

# Practising ethically in an unethical world: Cultivating professional ethical wisdom in social work

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# Outline

- The domain of the 'ethical'
- Practising ethically in an unethical world?
- The rough terrain of social work
- Professional ethical wisdom
- Traditional, new managerial and everyday ethics
- Exploring professional ethical wisdom through the concept of 'ethics work'
- Illustrating ethics work: the experiences of a recently qualified children's services social worker
- Cultivating professional ethical wisdom through education
- Concluding comments: the ethical is political

## The domain of the ethical

- **‘Ethical’ in a generic sense** refers to matters relating to the promotion of human and ecological flourishing, including harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities
- **‘Ethical’ in a positive sense** means ethically right or good – the opposite of ‘unethical’, which mean ethically wrong or bad.

**Note** – ‘ethical’ and ‘moral’ are often used interchangeably in ordinary English usage.

## Practising ethically

In accordance with social work values:

- human rights
- social justice
- professional integrity

With respect, fairness, trustworthiness, care, compassion, generosity, humility, wisdom ...

In an unethical world

- Inequality
- Unfairness
- Untruth
- Violence

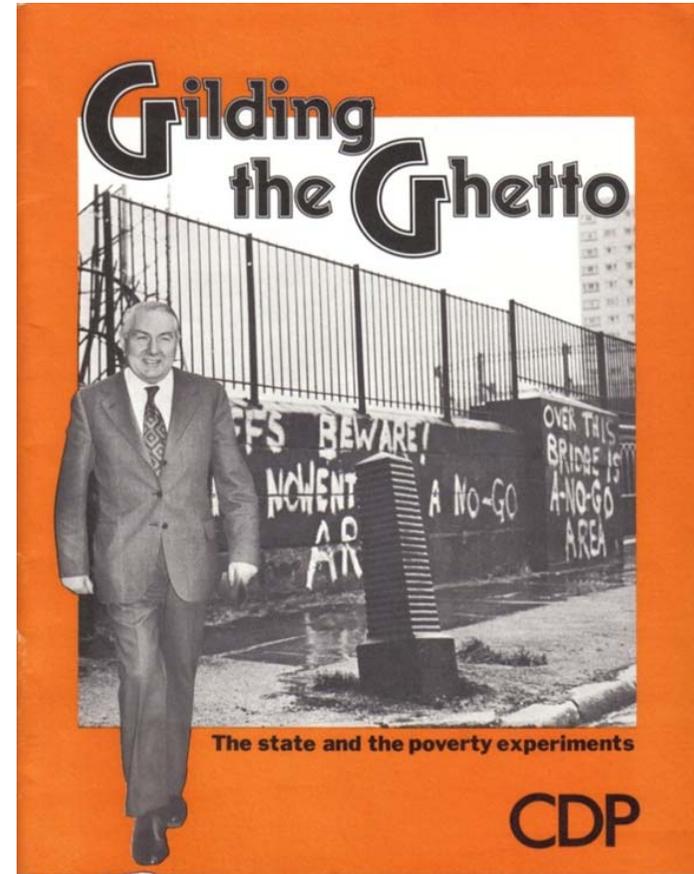
Self-interest, meanness, Grandiosity ...

'Immoral buildings'

# Practising ethically in an unethical world



A big thank you to [@hacknycouncil](https://twitter.com/hacknycouncil) social workers who have been working since Sunday to help those affected by the Grenfell fire.



# Practising ethically in an unethical world

**On that Sunday, social workers from outside the area were:**

Responding with care and generosity to displaced residents in an emergency

The emergency was linked to wicked inequality

**On a routine basis, social workers from the local area would be involved with some residents**

What would they be doing?

In what context?

## Everyday practice of social workers in Britain, 2017

- A social worker was *leaned on* to change his recommendation from supporting a family to stay together, to removing the children, due to lack of resources for family support in Children's Services.
- A social worker was *pressurised* to find a 'shared lives' carer for a person with severe psychiatric issues, as it would be cheaper than secure residential accommodation
- A social worker was told by his manager that it was not his job to support a mother to claim her welfare benefits

**Social work  
is on a cliff  
edge**

**The supports around  
social work are dissolving**

**Social workers are in the  
same psychological state as  
families – in crisis**

# The rough terrain of social work

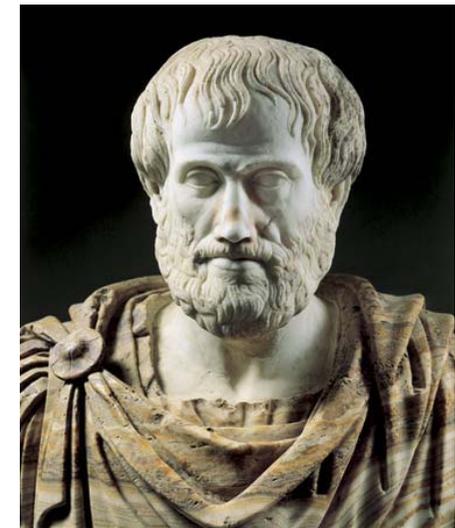
- It occupies a 'dilemmatic space' – built on contradictions, often no obvious right action
- Subject to increasing state regulation, managerialism and privatisation
- Affected by public sector austerity measures

## Negative trends linked with neo-liberalism, managerialism and austerity

- Creating dominant discourses of performance, risk, targets and results
- Setting social workers up to fail – impossible to follow all the procedures, rules, protocols; or to meet needs with limited resources
- Devaluing of professional autonomy, judgement and discretion
- Encouraging defensive practice
- Eroding personal responsibility & commitment to the profession
- De-humanising service users, social workers and the relationship between them
- Creating moral distress – social workers know the right thing to do, but are unable to do it

## Growing interest in *phronesis* and professional wisdom

- Response to concern about increasing focus on technical rationality and managerial accountability.
- Reclaiming hidden discourse of professional judgement and expertise.
- Drawing on Aristotelian *phronesis* or ‘practical wisdom’:
  - ‘a true and reasoned state of capacity to act with regard to the things which are good or bad for human beings.’ (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1954, *Nicomachean Ethics*, p. 142 [VI, 5, 1140b 4-6])
  - ‘Being good at thinking morally’ (Hughes, 2001, p. 86)



# The domain of professional ethical wisdom

- *Ethical* - wisdom practised in the domain of ethics (issues of human & ecological flourishing, harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities).
- *Professional* - ethical wisdom in professional life.
- *Professional ethical wisdom* – the disposition to engage in practical reasoning in professional situations where matters of harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities are at stake.



# Professional ethical wisdom – a capacity to:

- Think about and recognise universal questions – such as ‘what counts as a good life for human beings?’ and profession-specific questions such as ‘what counts as social welfare or social justice?’
- Perceive the nature of particular situations encountered in professional life; notice and attend to issues of ethical salience; place in a political context; look at situations from different perspectives and imagine alternatives.
- Empathise with the emotions and perspectives of others; experience and use emotions relevant to situations in professional life – such as compassion or righteous anger.
- Deliberate about and judge what will contribute to the good or to social welfare in particular situations and what is the role of social workers in bringing this about.
- Act justly, with courage, care, trustworthiness and professional integrity.

<b>Traditional professional ethics</b>	<b>New managerial ethics</b>	<b>Everyday ethics in professional life</b>
Ethics as decision-making	Ethics as regulation	Ethics as embedded
<i>Conduct</i>	<i>Competencies</i>	<i>Character</i>
<i>Codes</i>	<i>Conformity</i>	<i>Commitment</i>
<i>Cases</i>	<i>Categories</i>	<i>Context</i>
Respect, rights	Fairness, good outcomes	Virtues, care, social justice

# Exploring professional ethical wisdom through the concept of ‘ethics work’

‘**Work**’ – the moves people make psychologically, conversationally and bodily to perform or achieve a particular persona or state of mind (as in ‘identity work’, ‘emotion work’).

‘**Ethics work**’ - the effort people put into seeing ethical aspects of situations, developing themselves as good practitioners, working out the right course of action and justifying who they are and what they have done.



# Dimensions of ethics work

- **Framing work** – identifying and focusing on the ethically salient features of a situation; placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts (reflexivity and criticality).
- **Role work** – playing a role in relation to others (advocate, carer, critic); taking a position (partial/impartial; close/distant).
- **Emotion work** – being caring, compassionate, empathic; managing emotions.
- **Identity work** – working on one's ethical self; creating an identity as an ethically good professional; maintaining professional integrity.
- **Reason work** – making moral judgements and decisions; justifying judgments and decisions.
- **Relationship work** – engaging in dialogue; working on relationships
- **Performance work** – making visible aspects of this work to others; demonstrating oneself at work (accountability work).

## Illustrating ethics work: A Children's Services social worker

“... I've had supervision from management, I've been advised that it's not part of my child protection role to support a parent with a benefit appeal [Employment & Support Allowance], even though I know that the financial impact that will have on the family and on mum's mental health will be significant. So it's the debate around, as a social worker being a case manager or a case worker and increasingly I'm being encouraged back to that old position of case management - so working with families from afar rather than being hands on, offering practical support.”

The mother had quite complex mental health needs (she was agoraphobic), but was not receiving any mental health support and didn't meet the criteria for high levels of support from children's services. She used a community fostering scheme three times a week to enable her to attend appointments. She struggled with managing her finances and keeping appointments.

“The family ... have been in and out of children's services for some time. We've seen cycles of improvement and drop off ... I knew that all it took is a trigger such as loss of family finance or deterioration in mum's mental health and we may well have seen a significant deterioration ... That's when we're talking about removal of children.”

“Well I ignored my manager and offered her [the mother] support .... Supported her for advice interview ... to go to GP [doctor] to get a letter ... wrote letter of support ... took her to the appeal as well. I just didn't tell anybody”.

## Ethics work

**Framing work** – seeing the whole family in context, not just children. Aware of how the system works – he is ‘feeding the system’.

**Role work** – “Part of my role would be to do work with mum and to support her. So I just took it as part of that. So I suppose it was, for me, doing the right thing and working between the gaps. I think social worker’s case management isn’t good social work, is it? We all know that. We’ve got to be hands on with families”.

**Emotion work** – mentions his own family background, which means he is “sensitive” to the mother’s situation: “maybe I was drawn a little bit to this lady’s needs because of that ...”

**Identity work** – “... sometimes as practitioners ... we just have to do the right thing because there was no one else that was going to do the right thing in this case”.

**Reason work** – “she should have access [to support], it’s almost her human rights”. “You use your professional judgement and spend a little less time with another family where you’re managing risk”

**Relationship work** – developing a supportive relationship with mother

**Performance work** – making visible aspects of this work to his peers in a dilemmas café (although it was hidden from manager).

# Cultivation of professional ethical wisdom in educational contexts

- Going beyond traditional 'textbook' ethics (principles, codes, difficult decisions) to a situated everyday ethics (politics, people and practice).
- Supervision & critical dialogue with peers in a group
- Working with longer, real life cases
- Moral case deliberation, dilemmas cafés
- Neo-Socratic dialogue
- Forum theatre



## Dilemmas cafés as an example

- raise participants' awareness of ethical challenges in practice;
- encourage collaborative dialogue, including critical listening and questioning;
- stimulate learning through hearing about different ways of seeing and understanding issues;
- explore a variety of recommendations for action;
- seeing issues as collective and political, not just individual



“Being able to share with others honestly about key issues that are seldom talked about”

“Bringing different perspectives together and preparing for the unexpected”

“Meeting and hearing from other practitioners in a positive environment of equality. Was useful to use real examples”

“By sharing my dilemma I felt supported and acknowledged”

# Forum theatre as an example

**Developing attentiveness**, noticing key points when something could be done differently; focussing on particular features of a situation.

**Being an external critic** – seeing the whole picture from a distance.

**Empathising with the protagonist**, feeling what it is like to be that person, and getting the chance to take the place of the protagonist.

**Reframing**, repositioning characters, configuring the scene differently.

**Repetition**, rehearsal, how to challenge the oppressor; often being courageous, motivated by witnessing injustice.

**Dialogue**, sharing perspectives on what is going on, how to interpret the action, possibilities for action.



# Concluding comments: surfacing professional ethical wisdom through ethics work

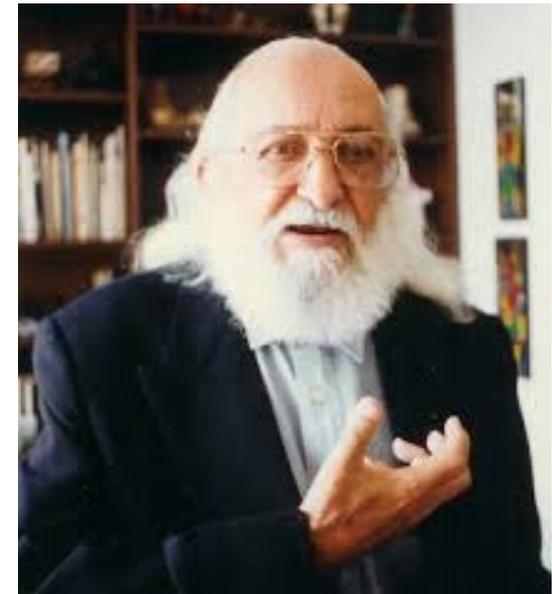
- reclaiming the ground lost to the domain of the technical and managerial
- the work of both deconstruction (of powerful structures of current discourses), *and*
- reconstruction of the ethical relationality of social work and its mission as a profession committed to acting for social justice. Examples: Social Work Action Network (SWAN); Orange Tide in Spain, based on the ethics of social work.



## Concluding comments: The ethical is political

To me it [political struggle] should be undertaken in the name of ethics, not obviously the ethics of markets but rather the universal ethics of human beings – in the name of the needed transformation of society that should result in overcoming dehumanizing injustice.

(Paulo Freire, 2004, 'On the Right and the Duty to Change the World' in *Pedagogy of indignation*. Boulder, Colorado: Paradigm, p. 35)



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[www.durham.ac.uk/socialjustice](http://www.durham.ac.uk/socialjustice)

