Ethics in Social Work: A Comparison of the International Statement of Principles in Social Work with the British Code

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Abstract:
This paper compares the International Statement of Principles in Social Work (IFSW/IASSW, 2004) with the Code of Ethics for British Social Workers (BASW, 2002). First, similarities and differences in the structure and language of the two documents is discussed and while both sit firmly within the tradition of Western liberal ethics, the latter is argued to pursue a stronger commitment to duty. However, both rely on voluntary acceptance as neither can be enforced beyond restricting membership. This is particularly embarrassing for the BASW code, as there also exists a code of practice in the UK that retains the capacity to sanction rogue practitioners. Beyond minor differences, both documents are also prone to a range of criticisms from sources that reject Western liberal hegemony providing the contradictory position where the aims of these organisations are challenged as discriminatory.
Keywords: International Statement of Principles, Code of Ethics, Codes of Practice, Social Work, alternative ethical frameworks

Introduction

This paper sets out to compare two statements concerning the ethics of social work. The first is the Statement of Principles published by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) (revised, 2004). Second is the Code of Ethics for Social Workers published by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW, 2002). On the surface, this appears to be an easy task as the code published by the British Association of Social Workers acknowledges the influences of earlier versions of the international statement in its own formulation. However, on further examination contradictions emerge as these codes operate in a pseudo-hierarchy, which privileges the international statement without exploring the problematic and contested idea of international social work (Healy, 2007; Midgley, 2001) or the assumptions of Western Liberal ethical theory on which these statements are based (Hugman, 2008).

These two statements promote social work, in its broadest context, an ethical activity (Parton, 2000), one where a complex range of human interests and desires circulate with a range of environmental demands to produce dilemmas at individual, group, community, organisational, and societal levels. Understood as an international activity, social work takes place in a variety of contexts in an ever-increasing range of countries. Moreover, the range of activities described as social work is such that social workers in one country may not initially recognise an activity in another country as social work. Even within countries, further complication arises when taking account of what might be broadly considered as social work rather than just the activity of qualified social workers (Sheppard, 2006). The development of international statements of values and principles is part of the process of developing a unifying framework for the social work profession based on, or influenced by, human rights declarations such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (1948) and the United Nations declaration of the rights of the Child (1959) (Banks, 2006). However, increasing globalisation has brought many of these values and principles into sharp relief producing a paradox challenging statements such as those above as modern forms of imperialism (Healy, 2007).

The format for this paper is as follows. The first section will explore and describe the structure of the IASW/IASSW Statement of Principles and BASW Codes of Ethics with a view to setting out the similarities and the basis for exploring differences. The second section will explore the feasibility of a universal code of ethics taking the different role and function of national versus international codes, in the process drawing on criticisms from non-Western ethical traditions. The final section will seek to explore challenges to the Western liberal position that emerge from revisions and responses to the liberal tradition, including challenges emanate from the postmodern position.

Statements Compared

As noted earlier and elsewhere (Strom-Gottfried & D'Aprix, 2006), considerable similarity exists between the statement by IFSW/IASSW and the code of ethics produced by BASW. Both introduce the respective documents by prefacing ethical practice and the need to make ethical judgements as essential to social work. In addition, the BASW code borrows the IFSW/IASSW definition of social work to set out what it considers social work to mean, although BASW feels the need to extend this by providing an extra interpretation. At this point, possibly the most important difference between the two documents is linguistic. The IFSW/IASSW addresses

"people" as the target of social work activity. This is replaced by "service user" in the BASW code and can be used singularly or in the plural to denote individuals, families, other groups, or communities (BASW, 2002; Strom-Gottfried & D'Aprix, 2006). This is not to suggest that IFSW/IASSW do not recognise "individuals, families, other groups, or communities," but rather refer to these separately, maintaining for the most part a more generic use of "people," possibly reflecting a more individualistic discourse and the dominant role of U.S. social work in the internationalisation of social work (Midgley, 2001).

The next section of the IFSW/IASSW document identifies international human rights conventions that form common standards to be achieved by the global community. Alongside the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, it notes conventions covering civil, political, economic and social rights. In addition, there are conventions concerning the elimination of all forms of discrimination based on race or gender, the promotion of rights of indigenous peoples, and children. BASW's code omits such distinct genealogical claims and any interdiscursive and intertextual implications (Fairclough, 1992, 2001) preferring instead to include respecting such conventions as a principle of the value of human dignity and worth. This rhetorical shift probably originates from the pseudo-hierarchical relationship of the two documents. The IFSW/IASSW statement rests at a level of abstraction where statements of principles support claims of applicability across the range of international contexts in which social work takes place. The BASW code displays a degree of fixivity, as it refers only to the UK context. This needs to accommodate both universal and specific contexts in the international statement provides the basis for an ongoing tension between the two documents. The critical issue here is that while the UK may be described as a residual welfare state (Jordan & Jordan, 2000; Jordan, 2005), economic and social rights remain embedded in UK citizenship. This situation cannot be said to be the same for many developed and developing countries. Indeed, Healy (2007) points out that the U.S. rejects the notion of social rights and has a limited view of economic rights. This, alongside the fact that many developing countries do not have (or desire) the infrastructure of a welfare state, means that claims to universality on this basis of a social citizenship cannot be sustained; rather, human rights become the universal substitute.

The IFSW/IASSW statement now moves on to identify its core principles of (1) Human Rights and Human Dignity and (2) Social Justice. Each principle is described and then supported by a set of statements, four in the case of the former and five for the latter. Hugman (2008)

describes the former as derived from deontological theory while the latter derives from teleological theory thus accommodating both Western liberal traditions within the statement. Interestingly, in all cases, the statements supporting the principle of Human Rights and Human Dignity employ a version of the imperative softened by the use of "should" to denote the responsibilities of social workers as do three out of five statements supporting Social Justice. This leaves just two supporting statements, "Challenging negative discrimination" and "Challenging unjust policies and practices" where the statement contains a firmer version of the imperative using "responsibility" and "duty" respectively. Moreover, these occur in a principle drawn from teleology. A section on "Professional Conduct" follows that sets out the responsibility of national associations affiliated with IFSW/IASSW to maintain codes in line with the international code. This continues with a series of twelve statements setting out appropriate behaviours concerning the accountability, competence, and integrity of social workers and their relationship with the users of services and welfare organisations. In addition, there are statements regarding the development of the profession and furtherance of the international statement of principles. Acknowledging the universal status of this code and the need to cover a range of national associations, the IFSW/IASSW code has a distinct teleological rather than deontological feel—a position best represented as mid-range (Healy, 2007).

BASW's Code of Ethics demonstrates both similarities and differences in format when compared to the IFSW/IASSW code. As expected, the BASW code contains a similar range of issues and much of the language is the same as the IFSW/IASSW code, which the former acknowledges in its development. The code identifies five social work values: (1) Human Dignity and Worth, (2) Social Justice, (3) Service to Humanity, (4) Integrity and (5) Competence, which it then articulates into a single sentence: *Social work practice should both promote respect for human dignity and pursue social justice, through services to humanity, integrity and competence* (BASW, 2002, p. 2). Supporting each value is an explanation and a series of principles (6/11/6/8/11 respectively). As noted earlier, much of the language in the BASW code resembles that of the international statement with two key exceptions. The first relates to the notion of duty. In contrast with the use of "should" throughout much of the IFSW/IASSW code, the word "duty" provides the imperative preceding statements of principle. Ethically, this provides a much stronger deontological influence to expectations of social workers. Second, the influence of the UK context is apparent as the commitment to a welfare citizenship persists in the language around social

justice. This is particularly evident in the focus on "equitable distribution of resources" and "fair access to public services." The final section of the BASW code sets out a series of statements related to ethical practice, again using firm imperatives, "will, duty to, or will not" in reference to responsibilities to service users, responsibility to the profession, responsibilities to the workplace, responsibilities in particular roles (i.e., management, education, research).

Differences in the language between these two documents can be explained in part by their respective positions in the pseudo-hierarchy noted earlier and by the relationship of the respective ethical codes for a distinct community of social workers. Therefore, while the IFSW/IASSW statement aims to address social workers in over 100 countries and something in excess of 1,700 schools of social work (Hokenstad & Kendall, 1995; Midgley, 2001), the BASW code addresses social workers in the four countries of the UK. Contextualising the BASW code has two effects. As noted earlier, it places this code in the context of a history of welfare that includes the concept of a social citizenship, which encapsulates commitments to social and economic rights. Additionally, existence of a welfare state in the UK has ensured a strong administrative role for both central and local arms of the state. In this context, the BASW code has to be viewed alongside the role of the four social care councils, one in each of the countries of the UK, set up in 2001 to regulate social (care) work (GSCC, 2002). The relationship between BASW and the councils is important to understanding the UK context. Legislation passed prior to the inception of the councils enabled the protection of the term "registered social worker" and restricts it to those persons who had completed a recognised programme of education and who had been accepted onto a national register held by the General Social Care Council. As the register develops, other "social care" workers will also become registered in different parts of the national register, hence the use of the title social care workers to address a wider audience than just registered social workers. Alongside the register, the councils have published "Codes of Practice" setting out expectations of professional social workers. The significance of the register lies in the ability of the council to remove rogue professionals from the social work profession, and therefore remove them from practice.

UK regulatory councils, such as the General Social Care Council in England, operate in a semi-autonomous position from government to regulate standards for social work and social care. Nevertheless, local authorities and many private and voluntary organisations employing social workers require registration with the GSCC as a condition of employment. As in some states in

the U.S. and other countries (e.g., New Zealand), the GSCC has the power to sanction practitioners who breach the "Code of Practice" with the ultimate sanction of removal from the register preventing employment. BASW, which is very influential and played a significant role in the development of social work, is a professional association where membership is voluntary. While it can exclude practitioners from membership, it has no powers to remove registration. In addition, the GSCC code of practice is enforceable on employers as well as workers through inspectorates that regulate social care providers, which again operate in a semi-autonomous relationship with the state. However, the GSCC Code of Practice is not a code of ethics, although it might derive from such codes. The Code of Practice covers six areas: (1) Protect rights and interests of service users and carers; (2) Strive to maintain trust and confidence of service users and carers; (3) Promote the independence of service users and protect from harm; (4) Respect the rights of service users and ensure their behaviour does not harm others; (5) Uphold public trust and confidence in social care services; (6) Be accountable for quality of own work.

The GSCC Code of Practice maintains the language of the "service user" established in the BASW code, although this subject is now joined by another subject "carers" and much of the discourse of GSCC code reflects the section of the BASW code that focuses on ethical behaviour. However, significant differences exist between the codes. The GSCC Code of Practice makes no mention of human rights and dignity nor does it make commitments to social justice. Moreover, the requirement of social workers to bring issues of oppression and discrimination to the notice of their employers is absent. These omissions suggest the limits to the semi-autonomous status of the GSCC, for as Hugman (2008) notes, the influence of neo-liberalism has sought to limit and de-legitimise the political activity of professions. Interestingly, the Code of Practice makes no requirements on employers to provide opportunity or protection for workers who act to bring such issues to the attention of the employer. In fact, it might be argued that requirements on practitioners to "maintaining public trust and confidence in social care services" militates against criticism that extends beyond the immediate confines of organisations.

Challenges to Universalism

The IFSW/IASSW statement of principles and the BASW code of Ethics aim to guide the practice of social workers as they seek to manage complex and dynamic situations. The significance of debates concerning ethics is summarised by Parton (2000) who describes social work as a practical–moral act rather than a techno–rational action, thus requiring a morally active

practitioner or, as Dominalli (2002) suggests, a practicing value. However, while theories of ethics look to bring clarity of purpose in ambiguous and uncertain situations, the precepts on which such theories are based are often uncertain and contested as are the propositions that follow. Leaving aside for now the challenge to universalism due to its embedding in Western liberal thought, I would like to turn first to the question of values.

A number of writers have pointed out that the discussion of values, "value-talk," often takes place in unsatisfactory ways that assume what is discussed is self-evident, known, and fixed and therefore beyond question (Timms, 1983; 1989; Powell, 2005). Others (Banks, 2006; Clark, 2000) concur noting the problematic, conceptually vague, and largely unsatisfactory way values are discussed as central to social work with little clarification of meaning. Powell (2005) suggests that values in professional practice concern the beliefs practitioners hold over what is important which can be summarised as beliefs about the essential ends of human life and social living. Clark (2000) proposes that discussions of values are limited to fundamentals of social work and can be summarised under four headings: (1) the worth and uniqueness of every person, (2) The entitlement to justice, (3) The aspiration to freedom, and (4) The essentiality of community. All this is further complicated with the recognition that social work values exist in a practice world of competing and often contradictory value positions (Beckett & Maynard, 2005). The significance of this debate rests with the actuality that the international code promoted by IFSW/IASSW is not immune from such uncertainties and conflicts. In fact, its aim is to negotiate such dynamics, however. Presently, the document is brief and uses a high level of abstraction in an attempt to achieve universality in the process, conceding detail to national codes. Consequently, it neither achieves universality nor provides a level of detail enabling a satisfactory exposition of values that underpin the principles.

Returning to the question of universalism, previous discussion noted that both documents under discussion, the IFSW/IASSW Statement of Principles and the BASW Code of Ethics, derive from Western liberal thought heavily influenced by commitments to individualism. One of the major challenges to the status of both documents emanates from claims that this disregards other philosophical and cultural traditions such as those of Asia, Africa, China, and the East (Hugman, 2005; Midgley, 2001; Powell, 2005; Healy, 2007). However, the impact on each of these statements differs. In the context of the IFSW/IASSW statement of principles, challenges to universality emerge due to objections to the primacy of "individual rights." Critics point out that

many of the other traditions prioritise the harmony of family or the community over the interests of individuals (Wong, 2004; Healy, 2007). Similar observations are made of the value systems of many indigenous peoples (Hugman, 2008). Challenges that are more strident come from writers who consider the IFSW/IASSW statement as a form of imperialism. Against a background where twenty-five nations filed reservations about the United Nations Convention of Eliminating all Forms of Discriminations against Women (1979) Cobbah (1987), described Human Rights as a "Trojan Horse" seeking to undermine African civilisations.

In the context of the BASW code of Ethics, criticism is contextualised to the UK. Nevertheless, it has a similar theme. In this case, the challenge is to claims of anti- discriminatory practice and the limited knowledge social workers have and the limited amount of time in social work programmes devoted to issues of cultural and other forms of diversity and the dominance of Christian values in services (Gatrad & Sheikh, 2002; Parrot, 2006; Mulé, 2006). In this sense, social work is criticised for promoting a position providing the illusion of inclusion while excluding many of the most vulnerable, particularly those who do not share Western liberal beliefs or Christian traditions. Alternatively, the state is charged with appropriating the voice of radical social work, neutralising its effect and placing the state as the representative of the oppressed:

> *Indeed, anti-oppressive practice has allowed the state to reposition itself as a benign arbiter between competing identity claims. Perversely, given its aim to make the personal political, it has allowed the problems of society to be recast as due to the moral failings of individuals who need censure and correction from the anti-oppressive social worker.* (McLaughlin, 2005, p. 300)

Nevertheless, it is also difficult to concede supremacy to cultural relativism without significant caution as more extreme forms bring a range of dangers. Moreover, in defence of CEDAW, many of these dangers affect women and children as Blyth (2008) vividly sets out in a review of sexual health and a range of mutilating practices undertaken without consent in unsterile conditions.

Alternate Ethical Frameworks: Care, Emotion, Ecology and Postmodernism

If the challenges to ethics built on traditional liberal thought noted above can be considered as challenges from "without," the challenges discussed in this section can be described as challenges from "within." Emerging from and a response to the traditions of Western liberal theory are ideas about ethics that take quite different starting points from the debate between deontology and teleology. Hugman (2005, 2008) describes these as an "ethics of care," which take caring

relationships as the start point; "ethics of compassion" where intelligent use of emotion provides the fulcrum for ethical decision making; an "ethics of life" that takes sustainability as criteria, and post-modern ethics that focus on the contingent, uncertain, and transient nature of contemporary social relationships.

Ethics of Care derives from feminist critiques of male values embedded in liberal thought, turning instead to the reciprocal and relational aspects of caring relationships in which the carer and cared for are set in a mutually responsive relationship. Ethics of Emotion share elements with the former position but focus on the rational and deliberate use of emotion, in particular compassion, to promote caring relationships and provide a balance to abstract ethical concepts drawn from liberal ethics. In taking sustainability as criteria, "ethics of life" suggests the importance of the "ecology" dependent on the interrelationship between a diverse range of systems that support life. The final perspective, "post-modern" approaches, seeks to go beyond the limits of liberal theory rejecting meta-narratives that provide overarching answers for a preference on perspectives that explore the relationship between social interaction, language and meaning. While none of these positions has gained ascendancy in place of liberal orthodoxy as the guide for professional activity, each in different ways raises challenges for abstracted, analytical, and detached ethics. In addition, in keeping with social work's traditions, values of human dignity, worth, and social justice can be accommodated as each promotes a political imperative capable of social change.

Conclusion

Comparing the IFSW/IASSW Statement of Principles and the BASW Code of Ethics has provided a discussion that identifies similarities that emerge from traditional liberal ethics that underpin both. In the case of the former, the articulation of higher-level principles seeks universal acceptance across a range of national contexts in which social work occurs. However, this brings criticism from those whose nations are influenced by other traditions of thought that resist and reject liberal hegemony. The latter addresses these international principles in the context of the UK. Nevertheless, primacy is given to the Code of Practice for social care practitioners, which retains the capability to sanction or ultimately remove the qualification of practitioners that transgress the code. Furthermore, the Code of Practice partially nullifies the Code of Ethics, as BASW cannot sanction a rogue practitioner in the same way. In addition, the influence of neo-liberal government removes any political commitment to social justice from the Code of Practice.

In seeking to promote a universalist position, both documents draw challenges from alternative traditions and emerging ethical frameworks that reject liberal orthodoxy and the hegemony of western forms of thought. Ironically, this places the two documents in a contradictory position to that which they are aiming to achieve and neither has an easy way out. However, Hugman (2008, p. 448) provides the following solution this dilemma:

> *Perhaps, then, the solution to this diversity is to regard ethical statements, at both the national and international level, as living traditions in the manner of an on-going conversation (Hugman, 2005). At any specific time, there will be a written statement on ethics, probably in the form of a code, which applies to the professional community. But this is open to continual debate and reconsideration. The task for each social worker is to be prepared to take part in the conversation and to ensure that the ethical tradition of social work remains alive and continues to grow.*

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