

Theoretical Considerations Regarding Social Work Education: do ethics matter and if so how do you teach them?

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Abstract

The professional capabilities that are required of practicing social workers include an understanding of ethics and the capacity for ethical practice, yet rather than facilitating procedural knowledge transfer, this paper emphasises the acquisition of ethical knowledge as a process of critical, transformational and political education. This paper considers the trends towards internationalising Social Work in respect to student learning needs regarding Social Work ethics. It considers cross cultural politics against an implicit, static, relativist philosophical framework, for ethics. Relevant Social Work education, rather than being a process of learning professionally endorsed context-specific, ethical practices, might be a process of developing comfort with explicit examination of group power-relations within dynamic practice contexts. It might examine a, relationist philosophical approach by considering ontological questions that underlie the relationships between professionals and other stakeholders that are involved in ethical decision-making. By making explicit, a relationist framework there can be description and analysis of the power-relations between Social Workers and client populations as they change and develop. This approach promotes critical reflection as an essential process for personal and professional transformation, when dealing with the ethical complexities of cultural relativism, humanitarian evangelism and risk management.

Introduction

Contemporary moves to institutionalise standardised graduate outcome qualities relate closely with increased expectations that new Social Work graduates are capable of professional standards of ethical behaviour. Yet Ryan, Cleak and McCormack (2006) argue that Social Work education processes have previously over-relied on the diligence of fieldwork supervisors as gate-keepers, especially regarding students' capacity to behave appropriately and to apply professional values in professional contexts. Ward (2008) has argued that educators may have over-emphasised the acquisition of knowledge and specific practice skills, while merely expecting that students were adopting professional values and attitudes.

This paper accepts these sentiments and it argues for systematic consideration of how educators might better understand Social Work ethics and thereby help students to develop both professional values and subsequent professional behaviours. Bearing in mind:

That an Aristotelian perspective in social work ethics was not taken up was perhaps testimony to the persistent drone of Kantianism and utilitarianism ... and the ubiquity of an 'ethics' of anti-discrimination which, though pitched at a low level of critical analysis, none the less was given equal status to a higher order moral thinking inspired by Aristotle, Kant and Mill. The easily bought discussion of an ethics of anti discrimination reduced humanity to narrow sociologically-driven categories of race, gender and disability. What looked like a way into ethical analysis was actually a closing off of discussion as most social workers and students saw the moral obligations towards these groups as self-evident and therefore they largely wanted to engage in considerations of practice instead of developing the virtue of providing philosophically informed reasons for action (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1017).

This paper argues that there is need for a more coherent understanding of, and then learning strategies for the development of Social Work values, ethics and the professional use of relationship building skills. It also argues after McBeath and Webb (2002) that there might be two approaches considered and two strategic

methods for developing professional standards in these areas. These two approaches are considered in the passage below.

Client Group Based Approaches

The first approach to ethical learning is to provide subject offerings that expose students to specific client groups' needs, and then to assist them in developing acceptable ethical responses or procedures (Thompson & Pumpa, 2011). One problem with this client-group based standard-setting is that these groups, which educators are pragmatically examining, may actually be undefinable except through external problematisation processes or other social construction processes. Though it seems unremarkable that the AASW code of ethics defines specific ethical positions that apply to distinct groups and then requires that Social Workers apply the correct approach with each group, there may in reality be no clear definition of the particular group that an ethical case fits within.

Just as post-structural theory has questioned the existence of social classes, so Latour (2005) has argued that no group can be defined except according to the conditions that resulted in its formation. For social work ethicists there seems to be no contention about group definitions. There are those that form themselves around a collective response to an issue and then there are those that are sociologically constructed by humanitarians as a site for intervening into an issue of concern. For example a 'gang' of young people may form because of boredom or safety concerns and social workers may deploy community work or groups work approaches in assisting them. This first type of group, can perhaps be called an 'organic' group. Community groups, lobby groups, social action groups, and even villages may accord with this loose definition.

Socially Constructed Groups

A second type of group may be developed by policy makers who wish to deal with the perceived issues or behaviours of specific people. For example the young people who are seen to cause problems in shopping centres might precipitate the definition of a generic 'youth' group who are citizens between the age of 15 and 25, whether they are or are not characterised by the 'problem' behaviour. Such a group might be called a sociologically defined or 'constructed group' and other examples of these could include 'people with disabilities', 'the aged', 'children', 'mentally ill people', 'people from non-English speaking backgrounds', and 'indigenous people'. These groups are the core foci of Social Work practice and their professional ethics (Thompson & Pumpa, 2011).

If constructed groups do not have an active membership and even have no representative structure, then the professional social construction of the issue and the group corresponds with a professional construction of the ethics for dealing with the group. This discussion contends that professional determination of ethics for constructed groups is illiberal and perhaps unethical especially when heterogeneity and internal cultural differences describe different values across a group. For example Bowker (1999) explains how ideological and ethical frameworks are institutionalised by bureaucratic and expert agents within government, the academy and/or professional bodies to define the appropriate treatment of constructed groups. Bowker examines how Apartheid was constructed as a socially and ethically appropriate way of dealing with 'non-white' citizens. Adult definition of youth work ethics or European definition of Melanesian child protection ethics are resemblant of Bowker's arguments.

This analysis presents an initial concern regarding the consideration of group-based ethics. Firstly the ethical practices of professionally constructed groups are socially constructed because these categories of people do not actually exist in any observable sense and the people who are ascribed to these groups may not even consider that they are a part of that group. For example just as the perceived membership of a constructed group of 15-25 year old 'youth' may never actually identify themselves as 'youth' or be part of any 'youth group' so village 'children' may identify more with their 'wantok' group or family in Melanesia than with those of their own age. The professional or expert construction of that group then leads to professional expertise ascribing 'appropriate' ethical practices which pertain to that group. This is

exemplified by the United Nations defining the ‘Human Rights’ that determine the appropriate treatment of young people or children in Melanesia. Social Work experts may then adopt those rights as core ethical guidelines for working in such ‘third world’ nations even though the ‘membership’ of that group was not involved in determining those ethical parameters. The difficulty with this agenda is that a universal ethic which determines that children must be sent to school or that they must be disciplined without corporal punishment may conflict with very long held customary practices which are in accord with local norms that are currently seen as essential to village life and family economics. For example Pastors of The Church of Melanesia have recently publically denounced the UN Charter for Rights of the Child as inspired by ‘the Devil’ because of the damage that they perceive that it might do to community cohesion and peace.

Social work training, if it builds ethical competency through practicing the implementation of preset principles in specific group contexts, will create conflict with essential customary values and will rapidly become outdated as new international social work contexts emerge. For example the development of child protection programs in Melanesia, after recent increases in substance abuse, has created an issue regarding the ethics of implementing child rights frameworks within collectivist cultural frameworks. Some village elders and chiefs are very concerned about the development of a youth culture that is promoting independence, challenge to traditional authority, substance use and social problems. Though contemporary European rights-based ethical positions seem incontestable at any fixed time in a Eurocentric Social Work context, the grave concern expressed by Church leaders and politicians in Solomon Islands is about increasing the instability and social problems in their communities as a perceived consequence of implementing ‘child rights’ approaches and changing power relations (Thompson and Hil 2010). It seems logical to consider that the Melanesian leadership are in fact more expert in managing Melanesian communities than are European child rights advocates though it should be acknowledged that there will be other ethical priorities develop in communities over time as cultures change. Ethical competence in Social Work is normally demonstrated by the capacity to implement contemporary rights based practices, yet if such activities are seen as immoral by important community leaders in the communities in which they are implemented then the subsequent conflict caused may prove that the implementation was unethical if it was not negotiated as an appropriate implementation.

The autocratic approach to ethics can be explained because the ethical competencies of internationally active social workers have been conceptualised as ‘sensitivities’ to the Eurocentrically perceived needs of sociologically constructed groups such as ‘children’ and then as a secondary consideration as sensitivities to the needs of the cultural group in which children are socialised (Thompson, 2011). It seems laudable to first save the women and children and then ensure cultural sensitivities, yet because the ‘wantok’ group is likely to be an organic group any external child/women saving strategy may clash with organic group ethics. Because of the diversity within the nation both the ‘child’ group construct and the Solomon Islands cultural group construct are undefinable as foci for ethical sensitivity. Yet many stakeholder organisations (including UNICEF, Save the Children and Secretariat of Pacific Communities) perceive that this ‘child’ group needs to be protected from the larger cultural group. The expert construction of these groups and their ethics creates perhaps greater conflicts between their interests than the perceived child abuse problem.

Organic Group Considerations

If after Latour (2005) issues are the only definition of groups, then the only ethical guidelines that are appropriate for dealing with groups must be the fluid and changing expectations that pertain to these groups, as they emerge and change. As Social Work ethics include phrases like respect for ‘culture’, ‘social justice’ and ‘self determination’ (AASW, 2010) then Ethical behaviours for dealing with an organic group should include negotiations about how the group-members wish to be treated. This means that it is inappropriate that ethical learning be focussed upon specific strategies or sensitivities for working with constructed groups. The professional ethics that students must learn must be defined in part by those that are dealing with the problem that their organic group has formed around. Ethical practice is a negotiation process regarding group

norms and professional norms. No firm unchanging ethical strategy is possible for any ‘group’, and it is misleading to teach students ethical capabilities as absolutes for specific constructed groups.

Further when issues define groups, the group definition processes may define specific ethical positions that are competitive with the ethical expectations of other forming groups. Simply if a group forms organically around a problem, then it is a fluid and pragmatic structure. The development and change process defines that the group’s practices, and thereby its ethics will accord with the conceptualisation of its problem. Consider the dramatic example discussed by Stille (2003) whereby influential Jews were so concerned about economic issues that they assisted in the development of the Fascist movement in Europe in the 1930s, and yet the movement gradually reconceptualised the source of its problem, changed its values and reconceptualised these Jewish group members as part of that problem. The ethics of the group changed as the problem construction changed. If an ethical position thwarts the intention of the transforming ‘group’ regarding its problem, then that ethic will be discarded in favour of new and pragmatically acceptable ethics. This case shows however that as the definition of a problem changes, and the ethics of the associated group changes, humanitarian workers may need to renegotiate the ethics that they apply to the group. For example were a Social Workers working in 1930s Europe they need not take their ethics from Fascist groups as they could strive to negotiate acceptable ethical positions or seek alternate approaches to the problems that these groups sought to address.

There is clearly a need to understand ethical practices as a component of group formation, power-relations and cultural identity. For professional education to ensure ethical standards for a diverse profession, and across multiple contexts, there is need for broad learning approaches that can be applied across a range of professional contexts, including substance abuse help, child protection, and cross-cultural social work.

This implies that there are conceptual flaws in teaching models which focus on fixed ethical rules for group based (or even occupational) contexts, as these tend towards a form of ethical absolutism that may prove unethical in changing, alternate, sociologically constructed or even complex contexts. If training is constructed upon a limited number of constructed group contexts it tends towards a misguided perception of stability within contextualised ethical positions and it encourages a false confidence regarding emerging ethical dilemmas. Such relativistic learning approaches seek to match ethical frameworks to such occupational contexts as child protective services, disability work or aged care, but in doing so they assume that ethical hierarchies will provide the answer to dilemmas. For example there is an assumption that ethical social workers will know that they can fall back on judgements regarding ‘doing no harm’ and then maximising group benefits, when they are faced with judgements about the need for caring first about the rights of neglected children and then about cultural rights. In fact they may not be in a position to judge what constitutes harm or maximum benefit within the cultural context. The ethical concern is that the worker may have the power to intervene without the capacity to judge these outcomes.

In the first instance a social worker may misjudge the concept of harm and separate a child from a family that seeks to initiate them into the rights of adulthood. The decision to intervene might then create tension in a community and prevent a young adult from achieving the culturally determined rights that characterise adult life in that community. Such tension might cause significant violence within the community. By contrast, cultural rights groups may demand cultural freedoms that conflict with mainstream perceptions of ethical behaviour or with developing child rights or women’s rights groups. This means that a child protection case might be dealt with according to the cultural rights based ethical beliefs held by some caseworkers and an ethical position which advocates that all children be reunited as a priority with their cultural network. In this case if the network that includes the child, also includes substance-abusers who act against traditional ethics, they might abuse the child. In the past Australian caseworkers who were aware of the ethics of cultural rights and the potential ethical conflicts between the carers of the child and the group’s ethics might have learned better approaches than the absolutist or rule bound approach that happened in Queensland in such a case. These case examples show that caseworkers have power to implement change that is perceived ethical because of the application of ethical rules and yet harm is done.

The development of ethical judgement is furthered by consideration of relationships between groups. The child group can be seen to be a sub-set of the cultural group and dependent upon it, yet both are social constructions and the group ethics are dubious. Perhaps because of the perceived attractiveness and powerlessness of children there are a number of European lobby groups that have activated for the implementation of 'child rights' ethics. These lobby groups have emphasised the importance of their own socially constructed ethical dealings with this constructed group, and these child rights ethics have become international norms. Should there be different constructions of his group then its perceived needs or issues would be different and had an organic child (lobby) group developed in Melanesia (or elsewhere in a developing Nation) then the needs that defined it would emphasise other norms than those European liberal conceptions of child rights. Yet the European and externally identified needs are perceived to define the ethical treatment of children in Melanesia and developing nations. It is a problem that culturally 'European' Social Workers are defining the ethics for working with an undefinable group whose needs have been predominantly interpreted by external groups. The ethical principles that are defined for ethics training of international social worker are defined within a range of cultural subgroups of European liberal norms. The impact is that no internally defined ethical rules exist for the child group as no coherent issues have created (or defined) an 'organic' needy-children group in Melanesia. Thus there is no group with which to negotiate ethical definition and a problem in implementing externally defined rights as ethics in Melanesia. Yet the implementation of external social work services is the NGO and UN preferred protective mechanism for child protection in developing countries and social work students learn these ethics. Even if these workers were informed about the need to negotiate with groups they wouldn't necessarily be able to find the groups with which then need negotiation.

It can be concluded that the first or group based ethical learning approach is an inflexible ethical approach which limits the capacity of professionals to respond ethically to new International Social Work dilemmas. This type of deterministic approach restrains the creativity of Social Work practitioners when responding to cases which fit within the context of several emergent organic groups but may deviate from the compartmentalised ethical framework that the (constructivist group) occupational approach constructs.

Virtue Ethics in Social Work

An alternate, 'virtue ethics' approach to ethical learning is to provide subject offerings that expose each student to a range of client needs, and then to assist them to develop their own ethical judgement routines as procedural knowledge which tests ethical interventions using theory and logic (Thompson & West, 2011). Gray and Gibbons (2007) argue that:

The application of ethical behaviours requires that students know the theory, know standards of behaviour, can ascertain when to apply this information, know how to apply it and that they will choose to apply this when required in a range of contexts. For students to appreciate the complexity of moral issues [they must] deal with uncertainty and ambiguity , and ... [they must] learn that when moral conflicts of ethical dilemmas arise, they can only be resolved through dialogue and ...moral reasoning, where existing knowledge, theory, skills, values and ethical guidelines are brought together to inform the decision making process (Gray & Gibbons 2007, p. 224).

Rather than assuming that there are rules for groups this approach acknowledges that there is an infinite diversity of contexts in which professionals must negotiate and judge ethical actions.

To Gray and Gibbons (2007) moral decisions are achieved through an active, theoretically-informed discourse with stakeholders. Thus the development of 'professional ethics' requires recognition of ethical challenges. Ethical practice demands a dynamic engagement with a joint narrative involving multiple personal reflections on real, and unpredictable interpersonal decision-making processes. This creates ethical solutions to real problems and links the development of ethics into critical examination of values, knowledge and the 'use of self' when developing meaningful discourse for shared understanding. It might be argued that

there is an uncritical simplicity associated with some of the occupational group based ethics that might manifest in assisting people with disabilities. By contrast there are critical challenges in judging when to intervene in Melanesian communities in support of individual rights. Thus it is the actual critical consideration and appropriate application of values in appropriate contexts that is important.

This ‘critical analysis and problem solving within a framework of ethicality’ can be considered against the example of students bullying educators or field placement supervisors while arguing that they are ready for practice because they demonstrated commitment to the rights of their favoured marginalised group. As the educational environment lends itself to standardisation and ease of assessment more than the development of complex ethical knowledge and capabilities (see Ryan et al., 2006) then ethical learning curricula must acknowledge Spano and Koenig’s (2010) ‘ideological’ argument that values and knowledge develop together. The student s who bully either: don’t know the theory; don’t know the expected values; can’t ascertain when to apply this information; don’t know how to apply it; or don’t choose to apply it in the context. They have developed ethics with knowledge of specific applications rather than developed a set of professional virtues regarding the broad or critical consideration of when to apply non-maleficent behaviour. The critical issue is then; how do educators ensure that students engage in learning that facilitates this complex integration.

Implications for Social Work Education

In the past when educators planned curricula for integrating knowledge and skill requirements in social work (Ryan et al., 2006) they sidestepped the complexity of the problem and made it a gatekeeping problem whereby fieldwork supervisors checked each student’s capability regarding ‘use of self’ and ‘application of values’. This must be considered now and critical skills (knowledge) must be considered beside ethics.

The academic role must promote knowledge and skill development while encouraging reflection on application-of-relationship skills, knowledge and value-judgement. The educational aim is to assist in the integration of skills, knowledge, ethics and relationship-building characteristics so that social work students can relate to clients and assist them. To assist clients, students must integrate these parameters so that they are all able to be applied at once during dynamic interactions. Such practices must be considered against real world contexts. This requires then, a personal transformational experience as part of the educational process, as it is not just an information transmission process. Personal transformation is inherently unpredictable, emergent and performative. It may also be extremely confronting for Social Work students to find that they have personal characteristics that may require development and therefore change. Engagement in this process of transformational confrontation may produce significant internal psychological and ethical conflicts for the Social Work student. These personal conflicts arise within the context of the Lecturer – Student supervisory relationship, and may have significant impact on the appreciation and evaluation of that relationship by the student. This impact may be expressed in several ways, such as the reported bullying of workplace supervisors by students and by negative student feedback results for Lecturers.

Furthermore, curriculum design for the development of attributes such as knowledge, value-judgement, and relationship skills addresses the lower order questions about Social Work education regarding ‘what do we develop’. However there is a need to define the second and third order questions about ‘how do we develop?’ and ‘how do we know we have developed?’. For example, how does a student engage in a strategic and panned way with a desire to transform personally and how does she understanding herself in terms of a working model of herself that models her desires, fears and capacities? These are epistemological and ontological questions which might be seen as too difficult to teach yet as essential if curricula are to equip Social Work students for the unpredictability, emergence and performativity of personal transformation.

This paper argues that in order to produce Social Work graduates that are capable of engaging with a wider view of ethics than is provided by a limited number of work placement contexts, it is necessary to move philosophical and methodological concepts of ethics from the current form of relativism towards concepts based on relationalism. An important aspect of this move from relativism to relationism is that it

moves Social Work education off its epistemological base, where ontological aspects are assumed and implicit, towards a model based on ontology, where ontological aspects are made observable and their political consequences questioned. More precisely student transformation is about learning how to know why their practices are ethical rather than just knowing that they are applying the ethical rules that they have learned.

As Noddings (2010) asserts with her formulation of Care Theory as an approach to Social Work ethics: “In care theory, relation is ontologically basic... Human beings are born from and into relation; it is our original condition” (p. 390).

However, this discussion does not assume that students are innately focussed by relational characteristics such as the ‘sympathy’, that Noddings relies upon. Rather this discussion employs the empirical, relational philosophy and methodology of Bruno Latour, which emphasizes the importance of empirical consideration of the needs of related others and analysis of ‘ontological politics’ of why then need what they need (Mol, 2002). Whilst Noddings’ (2010) arguments are acknowledged, regarding relations being ontologically basic, the process of learning to be ethical is not about interpreting applications of “sympathy” and “caring”, it is an overtly political process where analysis of ethical situations requires clear recognition and description of relational networks and the evaluation of the strengths and consequences of those relations. As Mol (2002) states, ‘To be is to be related’ it must be recognised that to learn to be ethical is to learn why certain actions harm and why they are unethical.

Conclusion

Social Work is an unavoidably political activity because it is about picking ‘winners’ who will be helped within contexts where different cultural and ethical practices compete for supremacy. The above discussed cross-cultural work is a stark example of how ethical learning can unethically create winners or losers. Social work educators need to acknowledge that the theory and practice of ethics is a consequence of political processes. Like Latour’s (1986) argument regarding scientific knowledge, they must acknowledge that relational parameters are ‘purified’ as they gain stability and acceptance. Consequently, the ontological politics is covered over and ethical arrangements that result are presented as inherently ‘cultural’ or ‘contextual’ and most importantly assumed to be natural, for the cultural or social group in question.

Because Social Work education seeks to develop professionals that ‘fit in’ with Social Work’s normalised ethics in prescribed contexts then Social Work students miss out on rich learning experiences about how ethical arrangements come to be and how they fit with them. This is because they are encouraged to accept the ‘cultural’, ‘contextual’ or ‘natural’, and to learn practices for specific situations. Rather they might be engaging with situations learning how they and other stakeholders feel about them and how they might derive ethical practices. If they focus on epistemological concerns, such as finding solutions to problems within given ethical frameworks, they miss out on ontological concerns which would focus on ‘why is this a problem, how did it come to be this way, and what would constitute an ethical response’?

In shifting from information transmission models of learning while rejecting ethical absolutes (God, Law and sympathy) social work educators have moved towards deeply personal and transformational models of ethical learning. This requires learning experiences that move beyond information transmission regarding group (cultural, class, gender etc) based ethics, and that embrace a personal engagement with the inherently political nature of ethical principles and the vagaries regarding why certain values and behaviours are deemed “ethical”. Ethical concepts and actions are dynamic, political and in flux, in response to these powerful and pervasive actors, and students of ethics must recognise that their effects are not uniform or indeed predictable across contexts. The political nature of Social Work does not have to rob Social Work practice of the humanity which is often purveyed as the most important aspect of the discipline. An learner may consider various standpoints regarding: caring, objective distance, confidentiality, non-malfeasance, self knowledge and client knowledge and learn to work with others in clarifying the best, most ethical course of action that affects the. Recourse to these aspects as essential, intra-personal parameters of professional practice, focuses learners on essential aspects of a virtue ethics approach. By contrast Social Work education

that emphasises the alignment of ethics to contextual practices limits the ability of the professional to “stand” at different relational co-ordinates within any context. To save social work from a limited prevailing ethical ‘standpoint’ of every given context, ethical learning must be an integrated and holistic process of skills, knowledge, critical analysis and application of relationship skills.

Such an approach is deliberately post-structural but not post-modern. Deconstruction is not the desired end product as it is about the description of, reflection on and negotiated composition of ethical practice. Social Workers can still choose to align closely with the ethical framework of the context they work in, yet they can do so after engaging in an explicit and philosophically consistent process of reflection and transformation. The ethico-political decisions about the “good” can be made based upon consideration of a much wider range of relational realities than is possible when passively “fitting in” with existing in-situ ethical practices and frameworks.

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