Between the Local and Global: Placing the Virtuous Professional Practitioner in Context

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Abstract

International associations exist for many professions, with ethical codes designed to be applicable worldwide. Frequently codes are principle-based, drawing on norms/philosophical traditions dominant in the global North (individual autonomy, privacy), leading to accusations of 'ethical imperialism'. Is virtue-based ethics more universally applicable, with virtue-based language/concepts more commonplace in the global South, and similar character traits regarded as important, e.g., trustworthiness, compassion, honesty? This paper explores these local/global issues with reference to moral virtues in social work. It examines narratives of ethical challenges from practitioners in different countries (from Peru to Finland), including how they construct the 'ethically good social worker'.

Introduction

In response to the call from the Jubilee Centre to explore the extent to which virtues are local or universal, this paper will focus on moral virtues in the light of narratives from social workers around the world about ethical challenges in their practice. This seems relevant to the conference theme, as social work can be construed as a locally-based practice as well as a nationally and internationally recognised profession and social movement. Hence the local-global dynamic is clearly present. There is also a growing concern about 'professional and ethical imperialism' (exporting inappropriate theories, values and practices from the global North to the global South), alongside increasing interest in the potential of virtue ethics as offering a more widely-recognised discourse than the principle-based language of individual rights and utility that predominates in international statements on ethics. I am taking a moral virtue as a disposition to feel, think and act in such a way as to promote human and ecological flourishing, entailing both a motivation to act well and, typically, the achievement of good ends. Virtues are often described as excellent traits of character, and entail a reliable disposition to act in certain predictable ways across contexts.

Social work as local, national and global

As a local practice, frequently regarded as part of an occupation or profession at a national level, social work is concerned with enabling and empowering people to function better in their local contexts (families, neighbourhoods, institutions) and/or change features of their own lives and the environments in which they live. Social work is usually part of welfare systems and may be directly or indirectly funded

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and sanctioned by local or national states. Hence the role of social work practitioners, and what is regarded as effective and ethical practice, is in important respects relative to particular circumstances, relationships, resources and welfare and political regimes. Indeed, what is called 'social work' in one country, may be significantly different from 'social work' in another country. For example, in the USA, a significant amount of social work takes place in private practice, with an emphasis on 'clinical' work (casework and therapy). In South Africa, much social work is provided by non-governmental organisations (NGOs), with a focus on social development (including neighbourhood-based group work and community development).

Yet, in spite of local variations, as with many occupations and professions, there are international associations for social work, which provide opportunities for networking, sharing good practice, lobbying and policy advocacy in relation to pressing social issues. The most significant of these are the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW). These associations also play a role in developing and maintaining the status and identity of the profession, which, despite its many different manifestations across the world, shares a common concern in working with people experiencing social difficulties in their lives. To facilitate this common identity, there is an international definition of social work (International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Workers, 2014), global standards for social work education (International Association of Schools of Social Work & International Federation of Social Workers, 2004) and a global statement of ethical principles (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018). The current definition of social work is as follows:

Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing. The above definition may be amplified at national and/or regional levels (IASSW and IFSW, 2014).

Not surprisingly, the drafting, agreement and revision of the definition and other documents has been, and remains, both challenging and controversial. The documents need to be pitched at a sufficiently generic level as to be applicable to all members. Yet at the same time they also need to be specific enough to outlaw practices agreed to be unacceptable and ensure certain valued principles or standards of practice are not misinterpreted or ignored, whilst also acknowledging national and cultural differences.

The recently revised 'Global social work statement of ethical principles' (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018) comprises general principles about respecting human dignity and promoting human rights and social justice, whilst also outlawing use of torture in social work, stressing respect for confidentiality of information relating to service users, promoting anti-discrimination, respecting diversity and acknowledging that taking gifts may be acceptable in some countries. It is an amalgam of ethical and practical principles and some more specific rules, and seems to have lost some coherence in its latest re-drafting. This is not surprising, given significant disagreements over its content, resulting in

the two associations (IFSW and IASSW) producing different versions of the statement. In this sense, it is an interesting document, as it reflects the current state of debate in the international social work associations, at a point when existing consensus has broken down and a new consensus has not yet emerged. Arguably this situation can be seen partly as a response to the growing critique of the dominance of western values and ethical principles in international social work, resulting in the superimposing of value statements of different types and levels of specificity onto the previous universal human rights-oriented document.

It may be helpful to understand this situation in the context of the development of social work, which first became established as an occupation in Europe and North America in the mid to late nineteenth century, growing out of voluntary and charitable social welfare work to support people in need, control social problems and organise for social change. Social work has now become established in most other countries around the world, very much influenced by theories, models and practices from the global North. This has led to accusations of 'professional imperialism' (Midgley, 1981), that is, the exporting of inappropriate models of professional social work based, for example, on individual casework and psycho-analytic theories, to countries and cultures where the predominant forms of social organisation may comprise extended families, tribes and other collectivities and communities, and/or the most pressing social issues are extreme poverty, environmental degradation or humanitarian crises, which call for social development rather than casework (Chitereka, 2009; Hugman, 2010, 2013; Midgley, 2008, 2017). On this view, it is important that 'indigenous' or 'culturally relevant' forms of social work develop that fit local contexts, needs and priorities (Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & 2008; Gray, Coates, Yellow Bird, & Hetherington, 2013; Osei - Hwedie, 1993) and also that statements on ethics, textbooks and models of practice reflect indigenous values and ways of working (Banks, 2015; Hugman, 2013).

Universality of virtue discourse in everyday life

It has been suggested that looking at ethics in professional life in terms of good qualities of character or virtues may be more universally acceptable than the principle-based, individual rights-oriented approach that is currently dominant. According to Gyeke (2010), character forms the basis of African ethics. Indeed, we find the language of virtue in many traditional and modern religious texts, from Confucius to Aquinas. These texts may not always concur on which virtues are the most important, or how a particular virtue is to be interpreted, but the language of good character or virtue (and vice) is very much present. Indeed, when Dahlsgaard et al (2005) undertook a study of written texts from influential traditions of thought in world history (Confucianism, Taoism, Hinduism, Athenian philosophy, Judaism, Christianity and Islam), they found 'a surprising amount of similarity' across cultures. However, while their literature review converged on six core virtues, courage, justice, humanity, temperance, wisdom and transcendence (Dahlsgaard et al, 2005, pp. 204-5), it is important to note that all of the six virtues were not present in all traditions (only justice and humanity were explicitly named in all). The researchers also found variability across cultures in what was most esteemed, and many virtues were discounted because they were not ubiquitous – i.e., they were culture-bound.

This echoes a recent empirical study conducted amongst students from 14 nations (from Malaysia to the Netherlands), which found core virtues shared by more than half the nations (van Oudenhoven & al.,

2014). These virtues were: honesty, respect, kindness, openness and tolerance, based on participants' answers to the open-ended question: 'What do you find important personal characteristics which you would like to bring into practice in daily life?' It is not clear what further information participants were given regarding what would count as an 'important personal characteristic', since this is not the same as the definition of virtues in the text of the paper as 'morally good traits that everyone either may possess or can learn' (p. 2). Participants were also asked in a closed question to rate a set of virtues gathered from a previous study in the Netherlands. The authors conclude that there are strong differences between nations in terms of importance ratings, and in the frequencies of virtues given in response to the open-ended question. For example, while honesty was mentioned in all nations, generosity was only mentioned by French respondents. The nations that are similar with respect to language, culture and/or religion also tend to share importance ratings. Regarding the relative universality of virtues, the authors do not wish to draw strong conclusions on the basis of data from 14 nations, but suggest that the five most frequently mentioned virtues listed above are potential candidates.

Such studies have many limitations, including how to ensure translations between different languages capture the nuances of meanings of virtue concepts, and the difficulties of interpretation and comparability between countries and cultures. In the last study it does not appear that respondents were asked what they meant by the virtues they listed, so we are left with a set of names of virtue concepts, but no description of what they mean. Hence these potentially universal virtue concepts are somewhat abstract, and less 'thick' than those that are located within a cultural context. This is inevitable if they are to be universally applicable, but we also need to be able to relocate them in their cultural contexts in order to engage in ethical dialogue between people from different nations and cultures, to rehearse moral disagreements and (sometimes) reach consensus on ethical evaluations.

Virtues in professional life: insights from social work ethics cases

The two studies mentioned above relate to virtues in everyday life. They suggest that some virtues may be universally recognised and valued (albeit described in a fairly 'thin' way). In professional life these everyday virtues will also be relevant, but there are likely to be specific virtues, or specific interpretations of virtues, that may be valued in professional contexts. While the literature on virtue ethics in social work is still relatively small, there is a growing interest (Banks, 2016b; Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Houston, 2003; McBeath & Webb, 2002; Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010; Wulfekühler & Rhodes, 2017), which draws on literature on virtue ethics in the professions more generally (Bondi, Carr, Clark, & Clegg, 2011; Oakley & Cocking, 2001). In order specifically to explore the moral virtues that are exercised in social work around the world, I will now consider what we can learn by looking at written accounts from social work practitioners of situations that they found ethically challenging.

During 2009-11, 26 real life 'ethics cases' were collected from social workers around the world for a book of cases and commentaries (Banks & Nøhr, 2012). These cases come from a range of countries, from Peru to Finland, and comprise two to three pages of rich description of circumstances, events and actions construed by the authors to have ethical import. They vary in the extent to which they are written in the first or third person, and in the degree to which the authors offer accounts of their emotions or reflections in or on action. Unlike short 'textbook' cases, often written to highlight an

ethical dilemma or crisis point, the ethical dimensions of these stories are embedded in the 'thick' descriptions of events (detailed, contextualised, rich with meaning and interpretation, see Geertz, 1973) and only occasionally explicitly identified in reflective comments by the authors. The accounts tend to be action-focused – telling about what happened, what the author and other key actors said and did. Hence the language of virtue is not widely used. Even when the author of a case explains why they acted as they did, virtue terms do not usually feature in these explanations. This is not surprising, since as Williams (1985, p. 10) comments, virtue terms themselves generally do not feature in the content of ethical deliberations, for example: 'The benevolent or kindhearted person does benevolent things, but does them under other descriptions, such as "she needs it", "it will cheer him up", "it will stop the pain". To elaborate further, 'a courageous person does not typically choose acts as being courageous … a modest person does not act under the title of modesty' (ibid). According to Williams (1985, p.11):

The deliberations of people who are generous or brave, and also the deliberations of people who are trying to be more generous or braver, are different from the deliberations of those who are not like that, but the difference does not mainly lie in their thinking about themselves in terms of generosity or courage.

So in examining the ethics cases, the reader has to interpret the accounts of actions and motives in terms of virtues. The cross-cultural dimension lies in the provocation the cases bring to the readers who can ask themselves, would I wish to be the sort of person who acts like this? Would this action be virtuous in my context? What are the features of this context that help us to make sense of the situation depicted? Below I summarise just three cases, inevitably losing some of the richness of the much longer narratives, but giving a flavour of the ethical issues covered and the responses of the social workers involved. In the book, each case is accompanied by two commentaries, at least one of which is written by someone from a country other than the one in which the case takes place.

Case example 1: Responding to child sexual abuse in East Jerusalem. This account comes from a school-based social worker in Palestine, in the Israeli occupied territory of East Jerusalem. The social worker decided not report a case of child sexual abuse of a young woman, Rana, by her father to the Israeli authorities as required by the law. Instead, the social worker and head teacher worked with the whole family to ensure the father lived in a separate part of the family house and Rana was able to lock her door. The reasons behind not reporting included the general reluctance to involve the Israeli authorities in the occupied territories, the likelihood of Rana and the whole family suffering shame and ostracism within their own community, the dangers of honour killing, and the poor provision for young women in the social services system.

In this case, the social worker and teacher were taking a risk in acting illegally and trusting that the father would change his behaviour and Rana would be kept safe. Were they acting courageously or in a foolhardy fashion? The British commentator on this case, while sympathetic to the circumstances, cites western research showing that abusers rarely desist and hence there is a likelihood that the abuse will continue and other young women may potentially be at risk (Jones, 2012).

Case example 2: A gay man applying to be an adoptive parent in Turkey. A Turkish social worker had to decide whether to approve a gay man as a potential adoptive parent of a young boy. The man, Ahmet, had a good job and fulfilled all the criteria. Legally single people are allowed to adopt and there is no mention in the law about the sexuality of potential adoptive parents. However, in Turkey gay men face serious discrimination. The social worker deliberated hard and consulted her colleagues. Whilst she knew it would be unfair to Ahmet not to accept him as a potential adoptive parent on the grounds of his sexuality, she felt her greater obligation was to the child, who, with a gay parent, would most likely face discrimination at home and school. She was also concerned that the child's own sexuality might be influenced by his adoptive father. So she decided to turn down Ahmet's application for approval as an adoptive parent.

This case raises the question of whether the social worker was being unfair to Ahmet and over-concerned for the welfare of the child. The Slovenian commentator on this case also adds in the dimension of the role of social workers in bringing about change in Turkish society (Sobočan, 2012). By not approving a gay man as an adoptive parent, the social worker was perpetuating the discriminatory culture. We might ask, would it be courageous or foolhardy to approve Ahmet as an adoptive parent? What does being fair mean in this context?

Case example 3: A Dutch student in Vietnam. A social work student from the Netherlands was undertaking a fieldwork practice placement in a rehabilitation hospital in Vietnam. She accompanied two physiotherapists on a home visit to an eight-year old boy, Trung, who had Duchenne Muscular Dystrophy (DMD, a severe form of muscular dystrophy characterised by rapid muscle degeneration). Trung was in a wheelchair, writing on a small table attached to the chair. His mother proudly talked about the school prize he had won for his handwriting and Trung talked about his favourite activities. His mother asked when there would be an improvement in Trung's physical condition. One of the physiotherapists said he did not know, and that Trung should keep doing his exercises. On returning to the hospital the student asked the staff if any improvement was possible with DMD. They replied 'no'. There was a possibility that Trung did not have a long life ahead. However, it was better that Trung and his parents did not know this, otherwise they would feel sad until the time came for Trung.

The student reflected on this case as follows:

This approach is in contradiction with my social work ethics. But the staff explained to me that this is their way of working and it is better for the boy not to feel sad, because in their opinion that might increase the weakness of the muscles. Another argument for them not to tell the truth about the prognosis was the quality of the boy's life. According to the medical staff, if Trung knew that he would die, for example, in less than a year, he would spend the rest of his life miserable knowing that.

From my point of view as a social worker, this could not be determined by the medical staff, for as far as we know, the boy could spend his last months perfectly happy. And even if he was not happy, is it bad to feel sad? Is not feeling sad a part of life as well? Do professionals have the right or power to prevent someone from being sad? By not telling him and his family the truth, the possibility to have a normal grieving process and to be able to overcome the pain which comes along with the prognosis is taken

from the boy and his family. It got me wondering whether this is a difference in intercultural sensitivity or a lack of knowledge about coping with psychological problems.

The medical staff was very curious about the western way of handling this type of situation. I explained to them that in the Netherlands we try to be very open and honest about a patient's medical situation. The medical staff was very interested in learning more about this - how to tell 'bad news', and how to overcome or accept bad news.

After talking to many Vietnamese people about this, it seemed that the approach of the medical staff was based on a combination of lack of knowledge, not knowing how to bring 'bad news', and was also culturally linked. They told me that it was perfectly normal for them not to be honest when giving diagnoses or prognoses. Often family members do know the truth, but patients themselves do not. This shocked me, because in my belief, which is similar to the average western belief, every person deserves to know the truth about their medical situation.

This account has been chosen for exploration in a little more depth as it specifically raises the issue of cross-cultural ethics - a social work student from one country is working in another very different one. It also includes a long reflective section by the student at the end of the case, when she makes reference to virtue concepts ('in the Netherlands we try to be very open and honest'). It raises the question for the reader, is honesty a virtue in Vietnam? We have no reason to believe it is not, but in this case honesty does not appear to have been an issue for the physiotherapists when discussing diagnoses/prognoses with patients until raised by the student. That is, the physiotherapists probably did not see themselves as having a dilemma about whether to be honest or not. However, when this choice was put to them, it appears that respectfulness (towards the family) trumped honesty. Or, as the Australian commentator suggests, perhaps happiness (of the family) was valued over honesty (towards the family) (Hugman, 2012).

The student's response to this issue is very interesting. She neither resorts to ethical imperialism (Dutch-style honesty should be adopted in Vietnam) nor does she succumb to ethical relativism (these are the local norms in Vietnam and we cannot question them). Instead she engages in open, critical dialogue – eager to learn and understand the position in Vietnam, while also keen to open up new ways of thinking for the Dutch physiotherapists to consider. She is demonstrating what Elshtain (2006, p. 158) calls 'a pluralistic relationality of an internationalist sort'. She is assuming that she and the physiotherapists have enough in common, notably a shared concern with the flourishing of patients/service users, to enable them to recognise their moral disagreements and engage in critical dialogue.

This, according to Moody-Adams (2002), is how cross-cultural learning takes place. Indeed, she argues that 'serious cross cultural moral disagreement is possible only against a background of basic cross-cultural agreement on a substantial number of fundamental moral judgements and beliefs' (p. 7). Admittedly, the 'flourishing of patients/service users' as a shared value is relatively thin - it has evaluative content, but little descriptive content relating to what counts as flourishing. However, it is a starting point that does not assume the incommensurability of conceptual schemes, languages and traditions entailed by a radical form of ethical relativism (Bernstein, 2006). It allows the student to engage critically with different ways of thinking and living. As Bernstein (2006, p. 8) comments:

The facile appeal to incommensurability is indicative of an ethical and practical *failure* – the failure to do the hard work required in order to understand and engage different ways of thinking and living.

Moral pluralism and the hard work of ethical engagement

Bernstein, along with many recent moral philosophers (e.g. Kekes, 1993; Lukes, 2008) argues for an 'engaged pluralism', which he describes as 'a demanding task that requires acknowledgement of genuine plurality, but where we nevertheless seek to engage critically the different ways of thinking and living' (Bernstein, 2006, p. 8). As Lukes (2008, p. 140) argues, 'acknowledging the facts of moral diversity and value pluralism does not entail abstention from judging others (and their judging us)'. Indeed, Lukes regards the creation of universal declarations, such as those by the United Nations on human rights, as based on a 'global process of transnational consensus building' (op. cit., p. 139). The process is highly imperfect, but welcomed by many oppressed individuals and groups as helping to redefine agendas and break with past ways of understanding behaviour, such as redefining violence against women as abuse rather than discipline. This can, therefore, be a process of welcome *appropriation* of new norms by the oppressed people themselves, rather than *imposition* of alien western values by dominant groups. This is one way to respond to the charge of ethical imperialism identified earlier in the paper in relation to social work.

Elshtain (2006), in her Augustinian-inspired discussion of the flow between the concrete household and the entire world, draws on the idea of the pilgrim. The pilgrim is a citizen of some country (rooted), who traverses the world with a purpose – which is very different from 'merely drifting, crossing boundaries and proclaiming one's cosmopolitanism' (p. 159). This echoes Appiah's (2007) call for a rooted cosmopolitanism.

Concluding comments

I will now return to our starting point of the global social work statement of ethical principles, having journeyed through some of the concrete particularities of the ethical challenges experienced by social workers in different countries around the world. Perhaps the main message to the members of the ethics commissions of IFSW and IASSW is simply to continue the hard work. There is no perfect statement and the route is tortuous and full of obstacles. Nevertheless, virtue ethics may offer an alternative vision to deontological and consequentialist-inspired ethical frameworks, and promote dialogue within a more commonly accepted discourse based on the character of moral agents.

The lesson I have drawn from studying the many ethics cases from around the world relates to the complexity of the labour undertaken by the professional practitioner to be an ethically good social worker. While social workers infrequently give accounts of themselves in terms of specific virtues (e.g. 'I want to be an honest person'), they do talk of themselves as puzzling and struggling over how to see situations in ethical terms - what roles to play, how to live up to professional responsibilities and working on their emotions and reasoning processes. I call this 'ethics work' (Banks, 2016a). The capacity to do this work (which could also be described as 'moral labour') I have characterised as 'professional

ethical wisdom' (Banks, 2018), an overarching virtue in the mould of Aristotelian phronesis (Aristotle, 350 BCE/1954). Case 3 from the Dutch student shows her doing this work, both in her retrospective accounts of her actual practice in Vietnam, and in the creation of her case story, in which she is also performing for the reader as an ethically good social work student: culturally sensitive, reflective, thoughtful and considerate.

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