The Social Construction of Social Work Ethics: Politicizing and Broadening the Lens

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The Social Construction of Social Work Ethics: Politicizing and Broadening the Lens

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Structural barriers and the intrinsic paradoxes of practice often lead to a discrepancy between what a social worker would like to do and what that individual actually implements, resulting in ethical tensions. However, the canonical approach to ethics has had a narrow perspective on what constitutes ethics and has tended to treat these issues as peripheral rather than central to the social construction of ethics. This essay provides an explanation of how the construction of ethics evolved and what interests are served by this viewpoint, thereby illuminating the political ramifications of the current social construction. The author suggests ways to broaden the lens of focus.

KEYWORDS   ethics, social construction, structure, paradox, history

In social work, at times there is a discrepancy between what a worker would prefer to do ethically and that individual's ability to actualize those preferences in practice (Weinberg, 2007). Practitioners express ethical tension about these incongruities, which are commonly caused by the structural obstacles or the inherent paradoxes that workers encounter in their practice. *Structure* refers to "social regularities and objective patterns external to individual action, intentions, and meanings, and not reducible to the sum of those meanings or actions" (Kondrat, 2002), namely, broad institutional and societal patterns. As examples, stresses emerge from insufficient resources, problematic institutional policies and legal requirements, scarce organizational supports, cost containments, inadequate staffing, frequent reorganizations, and the intense work pace (Aronson & Sammon, 2000; Baines, 2007a,b; Healy, 2000; Smith, 2007). In a 2008 National Association of Social Work study, the greatest stressors for professional social workers were identified as the lack of time to do

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the job (31%) and workloads (25%) (Arrington, 2008). At the 2008 Nova Scotia Association of Social Workers' Annual Meeting, the entire focus of the meeting was on ethics, and several speakers addressed issues of expanding needs combined with shrinking resources (Donovan, 2008; Jensen, 2008; Kirby, 2008; Weinberg, 2008c). In a qualitative study, a worker identified that she had $50 a month to distribute to an entire caseload of young new mothers who were living on the streets (Weinberg, 2004a). When a package of diapers costs anywhere from $20 to $30, and one can of powered formula costs a minimum of $15, no matter how conscientiously that worker distributes the discretionary money, there will be a significant shortage, and she will be in the unenviable position of having to determine between the have-nots and the more severely impacted have-nots to determine whom should receive those inadequate funds. When an income assistance worker has 200 people in her caseload (Weinberg, 2008a), how can she behave in a way consistent with her conscience, given the improbability of satisfactorily addressing the needs of that number of service users? In a mixed-methods study, Lonne, McDonald, and Fox (2004) explored the extent to which restructured service delivery was affecting ethical practice. They determined that market-based reforms were having an "often-understated negative effect on ethical practice" (p. 345). Why are those effects often understated? This article looks at how the social construction of ethics contributes to that lack of acknowledgment.

Along with the structural barriers that impinge on ethics, social workers inhabit a world of paradox and are inescapably engaged in conflicting social processes. One paradox is the understanding of the helping profession as involving principled behavior aimed at liberatory activity for service users, and at the same time, workers are members of institutional regimes that require elements of moral regulation. Individuals with expertise have an allegiance to both the political powers that granted them the title of expert and also to the individuals they are authorized to help (Rose & Miller, 1992). The most obvious example of this is the role of Children's Aid workers who, despite obligations to support parents, at times must remove the children from the care of these parents, in part because of workers' mandates to act as agents of the state. Besides the commitment to two opposing actors in society, another component of this conundrum is that the "client" in social work is commonly more than one individual, and each has differing and, at times, conflicting needs (Weinberg, 2004b, 2005a). Take, for example, a mother and child, in a case of child welfare. Protecting a baby because of apprehension may ultimately be positive for the child (although not always) but not constructive for the mother deprived of her child. Consequently, regardless of the "goodness" of the stances taken, harms may be attached (Orlie 1997; Weinberg, 2006), making context, history, and contingent factors essential components when addressing the implementation of ethical decision making (Rossiter, Prilleltensky, & Walsh-Bowers, 2000).

Yet there is a curious theoretical lag in the field of ethics in social work. Although resource limitations and structural dimensions are identified even in traditional approaches (Reamer, 1990, 2006), these issues are often seen as peripheral rather than central in the exploration of ethics in practice. The canonical approach has focused primarily on the one-to-one relationship, and a theoretical-juridical model is taken (Walker, 1998), one that prescribes the correct conduct a practitioner should undertake with clients. This is usually done through a code of ethics, the application of ideals laid out as a series of abstract, universally applicable principles. It is assumed that by applying the code in a prescriptive, linear fashion, in combination with good decision making (Congress, 2000) and a method for tracking harms (Robison & Reeser, 2000), a worker will be able to avoid ethical breaches. Banks (2006) suggests that in the past, the focus of professional ethics has been on "developing lists of principles and how to handle conflict between principles" (p. xiii). The influences of history and the contexts in which ethical dilemmas occur have been secondary. When workers struggle with issues that transcend their interpersonal relationships with service users, they commonly view these struggles as idiosyncratic or outside the lens of ethics. The problem with this perspective on ethics is it tends to see politics as the culprit and the solutions as being beyond the purview of individual practitioners. In one qualitative study, a worker said that fighting structures in her agency with which she disagreed went beyond her responsibility, and that battle was not identified in ethical terms (Weinberg, 2007). When broader solutions are sought, the field is usually based on the premise that the current social arrangements are equitable and that the answers lie more in tinkering with societal structures than in wholesale change. Writing a damning critique of the 2005 Canadian Association of Social Work code of ethics, Mullaly proposes that it "reflects a 'liberal-humanist' approach to social work that seeks to comfort victims of social problems, rather than a critical approach that seeks fundamental social change" (2007, p. 51).

Also, workers' own culpability in the development of those structures may be omitted. For instance, an agency whose mandate is to serve individuals with mental illness contributes to what is taken to be normative behavior and what is framed as ill. Even the construction of mental illness as an illness, rather than, for example, as a gift from the gods or as evil, results in the development of the structures of social science and social services. Each time a worker makes a determination of mental illness, she participates in development of those structures. Who is an insider and who is deviant are also defined, and those definitions reinforce who has the power to make those determinations.

Banks (2006) argues that "if we accept the embeddedness of ethics . . . in social practices, then it is important to study how certain ethical beliefs and qualities of character are constructed and performed" (p. xv). Yet the emphasis in social work ethics is narrowly constructed. When practitioners are

so clearly affected by broader issues and the intrinsic paradoxes of the work, why is that the case?

WHAT EXPLAINS THIS SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF ETHICS IN THE PROFESSION?

The History of the Profession of Social Work

The history of social work contributes to the constricted social construction of ethics as existing primarily between worker and client, outside of wider structural influences and the inherent contradictions of practice. In the early 1900s, the intransigence of problems in the cities provided a path for community involvement and professional advancement for college-educated, middle-class women entering the new field of social work (Struthers, 1987). One element in the process of professionalization was the need to "build, control, and legitimize an occupational terrain" (Abramovitz, 1998, p. 518). This requirement was particularly acute for the fledgling profession of social work because there were questions about its legitimacy (Flexner, 1915). To gain respectability as a profession, social work embraced a psychoanalytic approach that evolved into a psychologically focused casework model (Kunzel, 1993). The belief was that Freud's theories, which represented the privileged discourse of science (Irving, 1992), were the answer to the "antiquated" approach of early Christian reformers. Simultaneously, it was believed that this scientific advance would help to defeminize a profession that had the more limited prestige accrued by a predominantly female profession. This model emphasized the dyadic relationship between client and worker rather than the broader societal problems as the explanation of why some individuals needed help. By the 1920s, that shift had been accomplished. This move enhanced the status of the profession but was also a route more amenable to change than poverty and social blight. The trend also swung the profession away from explanations of broader causes that impact service users, contributing to a narrow construction of what is ethical practice today.

The Conservatization of the Profession

Wenocur and Reisch (1989) state that professionalization requires an identifiable knowledge base and control of a social service market. They suggest that these needs contribute to the conservatization of professional groups. For social workers, dependency on funders can result in support for maintaining things as they are and not questioning broader patterns of social injustice (Abramovitz, 1998). Also, the state provides much of the professional privilege accrued by social workers, with the consequence that individual practitioners can be "conservative, socialized to comply with employing organizations" (Fook, 2002, p. 25) and state regulations (Hugman, 2005).

Edelman (1988) would argue that when a problem such as poverty persists, the failure to find adequate remedies is the result of the advantages that some groups amass from its continuance. He states (p. 14), "A problem to some is a benefit to others; it augments the latter group's influence . . . the term 'problem' only thinly veils the sense in which deplored conditions create opportunities." By defining social problems as individual, rather than economic or political issues, social workers gain prestige, authority, and financial remuneration in solving those issues. Were those problems socially constructed as macro concerns, social workers might not have the requisite authority or expertise needed to resolve those matters and would lose that piece of the turf, reducing the likelihood that social workers will construct societal problems in broader terms or view ethics through a broader, politicized lens.

Emphasis on the Professional as Being Autonomous and Accountable

One aspect in the narrow construction is the socialization of the helping profession, with the emphasis on the autonomy, accountability, and culpability of each professional. In the Western/European tradition in the modern era, the emphasis has been on the importance of the individual as the unit for arbitrating ethical judgments (Hugman, 2005). The theoretical-juridical model underscores a modernist notion of the practitioner as an autonomous individual (Mattison, 2000) and the use of rational cognitive processes as the means of avoiding ethical breaches. Workers feel individually accountable for any judgments made. The prominence of personal responsibility results in the creation of practitioners who work at developing strong decision-making skills and good rule-following so as to avoid litigation or discipline. Ethical dilemmas that involve structural inadequacies may be viewed as private dilemmas rather than as part of broader societal factors. As a result, social work practitioners often see ethics as being primarily a personal rather than a communal responsibility, supported by codes that place the blame for inadequacies squarely on the shoulders of individuals as independent actors. "A power relation studied in isolation from its cultural and institutional context is easily perceived as an anomaly, and not as part of a larger system," argues Allen (1996, p. 286). By assuming the agentic capacity of individual workers, outside of structural constraints or the inborn paradoxes of practice, the effect of social structures on behavior is lost from view (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008).

An important factor that influences the construction of ethics in social work is the means by which individual social workers govern themselves. Unlike totalitarian regimes, liberal states do not have the same tools of domination to ensure stability. More subtle methods must be found. Therefore, the state must invoke "the capacities and powers of the self-governing individual while at the same time undertaking to foster, shape, and use those same capacities and powers" (Dean, 1994, p. 163). Foucault spoke about

the notion of governmentality, namely the connection between "institutional technologies of regulation and modalities of self-regulation" (Chambon, Irving, & Epstein, 1999, p. 275). These are strategies used by authorities (including social workers) to act on the populace (again, including social workers!) to prevent problems and to affect society positively (Rose, 1996). In the ethics of social work, this is effected through the dominant discourses attached to a juridical-theoretical model, which encourages individual social workers to conduct their one-to-one relationships with clients through the lens of codes of universal abstract principles such as confidentiality and to regulate themselves by being watchful of whether they are consistently abiding by those tenets. Associations of professional organizations, with their subcommittees on discipline, determine whether there have been violations of these codes, and they may censure individual practitioners. These are examples of the complex of technologies that ensure self-government "through . . . allegiance to particular communities of morality and identity" (Rose, 1996, p. 336), in this case that of the social work profession and professional associations. This may not be conscious, but workers, through their support of the dominant discourses in the theoretical-juridical model, enhance their place in the profession while simultaneously regulating their own behavior, thereby aligning "their personal choices with the ends of government" (Rose & Miller, 1992, p. 188). Being positioned in this way results in a point of view that creates a particular moral order (Arribas-Ayllon & Walkerdine, 2008) because, through these discourses, how one ought to behave and what one's powers should be become delineated. The normalizing effect of the theoretical-juridical discourse takes hold, creating the social construction of ethics that dominates in the profession today and can result in social workers' cutting off ideas about other concerns before they even emerge.

The Risk Society and the Blaming Game

The way risk is conceptualized is part of this particular moral order. Collective rights are replaced by individual obligations (Higgs, 2000). Rather than the sinners at the turn of the century, today it is those who are at high risk who are viewed as morally suspect. Hence, social workers' clients are seen as being problematic. Professions that work with those groups can be "contaminated" by the same infection of marginalization and may work to distance themselves, wanting to be different from the groups they serve. Those who have privilege (including professional social workers) tend to think of their successes as having been the result of their own hard work, rather than having been partially the result of the inherent privileges of their positions (Sherwin, 1998). Consequently, they are more inclined to assume others can do the same. This may be true, even for those whose personal journeys began in less privileged beginnings. According to Ryan (1998), a classed ideology emerges, "cloaked in kindness and concern," bearing the "trappings of scientism"

(p. 520) that allows people of good will to "swerve from the central target that requires systematic change" (p. 525) and instead study those affected by social inequality by determining how they are different, but then treating the differences as the explanations of the social problem. These strategies ultimately perpetuate cycles of victim blaming and can be seen in the history of the 1920s, with social work's emphasis not on the causes of problems but on providing a function through a technical service (Abramovitz, 1998).

Perhaps it is not possible to eradicate entirely certain social problems. It is easy to look for someone to blame for the insufficiency of efforts to create a just and civil society. Not only the users but also the providers of services can be held responsible. Because it is a female-dominated profession with limited prestige, status, or clout, social workers also are set up as targets for the frustration about irresolvable societal ills. A system of culpability has been created, and the blaming game occurs (Parton, 1996). The emphasis on calculating risk provides a means of coping (Parton, 1996). The modernist Western/European approach to the individual as autonomous puts the responsibility for self-government of the choices made, and the happiness and success that result, squarely on the shoulders of each person, both worker and client. Accountability and prudence are aspects of risk avoidance that are required of citizens (Rose, 1996), especially those viewed as experts.

However, the forces that impact and limit individual freedom (such as globalization) create anxiety and fear. No amount of risk management can contain the uncertainties of modern life. The result is a risk-saturated society reflecting these anxieties (Beck, 1992). Values rest on ensuring safety, as opposed to ensuring equality or equity. The prominence of high-risk cases, risk-assessment tools, and risk management is rife in social work, requiring professional judgment and sound decision-making skills, the very tools emphasized in the theoretical-juridical model of ethics. Yet the assumption that these dangers can be deduced results in reliance on a positivist standard of science that is often found wanting and inaccurate, leading to more insecurity and increased rigidity in the organizations expected to manage the risk (Parton, 1996). Also, trust in the expertise of those who are to make those determinations (such as social workers) is eroded. And the adequacy of a model of ethics that assumes the suitability of scientism is found to be insufficient as well.

The Economic Effects of Globalization

The current environment of globalization also contributes to the notions of risk. The economic effects of globalization have a profound negative impact on the progressive inclinations of front-line workers and their understanding of what constitutes ethics in the field. Social workers are operating in a climate in which the welfare state is under attack (Ghorayshi, 2004, p. 210). The quality and security of jobs have been eroded and part-time work and contracts have replaced many permanent full-time jobs (Rice & Prince,

2000). These effects are gendered; women in this female-dominated profession are more vulnerable (Dominelli, 2004). Work conditions have deteriorated. Managerialism is on the rise. Individuals (more often men than women) with values arising from the business world have become either the heads of social service agencies or the consultants charged with evaluating those settings. Emphasis centers on the necessity of productivity and documentation and on the dangers of litigation. To manage risk involves calculating it and recording the evasion of it. Social workers spend inordinate amounts of time doing paperwork. Evidence-based and competency-based practices have reduced complex skills to component-measurable parts, and proceduralism has led to the dominance of social work as a rational-technical rather than a practical-moral activity (Parton, 2000) in which practitioners operate as technicians rather than with the autonomy that befits a professional group. Most significantly from the standpoint of ethics, by the emphasizing the value of the marketplace, with efficiency and effectiveness dominating needs and care, the underlying values of social inclusion and entitlements have been eroded (Dominelli, 1999; Lonne, McDonald & Fox, 2004).

The Outcome of These Trends

How do these trends affect social workers' constructions of their responsibilities to solve those problems and hence to the definition of ethics? There is a benefit to carving off ethics from the wide-ranging concerns of structural inequity. It protects individual workers from the duty to engage in the fight to change unjust structures. The historical split in the field of social work into clinical, community, and policy streams contributes to the lacunae in seeing structural constraints as part of social work ethics. The emphasis in direct practice on the dyadic relationship of worker and client, hived off from broader contexts, has aided in the disconnection of ethics from systemic issues. Front-line workers are far removed from wider forces that directly impact their ability to act in ways they might prefer ethically. Those workers may not conceptualize developments such as globalization as being connected to their day-to-day practice. If they do understand the impacts, they still may believe they are impotent when it comes to altering macro-level effects. Social workers also gain privilege and benefits from the status quo, so there may be some reasons to leave those structures unquestioned. To move in the direction of changing structural inequities might require giving up some of social work's power and privilege in the process. Furthermore, as long as social workers frame themselves as victims, like their clients, they are absolved from blame for the way things are (Fook, 2002). This stance keeps social work innocent and infantilized, not answerable for changing the structures of society because to do so is beyond the agency and authority of individual practitioners.

These trends have resulted in several potential responses by workers, including collusion, accommodation, or the possibility of engaging in a

rear-guard action to maintain what they have as opposed to fighting for more progressive social change or taking a broader view of the nature of ethics (Dominelli, 1999). The traditional view of ethics thwarts viewing job action, alliances, and social movement responses as opportunities. However, all is not bleak. Because of the freedom in liberal states, there is also the possibility of resistance to the dominant discourses, which can lead to a more expansive definition of ethics in social work.

WHAT SHOULD BE DONE TO BROADEN THE FOCUS OF ETHICS IN SOCIAL WORK?

Social workers would benefit, when constructing their ethical responsibilities, by moving beyond the spotlight on the one-to-one relationship between worker and client. Professional accountability is robust in ethics, but it does not focus on the context of the practice or on the inexorable nature of paradox. Social workers ought to make several shifts (Weinberg, 2005a). Taking into account the broader structures and paradoxes that shape and limit practice would be a starting point. Recognizing the responsibility to question continually the taken-for-granted discourses that frame the development of those structures is also necessary. Social workers must go further and sidestep the dualism of the notions of agency and structure. Practitioners are restricted by structure but they also create structure (Weinberg, 2008b). The ways in which social workers interpret organizational structures, such as the policies and procedures as well as the legislation and funding requirements that lead to those structures, offer opportunities for ethical thinking and behavior. Because practitioners construct the notions of help every time they implement (or resist) such policies (Kondrat, 2002), in those moments there is the potential to shift an organization into more emancipatory directions that foster nonviolative relationships.

The current construction of ethics emphasizes which interactions are ethical and which are not. A further step toward an enhanced construction of ethics in practice would be a greater emphasis on self-reflexivity about the benefits to social workers of keeping the poor poor and the marginalized marginalized (Weinberg, 2005b). In the predominant paradigm, the profession as a whole is generally viewed as being benign, and the benefits of being part of the power elite are downplayed. Questions about privilege and perquisites should be fundamental parts of the social construction of ethics, not sidebars viewed as political difficulties. If workers were able to see ethics as extending to their positioning in social processes and their placement in institutional systems, the social construction of what constituted ethics would shift and there would be the possibility of reversing the historical trend away from a technical function and toward the causes of social problems.

Because they take on the responsibility of determining how normative behavior is defined, social workers invariably contribute to the construction of how, as a society, people ought to live with certain individuals who are disciplined for living otherwise. No emphasis on correct decision making can entirely avert the repercussions of this social obligation. And what goes along with that duty is the potential harm that may follow, not out of intention but because one can never predict the sum total effects of one's actions, especially in a profession in which multiple individuals are impacted by those decisions. Whom does a worker support—the over-stressed adult daughter of a man with signs of dementia who fears for her dad's safety and thus wants him in a nursing home, or the man himself, who abhors the thought of losing his home and perceives, possibly accurately, that he is still capable of looking after himself? Because this is an applied profession, these are not merely theoretical questions. A choice must be made, and supporting one individual's needs and wishes over another's may lead to unintended negative consequences. Social workers unwittingly are engaged in moments of ethical trespass, "the harmful effects . . . that inevitably follow not from our intentions and malevolence but from our participation in social processes and identities" (Orlie, 1997, p. 5).

The current state of affairs in which, to look competent, social workers must act autonomously and on the premise that they know the right thing to do, is problematic to both professionals and service users. Tronto (2001, p. 200) argues that what is required is for "professionals to see their own work in a broader context, to admit their capacity for error, and to accept the nature of their vulnerability." If an ethical framework stressed the ineluctable nature of trespass, isolation could be reduced because the problems would not be perceived as personal inadequacy. The field and the social construction of ethics would be strengthened by the solidarity of a community that recognized the inescapability of trespass, allowing for humility, doubt, and clemency.

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