

Private troubles and public issues

- *Troubles* occur within the character of the individual and within the range of his [or her] immediate relations with others. .. A trouble is a private matter
- *Issues* have to do with matters that transcend these local environments of the individual and the range of his [or her] inner life... An issue is a public matter... Often involves ..'contradictions'..



C. Wright Mills, *The Sociological Imagination*, Pelican, 1959, pp. 14-15

What's the problem with ethics?

1. Ethics tends to focus attention on individuals, their **choices** and decisions. Less attention to the bigger picture – structural constraints, location of power.
2. Association of ethics with morality. Morality as a bourgeois illusion (Marx), encouraging responsibility, **conformity**, illusion of free choice. Linked with moralising



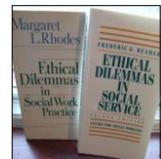
Does this critique apply to all versions of ethics, and in particular to professional ethics?

Professional ethics is about roles, responsibilities and conduct of practitioners in a work context. Surely it has to take account of bigger picture, esp. in social welfare professions? Workers' judgements, decisions, choices are not personal or 'free', they are public and constrained.



Problems with some versions of professional ethics 1

Decontextualisation and individualisation. Some of the professional ethics literature tends to focus too much on decontextualised cases, dilemmas, decision-making by individuals. Ethics as about difficult choices.



Problems with some versions of professional ethics 2

Association of ethics with codes, protocols. Ethics about conformity to rules



How to respond to this critique of ethics?

1. **Practice** – distinguish individual decision-making and responsibilities in relation to ethical *dilemmas* and *problems* from individual and collective responses to ethical *issues*. Ethics encompasses both.



Ethical issues – pervade youth work practice in that it takes place in the context of state-sponsored systems of welfare and control where matters of needs, rights, duties, interests, relationships, motives and the maintenance or transgression of prevailing norms are at stake.

Ethical problems – arise when the worker faces a difficult situation, where a decision has to be made, but it is clear which course of action to take.

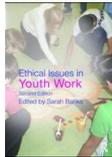
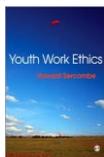
Ethical dilemmas – arise when the worker faces a decision-making situation involving a difficult choice between two equally unwelcome alternatives and it is not clear which choice will be the right one.

2. Principles and guidance –

distinguish statements that encourage mindless rule following (e.g. prescriptive codes of ethics) from those that promote informed critical reflection, dialogue and action (e.g. statements of values and general principles).



3. Textbooks - distinguish those that offer a traditional Anglo American version of professional ethics focusing on abstract principles, codes, conduct and individual rational decision-making, from those that take a broader approach to ethics in professional life and include also the context of politics and policy, commitment, character, collective responsibility.



Dangers of ethics without politics

Remove a nurse with an ethical problem from the hospital, replace her, and her replacement will encounter the same problem. The problem is not of the person but of the system.

Nurses face practical difficulties of accomplishing some task over the opposition of other people. They say: 'I know what ought to be done, but I can't get it done'.

Because the great problems of health care are structural and not the result of poor reasoning, the solutions cannot be created by increasing education, holding ethics seminars, or (alas) writing books.

(Chambliss, D., 1996, *Beyond Caring: Hospitals, Nurses and the Social Organisation of Ethics*, University of Chicago Press, pp. 91-2, 183)

Dangers of politics without ethics

Workers did not link these social relations [the hierarchical and paternalistic nature of the organisation's management] to ethics, but named them as 'agency politics'. As such, they assumed far less responsibility for politics than they would for the resolution of ethical dilemmas (p.93).

Many ethical dilemmas emerged which, because they involved an external system, were defined as 'politics' which was quite distinct from ethics (p.94).

Rossiter, A. et al (2000) 'A postmodern perspective on professional ethics', in B. Fawcett, B. Featherstone, J. Fook and A. Rossiter (eds), *Postmodern Feminist Perspectives: Practice and Research in Social Work*, London, Routledge, pp. 83-103.

Ethics and politics as inseparable

If ethics without politics is empty, then politics without ethics is blind.

(Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 2007, Verso, pp.148)

The role of ethics in youth work?

Youth work as a set of activities. Practical.
Competence to do the work.

Youth work as a vocation. Personal.
Passion and enthusiasm for the work.

Personal, practical

Youth work as a specialist occupation. Professional. Integrity and responsibility in the role

Ethical

Youth work as a social movement. Political.
Commitment to a cause.

Youth work as a state sponsored practice. Public. Accountability for the work.

Public, political

Ethics work: Negotiating between the personal and the public; the practical and the political

- recognition of the political context of practice and the practitioner's own professional power (reflexivity);
- moral perception or attentiveness to the salient moral features of situations; empathy; care; compassion.
- the moral struggle to be a good practitioner– maintaining personal and professional integrity while carrying out the requirements of the agency role.
- the moral courage to challenge unethical or oppressive behaviour by colleagues, service users, others; and to challenge poor, bad and unjust practices and policies.

Ethics work is vital for political resistance

Resistance is about the articulation of distance, the creation of space or spaces of distance from the state.

(Simon Critchley, *Infinitely Demanding*, 2007, Verso, p. 148)



Growth of interest in ethics as regressive & compliant with managerialism & neo-liberalism

1. Developing more regulatory codes of ethics.
2. Placing the focus of attention on the relationship between the individual youth worker and young person.
3. Highlighting the responsibilities of youth workers, young people and communities. ('responsibilisation').
4. Depersonalising and depoliticising of ethics.

Growth of interest in ethics as progressive and critical of NPM & neo-liberalism

1. Reclaiming professional autonomy.
2. Claiming the rights of service users.
3. Reasserting the social justice mission of youth work – bringing the political to the heart of ethics.
4. Reconfiguring professional ethics – bringing the personal back into youth work ethics.

Reclaiming and reframing ethics in youth work



Ethics as personal and political: towards a situated ethics of social justice

- Situated ethics
- Politicised ethics



Values for a situated ethics of social justice in youth work

- Radical social justice
- Empathic solidarity.
- Relational autonomy
- Collective responsibility for resistance
- Moral courage
- Working in and with complexity and contradictions

The place of a code of ethics in youth work



Codes of Ethics

Codes of ethics generally contain all or some of the following:

- *Ethical principles* - general statements of ethical principles underpinning the work, for example: respect for autonomy of service users; promotion of welfare.
- *Ethical rules* - some general 'do's and don'ts', for example: do not permit knowledge to be used for discriminatory policies; protect all confidential information.
- *Principles of professional practice* - general statements about how to achieve what is intended for the good of the service user, for example: collaboration with colleagues.
- *Rules of professional practice* - very specific guidance relating to professional practice, for example, declare a bequest in a service user's will; advertising should not claim superiority.

Functions of codes of ethics

- *Guidance to practitioners* about how to act & make ethical decisions, either through explicit rules, or through encouraging ethical awareness and reflection.
- *Protection of service users* by explicitly stating what can be expected of a professional practitioner.
- *Enhancement of professional status*, since a code of ethics is supposed to be one of the hallmarks of a profession.
- *Creating & maintaining professional identity* through the explicit statement of principles about the kinds of people who belong to this profession & the conduct expected.
- *Professional regulation* through requiring members of a professional group to adhere to the code and using it for disciplinary purposes in cases of misconduct.

Some limitations & critiques of codes of ethics

- Too general and open to interpretation
- Too prescriptive, 'unethical'
- Inhibit multi/inter-professional working
- Values and principles are professionally defined rather than by service users
- Philosophically incoherent, hybrid
- Locate responsibility and blame for public issues with individual practitioners

Some benefits of codes of ethics

- Defending profession/occupation from outside attack
- Maintaining professional/occupational identity
- Setting benchmarks against which to judge employer/organisational policies and practice – useful in time of resource cutbacks
- Reminder to youth workers of responsibilities to challenge inequities

What's missing in IYW code?

- Strong statement about the role of youth work in actively **promoting social justice**
- Responsibility of youth workers to **challenge employers/policy-makers** regarding injustices, lack of resources
- Acknowledgement of the **contradictions and conflicts** inherent in youth work and the worker's role in working with the tensions between, for example, care, control, education, empowerment