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The ethics of practical reasoning exploring the terrain

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ABSTRACT

Social work has been under sustained scrutiny regarding the quality of decision-making. The assumption is that social workers make poor quality decisions. And yet our knowledge and understanding of how social workers make decisions is, at best, partial. In our view, examination of practitioner decision-making will be enhanced by considering the role that ethics plays in practical judgement in practice. Although there has been significant work regarding the role of values and ethics in practice, this work tends to idealize morality, setting up external standards by which practice is judged. In this paper, we will argue that ethics in practice needs to be understood as more than simply the operationalizing of ideal standards. Ethics also entails critical engagement with social issues and can challenge idealized statements of values. We outline the idea of the ethical dimension of practical reasoning, consider its relationship to professional discretion, judgements and decision-making and argue that this opens up an area of investigation that can illuminate the interaction between practice and ethical thinking and reflection in novel and – for social work, at least – unconventional ways.

KEYWORDS

Values/ethics; practice/theory/methods; decision-making

AQ1

CE: AA QA: Coll:

Introduction

For decades now, high profile service failures have undermined trust in social workers and the knowledge base that underpins their practice. The challenges that these 'extreme failures' (Epstein, 1996) pose for the legitimacy of social work are both acute and distinct. Though failures in other areas of professional practice attract occasional attention, the seemingly unique 'damned if you do, damned if you don't' situation of social work lends this issue a particular character. The case of 'Baby P' in the UK represents perhaps the most potent recent example of service failure and led to the Munro review of child protection, which concluded that the ability of social workers to make accurate decisions is hampered by the burdensome degree of administration and scrutiny that they are subject to and its concomitant impact on the time available to spend with service users building relationships, learning about people and analysing their situations. Consequently, practitioners have to make judgements in far from ideal situations, based on less than full knowledge, compounding rather than alleviating the uncertainty that characterizes the work they undertake. Subsequent reforms in England have sought to strengthen trust in social work by equipping the profession to deal with the related issues of the quality of day-to-day practice, and the legitimacy of the profession.

It is not, however just external scrutiny to which practitioners are subject; there are also demands from commentators *within* social work. As well as ensuring that their decisions are accurate they must also ensure that they are ethical. As Banks (2014) makes clear, the ethical 'turn' in the social work

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academy over the last few years has occurred partly in response to concerns that contemporary practice, occurring within a framework of neo-liberal managerialism, is actually unethical (see also McAuncliffe & Chenoweth, 2008; Preston-Shoot, 2010, 2011). The scrutiny to which social workers are subject is thus heightened yet further; not only must practice be seen to be effective, it must also be seen to be ethical. Ethics, of course, as well as their closely related brethren, values and principles, are central to social work, and there are established ways of thinking about these issues in the discourse of ethics in social work. Although contemporary problematics have their own character, nevertheless the issues they encapsulate reflect these enduring debates. What is the right course of action to take in a particular situation? How do we judge what is proper and how can we ensure that this occurs? Such debates are unresolved, although at particular times and in particular domains a consensus may emerge.

Background

Historically, the ethical rationale for social work practice has tended to be expressed in the language of rights and duties, and can be seen in the emphasis of statements of ethical principles to which social workers should conform. This has also been quite closely aligned with both caring and virtue ethics, underpinned by the belief that the right course of action in a particular situation is that which is located in the capacity to care and to do good located within professionals as individuals and collectively in the profession. These two positions (the 'virtue' and 'deontological') take issue with the third common ethical strand in professional thought: the consequentialist school. Here, the emphasis is on considering the likely effects of a particular course of action to determine whether or not it might be the right course of action. Ideas derived from this perspective underpin the evidence-based practice movement, which emphasizes that 'what matters is what works'. Reframed in ethical terms, the right course of action is that which experience suggests is most likely to achieve a particular good outcome.

Evidence-based practice has attracted pointed critique across an array of dimensions, not least on the basis that a focus on outcomes downplays the significance of process issues, the arena of both virtue and rights/duties perspectives. The critique of evidence-based practice in social work is now well established, and indeed, has had an effect. It is rare, now, to find unequivocal advocates of the type of evidence-based agenda that early, strong proponents favoured. Instead, there is a generalized commitment to research or knowledge-based practice (e.g. Glasby, 2011; Orme & Shemmings, 2010) in which multiple sources of knowledge and understanding are synthesized in ways that are practically useful. Reservations remain, however, about the way in which managerial processes and expectations – as opposed to evidence-based prescriptions – insinuate themselves into practice and undermine the capacity of workers to practise ethically. The emphasis here is on the ways in which top-down diktats limit room for discretion and push practitioners in the direction of compliance with preordained objectives and outcomes, which often do not suit the particular set of circumstances that an individual service user faces.

When applied to decision-making, these debates take on a distinctive character, in which vexed issues of professionalism and discretion intersect. Freedom in decision-making is often taken to be a defining trait of professionalism; however, in contemporary social services, managerialism is routinely represented as limiting the extent to which practitioners can utilize professional judgement as a basis for the decisions they make. Friedson (2001) contrasts managerialism and professionalism in terms of different work logics. In managerialism work is the means by which a production plan can be realized; workers should be motivated by self-interest to do the jobs they are given. Professionalism, on the other hand, is characterized by a commitment to a set of values and a body of knowledge which requires them sometimes to step outside their role as employees to be true to their professional commitments.

In contemporary managerialized social care, practitioners are expected to comply with prescribed procedures and frameworks for decision-making and action, often based on actuarial assumptions

and 'evidence-based' claims. Decision-making is rendered technical-rational in nature, failing also to engage with its moral/ethical dimension (Taylor & White, 2000). The application of rationality is presumed to lead to decisions which are more accurate and thus practice that is more effective, which, in a non-process oriented framework, is a 'good thing'. This distinction – between decision-making as moral/emotional or technical-rational – is generally presented in dichotomous, 'either/or' terms. Procedural models are characterized as 'top-down' and risk averse, exemplifying 'simplistic reductionism' (McAuncliffe, 2011) in contrast to 'reflexive' approaches that leave much more scope for judgements and co-construction between service user and practitioner (Hall, Juhila, Parton, & Poso, 2003) though, as Sheppard (2006) points out, how such judgements are arrived at is 'shrouded in mystery'. Although there is a growing body of work challenging the accuracy and wider applicability of this representation (e.g. Evans, 2011; Evans & Harris, 2004; Hupe, Hill, & Buffat, 2015), nevertheless, these are the dominant 'terms of trade' for discussion of professional decision-making within contemporary social work.

Ethical frameworks

These debates mirror polarized positions in debates between competing ethical frameworks more generally. Within the professional literature, ethics are often presented as a choice between approaches or schools – most commonly three basic approaches: a consequentialist outcome-based approach; a right/duty-based approach; and virtue-based ethics (for instance, Banks, 1995, 2012). The right/duty approach is closely associated with Kant and emphasizes the importance of reason, freedom and consistency in ethical decision-making. Each individual is inherently ethically significant; we are under a duty to recognize that all individuals bear the same ethical rights as each other: you should not treat others any differently from the way you would treat yourself and you should '… act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' (Kant, 1994a, p. 274).

A common criticism of this approach is the absolute imperative nature of such commitments. It requires one to follow preordained principles – regardless of consequences. For Kant, for example, there is no such thing as 'a white lie' to save anybody's feelings: 'to be truthful in all declarations … is a sacred and absolutely commanding decree of reason, limited by no expediency' (Kant, 1994b, p. 281).

As well as concern about a fundamental inhumanity in an absolute commitment to principles above people, there is also a practical problem: if all rights are inviolable, what happens when rights or duties clash? How do you resolve the conflicts which are likely to arise in any social situation?

Consequentialist ethical approaches, such as utilitarianism, to an extent attempt to answer this problem. Everyone counts as one, and nobody counts as more than one – no one person's rights trump the rights of anyone else. In situations of ethical conflict, the consequences are added up for different sides, and the outcome that delivers the greatest aggregate utility for the group is identified as the best ethical option. While this approach addresses, to some extent, the problem of rights in conflict, there is a risk that it can displace individual rights in the interest of the collective solutions. And there are practical problems with this approach. How, for instance, do you predict or calculate consequences with sufficient certainty to warrant interfering with fundamental human rights and duties? How can you calculate and balance the different preferences of different people to come up with an overall idea of the greater social good? And a greater good for whom?

A longstanding problem faced by consequentialist and right/s duties-based approaches is that they can be desiccated in their attempt at universal validity. They have to strip away the sense of what it is to be human to either a hollow rationality or an improbable core motivation. Kant's ethical imperative is rational consistency – but it's possible to be reasonably and consistently bad. And consequentialism is often criticized for its strangely abstracted idea of human drives and concerns. Hume,[1] for instance, points out the empty space at the heart of any utilitarian calculation:

> Utility is only a tendency to a certain end; and were the end totally indifferent to us, we should feel the same indifference towards the means. It is requisite a sentiment should here display itself, in order to give a preference to the useful above the pernicious tendencies … reason instructs us in the several tendencies of actions, and humanity makes a distinction in favour of those which are useful and beneficial. (Hume, 1777/1917, p. 68)

These criticisms of rights-based and outcome-based approaches to ethics have been built on by another approach, which argues that the character of the actor should be placed at the centre of ethical decision-making. In virtue ethics, an individual develops and nurtures an ethical sensibility beyond simply following rules and principles. Rather, such judgements amount to an intuition of the right thing to do in any particular situation. This approach originated in the work of Aristotle, who argued that ethical actors need to develop habits of good practice that in turn reinforce and develop good judgement:

> It is the way we behave in our dealings with other people that makes us just or unjust … like activities produce like dispositions … it is a matter of no little importance what sort of habits we form from the earliest age – it makes a vast difference, or rather all the difference in the world. (Aristotle, 1976, p. 92).

A strength of this approach is the recognition of people as actors in ethical situations, and that they learn and develop their ethical judgement through engaging with ethical issues. It also alerts us to broader concerns to do with one's own identity and ethical well-being – ethics is, in part, concerned with one's own well-being as well as that of others. However, a basic problem with virtue ethics is that it is unclear exactly what virtue means and why particular virtues are necessarily ethical. Louden, for instance, points out that Aristotle relies on pointing to virtuous characters/habits to explain what they entail. This is not particularly helpful in modern complex societies where: ' … people really do not know each other at all that well, and where there is a wide disagreement on values' (1997, p. 213). Furthermore, there's a risk that virtues are simply conventional – the established practice of a group. Here, virtue ethics can become circular: 'I'm ethical because what I say is ethical is what I do'!

Perhaps because of these problems, while virtue ethics have become increasingly influential in professional ethics over the past decade (e.g. Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Clark, 2006), this has been accompanied by increasing interests in the ethics of care and feminist ethics (Hugman, 2005; Parton, 2003). Additionally, they share a critique of conventional professional ethics, particularly consequentialist ethics, as too closely associated with consumerist rights and managerial calculation. Although both have a long heritage, they have risen to prominence in social work of late. The distinctiveness of these approaches rests partly on their rejection of the presumed dominance of consequentialist ethics in contemporary social work organizations. Orthodoxy provokes critique, and each position sets itself up as an alternative to presumed aspects of the dominant school. An ethics of care emphasizes the role that social relationships play in society and their potential value in practice; for a relationship to prosper, parties to it must care about each other, and in their behaviour act upon this sensibility. Feminist ethics, often inspired by Gilligan's (1982) claim that there is a distinctive female ethical perspective, take this thinking a stage further and assert the significance of (feminine) emotion, which, they argue, is generally downplayed in comparison to (masculine) rationality in judgements and decision-making.

Proponents of feminist ethics in social work emphasize the vulnerability of service users and the need to exercise power carefully to ensure that the potential for abuse of power in professional relationships is constrained. Within the ethics of care, which have been strongly influenced by feminist ethical research and reflections, the relationship is the vehicle for ethical understanding and commitment, and it is this priority that should guide decision-making. Proponents of each perspective do not necessarily suggest that their preferred approach will be definitively 'right', however 'right' might be defined. But the assumption is that ethical judgements will, nevertheless, be 'more right' if the precepts of a particular perspective are used to guide decision-making. It is this assumption – that it is possible for external arbiters of morality to prescribe the right and proper course of action that a practitioner ought to take in a particular situation – that we seek to problematize in the remainder of this paper.

A practical perspective on ethics

To be clear, our argument is not 'a plague on all their houses' – by finding fault in each of these different perspectives we do not conclude that they are all of no use. This is not our argument. Rather, we want to suggest that each perspective we have considered, while limited, provides potentially useful insights into ethical problems and possible contributions to their resolution. We should acknowledge their strengths and weaknesses, and recognize that their multiplicity reflects the complex nature of ethical questions. This complexity involves recognizing and balancing different rights and duties, while also seeing them in a broader context of the consequences for a wide group of people, and understanding the ethical well-being of ethical actors as agents, not just as transmitters of principles. It's surely uncontentious that each of these perspectives will be useful in *some* way as a guide for *some* practitioners working with *some* service users in *some* situations, and at *some* times. But it is rare for proponents of a particular perspective to offer their own preferred frameworks as optional.

The risk, we would argue, in presenting ethical perspectives as positions one must take (and in so doing devaluing other ethical points of view) is that ethical-decision-making becomes conflated with moralizing. Williams (1983) draws a distinction between ethics and moralizing. He criticizes morality as 'a peculiar institution' which has carried over quasi-theological assumptions about the authority of ethical ideals. 'Morality', he argues, sees these principles as the equivalent of legislation. They are presented as imperatives that require compliance. But on what authority? An alternative approach is 'ethics' that sees ethical theories as resources to help us think about these fundamental issues. Concern for consequences, rights, procedural consistency, individual ethical creativity and virtue are not mutually exclusive; they do not reflect different schools, but are necessary tools that can be drawn on to analyse the nature of the ethical problem and identify an ethical response. For O'Neil (1986, p. 27), ethical thinking '… will require us to listen to other appraisals and to reflect on and modify our own … Reflective judgment so understood is an indispensable preliminary or background to ethical decisions about any actual case'.

The nineteenth-century philosopher J. S. Mill exemplifies the thoughtful eclecticism of sensitive ethical thinking. Mill is often simply paired with Bentham – with the pairing used to show up inconsistencies in 'classical utilitarianism' (e.g. Banks, 2012, p. 52). However, Mill's approach to ethical analysis, while clearly influenced by Bentham, is also very different, and draws on a range of other ethical ideas in addition to utilitarianism. For Bentham, utilitarianism was a matter of straightforward calculation of pleasure and pain to identify the right course of action. Bentham's approach to motivation was too narrow for Mill (Gray, 2015); it failed to take account of the quality of different sorts of pleasure and pain, and ignored the ethical value of personal and social improvement, in which '… utility [should be understood] in the largest sense, grounded on the permanent interests of a man as a progressive being' (Mill, 1979a, p. 136), which also reflected individuals' moral responsibility to regulate and govern their own behaviour, and to deliberate on their own desires and goals. In this, we can also see how Mill, alongside his sophisticated account of human motivation, has been influenced by virtue ethics in his concern for well-being and growth of human actors as ethical beings (Donner, 2011). For Mill, this also entailed a fundamental defence of liberty and autonomy as basic rights that could only be curtailed in extreme circumstances, where others' fundamental interests were threatened (Mill, 1979a) and a belief that utilitarian arguments can be used to provide a grounding for rights-based ethics (Mill, 1979b, pp. 251–155).

Front-line ethicists

Ethical ideas, principles and emotions can buttress each other and they can also come into conflict. They often have to be 'tweaked' to fit situations. They are starting points that help us to grasp and explore ethical challenges and problems – and they can often make us feel uncomfortable in the knowledge that, while we have done our best in that situation, we would have liked to do better. We can see this in the way ethicists operate – like the example of Mill. His moral thinking was not

one of fixed, inviolable principles, but reflected an expanding understanding of human need and developing ethical insights (Gray, 2015).

In the same way, we can see that front-line practitioners as practical day-to-day ethicists have to engage themselves in these sort of dynamic, ethical analyses, drawing on different ethical resources – and generating new ethical thinking in the process – to understand a situation and think about what to do. However, too often there is a tendency in the professional literature for ethical approaches to propound a strongly normative approach, which risks shading into 'this is how it should be done'. Proponents of consequentialist perspectives, for instance, advocate the use of pro-formas, checklists and more explicit decision-making tools to ensure – from their perspective – that judgements are both accurate and ethical (Gambrill, 2008). And while virtue ethicists tend to be much less prescriptive about the processes of decision-making, they can be critical and vocal about the morality of practitioners who do not adhere to their idea of virtuous ethical practice. There is a notable tendency – evident across the gamut of ethical schools – to emphasize the moral inadequacies of those who fail to live up to the requirements of their abstracted pronouncements. Because practitioners have acted in accordance with one particular ethical framework rather than another, they are deemed to have acted either ethically or unethically; Gambrill, for instance, asserts that it is the practitioner's ethical duty to follow the prescriptions of the evidence-based practice approach to decision-making (2011). Even Clark (2011) in his (convincing, in our view) characterization of decision-making as a hermeneutic process suggests that there is a 'right way' for practitioners to resolve ethical dilemmas. Similarly, Houston (2012) having rightly expounded the virtues of a pluralist take on ethics concludes with a distinctive process to use in ethical decision-making.

AQ7 For McDermott (2011) 'Good ethical decision-making is principled rather than pragmatic.' However, surely this opposition between principle and pragamatism is problematic in a discipline which is concerned with the need to act. As we have argued elsewhere, the ubiquity of uncertainty in front-line practice poses particular challenges, and imposes particular restraints on social workers. Consequently, 'Practitioners have no option but to make decisions and act as though their choices are objective, knowing full well that the knowledge upon which they are based is often contested and so their judgements and decisions may be "wrong"' (Evans & Hardy, 2010, p. 175). Whereas for some it is the very presence of uncertainty – the absence of certainty – that necessitates recourse to ethical frameworks, on the basis that this is precisely when we seek 'higher order' guidance on how to act, our own perspective is different. The fact that practitioners have not adhered to a particular framework does not, for us, mean that they have acted unethically. Not acting in accordance with the principles of evidence-based practice does not mean that practitioners have made an immoral judgement, any more than making a decision on the basis of an actuarial scoring tool means that a social worker's judgement is not virtuous. Rather, in both instances, practitioners may well be making reasoned judgements on the basis of practical considerations that, irrespective of whether or not they adhere to a specific framework, can retain an ethical character.

Practical reasoning

The decisions that practitioners make are best understood as practical judgements emerging from processes of practical reasoning, which lend themselves to neither prediction nor prescription. Practical ethical judgements are made in particular settings by particular people and they necessarily draw on a range of ethical insights because

> the moral field is not unitary, and the values we employ in making moral judgments sometimes have fundamentally different sources … the theoretician's quest for conceptual economy and elegance has been won at too great a price, for the resulting reductionist definitions of moral concepts are not true to the facts of moral experience. (Louden date 216)

AQ8 1997

Consequently, it seems to us, the uncertain status of the knowledge underpinning practitioner judgements means that the reasoning on which decision-making rests cannot be simply categorized

as 'right' or wrong', moral or immoral, ethical or unethical. Deductive reasoning, which is important to movements to instrumentalize generalized knowledge – such as evidence based practice, under which the expectation would be that practitioners determine how to act on the basis of what the evidence tells them, often in the form of practice guidelines or perhaps an actuarial score – is appropriate in some situations. Inductive reasoning, drawing upon case based knowledge, often co-constructed and individualized, can also be useful (Bleakly, Bligh, & Browne, 2011). It is tempting to laud the latter over the former (as we indicated, orthodoxy provokes critique), but this would be misguided. Both of these approaches have limits, and by the same token, they also both have strengths, which, where drawn on appropriately, can enable practitioners to work to make reasonably well-informed judgements. But both have well-established limitations, and so practitioners are still left to make judgements in the absence of confidence as to the outcome of any decision. Using the most apt style of reasoning and, where no consensus is evident, synthesizing strengths and limitations on a case by case basis is the essence of practical reasoning (MacCormick, 2008) – for better or worse.

The ethical dimension of practical reasoning in social work

There is now a well-established literature regarding decision-making in social work (e.g. O'Sullivan, 2011; Preston-Shoot, 2014; Taylor, 2013). A subset of this concerns the ethics of decision-making. With a few exceptions, such work is normative rather than empirical. Where empirical work has been undertaken, it has focused on assessing professional capabilities or testing the extent to which practice conforms to preordained frameworks or criteria (e.g. McDermott, 2011; Taylor, 2012; Yeung, Ho, Hui-Lo, & Chan, 2010) There is also a body of work which – following Flyvbjerg (2001) – focuses on the practicalities of decision-making, sometimes based on the Aristotlean notion of phronesis, and loosely associated with the investigation of broad-based practitioner epistemologies (Petersen & Olsson, 2015; Whitaker, 2014). This literature is still developing. As such there is a clear gap in our understanding of the practical ethics of decision-making, and a corresponding need to understand these sense-making activities in themselves, and as such, as complex, complicated and neither necessarily good nor bad, moral or immoral, ethical or unethical.

The ethical perspective

Talk about ethics can be slippery, and it can be lost in 'value talk' that shifts between personal interests, norms of everyday life, ideas about fundamental responsibilities and basic expectations and goals. In identifying where the field of ethics sits, it is useful to distinguish the general sociological idea about values as the commitments and interests of individuals and groups, from concerns that not only relate to one's own interests and the interests of our group, but is also fundamentally interested in the needs and interests of others – a distinction that resonates through sociological analysis and goes back to Mead (Giddens, 1998). Plant (1970) points out that in the development of Western moral thought, the ethical perspective reflected a shift from a system of obligations based on traditional relationships within one's community to a wider recognition of obligations based on rational reflection beyond familial and community ties (Plant, 1970, p. 22). Singer (1993) develops this perspective, arguing that a fundamental characteristic of talk about ethics is that it is not just couched in self-regarding terms but is also concerned with the needs and aspirations of others; and that when thinking ethically about a course of action one ' … cannot point only to the benefits it brings me. We must address myself to a larger audience' (Singer, 1993, p. 10). Furthermore, it is not just that ethics are concerned with others as well as oneself, but that they engage fundamental concerns about our ' … understanding of the nature of human values, of how we ought to live and what constitutes right conduct' (Norman, 1998, p. 1).

Within philosophical ethics a distinction is often drawn between ethics as making substantive judgements about conduct in particular settings (first order or substantive ethics) and ethics that

examine the ideas of right conduct underlying these judgements, reflecting on substantive ethical discourse (second order or meta-ethics). Norman (1998) argues that ethicists now tend to focus on the second perspective, while also engaging with day-to-day substantive questions, so that it can help people who are every day engaged in ethical decision-making to examine, question, reflect on and develop their ethical position: '… to help them to clarify the terms they use, and the arguments which they deploy, when making such decisions' (Norman, 1998, p. 2). Thinking of front-line ethics in this way helps us focus on the function of ethics, and recognize that its role is: '… not in order to preach, but in order to contribute to that common enterprise' (Norman, 1998, p. 2).

This account of the ethical perspective is meant to give a sense of the register – the sort of talk, the discourse, if you like – within which ethical positions are discussed and examined. Talk about values does not equate with talk about ethics. Ethical talk relates to much fuller and more considered concerns about not only one's own interests, but also others' interests, and about fundamental responsibilities and aspirations. Approaching the ethics of front-line decision-making through this lens entails focusing on the range of ethical ideas, principles and feelings that front-line practitioners draw on; how they combine and deploy them in particular situations; how they learn from situations – or not – in terms of extending and developing their ethical perspectives, and how they hold the tension between recognizing particular rights, the consequences of action and retaining their own sense of their professional character and project. This is not to say that every front-line professional will always behave in this way; we can all be inconsistent and the intensity of our commitment can vary. Some people will try and not succeed. Some will be very skilled. Others may have a 'take' on ethics that is very different from conventional formulations, which some will see as indicative of incoherence. Nor does it suggest that these sorts of considerations can be straightforwardly illuminated. However, there is much we can learn about both front-line social work practice – and practical ethics itself – by exploring the degree to which the language in the register of ethics is deployed in particular situations to guide action, and, where it is deployed, how the grammar of ethical decision-making works; what different elements are drawn upon and used; how they are combined and re-combined, and the way particular styles or characters of ethical practice are developed, consolidated and deployed.

The way in which practitioners' practice combines and embodies ethical arguments suggests a further question: how can research be attuned to the ethical register within which practitioners engage with these issues?

One of the challenges here, particularly when we think of ethics as involving fundamental concerns and commitments, is that they may well be difficult to articulate because they are felt to be so fundamental and may be taken for granted. This is, in part, why we think it's important to look beyond professional codes to understand these concerns. Codes will formalize some things, but they can't capture the way in which wider ethical concerns come into play and operate in practice. Codes, in themselves, also seem to us to be essentially contestable (Gallie, 1955) in that they are as open to interpretation and question as any other text, giving a false sense of clarity about the nature of professional ethics. At best, they are understood as frameworks within which debates occur, as a resource which may or may not be drawn upon in the day-to-day practice of practical ethics. Timms (1983), for instance, characterizes social work as a set of traditions, not so much defined by core agreement about a set of values, but rather having a shared concern for key ethical issues – often summarized as social justice – which are disputed through the medium of a shared vocabulary. Furthermore, these debates do not exist within a hermetically sealed environment of 'professional values', but intersect and overlap with broader organizational policy and social debates which themselves have an ethical character. Rather than impose external criteria (those of service users, policy-makers, etc.) and gauge adherence to these, it is instead important to understand the self-defined criteria of good practice and good service-delivery employed by practitioners themselves in order to elucidate the variable factors that are drawn upon in any particular decision-making situation.

Conclusion: investigating the ethics of decision-making

Defining the territory – the register of the discussion and the key areas of debate – is, we think, the first necessary step to opening up the investigation of ethics and decision-making in practical reasoning. In doing so, certain research questions are immediately apparent: how do practitioners resolve the ethical dilemmas that pervade decision-making in social work? In what ways are their reasoning processes informed by ethical considerations? Which explicit or formal ethical or decision-making frameworks are drawn upon, if any? How are these applied to the particular situation and with what effects? Which other implicit, informal, non-formulaic considerations impact on decision-making processes? We know something of each of these components, but there is much that is left untouched. Embedded in each of these questions are a set of assumptions regarding the nature of social work practice – its aims and objectives, the key decisions which it comprises, and the nature of professional identity – none of which should be taken for granted. Practically, these sorts of issues suit a qualitative approach and fit comfortably with the tradition of exploring how people understand their own world and identify the ideas and commitments that are significant to them in operating within it.

However, there are challenges in developing this approach to researching ethics in practice that are helpful to touch on here. Ethics is an emotive topic, because it involves fundamental commitments and often commitments that people feel should bind not only themselves but others. Ethical ideas can be difficult to talk about, because asking someone to talk about their commitments will often involve digging down to the bedrock of understanding, pushing to know what lies behind what seems obvious to the person concerned (Johnson, 1991). This, we think, necessitates a more assertive form of research practice than is often the case in qualitative research; it involves challenging the default cynical pose of the social researcher and probing and pushing beyond immediate and obvious answers to draw out underlying ideas and arguments (Becker, 1971a). To balance this, it also entails a heightened sense of micro-ethics in social research, knowing when to stop pushing, recognizing when the interviewee has gone as far as he or she can. The other side of this is that researchers themselves need to bring into clearer understanding their own ethical perspective through a process of unsentimental reflection and reflexivity, to be aware of their own ethical assumptions and to seek to articulate them so that they are aware of their own particular commitments and how these may influence and sometimes close off others' opportunities to express their point of view and challenge their own commitments (Becker, 1971b). Undertaking this sort of research also has the potential to be emotionally extremely draining for both interviewer and interviewee. Openness to the expression of ethical positions to one another entails recognizing that others can have fundamental commitments which are different from one's own and – at the extreme – may initially be unimaginable to oneself.

Although both ethics and decision-making are key areas of discussion within social work discourse, our knowledge and understanding of how they intersect in practice remains limited. Indeed, it is the absence of such knowledge and understanding, we would argue, that accounts for the tendencies towards proceduralism and moralizing in how decision-making and ethics are conventionally formulated in social work discussion. Conceptual work is necessary to challenge current disciplinary discourse with regard to ethics, decision-making and indeed, the ethics of decision-making. Somewhat paradoxically, however, our aim is not to say this is how social workers 'ought' to practise, or to what extent, in what ways, according to which conventions (ethical or otherwise) decision makers should formulate their judgements, or according to which criteria these decisions might be judged. Indeed, following Millgram (2005), we do not advocate a particular moral perspective. Rather, our interests here are in scoping out a future research agenda that has the potential to illuminate the intersections between practice and ethical thinking and reflection in novel and – for social work, at least – unconventional ways. In our view research that focuses on the intersection between varying forms of practicality and morality is best placed to further the debate in this contentious area of social work.

AQ9

Note

1. Hume, while he is known primarily as a philosopher, was at the time better known for his work as an historian and what is evident from his work is a rich sense of ethical thinking grounded in an historical and social understanding of ethical commitments and motivation.

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