

Practising ethically in an unethical world: Cultivating professional wisdom in social work

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Outline

- Practising ethically in an unethical world
- The domain of the ethical
- Impact of cuts in public services on social work (UK as an example)
- Traditional, new managerial and everyday ethics
- Professional ethical wisdom
- Exploring professional ethical wisdom through the concept of 'ethics work'
- Illustrating ethics work: the experiences of UK children's services social workers and youth workers
- Cultivating professional ethical wisdom through education
- Concluding comments: the ethical is political

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Practising ethically

in an unethical world

Practising according to social work values:

- human rights
- social justice
- professional integrity

Being respectful, fair, trustworthy, caring, compassionate, generous, humble, wise ...

- Unfairness
- Inequality
- Untruth
- Violence

Public austerity

- Cuts
- Blame
- Stigma
- Hostility

Self-interested, mean, grandiose ...

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The domain of the ethical

- **'Ethical' in a generic sense** refers to matters relating to the promotion of human and ecological flourishing, including harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities
- **'Ethical' in a positive sense** means ethically right or good – the opposite of 'unethical', which mean ethically wrong or bad.

Note – 'ethical' and 'moral' are often used interchangeably in ordinary English usage.

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The hard terrain of social work

1. **The 'dilemmatic space' of social work** - the perennial contradictions of care, education & control. Often there is no obvious right action.
Traditional professional ethics focusing on dilemmas and decision-making relating to individual rights, social justice and the public good.
2. **Impact of neo-liberalism** – from 1990s/2000s.
 - **Markets** – contracts, competition, costs, efficiency, privatisation;
 - **Managerialism** – regulation, procedures, targets, measurement, outcomes**'Soft' utilitarianism**, focusing on compliance with procedures and regulations, based on fairness, good outcomes.
3. **Effect of public sector austerity measures in Europe & increasing authoritarianism in Hong Kong** – cuts in services, intensification of managerialism and victim-blaming in many countries.
'Hard' utilitarianism, focusing on competition & calculation: based on cost effectiveness, financially driven.

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New public austerity in the UK & many other countries

- Cuts in welfare services
- Tighter eligibility criteria
- People taking responsibility for their own care
- Activation programmes
- Targeting people in greatest need
- Increased victim blaming
- Creating hostile environments
- Performance management of workers
- Payment by results for organisations



Negative trends linked with managerialism, marketisation, austerity and authoritarianism

- Setting social workers up to fail – impossible to follow all the procedures, rules & protocols; or to meet needs with limited resources
- De-humanising service users, social workers and the relationships between them
- Devaluing of professional autonomy, judgement and discretion
- Eroding personal responsibility & commitment to the profession
- Encouraging defensive practice
- Creating moral distress – social workers know the right thing to do, but are unable to do it
- Creating dominant discourses of performance, risk, targets and results

Comments from dilemmas cafes and focus groups, UK, 2017

Workers are in the same psychological state as families – in crisis

The supports around social work are dissolving

Social work is on a cliff edge

Everyday practice of UK social professionals, 2017-18

1. A social worker was *leaned on* to change his recommendation from supporting a family to stay together, to removing the children, due to lack of resources for family support in Children's Services.
2. A social worker was told by his manager that it was not his job to support a mother to claim her welfare benefits.
3. A 'shared lives' worker was *pressurised* by her manager to find a family-based carer for a person with severe psychiatric issues, as it would be cheaper than secure residential accommodation.
4. Youth workers discovered some young people of Roma background (a minority ethnic group from Eastern Europe) were not attending school. They were told by the head teacher that they had been excluded due to poor behaviour. They were being 'home schooled'. The youth workers knew the parents didn't speak English so could not teach them at home.

Workers' responses

1. A social worker was *leaned on* to change his recommendation from supporting a family to stay together, to removing the children, due to lack of resources for family support in Children's Services. **Social worker changed his recommendation as asked (compliance)**
2. A social worker was told by his manager that it was not his job to support a mother to claim her welfare benefits. **Social worker supported mother without telling manager (invisible individual resistance)**
3. A 'shared lives' worker was *pressurised* to find a carer for a person with severe psychiatric issues, as it would be cheaper than secure residential accommodation. **Worker refused (individual resistance)**
4. Youth workers discovered some Roma young people were not attending school. They were told by the head teacher that they had been excluded due to poor behaviour. They were then registered as being 'home schooled' by parents. The youth workers knew the parents didn't speak English. **Youth workers challenged the school and are now planning wider action (collective resistance on a public issue)**

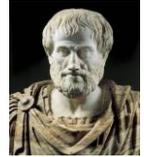
How to support social workers to be ethical in hard times?

1. To reclaim moral agency and professional autonomy.
2. To advocate for the rights of service users.
3. To reassert the social justice mission of social work – bringing the political to the heart of ethics.
4. To reconfigure professional ethics – bringing the personal back into professional ethics.

| Traditional (western) professional ethics | New managerial ethics | Everyday ethics in professional life |
|---|------------------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| Ethics as decision-making | Ethics as regulation | Ethics as embedded |
| <i>Conduct</i> | <i>Competencies</i> | <i>Character</i> |
| <i>Codes</i> | <i>Conformity</i> | <i>Commitment</i> |
| <i>Cases</i> | <i>Categories [+ Calculation]</i> | <i>Context</i> |
| Respect, rights | Fairness, good outcomes [for rich] | Virtues, care, social justice |

Growing interest in *phronesis* and professional wisdom

- Response to concern about increasing focus on technical rationality and managerial accountability.
- Reclaiming hidden discourse of professional judgement and expertise.
- Drawing on Aristotelian *phronesis* or 'practical wisdom':
 - 'a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things which are good or bad for human beings.' (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1954, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 142 [VI, 5, 1140b 4-6])
 - 'Being good at thinking morally' (Hughes, 2001, p. 86)



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The domain of professional ethical wisdom

- *Ethical* - wisdom practised in the domain of ethics (issues of human & ecological flourishing, harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities).
- *Professional* - ethical wisdom in professional life.
- *Professional ethical wisdom* – the disposition to engage in practical reasoning in professional situations where matters of harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities are at stake.



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Professional ethical wisdom – a capacity to:

- Think about and recognise universal questions – such as 'what counts as a good life for human beings?' and profession-specific questions such as 'what counts as social welfare or social justice?'
- Perceive the nature of particular situations encountered in professional life; notice and attend to issues of ethical salience; place in a political context; look at situations from different perspectives and imagine alternatives.
- Empathise with the emotions and perspectives of others; experience and use emotions relevant to situations in professional life – such as compassion or righteous anger.
- Deliberate about and judge what will contribute to the good or to social welfare in particular situations and what is the role of social workers in bringing this about.
- Act justly, with courage, care, trustworthiness and professional integrity.

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Exploring professional ethical wisdom through the concept of 'ethics work'

'**Work**' – the moves people make psychologically, conversationally and bodily to perform or achieve a particular persona or state of mind (as in 'identity work', 'emotion work').

'**Ethics work**' - the effort people put into seeing ethical aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done.



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Dimensions of ethics work

1. **Framing work** – identifying and focusing on the ethically salient features of a situation; placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts (reflexivity and criticality).
2. **Role work** – playing a role in relation to others (advocate, carer, critic); taking a position (partial/impartial; close/distant).
3. **Emotion work** – being caring, compassionate, empathic; managing emotions.
4. **Identity work** – working on one's ethical self; creating an identity as an ethically good professional; maintaining professional integrity.
5. **Reason work** – making moral judgements and decisions; justifying judgments and decisions.
6. **Relationship work** – engaging in dialogue; working on relationships
7. **Performance work** – making visible aspects of this work to others; demonstrating oneself at work (accountability work).

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Illustrating ethics work: A Children's Services social worker

"... I've had supervision from management, I've been advised that it's not part of my child protection role to support a parent with a benefit appeal [Employment & Support Allowance], even though I know that the financial impact that will have on the family and on mum's mental health will be significant. So it's the debate around, as a social worker being a case manager or a case worker and increasingly I'm being encouraged back to that old position of case management - so working with families from afar rather than being hands on, offering practical support."

The mother had quite complex mental health needs (she was agoraphobic), but was not receiving any mental health support and didn't meet the criteria for high levels of support from children's services. She used a community fostering scheme three times a week to enable her to attend appointments. She struggled with managing her finances and keeping appointments.

"The family ... have been in and out of children's services for some time. We've seen cycles of improvement and drop off ... I knew that all it took is a trigger such as loss of family finance or deterioration in mum's mental health and we may well have seen a significant deterioration ... That's when we're talking about removal of children."

"Well I ignored my manager and offered her [the mother] support Supported her for advice interview ... to go to GP [doctor] to get a letter ... wrote letter of support ... took her to the appeal as well. I just didn't tell anybody".

Ethics work by children's service social worker

Framing work – seeing the whole family in context, not just children. Aware of how the system works – he is 'feeding the system'.

Role work – "Part of my role would be to do work with mum and to support her. So I just took it as part of that. So I suppose it was, for me, doing the right thing and working between the gaps. I think social worker's case management isn't good social work, is it? We all know that. We've got to be hands on with families".

Emotion work – mentions his own family background, which means he is "sensitive" to the mother's situation: "maybe I was drawn a little bit to this lady's needs because of that ..."

Identity work – "... sometimes as practitioners ... we just have to do the right thing because there was no one else that was going to do the right thing in this case".

Reason work – "she should have access [to support], it's almost her human rights". "You use your professional judgement and spend a little less time with another family where you're managing risk"

Relationship work – developing a supportive relationship with mother.

Performance work – making visible aspects of this work to his peers in a dilemmas café (although it was hidden from manager).

Cultivation of professional ethical wisdom in educational contexts

- Going beyond traditional 'textbook' ethics (principles, codes, difficult decisions) to a situated everyday ethics (politics, people and practice).
- Supervision & critical dialogue with peers in a group
- Working with longer, real life cases
- Moral case deliberation, dilemmas cafés
- Neo-Socratic dialogue
- Forum theatre



Dilemmas cafés as an example

- raise participants' awareness of ethical challenges in practice;
- encourage collaborative dialogue, including critical listening and questioning;
- stimulate learning through hearing about different ways of seeing and understanding issues;
- explore a variety of recommendations for action;
- seeing issues as collective and political, not just individual

"Being able to share with others honestly about key issues that are seldom talked about"

"Bringing different perspectives together and preparing for the unexpected"

"Meeting and hearing from other practitioners in a positive environment of equality. Was useful to use real examples"

"By sharing my dilemma I felt supported and acknowledged"



Forum theatre as an example

Developing attentiveness, noticing key points when something could be done differently; focussing on particular features of a situation.

Being an external critic – seeing the whole picture from a distance.

Empathising with the protagonist, feeling what it is like to be that person, and getting the chance to take the place of the protagonist.

Reframing, repositioning characters, configuring the scene differently.

Repetition, rehearsal, how to challenge the oppressor; often being courageous, motivated by witnessing injustice.

Dialogue, sharing perspectives on what is going on, how to interpret the action, possibilities for action.



Concluding comments: surfacing professional ethical wisdom through ethics work

- reclaiming the ground lost to the domain of the technical, managerial & economic
- the work of both deconstruction (of powerful structures of current discourses), *and*
- reconstruction of the ethical relationality of social professional work and its commitment to acting for social justice. Examples: Social Work Action Network (SWAN); In Defence of Youth Work in UK; Orange Tide in Spain; social workers' involvement in Umbrella Movement and recent protests in Hong Kong



Reclaiming and reframing professional ethics

Ethics as personal and political: towards a situated ethics of social justice

- Situated ethics
- Politicised ethics

Values for a situated ethics of social justice in social work

- Radical social justice
- Empathic solidarity.
- Relational autonomy
- Collective responsibility for resistance
- Moral courage
- Working in and with complexity and contradictions



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[社會工作倫理與價值 \(Ethics and Values in Social Work, 4th edition\)](#), Taipei, Hungyeh Publishing, 2014