

PREPUBLICATION VERSION

There are no answers, only choices: Teaching ethical decision making in social work

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Abstract

In teaching students about ethical decision making in social work it is essential that they are able to recognise the moral implications of their work and develop a deep understanding about ethical issues and their personal responsibility for making ethical choices. Thus more than a ‘how to do it’ approach is needed and teaching students about values and ethics is an essential thread which runs through our experience based social work education program. The paper describes a learning unit which sought to teach students about ethical decision making as a critical thinking process and, in so doing, to integrate students’ knowledge and experience of values, ethics, policy, and research in the final year of study. The relationship between values, ethics, policy, research, and social work practice provided an ideal context within which students can learn to integrate their knowledge and experience and apply it directly to their fieldwork practice. The paper ends with our critical reflection on this teaching experience and a critique of decisionist ethical frameworks.

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It's not only the transformation of the public consciousness that we are interested in, but it's our own transformation as artists that's just as important. Perhaps a corollary is that community change can't take place unless it's transformative within us. That familiar line – 'I see the enemy and it is I' – means that every prejudice, every misunderstanding that we perceive out in the real world is inside of us, and has to be challenged

(Allan Kaprow, in Lacy, 1995, p. 33)

In the social work literature, ethical guidelines embodied in codes of ethics are said to provide the guidance needed when ethical dilemmas arise (Banks, 2001; Congress, 1999; Hugman & Smith, 1995; Loewenberg, Dolgoff & Harrington, 2000; Reamer, 1999; Rhodes, 1986; Rothman, 1998). However, this is only the tip of the iceberg for ethical guidelines do not guarantee ethical social work practice (Gray, 1995; Rhodes, 1992). Social work education programs want to graduate students who take morality seriously, who take responsibility for moral action, who can demonstrate their commitment to ethical practice and who have the awareness to recognise, and the expertise to work through, complex ethical problems. Field education placements provide rich and valuable experience on which to draw as well as opportunities for direct application of new learning (Plath, 2004).

A common purpose in social work is to teach students how to solve problems by developing as full an understanding of the situation as possible through listening to the client's story, by helping clients to consider possible options for problem solving and anticipate the possible consequences of each option, and by enabling them to choose a solution which best suits their needs and interests and those of others involved. However, we need to be careful not to

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over-emphasise the rational aspects of ethical decision making to the detriment of other ways of knowing and gaining understanding. If we want to develop creative, imaginative practitioners we need to avoid what Dreyfus and Dreyfus (1986) refer to as the Hamlet model of decision making – the detached, deliberate, and sometimes agonizing selection among alternatives. This overemphasis on rational problem solving or decision making leads to the situation where students—and practitioners—want to be told *how to do things* wherein they are happy only when they are being given a well-defined structure within which to work. While not overlooking the importance of the technological or skill dimensions of social work, we believe that an overemphasis on technical skills and models discourages students from thinking creatively. By encouraging students to reflect on their values and commitments, as well as their intuition and emotions, we lead them to exciting and perplexing discoveries about themselves and others. While rational decision making is important, ethical practice requires us to go beyond formulaic responses to become intuitive decision makers who know from experience that it is impossible to generate a complete list of options and to anticipate their consequences (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1986). Essentially problem solving is an interactional or dialogical process wherein discoveries are made. Thus we also need to encourage students to respond intuitively and to reflect on the validity of their intuitions as well as to draw on their experience and to incorporate situational and intuitive understanding into their reasoning processes.

More than this, we need to teach students to reflect on the way in which their reasoning, actions and decisions are affected by their values for without values the helping process becomes a rational-technical endeavour (Gray & Askeland, 2002); without an understanding of the complexity and uncertainty of the helping situation, the ‘practical, problem solving perspectives of professional helpers may only prolong the false hope ... that there is one rational solution to

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any problem’ (Goldstein, 1987, p. 184). When values are factored into the equation, a richness and complexity is added and students begin to understand that moral conflicts, by their very nature, defy ‘coherent explanations or plausible solutions’ (Goldstein, 1987, p. 182). Combined with the ambiguity and uncertainty of human experience, helping becomes centred on the ‘critical choices that need to be made ... (and our) obligation and responsibility to others’ (Goldstein, 1987, p. 181; see also McBeath & Webb, 2002).

For students to appreciate the complexity of moral issues, it is necessary for them to be able to accept and deal with uncertainty and ambiguity, and the absence of cookbook solutions; to learn that when moral conflicts or ethical dilemmas arise, they can only be resolved through dialogue and a process of moral reasoning where existing knowledge, theory, skills, values, and ethical guidelines are brought together to inform the decision making process. As Allen (1993) observed, ‘moral decisions are made through active dialogue’ (p. 46). She went so far as to say that it was ‘the ethical responsibility of the clinician to behave in ways that maintain the dialogue and foster an atmosphere of respect for a multiplicity of views’ (p. 38). To do this, students need to understand the role that their own values and beliefs play in this dialogue and the way in which they ‘contribute to meaning-making around clients and their problems’ (p. 39). They need to recognise too that judgments, assessments or ‘diagnoses are meanings and represent the values and cultural and gender biases of the dominant voices of the therapy world’ (p. 40) as well as their own. They also need an understanding of the broader context in which the dilemmas arise and those affected by them. Thus, we have an ethical responsibility to extend our ‘curiosity to the web of connectedness manifested in how clients perceive themselves, their lives, their problems, and their possibilities’ (Allen, 1993, p. 47). This is why, when students are at the highest level of their learning in working with people, we also engage them in practising and reflecting on their

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ethical decision making as well as their responsibilities to build knowledge and be accountable through social work research, and to participate in policy development and evaluation through policy practice.

Ethical decision making

The Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW, 1999) Code of Ethics (Section 5.1) defines ethical decision making as a ‘process of critical reflection, evaluation and judgment through which a practitioner resolves *ethical issues, problems and dilemmas*’ (p. 22). These can occur *inter alia* when people’s interests conflict with one another; when there is conflict between the worker’s professional values and those of the employing organization and wider society; when resources do not match client needs; and when system demands for efficiency and outcome conflict with the workers’ ethical responsibilities. There are many ethical decision making models in the social work literature, most of which follow a rational, problem solving framework as mentioned previously (for example, Congress, 1999; Hill, Glaser & Harden, 1995; Loewenberg, Dolgoff & Harrington, 2000; Mattison, 2000; Robinson & Reeser, 2000; Rothman, 1998). Within these models students—and practitioners—are entreated to review the relevant code of ethics and know the applicable laws and regulations (Corey, Corey & Callanan, 2003); to reflect on their ethical preferences, isolate the ethical and technical aspects of the situation and reflect on their choice of action (Mattison, 2000); to **Examine** relevant personal, societal, agency, client and professional values, **Think** about what ethical standard of the relevant Code of Ethics applies to the situation, as well as about relevant laws and case decisions, **Hypothesise** about possible consequences of different decisions, **Identify** who will benefit and who will be harmed

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in view of social works commitment to the most vulnerable, and Consult with supervisor and colleagues about the most ethical choice [Congress's (1999) ETHIC Decision Making Model].

Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) observe that despite some merit in available ethical decision making frameworks, ethical dilemmas often masquerade as other things. In reality, problem solving is never a structured linear process of decision making; people are not always available for consultation and may not always give good advice; clients often do not understand the situation they are in; there is always the potential for unintended or unforeseen outcomes; and it may not always be possible to get all sides of the story. In reality, all that we can do is work with the incomplete information we have, and do the best that we can. While we are expected to justify our actions drawing on available knowledge and research (evidence), including agency policy and relevant ethical codes, ultimately, ethical decisions are subjective and relational and depend very much on the situations in which they occur. They are complex. There are no right answers, only choices and we are responsible for, and have to be able to live with, the decision or choices we make. Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) believe that it is helpful to have a support network with whom to discuss ethical issues and reflection is critical. Every challenge creates opportunities for learning and for refining one's practice.

Learning unit on ethical decision making

With this theoretical framework as a backdrop, the learning unit on ethical decision making will now be presented in the form that it is given to students. However, before doing so we wish to draw attention to two important aspects of our pedagogical approach. First, we teach experientially through the medium of small groups which Reisch and Lowe (2000) referred to as being 'especially useful for teaching material on ethics' (p. 27) and secondly, students analyse an

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ethical dilemma drawn from their field experience which, like Reisch and Lowe, we have found to be ‘a particularly useful teaching tool’ (p. 28). The goals of the learning unit are to:

- Stimulate the moral imagination and to alert students to the ethical dimensions of social work theory and practice.
- Apply critical thinking skills in identifying and dealing with ethical issues when they arise.
- Develop a sense of moral obligation and personal responsibility for our value choices and the ethical decisions we make.
- Respond to ethical controversy and ambiguity and understand that ultimately ethical decisions result from the moral judgements we make.

The learning unit is taught over five three-hour sessions. During these sessions we locate values and ethics in social work practice, examine core social work values, the purpose and limitations of ethical codes, ethical dilemmas in social work, and ethical decision making. It must be emphasised that this learning unit is the culmination of teaching students about social work values in an integrated manner over the four years of the program which includes a course on ethics in second year taught by philosophers.

Session I: Locating values and ethics in social work practice

In the first session we encourage students to reflect on, and add to, their learning about social work theory on values through integrating ethics with social work practice, i.e. through connecting values and ethics to knowledge, theories, skills, practice, policy, and research. We want students to understand that intellectual knowledge alone cannot prepare them for the uncertainties and ambiguities of social work practice and will not be sufficient for the kinds of

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complex decisions they will have to make, especially when ethical dilemmas arise. Though often presented as a rational process, ethical decision making is a complex problem solving activity which requires the application of critical thinking as well as the an ability to make judgments on the basis of our knowledge, theories, practice experience, and values not to mention those of the client involved. This requires a certain kind of understanding not just rational-technical approaches (Schön, 1983). We want students to learn to accept that things are not always black and white; there are many shades of gray (Gray & Askeland, 2002), which is why a thorough understanding of the moral implications of what we do is needed along with critical reflection on personal and professional values, as well as the guidance of ethical codes. Through group discussion, we establish what the students already know about values and ethics, identify areas which they want to learn more about, and conduct an exercise to help them articulate their values. In a sense our values are our ideals while our ethics guide us towards the achievement of these ideals. Codes of ethics are guides for practice. We examine the history of social work values and debate their universal nature and their applicability to diverse cultural contexts (Gray & Fook, 2004; Gray, 2005). Finally, we link values to concepts of human rights and social justice which, like codes of ethics, offer guidelines for practice and are mainly enforceable to the extent that they are embodied in legislation and policy.

Session 2: Core social work values

In the second session we examine various value classification systems, such as those of Biesteck (1961), Biestek and Gehrig (1978), Levy (1993), Pumphrey (1959), Reamer (1999) and Timms (1983). Students complete a values questionnaire on their own and then discuss the questions and their responses in small groups. The questions relate to the values of social work and why they

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are important; the difference between values and ethics; ways in which we might encourage people to practice ethically; and the relationship between personal, professional, organisational, and social values. Working in their small groups, we ask students to reflect back over the three years they have been studying social work and to consider the following:

- Have your values changed? If so, how? If not, what values have been confirmed?
- What do you see as the most important, pivotal or even over-arching values of social work?
- What do you know about the history of social work values?
- How have social work values changed or remained the same over the years?
- What are the limitations of your knowledge about values?
- Do you know how to apply your values in practice?

Session 3: The purpose and limitations of ethical codes

In the third session we review different ethical codes - some different social work codes, and some codes from other disciplines - to identify the main tenets of the code, to establish how they embody the core values of social work and to relate them to the ethical and legal duties of helping professionals, such as the duty of care, duty to respect privacy, duty to maintain confidentiality, duty to inform, duty to report, and duty to warn. Working in small groups, students review a different ethical code in social work, identify the main tenets of the code, establish how this differs from core values identified in the previous learning task, and connect the code to critical thinking. Thereafter they work through a case example, usually a current Australian story in the media with ethical overtones, using the codes, values and critical thinking to reflect on the moral issues involved in this case situation. In reporting back, we draw their

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attention to the purpose of ethical codes as a means of ensuring that we are accountable for our actions and to protect client interests. We discuss the difficulties of using codes prescriptively since they are only guides and the importance of having an understanding of moral and ethical theory to help us identify the ethical aspects of the situations we encounter (Gray, 1995, 1996).

Session 4: Ethical dilemmas in social work

In the fourth session we learn about the nature of ethical dilemmas. We review the most commonly encountered ethical dilemmas in social work practice and the extent to which the AASW Code of Ethics helps us to work through these dilemmas. Students identify ethical dilemmas they have encountered in their fieldwork practice. Drawing on their collective experience, they make a list of possible ethical dilemmas they have encountered grouped under the following headings:

- Confidentiality, privacy and informed consent: Limits of confidentiality and privacy
- Self-determination and paternalism: Clients right to self-determination and deciding what is in the clients' best interest, in other words, the appropriateness of paternalism; conflicts of interest and boundary issues; duty of care; and self-determination.
- Allocating resources: Ways to allocate limited resources; and ethics inherent in eligibility for services.
- Laws, policies and regulations: Conflicts between policy and professional values; and bureaucracy and procedures that block access.
- Research and evaluation: Issues of confidentiality, prevention of harm to research participants, respect for privacy, and protection of autonomy.

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- Administrative practices: Ethics of whistle blowing; and ethics in organisational practices.
- Community practice: Conflicts between individual and collective interests, individual rights (entitlement) and the common good.
- Ethical dilemmas among colleagues: Dilemmas of reporting malpractice or unethical conduct.

Then we discuss the way in which the AASW code provides guidance for practitioners faced with an ethical dilemma and compile a possible strategy for ethical decision making in social work. Finally, the groups present their strategies for ethical decision making to the class.

Session 5: Ethical decision making

In the fifth session each group chooses a different strategy for ethical decision making. In this particular unit the various ethical frameworks used included Congress (1999), Corey et al (2003), Hill et al (1995), Loewenberg et al. (2000), Mattison (2000), Robinson and Reeser (2000), and Rothman (1998). Thus students gained an idea of the range of perspectives and emphases in the ever increasing number of decision making frameworks that proliferate with each new text on ethics. For example, Loewenberg and Dolgoff's model, which was first introduced in the early 1980s and is now into its sixth edition with Harrington, uses a priority ranking system with ethical rules and principles screens. Hill et al (1995) provide a feminist perspective, though gendering an ethics of care and polarizing male reason and feminine caring is discouraged 'for it is not clear that caring qualities pertain properly only to women' (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1027). Robinson and Reeser (2000) advocate a least harms model; Mattison's (2000) 'person in the process' model emphasises the reflective cycle and so on. We ask students to examine the

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differences and similarities between these models and their group's framework and others they have found themselves through their reading. A practitioner is invited to present students with information on setting work priorities, experiences of having a colleague practising unethically, limits of confidentiality, conflicts between organisational, professional and personal values, and case examples of situations where ethical dilemmas have arisen. Working in small groups, students apply theory to practice using a case example drawn from their field placement experience and consider the following questions:

- Is this an ethical dilemma?
- If so, what is the ethical dilemma involved?
- How do existing ethical frameworks help us deal with the dilemma?
- What, if anything, does the code of ethics say about this dilemma?

They then have to use all the knowledge they have learnt, including the ethical code, decision making frameworks and their reading to decide on an appropriate solution to a particular dilemma. They are asked to justify the analytic process they used to make this decision and to plan how they might act on the decision made. Finally, they are asked to reflect on the extent to which critical thinking, ethical codes and ethical screens or decision making frameworks have helped them think through their dilemma. Usually the session ends with the lecturer analysing one of the dilemmas presented by the students to demonstrate how to integrate knowledge from various sources. There is always a relationship between the ethical material and policy, whether agency policy or legislation relating to particular practice areas, such as child protection or ageing.

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The final assessment

When we first began teaching this learning unit the assignment (which constituted one of the assessment items for this course, the second being an essay on competing research models in social work) was conducted as an oral where students presented to two of their teachers who then engaged them in discussion about the case which they presented. More recently we have made this into a written assignment in the belief that our students needed to be able to articulate their ideas in writing since our model of teaching provided ample opportunity for students to participate in small group discussions.

In their assignment, they are required to draw together their learning on values, ethics, models of ethical decision making, the social work code of ethics as well as self-awareness about how their own values and experience influence their ethical decision making. By this time students are expected to be aware of their legal responsibilities (they undertake a legal subject taught by the law faculty in their third year) and to have some experience of agency practice (they have completed two 50-day field placements by this stage) (Plath, 2004). As an example of the way in which students fulfill this task, we now present a case example.

Case presentation

This case has been adapted from a lengthier assignment wherein the ethical dilemma arose while the student was on placement in a hospital setting. The client was Mrs Brown, an elderly woman hospitalised for a recent fall. The student was involved in deciding whether to support her return home or to recommend a nursing home placement. The student identified the ethical dilemma as ‘client safety versus client self-determination’. In thinking critically about this ethical dilemma, the student turned to Rothman’s (1998) and Mattison’s (2000) ethical decision making

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frameworks as well as her knowledge of (i) social work theory, (ii) legal requirements and (iii) the AASW code of ethics, at the same time taking (iv) client, personal, social, and agency values into consideration. In so doing the student recognised her need for knowledge pertaining to research on the impact of older people going home as against nursing home care, particularly information relating to clients who remain at home in unpredictable conditions; resources and services available in the home; statistics on injuries to elderly people who live alone and on nursing home admissions; adjustments of patients to nursing home settings; and life satisfaction at home and in institutional settings (Rothman, 1998). In order to gain a deeper level of understanding, the student also thought it might be useful to explore the terms self-determination and client safety, to examine their meaning, the conditions in which they might be limited, and the values and laws that supported them.

Relevant social work theory

In applying *structural social work theory* to the case, the aim would be to support the client in taking control of her own social structures and promote an empowering outcome, such as supporting her to be self-determining and allowing her to come to the decision, agreement or compromise about her situation rather than letting social constructions of her situation push her into a decision. The *strengths perspective* reminds us to focus on the client's strengths and to use her determination, independence, strong-spirited nature, and self-reliance as a source of empowerment (Saleebey, 1997). This might draw the worker into an advocacy role (Payne, 1997).

There are many elements of *grief and loss theory* that are related to Mrs Brown's experiences including her loss of independence, autonomy, life style, experiences, social

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supports, freedom, and even loss associated with her mortality. It is important to consider the possible effects of further grief and loss associated with this decision. Although this cannot be foreseen, the strength, security and nature of attachments of the client's current life style would need to be further explored (Worden, 1991).

In terms of *life cycle theory*, the client would be in late adulthood or the stage of integrity versus despair where people need to find meaning and satisfaction in their lives, rather than resentment and bitterness. Erikson (cited in Weiten, 2000) notes that living arrangements are a significant determination of satisfaction as 60-90% of time is spent at home making us cognizant of the importance of 'home' at this stage of life.

Legal requirements: Duty of care

The AASW Code of Ethics (1999) defines 'duty of care' as 'the obligation to take reasonable care to avoid acts or omissions which one can reasonably foresee would be likely to injure another, also the duty of people in particular circumstances and occupations to protect and control others' (p. 27). As 'to injure' means to do or cause harm of *any kind*, in the case of Mrs Brown, the student noted a catch 22 situation: Paying attention to the client's physical wellbeing might point to the preferability of nursing home care. However, this might be to the detriment of her emotional and psychological wellbeing since psychological harm might result from denying the client's decision making power and overriding her self-determination. The duty to 'protect and control' in this case could be interpreted as enforcing the worker's right to control decisions if the client's safety were deemed to be at risk. In the *Australian Social Worker and the Law*, Bates et al (1996) point out that the main focus in legal terms would be physical rather than psychological negligence as the former was easier to prove. Thus it would seem that, when it

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comes to the law and social work negligence, the threat of physical harm might be more important legally since psychological harm is more difficult to monitor and assess. The AASW Code of Ethics (1999) is not very helpful here despite its hortatory claim that ‘while social workers should generally act in accordance with the law and with organisational directives, neither the law nor the directives of others should be taken as disposing of moral issues, problems and dilemmas or as overriding moral obligations’ (p. 22).

AASW code of Ethics

The AASW Code of Ethics (1999) stipulates that social workers should promote the client’s right to self-determination, fulfillment and autonomy; fair access to public services and benefits; action to change social structures that preserve inequalities and injustice; and the client’s wellbeing. However, these injunctions may appear to hinder rather than help the resolution of this ethical dilemma. The code does not provide guidance in prioritising values and its terminology is obscure as with the notion of ‘wellbeing’. Does this mean physical or emotional wellbeing? Given that the client was mentally capable of making an informed decision, there was no reason to override her decision making power. However, there was the possibility that hospital staff would challenge this if they were not happy with her decision.

Values and reflections

The *client valued* self-determination, autonomy, independence, and her right to refuse nursing home services. So strong was her will in this regard that she wished to go home with or without services. So quickly was the decision made in this situation that there was insufficient time to explore fully the client’s values and life experiences and the family and support networks

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available to her. Clearly the *agency valued* the client's physical safety over her psychological wellbeing and, if necessary, would exert power and authority despite respect for self-determination. *Societal values* seem inclined towards nursing home care once older people become incapable of caring for themselves hence the huge public outcry in the face of cuts to government funding for nursing homes. The media is quick to highlight negligence showing that society places more value or concern about older people's physical rather than their psychological welfare. In general, however, the agency's policy is likely to have the greatest influence over the resolution of the ethical dilemma regardless of professional, client, societal or the worker's *personal values* (Schmidt, 2001).

Ethical decision making models

Ethical decision making models, such as Mattison (2000), are valuable in developing awareness as to the extent to which the values and value patterning of the worker affect the ethical decision making process. They direct us to consider background information, practice considerations, ethical components, value tensions, principles of the code of ethics, possible courses of action, priority and choice of action and finally, to come to a resolution. While awareness of personal value patterning was helpful in this case, the model gave no direction as to the steps to take to balance the influence of personal value preferences. Mattison (2000) also provides guidelines to assist in the reflective process where the student identified her tendency to honour client self-determination which would only ever be sacrificed as a last resort in the client's best interests. She questioned whether this would be possible in every case and wondered about situations where she would sacrifice client self-determination and whether she would still honour self-

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determination if it meant breaking the law, or going against agency policy. In light of these reflections, she identified the following options open to her:

Option 1: Remove all current services from the client to force her into a nursing home placement. However, this option did not seem feasible as the client could still opt to go home and without services this would place her in an extremely vulnerable and dangerous situation leaving the worker open to claims of negligence.

Option 2: Support client to go home with current services. This option would allow the client the right to self-determination and respect the client's strengths. However, it did not address client safety issues.

Option 3: Support client to go home with additional services. This option allowed the client the right to self-determination and also took the client's safety into consideration. It respected the client's strengths and also considered the worker's duty of care.

Option 4: Arrange a psychological assessment in the hopes to eliminate the client's rights to informed consent. This option would be a manipulative and unnecessary form of action as there had been no indication that the client was psychologically unstable such that she should forgo her right to informed consent. This action would not value her self-determination or her psychological wellbeing.

Option 5: Discuss the idea of a more supported environment with the client, such as a hostel placement or retirement village. This option would respect self-determination and client safety, although a further decision would then need to be made if the client did not like this idea and the

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ethical dilemma would not be resolved. There was the possibility that the student's personal values could be unintentionally imposed on the client. To minimise this, the student speculated with the idea of saying something like, 'I recognise that you have lived alone at home and I am sure that you are capable of continuing this. Another option you may want to consider for now or the future is ... but I will respect your decision if you choose not to'.

Option 6: Discuss the idea of a more supported environment with the client, such as a hostel placement or retirement village. If the client does not feel the need for a supported environment, then support the client to go home with additional services. This option meets both sides of the dilemma: It minimises conflict between self-determination and client safety and sees both sides as important and in the end makes client self-determination a priority.

Hence the student opted for option 6. This way the decision met both sides of the dilemma: It minimised conflict between self-determination and client safety and saw both sides as important and ultimately put client self-determination first.

Critical reflection

This case provides a fair reflection of the kind of response elicited from students in the ethical decision making unit where for the most part, a standard problem solving process was applied reaching a resolution of sorts. In reflecting on this work now, we believe that the strength of the program lies in the practical examination of concrete cases yet there is much about this teaching unit that we would change. First, we are not overly enthusiastic about the contemporary climate of risk assessment in which social work has moved increasingly from rational problem solving, or, stated more positively, helping clients cope with problems in living, to a defensive,

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productivist, decisionist framework where ‘adherence to an ethical stance’ has become ‘far more radical than it seems in a (neoliberal) society that is permeated with calculative reason, material self-interest and mass consumption’ (Webb, 2006, p. 33). We agree with Webb (2006) that within this context, social work as a ‘practice of value’ is more important than ever before because every society needs its champions of justice and, in ‘some very important respects social work can turn the neo-liberal economic doctrine on its head by emphasizing care, compassion, solidarity and shared values’ (p. 11). More emphasis needs to be placed in courses on values and ethics on accepting social work ‘as society’s conscience’ (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1030) and less on simplistic decisionist frameworks which imply that ethical issues can be resolved through logical thinking. As a profession social work will always experience the tension between the harshness of impersonal bureaucracies and its strong values oriented towards social justice and an ethics of care

Secondly, ethical decisionist frameworks are not that different from defensive risk assessment and calculative problem-solving regimens and create the false notion that risk and consequences can be predicted, that, as managers and politicians often imply, ‘each case is essentially controllable and predictable’ (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1024). The greater challenge is to teach students that ‘moral action (takes place) under conditions of uncertainty’ (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1016). This is made more difficult by the literature which is heavily rooted in ‘ethical dogmas already established in social work’ (p. 1016), that is to say in the calculative reasoning of Kantian and utilitarian ethics which has been taken to extremes by authors like Reamer (2001) with his social work ethics audit. How do we make students see that the ‘identity of the moral individual is ... dispositional rather than functional’ (p. 1016), that morality inheres in the *person* and not in the consequences of his or her actions. This is why

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virtue ethics is important because it places the emphasis upon the person making the decisions and not the framework or code or consequences and so on. It places emphasis on personal ‘judgement, experience, understanding, reflecting and disposition. All of this adds up to what we might call the hermeneutic social worker—the worker acting within a reflexive-interpretive process of self and other’ (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1016). Perception, reasoning, reflecting, imagining, intuiting, feeling, thinking, interpreting, and so on, so important to ‘good judgement’, are all personal capacities that can be developed, refined and improved with practice. But appreciating their importance to moral action requires that we give students a thorough grounding in moral philosophy, and most social work educators do not have this themselves. Thus we tend to take the instrumental route and use functional ethical decision making frameworks that make it easier to teach the technical aspects of the process producing graduates ‘homogenized’ by ‘determining discourses’ (p. 1031), to use postmodern parlance, without a deep understanding of morality as inhering in moral actors, in human decisions and actions. ‘It is not that the ends do not matter but that the (intended) result does not make the actor moral ... The goodness of an action lies in persons in a context of moral appraisal and their motivations and dispositions in the execution and aims of their actions’ (p. 1021). It is not merely about taking the least risky option and following pre-established procedures but often requires grappling with hairy demons that would have us tow the party line when our compassionate self cries out to respond to the call of the suffering other. Even our anti-discriminatory practice frameworks are ‘pitched at a low level of critical analysis ... (which) reduces humanity to narrow sociologically driven categories of race, gender and disability. What looks like a way into ethical analysis is actually a closing off of discussion as most social workers and students see the moral obligations towards these groups as self-evident and therefore they largely want to engage

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in considerations of practice instead of developing the virtue of providing philosophically informed *reasons* for action’ (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1019 tense of quote has been changed).

Thirdly, there is no shortcut to the wisdom of good judgement. If we are not careful, proliferating ethical decision making frameworks could become like the never ending raft of diets people latch onto when what is really required to lose weight is a lifestyle change. The moral life must be lived morally and good prudent judgement is an individual virtue that must be cultivated. While critical reflection offers us some distance from which to hone our ‘practice of value’, it is *in the moment* that decisions are made and social workers have to become virtuosos at ‘good judgement’ and always mindful that ethical action more often than not rocks the boat. Thus too much emphasis on decisionist frameworks develops the false assumption that the procedures or codes or frameworks will *resolve* the ethical problem when clearly, there are no answers, only choices, and often the right choices make waves. Still our strong values make it imperative that we rock that boat and make those waves if that’s what’s needed for compassionate and just practice.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have described a learning unit incorporating values, ethics, policy, and research in the final year of study in a Bachelor of Social Work program at an Australian university. We showed how we drew together these elements in an integrated, experience based approach to teaching students about the relationship between these aspects of social work practice. We described the learning unit and presented an example of a student’s work to show how students learn to integrate knowledge from a variety of sources and critical thinking to enhance their

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ability to make ethical decisions in practice. In reflecting critically on the course, we express caution about over-reliance on decisionist frameworks.

Students found this course extremely challenging and the most difficult hurdle for them was identifying an ethical dilemma from their fieldwork practice. Making distinctions between moral – things that we can, to some extent, control or influence – and non-moral – things beyond our control – matters was not much help and, as McBeath and Webb (2002) note, this moral/non-moral distinction is redundant' (p. 1027). In relational terms, moral matters are a 'call to responsibility thrust upon us in our encounter with the face of the Other' (p. 1027). Thus students needed considerable guidance in identifying ethical dilemmas and perhaps the emphasis placed on 'dilemmas' distracted them from going with their gut feel – for moral issues generally evoke strong emotions – and perhaps this is the key to the call to moral action. Easier for students was relating to the literature on ethical decision making frameworks. We are not that anxious about keeping pace with new and emerging models of ethical decision making for it seems these days there is one born every minute within our technicist decisionist culture. More important, however, is keeping abreast of developments in the field of ethics and gaining experience in applying knowledge to concrete cases. Where ethics is concerned this is the best mode of teaching an integrated approach and helping students to draw on their experience and reading in all aspects of the course, as well as their learning in related disciplines.

In a subsequent course, students went into agencies to collect information on agency policies and protocols to guide ethical practice. They gained an understanding of the usefulness and limitations of ethical codes and guidelines, and the importance of critical reflection, though we want them to understand that the responsibility to make the right decision happens in the moment and not at the remove of critical reflection. We can learn from our critical reflections but

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they always involve a reinterpretation of direct experience and there is no avoiding the intuitive use of self in social work. As England (1986) wisely pointed out all those years ago in his *Social Work as Art*, this has to be managed rather than avoided, for social workers offer *personal* services and are unavoidably an important part of those services. The art of what we do is implicit in the ‘work’ of the social – in constantly grappling with the tension between our strong values and the uncaring managerial institutions in which we work. Ever will it be that people need caring professionals to give bureaucracies a compassionate face and to serve as society’s conscience. If we can give students the courage to heed this call then we can rest assured our job is well done.

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