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Title: Values and Ethics Discourses in Irish Social Work: Which values do practitioners view as realistic and implementable in day to day practice?

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Abstract

Discourses surrounding values and ethics are central to the professional of social work. This paper focuses on the role of values and ethics in Irish social work practice. Drawing on findings from original research it explores the place of both traditional and emancipatory values as they are viewed by practitioners in the field. It also explores which values workers view as realistic and implementable in day to day practice. The methodology employed to achieve these aims consisted of a structured literature review coupled with a web-based attitudinal survey. The sampling process resulted in 128 responses, 111 of which were complete. Overall findings suggested a marked preference for traditional value types with many respondents indicating that the tasks associated with emancipatory values are best placed with other groups in Irish society.

Keywords: Social Work; Values; Ethics; Traditional; Emancipatory; Discourses; Genealogy.

Introduction

Social work has undergone much change over the course of its existence, emerging from charitable/voluntary efforts in the late 18th and early 19th centuries to become both an academic discipline and a practical and applied profession requiring those who practice to hold a recognised third level qualification (Skehill, 1999; Thompson; 2009, Horner, 2009). Throughout this development values have held a constant presence.

When considering the development of the social work value-base most Irish social work practitioners will be keenly aware of Biestek (1961) who is widely credited with formally describing what have since become cemented in place as traditional social work values. They will also be aware that during the 1960s and 70s new sets of values characterised social work discourses as emancipatory values began to emerge (Banks, 1995; Thompson, 2009). Contemporary social workers operate within formal codes of ethics which should ideally function to define practice (*see BASW, 1996; NASW, 1999 IASW, 2006 for precise* examples). Broadly speaking, there is simply no denying the importance of values to social work and along with knowledge and skills, values form one of the three central pillars of the profession.

However, despite this importance, in reality social work values and ethics are abstract and contested concepts and therefore extremely difficult to adequately and satisfactorily define (Banks, 1995; Shardlow, 2002; Dominelli, 2002). The research presented in this paper aims to shed light on which values Irish social work practitioners identify as realistic and implementable in day to day practice. The theoretical foundation used to lend intellectual rigour to this paper draws on the work of the philosopher Michel Foucault (1977; 1984; 1987; 1988), particularly his notions of genealogy and discourses, and this shall be detailed in the first section of this paper. Following this, and in order to lend context to the findings, a brief examination of the genealogy of social work values and ethics, including how these discourses are imparted in educative settings, will be presented. This will followed by a

description of the methodology used to complete the research. The findings will then be presented along with a brief discussion to conclude the paper. It is hoped that this paper will help lend insight into and generate debate about the place of social work values in contemporary Irish social work practice.

Foucault: Key Concepts

When seeking to understand the development of social work values along with contemporary codes of ethics a theoretical language that provides a basis for this understanding is essential. This is particularly true when examining what may be viewed as the competing discourses of traditional and emancipatory values. In this respect, this study has employed a form of discourse analysis throughout and in doing so has sought to enhance understanding through the persistent application of concepts developed by Foucault (1977; 1984; 1987; 1988). Further explanation of these concepts is given below:

Discourse(s): Discourses may be viewed as variable ways of specifying knowledge and truth and therefore contain and control considerable power (Powell & Khan, 2012). When a discourse becomes embedded and largely accepted it can be referred to as a discursive formation or a hegemonic discourse (Foucault, 1984; 1987; Fairclough, 2005). This research proposes that discourses are embedded within structures and organisations and function to legitimise and justify the activities of said structures or organisations. So, in this case, the discourses of values and ethics are viewed as being embedded within the structure of organised social work, acting to legitimise the role and function of the profession. The accepted techniques of professional groupings effectively create 'true' discourses which constitute whole domains of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1977). This has the effect of destroying or delegitimizing competing discourses for example, the discourse of physics and science delegitimizes the discourse of the supernatural, the discourse of medical science

delegitimizes the discourse of folk medicine or alternative therapies and the discourse of market economics delegitimizes the discourse of collective redistributive welfare policy and state sponsored services. A social work example may be how the discourse of managerialism delegitimizes the emancipatory discourse and ethos of the profession.

Genealogy (of discourses): Genealogy is very simply meant in the sense of tracing the historical developments that have lead to contemporary circumstances and discourses.

The ideas and concepts of Foucault have previously provided fertile ground for analysis and research relating to social work although this has not been extensive. Chambon (1999), writing in the US, has produced an edited book for those engaged in the process of thinking about or analysing social work from a Foucauldian perspective. Garrity (2010) successfully maps out the merits and benefits of using Foucault's discourse analysis as a tool to scrutinise the social work profession's values, policies and practices. Gilbert and Powell (2010) use the concepts of Foucault to explore the power relations that exist within the profession of social work. Powell and Khan (2012) acknowledge the work of Foucault as having provided 'conceptual gifts' suitable for the analysis of, and investigation into, social work. They argue that the use of Foucault's work can provide a deeper less assumptive understanding of power relations within the profession.

The Development of a Discourse: Values through to Professional Codes of Ethics.

When considering the development of the contemporary values and ethics discourse, Reamer (1980; 1983; 1994; 1998; 2006; 2014; 2015), writing in the United States, has published extensively in the area and provides a useful model for analysis. He has identified four distinct periods through which the genealogy of contemporary social work values and ethics is traceable. It is important to point out that these periods do not denote a linear progression and often overlap. They are detailed as follows:

1) The morality period;
2) The values period;
3) The ethics theory and decision making period;
4) The ethical standards and risk management period[1].

The 'morality' period refers to the late 20th century and posits that workers were more concerned with the morality of the client rather than what may have contributed to their need for intervention. This analysis is largely congruent with the Irish example where social work developed in the moral atmosphere of charitable intervention couched in the language of catholic social teaching (Curry, 1998; Cousins, 2003; Considine & Dukelow, 2009). Further highlighting the link between social work values and religious morality it is interesting to note that Biestek (1961), himself a Catholic priest, is credited with developing what has subsequently become identified as the traditional social work value-base in his seminal work The Case-Work Relationship. In this, Biestek (1961) developed seven principles of social work. Because of their on-going importance to social work they are listed as follows:

1) Individualisation;
2) Self-determination;
3) Purposeful expression of feelings;
4) Controlled emotional involvement;
5) Acceptance;
6) Confidentially and a...
7) Non-judgemental attitude.
8) The values espoused by Biestek (1961), while highly individual in nature, remain hugely relevant in social work today.

[1] Reamer (2015) has recently added a fifth period to reflect changing ethical dilemmas in an increasingly technological society which is not being discussed here.

The period in which Biestek was writing arguably encapsulates what Reamer (1998) referred to as the 'values' period and was marked by a focus on developing specific social work values. Further notable contributions from the values period came from Levy (1972; 1973) who attempted to develop a typology of social work values and subsequently went on to help create and develop social work codes of ethics (Chase, 2015). Between this and Reamer's (1998) third period saw the emergence of what have come to be known as emancipatory values (Highman, 2006; Thompson, 2009). These differed extensively from traditional social work values in that their focus was far more political and much more focused on matters of social justice and structural inequalities (*ibid*, 2006; *ibid*, 2009). Much of the emancipatory movement in social work originated in the US and was perhaps reflective of the turbulence of that period there (Reamer, 1998). Academics and practitioners espousing emancipatory values were openly and directly critical of traditional casework approaches (Chase, 2015; Reamer, 1998). Notable entries from this time include Emmet (1962), Lucas (1963), Plant (1970) and Lewis (1972).

Reamer's (1998) third period is referred to as the 'ethics theory and decision making period' and is characterised by a renewed focus on applied professional ethics and can be viewed as being reflective of developments in the field of medical ethics. This period has led directly to the fourth period which is named as the 'maturation of ethical standards and risk management period' and which is arguably most reflective of contemporary social work in Ireland today. It is the period of the social worker as the 'bureau professional' (Parry & Parry, 1979) who works within a hierarchical structure where ethics and values represent a code for practice, a guide for conduct and a template for decision making (Spano & Koenig, 2007; Chase; 2015; Banks, 2013; Reamer; 1998). While the discourse of values remains largely intact, located within these codes of ethics, it is arguable as to how reflective this discourse is of actual practice.

Delivering a Discourse: Values in Social Work Education.

When considering how the discourse of social work values develops for individual practitioners it is interesting to examine some of the literature as it relates to values in educative settings. Imparting a strong and robust discourse denoting social work as a value-led profession must almost certainly form part of any social work educative curriculum (Hugman, 2005; Mackay & Woodward, 2010). Hughman & Smith (1995) echo this sentiment and argue that the teaching and imparting of the profession's value-base is the single most important aspect of training new social workers. However, such a task is not without challenge. For example, Clifford & Burke (2009) argue that methods relating to the teaching of social work values remain under-developed while Allen & Friedman (2010) acknowledge the essentialness of imparting social work values to students but argue that a difficulty arises from the fact that the take up of these values is incredibly difficult to assess.

Compounding this difficulty, it is also possible to suggest that there are competing values discourses in social work education and that these are reflective of the conflicting discourses within the profession itself. Mackay & Woodward (2010), writing in Scotland, have recognised this. They highlight the influence of neoliberal market driven ideologies and managerialism in the formation of social work curricula which, they argue, is reflective of governmental influence on modern social work codes of ethics. They further argue that students, in their experience, consistently do not recognise the more structural components of the social work value-base. Furthermore, they suggest there is a preoccupation among students with individual approaches to values at the expense of structural analysis and critical reflection. In a follow-up piece, concerning the same themes, Mackay & Woodward (2012) conducted a small scale research project where 22 student social workers answered a qualitative questionnaire relating to values. The results showed that for students, values often remain abstract. Students were also found to have difficulty in articulating around the area of

emancipatory values and many struggled to say how they would apply such values in practice.

Research Design

The study was conducted by way of an attitudinal survey using the web-based survey platform, Survey Monkey. Participants were provided with brief explanations of the intent and purpose of the study as well as clarification of the researcher's meaning of the specific topics under study. For the purpose of this research, traditional values were defined as those which are perceived as being more individual in nature whilst emancipatory values were defined as those that place a greater emphasis on structural inequalities. Aside from the section seeking participant profile information, the survey utilised forced choice attitudinal measurement devices such as the Likert scale throughout (de Vaus, 1999, Bryman, 2012). Estimated at between five and ten minutes, the survey was designed to be relatively quick to complete. The purpose of this was to help generate a higher rate of response. Participants were also given the opportunity to comment after each section in an optional comment box.

The Sampling Process

This study was conducted using a purposive sampling technique which is where a specific group or cohort are deemed to hold the answers to the questions being asked and so are deliberately and exclusively targeted (de Vaus, 1999, Bryman, 2012, Whitaker, 2012). The cohort in this instance was made up of practising social workers. A form of snowball sampling was also utilised as initial contact was made with gatekeepers—largely in the form of principal social workers—who were then encouraged to re-transmit the survey to other suitable participants (de Vaus, 1999; Bryman; 2012; Whitaker, 2012; Dawson, 2013). As this was an electronic survey all distribution and subsequent redistribution was carried out by way of email. An exhaustive and comprehensive campaign to enlist participants was undertaken

through a number of avenues of enlistment. A breakdown of the resulting sample is detailed below:

Results of the sampling process: Sampling resulted in 128 responses, 111 of which were complete. Of the 111 who answered 86 or 77.5% identified as female and 25 or 22.5% as male. Age range was highly varied with 2 respondents identifying as being under 25; 30 as being aged between 25 and 35; 29 as being between 35 and 45; 27 as being aged between 45 and 55 and 22 as being aged between 55 and 65. There was also a significant variance in respondent roles, with the majority (60%) of respondents coming from child protection backgrounds. This is given more detail in fig 1.1.

Answer Choices	Responses	
Child protection services	**60.00%**	66
Mental health services	**4.55%**	5
Probation services	**1.82%**	2
Disability services	**1.82%**	2
Medical social work	**10.00%**	11
Community based social work	**5.45%**	6
Fostering or adoption	**10.91%**	12
Other	**5.45%**	6
Total		**110**

Fig 1.1 Respondent roles.

Data Analysis

Very simply speaking, there are two basic types of statistics, descriptive and inferential. Descriptive statistics are those which summarise patterns in participant responses. Inferential

statistics seek to identify if the patterns observed are generalisable to the whole of the population from which the sample was drawn. The data being presented here has been analysed using both techniques (de Vaus, 1999, Whitaker, 2012). The aim has been to present and describe findings in order to identify trends or patterns that may generate discussion.

Values and Ethics Discourses in Social Work: Key Findings

One of the key objectives of the research was to explore social work values and ethics discourses in professional practice. In order to first get a very general sense of the importance of values participants were first asked to respond to the statement that social work values represented an important feature of day to day practice. Of the 109 who answered an overwhelming majority either agreed (58) or strongly agreed (48) with this statement.

A Hierarchy of Values:

In order to then begin differentiating between different values-types—and their respective importance to practising social workers—participants were asked about the roles of traditional values and emancipatory values respectively. When asked if traditional values played an important role in practice a strong majority of respondents agreed that they did with 61 agreeing and 29 strongly agreeing.

When participants were asked the same question in relation to emancipatory values a marked difference was apparent. An overall majority (58) still agreed that emancipatory values are important in practice; however, it was it is a much smaller majority than that which was received in relation to the importance of traditional values. The question relating to emancipatory values also generated a much greater neutral response (45). Taken together, these findings lend credence to the notion of competing discourses within the overall discourse of social work values and ethics (Chase, 2015; Reamer, 1998). They are also,

arguably, indicative of the ambiguity surrounding the espousal and articulation of emancipatory values (Mackay & Woodward, 2010; 2012).

In order to further understand the place of values in social work practice, participants were provided with a list of specific values, both traditional and emancipatory, and asked to identify the 3 values which they felt featured most in their day to day practice. Fig 1.2 details the results:

Answer Choices	Responses	
Acceptance	18.92%	21
Non-judgmental attitude	55.86%	62
Client self-determination	27.93%	31
Empathy	52.25%	58
Unconditional positive regard	17.12%	19
Equality	16.22%	18
Social justice	22.52%	25
Partnership	45.95%	51
Empowerment	45.05%	50
Total Respondents: 111		

Fig 1.2: The values which practitioners feel feature most in day to day practice.

A non-judgemental attitude was chosen 61 one times with empathy being chosen 58 and these represented the two most popular values of the choices on offer. Both represent values that can be characterised as both traditional and individual in nature (Thompson, 2009) with their formal origin traceable to the work of Biestek (1961). These were closely followed by the values of partnership and empowerment which, conversely, can be characterised as emancipatory (Thompson, 2009). However, while partnership and empowerment are describable as emancipatory or radical values, they are, arguably the more individual of this type. They can and have been associated with advocacy and empowerment approaches (Leadbetter, 2002) or approaches such as the strengths perspective (Saleeby, 1997) each of which have been criticised in part for being overly individualistic and ignoring the potential for wider structural problems in clients' lives (Payne, 1997; Gray, 2011). Moreover, it is

noticeable that other important, and arguably extremely salient emancipatory values, namely social justice and equality, scored quite low, with equality representing the overall lowest scoring value despite social work's overt commitment to the realisation of same. Again, this is arguably reflective of competing value discourses and is suggestive of an apparent trend of ambiguity or apathy in relation to emancipatory values (Reamer, 1998; Mackay & Woodward, 2010; 2012; Chase, 2015). These findings are then further borne out and reiterated in other findings. For example, when exploring value-led tasks a majority of respondents (44) agreed that matters of social justice are best pursued by other groups in Irish society, with many others (36) preferring to remain neutral. This is despite the fact that an very strong majority of respondents (89) had previously identified social justice as a key practice value.

When it came to the general notion of addressing structural inequalities a marked ambiguity was apparent with a slight majority of respondents (44) agreeing that this was a realistic expectation in everyday practice, many others choosing to remain neutral (32) and a sizeable proportion of disagreeing altogether (35). Mirroring this, a majority of respondents (56) also agreed that there are other groups in Irish society who are better placed to address structural inequalities with 32 preferring to remain neutral and only an overall number of 19 disagreeing.

These findings demonstrate the concept of a hierarchy of values in day to day to social work practice. They also identify which values social workers feel are most realistic and implementable in day to day practice. They also, arguably, reveal an incongruity between many of social work's espoused values and the reality of practice on the ground. These findings also reveal something about how those working in the profession view their role. Despite social work espousing an overt commitment to pursuing social justice and addressing structural inequalities many of practitioners who took part in this study feel these tasks are

best placed elsewhere. It can therefore be argued that social work values in Ireland belong firmly in the 'maturation of ethical standards and risk management period' (Reamer, 1998) of articulation.

Conclusion

The research findings presented here are important because they show, for the first time, which values feature most in Irish social work by quantifying which values practitioners view as realistic and implementable in day to day practice. The findings also go towards quantifying the feasibility and frequency of particular value positions by examining which value-oriented tasks—such as the pursuit of social justice and addressing structural inequalities—practitioners view as being best placed with other groups in Irish society. Arising from this undertaking it becomes possible to construct a hierarchy of values (see fig 1.3) in Irish social work practice which can then be generalised to the professional social work population as a whole.

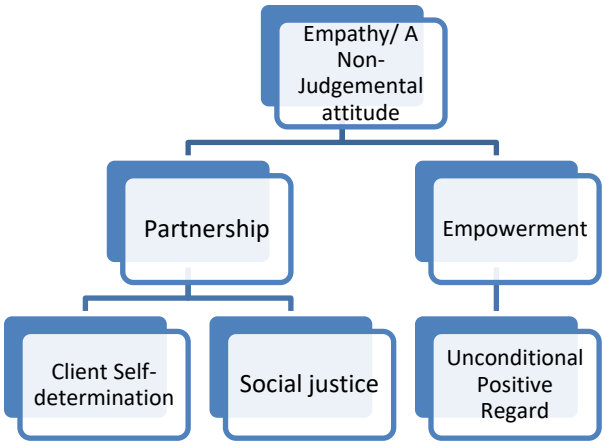


Fig 1.3: A hierarchy of values.

This hierarchy of values places what are typically characterised as traditional social work values in a position of prominence. These are then closely followed by more emancipatory,

yet still highly individual, values. The last group represents a mixture of value types and can arguably be interpreted as an ambiguous grouping.

Having established the concept of a hierarchy of values in Irish social work practice what remains unknown is why this is the case and why the hierarchy takes the form it does in respect to the prominence of certain values over others. This research was designed to quantify the frequency of phenomena—in this case values—thereby providing a picture of the place of values in Irish social work practice. It was designed to tell us *what* social workers think, but not *why* they think it. However, by drawing on previous research and literature and also on common experience, it remains possible to infer.

Firstly, an ambiguity around the articulation of emancipatory value types is something that has arose in previous studies. Mackay & Woodward (2010; 2012), mentioned here earlier, conducted research at the student level and have shown that student social workers struggle with the more structural components of the social work value-base. Furthermore, they suggest there is a preoccupation among students with individual approaches to values and a difficulty for students in articulating around the area of emancipatory values with many struggling to say how they would apply such values in practice. However, the fact remains that Mackay & Woodward's (2010; 2012) research was carried out within the student social worker population and although student social workers and social work practitioners share a common trajectory of experience they represent two very different cohorts along that trajectory. It may be possible to suggest that difficulties surrounding the articulation of emancipatory social work values begin during the educative process, but substantially more work would need to be carried out to in order to verify this assertion.

Secondly, when examining the emergence of a hierarchy of values, it is notable that an overall majority (66) of the survey participants—as representative of the majority of

practising social workers—identified as working in child protection roles. Child protection social work represents an intensely procedural and tightly defined statutory role which is governed by standard operating procedures and richly detailed business plans (*see Tusla, 2016*). This may have a limiting effect on which values are realistic and implementable or even desirable and necessary in day to day practice. This assertion is borne out by some of the child protection workers who participated in this study and who chose to highlight their views through use of the optional comment box whilst completing the survey. For example one respondent noted that:

Because social work in Ireland is dominated by Child Protection, ideas of promoting social change and empowering and liberating people to enhance their wellbeing are becoming devalued.

Another respondent noted that:

Standard business processes have hindered true social work practice which is now based on ticking boxes rather than working with individual people and families.

And a further respondent noted that:

I feel that there is quite a clash between social work values and the demands of agency and agency policy and practice. This causes a lot of angst for social work practitioners who wish to uphold the integrity of social work values.

These and similar sentiments were echoed repeatedly by many of the participants who chose to comment, the vast majority of whom occupied child protection roles. Therefore, it is possible to suggest that the value hierarchy present in Irish social work practice is reflective of practitioner roles. However, the fact remains that the verification of such an assertion would require much more work of a qualitative nature in order to be borne out conclusively.

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Author agreement

I agree not to submit the contents of this article to any other journal for publication.

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