Using the Critical Incident Technique (CIT) to Explore How Students Develop Their Understanding of Social Work Values and Ethics in the Workplace During Their Final Placement

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Abstract

This paper presents and discusses the findings of a study that explored how social work students develop their understanding of social work values and ethics in the workplace during their final placement by utilizing critical incident technique (CIT). The CIT was found to be an effective qualitative research method to explore aspects of the process of the students' ethics learning and development in the course of their field placement and as such, it can be used to identify whether the philosophy of the practice environment is congruent with the mission, values and ethics of the social work profession.

Keywords: critical incident technique (CIT); social work values and ethics; social work students; field placement; Greece

Introduction

Values and ethics lie at the heart of the mission of social work as an ethical value-based and values driven profession and are essential components of professionalism (Banks, 2004, 2012; Bisman, 2004, 2014; Reamer, 2013). Learning and development of social work values and ethics is therefore of great importance for students to develop awareness and sensitivity to ethical issues raised in social work practice and acquire the commitment to ethics standards and principles regarding their future professional role.

Given the central role of values and ethics in professional practice, social work educators acknowledged early-on the necessity for teaching and learning about such issues in classroom instruction and field education. Historically, the literature on the teaching of social work values and ethics in the western world (and in particular the US) dates back to the work of the American social work educator, Muriel Pumphrey in 1959, followed by Reamer and Abramson's (1982) book on the teaching of social work ethics (Reamer, 2013). Nowadays, it is widely acknowledged that education plays a vital role in transmitting professional values and ethics and as such, the majority of social work schools around the world - including the Department of Social Work in Athens, Greece- include ethics and values into their curricula at undergraduate or/and postgraduate level.

In general, social work values and ethics are formally taught in the classroom environment and then applied and developed in workplace settings during the field education. In relation to the latter, particularly, it has been well documented in the literature that, learning and development of social work values and ethics through field placement in the work environment is crucially important for students to build a competent and ethical

professional self (Bogo, 2010; Congress, 2002; Doel, Shardlow, & Johnson, 2011; Reamer, 2013). During field placement in the workplace, students have the opportunity to get first-hand experience of the workplace[1], its culture and values, along with the existing relationships (e.g., between employees and students or organizations) and prepare under real life conditions to become ethical social work professionals (Doel & Shardlow, 2005; Papouli, 2014). Undoubtedly, the workplace[2] is the best place for transferring classroom knowledge to practice, for comparing ethical theoretical ideas with the reality of practice, for learning by doing and also for developing a strong social work value and ethics culture.

In light of the above discussion, it becomes obvious that the workplace is the key place in social work field education; it is the place where knowledge, values and ethics along with skills are transformed and shaped from being abstract theoretical ideas to becoming situated practice knowledge. It is also the place where values and ethical skills are developed and actively maintained through interactions with others in daily professional practice. In essence, the workplace is the place where social work values and ethics can fully develop or even fail to develop.

During field placement in the workplace, as mentioned earlier, students have opportunities to be actively engaged in hands-on work related activities that help them to develop a deeper understanding of the ethical dimensions of their profession. Through these activities, as practice learners, students are likely to experience certain events that can play a crucial role in their development as skilful and ethically informed social workers. These events might be a negative or positive ethics learning experience for them, but are likely to be critical turning points in the formation of the students' professional ethical identities.

My position as lecturer and supervisor in particular, in the Department of Social Work in Athens has given me the opportunity to talk and interact directly with students placed in social service agencies, as well as to encourage them to reflect and discuss upon their field placement

experiences. Over the course of these discussions, I have had the opportunity to observe that students usually prefer to describe their experiences of ethics and values using critical incidents that occurred within the field placement. For students, these critical incidents served to trigger insights into the factors that influence the development of their professional ethics and values in the workplace settings and were seen as valuable examples of retrospective reflection on the ethics issues during the placement. As a result, I decided to use the CIT as the research tool in my study (conducted for my PhD work) through which students were asked to examine the development of values and ethics in the workplace during their final[3] field placement.

Using the CIT method, as will be presented below, the present study has been an attempt to contribute in the understanding of the processes which students undergo in the development of their knowledge and understanding of social work values and ethics in their final field placement. However, this paper discusses the part of the study findings completed with final-year students within my own Department as it is beyond its scope to delve into a detailed analysis of all the study findings. Below I present the methodology used in this study, the results and a brief discussion of the findings. It is worth noting here that this paper includes a general descriptive discussion of the findings rather than interpretation and therefore, the findings are included in the discussion in a more general way. Finally, I attempt to draw some conclusions from the study findings described here and discern implications for using the CIT method to explore values and ethics issues in social work field education.

Values, Ethics and Development: Definition of Terms

In much of the current literature, values and ethics are perceived as difficult and complex topics and investigating values and ethics in social work is perceived as a real 'minefield' (McAuliffe & Ferman, 2002; Shardlow, 2002). Shardlow (2002) notes that in the available literature, there is so much ambiguity around the topic that the lexicon

of social work values and ethics is often ill-defined and misinterpreted. The most prevalent explanation is that the Anglophone literature, upon which most textbooks and journal articles on values and ethics rely, includes different concepts. Some texts use *values* and *ethics* interchangeably, others do not define the terms at all, and others offer terms either used in different ways, with different emphases and different assumptions or they are used synonymously and so can be interchanged (Banks, 2004, 2012; Reamer, 2013; Shardlow, 2002).

While values and ethics may be used similarly, they are not synonymous. Within wider social and cultural issues particularly, *values* as a concept refers to the knowledge gained by each society over time and which guides both individual and group cognitive and emotional processes, preferences and behaviours (Banks, 2012; Reamer, 2013). In the social work literature, the term *values* is often linked to *principles* as both concepts are inextricably tied into the mission of the social work profession. The connection between the two concepts in the literature can take a number of forms: i) the terms *values* and *principles* appear together; this version is often present in the Greek literature and the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) values global statement, ii) the two terms are treated synonymously and used interchangeably; this is evident in the English-speaking literature, perhaps, because there are some principles such as ethical principles, that are closely linked to certain social work values. Some literature separates *values* from *principles*, while *principles* is the preferred term in other texts and used to describe the same event or phenomenon as *values*. In addition, some countries, for example Greece, prefer the term *principles* throughout their ethical code for social workers to *values*.

As regards *ethics,* scholars also use this term in a number of different ways. For instance, *ethics* can be used to refer to moral philosophy or moral norms and standards, or it may also refer to 'the character or ethos' (Banks, 2004, 2012; Clark, 2000). Sometimes, the term *morality* gets thrown into the same text; however, *morality* involves the judgment or evaluation of an action based on the norms of a larger cultural or religious context (Corey et al.*,* 1998; Gladding, 2000).

In the social work literature, the term *ethics* usually refers to the written rules or standards that govern the conduct of members of the profession (Banks 2004, 2012; Beckett and Maynard, 2005; Clark, 2000). In other words, the term *ethics* is used to describe the practical side of values and principles expressed through a code of ethics. Ethics is normally based upon wider social work values (Clark, 2000), which, in turn, directly influence ethics (Boland, 2006). Taking into account the views in the literature as a whole, I decided to keep the terms values and ethics together while recognizing that the two terms are not synonymous. When appropriate, necessary clarification will be provided in the paper.

The remaining term to clarify is *development*, which is also used differently by different authors or in different disciplinary contexts, thus it can have various meanings and implications. Nevertheless, common to all the definitions, whether Greek or English, is the idea that *development* is used in a positive/optimistic sense to describe a dynamic process, a process of change through time. Dreyfus & Dreyfus (2004) and Benner (2004) point out that development as a positive process implies a path of progress that enables students to acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve professional competence. Development in their view not only describes the process of progressing, but also the product or result of developing, a specific situation or state.

Based on the aforementioned, the term *development* in this paper includes both the concepts of process and the state aspired to, and as such, provides a holistic approach to understanding the development of social work values and ethics in the workplace during the student's field education.

The Study
Methodology
Given that values and ethics is an under-researched area in the Greek social work literature, as well as being complex in nature and difficult

to study as mentioned earlier, I as researcher adopted an exploratory qualitative approach (with descriptive elements) positioned within the constructivist paradigm as the most appropriate approach to the topic. According to Babbie (2011, p. 95), "exploratory research is usually conducted when a researcher examines a new interest or when the subject of study itself is relatively new". On the other hand, "descriptive research aims to facilitate the description of situations and events" (ibid, 2011, p. 96). Qualitative methodology used in the study, is concerned with the meaning and understanding of social reality by focusing on the voices of the participants, rather than those of the researchers (Babbie, 2011). Given the type of study methodology and its objectives, finally, this study was guided by one central research question:

"What can critical incident analysis tell us about how social work students perceive the development of their professional values and ethics whilst in the workplace?"

Data collection: The CIT as a data collecting tool

As mentioned earlier, data were collected using the critical incident technique. The CIT is a flexible, retrospective qualitative approach initially developed by the psychologist, Flanagan (1954) a half-century ago in order to understand pilot error in flying aircraft and later applied to researching safety during anaesthesia (Green Lister & Crisp, 2007). Today, the CIT method (and its several variants) is widely used in health and social care professions for a variety of purposes. In the area of social work, the CIT has been mostly used as a tool for teaching and learning rather than as a research method, though it is recognized as a qualitative method of data collection.

Critical incidents are usually defined as "brief written or spoken depictions of vividly remembered events" that hold special significance for the person who experienced them (Brookfield, 1990, p. 84). Critical incidents can be associated with past or current experiences or observations that occur in everyday life or professional practice and can be positive or negative[4] (and unpleasant) events (Ghaye & Lillyman, 2006; Green Lister & Crisp, 2007). In addition, critical incidents are unplanned, unanticipated and uncontrolled (Woods, 1993). Green Lister & Crisp (2007, p. 24), argues that, critical incidents tend to "mark significant turning points or changes in the life of a person or an institution or in some social phenomenon". For Tripp (1993), however, "critical incidents are not necessarily dramatic or obvious; most critical incidents are straightforward accounts of very commonplace events that occur in routine professional practice; but, are rendered critical through analysis" (24-25). Due to its retrospective nature, the CIT technique is a valuable reflective tool for enabling social work students to recall learning experiences using their own words, thus helping them to learn from practice, and certainly, as Green Lister & Crisp (2007) claim, they facilitate the integration of theory and practice.

In this study, critical incidents were collected with an open-ended questionnaire. The CIT questionnaire was divided into three Sections as follows:

Section A: Personal Details—with demographic information (age, gender, field placement sector: public or private: for profit/not-for-profit).

Section B: General Instructions and Key Questions Related to the Critical Incident—giving general instructions to students on the writing of the critical incident and asking a set of key questions related to the critical incident (e.g., what the incident was about; who was involved; what was the student's role/involvement in the incident, etc.). The questions were grouped under the common heading: "Account of Critical Incident."

Section C: Additional Questions about the Critical Incident—contains a series of additional open-ended questions (and/or sub-questions) grouped under three thematic headings: 1. Professional Social Work Values Highlighted by the Critical Incident; 2. Discussion of the Critical Incident with Others; 3. Lessons from the Critical Incident.

Given that critical incidents should be short stories (Branch, 2005), there was a ~300 - 400 word limit for answering the total number of questions included in Section A. This was considered to be enough for students to provide the necessary information about the critical incident in Greek, the language of the research tool.

The study used the CIT as a written account rather than a verbal process because written reports usually allow students more time to reflect on their field practice experience and select the most representative critical incident. In addition, "written accounts have been shown to be a time-efficient means of gathering good-quality, descriptively rich data" (Handy & Ross, 2005, p. 40), although some authors argue that critical incidents collected by interviews provide more opportunity for clarification (Radford, 2006).

Students were also allowed to choose freely both the type of critical incident (positive or negative), and the role they played (observer[5] or active participant). As the literature review shows, firstly, both positive and negative learning experiences can be a source of knowledge about values and ethics in social work practice, and secondly, the description of an event as critical is not necessarily associated with the role that an individual plays in it (Crisp et al., 2005). Finally, I developed a working definition of the critical incident to help students better understand the specific technique. The working definition provides the main characteristics of a critical incident as identified by the researcher from the relevant literature review, as follows:

- It has a significant effect upon your thinking and knowledge as an ethical social worker.
- The incident may be a positive or negative experience.
- You may have been actively involved in it or have observed it during your final field placement.
- It may not be dramatic or obvious; critical incidents are often embedded in work routines.

- It may mark a turning point or change in the way you think and/or act as an ethical social worker.

Sample

The study population consisted of social work students who had done their final 6months placement in a social service/organisation in the capital city (Athens) and its surroundings (the region of Attica). The final sample consisted of 32 students who completed the CIT questionnaire between 11th and 25th October, 2010. Among the 32 students who participated in the study, 30 were female and 2 were male, while their ages ranged from 22 to 38 years.

The study employed purposive sampling methods to select participants because it allowed the researcher to gather data from students on the basis of their first-hand knowledge and experience of the subject (Babbie, 2011). Purposive sampling also has low costs (the study was self-funded) while it provides good quality information on the given topic (Babbie, 2011). Students' participation was completely voluntary, anonymous, and confidential, while potential participants were fully aware of the research aims and procedures through the written informed consent letter. Finally, ethical approval was obtained from the Department of Social Work in Athens using written consent procedures.

Most students (22) had the role of active participant in the critical incident, while the remaining 10 students were observers. The large number of students who were active participants in the incident is easily explained as the students were asked to describe a critical incident which, preferably, was experienced first-hand by themselves. 28 students indicated that they completed their final practice in the public health and social care services, while 4 students stated that they completed their final practice in the private not-for-profit sector.

Data analysis

Qualitative content analysis was used to identify the characteristics and nature of critical incidents, as well as to extract general categories

and subcategories from the data. Qualitative content analysis is a step by step process of categorisation (Graneheim & Lundman, 2004), and as such, there are general guidelines that the researcher should follow in order to perform the analysis. For the purposes of this study, a specific four-step approach was developed and used by the researcher to analyze the data. The four basic steps involved in the process of qualitative content analysis were as follows: a) the unit of analysis; due to the nature of the data and the purpose of research, each critical incident formed a unit of analysis for this study, b) arranging the raw data; each critical incident was assigned a unique serial number, such as CI01, CI02, etc., so that no two incidents had the same number, c) coding; critical incidents were coded based on their nature, i.e., *'positive'* or *'negative'* as defined by the students, and d) category extraction (and subcategories); categories were based on who the *'actor'* was in the account of the incident, not imposed by the researcher, but as they emerged from the data. It is important to mention here that the descriptions of critical incidents (see the tables below) under each category are in the language of the students and have not been paraphrased by the author.

For the purposes of this study, the 'actor' was defined as the *subject* (i.e. a person, a team or an institution) that either caused the critical event to occur, or engaged in it in various ways, or just performed the main action, according to the student's view. Critical incidents were then grouped into subcategories based on the general action, behaviour or attitude of the actor in the story of the incident. Given the qualitative nature of the study, I decided to create enough categories so that every critical incident could be included, according to content analysts Graneheim & Lundman (2004), and to count incidents with more than one actor category and subcategories as the same incident in order to express its full meaning (ibid 2004).

Findings
Characteristics of critical incidents
Of the 32 critical incidents reported by students, 28 took place in the social services of the public sector, and 4 took place in social services of the private not- for-profit sector. Most critical incidents (30) occurred inside the workplace while handling the case and only 2 critical incidents occurred outside the workplace during a home visit. According to the respondents, 9 incidents happened at the beginning of their final practice, 11 occurred in the middle of the field placement, and 12 at the end of their final practice. Of the 32 critical incidents, finally, 18 were classified as positive experiences and 14 were classified as negative experiences according to the students' responses.

The nature of critical incidents: Types and categories
The following sections describe the main categories that emerged from the analysis of positive and negative critical incidents. Note that the presentation of the categories of critical incidents below is in alphabetical order, not the frequency in terms of the number of either positive or negative critical incidents.

Positive critical incidents and related categories
Client [3]
The *client* category is central to three critical incidents categorized as positive (Table 1). This category refers to the client's behaviour during his/her interaction with the professional(s), including students. Client's improper behaviour is what lies at the heart of the three positive incidents. Here, the term 'improper behaviour' involves a broad range of client behaviours (e.g., challenging, disruptive, aggressive, violent, manipulative, etc.) and refers to interactional and behavioural processes without reference to underlying causes. Despite the fact that the client's behaviour was viewed negatively by students, it is interesting that all the critical incidents were reported as positive due to effective collaboration between team members, and the student's ability to practice ethical and professional behaviour skills effectively and cope with the incident.

Table 1. Positive Critical Incidents/Client

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Client	Clients tried to disrupt existing good relations between team members to curry favour with the social worker and take advantage of this.
	A client tried to put her personal interests above the public interest by asking the student to breach the rules of the organisation. Student tried to maintain client boundaries and refused to provide any service that did not comply with the rules established by the agency.
	Manipulative client with learning disabilities sought to gain the attention of student in a deceptive and unethical manner, asking her to investigate false allegations of abuse by another staff member.

Field instructor [3]

The category of *field instructor* is central to three positive critical incidents. In the positive incidents the field instructors were perceived as ethical, skilled social workers (Table 2). It is worth noting here that the two of three critical incidents were also related to the personal qualities of field instructors. This means that students admired not only the way that the field instructors as professional social workers treated clients and helped them to solve their problems, but they also appreciated their personal character traits, though they did not refer to specific traits; students generally considered their field instructors as good, both personally and professionally.

Table 2. Positive Critical Incidents/Field Instructor

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Field Instructor	Social worker initiated, facilitated, and coordinated the return of a cancer patient (end-stage) with serious respiratory problems to her island village.
	Separate meetings held with divorced parents with mental health problems to get permission for their child to be assessed for possible dyslexia. Parental counselling.
	Counselling support to adult young man with problematic family relations due to his sexual orientation.

Interprofessional teamwork [4]

The category of *interprofessional teamwork* is central to four positive critical incidents (Table 3). This category refers to the overall behaviour and attitudes of team members from different disciplines toward third parties such as the student (e.g., acceptance of student as team member), the client (e.g., violation of organisational ethics in favour of the client's interests) or the organisation (e.g., effective teamwork collaboration). Interestingly,

Student [8]

The category of *student* is the most common to emerge from the analysis of positive critical incidents (Table 4). This category refers to the student's ability to understand and uphold the values and ethics of the profession. In all the critical incidents belonging to this category, students play the most active role in applying and developing their professional values and ethics in practice; students chose to describe incidents that were part

Table 3. Positive Critical Incidents/Interprofessional Teamwork

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Interprofessional Teamwork	Student claimed ignorance of the organisational code of ethics and did not inform team members about formal counselling offered to a client. Team members understood the student's position and advised her appropriately.
	Professionals from different disciplines (doctor, nurse, social worker) in a hospital setting worked together to help an indigent and uninsured young immigrant suffering from serious health problems.
	Team members' successful crisis management of individual with learning disabilities due to separation from his beloved teacher who resigned from the agency.
	Team members violated the ethics of the organisation by changing the results of a diagnostic assessment of a poor child (with single-mother) in order to help her get the treatment she needed at a private centre free of charge.

the critical incident related to the team members' positive attitude to student, who made mistakes during his/her performance, seems to be key component of an open, ethical and cooperative learning environment. On the other hand, the critical incident related to the violation of the organisational ethics brings to surface the topic of professionals who go against organisational norms and rules in order to benefit their clients.

of their handling of a case they were involved in as trainee students. In general, students handled these incidents either under the direct supervision and guidance of their field instructors, who praised their good work or they handled it themselves because of their field instructor absence owing to various reasons.

Table 4. Positive Critical Incidents/Student

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Student	Student who replaced her practice instructor in group meetings with young people with learning disabilities handled the challenging behaviour of a group member, avoiding the dissolution of the group.
	Student placed in the municipal department of social services agreed to a mother's request to persuade the social welfare agency to reassess her daughter's allowance entitlement due to her learning disabilities.
	Counselling parents with difficult/aggressive behaviour after their request for a diagnostic assessment of their children for immature behaviour was rejected.
	Counselling support and guidance to family members to provide proper care to a very old family member with serious psychosocial problems.
	Counselling support and guidance to mother with immature behaviour and her partner while investigating whether conditions were suitable for the upbringing of their newborn baby.
	Counselling support and guidance to a single mother facing serious financial problems in order to help her terminate her pregnancy.
	Intake interview with a mother who wanted her child assessed for learning difficulties. Counselling and support to the mother who confided to the social worker she experienced domestic violence from her husband.
	Intake interview and counselling support and guidance to a Moldovan immigrant woman in final stages of breast cancer.

Negative critical incidents and related categories with subcategories

Client [2]

The category of *client* is central to two negative critical incidents (Table 5), one of which overlaps with the *management* critical incident that will be discussed later. Like the critical incident regarding the *management* category, this incident also focuses on the client's challenging behaviour during his/her interaction with the social workers including the student. The incident reported in this section describes an event when the client refused to comply with the rules of the agency and asked the student who had undertaken her/his case, to give back his/her personal data file in a violent manner.

Table 5. Negative Critical Incidents/Client

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Client	Client with challenging behaviour blamed the social agency for poor service and asked student to return her personal data file in a violent manner.

Field instructor [3]

The *field instructor* is central to three negative critical incidents (Table 6). This (negative) *field instructor* category refers to his/her inability to apply professional values when working with difficult and challenging clients or when guiding and supervising students in the practice context. In two of the three critical incidents, students observed their field instructors making errors or mistakes (e.g., loss of self-control, use of verbal abuse, verbal quarrel) in managing difficult clients, while in the third critical incident, the student had a bad supervisory experience because of the field instructor's indifferent behaviour toward her learning needs. According to the students, all of the above types of field instructor errors or attitudes were forms of unprofessional conduct, which is synonymous with unethical conduct in professional practice.

Interagency work [1]

The category of *interagency work* is related to only one reported critical incident (Table 7). This category generally refers to the relationships between organisations (public or private) that have different and sometimes incompatible goals. Through analysis, it appears that the student, who handled the situation herself, experienced strong disappointment and frustration because of the misuse of regulatory power by another public sector organisation involved in the same case.

Table 6. Negative Critical Incidents/Field Instructor

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Field Instructor	Loss of self-control by social worker and use of verbal abuse to a mother/client of social services who neglected her minor child.
	Student refused to work on a specific case because her field instructor did not provide her with the necessary information and guidance for handling the case.
	Verbal quarrel between drug addicted woman with wayward behaviour and the social worker in charge of the aid programme for people in need of material assistance.

Table 7. Negative Critical Incidents/Interagency Work

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Interagency Work	The Migrant Services Department declined to provide the care planned by the hospital social service department to a mother immigrant patient and her minor child, permanent residents of Greece, which risked their being deported.

Interprofessional teamwork [3]

There are 3 *interprofessional teamwork* negative critical incidents concerning various negative aspects of the team members' behaviour and performance (Table 8). All critical incidents in this section disclose various types of unethical, illegal and unprofessional acts at work, which could have had a serious effect, either on the client's welfare or on the proper functioning of the social agency or organisation. These acts were the responsibility of the whole team with the connivance of the head of the social service agency.

Management [1]

The category of *management* is related to only one reported critical incident, which is seen as of particular importance to the student (Table 9). This incident is indicative of the negative attitude that some social services managers in Greece may have toward the profession of social work; especially when managers or administrators come from other specializations (e.g., economists, doctors, etc.). It also reveals the relationships that may exist between the clients of social services and local politicians; the client who behaved violently toward a city council social worker in order to gain

Table 8. Negative Critical Incidents/Interprofessional Teamwork

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Interprofessional Teamwork	Team members remained indifferent to the plight of two abused and neglected children from a multi problem family who came to the social agency to get tested for dyslexia.
	Team members' inability to work together and make appropriate decisions led a drug addicted client to stop attending therapy sessions and leave the addiction treatment centre.
	Team members with the connivance of the head of social services department violated team operating rules. Student took the initiative and intervened during a meeting to restore team co-operation.

Table 9. Negative Critical Incidents/ Management

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Management	Violent behaviour of client towards city council social worker was strongly supported by people with political power working within the community. Management undermined the social worker's role.

an advantage did not act alone, but was strongly supported by people with political power within the specific workplace context.

Staff [3]

This category refers to a number of individual or collective unethical professional actions or behaviour that happened in the working environment (Table 10). Each critical incident has its own features; the first incident describes how the lack of the teacher's professional and ethical competence can cause communication problems between adolescents with learning disabilities. On the other hand, the second incident describes extreme actions in the workplace and illustrates the lack of ethical accountability and professionalism at all staff levels within the organisation (management and technical staff). Finally, the third incident describes the refusal of a particular staff member to provide care services to the social worker's client. This

Table 10. Negative Critical Incidents/Staff

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Staff	Teacher's inability to collaborate with the teaching assistant to manage and resolve a conflict situation in a special education classroom caused serious communication problems between adolescent students and disrupted the smooth functioning of the class.
	Staff (both management and technical) abandoned the social services department to celebrate a national anniversary. Staff instructed students from different disciplines (led by social work students) to manage the social services department by themselves.
	Colleague of another specialty (psychologist) within the same social agency refused to provide care services to the social worker's client.

incident clearly shows how the lack of work ethic can impact on the client's access to the full service.

Student [2]

The category of *student* is central to two negative critical incidents (Table 11). These refer to the student's inability to apply ethical standards and professional values when working with clients. In both types of incident, students failed to adhere to the expected ethical standards and skills for professional social workers. The students attributed this failure to different causes. In the first incident, for example, the student attributed her/his failure to help the client to her own lack of ability to practice proper professional ethics and skills. Here the student was unable to maintain the professional boundaries between the client and herself as she was emotionally involved with him. In contrast, in the second incident, the student criticised the field instructor for not helping him/her to handle the situation properly; the field instructor was not a social worker, but a psychologist within this specific organisation as any professional can function as a field instructor for social work students.

Discussion

The findings clearly showed that both positive and negative critical incidents helped students gain valuable insights into their ethics development process in the practice context. However, negative critical incidents served as good examples for students of what not to do in their future professional careers. On the other hand, the findings revealed that negative critical incidents may also result in a positive learning experience for students under certain circumstances (e.g., effective collaboration between team members, or the student's ability to practice ethical and professional behaviour skills).

Furthermore, the findings of this study indicated that, professional values are not simply theoretical and abstract ideas, but are core concepts which take on concrete meanings and are activated by/in the world of social work practice. As a result, their applicability and development seems to depend upon various individual and situational factors, as revealed by the CIT analysis. More specifically, the results of the qualitative content analysis showed, inter alia, variations in the content of critical incidents and highlighted a number of factors that, in different ways and to different degrees, seem to play a key role in the development of social work values and ethics in the workplace. These factors appeared under various headings (e.g., client, field instructor, student, interprofessional teamwork, etc.) under which either positive or negative critical incidents were classified. This variety of factors also confirms

Table 11. Negative Critical Incidents/Student

Category	Critical Incident/ Description
Student	Student, who had been involved emotionally with a client, was unable to think objectively so failed to provide appropriate services to the client.
	Student failed to deal with clients efficiently because her practice instructor was a psychologist not a social worker and unable to provide her with adequate training and guidance based on social work ethical standards.

the depth and complexity of the topic under study as has been documented in the social work literature (Banks, 2004, 2012; Bisman, 2014; Papouli, 2014). Summarizing the results of the CIT analysis, the following five factors are of particular interest:

- The students' own contribution to upholding their ethical standards. The findings confirm recent social work research and literature pointing to the adequacy of students' preparation along with their ability to implement knowledge and skills—including values and ethics—in field education (Bogo, 2010; Kanno & Koeske, 2010; Regehr et al., 2002). Bogo (2010) and Regehr et al. (2002) argue strongly that the ability of social work students to conceptualize their practice and identify the values, principles, and ideas that underlie their judgments and actions is an essential meta-competency for effective learning and development.

- The role field instructors play in the transmission of social work values and ethics to students during their placements. As has been well documented throughout the literature, field instructors as role models play a key role in the inspiration and encouragement of students to learn to act in an ethical manner in their professional life (Barretti, 2007, 2009; Bogo, 2010; Congress, 2002; Papouli, 2014). Field instructors not only teach students to act ethically, but they are offered as examples for them through their own behaviour. Thus, students learn to develop the ethical standards of the profession through direct observation of the field instructor's behaviour which also plays a major role in the development of their identities as ethical professionals.

- The importance of ethical collaboration, whether inside or outside the workplace. The findings shed light on the role of ethical collaboration in delivering good quality social services and reveal that ethical climate within a social organisation requires not only individual ethical behaviour, but also relational (or collective) ethical practices between staff members at all levels of the organisation (colleagues, team members including students, etc.). Extensive literature reviews of behavioural ethics in organisations (Trevino, Weaver, & Reynolds, 2006) and team collaboration in health and social care (O' Daniel & Rosenstein, 2008; McAuliffe, 2014) have also identified that individual ethical behaviour, and relational factors such as staff relationships, are significant in building and maintaining ethical practice in the workplace. But the findings of this study also suggest that ethical relationships provide role modelling functions that are particularly important for students learning to perform their tasks better based on the ethical standards of their profession.

- The client's behaviour as a determinant of the ethical practice of social workers in the workplace. Negative client behaviour, particularly, was found to be a powerful trigger forcing students to actively engage with their professional values and ethics, as well as the ethics of the social agency. But, as the study findings revealed, negative client behaviour can adversely affect professionals' judgment to act ethically if they themselves are not able to manage difficult clients, and/or the work environment is not appropriately supportive. In the same way, negative client behaviour may cause stress to students and lead to poor ethics learning outcomes. Recent research on stressful encounters with social work clients showed that negative client behaviour (e.g., hostile, aggressive, unethical, etc. behaviour) including violation of the unwritten rules of the profession or the workers' expectations, is an important source of ethical distress for

social workers (Savaya, Gardner, & Stange, 2011).

- The importance of the ethics of management (including the political affiliation of the heads of organisations) in creating and sustaining an ethical work/learning environment. The findings are generally in agreement with the literature which considers ethical leadership as the major requirement for creating and developing an ethical climate within organisational settings (DuBrin, 2008; Hardina et al.*,* 2007). At the same time, the findings also point to the complex relationships between management ethics and clientelistic practices that, to some degree, exist in the provision of public health (Sotiropoulos, 2004) and social care services in Greece. Clientelistic practices can occur when clients (e.g., individuals, families or groups) circumvent the formal processes to get welfare benefits for themselves and to the detriment of third parties. In such cases, clients exert pressure on persons who have institutional power (e.g., the manager/head of an organisation) and/or hold political positions (e.g., a municipal counsellor, major, member of parliament) within or outside the organization. It appears that clientelistic relationships tend to affect adversely the quality of service delivery and, consequently, the ethicality of the organisation itself.

Limitations

As with all research, this study has its own limitations. One limitation is the small number of participants and the restriction of the data to only one Social Work Department, though the findings are based on qualitative inquiry. In the future, a larger study that includes students from other areas of Social Work, would help stakeholders (e.g., researchers, educators, instructors, employers, professionals associations) to have a wider and deeper understanding of the topic under investigation. Another limitation is related to the sample composition. The study included only the students and not their field instructors. Research also including the field instructors in the sample population might have given a different balance to the data, shed more light on the subject, and enabled the field instructors' perspectives to be addressed as part of a more holistic investigation into what influences the practice experience.

Conclusions and Implications

This study focused on a phenomenon that forms the bedrock of the social work profession, i.e. values and ethics. To accomplish its goals, the study used the CIT method to gather data from social work students who had completed their final placement. The CIT as a reflective method was found to be an effective tool to explore aspects of the process of the students' ethics learning and development in the course of their field placement; The CIT analysis reveals the multifaceted and situation-specific nature of the learning of social work values and ethics in the field placement, while clearly indicating that positive workplace learning experiences during placement are strong motivational factors for students to use and expand their theoretical knowledge in ethics, build their ethics skills and develop their identities as ethical professionals.

Given that the phenomenon of social work values and ethics is complex in nature and difficult to investigate using conventional research techniques, as well as the fact that competency models of learning and assessment have been criticized for not dealing well with values and ethics, the CIT method as described above could be part of the evaluation process of ethics learning and development in field practice. In this way, the CIT method used by social work students can identify whether the philosophy of the practice environment is congruent with the mission, values and ethics of the social work profession.

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FOOTNOTES

[1]The term *workplace* in this paper is used to describe places used as field placement settings for students by the Department.

[2](or field placement setting)

[3]The final placement of students (i.e. professional practice placement) comes after the two first blocks of field placement (I & II) in the 5th & 6th semesters of study. The final placement is undertaken at the 8th (final) semester of study, takes place on a daily basis and lasts six months.

[4]In nursing research, interestingly, Schluter, Seaton, & Chaboyer (2008) replaced the term 'critical incident' with 'significant event' because in hospitals, the former term is usually synonymous with negative events or crisis events.

[5]Active participant means that the student was directly involved in handling the incident. Observer means that the student was not actively engaged in the incident, but observed someone else's handling of it such as the field instructor, either alone or as a team member or another professional in the workplace closely collaborating with the field instructor.