The Ethical Foundations of Social Work

Annie Pullen-Sansfaçon and Stephen Cowden

Published by Pearson, Harlow, 2012

http://catalogue.pearsoned.co.uk/educator/product/The-Ethical-Foundations-of-Social-Work/9781408224434.page
# Contents

- Preface xiii
- Acknowledgements xv
- Publisher’s acknowledgements xvii
- Introduction xix

## Part 1 What is social work? 1

1 Social work histories 3

- Introduction 3
- Social work ethics in history 5
- Social work as a ‘product of modernity’ 7
- The Charity Organisation Society 11
- The Settlement Movement 13
- The two souls of social work 15
- The emergence of state social work 16
- Radical social work 17
- The New Right and social work ‘scandals’ 21
- Conclusion 24
- Summary 25
- Further reading 26

## 2 Ethics and values in social work 27

- Introduction 27
- What is ‘ethics’? 28
- What is a ‘value’? 33
- Values and ethical dilemmas in practice 38
- Managing ethical dilemmas in practice 43
- Summary 44
- Further reading 44

## Part 2 The social dimensions of social work ethics 47

3 Power in social work 49

- Introduction 49
- What is ‘power’? 50
- Understanding power historically – the Enlightenment and its critics 52
- Medieval power and the European Enlightenment 52
- New understandings of power: Karl Marx 55
- Who is a ‘rational subject’? ‘issues of gender and ‘race’’ 57
- Michel Foucault’s theories of power 61
- Summary 67
- Further reading 67

4 The idea of empowerment in social work 69

- What is empowerment? 69
- The empowered citizen/consumer 74
- Is empowerment ‘good for you’? 78
- Empowerment and power relations 81
- Summary 86
- Further reading 87

5 Bureaucracy and social work 89

- Social workers: prisoners of bureaucracy? 89
- Defining bureaucracy 91
- Understanding life in the bureaucracy: pessimists and optimists 95
Preface

In 2006, the two of us began developing a year one module for Social Work students at Coventry University in the area of ethics and values. What we wanted to do was something that was both accessible and practice-based, but which also sought to expose students to theoretical complexity. We felt this was necessary as much of the teaching we had encountered in this area tended to give students overly condensed versions of ethical theories with an over reliance on the teaching the existing Codes of Practice. While the latter certainly need to be taught, we felt that this approach needed to be turned on its head – in other words that the starting point should be to teach ethical theories in their originary form. We felt that by explaining the way these emerged historically, what it was they were trying to address at the time they were originally articulated, and how these debates developed over time, that students and practitioners would be better equipped to use these ideas in practical situations. We also felt that this allowed students and practitioners to understand where our contemporary Codes of Practice came from. While there is no doubt that contemporary Codes of Practice are important and valuable within Social Work practice, they are in some sense a substitute for Social Work professionals who can think critically and independently. So rather than seeing Codes of Practice as the limit upon the horizon of debate in Social Work ethics, we wanted students and practitioners to see them as something which themselves were a product of a particular historical moment and which also needed to be critically examined and discussed. We wanted Social Workers to see ethical theories as ways of thinking through and around a problem, rather than as prescriptive guidelines. We also incorporated into our approach insights from Sociology and Social Theory, again with a view to seeing these not as providing technical expertise or empirical justification, but as tools which sought to give students a better grasp of the complexities of moral concepts. It was on this basis that we developed a module based on this idea that it is necessary to both critically understand the ethical foundations of Social work as a means of being equipped to apply those theories and concepts to everyday situations which were encountered in Social Work practice.

Of central importance within all this is the relationship between theory to practice; in particular the capacity to understand the way situations in Social Work practice, as well as in the life in general, represent practical embodiments of the concerns addressed by ethical theories. As a means of facilitating this within our Module we used “Socratic Dialogue” groups; a form of pedagogical activity which has been used to promote the development of practical reasoning. The format for this would be that students working in small would address an issue such as “To be a good social worker you must also be a good person”, but in answering this, they were only allowed to respond using personal experience. We then followed this up with a lecture looking at ethical theory, aiming to facilitate students grasping the relationship between the experiential and theoretical levels (see Pullen-Sansfaçon 2010 for a further discussion of this). Our students were very supportive of the way we had developed the module and this encouraged us further. However, one of the biggest challenges for this module was to find relevant and accessible reading to accompany our lectures. We found that generalist philosophy texts on one hand were a little dry and difficult for students to grasp, but on the other that the applied Social Work ethics books, while very practice orientated, did not expose students to ethical theory and its application in practice in the way we were trying to. This book was written to solve this problem. Within this we have sought as much as possible to combine clarity with depth, promoting a theoretically rigorous approach to ethics at the same time as making the material as accessible as possible for an undergraduate and postgraduate audience. Though the inspiration for this book came from very particular circumstances, we hope that the approach we have developed has a broader relevance to social work students and practitioners alike, but the extent to which this is true now resides with the question of how useful you, the reader, find it.

Stephen Cowden and Annie Pullen-Sansfaçon

Coventry and Montreal, 2011.
Introduction

We truly engage in ethics when we are not only concerned with our own freedom but also with that of others (Ricoeur, 1990).

The book is concerned with introducing and examining a series of concepts which we see as making up what we have called the ‘ethical foundations’ of Social Work. These come from moral philosophy and from social theory, and we see the combination of these two as very valuable in exploring the kinds of ethical issues that are thrown up in Social Work practice. One of the key themes that we address throughout this book is that ‘ethical practice’ never exists in a vacuum; this becomes real through the way practitioners use ethical concepts in concrete situations – and in a wider sense these situations are themselves located within particular societies in particular historical moments. It is in this sense that we see ethics as having a strongly social dimension, that this they are concerned with the issue of how people relate to each other as well as how individuals and groups relate to social institutions. Many writers on Social Work ethics (such as Rhodes 1986; Clark 2006; Clifford & Burke 2009) have seen in this the political dimension of ethics, and we have also sought to develop this line of argument by drawing attention to the way ethical issues in Social Work are always contextualised and situated within power relationships. It is for this reason that ‘conscious’ ethical practice needs to be about questioning assumptions and critically challenging the various forms and structures of oppression which are encountered within Social Work practice.

This question of ‘conscious’ ethical practice is a key theme throughout this book, and we have here drawn from the work of the contemporary moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre. In his book Rational Dependent Animals (1999) Macintyre set out an argument for what he called the “practical reasoner” and we see this idea as very useful for Social Work, and indeed something which may become an important paradigm for Social Work practice. MacIntyre suggests that people – in this case, social work students and practitioners – need to develop as practical reasoners. He characterises practical reason as a process which involves both reflection and self-knowledge; an enquiry that “provides us with grounds for the criticism, revision, or even rejection of many of our judgements, our standards of judgement, our relationships and our institutions.” (MacIntyre 1999:157).

There are a number of reasons why practical reasoning skills are so applicable to Social Work practice. Firstly, becoming a practical reasoner represents a set of understandings and skills which need to be consciously acquired and whose application needs to be worked on. It requires active engagement, rather than passivity, unquestioning reliance on external guidelines, or arbitrarily doing one thing in one instance another elsewhere. Being a practical reasoner means developing your own voice, rather than just going along with what is happening around you because it has ‘always been done like that’. Secondly the concept of the practical reasoner situates ethics in a social and relational dimension. When we think of ethical dilemmas we often think of an isolated individual confronted by a series of difficult choices, but in reality the moral dilemmas that are dealt with in Social Work, if not in life in general, are invariably located in relationships with others as well as in particular institutional settings. In this sense ethical decisions are not simply individual decisions, but are decisions which involve other people, both directly indirectly. This concerns the way questions about what people see as important are social questions. A key implication in this is the critical dimension of ethics, which is not just about an immediate situation, but is related to wider questions about what the role of a Social Worker is, and who they are meant to be accountable to; another key theme which runs throughout this book.

This concept of the Social Worker as practical reasoner is central to the way we conceive of ethical practice in this book, and we explore this concept in a range of different ways. Like other books on Social Work ethics, our approach is thematic, but the themes we have chosen take their starting point in theory and then work back to practice, rather than the other way around which is more typical. This approach has been adopted because we feel that a ‘conscious ethical practitioner’ needs to be able not only to grasp the realities of ethical dilemmas as they present, but also to able to understand the way ethical theories can help us to open up and better understand the issues within these dilemmas. As noted in the Preface there is a tendency to approach the teaching of values and ethics primarily through the prism of contemporary Codes of Practice. While these are undoubtedly important, our approach has been to try to give students and practitioners an understanding of where these have come from, rather than seeing them
as fixed and frozen – after all very few people would suggest that our current Codes of Practice will remain the same for even the next five years. An understanding of the development of moral philosophy is valuable for the way it allows us to see the relationship between the past and the present, and thereby understand the strength of relevance these ideas continue to have for contemporary practice.

We have emphasised the importance of theory so far, but it is equally important to state that because ethics are a practice, they must bring together theoretical understandings with the acquisition of particular skills which are exercised in practice settings - it is in this way that practical reasoning skills are developed. It is therefore crucial that we locate the process of developing ethical consciousness within the real world of Social Work practice, and it is for this reason that we have made extensive use of case studies throughout the book. We draw from case studies not just to illustrate contemporary ethical dilemmas, but also to demonstrate the process of analysing the situation, making links between theory and practice, as well as applying a conscious ethical framework to a particular situation. The use of case studies allows the reader to conceptualise Social Work practice as a process in which ethical principles are able to be applied to concrete situations.

The book is devised into three sections, all of which include between two and three chapters each. The first section, entitled ‘What is Social Work’ considers the historical evolution of Social Work up to and including contemporary policy perspectives. Rojek et al’s pioneering investigation of Social Work’s “received ideas” (1988) made the important point that “European Social Work can best face up to the actuality of value questions through a critical examination of its own historical roots and its received ideas in the context of their various discourses” (1988:44). The first section seeks to recover the importance of this historic perspective as a means of re-visiting the frequently asked question of what Social Work is. This work on Social Work’s historical genesis is developed in the second chapter, which looks at the contemporary definition and manifestation of Social Work values and ethics.

Chapter One begins with the emergence of Social Work in the late 19th Century as a moment in which the ethical boundaries of Social Work have been defined. We offer a comparison between two divergent conceptions of Social Work; the first and dominant tradition was that of the Charity Organisation Society (COS), which sought to reintegrate the “outcast” poor into society through “remoralisation”, and then look by contrast at the Settlement Movement, whose focus was working alongside impoverished communities in partnership, seeking to develop the community’s existing resources, as well as campaigning on issues of concern. By looking at these two traditions from which Social Work in its contemporary forms has evolved throughout the twentieth and twenty first century, it is argued that Social Work has “two souls”; one which emphasises the need for the socially disenfranchised to aspire toward “respectability”, the other which takes as its starting point the real problems amongst people who are marginalised and excluded. The tension between these two conceptions of Social Work is then explored in a more recent period, in a discussion of the Radical Social Work movement in the 1970s and its critique of “mainstream Social Work”. We see the reconsideration of this period as important as it was also a moment in which questions about the role and purpose of Social Work were posed. While this movement was subsequently crushed under the weight of what Alex Callinicos has called the “Reagan- Thatcher juggernaut” (2010:8), we argue that there is still much that can be learned for contemporary practice by looking at the issues raised in this period.

Chapter Two seeks to define the nature of “ethics” and “values”, looking at the meaning of these terms in the context of a number of ethical dilemmas from Social Work practice. Following Clark’s (2000) argument, we question the conception of ethics as a prescription which dictates how to behave in problematic situations, and as a discipline that examines the foundations and the arguments on which the requirements are defined. The approach we argue for regarding social work ethics is one that both takes into considerations the professional norms and standards in Social Work, but which also puts the concept of practical reason as central in the process of ethical deliberation. We also consider the Social Work value base as it is deployed within the current codes of ethics in Social Work, in particular within the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) and the British Association of Social Work (BASW). Finally, we describe and illustrate some of the most common forms of ethical dilemmas in practice.

The Second section of the book is entitled “The Social Dimensions of Social Work Ethics”. These chapters develop the material raised in the first section with a focus on three key issues in Social Work;
Power, 'Empowerment' and Bureaucracy, and their significance for 'conscious' ethical practice. The chapters in this section work at the interface of Social Theory and Ethics to consider the wider factors which frame the practical context in which Social Workers operate.

Chapter Three begins by looking at the complexities of defining power within Social Work, and argues that the best way of understanding this is by looking at the way the term has acquired different meanings historically. We have then looked at ideas of power put forward by the philosophers of the European Enlightenment, the work of Karl Marx and Michel Foucault, as well as the importance of political struggles for class, gender and ‘racial’ equality. This chapter concludes with a Case Study in which the practical implications of these different ideas of power are explored.

Chapter Four takes a more contemporary focus looking at the trajectory of the term “Empowerment” as a concept which begins its life amongst community based activist groups seeking a voice, but has subsequently become a key concept within the social policy universe of "neo-liberalism". Why has this term "empowerment" become so important, not just within Social Work, but in contemporary policy and political rhetoric across the board? This chapter offers a critique of the way term has come to be understood in such as individualised manner and offers some thoughts on how the term might be reclaimed for more progressive use in Social Work practice.

As we have discussed throughout this introduction ethical issues within Social Work are invariably situated within organisational and institutional settings. This insight is particularly pertinent to Chapter Five which looks at what a bureaucracy is and the different ways in which conscious ethical practice can be conceptualised within organisations. Are Social Workers always prisoners of the “Iron Cage” of bureaucracy or are there ways in which we can exercise agency within them? We conclude this chapter with a discussion of “managerialism” and the impact that this has had on Social Work.

The third and final section, ‘Theorising Ethical Practice’ examines three core principles of Social Work through a number of ethical theories. We have chosen to explore three specific families of ethical theories which we believed have greatly influenced professional ethics in Social Work. We have done this because we believe that developing practical reasoning skills should involve a broad understanding and a critical appraisal of key ethical theories and their application to social work practice situations. Chapter Six begins the exploration of Social Work’s underlying roots in the moral philosophy of the Enlightenment. This chapter looks at the central concepts of self-determination and human dignity through the work of Immanuel Kant. The chapter will outline the way in which Kant's work has framed the understanding of these concepts in modern Social Work.

Social Justice is another of the core values of Social Work which appears as such in the IFSW and BASW Codes of Ethics, and which, along with Human Dignity, serves as a central motivation and justification for Social Work action (IFSW 2000). Chapter Seven therefore explores this theme through a discussion of the Utilitarian theory of ethics from the perspectives of John Stuart Mill, and from the Theory of Justice as articulated by John Rawls.

The concept of “professionalism” is central Social Work practice as deployed in the wide range of different ethical codes. Chapter Eight outline that Social Work’s professionalism can be understood to be based on the demonstration of different personal qualities that Social Workers are expected to embody in their work. It is through this theme that we examine a third position within moral philosophy which enables the contextualisation of the personal qualities and the importance of relationships between Social Workers and service users. The framework through which this is considered is through the work on ‘relationship-based and Virtue Ethics’. The work of Socrates and of contemporary moral philosopher Alasdair MacIntyre, who was mentioned earlier in this introduction, are explored, alongside debates on the “Ethics of Care”, an influential development of virtue ethics.

We conclude with a discussion of the centrality of ethical practice to Social Work as a whole, which expresses our hope that in writing this book we have made a contribution to keeping alive the concept of Social Work as a project of practical humanitarian social change.
Chapter One: Social Work Histories

In this chapter we will:

- Begin by considering some different definitions of Social Work.
- Think about the reasons for this in terms of understanding the different trends within Social Work.
- To understand the way these have developed historically, seeing the different social and political forces which have influenced Social Work.
- To focus on two historic periods – the 1890s and 1970s as illustrations of the different ways in which ideas about what ethical practice in Social Work have been manifested.

“The past, the present and the future are really one: they are today”.
(attributed to Harriet Beecher Stowe (1811-1896))

Introduction

When we talk about Social Work, what are we talking about? One of the complications of defining the nature and content of Social Work practice is that what it is varies considerably according to where it takes place. Sarah Banks has noted that:

"Social work has always been a difficult occupation to define because it has embraced work in a number of different sectors (public, private, independent, voluntary), a multiplicity of different settings (residential homes, area offices, community development projects), with workers taking on a range of different tasks (caring, controlling, empowering, campaigning, assessing, managing) for a variety of different purposes (redistribution of resources to those in need, social control and rehabilitation of the deviant, prevention or reduction of social problems)."(Banks 2006:1).

There are those Social Workers employed by Social Services Departments, there are those who work in national voluntary organisations for children, and there are others who work in small, grassroots organisation with homeless people. Are they all doing Social Work? Can they all call themselves Social Workers? Can we define Social Work independently of its context of practice? Just as the question of what activities actually count as Social Work has never had different kinds of answers, so equally we find different definitions of what Social Work is. Consider for example the two following two definitions of Social Work:

Social work is ‘a profession which promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being…Principles of Human Rights and social justice are fundamental to social work’ (The International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) quoted in Horner 2003:2).

‘Social work is ‘a very practical job. It is about protecting people and changing their lives, not about being able to give a fluent and theoretical explanation about why they got into difficulties in the first place’ (Jacqui Smith, former UK Minister of Social Care, quoted in Horner 2003:2).

When we think about these two definitions it becomes apparent that the authors of these two definitions are emphasising quite different conceptions of Social Work. The first definition, from the International Federation of Social Work, evokes a concept of the Social Worker as the agent of individual and social change, placing their skills at the service of the excluded and disempowered. While this definition sounds very positive and democratic, how much like the “real world” of Social Work do you think it is? The second definition from Jacqui Smith, former UK Minister for Social Care, by contrast, does not talk about social change, empowerment or liberation – instead she emphasises that Social Workers need to be ‘practical’. This definition promotes the idea that Social Workers should be ‘doers’ rather than ‘theoreticians’. At first glance that may sound a lot more realistic, but then we need to ask ourselves if we are to practice ethically, don’t we need to be ‘thinkers’ as well as ‘doers’? Isn’t there a danger in putting emphasis so much on ‘doing’ that we fail to ask the question of what it is we are supposed to be doing?