

A Co-operative Inquiry into Structural Social Work Students' Ethical Decision-Making in Field Education

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Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics, Volume 3, Number 2 (2006)
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Abstract

This article describes the participative methods and results of a co-operative inquiry project that explored fourth year social work students' ethical decision-making in field education. First, the article relates the pedagogical objectives of structural social work education to the ethical challenges of structural social work practice. Second, it outlines a self-driven framework for ethical decision making that was used in the research project to help guide students in ethical decision making. Third, it highlights co-operative inquiry as a research approach that reflects critical pedagogical praxis by assisting students (co-learners) to engage in a process of inquiry that honored their capacity for constructive self-determination. Finally, the article concludes with a discussion of the research findings and implications for structural social work education.

Key Words: Co-operative Inquiry, Ethics, Ethical Decision Making, Field Education, Structural Social Work

Introduction

The University of Northern British Columbia is one of only nine post-secondary institutions in Canada to adopt a structural approach to social work education (Radian, as cited in Ewashen, 2002). A structural perspective has provided the conceptual grounding for a variety of pedagogical approaches in social work education including, but not limited to, anti-oppressive, anti-racist, feminist, critical, radical, and liberatory frameworks (Dominelli, 1988; Dominelli & McLeod, 1989; Moreau, 1993; Carniol, 2000; Leonard, 2001; Fook, 2002). All these approaches share the conviction that conventional social work practice, which operates within existing social institutions to assist individuals to adjust and adapt to the status quo, actually contribute to

oppression in society (Mullaly, 1997; Hicks 2002; Allan, Pease, & Briskman, 2003; Baskin 2003; George 2003). Furthermore, they share the premise that many forms of social work education mask the oppressions that need to be challenged (Ife, 1997; Leonard, 2001; Rossiter, 2001; Dudziak, 2002; Hicks, 2002). Mullaly (1997) describes structural social work as follows:

“...the term ‘structural’ is descriptive of the nature of social problems in that they are an inherent part of our present-day social order. Secondly, the term is descriptive, as it indicates that the focus for change is mainly on the structures of society and not on the personal characteristics of individuals victimized by social problems. Thirdly, structural social work is an inclusive social work approach because it does not attempt to establish hierarchies of oppression but rather is concerned with all forms of oppressive dominant-subordinate relations. Fourthly, it has a dialectical analysis, which means that it does not get trapped into false dichotomies, such as whether one should work at the personal or the political—both are necessary simultaneously. Fifthly, it is a critical theory, which by definition means that it has a political and practical intent. Finally, most of the development of structural social work has occurred in Canada, where it continues to assume increasing importance as a major social work perspective, theory and practice (pp. ix-x).”

Hicks (2002, p. 89) further writes that although the skills involved in structural and generalist social work practice are similar, it is the manner “in which the social worker analyses problems and the type of action that result from this analysis that distinguishes the structural approach.” A structural perspective and Hicks’ view, in particular, serve as the backdrop for this cooperative inquiry project examining students’ experience of putting theory into practice in the face of difficult ethical dilemmas that take place during field placements.

Field Education: The Essential Nexus between Theory and Practice

Given that social work is an applied discipline, field education serves as a vital component of the curriculum (Horejsi and Garthwait, 1999; Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2003). It is in field placements that students learn to apply theory taught in the classroom to actual practical situations. Bogo and Vayda (2000, p. 3) write that social work students “must be able to examine their own practice.” This holds particularly true as it relates to negotiating the ethical aspects of social work practice (Garfat & Ricks, 1995; Goldstein, 1998). Given the plethora of ethically challenging situations that will inevitably confront graduating social workers, we felt compelled to develop a

pedagogical approach that might help increase the capacity of students to, first, become aware of ethical moments and second, to work through these situations in a critical and ethical manner--in short, to assist students as they struggle to put classroom-acquired knowledge into practice in the community.

A Critical Pedagogical Approach to Ethical Decision Making

In addition to structural underpinnings, our developing critical pedagogical approach to teaching ethical decision-making builds on and incorporates the Standards for Accreditation articulated by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work (CASSW, 2004):

“...the curriculum shall ensure that the student will have...understanding of and ability to apply social work values and ethics in order to make professional judgments consistent with a commitment to address inequality and the eradication of oppressive conditions (p. 9).”

As we seek to facilitate this capacity in all our students, we know that, in field placement, they inevitably struggle with the day-to-day, messy, practical ethical dilemmas that involve both conflicting values and responsibilities (Reamer, 1982, 1992; Rhodes, 1986; Ricks & Bellefeuille, 2003).

Drawing on more than thirty years of ethics education, Ricks (1989, 1992, 1997) makes a persuasive case that students struggle in their efforts to reach self-driven ethical decisions because they learn that there are preferred skills, practice approaches, or models that should be applied in specific case circumstances. This sets up the expectation that in practice there are relatively clear cut, “right ways” that are easy to learn and incorporate into practice (Ricks & Charlesworth, 2002, p. v). Consequently, becoming accustomed to the uncertainties associated with resolving ethical dilemmas is an educational goal that many social workers fail to meet (Ricks & Bellefeuille, 2003). The bottom line for Ricks & Bellefeuille (2003, p. 118) is that “ethical practice that relies heavily on professional codes of ethics can lull practitioners to sleep in matters that require critical reflection and discretionary judgment.”

A critical pedagogy should encourage students to assess professional codes of ethics with a critical eye and to consider the relationship between ethics and politics (Benhabib, 1992; Finn, 1994; Hugman & Smith, 1995; Morelock, 1997). As suggested by Finn (1994, p. 102), “ethical praxis cannot renounce politics because it is actually constituted by it.” She goes on to explain that

ethical codes are the formal articulation of modernist thought and as such reflect the prevailing liberal world view where universalism, rationalism, and liberal individualism are seen as the foundation of professional practice:

“Since ethical praxis always occurs within a particular political context (community), it will (either by default or design) confirm the values, goals and ends of the political situation within which it is situated and thereby the hierarchies of power and control which they enable and sustain, or it will contest them.” (p. 104)

Finn (1994) calls into question much of what passes as ethical in the theories and practices of professional, practical and applied ethics. From this view, ethics really have very little to do with promoting social justice:

“...an ethics which relies on the (political) categories of established thought and/or seeks to solidify or cement them—into institutionalized rights and freedoms, rules and regulations, and principles of practice, for example—is not so much an ethics, therefore, as an abdication of ethics for politics under another description (Finn, 1994, p. 101).”

Thus, critical pedagogy as an educational approach to understanding the personal and contextual nature of ethical decision-making necessitates asking students, through a process of collaborative dialogue, to critically examine the thoughts, attitudes, values, and feelings that underpin the actions they take on a daily basis. This emphasis on the contextual self requires that we re-think ethics education in terms of more process oriented and practice-based ethical decision-making models in which self is central (Blum, 1994; Finn, 1994; Sharmer, 2000; Adams, Dominelli, & Payne, 2002; Fook, 2002; Ricks & Charlesworth, 2002). This calls for extensive self-reflection, a willingness to engage in critical thinking, and a non-judgmental attitude of self and others.

In an attempt to create a space for field-based students to engage in this pedagogical praxis, we established a series of classroom seminars supported by a web- based discussion board as a collaborative forum in which students were able to examine and explore their ethical practice within a self-driven ethical decision-making framework (see Figure 1).

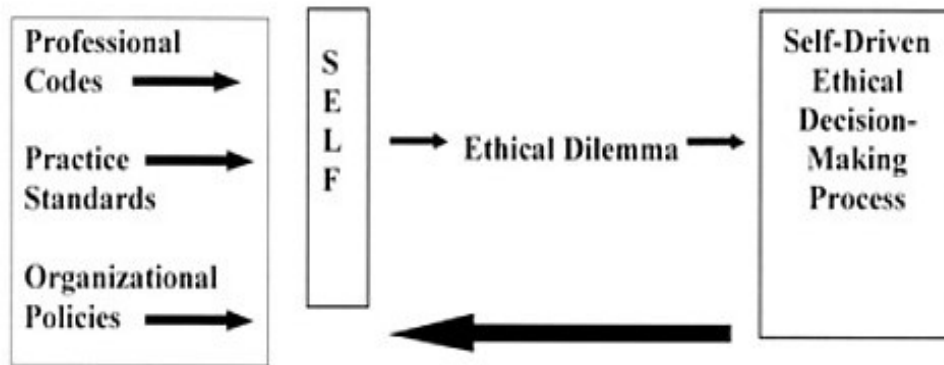


Figure 1. Ethical practice context

Within a self-driven ethical decision-making model, the ethical principles embedded in codes of ethics become only part of the “contextual mix” and are “differently applied in practice” (Ricks & Bellefeuille, 2003, p. 121). The self-driven model highlights beliefs (what one holds as true); values (what one holds as important); and ethics (the rules and standards used to determine what to do) as well as individual thoughts, feelings, and actions. In short, codes, standards, and organizational values are filtered through ‘self,’ as part of the problem-solving process. Ultimately, decisions, actions and evaluation, in turn, impact ‘self’ and, thus, future ethical decision-making.

Locating the Research in Co-Operative Inquiry

We chose a co-operative inquiry approach because it reflects critical pedagogical praxis. Co-operative inquiry is a form of action research in which all those involved contribute to the decisions about what is to be looked at, the inquiry methods to be used, the interpretation of what is discovered and the action that is the subject of the research (Reason, 1988; Reason, 1994; Heron, 1996; Reason & Heron, 1999; Heron & Reason, 2001). Co-operative inquiry is congruent with the emancipatory goals of structural social work in that it confronts the way established elements of society hold power (Heron, 1996). From a structural social work perspective, power and knowledge are not separable (Ife, 1997).

Initiating the Inquiry Group

Fourth year students were invited to a meeting to discuss their voluntary participation in the research project. In co-operative inquiry, “all those involved work together as co-researchers and co-subjects” (Reason & Heron, 1995, p. 4), in other words, as co-learners. Twenty-six students out of a class of 30 volunteered to take part in this study – 24 females and 2 males. As co-learners,

the group was asked to think about the type of questions that would guide the inquiry. Coming out of the initial meeting, the following questions were constructed:

- What kind (s) of ethical dilemmas are present in social work settings?
- Do social work students know what to do when confronted with ethical dilemmas?
- What keeps social work students from acting ethically?

Data Collection Methods

The experiences of each co-learner were recorded using a reflective journaling process. Co-learners were presented with a framework of ten guiding questions to assist in their efforts to apply the self-driven ethical decision-making model (see Figure 1) as they worked through ethical dilemmas encountered over their 3-month field education placement. For each ethical dilemma, students were asked to work through a series of questions as part of their reflecting process:

- What makes this an ethical dilemma, i.e., what values are in conflict?
- Who was present?
- Who said or did what? Or who didn't say or do what?
- What were my fears?
- How and why am I making the choice I am making, i.e., what did I think, feel, and what did I do or not do?
- How is my decision-making affected by the fact that I am taking it in this particular setting (e.g., standards, policies, organizational values)?
- How does my personal knowledge, culture, life experience affect my choice?
- Given similar circumstances with another person, would I take the same or a different action?
- What other resources would be helpful to me in making this decision?
- How did the code of ethics inform and/or direct my action?

Reflection and Action Cycles

As part of the co-operative research method, the group was brought together for three full-day seminars. The first seminar was held during the first week of field at which time co-learners were introduced to the self-driven ethical decision-making model. The second seminar involved co-learners reflecting on and making sense of their ethical decision-making experiences. This was facilitated at the six-week point or mid-point of their field placement. Following the second seminar, co-learners returned to the field and continued their inquiry in that practice context. As explained by Reason & Heron (1995), the cycling can be repeated several times:

“Ideas and discoveries tentatively reached in early phases can be checked and developed; investigation of one aspect of the inquiry can be related to exploration

of other parts; new skills can be acquired and monitored; experiential competence are realized; the group itself becomes more cohesive and self-critical, more skilled in its work (p. 5):”

Although the context of students’ experiences reflected the variances in field placements (from grass roots community-based organizations to institutional settings such as child welfare), many of the themes they identified were similar. The final seminar was held at the conclusion of the field placement and presented as a concluding focus group. It served as a forum to capture the co-learner’s overall perceptions of the inquiry process, of the self-driven ethical decision-making model, and of our critical pedagogical approach to teaching ethical decision-making in field.

Ethical Considerations

The proposal for this study was approved by the Research Ethics Board at the University of Northern British Columbia. All participants were provided with an information letter that outlined the process and purpose of the inquiry and described any potential risks. Participants were also presented with a consent form that was signed prior to their participation in the collection of data. The consent form indicated that consent could be withdrawn at any time without penalty or need for explanation.

What We Learned

A total of 133 case examples of ethical dilemmas were submitted by the co-learners. Of these, 68 were from co-learners placed in a child protection setting as part of the child welfare specialization stream, and 65 were from co-learners placed in various community-based settings. The results are presented for each of the four research questions developed at the inaugural meeting of participating students and faculty members.

What Kind (s) of Ethical Dilemmas are Present in Social Work Settings?

A thematic analysis of the kinds of ethical dilemmas encountered by co-learners is presented in Figure 2. The top four categories included: lack of respect for clients, conflict of interest, abuse of power, and revealing confidential information. Although students were able to identify ethical dilemmas, they struggled to openly and critically examine the personal beliefs and values that guide their practice or the practices at their placements, and the consequences these have for ethical decision making. Structural social work demands that students understand who it is that they privilege and whose experiences they limit when they embark upon courses of action that reflect personal preferences (Garfat & Ricks, 1995) and/or that are the products of historical

forces (Mullaly, 1997; Baskin, 2003), particularly in public institutions of learning that cross social, cultural, and experiential boundaries. To practice from a structural perspective, social work students must be both willing and able to reflect on the origins, purposes, and consequences of their actions as well as on the material and ideological constraints and encouragements embedded in the classroom, agency, and societal contexts in which they work. While this self-exposure and self-confrontation is uncomfortable and sometimes threatening, it is never inconsequential when we engage in it with others with whom we stand in a pedagogical relationship.

| Kind of Dilemmas | Frequency |
|---|------------------|
| Lack of Respect for Clients | 18 |
| Conflict of Interest | 16 |
| Abuse of Power | 14 |
| Revealing Confidential Information | 14 |
| Bad Practice | 9 |
| Lack of Proper Assessment of Needs | 9 |
| Lacking the Necessary Skills | 9 |
| Efficiency and Cost Savings over Best Interest of Client's Needs Judgmental | 8 |
| Judgmental | 8 |
| Deception | 7 |
| Demeaning Comments Made by Workers | 6 |
| Gossiping about Co-Workers | 6 |
| Lack of Professionalism | 6 |
| Racism | 3 |

Figure 2: Thematic analysis of ethical dilemmas

Do social work students know what to do when confronted with ethical dilemmas?

Only 95, or 75%, of the 133 case examples indicated that they knew how to successfully work through the ethical situation. Further, many of the examples of perceived successful resolution involved students turning to their practicum mentors for direction. This may reflect a level of inexperience on the part of the students or the complexity of the issues being addressed, but it also may signify a reluctance to accept personal responsibility for their practice. Structural social work students who are committed to critical ethical praxis need to develop the capacity for critical self-reflection. This notion is not a new one.

However, a more complete understanding of how self-reflection looks in practice is key. Although self-reflexivity is indubitably connected to one's personal history, and one's history is tied into each social worker's ethical decision-making process on some conscious or unconscious level, critical practice is a moving dialectic between practitioner and practice. This process can incur feelings of discomfort, grief, frustration, and resistance and requires not only cognitive but

emotional work. It is only by examining emotional reactions (i.e., how did I feel and how did that relate to what I did?) that one truly begins to identify privileges as well as invisible ways in which one complies with dominant ideology. It is in this context of critical self-reflection, which is not separated from feeling, that additional new windows on the world can be revealed to students – a primary ethical aim of a critical pedagogy of practice.

What keeps social work students from acting ethically?

Figure 3 reports the analysis of the themes for the third research question: What keeps students from acting ethically? Figure 3: Thematic analysis of reasons given by co-learners for not acting ethically

| What Keeps Social Workers from Acting Ethically | Frequency |
|---|------------------|
| Not sure What to do | 16 |
| Fear of Speaking Up for Fear of Jeopardizing placement | 14 |
| Fear of Making a Mistake | 14 |
| Fear of Being Disliked | 6 |
| Fear of Creating Conflict | 14 |
| Not Being a Team Player | 7 |
| Uncertainty About Being Helpful and Creating Dependency | 5 |
| Afraid of Portraying Self as Naive | 4 |
| Afraid of Portraying Self as a Stickler for Detail | 1 |

Figure 3: Thematic analysis of reasons given by co-learners for not acting ethically

Fear was the overwhelming feeling expressed by student co-learners as the reason for failing to deal with ethical dilemmas encountered in their field placements. For example, one co-learner stated that she feared “retaliation from her colleagues.” Another co-learner feared “losing the trust” of her supervisor. The most common concern, however, was fear of failing the placement. The following statement offered by McFarlane, Ricks, and Field (n. d.) sheds some light on why people who know what to do often fail to act. They explain that people fail to act when:

“The risk is too high and/or the costs are too great at a very personal level. As a result, they are completely overcome by their fear and immobilized. When this happens, the personal fears are not intruding on making the best choice but are intruding on acting on the best choice. For example, fear can restrict thinking about all the options. Under the condition of fear, we can be reductionistic and generate only two options: e.g., I can lose like this or I can lose like that" (p. 7).

The challenge, therefore, is to support students to move beyond simplistic binary understandings so prevalent in Western thought (Hooks, 1992; Fook, 1999; Meagher & Parton,

2004; Fisher et al., 2005). We live in a complex world that contains many shades of gray. If we cannot escape the confines of binary thinking in our society, how are we to ever think outside of the box on a larger scale? The end result of binary thinking is to preclude the possibility of the ambiguous options. Thus, ambiguity is a source of discomfort in a culture defined by simple binary oppositions. For this reason, we believe that a critical approach to ethical decision-making requires that students acquire an understanding of the complexity of ethical situations and acquire the critical thinking skills to operate in what Finn (1994, p. 101) describes as “the space between...the space of the ethical encounter with the other as other and not more of the same.” Following Finn, we argue that the role of the field student is to explore that “space between” that puts their beliefs, values, and feelings into question.

About the Process

The use of self-driven ethical decision-making in field education/practice-based teaching is presented as a co-operative inquiry involving both field faculty and students. During the final seminar, students were asked to talk about their experience with the process, and most reported that the self-driven ethical decision-making model had been an important and valuable aspect of their field placement experience. They also indicated that the guiding questions were helpful in their efforts to work through the self-driven ethical decision-making model. However, several recommendations were made to improve both the clarity and effectiveness of the questions. These will be incorporated in future field education classes.

Implications for Structural Social Work Education

A major challenge that must be confronted in schools of structural social work involves the role of field education in the development of critical ethical practice. As highlighted in this inquiry, although systematic guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas offer social workers a logical approach to the decision-making sequence, it is inevitable that discretionary judgments affect the ultimate choice of action. Through critical self-reflection, social workers can learn to recognize their value preferences (including deferring to someone in a position of authority) and be alert to the ways in which these values unknowingly influence the resolution of ethical dilemmas. Further, this co-operative inquiry process challenged the co-learners to consider their ethical decision-making as linked to other ethical decisions they have made in the past or will make in the future.

A second challenge relates to the obligation of structural schools of social work to provide students with a critical approach to ethical decision-making. This obligation has long-term implications, because most students will be interacting with the community as professionals for the rest of their careers. Students and graduates whose conduct is oppressive or unethical can make it understandably difficult for a school of social work to continue to be a legitimate site of resistance within the community. In moving towards a self-driven ethical decision-making approach to field education, structural social work students are encouraged to accept responsibility for their practice. Through self-reflection of feelings, values, and beliefs, it is possible to explore ethical and practice issues so as to continually inform and reform these practices for the purpose of critical praxis, to confront oppression and, at the same time, to support life-long learning/professional development. However, the challenge lies not only with the students, but perhaps even more so with schools of social work themselves who must meet the challenge head on and figure out the ways to provide students with the tools and the experience they need.

The cooperative inquiry process that we undertook is but an initial attempt to put the question of a self-driven model for ethical decision-making clearly on the table in a fourth-year field education setting. Results indicate that there is a long way to go and justify ongoing research into the application of self-driven ethical decision-making models in shaping critical praxis.

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