her own sense of professional responsibility, personal values and beliefs, especially her commitment to integrity, protection and empowering service-users. With high consciousness, she is highly aware of both her internal values and the requirements of her role as a registered social worker, while her high constructiveness enabled her to advocate for the young person when she received information on the case, making practised-based, thoughtful decisions to meet with the foster carer and clarify the expectations of their roles. The IRO

actively challenged the social worker for not providing the foster carer with full information, while having the integrity to question the foster carer for failing to ensure that the same respect was shown to the young person's religious rituals as that which she expects to be shown to her own. While noting her own positionality, the IRO needs to be mindful of maintaining open, honest communication with the social worker, who may not be as knowledgeable as herself, and provide guidance in a manner that balances good practice with measured mentoring, so workers can grow with confidence and autonomy.

3 Christianity (Jehovah Witness): Low Consciousness and High Constructiveness

The newly qualified social worker needs to explore their values of justice, fairness and religious devotion. With low consciousness, they might be less aware of how their personal biases affect their decision-making. However, their high constructiveness means they can perform tasks effectively and understand their roles well. The social worker should focus on the ethical aspects of their decision-making process, ensuring that they do not alienate anyone by over-focusing on process, which could lead to burnout. By engaging in open, honest discussions with their supervisor, and considering the broader implications of their decision, they can support the young person and young adult, while not alienating the mother.

4. Sikhism: Low Consciousness and Low Constructiveness

The social worker, having recently moved into academia, needs to reflect on their values of faith, tradition and support for personal growth. With low consciousness, they appear to be less aware of - or able to name - their internal influences, and how these affect their decision-making, which is focused on process and a task-centred approach to their practice. This also leads to low constructiveness, in terms of engagement with the issues on a emotional level, so that they may not, in their role as practitioner, fully utilise their awareness and how they can apply it in future cases. They should seek to understand their subconscious biases and how these impact their concerns about decision choices. By seeking counsel from supervisors and managers, and by engaging in open conversations, they can better understand the service-user(s) perspectives and fine-tune their support for trainee social workers, while promoting their own academic and personal growth and maintaining a connection to their faith.

5. Judaism: High Consciousness and Low Constructiveness

In this case, the social worker's high consciousness ensured a diligent focus on the mother's, child's and foster carer's physical and emotional wellbeing. However, their low constructiveness, influenced by past experiences, of working with the Local Authority and LADOs may have led to overly cautious or rigid decisions. These past experiences possibly triggered a heightened sense of duty and legislation, limiting their ability to adapt and reflect critically on their

approach. As a result, while their intentions were rooted in strong ethical considerations, their decision-making may have been negatively impacted, reducing their effectiveness in navigating the complex family and cultural dynamics. There is a need to be more conscious of internal values, and how these impact decisions to advocate for both the mother and foster carer, in relation to the Local Authority's and the social worker's actions.

6. Hinduism: High Consciousness and Low Constructiveness

This combination is rare and can be both beneficial and challenging. The social worker is likely to approach the case with a strong sense of duty and moral integrity, keenly aware of the complexities involved in the child's situation. Their conscientious nature may have driven them to thoroughly investigate the spiritual leader's influence and the family's dynamics, but this might have come at the expense of flexibility and collaboration with the family. The social worker's low constructiveness could manifest in difficulties with adapting to new roles or adjusting to their approach in response to the evolving needs of the child and family. While their diligence ensured that the child's welfare remained a priority, a more adaptive approach might have fostered better communication and trust with the family, ultimately improving outcomes in this complex and sensitive situation.

All the interviewees defined themselves as having a faith, or belief system, although only one described what this meant to them in

practice. Interestingly, none of the participants had the same faith as the service-user(s) in the case study they described. It was particularly noteworthy that, while names were not immediately recalled, the specifics of the case, as it related to religion seemed etched into the social workers' minds.

It is also interesting to note that all participants, bar one, stated that having a personal faith, even though different from that of the service user, had a positive impact on their management of the case, as it helped them understand the importance of adherence to religious practices. They also expressed the view that other social workers and professionals who did not have faith might have difficulty in empathising with religious service users.

In terms of the relationship between social work education and faith, only one participant said religion and spirituality was part of their training, though another said that the subject was indirectly addressed under the umbrella of cultural matters. However, the majority felt that the lack of coverage of religion during their training was an omission, as all social worker students would benefit from its inclusion. All participants were of the view that failing to address faith and religion in their practice, for fear of 'getting it wrong' and offending service users could lead to service-users not being adequately assessed. Indeed, in one of the case studies described, it resulted in harm being caused to a foster carer and discriminatory practice against both the service-user and foster carer. This highlights the importance, yet to be fully acknowledged, of the significance of

including faith and religion in higher education and organisational training and practices. While this researcher found it encouraging that all participants showed high levels of cultural humility when speaking of service users' faiths, it was also concerning that none mentioned undertaking any private or employer-based training on religion and spirituality.

Conclusions

In order to ensure that decisions are made in the best interest of the service user, it is critical that a number of factors are observed, one being acknowledging their unique perspective (Harvey and Weekes, 2023), on their own faith and religious beliefs. Another concerns positionality: recognising one's own positionality is key to working successfully with service-users and colleagues (Weekes 2021). This raises the question of how this can be effectively achieved.

This article argues that one answer to this question lies in the application of the Effective Personal and Professional Judgement (EPPJ) tool. Recently (2021) developed and introduced by the author of this paper, EPPJ is based on the contention that any belief that humans can be non-judgemental is fallacious. This implies that when an individual claims to be non-judgmental, they are denying the existence of both internal prejudices and external systemic inequalities. By denying these aspects of themselves, they are missing an opportunity for real reflection. The aim then becomes to support,

educate and empower people to be consciously aware of their inherent personal and professional biases.

This paper has shown that EPPJ can contribute significantly to this process. By analysing six case studies, each revealing the complex intersections of culture, religion, faith, socioeconomic status, and child welfare in social work practice, where professionals must navigate multiple sensitivities to protect and support vulnerable children and families.

*Cultural and Religious Conflict***:** All the families with overt cultural and religious identities that influenced their behaviours, decisions, and interactions with social services. These practices lead to conflicts, tensions and misunderstanding due to a lack of awareness about these cultural and religious practices. e.g., Jewish circumcision or the foster carer's discomfort with a Buddhist statue.

Challenges in Child Protection within Cultural Context: There is a need to understand child abuse or neglect within the context of religious or cultural practices. Social workers are tasked with navigating these cultural sensitivities while intervening in a way that ensures the safety of the children, this may involve making difficult decisions that may conflict with the family's cultural or religious beliefs, as in the case of the Kurdish child learning the Quran or the spiritual leader's exploitation of the girl.

Impact of Socioeconomic and Factors and Religious Beliefs Socioeconomic challenges contribute to the stress and vulnerability of the families. This stress is compounded by the pressures of maintaining cultural or religious norms in difficult circumstances. For example, the cramped living situation in the Polish family's home exacerbated familial tensions, while the British-Indian Sikh family dealt with financial instability and substance abuse.

Parental Authority Parental Control and Religious Adherence vs. Children's Rights and Welfare Where parents or parental figures exert control over children's lives based on religious beliefs, there may be conflict over the welfare, requiring social workers to intervene. Highlighting the tension between respecting parental authority within cultural and religious contexts and ensuring that the children's rights and welfare are prioritised.

The study highlights the effectiveness of EPPJ in helping social workers and service users to recognise their own positionality and engage more openly with the subjects of faith and religion.

There are two main limitations of the study. One is the small sample size (n=6), which limits its generalisability. The other is that, unlike Carlisle (2016), the subjective nature of the narrative interviews meant that, while all participants showed varying degrees of advocacy and attempts to empower service-users, there was no way of measuring the service-users perception of the social workers'

[participants] interactions or intervention, specifically in regard to their faith and/or religion.

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