Social Work as a Value-Based Profession: Value Conflicts and Implications for Practitioners' Self-Concepts

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Abstract

Scholars have consistently posited that the social work profession's commitment to its values and ethics is unlike any other profession. Central to the mission of the profession are these principles, which direct the profession's priorities. However, social work professionals bring their own diverse worldviews and personal values to practice, and must anticipate the eventuality of personal-professional value incongruence. This paper examines the concept of value incongruence with attention to the role of the self-concept. Using the value conflict resolution model proposed by Spano and Koenig (2007), implications for social workers' personal-professional value incongruence is discussed.

Keywords: value-practice conflict, self-concept, personal-professional conflict, worldview

1. Introduction

Throughout social work discourse, few topics have been as meticulously discussed as the relevance of values and ethics to the profession. Indeed, the crucial role that values play in guiding the mission of the profession and establishing practitioners' priorities have been articulated by membership bodies and ethics scholars alike (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 1996; Reamer, 2006). Values are used to articulate goals and outcomes, identify preferred means of attaining them, and support policy decisions at various levels of practice (Gambrill, 2011, p. 40). At a broad level, values are a reflection of "society's ethical principles" (Gambrill, 2011, p. 40), but more specifically, they are a profession's principles. And while virtually all professions assert their preferred outcomes through value statements or ethical codes, what follows is the argument that few professions, if any, emphasize their values and ethics to the same degree as social work. Having acknowledged this position, this paper is organized around the following question: How does social work's emphasis on values and ethical practice differentiate it from other professions, and how do social workers maintain this emphasis in contemporary practice? It incorporates a discussion of the role of the self-concept (Rogers, 1947), and suggests how social workers can use this theoretical approach to address the challenges associated with maintaining an ethical framework in contemporary practice.

2. Social Work as a Value-Based Profession

Reamer (2006), one of the most prominent social work ethics scholars, argued that since the profession's inception "social workers' attention was focused primarily on cultivating a set of values upon which the mission of social work could be based" (p. ix). "Over time, the profession has nurtured and refined a set of values that given meaning and purpose to generations of social workers' careers" (Reamer, 2006, p. ix). Today, our enduring commitment to vulnerable and oppressed people, individual wellbeing, and social justice, are all based on what Reamer (2006) appropriately

termed "the profession's rich value base" (p. ix). In fact, this longstanding commitment to ethical practice and value exploration has positioned social work "among the most value based of all professions" (Reamer, 2006, p. 3), a contention shared by the NASW (1996) which wrote that professional ethics and core values provide "the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective."

In his assessment of the inception and development of the profession, Reamer (2006) noted that "historical accounts … routinely focus on the compelling importance of social work's value base and ethical principles" (p. 4). These beliefs served, and continue to serve, "as the foundation for the profession's mission" (Reamer, 2006, p. 4). Not surprisingly, therefore, with such historically engrained value statements, social workers are apt to encounter a seemingly endless host of ethical dilemmas and conflicts. Moreover, expectations from clients, colleagues, employers, and regulatory bodies to resolve these conflicts further illustrate the inherent challenge of maintaining value-based practice. Tensions between "social workers' simultaneous commitment to individual well-being and the welfare of the broader society" (Reamer, 1994, p. 200), "their own personal values and the profession's espoused values" (Reamer, 1994, p. 201), and challenges against the "legitimacy of social work's core values" (Reamer, 1994, p. 203) identify just a few examples of this conflict. Changing practice contexts, including the "influence of the medical model and proprietary or entrepreneurial models of practice" (Siporin, 1989, p. 44, cited in Reamer, 1994, p. 203) and society's changing values further add to the complexity. Fortunately, scholars in the field of applied ethics, who are devoted entirely to identifying and exploring professional ethics/value conflicts, can provide some direction and support, but an overreliance on external disciplines and professionals is insufficient. As Reamer (2006) contended, "contemporary social workers must be acquainted with advancing knowledge related to the profession's values and the kinds of ethical issues and challenges that practitioners encounter" (p. x).

Even within social work's brief history as a formalized profession, this changing perception of values is evidenced by four distinct periods of ethical practice (Reamer, 1998d, cited in Reamer, 2006). Each period, with its unique social milieu, necessitated social workers to emphasize new and changing values and priorities to guide their practice. The morality period, characterized by a paternalistic preoccupation with the poor, aimed to "strengthen the[ir] morality or rectitude." During the latter part of this period, signified by the Great Depression, social workers realigned their priorities to address the need for structural social reform to address problems related to "housing, health care, sanitation, employment, poverty, and education" (Reamer, 2006, p. 5). Next occurred the values period, during which emphasis on client morality declined slowly as social workers focused more on the direction of the profession and its areas of expertise. Significant efforts during this period were made to develop core professional values, especially as they pertained to "controversial and divisive issues" (Reamer, 2006, p. 5). The first formalized codes of ethics were adopted first in 1947 by the Delegate Conference of the American Association of Social Workers and then in 1960 by the NASW (Reamer, 2006, p. 6), and considerable attention was paid "toward the ethical constructs of social justice, rights, and reform" (Reamer, 2006, p. 6). Social workers were trained to uphold a "prominent set of values focused on social equity, welfare rights, human rights, discrimination, and oppression" (Reamer, 2006, p. 6). Levy (1976), in what was arguably "the profession's most ambitious conceptualization of the subject" (Reamer, 2006, p. 7), propelled the discussion of social work ethics into the third period.

During the 1970s, the social work profession "underwent another significant transformation in its concern about values and ethical issues" as diverse professional disciplines began to "devote sustained attention to the subject" (Reamer, 2006, p. 7). Reamer attributes this surging interest to the development of controversial health care technologies, government scandals, widespread allegations

of unethical behavior by professionals, and a publicized increase in malpractice litigation (Reamer, 2006, pp. 7-8). The latter two issues precipitated an increase in ethics education for many professions including social work, and publications on social work ethics began to explore "the relevance of moral philosophy and moral theory" (Reamer, 2006, p. 9). This exploration provided an appropriate segue into the last (and current) interval, the risk management period. According to Reamer (2006), "this stage is characterized mainly by the significant expansion of ethical standards to guide practitioners' conduct and by increased knowledge concerning professional negligence and liability" (p. 9). What also emerged is a "significant body of literature focusing on ethics-related malpractice and liability risks and risk-management strategies designed to protect clients and prevent ethics complaints" (Reamer, 2006, p. 9). To date, although some may contend that the pendulum has swung too far on the risk-management spectrum, it has positively influenced practitioners' training and education towards ethical practice (Reamer, 2006, p. 9).

Evidently then, historical and contemporary social workers alike have emphasized values and ethical standards in practice. But as the risk management period emerged, professions alongside social work also adopted practice standards as a response to emerging ethical dilemmas (Reamer, 2006, p. 9). Nevertheless, amidst the contemporary risk management ethos, some professional distinctions unique to social work persist. For instance, Buila (2010) in her examination of fifty-five professional codes of ethics, found that "the profession of social work is unique in taking the stance that social and political action are in the realm of professional responsibility" (p. 1). Similarly, Payne (2006) articulated that we are the only profession that attempts to influence broader social forces while attempting to capitalize on individuals' capacities to adapt to that very same milieu (p. 1). Indeed, social work has always differentiated itself from other professions because of its roots in social justice, equality, and fairness, so much so that Reamer (1994) called it "the most normative of the so-called helping professions" (p. 194). However, one argument against maintaining such a normative approach is that social workers stand to find themselves, perhaps isolated from other professionals, in the position of having to defend a stance not shared by all. The balance of this paper explores the influence that the value-laden standard of practice espoused by the social work profession has on practitioners in the contemporary practice climate.

3. The Social Worker with a Perplexed Self-Concept

One ethical dilemma encountered by social workers—perhaps more common today than ever before—is whether to provide a particular service despite financial constraints. Indeed, recent changes to the professional capabilities framework by the Social Work Reform Board in the United Kingdom reflect the struggles social workers encounter with "ethical reasoning" in the current economic climate (McGregor, 2011). Banks, cited in McGregor (2011), notes that especially with current financial constraints, social workers are experiencing "moral distress"—"they know what they ought to do but they can't do it" (para. 4). Resultantly, the Board, which aims to implement sector changes recommended by the national Social Work Task Force, argues that as a fundamental criterion of professional suitability, "social workers should be capable of applying ethical principles and values to guide professional practice" (McGregor, 2011, para. 6). In addition to upholding confidentiality, person-centered practice, professional accountability, the legal context of practice, and promoting partnership, the Board contends that managing one's own values, and understanding and applying the ethics and values of social work are the benchmarks of a capable practitioner (McGregor, 2011, para. 33). Banks encourages social workers to challenge their employers if they sense an injustice. "If you see yourself as part of a profession committed to people's rights," she stated, "you should be able to act on your judgements" (McGregor, 2011, para. 22).[1]

Resultantly, if social workers are to respond to perceived ethical injustices appropriately, they must appreciate the implications of how their personal values are operationalized in practice. Given that social work professionals are generally well-attuned to self-awareness and the use of self, and in some cases, place "self-reflection at the heart of competent practice" (Spano & Koenig, 2007, para. 26), one particular approach to understanding ethical conflicts or "moral distress" is by exploring the role of the self-concept. Though dating back to the philosophical writings of Rene Descartes, modern self-concept theory is primarily based on the work of Sigmund and Anna Freud, Prescott Lecky, and Carl Rogers (Purkey, 1988). Typically, one's self-concept is defined as a summary of his or her self-appraisals in relation to personality and behavioural "traits, values, social roles, interests, physical characteristics, and personal history" (Bergner & Holmes, 2000, p. 36). When applied to one's work, as in the following example fittingly presented by Payne (2006), a person's "occupational self-concept" may consist of early ideas based on others' descriptions of the field, "intellectual and academic" knowledge, and "broader conceptions reflected in the news and media" (p. 3). Recently, Aronson (1999), in a review of fifty years of dissonance theory reexamined the self-concept paradigm and concluded that "most people have relatively favorable views of themselves … [and] … want to see themselves as (a) competent, (b) moral, and (c) able to predict their own behavior" (p. 111). Thus, when a social worker's self-concept, which encapsulates his or her professional identity and responsibilities as well as personal values, is conflicted, personal-professional incongruence is likely to be experienced. Recognizing this potential outcome, professionals can use self-concept theory as one means of preparing for a potential value-practice conflict. After all, one does not stop being a social worker at the end of the workday. The value base and fundamental beliefs about human nature, social justice, equality, and oppression are far too ingrained to leave at the office. In light of this, social workers should make a conscientious effort to find congruence between their self-concepts and professional identities.[2] By maintaining a keen awareness of one's own values, as well as the changing ethical priorities of one's profession, a healthy anticipation of potential value-practice incongruence is encouraged.

Research by Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth (2002) summarized that "there is a commonly held belief that social work is a highly stressful occupation as a result of conflicting roles, status, functions and contexts" (p. 256). Borland (1981) argued that social workers are apt to encounter conflict "as they continue to maintain supportive relationships based on social work values" even as employers emphasize efficiency and "throughput" (cited in Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth, 2002, p. 257). Resultantly, administrators may view social work as a cost-ineffective discipline, primarily because of the time required to operationalize its values in practice. Administrators may fail to recognize the inherent stress experienced by social workers and their clients who are often choosing from unsatisfactory alternatives because there is no wholly appropriate outcome (Rushton, 1987, cited in Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002, p. 257). In addition to the potential for role conflict and ambiguity, organizational constraints, practice limitations, as well as a poor understanding of the profession among interdisciplinary colleagues, "social workers [also] face a conflict between the demands made on them as employees and their expectations of some professional autonomy" (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002; p. 257; see also Banks, 1998).Taken together, it is not surprising that social workers have been described as practitioners immersed in a "climate rife with potential value collisions" (Taylor, 2002, p. 1).

Despite the admittedly limited empirical evidence, Lloyd, King, and Chenoweth (2002) maintained that "there is a strong perception in the profession that stress … is particularly associated with role ambiguity, discrepancies between ideals and work outcomes and personal vulnerability characteristics of people who enter the profession" (p. 261). Regarding the latter point, self-concept

theory provides a means by which practitioners can explore their motivations and reasons for choosing a profession that carries such conflict potential. Personal accounts, beliefs, and opinion pieces scattered within social work literature insist that "the profession appeals to vulnerable or unstable people" (Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002, p. 262). Similarly, Rushton (1987), proposing an inquiry that wholly reflects psychodynamic theory, "queried whether people who are vulnerable to depression choose social work rather than another occupation because, unconsciously, they wish to work through personal problems by helping others" (cited in Lloyd, King, & Chenoweth, 2002, p. 256). These two inquiries are examples of how the intimate, personal evaluations incorporated into an individual's self-concept can elucidate and attempt to explain practice conflicts. Additionally, the relatively untested status of these inquiries may reflect the inherent challenge in measuring deeply personal phenomena, because of, for example, social desirability bias. Therefore, while the limited empirical support for this interpretation is certainly concerning, it does not detract from the importance of ongoing self-concept evaluation as it relates to one's individual practice context. As Payne (2006) noted, one's occupational self-concept undergoes continual growth and refinement during career progression (p.3). In the interest of practitioner well-being, and capitalizing on social workers' existing skills in self-awareness, professionals are encouraged to adopt a more active and ongoing emphasis on the importance of their self-concepts, inclusive of both personal and occupational characteristics. Otherwise, social workers are at risk of practicing their careers in a state of influx, dominated by personal-professional value conflicts and perplexed self-concepts.

4. Resolving Value Conflict

There are only two sureties conveyed in this paper: 1) that social work is a value-based profession, and that 2) professional values are apt to conflict with personal beliefs, or at least preferences, at some point in time. The problem with responding to this inevitable conflict occurs when, as articulated by Spano and Koenig (2007), "personal worldviews are used to reinterpret the *Code [of Ethics],* thereby taking precedence because they are understood to represent an ultimate or higher truth" (para. 1). Spano and Koenig (2007) propose the contrary; namely, that the social worker's governing Code of Ethics be accepted as "*the* [emphasis added] framework or screen through which … personal worldviews must be drawn to determine their acceptability in social work practice" (para. 2). Stated another way, social workers must conform their personal worldviews to the profession when required, but ethical codes and practice guidelines cannot be interpreted out of convenience to conform to individual belief systems. Despite the risk of venturing into the topic of professional suitability at this point in the discussion (e.g., Currer, 2009; Tam & Coleman, 2009), it is worth emphasizing that the profession's ethical codes and value statements have always been the cornerstone of its practice (Reamer, 1998). Resultantly, by virtue of choosing this profession, social workers should respect this value base. As Spano and Koenig (2007) asserted, the ethical code "represents an agreed upon framework within which social workers are expected to formulate their actions in their professional roles" (para. 22). Essentially, an inability to conform to one's ethical code as a professional obligation because of irresolvable value-practice conflicts, an incongruent personal-professional worldview, or a perplexed self-concept may suggest professional unsuitability. Nevertheless, this topic remains reserved for a later discussion.

As a means of examining congruence between personal worldviews and, in these authors' case, the NASW *Code of Ethics*, the following model is proposed (Spano & Koenig, 2007, Table 2). Naturally, it is transferrable to individual practitioners' specific governing codes since the underlying personal-professional value discrepancy is common.

Stage	Description
1: Self-Awareness	Develop an awareness of one's personal worldview and the values that undergird that perspective.
2: Self-Reflection	Use self-reflection skills to examine the implications of and consequences of one's personal worldview on professional work.
3: Understanding and applying the *Code of Ethics* within a professional knowledge base	Thoroughly examine the NASW *Code of Ethics* to understand its meaning, historically and currently, as the basis for defining values and principles like diversity, social justice, self-determination, respect for human dignity, and other core elements articulated in the profession's literature.
4: Comparing personal worldview with professional code	Engage in a process of examining discrepancies between the *Code of Ethics* and one's personal worldview.
5:Professional decision making	Make decisions about what needs to be done to remain faithful to the *Code of Ethics* (Decisions in practice should never be made solely based on one's personal worldview.)
6: Professional ethical action	Take action and monitor conformity to the *Code of Ethics.*

The authors note that this model was developed in part because of prior authors' (e.g., Abramson, 1996; Levy, 1976; Loewenberg, Dolgoff, & Harrington, 2005; Rhodes, 1992; Sherwood, 2002, all cited in Spano & Koenig, 2007) failures, despite identifying the need, to provide guidance about *how* [emphasis added] to resolve or "minimize conflicts among personal, societal, and professional values" (para. 25). This model can be used as a tool for social work professionals to ensure that "fidelity to the *Code of Ethics*" is and remains the primary professional obligation, and that any conflicts encountered in practice are resolved in accordance with these parameters (Spano & Koenig, 2007, para. 35). One's professional code of ethics, not personal beliefs and worldviews, should formulate the cardinal rules of practice.

6. Conclusion

The social work profession's ideological foundation rests on a set of core values that have been "embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, [and] are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective" (NASW, 1996, para. 3). These values are service to others, promoting social justice, respecting the dignity and worth of the person, recognizing the importance of human relationships, and maintaining integrity and competence (NASW, 1996, para. 3; see also International Federation of Social Workers, 2004). An inability to conform to these basic principles, as defined through professional rather than worldview-based interpretations, is indicative of an unresolved value-practice conflict or perhaps professional unsuitability. Left unresolved, such conflicts may instil or perpetuate role ambiguity or an ambiguous occupational self-concept, and ultimately lead to career dissatisfaction. Given the potential for a stressful career in social work to begin with, efforts should be made to minimize if not eliminate such conflicts rather than ignore them. If Aronson (1999) and the half-century of dissonance theorists before him have taught us nothing else, it is that contradictory values cannot be comfortably maintained in tandem.

This discussion purposefully introduced self-concept theory as one way of conceptualizing the conflict that can exist between personal and professional values, which coexist out of necessity as part of the whole person. It is hypothesized that the social work readership would be aided by this conceptualization given the profession's focus on

self-awareness, self-reflection, and professional growth and development. For this same reason, the previously introduced decision-making model by Spano and Koenig (2007) capitalizes on social workers' existing skills and strengths in the area of self-assessment. Lastly, although deserving of a discussion all its own, the notion of professional suitability in social work was briefly introduced to encourage practitioners to assess their appropriateness for the profession. At the very least, its inclusion in this paper identifies it as a concept currently being explored by social work scholars to use as part of standardized assessment practices. Certainly, fidelity to ethical codes and value statements is most deserving of inclusion in such assessments.

Social workers certainly encourage meaningful discussion and debate, especially as it pertains to challenges encountered in practice. Rhodes (1986), when describing her book on ethical dilemmas in social work, noted that it is "dialogue [that] has given the book its life" (p. x). But ethical dilemmas and moral debates are not value statements, and it is imperative that the concepts are neither confused nor used interchangeably. Fidelity to one's ethical code may be the fundamental, uncontestable, and non-debatable professional obligation. To conclude with the wisdom of Levy (1976), "the justification of the Code of Ethics is that it needs no justification" (cited in Rhodes, 1986, p. 15).

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Endnotes

[1] It is noteworthy that Andy O'Beirne, an interim governing board member of the College of Social Work in England, insists that social workers are "ultimately accountable to their employers" (McGregor, 2011). This perspective contrasts that of the Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers (OCSWSSW), for instance, which states that "if there is a conflict between College standards of practice and a College member's work environment, the College member's obligation is to the *Ontario College of Social Workers and Social Service Workers Code of Ethics* and the *Standards of Practice Handbook*" (OCSWSSW, 2008, p. 8, s. 2.2.10).

[2] Congruence is not satisfied through self-deception. As Aronson's studies on the self-concept (Stone, Aronson, Crain, Winslow & Fried, 1994; Dickerson, Thibodeau, Aronson, & Miller, 1992; Fried & Aronson, 1995) demonstrated, conflict is most strongly experienced when study participants acted in hypocritical fashion – "where the participants were preaching what they were not always practicing" (Aronson, 1999, p. 117). Achieving congruence means legitimately balancing one's professional identity, inclusive of ethical responsibilities, with personal values.