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Ethics and Conduct in Self-directed Groupwork: Some Lessons for the Development of a More Ethical Social Work Practice
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This paper compares and contrasts the impact and the interface of different sets of values held by social care practitioners in their decision-making process with regard to ethical dilemmas. Specifically, it explores some of the fundamental distinctions between self-directed groupworkers and other qualified social workers practising in both statutory and voluntary sectors. The methodology is qualitative and draws upon a Grounded Theory process. In contrasting the contribution of different sets of values in decision making, we found that participants, regardless of their approach to work, showed an overall fit between their personal and professional values. However, when we explored the influence of participants’ agencies on their decision-making processes, participants tended to prioritise organisational values, whereas for participants practising in the self-directed approach, the impact was less marked. Reflections on the role of values in increasing social workers’ resistance to organisational constraints, and discussion of some implications for social work education, conclude the article.

Keywords: Values in Tension; Ethical Decision Making; Social Work Practice; Social Work Education; Self-directed Groupwork; Social Work Ethics; Organisational Constraints; Resistance

Social Work is internationally defined as a ‘profession that promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being’ (IFSW 2004). To this end, social
workers use a range of social work methods and approaches to working with individuals, groups and community. Coherent with practice principles articulated in the social work international definition, Self-directed Groupwork (SDG) (Mullender & Ward 1991) is one approach that can be utilised in social work practice and one that is known to be particularly empowering (Preston-Shoot 1992; Rimmer 2005). However, as for many approaches that position the concept of empowerment as central to their work, its application to practice can be fraught with challenges. Indeed, as Preston-Shoot (1992) asserts, it is rather difficult to be empowering when practice is regulated, because regulation can itself be oppressive and disempowering. Therefore, some values or principles such as ‘empowerment’ as articulated, for example, within codes of practice or statements of principles, both in social work generic practice and SDG, are not always easily translated into practice.

The study referred to in this article stems from practice issues I faced with when I was employed by a food bank subsidised by a local authority to work with First Nation people in Canada. As part of the various services we offered, I put in place a Self-directed Group for service users and began quickly to realise that embedding the practice values and principles of the approach was fraught with many challenges, in so far as my own professional social work values, and specifically SDG principles, were constantly at issue with those of the organisation.

Based on a Grounded Theory methodology, the overall research project aimed to investigate similarities and differences in the conduct and ethics of social workers who practise generalist social work with those who specifically use the SDG model, and to determine the differences or similarities in terms of their decision-making processes. Since social work may vary according to its contexts, data from different areas and contexts of social work practice, such as work with children and adults both within the voluntary and statutory sector, were gathered. Because of the specific methodological framework, a large amount of data had to be collected before reaching saturation (Stern 2010). Thus, this paper explores only one aspect of the research, namely the value tension in the decision-making process. Whilst an understanding of decision making can lead to improvements in practice (O’Sullivan 1999), research on ethical practice that addresses a variety of specific service settings is limited (Fine & Teram 2009). This is part of a gap that this paper attempts to address. The present article, therefore, focuses on the data as written up at the end of the project and specifically explores some of the fundamental distinctions between SDG workers and generalist qualified social workers practising in different contexts, that is, within the statutory and the voluntary sector. The discussion of the paper attempts to understand the differences and similarities that have been observed, especially with regard to responses to organisational constraints and the role of values in managing ethical dilemmas and problems encountered in practice. The article concludes by highlighting some implications for social work education.
Defining Self-directed Groupwork within the Broader Social Work Practice Context and Values

The features and characteristics of ‘social work’ practice can vary greatly. However, a characteristic of social work is that it is based and informed by a value based described in various codes of ethics (BASW 2002; CASW 1994) and in the ‘Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles’ (IFSW and IASSW 2004) which is adopted by many members of the IASSW (Barretta-Herman 2008). At the same time, social work practice is highly influenced by local contexts (Mayer 2002; Blewett et al. 2007). To this end, social work values are not always fully translated into practice and may become rhetorical in practice (Chu et al. 2009). For example, Adams (2003, p. 183) reminds us that ‘empowering individual service users requires that policies and practices are embedded in the culture of relevant organisations and professions’. Thus, it is not surprising to observe that while universal social work values may influence the various schools’ curricula and published professional statements (Hendriks et al. 2008), the actual practice of social workers is not always based on social work values and principles.

On the other hand, SDG, also known as ‘Social Action’ in the United Kingdom, is a specific approach in social work that is practised in many parts of the world (Arches 2010; Fleming & Keenan 2000) and is characterised by a deep commitment to empowerment (Mullender & Ward 1991; Ward 2004, Ward 2010). To achieve this, SDG is based upon a set of principles and a process that cannot be separated. Combined, they form an effective approach for working with people and a powerful force for change (Centre for Social Action 2004).

Central to the approach is a deep concern for the understanding of ‘the relationship between oppression, power, and change’ (Mullender & Ward 1991, p. 13). The emphasis of SDG is thus orienting towards social change, a contrasting feature to some other types of social work practice, which may focus on the adaptation of individuals in society or personal change (Zastrow 2009). SDG is acknowledged by many as an extremely empowering approach (Denney 1998; Preston-Shoot 1992; Rimmer 2005). The model is based on six principles and five stages (see Appendix A), which aim to examine, along with service users, a number of questions to understand the underlying causes of oppression (Centre for Social Action 2004). The model was designed specifically to distance itself from the ‘deficit’ and ‘blaming the victim’ approaches (Mullender & Ward 1991).

Thus, SDG is based on the principles that people have the right to be heard, to define the issues facing them, to set the agenda for action, and, most importantly, to take action on their own behalf. The process, which is circular, is described as involving five stages, examining different questions in order to understand the underlying causes of oppression. The five stages are known as ‘what’, ‘why’, ‘how’, ‘action’ and ‘reflection’ (Mullender & Ward 1991; Centre for Social Action 2004). It is the combination of its practice principles and its process, which together facilitate service users’ empowerment (Mullender &
Ward 1991; Ward 2010). Finally, one of the distinguishing features of SDG is the necessity for practitioners to internalise professional values more deeply to achieve change.

SDG shares many similarities with the international definition of social work (2000). For example, while it does not draw directly on theories of human development, its focus on understanding the relationship between power and change both at the personal and structural levels (Mullender & Ward 1991, 2009, p. 94) makes the approach one of the most fully developed groupwork methods to achieve empowerment (Cohen & Mullender 1999 in Mullender & Ward 2009), a recognised core aim of social work as articulated by the IFSW (2005).

Values, Ethics and Decision Making in Professional Practice

An ethical dilemma is a situation that highlights a conflict between two different courses of action or ways forward to resolve a situation. Banks and Williams (2005) specify that not all ethical issues are ethical dilemmas and that some social workers’ experiences translate better into what they call an ‘ethical problem’. Indeed, some social workers are faced with situations whereby ‘a decision had to be made but where there was no dilemma for the person making the decision’ (Banks & Williams 2005, p. 1011).

The causes of ethical dilemmas are varied. Banks (2006) proposes that social workers may be faced with issues around individual rights and welfare; public welfare, including the rights and interests of non-service users; equality, difference, and structural oppression; and, finally, professional roles, boundaries, and relationships. Dilemmas often emerge as a consequence of a confrontation between two opposing sets of values (Banks 2006; Eby & Gallagher 2008; Dolgoff et al. 2009).

While many factors such as educational background, experience, prior ethics training, and professional identification with social work values (Boland 2006) can affect ethical decision making, values are most of the time very central in the process (Doyle et al. 2009). Values, which can be personal, professional, social, or even philosophical, are influenced by a multitude of factors such as age, gender, class, political awareness or affiliation, and experience (Moss 2007).

Design of the Study

The research project was based on Grounded Theory methodology (Glaser & Strauss 1967) and aimed to compare and contrast the experience of SDG workers with that of other social workers with regard to their conduct and ethics, and to determine the differences or similarities in terms of decision-making processes in their cases.
The data were collected using a variety of research methods in order to obtain a triangulation of data until theoretical saturation was reached (Glaser & Strauss 1967; Stern 2010). Specifically, unstructured interviews (stage 1), focus groups (stage 2), questionnaires (stage 3) and vignette-based and semi-structured interviews (stage 4) were used to collect data. Grounded Theory, being a retroductive methodology (Layder 1982), directs each stage of data analysis to inform the development of the next tool of data collection and sample.

The overall research sample included qualified social workers and SDG workers working in similar settings within two different sectors of social work activities, namely the statutory and the voluntary sectors. While the whole study involved over 60 individuals who participated in interviews individually or in groups, or completed a questionnaire, the final sample of interviewees, which is the focus of this article, was built as follows: two female statutory social workers (child protection and older adult); two male social workers working for the voluntary sector (a national children’s organisation and an organisation working with homeless people); and two male SDG workers (one working for statutory youth services and one working for a medium-sized voluntary organisation). All were Caucasians except for one SDG worker who was of Asian origin. Theoretical sampling (Glaser & Strauss 1967) was used to guide the choice of participants for the final stage of the data collection. Since Grounded Theory incorporates the research of exceptions or ‘negative cases’ (Strauss & Corbin 1990), participants who gave marginally different responses in the questionnaire were invited to participate in the vignette-based interviews, being the last stage of the data collection. Involving participants in different fields of practice was helpful in discovering varied social realities, an important feature of Grounded Theory (Stebbins 2006). At each stage of the data collection and analysis, constant comparison was undertaken between social workers and SDG workers from both fields, allowing for the development of the formal Grounded Theory (Strauss & Corbin 1990; Sousa & Hendriks 2006; Kearney 2010).

For the final stage of data collection, a vignette-based and semi-structured interview (stage 4) (Finch 1987; Taylor 2006) was developed from the codes that emerged in the data analysis of the questionnaires (stage 3). The interview comprised two parts: the first part used vignettes and included questions that were articulated in such a way as to capture the experiences of the participants through examining the effect of different sets of values on their decision making. Each of the case studies was developed in order to integrate the codes obtained through the previous data analysis, which were then compared to those developed by Banks (2006, pp. 13–14) as the four areas of ethical issues in social work. The vignettes used are summarised in Appendix B.

After having read each of the four vignettes, the participants were asked to answer a series of questions aimed at making sense of each of the vignettes, and exploring the impact of each set of values on the decision. The focus on the role of values was included in the complementary questions because this dimension emerged from the previous data collection (questionnaires). These different sets of values are also acknowledged in the literature as bearing an important
influence on the decision making of social care practitioners (Karacaer et al. 2009; Clifford & Burke 2009). The second part of the interview included nine additional open-ended questions based on the core findings of the questionnaires. The questions allowed the participants to explore further the impact of different elements identified in the questionnaires as constraints to ethical practice in their work contexts and practice settings (see Appendix C for the interview schedule and questions).

To sum up, the research design, through hypothetical cases and nine supplementary questions related to the respondents’ practice, helped to validate the elements affecting ethical practice that emerged in the previous stage of data collection as well as to capture in more detail the effect those elements had on the participants’ decision-making process and their overall ethical posture.

**Personal and Professional Values**

Data from the vignettes indicated that, in contrasting the contribution of the different sets of values in decision-making processes, participants, regardless of the practice group to which they belonged, appeared to show an overall fit between their personal and professional values. Where differences were noted, they were usually more in relation to the skills used or strategies adopted to carry out their decision than the fundamental values held and the overall direction the values gave to the management of the dilemma. For example, referring to the vignette where a practitioner is asked to leave a young people’s group to set up another one for the under fives, a social worker explained that the dilemma for her was about upholding the needs of the young people which was in conflict with the agency’s expectation towards her. She explains that according to her personal values she would prioritise the value of upholding the needs of the young people and that to achieve that she would ‘create so much trouble . . . so much trouble . . . that [she] would get sacked!’ When asked about her professional values, she maintains that she would continue to act according to the value of upholding the young people’s needs, and thus maintain her original position, but that she would employ a different strategy to actualise her decision:

[Based on my professional values] I would still do more or less the same thing [than based on my personal values only] . . . but I would probably do it in a more professional way . . . Yeah, if I could not get satisfaction from my line manager, I would do a presentation for his line manager . . . I would do anything to get recognition, really, because I think this decision is wrong . . . Yeah, professionally, I would do that!

Therefore, this example illustrates that while both professionally and personally her values are the same and continue to influence the course of action similarly, there are some differences with regard to the way in which those are translated
into practice. Thus there seems to be a fit between the participants’ personal and professional values with regard to the management of ethical dilemmas presented in the vignettes. Even when the personal values seem somehow different from the professional ones, the respondent still felt that they were compatible:

My personal values are that I don’t really approve of gender change or things in that book, because it is my own religious belief, but at the end of the day, I think my values are about valuing the person despite the lifestyle . . . so it would be the same [between personal and professional values]. (Social worker, voluntary sector)

This sort of symbiosis between professional and personal values may be interpreted in two ways: it may indicate that the participants have integrated the social work values as part of a personal commitment to the profession (Banks 2008), or it could equally indicate that personal values continue to affect the decision making of social workers, as Doyle et al. (2009) suggest. Because the aim of the research was not to assess the rightness or wrongness of the decision or the fit of the answers with related professional social work values, but rather to look at the interface between the different values, the tool of data collection was not geared to respond fully to this question. However, it can be posited that the responses related to ‘professional values’ discourse were, in fact, very similar to those related to ‘personal values’ decisions. Further research may be needed to shed more light on this aspect.

Professional Values and Agency Guidance: Priorities and Constraints

Another interesting finding of this research is the often marked difference between the agencies’ core values and the respondents’ professional values. Indeed, the data gathered through the vignettes as well as the nine complementary questions aimed at validating the previous stage of the research (questionnaires) through exploring their practice realities highlighted that most participants thought that their organisational context was not in line with their professional judgement or values. While this observation was more widespread among SDG workers in both sectors, voluntary and statutory workers also found that the organisational context of work was often dissonant with their professional values and overall detrimental to their ethical practice. A statutory worker illustrates this point by talking about the discrepancy between her professional values and those of the agency:

Everything that we are told and we train about is empowerment . . . in the books . . . but the reality is that when we try to deliver that is very difficult because our services with older people are very much ‘doing for’ instead of ‘doing with’. (Statutory social worker)
The interview questions about their practice therefore highlighted that some participants directly identified that their organisational core guidance and values acted as a constraint to their work. This finding was also illustrated when participants were articulating their values and course of action in the vignette. A statutory social worker illustrates well how her agency values differed from her own while reflecting on vignette 3 (issues around equality, difference and structural oppression):

I would be panicking that everybody wanted to leave ... but I know that the agency would put me under a lot of pressure in my group to function with full group members ... otherwise ... if I say, 'oh ... it is your choice ... don't come', I would just be in so much trouble with the line manager ... so that would be ... for them ... for the agency ... their priority would be ... to keep as many people as possible ... so I would be struggling. (Statutory social worker)

Asking questions through the vignettes and the questions aimed at validating the previous data allowed for a number of elements to be identified as direct constraints to ethical practice. In summary, participants articulated that the most frequent dilemmas they faced in practice were related either to conflicts between their professional and agency's values, or to conflict between the service user's identified need (and their professional judgement), and the risk assessment policy, the budget restrictions or the eligibility criteria.

Practitioners from all groups also referred to the tension arising from the various roles they had to play within the agency (i.e. enabling or controlling). Furthermore, even for practitioners working within small organisations without apparent oppressive structures, the funding element of the project had the same impact as the organisational work context did within more regulated agencies. Many of the dilemmas cited above included an aspect related to the organisational values, so it is not surprising that the participants identified a lack of fit between their values and those of the organisation for which they worked.

Ethical Practice and Response to Organisational Context of Work

Organisational context was identified as an important cause of ethical dilemmas, and core values conveyed by the agency did not always fit with the professional values of the participants. However, the most revealing finding of the study related to the impact of organisational context on the decision-making processes of practitioners. Not only was the organisational context often identified as not always compatible with the participants’ professional values but participants also felt that work context was a source of considerable pressure vis-à-vis their decision-making capacity. Words such as hopelessness and powerlessness effectively translate some of the feelings expressed by participants when referring to the effect of organisational context on their decision making. Both the vignettes and the additional questions looking at
their practice realities highlighted that participants tended to give priority to agency expectations, guidance, and core values, even when they conflicted with previously identified courses of action in line with the participants’ professional values:

I would fight for the service users really ... but then he has [the manager] got the say at the end of the day because he has got the power ... so if he says that somebody can’t have the service, they can’t. (Statutory social worker)

Preston-Shoot (2010, p. 7) also notes that social workers struggled ethically in relation to organisational context in which decisions were not ‘care-ful’ (care not being a priority), for example where the need to achieve targets or to manage within limited resources dominated decision making. In the context of our study, one participant explains:

We struggle ethically because of the restraints put on us by outside policies that we can’t change ... or whatever it is ... criteria or whatever ... we can’t change that. (Statutory social worker)

This reflects a feeling of powerlessness from the participant that can have potentially serious consequences on ethical practice. Even when the organisational context was articulated positively by the participants, it was in terms of its relieving them from a sense of responsibility:

I think it [the organisational context] affects in a positive way ... because ... you know ... it relieves us from a responsibility ... although it might seem more controlling sometimes, you know. (Social worker, voluntary sector)

On the same note, another statutory social worker echoes this effect of a lost sense of responsibility:

We have ethical dilemmas, but I think the policy makes us very clear about what we have to do and what we don’t do. If you are not there and not seeing people that you’ve got to see, then it is quite easy to make that decision. What’s hard is when it comes to us ... (Statutory social worker)

However, the situation was somewhat different among the SDG groupworkers. For them, even though the organisational constraints were perceived as a challenge in terms of practising ethically, they still felt the need to resist these constraints when the course of action promoted by the organisation was perceived as unethical. Indeed, in examining their decision-making processes, SDG workers made it clear that their professional values tended to take precedence over agency guidance and core values. An SDG worker, discussing vignette 2 but reflecting on his own practice, illustrates this point:

I will not break my relationship with the young people, because it took me a year to build this relationship, and now they trust me ... and if I do this, the whole relationship is going out the window. And it doesn’t only affect me and the young
people, but also all the rest of the team ... this project is supposed to be different from social services and built upon a good trust relationship, and you want to break this relationship? You’ll have to sack me! (Self-directed group-worker)

Even when resources were stretched to the limit, the SDG workers still showed a level of resistance with regard to their decision-making process. Relating to their practice experience, a participant explains:

You have to deliver a service, but you have a budget plan, and that budget is for everything ... but you can’t say to an organisation that pressures you because of money, ‘Let’s just talk about the process. Give us a whole year ... you will see how marvellous it is to empower young people!’ It is not going to happen ... it is not possible! So I think it has a hell of a lot to do with ethical dilemmas, because my principles say ‘f*ck the money, and let’s work with the young people’, but because I am so pressured by the money and the time, there is only a certain level of stuff that you can do. (Self-directed groupworker)

Our study therefore seems to support one of Doyle et al.’s (2009) conclusions in that the more one adheres to a set of professional values, the more solid a frame of reference one can draw from in making ethical decisions in practice and resisting organisational constraints. Indeed, our study observed a greater level of resistance from the SDG workers when their professional values were at issue with the organisational context of work, in comparison to the generalist social work practitioners, wherever they practised. A voluntary-sector worker explicitly asserts that, according to him, their ability to resist detrimental organisational context is influenced by one’s adherence to professional values:

I would attempt to persuade my own organisation and erm ... that they need to talk to the young people ... I mean they may be a real issue about funding I don’t know ... but I suppose if you feel very strongly about it at the end, you have to put yourself personally on the line ... but depends how strong you feel ...

This observation may be explained by two recent remarks: first, that overall adherence to social work values tends to be more rhetorical in some areas of social work practice (Chu et al. 2009), and, second, that SDG workers must have a deep commitment to the values, principles and process in order to successfully complete the intervention and facilitate service users’ empowerment (Mullender & Ward 1991; Ward 2004, Ward 2010). Thus, our research findings can begin to suggest that the stronger the adherence to a value base the more able a practitioner will be to resist the various organisational constraints.

Discussion

The accounts of SDG workers with regard to their ethical experiences correspond well to the description of an ethical dilemma by Banks (2006, p. 13), that is, ‘a
choice between two equally unwelcome alternatives, which may involve a conflict of moral value, and it is not clear which choice will be the right one’. In our study, the ethical dilemma most faced by SDG workers relates to their highly defined organisational work contexts involving numerous constraints; at the same time, these workers uphold a set of values and principles that they are unwilling to compromise in practice (Mullender & Ward 1991). Indeed, SDG principles and values are considered the crux of the practice, since the model ‘rests on an explicit statement of values which has clear implications for practice […] [and] they cannot be verbally acknowledged but then ignored where it really counts—the work itself’ (Mullender & Ward 1991, p. 28). Consequently, the practice of SDG involves a set of principles that must be upheld at all times. It is not surprising, then, that the practitioners from this group were confronted by many conflicts between their SDG and organisational values, those being often perceived as incompatible. These practitioners defined their experience of resolving ethical dilemmas as having to choose between two courses of action, for example between empowerment and working within the funding constraints. This was articulated well by the SDG worker above. SDG workers were clearly ‘stuck’ between their professional value base and the organisational constraints.

Because SDG workers base their interventions on an explicit statement of values having clear implications for practice (Mullender & Ward 1991, p. 28), they are left to make complex ethical decisions and thus resist relying on regulation to make these decisions. In making links with his own dilemmas in practice, one SDG worker explained the following:

As a social action worker, you have a lot of responsibility, because there are no structures in terms of social action that give you any kind of guidance at all … and you could be a social action worker working with deprived children or single mums on an estate … and what if there is an issue of child protection there? What happens? As a social action worker, you won’t have all the structure and legislation that a social worker would have, you know. Where do you go back? You can’t go back to the process, because the child’s life is involved … and you can ask ‘what, why, how, action, and reflection’, but it can blow up in your face! Social action does not have any of that, and that’s why it crosses over a very dangerous territory.

On the other hand, social workers from the statutory and voluntary sectors’ experience of ethical dilemmas was somewhat different. Some practitioners referred to the concept of ethical dilemmas as defined by Banks (2006), but some indicated that they rarely experienced ethical dilemmas in practice. To illustrate this point, one statutory social worker mentioned that no ethical dilemmas were apparent within her practice, that she experienced many ‘personal dilemmas’:

I just don’t think we have the dilemmas … apart from personal dilemmas … I don’t think we have … because it is out of our control … so it is not our ethical dilemma really … You know, we are a huge organisation … and I am just a little person at the bottom … It is all this structure of other people that make the decision[s].
The notion of ‘personal dilemma’ was referred to by this social work participant as a situation in which she felt she had no choice about the course of action because of the pressure from the organisational context, but where she was left feeling awkward because another course of action (more in line with her professional values) would have been more ethical. This concept, although discussed by the other social work participants through different use of words, was present in much of their discourse. Therefore, the concept of ‘personal dilemma’, as it emerged within the context of this research, occurs when practitioners perceive themselves as being helpless in regard to a situation. This concept resembles that of the ‘ethical problem’ suggested by Banks and Williams (2005). Indeed, Banks and Williams (2005, p. 1011) define ethical problems as those ‘where a decision has to be made, but where there was no dilemma for the person making the decision—i.e., it was clear which course of action to take’. However, in the case of some of the social workers interviewed in our study, the perception of an ethical problem was slightly different. While the prescribed course of action was not perceived as morally right by the respondents, they often carried it through but emphasised the difficult personal feelings they were left to deal with. Indeed, by acting in the ‘prescribed’ way, social workers felt, in their own words, ‘awkward’ and ‘unethical’.

More broadly, the findings from our study support what Ferguson and Powel (in Payne & Shardlow 2002) identified as struggles between the demands of the organisation and a practice that places social justice and empowerment central to social work practice and highlights, again, the extent to which social workers’ actions are confined within the limits of the organisational context of practice. In so far as no alternative courses of action were perceived as possible by these participants, they expressed that they were often morally unhappy with the outcomes. Although the participants demonstrated a level of reflection in resolving the dilemmas presented to them, the scope for ethical reasoning was constrained by the pressure of the organisational work context. Because, on the one hand, the organisational context is frequently experienced as a barrier to ethical practice by many social workers, and because, on the other, SDG workers seem to stand against some of those same constraints, our research overall points towards an understanding that a stronger adherence to a professional social work value base is necessary to increase resistance to organisational constraints and improve overall ethical practice in social work.

**Limitations of the Study**

Even though our combined sample was much greater than $n = 30$, a number usually adequate in Grounded Theory to reach saturation in the categories (Stern 2010), the qualitative nature of the research means that the data presented in this paper do not necessarily reflect all social workers or indeed DSG workers’ experience with regard to ethics and conduct. Instead, the study has only begun
to explore some of the effects that holding a strong value base may have on resistance to organisational constraints and practitioners’ overall ability to maintain an ethical practice. However, because it is clear that organisational contexts are a major constraint to ethical practice, it would be relevant to develop a further research project, using a more homogeneous sample of social workers from the same field of practice, to look specifically at the impact of different sets of values on ethical decision-making processes, as well as to assess decisions in terms of ethics and the fit of the decision with professional social work values.

Implications for Social Work Education

Because, on the one hand, the personal and professional values seem to be coherent in the decision-making process of the research participants, and because participants who had a deep commitment to their value base seem to be resisting better the organisational pressure, social work students would be better equipped if professional social work values were incorporated more deeply as their own personal values. Indeed, we observed that SDG workers seem to be more inclined to resist the organisational values and constraints than the participant social workers. Fostering professional values more deeply may therefore help in ensuring a more ethical practice regardless of the practice setting. Indeed, even though the organisational context of work largely defines what is expected from a social worker through rules and regulations, it is nevertheless important for practitioners to place their practice values at the forefront of their decision-making process and challenge the organisational context of work.

Rule-following will often be involved in knowing how to respond rightly, but no rule or set of rules by itself ever determines how to respond rightly. (MacIntyre 1999, p. 93)

The work of MacIntyre is useful in the context of this research as he tells us that developing and nurturing virtues can aid people to live a good life within structures of domination and power relationships. This may therefore constitutes a means, according to MacIntyre (1999) to better resist organisational structures that are detrimental to ethical practice in social work. Indeed, because we know that core values and principles are central to professional identity in social work (Asquith et al. 2005) and because internalised values mature into a coherent and dynamic set that guides belief and behaviours (Furnham & Ward 2001), we can assert that social workers would become better at resisting organisational constraints if they embedded fully the values of the profession in their own practice to the point that they become character traits or virtues.

While practical tools for developing virtues are not always clearly presented in the literature, social work educators can play a role in the development of more
ethical social workers, for example, by presenting students with opportunities to foster their adherence to the social work value base through the development and integration of pedagogical strategies that extend beyond ethics and values courses. Furthermore, in teaching, as in practice learning experience contexts, students need to engage with professionals who themselves embody the professional values so that they can experience professional socialisation, an important component to developing a professional as a person of character in the virtue ethics tradition (Summers 2009). Indeed, ‘the properly socialized [practitioner] has internalized the ethical expectations. To do the right thing becomes part of their identity’ (Summers 2009, p. 11). However, in many places field practice educators, or even university teaching staff, do not always mirror social work values in teaching or practice, some of them not even being qualified in social work.

Conclusion

Moving away from ‘The more it changes, the more it stays the same’ …

Without major opportunities to develop their professional identity and internalise their professional values, students may be constrained in their journey to become ethical practitioners able to resist detrimental work contexts. Social work will continue to be circumscribed by the current political, social and economic environments, so it is unlikely that social care organisations will change to the point that they promote contexts where the values of the profession are maintained at all times. However, a practitioner who has internalised the value base, to the point that it is embedded as a trait of character, may be better equipped to challenge and resist some of the organisational constraints that are so detrimental to ethical social work practice.

Learning from the accounts of social workers practising within both the statutory and voluntary sectors, as well as from the SDG workers, it seems that embedding social work values to the point that they become internalised may be a way forward to better equip social workers to practise ethically, regardless of the context in which the practice takes place. The adherence to a strong social work value base to the point of becoming a trait of character seems to remain central to achieve ethical practice. To practise ethically, therefore, is to uphold and translate the social work value base into practice—to think and do ‘praxis’ (Freire 1972). Only then will the decision-making process, regardless of the framework or model used, truly account for the value base, and serve as a basis to challenge, when necessary, the organisational context of work.
References


### Appendix A Self-directed Groupwork Principles

- [Self-directed groupworkers] are committed to social justice. We strive to challenge inequality and oppression in relation to race, gender, sexuality, age, religion, class, disability or any other form of social differentiation.

- We believe all people have skills, experience and understanding that they can draw on to tackle the problems they face. [Self-directed groupworkers] understand that people are experts in their own lives and we use this as a starting point for our work.

- All people have rights, including the right to be heard, the right to define the issues facing them and the right to take action on their own behalf. People also have the right to define themselves and not have negative labels imposed upon them.

- Injustice and oppression are complex issues rooted in social policy, the environment and the economy. [Self-directed groupworkers] understand people may experience problems as individuals but these difficulties can be translated into common concerns.

- We understand that people working collectively can be powerful. People who lack the power and influence to challenge injustice and oppression as individuals can gain it through working with other people in a similar position.

- [Self-directed groupworkers] are not leaders, but facilitators. Our job is to enable people to make decisions for themselves and take ownership of whatever outcome ensues. Everybody’s contribution to this process is equally valued and it is vital that our job is not accorded privilege.

The role of the social action worker is to facilitate the group through a five-stage process. The intention is to change the traditional relationship between service users and the professionals employed to work with them. A social action worker is a facilitator, not a provider. In this process service users are not just consumers, they are active agents for change (Centre for Social Action 2004).
Appendix B Interview—Part One: Vignettes and Accompanying Questions

Vignette 1: Issues around Individual Rights and Welfare

The vignette developed to examine this area of ethical issue was set around a social worker supporting a mother of three children, Vicky, in her new role of single parent. The social worker, Jo, who stops to leave some documents at Vicky’s place, realises that the children are locked inside the house, on their own. Issues of service user’s rights and welfare of children were central to this vignette.

Vignette 2: Issues around Public Welfare

The issues around public welfare were covered by a vignette involving a worker who is faced with a decision related to resource allocation. Because of budget cut, John, the worker, is asked to end the work he has begun to undertake 18 months ago with a group of young people in the merging of social exclusion, and to re-focus his efforts with the development of a new group for the under 5s.

Vignette 3: Issues around Equality, Difference and Structural Oppression

This vignette told the story of Louise, a worker for an independent project funded by the Local Authority that leads a women’s group around various gender issues. When the group realises that Rachel, a new member, has been a man who is in the process of a sex change to become a woman, Louise is confronted by threats coming from the members saying that they would all leave the group.

Vignette 4: Issues around Professional Role, Boundaries and Relationships

This vignette told the story of Jane, a worker whose role was to help young people with a learning disability in Further Education College. When she learned that Mark, a service user, HIV positive, who she worked with, refuses to disclose his health issues to his new underage girlfriend Laura, Jane is confronted with a dilemma about confidentiality. Jane, in the vignette, also knows Laura personally.

Each vignette was explored using the following questions:

Looking at the vignette, what do you think the practitioner should do? Why is that?
According to your personal values, what would YOU do being the worker?
According to your professional values, what would YOU do being the worker?
According to your organisation’s core values and guidance, what would YOU do?
Would it be an ethical dilemma for you? Why is that?
Appendix C Interview—Part Two

(1) On the questionnaire used in the previous data collection, respondents have identified many elements as main causes for ethical dilemmas. Those were ‘lack of clarity about the role’, ‘conflicts between personal, professional values and regulations’, ‘budgets’, ‘conflicts between professional expertise and self determination of the users’, ‘disclosure of information’ and ‘pressure of the outcomes or expectations from the agency’. Could you comment on these, telling me if and how you experience them within your practice and which one of these (or any other) would be the main one for you?

(2) How does the organisational context of your work (e.g. legislation, structure of organisation and hierarchy, and so on) help or not in relation to your work in general?

(3) From the questionnaire, people who answered mention that often, regulation, legal duties or even agency policy and procedures affect their work in relation to ethical dilemmas. They identified that often these regulations are one of the elements that cause ethical dilemmas. However, when they were asked if a code of practice or code of ethics was developed, they say they would use it. Could you comment on this?

(4) How does the organisational context of your work help or not in relation to ethical dilemmas?

(5) How does the organisational context of your work help or not in relation to the empowerment of the user?

(6) How do duties and statutory legislation affect your work? Does it affect it in positive or negative ways?

(7) How does duty or statutory legislation affect your work in the context of ethical dilemmas? Does it affect it in positive or negative ways?

(8) How often does legal duty or statutory legislation affect the empowerment of the user? Do you think it affects it in positive or negative ways?

(9) How do you think funding affects the cause of ethical dilemmas?