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ETHICS IN SOCIAL WORK - FROM RULES TO DISCOURSE

ENGLISH SUMMARY

My dissertation (from 1993) deals with the central developmental characteristics of a professional code of ethics in social work. I demonstrate how professionalisation and the development of a professional code of ethics go hand in hand, and review the critique surrounding the traditional code of ethics. This is followed by a presentation of the development of an alternative model for professional ethics which has been adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers and the Norwegian Association of Social Workers and other professional associations in Norway and Denmark

The purpose of the dissertation is

(A) to provide a critique of the traditional code of professional ethics and

(B) to establish the grounds for a new ethical model based on a inter-disciplinary approach (social work-related, moral philosophical, socio-political)

In the period 1986-1989, the author worked with the creation of ethical guidelines in the Norwegian Association of Social Workers and in the International Federation of Social Workers. In this work, one attempted to build upon a type of thinking which deviated from that which was common in the Anglo-American tradition of professional ethics. Nonetheless, the dissertation defends the development of a separate professional code of ethics for social workers. Though ethics and values may represent a common pool of ideas which transcend the various sectors, vocations and professions, there will be characteristics specific to the praxis of a profession which warrant a particularised code of ethics. Social workers' relations to clients, for example, are marked by a specific type of power. Daily, the praxis of social work places the individual social worker in situations which involve value choices. These choices may differ from those faced by other professions or by the citizenry in general.

The dissertation is divided into five sections. The *first section* presents a review of central concepts and ways of thinking about social work as they emerge in ethics and science. Here, the very concept of social work is also discussed and defined. This opens for a discussion of the dissertation's epistemological and methodological foundation in which the author's participation in the above-mentioned reform work functions as a starting point for the use of elements of action research theory. In addition, references in the realm of moral philosophy are presented. Collectively, these references address central ethical streams of thought within moral philosophy which are relevant to the question of professional ethics.

The remaining sections of the dissertation are built around four main issues, which also reflect the mode of thinking which served as a foundation for the aforementioned reform work:

(1) An analysis of the relationship between the development of a professional code of ethics and professionalization efforts in social work.

In the *second section* of the dissertation, the author seeks to present historical aspects of the development of separate ethical guidelines, rules and principles in the field of health and social work. He forwards the probability that the form and content of a professional code of ethics is connected to the social position of the professional group and to the ideological and value-related streams of thought in society, streams of thought which have shifted character throughout time. The connection between a professional code of ethics and the process of professionalization constitutes a central theme. It is a link which is marked by a certain amount of concurrence in *time, themes, tendencies* and *ideology*.

Critique of the traditional professional code of ethics is presented. The critique includes the code of ethics' tendency to be professionally protective, its lack of ability to grasp and discuss current ethical conflicts and problems related to social ethics, its tendency to bind practitioners to an outer authority which makes it possible to absolve the individual of responsibility, its tendency to objectify clients, and its tendency to mechanically apply rules of ethics. Though this criticism can appear uncompromising, it is the author's intention to show that the traditional professional code of ethics has, in spite of everything, led to a certain self-correction among social workers with regards to their treatment of clients. In addition, it has led to the establishment of a number of values in the praxis of the profession. The new ethical approach which is supported in the remaining portion of the dissertation builds, to a certain extent, on the traditional code of professional ethics and its critique.

(2) A clarification of the basic values in social work

In the *third section* the author elucidates the establishment of the basic values and goals in social work. A review is presented of the values and goals which are chosen as principles (in the sense that they are given precedence) in the social worker ethic which the Norwegian Association of Social Workers and the International Federation of Social Workers has ratified. The dissertation underlines the significance for the profession of the values which appear to be central in our cultural inheritance, the values expressed in the United Nations' Human Rights Resolution, and the values found in the principles which are developed through experience within the profession's praxis.

The values which are presented and documented are:

- the fundamental *humanistic* principle of reverence for or respect for life,
- the *freedom-oriented* principles of self-realisation, liberation and solidarity
- the fundamental *democratic* principles regarding respect for representative government and human rights, hereunder the principle of non-discrimination
- the fundamental *judicial state* principle of the protection of integrity, and

- the fundamental *altruistic* principles of participation and self-determination (the principle of autonomy) and the dismissal of brutality or brutal methods in the treatment of and interaction with clients and patients (the principle of doing good)
- the fundamental *existential* principle of personal responsibility for one's own actions

In this context, the dissertation brings up the origins of these values, and discusses the reasons for their relevance for social work. Explicitly in Chapter 7, and implicitly in its review of each principle, one will also find an explanation for the choice of these particular principles. The principles are illuminated with a number of relevant examples from the social sector, primarily from Norway and Denmark.

(3) Assistance in locating and analysing ethical dilemmas

Section 4 deals with the dilemmas and value choices which face social workers. Through a focus on the conflict of interest the actors - in treatment and interaction - may have to one another, a discussion is raised and exemplified regarding the way in which loyalty conflicts constitute a significant portion of the work done toward increased awareness in field of professional ethics. It is pointed out that "harmony"-models may present a hinder toward the recognition of ethical conflicts.

A second central area of value choice is the double role of the social worker. One such value conflict, among many, which lies in the nature of their professional functions is the manner in which social workers are both helpers and controllers.

Ethical dilemmas may also arise in the *conflict between goals and means* in health and social welfare. Relevant examples here would be choices between an individual's right to privacy and utilitarian considerations. Here, the assumption is that the organisation of the work, and the technological level of the work, will both play a central role. This can be exemplified through the manner in which organisational forms might serve to contribute hidden goals. Another example is the manner in which modern technology opens for the use of methods which camouflage central value-related aspects of praxis in help-related fields.

(4) A method for weighing ethical dilemmas.

In its *fifth section* the dissertation discusses how value conflicts can be weighed and dealt with. The point of departure is the fact that rule-oriented professional ethics are neither practically possible nor ideologically desirable. The new model of professional ethics which is presented is called a *multi-faceted value ethic* because it attempts to combine several different approaches to work with ethical conflict resolution.

Within this model one finds no explicit duties and rules, no detailed regulations governing professional conduct in practical situations. On the contrary, the ethical norms are

formulated as *expectations regarding the professional practitioner's adherence to and active use of a given set of values*.

Secondly, the model underlines *each individual's personal responsibility for his or her actions and choices*, thereby insuring that the ethical guidelines do not function as an authority which absolves the individual of responsibility. The dissertation expresses the specified desire that one moves away from an authoritative body of regulations which function to absolve the individual of responsibility.

A third central aspect of this model is that it seeks to *raise the awareness level* of each individual social worker regarding ethical problems and choices. The practitioner's awareness level is raised through:

- *a clarification of the value foundation for social work,*
- *a focus on central areas where ethical dilemmas will arise in the profession, and*
- *a collective effort to open for discussions, and to increase the awareness level regarding methods for the resolution of ethical dilemmas*

Therefore, the new ethical model does not provide any bombastic answers as to what are "correct" or "incorrect" ethical solutions. Instead the author propounds that work with ethical conflicts should occur through the opening of organisational avenues which stimulate the individual professional practitioner to increase their awareness of the foundation of values, of how these value might come in conflict with one another, and of their own actions and responsibility. The professional ethic cannot give the practitioner answers, but it can ask the right questions such that the practitioner is stimulated toward systematic reflection as to the foundation for action and choice. Thus, organisation and the framework surrounding the individual will be of great importance. The dissertation brings up important prerequisites and optimal conditions for reflection on the subject of professional ethics. Collegial counselling or supervision is held to be a good approach toward consciousness-raising and choice in conflict situations. In this context, one can also say that the model is inspired by *Jürgen Habermas'* discourse ethic or communicative ethic, which places an emphasis on the fact that in modern society the solution to ethical conflict must arise through a discourse amongst those who are effected by the conflict. The model emphasises that when values and other considerations collide in practical life, it is possible to systematically work with the difficult and apparently chaotic aspects of these choices. This is reflected throughout the entire dissertation in its attempt to forward discussions related to the dissertation's central issues and examples.

In the conclusion of the fifth section an outline is presented of a systematic model for working with ethical dilemmas - a model which eclectically adopts various elements from moral philosophy. A discussion is presented regarding the manner in which one can systematically work with ethical choices. In the model for developing a rational decision-making foundation for choice in ethical dilemmas, the table is laid for analysing and discussing various alternatives for action from several different approaches: considerations related to dispositional ethics* (values, context, motives, intentions, the nature of the means), and considerations related to consequence-ethics. In combination with discourse-ethical principles which advocate participation of the involved parties, this will provide the possibility for the development of a higher level of rationality in ethical

choices. It is, however, important to accept the limitations of rationality in situations which entail these type of choices. This point is supported with reference to game theories.

A multi-faceted working model implies that ethical choice is made based on several considerations. One does not merely emphasise disposition or consequences nor does one form one's decision based solely on one's own somewhat bothersome values. This method is also marked by the influence of situational ethics, in other words the concrete situation in which one stands will effect the type of reflection which is given the greatest weight. Through one specific case study, along with the examples provided in the other portions of the dissertation, the author attempts to show that this type of systematic approach can lead to clear and well-considered choices between the various alternatives for action.

The goal of the dissertation is, as previously mentioned, to contribute to the critique of professional ethics and to develop a new approach to perceptions of professional ethics in social work. Simultaneously, this type of new approach to ethical considerations is not possible without reference to a foundation of knowledge regarding the traditional approaches in professional ethics.

The goal of the dissertation also presupposes that there will be areas that are also relevant for health and social service professions which share many common characteristics with social work (ethics for doctors, nurses etc.) Though the question of ethics in social work is the primary focus of the dissertation, the use of an interdisciplinary approach to a number of the central issues is in some ways unavoidable. The very nature of ethics in the helping-professions presupposes that there will be no health or social service professions which are exempt.