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Crisp, Beth R and Dinham, Adam. 2020. Are codes of ethics promoting religious literacy for social work practice? *Australian Social Work*, 73(2), pp. 204-216. ISSN 0312-407X [Article]

Persistent URL

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Are codes of ethics promoting religious literacy for social work practice?

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Abstract

As codes of ethics play at least a symbolic, if not educational, role in highlighting and informing professional priorities, 16 codes of ethics for social work practice were examined for references to religion and belief and analysed against the four domains of Dinham's religious literacy framework. Although religion and belief are mentioned in all but two of the documents, approximately half the surveyed codes only mention religion and belief in respect of either knowledge or skills. Some recognise the need for social workers to be aware of their own biases, but very few recognise the need to explain what is meant by religion and belief, despite these terms being in flux. While codes of ethics can contribute to the development of religious literacy among social workers, this requires social workers who already have some religious literacy to actively participate when codes of ethics are being revised.

Implications statement

- It is an ethical imperative that social workers are able to engage with religion and belief.
- Social workers require religious literacy, including skills and knowledge of different religions, recognition of the fluidity of the concepts religion and belief, and understanding one's own attitudes towards religion.
- Codes of ethics can contribute to the development of religious literacy among social workers but this potential is often not realised as fully as it might be.

Keywords

Religious literacy, codes of ethics, religion, beliefs, international social work

Introduction

The emergence of professional social work in the English-speaking first world in the final decades of the 19th and early part of the 20th century, coincided with a growing secularisation, which considered that welfare provision and religion should be separated (Bowpitt, 1998). This view was articulated in the words of one respondent in a survey of UK social workers who argued that “there is no room for religion or spirituality or cooking tips in social work” (Furman, Benson, Grimwood & Canda, 2004, p. 780). Others have reported similar sentiments being widespread (eg Furness and Gilligan, 2010; Whiting, 2008) with the consequence that social workers are not equipped to deal with the complexities of religion and belief (Holloway & Moss, 2010).

Although there have long been those who have lamented that “the literature of the profession genially and serenely ignores religion” (Marty, 1980, p. 465), over the past two decades there has been a growing acknowledgement that there will be professional encounters in which social workers need to engage with religion and belief (Crisp, 2017; Dinham, 2018; Holloway & Moss, 2010). Instead of being confined to situations in which they are perceived as problematic or deviant (Furness and Gilligan, 2010), social workers are increasingly regarding religion and belief as integral to the human condition (Hodge, 2018), albeit with a tendency to prefer the language of “spirituality” to that of “religion” (Crisp, 2010). It has been suggested that “(f)ailure to recognise the importance of religion in the lives of service users can, at worst, amount to an attack on their sense of well-being, their integrity and their identity” (Beckett, Maynard & Jordan, 2017 p. 38). Framed in this way, engaging with religion and belief may be regarded as an ethical imperative and this marks a change in emphasis from a profession which has been preoccupied with ensuring that social workers do not impose their religious beliefs on service users (Keenan, 2010). This increasing

recognition of religion and belief in social work practice has been accompanied by greater discussion of religion and belief in professional codes of ethics (Crisp, 2011; Hodge, 2012).

Despite this new ethical imperative, social workers often report that they have received inadequate preparation to engage in matters of religion and belief as part of their professional training and practice (Horwath & Lees, 2010) and may struggle to identify even the most important religious celebrations of the major traditions of their service users (Bradstock, 2015). In this context it has been proposed that the level of religious literacy among social workers is insufficient (Horwath & Lees, 2010; Shaw, 2018). Although social work education is beginning to address a need for religious literacy (Crisp and Dinham, 2019a), changing only the requirements for social work education does not address concerns that many experienced social workers lack the knowledge and skills to effectively work with service users around matters of religion and belief (Crisp, 2011). It is important to consolidate such spaces for change as widely as possible; hence the focus on codes of ethics here.

Religious literacy is a term which has gained currency over the past decade or so in discussions about the place of religions and beliefs across the public sphere (Commission on Religion and Belief in British Public Life, 2015; Dinham, 2018). In addition to the growing number of “nones” (people who identify as having no religion), many of whom have little knowledge or experience of any religion (Singleton, 2018), there have been substantial changes in religious makeup in many countries as a result of migration (Dinham, 2018), the revival of ancient traditions (including wicca and druidism) (Ezzy, 2013), increasing recognition of the importance of the spiritual traditions of Indigenous Peoples (Coates, Gray & Hetherington, 2006), increasing influence of non-religious beliefs (including humanism, secularism as well as environmental concerns) and non-religions (such as the Atheist Church). This poses the need for policy and practice approaches which are able to both

engage with religious diversity and manage tensions between individuals and groups who have differing or no beliefs (Ezzy, 2013). The emerging dialogue around religious literacy adopts a flexible understanding of religion and beliefs and challenges the framing of religion as a problem to be managed, and includes what some may regard as being “spirituality” rather than “religion”. As this dialogue reimagines religion as one of many pervasive human identities to be engaged with (Crisp and Dinham, 2019), it is unsurprising that social workers are amongst those at the forefront of those arguing a need for religious literacy (eg Crisp, 2015; Dinham, 2018; Pentaris, 2019).

In an evolving professional environment with changing expectations, periodic revisions of codes of ethics can play an educative role (Gambrill, 2007), in this case by signalling new ways in which religion and belief are considered within the profession. Perhaps unsurprisingly given religious beliefs have often informed ethical frameworks (Banks, 2012; Hugman, 2013), more developed understandings of religion and belief have been linked with higher perceived levels of compliance with ethical standards (Hodge, 2006). Furthermore, codes of ethics can also provide a framework for decision-making for social workers who find their religious beliefs and professional values conflict (Valutis, Rubin & Bell, 2014). The potential of the most recent revision of the *Code of Ethics* of the Australian Association of Social Workers (2010) to encourage religious literacy has been noted previously (Crisp, 2011), but no international comparisons have been undertaken. Hence, this article explores the potential for codes of ethics to stimulate religious literacy among social workers in different countries.

Method

Approach

The overall approach taken in this research has been to analyse codes of ethics for the social work profession in relation to Dinham's framework for religious literacy (Dinham & Jones, 2012; Dinham & Francis, 2015; Dinham & Shaw, 2015). This has previously been utilised to explore religious literacy in a range of settings including standards for social work education (Crisp and Dinham, 2019a), higher education (Dinham and Francis, 2015), teacher education curriculum (Dinham and Shaw, 2015), regulatory standards for health and social care workers (Crisp and Dinham, 2019b) and also underpins a recent study about religious literacy among hospice care workers (Pentaris, 2019).

Dinham's framework includes four distinct dimensions of religious literacy against which codes of ethics can be assessed: i) Categorisation - how religion is understood, and what counts as religion and belief; ii) Disposition – attitudes, feelings and beliefs about religion; iii) Knowledge about religions; and iv) Skills to engage with matters involving religion in the professional arena. Other frameworks for religious literacy (e.g. Castelli, 2018; Moore, 2006) are less comprehensive as each is only concerned with two of Dinham's dimensions.

Castelli's framework aligns with Dinham's Knowledge and Skills dimensions whereas Moore's framework considers Disposition and Knowledge as the critical components of religious literacy.

The first is called "categorisation" and is concerned with how religion and beliefs are understood in professional practice. Key questions are what religions, beliefs and non-beliefs count, and how are they broadly conceptualised? Rather than determining adherence to pre-set definitions, categorisation enables a breadth of understandings to be revealed as they

occur in the perspectives of participants, including new and emerging understandings of religion and beliefs. The second dimension is “disposition”, which involves exploration of the often sub-conscious emotional and atavistic assumptions which are brought to discussions about religion and belief. Being able to identify these assumptions and emotions is regarded as a critical precursor for thoughtful engagement with diverse religions and beliefs. This framework is completed with a determination, in light of category and disposition, of what “knowledge” is needed in the setting at hand. This is the third dimension of Dinham’s framework. This in turn translates in to an identification of what “skills” are needed in response, which is the fourth and final aspect.

Data collection

The International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] has not only produced its own *Statement of Ethical Principles*, in conjunction with the International Association of Schools of Social Work [IASSW] but also provides links to the national codes of ethics for more than 20 countries, many of which are available in the English language (IFSW, 2012). English language versions were sourced from the IFSW website, and then checked against the website of the relevant national organisation to confirm that the document had not been superseded. When no English-language version was available via the IFSW, the website of the national organisation was searched and relevant documents extracted where available. As the IFSW webpage did not mention Hong Kong, New Zealand and South Africa, all countries known to have a code of ethics in the English-language, these documents were sourced directly from the relevant national organisations. This process resulted in codes of ethics being obtained from 15 different countries in addition to the international statement.

Data analysis

Data analysis involved a similar approach to a recent comparative study of social work codes of ethics which explored the place of environmental sustainability in documents from different countries. That study identified keywords of interest which were searched for (Bowles et al., 2018). In the current study, each document was searched electronically using the following keywords and related terms, via truncations as noted in brackets:

- Beliefs (belie*)
- Religion (relig*)
- Spirituality (spirit*)

All documents were also read in their entirety to locate additional material which the keyword searching would be unable to identify. Relevant text was entered onto an Excel spreadsheet, along with details of the country, title and year of the source document, information as to where this was located within the document, and relative location to any other data extracted from the same document. Each author then separately rated each text fragment as either “Yes”, “No” or “Maybe” in respect of each of the four dimensions of the framework for religious literacy. Where there was initial disagreement, these items were discussed. The data presented here represents the subsequent agreed position. In practice the degree of consonance in our analysis was more than 98 per cent.

Results

One or more statements associated with religion and belief was found in documents from all jurisdictions except for Israel (Association for the Advancement of Social Work, 2007) and South Africa (South African Council for Social Service Professionals, n.d.). A summary of

the standards in each place in respect of the four dimensions of Dinham’s framework is summarised in Table 1.

INSERT TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE

Categorisation

In Dinham’s framework, categorisation refers to how religion is understood or defined—in other words, what counts as religion and belief, and how can we think about them? However, although religion is often linked with a wide range of beliefs and characteristics, it is not actually defined in any of the documents reviewed as part of this research. The Swedish code however did note that the principle of human dignity, central to social work, is found in most religions (Akademikerförbundet SSR, 2015). A link between religion and values is also made by the British Association of Social Workers:

In everyday usage, ‘values’ is often used to refer to one or all of religious, moral, cultural, political or ideological beliefs, principles, attitudes, opinions or preferences. In social work, ‘values’ can be regarded as particular types of beliefs that people hold about what is regarded as worthy or valuable. In the context of professional practice, the use of the term ‘belief’ reflects the status that values have as stronger than mere opinions or preferences. (British Association of Social Workers, 2012, p. 17)

A more flexible understanding of beliefs was also found in the Australian code in referring to those persons from whom social workers might need to collaborate. While there was no mention of religious leaders, “working relationships may at times need to extend to cultural advisors, mentors and/or recognised Elders in the development and provision of culturally safe and appropriate services” (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p. 18). Also,

although religion is sometimes linked with spirituality, only the Australian code provided a definition of the latter. This comprises of a one-sentence quote from Gilligan (2010, p. 60): “Spirituality is a search for meaning, and purpose and connection with self, others, the encompassing universe and ultimate reality”.

In several codes of ethics, religion is mentioned as part of a list of factors which contribute to diversity within communities but at the same time leave some members at risk of discrimination. For example, in the *Code of Ethics* for Australian social workers these are “national origin, ethnicity, culture, appearance, language, sex or gender identity, sexual orientation or preference, ability, age, place of residence, religion, spirituality, political affiliation and social, economic, health/genetic, immigration or relationship status” (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p. 19).

Whereas religion, belief or spirituality tend to be listed midway through such lists, in two Asian countries, religion is listed first, seemingly because of the strength of concerns about religious discrimination. In Singapore, the *Maintenance of Religious Harmony Act* is a legislative initiative of a secular government which seeks to contain tensions and encourage cohesiveness in a religiously diverse society (Hays, 2015): Hence in Singapore, social workers are expected to “strive to ensure a culturally sensitive practice which acknowledges all religions, cultures, races, nationalities, political beliefs, sexual orientations, age groups, gender identities, marital statuses, and mental and physical abilities” (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2017, p. 2). Similarly, in Korea which is also a religiously diverse society (Canda, Moon & Kim, 2017), there is an expectation that “social workers should never discriminate clients based on religion, race, gender, nationality, marital condition, sexual orientation, economic status, political faith, mental or physical disability, or other individual preferences, features, or status” (Korea Association of Social Workers, n.d., p. 2).

Disposition

The need for a critical awareness of one's own beliefs and values, which is what Dinham refers to as disposition, is mentioned in codes of ethics from several countries. For example, the British code states that social workers "should respect people's beliefs, values, culture, goals, needs, preferences, relationships and affiliations. Social workers should recognise their own prejudices to ensure they do not discriminate against any person or group" (British Association of Social Workers, 2012, p. 13). In particular, the concern was to "refrain from imposing these on clients" (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p. 17). Some codes, including the one from Puerto Rico, address this issue in the context of power imbalances between service users and social workers:

Recognize the attribution of power that underlies the professional relationship and avoid taking advantages based on it to exploit, intimidate, coerce or use any improper practice against its participants and for their personal, religious, political, economic or any other interests. (College of Social Work Professionals of Puerto Rico, 2017, p. 35)

Responsible social work practice also involves the capacity to deal with any situations in which one's religious and professional belief systems conflict. The Canadian code notes that

a social worker's personal values, culture, religious beliefs, practices and/or other important distinctions, such as age, ability, gender or sexual orientation can affect his/her ethical choices. Thus, social workers need to be aware of any conflicts between personal and professional values and deal with them responsibly. (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005, p. 2)

One way in which this can play out is when social workers have a conscientious objection to providing specific services. Recognising that this occurs, the Australian code proposes that social workers need to be able to justify their decisions (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010). As to what is the duty of a social worker is spelt out in the New Zealand code, which states that social workers must only declare to service users any conflict based on religious beliefs but to make appropriate referrals to social workers for whom their beliefs are not problematic in a particular situation:

A member's moral position or religious convictions do not override their duty to ensure client independence. They will maintain professional objectivity, advise clients of any potential and relevant personal, moral or religious conflict, and if indicated, offer appropriate referral to another social worker.

(Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2007, p. 9)

However, even if social workers are able to “critically reflect on ethical dilemmas and ... are also aware of their own worldview, moral, cultural, historical, political, religious, spiritual, societal and professional values and biases and the possible influence of these on their professional judgements” (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p. 14), service users may not accept this is so. Hence, social workers from the United States are reminded that their activities on social media may be detected by service users who may, rightly or wrongly, make judgements about the professional capacities of individual social workers, based on personal attributes such as religion (National Association of Social Workers, 2017).

Knowledge

Three countries specify knowledge in relation to religion and belief: Hong Kong, Canada and Australia. In no other country was there any requirement that social workers should have any knowledge of the religious traditions of the service users with whom they worked.

In Hong Kong, “Social workers should be acquainted with and sensitive to the cultures of clients and appreciate the differences among them in respect of their ethnicity, national origin, religion and custom” (Social Workers Registration Board, 2013, p. 3). Likewise, Canadian social workers are expected to “seek a working knowledge and understanding of clients’ racial and cultural affiliations, identities, values, beliefs and customs” (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 2005, p. 4) while in Australia, it is an expectation that “Social workers will recognise, acknowledge and remain sensitive to and respectful of the religious and spiritual world views of individuals, groups, communities and social networks, and the operations and missions of faith and spiritually-based organisations” (Australian Association of Social Worker, 2010, p. 18).

Codes from Australia, Britain and the United States make mention of the need to respect the religious beliefs of colleagues or to challenge words or actions which were derogatory, though these statements tend to be generalisations. An exception is an Australian statement about the rights of individuals to receive professional supervision or training from social workers which respects their beliefs, such as “Social workers will ensure that supervision and training are culturally safe places for social workers with diverse ethnic and cultural backgrounds, religions, sexual orientations, gender identities, disabilities and other identities” (Australian Association of Social Workers, 2010, p. 36). The Australian code is also the only one which makes reference to the need to understand the role of religious groups who currently provide welfare services while their New Zealand counterparts are reminded of the place of religion in the formation of social work as a profession:

Social work has grown out of humanitarian, philosophical and religious attempts to find solutions to poverty and injustice. It originated in Europe and North America and was brought to and further developed in Aotearoa New

Zealand where it played a significant role in the colonisation process

(Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers, 2007, p. 4)

Instead of pertaining to religious traditions, religions and beliefs tend to be discussed as an essential element of human rights. In Switzerland it is understood that “Fulfilment of human life in democratically constituted societies requires consideration and respect of individuals’ physical, psychological, spiritual, social and cultural needs, and of their natural, social and cultural environment” (AvenirSocial, 2010, p 7). Democracy also features in the Swedish code but with the focus on freedom rather than needs:

The word democracy is often used as an overall designation for what are essentially democratic values, by which is meant social concepts that can also be classified as civil rights, such as freedom of opinion, freedom of the press, freedom of religion, freedom of assembly, freedom of political affiliation, universal suffrage, gender equality, anti-discrimination legislation and practice, children’s rights and the rule of law. (Akademikerförbundet, 2015, p. 8)

Freedom *from* rather than freedom *to* is central to the Russian discussion of *The International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights*:

The document fixes the following rights: for life, freedom and inviolability of a person; not to be exposed to tortures, and severe, brutal or ‘humiliating the person’s dignity’ treatment; prohibition of slavery; not to be exposed to arrest and detention; for the freedom of speech, religions, assemblies and associations, including membership in trade unions; for the freedom of movement and choice of residence; to vote on the basis of system of general

suffrage; for free proceeding; for protection of minority. (Russian Public Association, 2003, p. 20)

Other documents referred to include mention of the *Declaration on the Protection of Persons belonging to National or Ethnic, Religious and Linguistic Minorities* in the New Zealand code of ethics, and mentions of other documents produced by the United Nations in the codes of ethics from Canada and Puerto Rico.

Skills

Given that the emphasis of codes of ethics is on what social workers say and do, it is unsurprising that there are more statements relating to skills than to any other category in Dinham's framework. These include the only statements pertaining to religion or belief in the *Statement of Ethical Principles* endorsed by the IFSW and IASSW including the expectation that "Social workers should uphold and defend each person's physical, psychological, emotional and spiritual integrity and well-being" (IFSW, 2012, Section 4.1). Similarly, the only mention of religion in the Irish code is that

You must show through your practice and conduct, a respect for the rights and dignity of people regardless of: gender; family status; marital status; age; disability; sexual orientation; religion; race; membership of the Traveller community, as identified under the Equal Status Acts, 2000-2008. (Social Workers Registration Board, 2010, p. 10)

Indeed, statements affirming the need to challenge discrimination and oppression on the basis of religion and beliefs are present in nearly all of the codes of ethics, with the exception of Russia, Sweden and Switzerland. In Puerto Rico, this not only includes personal interactions

but also pertains to what social workers write in public forums, including on the internet (College of Social Work Professionals of Puerto Rico, 2017)

Discussion

This study has found evidence of a recognised place in social work for religion and belief in documents from all countries except Israel and South Africa. Differences between the codes of ethics in respect of how they address issue of religion and belief may reflect national concerns and priorities (Benson et al., 2016) as well as the extent to which religion and ethics are regarded as separate entities (Hugman, 2013). The point of time when each code was finalised may also be critical, with codes being published since 2010 addressing more of Dinham's categories than those published earlier. Given the role of religion in the founding of Israel, the exclusion of religion from the code of ethics for Israeli social workers could be considered surprising. Yet the legal framework of Israel promotes religious equality, so making mention of religion in a code of ethics might be perceived as superfluous (US Department of State, 2004). Religion is also very important in the lives of South Africans, but there is no majority religion and the need for religious tolerance and cooperation make it not unlike countries where religion is mentioned in the codes of ethics of social workers (South African History Association, 2018). The examples of Israel and South Africa nevertheless pose the question as to whether the need for social workers to include mention of religion is more necessary in countries where there is a high degree of ambivalence about religion, which can nevertheless occur in countries where there is a very high level of nominal religious affiliation (Crisp, 2013).

Mentions of religion and belief in codes of ethics from other countries, as well as in the international statement of ethical principles, do not necessarily answer criticisms of the capacity of social workers to engage with religions and beliefs. Approximately half of the

codes inspected referred to religion and belief in respect of only knowledge (Hong Kong, Russia and Switzerland) or skills (Ireland, Korea, Singapore and the international statement). The specific skills mentioned reflect a trajectory in which “social work has tended to focus upon equality and diversity concerns” in relation to religion and belief (Shaw, 2018: 414). But knowledge or skills alone, without reference to disposition or category, is likely to continue a situation in which the depth and significance of religion and belief, as they are lived in service users everyday lives and identities, largely goes unrecognised (Teasley & Archuleta, 2015).

As with any research, the approach taken in this research is subject to limitations. When guidance concerning religion and beliefs are characterised by a lack of clarity and specificity, they are open to interpretation not only by practitioners subject to a particular code, but also by others with an interest in codes of ethics, including the authors of this paper. A further limitation is that this study has only considered published codes of ethics published the English language which were locatable through internet searching. As such, the findings are not generalisable beyond the group of countries surveyed. Nevertheless, Dinham’s framework for religious literacy, does provide a consistent framework for comparing how codes of ethics developed at different times, and in different contexts, address matters of religion and belief.

While a minority of codes provide guidance in respect of two or more of the four dimensions of Dinham’s framework, the extent to which these indicate the recognition of the need for religious literacy may still be limited. Rather, codes of ethics may serve inadvertently to simplify complex issues such as religion and belief (Elliott, 2017). Codes of ethics may also be difficult to interpret (McAulliffe and Chenoweth, 2008) and with the exception of a separate guidance document accompanying the Canadian code of ethics, guidance in general

was limited overall, and particularly in respect of engaging with religion and belief. Furthermore, social workers may gravitate to those parts of a code of ethics which most resonate with them. One study in the United States found that 44 percent of social workers knew of service users who had been discriminated against because of their religious beliefs. Similarly, almost half of social workers who were themselves religious also reported being discriminated against by colleagues (Ressler and Hodge, 2005). Hence, it would not be surprising if social workers were more aware of clauses which discuss responding to discrimination than to issues such as how religion and belief are understood, which they might not even recognise as problematic.

Although it is appropriate that codes of ethics reflect the unique circumstances of the practice contexts which they aim to support (Williams and Sewpaul, 2004), there are some common themes which emerge. First, if codes of ethics are concerned with religion and belief because they are perceived to be problematic, there may be missed opportunities in exploring religion more positively as a potential resource in social work practice, for example in underpinning well-being or resilience (Furness and Gilligan, 2010). Second, it cannot be assumed that simply increasing the number of references to religion and belief in a code of ethics will promote religious literacy. For example, although there were more mentions of religion and beliefs in the Australian code than in any other that was examined in this research, this does not make it a standard against which all others are judged. Just because a code addressed a dimension in Dinham's framework does not mean it did so in a way which might promote religious literacy. Third, while social workers reportedly comply with clauses of codes of ethics which are explicitly about religion and belief (Hodge, 2005), when religion and belief are part of a long list of factors which social workers must take care not to discriminate on the basis of, there is a likelihood that they will be overlooked.

Codes of ethics on their own are unlikely to ensure religious literacy among social workers. Nevertheless, they do play an important role at least symbolically in denoting what should be of importance to social workers, and providing a reference point against which social workers can identify their needs for continuing professional education in relation to religion and belief. However, this is likely to require social workers who themselves already have some religious literacy to take an active role in periodic reviews of social work codes of ethics.

Codes of ethics

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Table 1. Social work codes of ethics by place and year: Requirements for religious literacy by category

Place	Year	Categorisation	Disposition	Knowledge	Skills
International	2004	No	No	No	Yes
Australia	2010	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Canada	2005	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Hong Kong	2013	No	No	Yes	No
Ireland	2010	No	No	No	Yes
Israel	2007	No	No	No	No
Korea	Not	No	No	No	Yes
New Zealand	2007	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Puerto Rico	2017	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
Russia	2003	No	No	Yes	No
Singapore	2017	No	No	No	Yes
South Africa	No	No	No	No	No

Sweden	2015	Yes	No	Yes	No
Switzerland	2010	No	No	Yes	No
United Kingdom	2012	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
United States	2017	No	Yes	Yes	Yes
