

Spirituality within Assessments

**Paper by Leethen Bartholomew,
l.bartholomew@sussex.ac.uk**

Assessments are carried out to aid in understanding the clients' situation and may be used to identify resources, weaknesses and strengths. When working with families this is important to gain an understanding of the role spirituality plays in their decision making process and how their spirituality may act as either a source of stress or support in times of need.

Gaining an understanding of the client's level of spirituality will help you understand what the individual's beliefs are and what their past and current practices are. It is important to be aware that some clients may be unwilling to discuss their spirituality as they may fear being characterised, ignored or dismissed as being abnormal. Furthermore, they may even consider it extremely private and personal.

It is vital to be aware that one's spirituality is not static as it may change over time. Therefore clients may change their minds about their religion and non-religious people may become religious (and vice-versa). This is why it is imperative to bear in mind that spirituality within assessments is not a one-off activity.

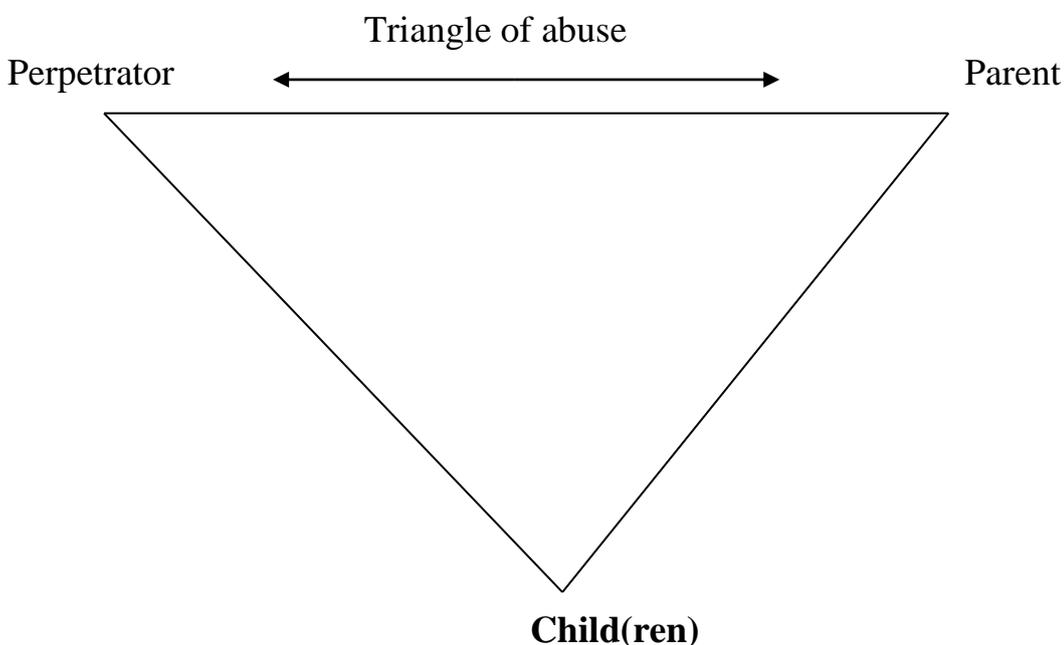
When asking clients about their spirituality they may be reluctant to divulge information. Therefore, it will be helpful to discuss with them what the assessment is about and what will happen as a result of the assessment. A good way to start off with the client may be to say to the client that you are aware that one's spirituality or religion can act as a coping mechanism for some individuals and if this is the same for you? Using the correct terminology may help to break the ice with the client therefore try to use the exact wording the client uses for either spirituality or religion? Remind the client that they will get a copy of any assessment done.

People with a belief in witchcraft believe that the witch doctor or faith leader has powers to command evil spirits. Therefore the individual or community would have an indelible respect or fear of the faith leader or witch doctor. It is impossible to make parents sway from this belief in witchcraft and parents may never admit to accusations of spirit possession since doing so may place them at risk of being harmed by the faith leader or witch doctor by Juju (try to use the exact word used for the particular culture). Therefore, we need to ask what will be the consequences of admitting to the parent. Additionally, if the parent admits that the abuse has taken place within the place of worship or that they perpetrated the abuse, what impact will this

have on that faith community and will the parent be blamed and/or ostracised. Admittance could have far reaching consequences which can be worse than denial.

When working on complex cases doing a chronology can be a useful assessment tool. Similarly, obtaining an account of the family's religious/faith background can be just as useful especially, if done in the form of a chronology spanning several generations. The information provided will give you a snapshot of how entrenched the belief is, how the belief affected the parenting style of different generations and how this has been transmitted to the belief system of the children involved in the current case.

Looking at the role the faith community plays in the life of the family could help you understand why the parent may refuse to co-operate. A family may have made contact with a faith organisation during a stressful time. For example, for some people the impetus to attend church would have been due to a threat to one's safety or existence (immigration, DV, financial support and housing). Therefore, if the faith organisation provided a haven during these difficult times the parent would not want to be seen as causing difficulties, as the parent may feel eternally indebted to them. In these cases it is important to consider what is the real nature of the relationship between the parent and the faith organisation and do the dynamics of this relationship hinder the parent in protecting the child. In these situations using the simple triangle of abuse diagram could assist with developing a better understanding of the issues.



The main task is to assess the nature of the relationship between the abuser and the parent that is expected to protect the child. If both of them are the abusers then this would have serious implications for the safety of the child. Additionally, if the abuser holds a considerable amount of sway over the non-abusing parent then this would also raise questions about this parent's ability to protect the child.

What role does the faith organisation play in the life of the family?

If the faith organisation played a major role in the life of the family find out what level of involvement did each family member have? Find out from the parents if they were involved in any of the church ministries e.g. children's ministry, choir or evangelism. This should give you some idea about the parent's level of commitment to the church and it will be a good idea to find out how much time weekly or even daily is devoted to such activities.

Within some churches members attend cell groups (also known as home groups) where members are encouraged to visit the home of someone living within their locality during the week and where they pray and worship as a group. The home group is responsible for providing support for the family and children are known to attend them. Therefore find out if the family's home was used as a base or if they attended such a group. It will be a good idea to find out from the child if they also attend such groups on their own or with their parent and explore with them what activities took place during these meetings.

There is a possibility that the family may have attended more than one church at a time. Therefore, explore this with them and whether or not there have been previous allegations against the faith leader. Find out if the previous church had similar practices. For example, if the child is making an allegation against their current faith leader, did anything similar happen at their previous place of worship, even if that place of worship was overseas.

In cases where the child has been called a witch, devil or demon and they seem to have not been affected by it these are a few questions to ask to consider.

- What makes this child resilient?
- What is the child's belief system and why is it that they remain relatively unaffected by the accusation?
- What is a witch, demon or devil and where did they get the explanation from?
- Who does the child see as the perpetrator of the abuse and in the child's view is there a hierarchy among the abusers?
- What rituals did the parent perform within the home (when faced with a problem)? For example, within some Caribbean cultures parents would pin a small bag containing blue (blue is a detergent block smaller than the size of a match box used to wash white clothing) on the child's clothing to defend against bad things.
- In the place of worship are there any special activities for children?
- How are children expected to behave within the church? For example are children allowed to lead part of the service? (ask parent)
- Does the child still believe in God?
- Ask the child if they have ever seen the movie Bruce Almighty. If the child has never seen this movie explain it to them (Jim Carey was given the chance to be God). Ask the child if they were God for a day what will they do to change/improve their situation.

Useful questions to ask clients:

Faith and Religion

- Do you have a religion or faith?
- What is your religion or faith?
- Can you tell me more about it?
- Does (child/parent/carer/relative) have a religion or faith? (prompt for what it is)
- Can you remember doing things related to your religion or faith when you were younger? Would you like (name of child) to continue this? (night-time prayers, spiritual healing, fasting, reading religious text, singing, attending classes and tithing)
- Who instructs in your faith (who are the key people)

Places of Worship

- Does (name of child, parent, carer, relative) attend a place of worship at the moment?
- What is this place called? (including the address)
- Is it near here? (if they reside within the same area)
- How often do you go?
- Does (name of child, parent, carer or relative) go on your own or does someone go with them? (If yes, who goes with them).
- What does (name of child, parent, carer or relative) do at the place of worship? (if the person is a Christian they may belong to a particular ministry within the church e.g. children's ministry, usher, security, coffee morning)
- What do they like or dislike best about the place of worship?
- Does anyone from the place of worship come to visit (name of child, parent, carer or relative)? (prompt for who this is)
- Are you happy with (name of child, parent, carer or relative) involvement with this place of worship (whether the answer is yes or no ask why)
- Is (name of child, parent, carer or relative) part of any group that meets outside of the place of worship (e.g. within the Christian community members attending a church living within the same area may meet during the week at the home of another member and conduct a prayer service. These groups are called cell groups or home groups.)

Expressing Faith:

- On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the highest how important is faith to you and your family.
- On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the highest how does your faith contribute to you being a better parent?
- What festivals does your religion or faith have?
- Do you do anything special for these festivals?
- Do you do anything else because of your religion or faith?
- Do you pray?
- Are there specific prayers said?
- How does your place of worship or members within the place of worship assist you during times of need/stress?
- Do you watch or listen to religious programmes?

Families and Faith

- Was (name of child, parent, carer or relative) raised by their family in a particular religion or faith?
- Can you remember (name of child, parent, carer or relative) doing things related to their religion or faith when they were younger?
- Does (name of child, parent, carer or relative) take part in any religious activities with their family?
- Does (name of child, parent, carer or relative) you know other people with the same religion or faith?

- Is there anyone within your family or network a faith leader either currently or in the past (this could include people that have died).

Alternatively many of the elements of a child's behaviour that parents see as indicating the child is a witch, like nightmares and bed-wetting, are seen by us as indications of stress- but the stress may not show in daytime behaviour. So a child who does not seem worried by the accusation may actually be deeply stressed.