



# The ideological dilemma of subordination of self versus self-care: Identity construction of the 'ethical social worker'

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## Abstract

Discourse analysis, while under-utilized in social work, is useful for understanding the social construction of identity as negotiated in talk with others. The article has twin aims. First, the author argues that identity is a fragmented co-construction, changing moment-to-moment in context with others. This argument is supported by analyzing an extract from a research study on ethics in social work practice, in which a practitioner struggled with an ideological dilemma. How 'ideological dilemmas' differ from the more commonly used notion of 'ethical dilemmas' in social work is addressed. The second goal is to heighten awareness of the utility of both discourse analysis and 'ideological dilemmas' for use as theoretical tools for social work. The particular ideological dilemma the worker had to negotiate to be seen as an 'ethical practitioner' was that of the subordination of the self versus self-care.

## Keywords

Conversation analysis, discourse analysis, discursive psychology, ethical dilemma, ethics, identity, ideological dilemma, self, self-care, social work

## Introduction

Discourse analysis has not been a major approach in the discipline of social work, yet it holds great promise for the profession. The primary goal for this article is to demonstrate its utility for understanding the social construction of identity as negotiated in talk with

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others. Discourse analysis will be used to illustrate that identity is a fragmentary and fluid construction, changing in context and through co-creation with others in a moment-to-moment fashion.

This goal will be realized using an exemplar from a large-scale research project on ethics in social work practice. To practice ethically, social workers must confront dilemmatic situations. However, these circumstances are often viewed as private and individual struggles. Historically, the major tool used by social workers to examine these situations has been that of 'ethical dilemmas'. Billig et al. (1988) have offered an alternative concept of 'ideological dilemmas' which operate as taken-for-granted notions in society and are the preconditions of thought. How the concept of an ideological dilemma differs from the more familiar notion of an ethical dilemma will be addressed. By exploring an ideological dilemma, the social co-construction of one aspect of a worker's identity as an ethical individual will be illustrated. The particular ideological dilemma investigated is that of subordination of the self versus self-care, a common theme found in the research study. An excerpt is provided in which the two sides of this ideological dilemma are presented and analyzed. The second goal of this article is to demonstrate the usefulness of the concept of ideological dilemmas and of discourse analysis, as theory and method, so that these might be utilized as additional conceptual tools in social work.

The article will begin with the theoretical framework. There will then be an elaboration of the differences between the concepts of ideological dilemmas and ethical dilemmas, and an exploration of the particular ideological dilemma of subordination of the self versus self-care. That section will be followed by an explanation of the research project and the provision of the particular extract used. I will then offer an analysis and discussion of the central ideas. Let us turn to that theoretical framework now.

## **Theoretical framework**

There is a relatively new trend in social work to utilize discourse analysis for the examination of social work practice and empirical research data (e.g. Hall and White, 2005; Hjørne, 2005; Juhila and Abrams, 2011; Suoninen and Jokinen, 2005). Discourse analysis is an umbrella term which covers a range of traditions in the social sciences, from disciplines such as psychology, linguistics and philosophy to theoretical approaches to knowledge, such as post-structural thinking (Potter, 1997; Wetherell, 2001; Willig, 2008). What unites the various traditions is a theory of language that emphasizes that social practices are mediated through discourse and approaches which investigate people's talk as action (Wetherell, 2001). Discourse analysts argue that language is not reflective of reality, but is productive of what is taken to be truth. It is through language that social practices and versions of the social world are constructed (Willig, 2008). Analysts suggest that there are innumerable possible readings of the social world and that these should be investigated through language.

In addition to theoretical approaches, discourse analysis also provides a constellation of research methods with which to study those theoretical directions. As a research method, discourse analysis is used to study the data of discourse, since it starts from the premise that what we see as 'truth' is, to a large extent, the consequence of what is socially-based accepted wisdom constructed through people's accounts. One tradition

within discourse analysis, utilized in this study, is discursive psychology (Wetherell et al., 2001; Willig, 2008). Willig suggests that discursive psychology is 'primarily concerned with *how* people *use* discursive resources in order to achieve interpersonal objectives in social interaction' (2008: 95–96, italics in the original). The emphasis in discursive psychology is on what is happening in a particular strip of talk. It can be used to explore the construction of individual identities. For example, the 'good and ethical' social worker needs to be negotiated as an identity for individuals (Edley, 2001), and this is done in part through talk in interaction with others.

This understanding of the negotiation of identity of the ethical practitioner is in stark contrast to dominant discourses regarding what constitutes the 'ethical social worker'. Traditional approaches in social work, such as utilitarianism (Mill, 1957) and deontology (Kant, 1991), have assumed a liberal humanist notion of the person as an autonomous individual, whose selfhood is an internal essential construction – a unified consciousness that primarily endures over time. While there are subjugated discourses, such as ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Tronto, 1993), postmodern ethics (Bauman, 1993; Levinas, 1991) and ethics of feelings (Nussbaum, 2001; Vetlesen, 1994), which take more dialogical and affectively-oriented approaches to what constitutes the ethical worker, the principal discourses assume the primacy of reasoning by a self-determining and free agent. The independence of the actor to make such decisions is an underlying assumption (Hugman, 2005). Additionally, rationalism, the 'view that all aspects of the physical and social world, including human experience, can be explained by means of reason' (Hugman, 2005: 170), is key. The social actor in these models, rather than being seen as constructing what constitutes ethics or identity in discourse with others, is viewed statically and dualistically, with the practitioner being the expert in relation to clients, with the power and ultimately the accountability to make ethical decisions.

The principal tools for achieving the goals of ethical practice are the utilization of codes of ethics, decision-making models (Barsky, 2010; Mattison, 2000; Nash, 2002) and the notion of ethical dilemmas (discussed later) as the constructs for examining contradictions that must be overcome to make ethical choices. The codes are principal based, designed to be universally applicable, regardless of context or material circumstances. Morality is seen as 'a compact, propositionally codifiable, impersonally action-guiding code within an agent' (Walker, 1998: 7). Walker has referred to this view of morality as a 'theoretical-juridical' model (1998: 7). She distinguishes five features of the dominant discourses that underpin these models: they are intellectualist, individualist, impersonal, socially modular, and transcend history and culture (Walker, 1998: 9). By socially modular, she is suggesting that 'core or essential knowledge ... remains the same', regardless of the context (1998: 9). Consequently, the ethical practitioner 'in action resembles a judge, manager, bureaucrat, or games-man, exercising patterns of judgment appropriate to legal, institutional, or administrative contexts, or games' (1998: 21).

However, the contention in discourse analysis is that identity is highly variable and situated. Therefore, what emerges as the 'ethical social worker' varies over time, in response to and in conjunction with others, and can lead to inconsistencies rather than being a constant core ethical self. It is through being accountable and resolving what can be taken as discrepancies that people's versions are taken as credible. This is a

performance that is accomplished through a series of discursive strategies that can be scrutinized in talk (Hjörne, 2005; Juhila and Abrams, 2011; Wetherell et al., 2001), allowing for the analysis of diverse aspects of identity (Clary-Lemon, 2010; Josey, 2010; Mayes, 2010; Van de Mierop, 2011) such as one's ethical self.

In addition to using discursive psychology in this article, I have also used conversation analysis which allows for fine-grained analyses of the functions of language in the study of communication between individuals (Wetherell et al., 2001). I will apply some of the principles of conversation analysis to the proffered extract. But first, I would like to detail the ideological dilemma that confronted many practitioners in the study which is used as the illustration in this article. Following that, I will analyze how one research participant, with input from the interviewer, managed the contradictions of an ideological dilemma to see herself as 'ethical'.

## **The ideological dilemma: Subordination of one's own needs versus care of the self**

### *Subordinating one's own needs*

In social work, one commonsense aspect of professional responsibility is to act for the benefit of others and to put the needs of those served ahead of one's own needs. A profession involves 'committing its members to ... a kind of work which has as its purpose the rendering of public service' (*Webster's*, 1981: 1811.) Social workers are given authority, power and remuneration in exchange for providing that service to others, while setting aside their own interests and needs. Whereas there are those who would critique professionalization as in fact a self-interested process enhancing the benefits of its members, at times to the detriment of their clients (Flynn, 2002; Margolin, 1997), there are others who argue that altruism is an essential ingredient in the very definition of being a professional (Crueess et al., 2004). This subordination of the self in professional relationships is held as a *moral* responsibility, underlined in codes of ethics for social workers throughout the Euro-Western world. For example, in the International Federation of Social Work Codes of Ethics (2012b), it is stated: 'Social workers should not subordinate the needs or interests of people who use their services to their own needs or interests.' Similar statements can be found in the codes of ethics of social work in Australia, Canada, Israel, Sweden, the USA and the UK, for example (International Federation of Social Workers, (IFSW) 2012a).

'Going the extra mile', 'doing a little bit more' – these phrases are part of an interpretative repertoire on ethics in social work practice. An *interpretative repertoire* is a 'culturally familiar and habitual line of argument comprised of recognizable themes, common places and tropes' (Wetherell, 1998: 400). It represents a relatively consistent way of speaking about objects and situations. Talk is made up of *interpretative repertoires* that are the raw material from which individuals draw to talk about events and ideas in their lives. The term bears some resemblance to the Foucauldian concept of 'discourse', but tends to be utilized – particularly by social psychologists – in contrast to the term discourse, to emphasize the agentic quality of individuals' talk and to refer to more local rather than larger-scale conceptual abstractions such as 'ethics' (Edley, 2001). For example, the US code of ethics in social work makes the expectation of going the extra mile

explicit. In the document, the very first ethical principle listed is 'service' and an element of that is articulated: 'Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service)' (National Association of Social Workers (NASW), 2012: n.p.). Therefore, being an ethical practitioner involves not only subordinating one's own needs, but in fact going further than one's job description would entail.

### *Self-care and avoiding stress conditions such as burnout*

At the same time that there is an ideology of subordination of the self, it is also common sense that practitioners must look after themselves and not do so much that they cannot function. But when is doing a bit more ethical behaviour and when is it too much, leading to a charge of not practicing self-care? It is recognized that in social work, listening to the suffering of others and being exposed to traumatic situations on a daily basis is very difficult physically and psychologically. While the need for self-care may not be the dominant side of this ideological dilemma, the interpretative repertoire of self-care has emerged as a familiar trope in social work. For example, the same document discussed earlier (IFSW, 2012b) states: 'Social workers have a duty to take necessary steps to care for themselves professionally and personally in the workplace and in society, in order to ensure that they are able to provide appropriate services.' Self-care is an *ethical* imperative, in order to protect clients and to ensure adequate service. Its moral implications are underscored by it being a principle in the code of ethics itself. To illustrate its importance, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), the overarching organization in the USA, had as the title of a newsletter in November 2008: 'The profession must prioritize self-care' (NASW, 2008).

Individual practitioners are expected to use behavioural strategies to avoid, or at least minimize, the effects of exposure to the pain of service users. They are held accountable for their own health, even though there is recognition of the significant impact that broader structural issues play in these psychological effects (Lizano and Mor Barak, 2012). And the consequences of not looking after oneself are viewed as burnout, secondary traumatization or compassion fatigue (Canfield, 2005; Kanter, 2007; Newell and MacNeil, 2010) – familiar interpretative repertoires in social work parlance. If participants are viewed as going too far over the line of doing the 'little bit more', they will be judged as unable to care. The inability to 'apply the brakes' on caring can be viewed as being in an unhealthy state, or as being addicted to work (workaholics), or as having poor boundaries and not being credible as informants and representatives of the social work community for whom they wish to speak. Furthermore, this 'problem' can result in disciplinary tactics. Currently, in some provinces in Canada, a requirement in professional responsibility is to identify if there is some physical or psychological hindrance to adequately performing one's duties. Practitioners can be sanctioned for not revealing these limitations.

### *The ideological dilemma*

Consequently, professional subordination of personal needs and interests versus the responsibility for self-care represent one ideological dilemma. How is the concept of

ideological dilemma different from that of ethical dilemma, a key theoretical concept in social work? What distinguishes these two concepts is that ethical dilemmas are viewed by traditional theorists as conflicting principles and practices that are private matters necessitating decision making for an *individual* and are understood as internal thought processes requiring action. Weinberg (2009: 144) states that an ethical dilemma refers to 'two or more courses of action which are in conflict (and will potentially have both positive and negative consequences) but where each action can be defended as viable and appropriate' and a decision needs to be made. Ideological dilemmas, on the other hand, are regarded as contradictory principles and practices that emerge as *discourses* in the *society* or culture as a whole, taken as the common sense of those communities, and not necessarily perceived by a person as simultaneously contradictory ideologies (Billig et al., 1988).

In the book *Ideological Dilemmas*, Billig et al. (1988) contrast two notions of ideology. The first, referred to as 'intellectual ideology' (1988: 28), is viewed as a fixed and internally consistent intellectual system, a Marxist understanding of ideology. This interpretation is the more commonly understood meaning of ideology. According to Billig et al. (1988: 27), it is a 'system of political, religious or philosophical thinking' which is internally consistent and where 'all has been settled psychologically in advance' (1988: 30). While I have reservations about the lack of individual agency in this explanation, the authors argue that this first conception represents a 'complete, unified system of beliefs which tells the individual how to react, feel and think' (1988: 2).

Their second concept of ideology is 'lived ideology', 'society's way of life' that '[passes] for common sense within a society' (Billig et al., 1988: 27), the 'condensed wisdom' (Edley, 2001: 203) composed of the principles, ideals and practices of a particular culture. This understanding of lived ideology is rife with contradictions requiring individuals to think. The focus of their book and this article is on the second conceptualization of ideology – the 'non-formalized consciousness' (Billig et al., 1988: 28) of a society.

From lived ideology, ideological dilemmas emerge. I am referring to ideological dilemmas as contradictory themes (Billig et al., 1988: 4) that can arise as a dialogue within the self about opposing values, rather than as a closed cohesive system of thought understood by ideological theorists such as Marx (the first notion of ideology). The ideological ideals and principles may be fought out internally by an individual but they are present in the culture at large as well, making them the building blocks available for individuals' thoughts on a matter, as well as on the construction of individual identity. They are the taken-for-granted notions in a society and are the '*social* preconditions' (Billig et al., 1988: 8, italics added) of the decision making that is the focus in ethical dilemmas. The discourses that develop as the common sense of a society contain both their 'own thesis and antithesis' (1988: 24), and these opposing themes 'express moral evaluations, and ... enable opposing moral judgements to be made' (1988: 16). Thus, they create a medium for looking at how the identity of the ethical practitioner must be negotiated. But, even in intellectual ideology (the first understanding of ideology), what is being justified 'takes its sense from what is being criticized' (1988: 37) and, to understand this, one could go to the context and see the counter themes which at times are explicit, but at others may only be implied.



Of course, dilemmas exist in practice, not just in discourse. Ideological dilemmas ‘can give rise to actual dilemmas in which choices have to be made’ (Billig et al., 1988: 144), an ongoing feature of an applied field such as social work, and these represent the *ethical* dilemmas confronting practitioners. Nonetheless, the concept of ideological dilemma is a significant addition to social work ethics theorizing, since such an idea assumes that the issues confronting a practitioner are bigger, broader and more encompassing than can ever be resolved by an individual agent, and prefigure the decision-making processes based on principle-oriented codes of ethics that are the hallmark of ethical thinking in the dominant discourses of social work. The attention in this article is on these discursive preconditions that give rise to tensions and dilemmas for practitioners, rather than the decision-making processes that have been the traditional emphasis in social work ethics.

In speaking about one’s practice as a social worker, it is necessary to navigate this tightrope of an ideological dilemma. This dilemma arose repeatedly in a study on ethics in practice and the participants had to manage it in the interview situation to be viewed as ethical practitioners. I will describe that study now and will then analyze one extract from the research as an illustration.

## The research study

The empirical data for this article was generated by a three-year qualitative exploratory study of front-line social workers in Canada, conducted during 2009–2012. The question for the project was how, in attempts to act ethically, practitioners experience and address the constraints and paradoxes in their day-to-day practice. Workers were recruited through requests to two associations of social work in the provinces of Ontario and Nova Scotia, which have different demographics and governance structures. A total of 26 front-line practitioners were interviewed; 52 individual semi-structured interviews were conducted, with a range of one to four interviews per participant, based on the detail provided to complete the interview guide. Six focus groups were also held. The practitioners represented a broad cross-section in fields of practice, including health, child welfare, mental health, addictions, education, for-profit organizations and family service associations. The socio-demographics of the group included workers who were white, Aboriginal, people of colour, rural and urban participants, LGBTQ (lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, questioning) participants and individuals with disabilities. The average age of the participants was 44. All participants had at least one social work degree and most had completed their Master of Social Work (MSW). The average number of years in social work practice was 15.

The research team consisted of the principal investigator (the author), two co-investigators, a consultant and a team of research assistants, one of whom is the interviewer in the following extract. All data was coded and managed through the use of ATLAS.ti. Every participant gave informed consent and was offered the opportunity to see the transcripts of their interviews. The research was approved by ethics review boards in two universities.

I will now turn to the extract from the research study. This extract was taken from the third of four interviews that were conducted with ‘Annie’ (a pseudonym chosen by the participant). She was a social worker who worked in an urban hospital. This excerpt

illustrates the way that Annie's social identity as an ethical subject was shaped in the interview process. While many participants struggled with the ideological dilemma discussed previously, this particular extract was chosen because the conflict for Annie between the two sides of the ideological dilemma is vividly expressed and the fluctuation between the two poles of the dilemma occurs within lines of each other. Edley (2001: 223) suggests that oscillations are an indicator that an ideological dilemma exists 'as people switch back and forth between two equally balanced but contradictory aspects of a culture's common sense'. In this excerpt, Annie must show that she cares deeply, is willing to go the extra mile to meet client needs, but, at the same time, that she can be taken seriously since she has not burnt out and is able to function effectively. One should not assume that I am suggesting there is some manipulative intent on Annie's part in this construction. Discourse analysts propose that all competent human communicators use discourse to fulfill certain functions (Wetherell, 2001). These tasks include being accountable or persuading others – functions we will see enacted in this excerpt.

## Extracts

In this strip of talk, the interviewer, Cindy, starts the thread by asking whether Annie ever feels jaded or burnt out. Her question actively sets in place specific categories (namely those who are and are not burnt out) and contributes to the potential ideological dilemma facing Annie. Due to space considerations, I have omitted a few sections of the interview, including Cindy's question to Annie.

NS13C Annie: I – the, so the way I deal with it is I have worked harder in the last couple years to make sure I have other interests.

1 Cindy: *OK.*

2

3 NS13C Annie: So I focus on things about what, I, I stop my work day ... There,  
4 there's a lot of rumour that goes around that I work here 'til the wee hours or something  
5 and I don't know, I think early on when I first got here and really trying to build this  
6 position, cause I had to build it from scratch with others, you know, with the advisory  
7 group I had, I think I gave that impression? But I don't; I leave at, you know, five  
8 o'clock and, and I'm done. There might be the occasional time but not unlike anybody  
9 else. I mean it's once every few months or something, I might come in if I'm in town  
10 and I want to get something and I'll put in two hours on a weekend or, or stay late one  
11 hour or something; but it's nothing outrageous ... So I stop; I have other interests  
12 outside of work. Mind you that's other committees but that's another matter. I do other  
13 community, things in my community. I also live outside the city.

The next segment is omitted. In it, Annie and Cindy discuss the advantages of living outside the city and the commute as a means to shut out work stresses.

14

15 Cindy: Well, it sounds like a great way of establishing some, you know, really



- 16 significant emotional and mental boundaries. And also you've created physical  
 17 boundaries also.  
 18  
 19 NS13C Annie: Yeah.  
 20  
 21 Cindy: As ways of helping yourself, you know, get past the stuff.  
 22  
 23 NS13C Annie: Yeah. Where I need to do better is during the work day. I don't take a  
 24 break. I typically work through lunch and I just keep going, going, going the whole day.  
 25 So, I mean I eat, but I'll eat at my desk.  
 26  
 27 Cindy: *Right*.  
 28  
 29 NS13C Annie: And, I might, if I take a break, my, my way of taking a break is more  
 30 mental for a few moments. So I might lean back and close my eyes for five minutes  
 31 while I'm in here after I've eaten just to recharge. But I, typically I read the news or  
 32 something online, so, it's not much of a break. Read the Obits, there's a break, yeah.

At this interval, again a brief section has been left out of the transcript. In it, Cindy asks Annie her reasons for being in the study and Annie replies that she has been a researcher herself and therefore feels some empathy for the need for volunteers in the recruitment process.

- 33 Cindy: Are there times when your personal ethics conflict with what you think are  
 34 your professional ethics? [...]  
 35  
 36 NS13C Annie: My personal ethics - - - I don't know, I don't know, I don't, I can't  
 37 think of times where they - - I th-, so, OK, I can think it, of only, there's probably more  
 38 instances, if I, if they, come up, not in conversation, but there's only one thing that  
 39 stands out to me. One of the reasons is because a, a professor told me a long time ago  
 40 that when you become a social worker, because of the nature of our work, you live that.  
 41 Like a certain personality gets into social work and it gets into your skin and, and that is  
 42 me. I mean I live, eat and breathe this work and I take a lot of what I believe in and how  
 43 I practice into my life.

There is one final brief stretch of talk that has been left out. In it, Annie gives an example of the merging of her social work identity that occurred in a community meeting.

- 44 NS13C Annie: Sometimes I keep, I keep my, I keep going. Like with, even though I  
 45 shut off the, the stresses or the issues, the way I approach life is, is much how  
 46 I've ... I've taken to my life much of what I learned through work.  
 47  
 48 Cindy: Right. So you shut off the work- work part of it. The work-work, but the, but the  
 49 social work part is in you so when you're in other, you're sort of approaching life from  
 50 that perspective.  
 51  
 52 NS13C Annie: Yes, I, I do...

## Analysis

Annie begins her response with a statement about working harder to have other interests (lines 3, 11–12), indicating a need to be accountable for her behaviour and to explain it as being within appropriate bounds and not slipping into doing too much work. Having other interests is a component of the discourse on the avoidance of burnout (Newell and MacNeil, 2010) but also functions as *stake inoculation*. People have a stake in ensuring that others view them in particular ways and add a piece of discourse, stake inoculation, to prevent that view from being undermined (Potter, 1997). After a brief agreement token of ‘OK’ by Cindy, Annie continues to offer statements that shore up this perspective, such as leaving at 5 o’clock and being ‘done’ (lines 7–8). However within this paragraph, Annie also animates the voices of other workers who might disagree with her perspective. She states: ‘there’s a lot of rumour that goes around that I work here ’til the wee hours or something and I don’t know’ (lines 4–5). An interesting feature is the use of ‘I don’t know’, which has been suggested as a common means of stake inoculation (Potter, 1997). Much of the work of the following strip of talk is to dispute this conceivable charge, such as working the ‘occasional time but not unlike anybody else’ (lines 8–9). Hesitations, repairs (‘not unlike anybody else’, lines 8–9) and downgrades (‘I mean it’s once every few months’, line 9) are indicators of the need for expressive caution in situations that are ‘delicate’ (Silverman, 2001), such as managing the potential criticism of overworking. And when Annie stays extra time, it is ‘nothing outrageous’ (line 11).

What is significant about the following included sequence (starting at line 15) is the subtle co-creation between Annie and the interviewer of a building block of Annie’s identity. Annie being seen as ethically able to do her job is supported by such statements of Cindy’s as ‘it sounds like a great way of establishing some, you know, really significant emotional and mental boundaries. And also you’ve created physical boundaries’ (lines 15–17), to which Annie agrees. In the profession, it is understood that ensuring boundaries assists in avoiding burnout. By suggesting that Annie establishes boundaries, Cindy has offered Annie support for her claims. Social meaning is a joint production through which a shared sense of the ‘truth’ of who Annie ‘is’ develops. In this section, Annie is produced as the practitioner who manages self-care and protects herself through boundaries. This process of mutual construction will become even more important at the point where Annie’s identity as the ethical practitioner cannot be easily reconciled with the need to be altruistic and go that extra mile, a point to which I will return shortly.

In lines 23–25, we see a slipping towards the other pole in the ideological dilemma. Here, Annie acknowledges: ‘I need to do better ... during the work day. I don’t take a break.’ This utterance harkens to the need for self-care and her ‘failure’ to do that. At the same time, she is constructing herself as the self-sacrificing worker who even gives up lunch in order to be the ‘good’ worker. She elaborates with a number of statements, including: ‘I just keep going, going, going the whole day. So, I mean I eat, but I’ll eat at my desk’ (lines 24–25). Again, we see the qualifications, downgrades and hesitations. Annie says, ‘if I take a break, my, my way of taking a break is more mental for a few moments’ (lines 29–30). The discursive work this statement does is to suggest that while one might not be able to see her attempts at self-care, they are occurring internally. Even the type of break Annie takes shows her as a caring individual, as implied by her

statement (which seems to be expressed with some humour) that when she takes a break, it is to read 'the Obits, there's a break, yeah' (line 32).

Identities are viewed as 'troubled' when they are inconsistent, and those discrepancies need to be accounted for and explained (Wetherell, 1998). Ideological dilemmas, by their very nature, create situations where there will be inconsistencies in the discourses of individuals that could result in an individual being seen as not credible and having a troubled identity. At this juncture, Annie's identity as an ethical practitioner is troubled since the two positions cannot easily be reconciled: the individual who looks after herself to avoid burnout and is not 'addicted' to work versus the person who is altruistic and goes the extra mile to ensure that sound and ethical work is done on behalf of one's service users.

'Are there times when your personal ethics conflict with what you think are your professional ethics?', Cindy queries (lines 33–34). At this point in the talk, the contradictions in Annie's identity reach a crescendo as she tries to manage the ideological dilemma. She responds with: 'My personal ethics - - - I don't know, I don't know, I don't, I can't think of times where they - - I th-, so, OK' (lines 36–37). Each dash in the transcription refers to a pause of approximately one second. So Annie's hesitation, followed by three 'I don't knows', again represents the stake inoculation, perturbation and need for excessive caution discussed above. Annie articulates that there is no separation between social work as a job and her identity as an individual (lines 40–42). Social work gets 'into [her] skin', and she states 'I live, eat and breathe this work'. The separation between self and work is effaced in this discourse. This is clearly the antithesis – in terms of poles of the ideological dilemma – of the earlier suggestion that her overwork is 'nothing outrageous' (line 11) and similar to other people's work patterns (lines 8–9). At this moment in the talk, she is her job. What follows (lines 44–46) is a discursive effort to deal with her troubled identity. While she 'keeps going' (line 44), she importantly adds, 'I shut off the, the stresses or the issues' (lines 44–45). Her identity work is balanced here between the two opposites of keeping going and shutting off the stress of the issues.

Earlier, I discussed the co-construction of identity. Cindy aids Annie in a resolution of the trouble at this point in the talk. She offers (lines 48–50): 'So you shut off the work-work part of it. The work-work, but the, but the social work part is in you so when you're in other, you're sort of approaching life from that perspective.' Annie agrees with this way of managing the trouble in her identity (line 52).

## Discussion

In this analysis, we have seen the fluctuations between two sides of an ideological dilemma. In order to be ethical, many other practitioners in the study expressed not only the need to subordinate their own needs, but also the compulsion to go beyond the proscribed limits of their job responsibilities. With increasing managerialism, bureaucratization and accountability, there has been a growing emphasis on quantity and the bottom line rather than on quality and relationship in the field of social work (Banks, 2011; Burton and Van Den Broek, 2009; Healy, 2009; Meagher and Parton, 2004). It becomes harder and harder to hang onto the moral aspects of the work, with the risk of social work becoming a rational-technical affair rather than a practical-moral endeavour (Parton,

2000; Smith, 2011). Furthermore, with the erosion of resources, 'poorly funded organizations must rely on the values and commitment of workers to give as much as possible' (Kosny and Eakin, 2008: 163). Thus, in order to practice ethically, practitioners must go the extra mile often due to the inadequacy of the resources or to overcome the bureaucratic requirements of their work environment (Kosny and Eakin, 2008; Smith, 2011; Strike et al., 2004). In fact, doing extra is encouraged. As an illustration, the British Columbia Association of Social Workers provided a special award to recognize a member who exemplified 'what it means to live out ... [the] core social work values. "She always goes the extra mile to make sure our clients are well served" stated her supervisor' (*The Citizen*, 2011: n.p.).

Several other participants in the study extended this understanding of going the extra mile to view their profession as a calling or mission, entailing sacrifice. 'This wasn't a job. This was a mission', said one participant. The notion of sacrifice contributes to the discourse that makes doing more dominant as a *modus operandi* for ethical practice in social work. Social work began as a fledgling profession through the missionary zeal of Christian women (Burke, 1996), and while many of the women subscribed to the same religious origins as earlier evangelical volunteers, by secularizing theology and constructing themselves as experts they were able to maintain their religious roots but fit into the burgeoning trend which emphasized science as the privileged discourse (Irving, 1992; Moffatt, 1996; Struthers, 1987). However, the original religious underpinnings are there like the art process of sgraffito where one scratches beneath the top layer of colour to reveal another underneath – the historical concept of social work as a sacred mission.

At another level, the ideological dilemma of doing a bit more versus self-care underscores a constant back-and-forth dilemma for social workers, namely the needs and concerns of the individual (in this case, the practitioner herself) versus the interests of society as a whole. This is implicit rather than explicit. There is always the question of at what point an individual should put his or her own interests ahead of those of society. And that query is amplified for professionals, given their public mandate. It is also a gendered concern, with women as a whole perceiving responsibilities to care for others as a major trope directed at them; and in a profession that is highly gendered and where values of caring are central. There is literature to support the notion that exploitation has been a dynamic of concern in the caring professions (e.g. Baines et al., 2011; Bubeck, 1995).

However, we have seen, as exemplified in the analysis shown, that practitioners are aware of and also articulate the opposite side of the ideological dilemma, namely, the need for self-care and putting limits on their work lives. The dominant discourses about ethics which reflect a liberal-humanist understanding of the self veer towards seeing the self as primarily integrated and autonomous, although there are contradictory tensions in these approaches. That interpretation is queried theoretically in this article. Instead, the self is viewed as fragmented, shifting and co-constructed moment to moment in dialogue with others. This alternative has important implications for the reliance on decision-making procedures and codes of ethics as the primary theoretical tools for ethics in the helping professions, since more collaborative and contextual processes are suggested by this turn to discourse (Weinberg and Campbell, in press).

While one could argue that since the interview process is not a situation of naturally occurring speech one cannot make these assertions about the self, there is an opposing

argument that, in our society, the interview has become a standard and natural form of interaction in its own right with particular conventions and cultural roots which lend themselves to the use of discourse analysis (Taylor and Littleton, 2006). Furthermore, discourse analysis has been effectively utilized in a large variety of naturally occurring situations, including that of counselling (Silverman, 2001), to support the same claims about the fluid, contradictory and multiply-constructed nature of the self.

## Conclusions

Discourse analysis as both a theoretical approach and a constellation of methods is particularly useful in the field of social work. This article is one illustration of its utility. Through an analysis of talk as interaction, it allows the complexities and ambiguities of ethics in practice to be laid bare, and the rationalist assumption that practitioners are internally consistent can be rendered questionable (Billig et al., 1988). It opens new vistas for understanding the construction of the ethical self as an unfinished canvas on which the artist is continually reapplying the paint.

I have investigated the intransigent nature of ideological dilemmas inherent in discourse and the preconditions of ethical struggles for social workers for one such dilemma: subordination of the self versus self-care for professionals in social work. Examining this ideological dilemma is important for social workers since taken-for-granted ideas left unexamined can lead to stress or exploitation. This is particularly a risk in a profession that is gendered and where the interpretative repertoire of the value of caring is dominant. Additionally, the context of managerialism in which social workers are currently operating actually exacerbates the risk that professional social workers will be ill-used.

However, it is beyond the scope of this article to address solutions to this conundrum, in part because no resolution will ever adequately address any ideological dilemma – such dilemmas are in the very nature of society (Billig et al., 1988). The ideological dilemma of ethical responsibility to do a little more versus the injunction for self-care is like an Escher painting of birds and fish. What is foreground and what is background will always keep shifting.

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