



Practising professional ethical wisdom: the role of ‘ethics work’ in social welfare professions

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Practising professional ethical wisdom: the role of ‘ethics work’ in social welfare professions

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Abstract

This paper critically explores ‘professional ethical wisdom’ - the disposition to engage in practical reasoning in professional situations where matters of harm, benefits, rights and responsibilities are at stake. This entails sensitivity to ethically salient features of situations; empathy with feelings, values, desires and perspectives of others; capacity to exercise moral imagination; deliberation on the right course of action and giving reasons for actions.

While the capacity to deliberate and make good judgments is important in professional ethics, this is often emphasised at the expense of the less visible work of moral perception, imagination and emotion. This paper examines these aspects of professional ethical wisdom in the social welfare professions - covering fields such as child protection, mental health, elderly care, disability services, youth justice and community development. Here the relationship between service users and professionals is sometimes unwelcome or involuntary. Professionals are publicly accountable, yet also develop relationships based on personal engagement with service users and may have a strong sense of vocation. How do they develop themselves as ethical practitioners, negotiate roles and responsibilities, and make difficult ethical judgements and decisions?

Drawing on a practice example of the experiences of a psychiatric social worker, the paper will introduce the concept of ‘ethics work’ as a feature of professional ethical wisdom.

The rough terrain of social welfare work

In this paper I will explore ‘professional ethical wisdom’, with particular reference to the social welfare professions. Before elaborating on what I mean by ‘professional ethical wisdom’, I will first introduce the social welfare professions and briefly describe the nature of their work. Social welfare professions work with people experiencing difficulties in their lives, using processes of care, control, informal education, empowerment and social support. Core values underpinning these professions include the promotion of social welfare, social justice and human rights. While they work with individuals and groups to improve the circumstances of their lives, they also have an explicit core purpose to work for social change – to challenge inequality and injustice and promote fairness and the social participation of individuals and groups. The global definition of social work is an example of how one of these professions frames its purpose:

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. (International Association of Schools of Social Work and International Federation of Social Workers, 2014)

Like all professions, in recent decades the social welfare professions have been subject to increasing state regulation, managerial emphasis on reaching targets and measuring outcomes, privatisation of former public services, introduction of competition, striving for efficiency and profitability, and growing technicisation of practice (relying on protocols, proformas, manuals and checklists) (Harris, 2003; Banks, 2004; Harris and White, 2009; Banks, 2011). Austerity measures introduced in many countries have exacerbated these trends, adding to the push towards service users becoming more independent ('responsibilisation') and local communities filling gaps left by withdrawal of state-provided services.

This is difficult terrain to occupy. As in the teaching profession, there is a strong government agenda that defines and constrains the way the work is done. But there is more societal ambivalence towards the existence of the social welfare professions, as they work with people often regarded as undeserving and dangerous. As in health care professions, difficult ethical problems are commonplace, relating to unmet needs, resource allocation and the dilemma of responding to service users' wishes versus doing what the professional believes to be in their best interests or what the policies and procedures of governments and welfare agencies require or allow. Arguably the challenges are even more prevalent and uncomfortable in the social welfare professions because the public interest is more overtly at stake in this work. Furthermore, the social solidarity expressed through public welfare systems, which social welfare workers represent, is increasingly under question and the social justice mission is even harder to retain.

The discussion above suggests that social welfare work occupies a turbulent space. Honig's (1996, p. 259) concept of 'dilemmatic space' may be useful here – a term she uses to describe the ever-present conflicts in social orders that lie under the surface, which crystallise in the form of dilemmas periodically:

Rather than springing up ab initio, dilemmas are actually the eventful eruptions of a turbulence that is always there. They are the periodic crystallisations of incoherences and conflicts in social orders and their subjects.

This metaphor of a turbulent space (or 'terrain' as I have called it) has resonances with similar metaphors in the literature on *phronesis* and/or professional judgement, such as Dunne's (1997) 'rough ground' and Schön's (1991) 'swampy lowlands'. Similarly, Saario (2014), depicting the response of mental health practitioners in Finland to audit regimes, uses the metaphor of the rough sea, and describes the work as 'tacking' (sailing against the wind, avoiding obstacles and difficulties). Whichever metaphor we use, the professional journey is fraught with challenges, and the ability of practitioners to navigate the turbulent context within which they work seems to require a range of qualities, which described in ordinary language might include: mental agility, perceptual acuity, sensitivity to context, courage, commitment, good judgement, practical knowledge, collaborative working and seeing the whole political picture within which they operate. In philosophical and

professional language such qualities have been associated with practical wisdom (*phronesis*) and more specifically professional wisdom.

The domain of professional ethical wisdom

I now consider what is meant by 'professional ethical wisdom', discussing what concept of 'wisdom' I am using and why I have qualified it with 'ethical' and 'professional'.

The concept of wisdom in use here starts with the Aristotelian notion of '*phronesis*' (often translated as 'practical wisdom') which he describes as '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/1954p. 142 [VI, 5, 1140b 4-6]). According to many interpretations of Aristotle, the 'ethical' or 'moral'¹ is part of the meaning of '*phronesis*'. For example, Hughes (2001, p. 86) describes practical wisdom as 'being good at thinking morally', and comments (*op. cit.*, p. 85):

... Aristotle has in mind something which comes close to a moral use; as he puts it, to have practical wisdom is to be good at thinking about how to live a fulfilled and worthwhile life as a whole.

Aristotle offers conflicting accounts (and certainly has been interpreted in different ways) regarding whether practical wisdom involves both thinking about what counts as a fulfilled life (the end) as well as how to achieve this in particular situations (means); or whether it is just about the means to achieving fulfilment. Following Hughes, I subscribe to the first interpretation, which entails no separation between actions and consequences. Hence practical wisdom is 'concerned with good actions, whose goodness is intrinsic to the actions themselves' (Hughes, 2001, p. 94).

If this paper was to stick with its Aristotelian starting point, then arguably I should use the term 'practical wisdom' rather than 'ethical wisdom', as clearly 'practical' includes 'ethical'. However, in modern-day ordinary language, 'practical' is not immediately associated with 'ethical' and indeed might include the 'technical' sphere. So I have used the adjective 'ethical' to make it clear that we are looking at wisdom practised in the domain of ethics, which covers matters relating to the promotion of human and ecological flourishing, including harms, benefits, rights and responsibilities. It is important to stress that 'ethical wisdom' is not a special kind of wisdom, but rather it is wisdom in the ethical sphere. Audi (2013, p.158) makes a similar point in relation to the concept of 'moral imagination'.

The next question is why '*professional* ethical wisdom'? This is shorthand for 'ethical wisdom in professional life' and further qualifies the domain in which I am interested. Here the main questions to be explored are: 'what counts as ethical wisdom and how is it deployed by professionals in the context of their work?' The term 'professional wisdom' was introduced relatively recently into the literature on the professions, and is often used quite loosely. In some of the literature 'professional wisdom' has an ethical focus, and sometimes it is based explicitly on the Aristotelian concept of *phronesis*. There are also other examples of literature that assume a much broader

¹ In this context I am using the terms 'ethical' and 'moral' interchangeably

concept of professional wisdom stretching across many domains of professional practice (not focusing specifically on the ethical) and comprising other types of expertise, competence and skills (not just *phronesis*). This broad range of interpretations is exemplified in an edited collection (Bondi *et al.*, 2011) and special issue of a journal (Clark *et al.*, 2009), both of which draw on an inter-disciplinary conference on professional wisdom in Edinburgh in 2008. Speaking in the introductory chapter to another edited volume on practical wisdom in the professions, Kinsella and Pitman (2012, p. 2) comment on the 'slippery' nature of the concept of *phronesis*, and the 'diaspora of meanings' revealed by the contributors to their edited volume on practical wisdom in the professions.

What this literature has in common, however, tends to be a concern about the increasing focus on technical rationality and managerial accountability in the professions, which is diminishing opportunities for professionals to exercise discretionary judgement based on their own expertise and professional values (Banks and Gallagher, 2009; Dunne, 2011; Kinsella and Pitman, 2012; Banks, 2013). As Kinsella and Pitman (2012, p. 2) remark, there is a concern about what is missing from the official discourse. This is characterised by Kemmis (2012, p. 155) as a 'kind of negative space for knowledge'. Professional wisdom seems to be a good candidate to fill this gap. However, filling the space cannot simply entail giving an account of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* and applying it to twenty-first century professional life. As many commentators have pointed out, we do not live in Aristotle's world (Hughes, 2001, pp. 211-221; Ellet, 2012). However, *phronesis* is a useful starting point, and some of the key features identified by Aristotle can provide a framework for the kind of professional ethical wisdom that might fill the 'negative space'.

Aristotle distinguishes *phronesis* (practical wisdom that is context-dependent and involves deliberation based on values) from *episteme* (theoretical wisdom that is universal and independent of context) and *techne* (productive wisdom that is context-dependent and oriented towards instrumental rationality). In developing his account of professional wisdom, Dunne (2011, p. 17) outlines the following key features of *phronesis* based on Book 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics*, which I have organised as a list:

- Its role as an action-orienting form of knowledge;
- Its irreducibly experiential nature;
- Its entanglement with character;
- Its non-confinement to generalised propositional knowledge
- Its need to embrace the particulars of relevant action-situations within its grasp of universals;
- Its ability to engage in the kind of deliberative process that can yield concrete, context-sensitive judgments.

A key feature of Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* is its relationship to the moral virtues (such as courage and trustworthiness). A person of practical wisdom must also have a disposition towards virtuous action; and practical wisdom is required to balance and unify the different virtues - e.g. to judge when courage is required as opposed to generosity, or at what point in a particular situation courage becomes foolhardiness. As Aristotle (350BCE/1954, p. 158 [1144b29-1145a11]) comments:

It is clear then, from what has been said, that it is not possible to be good in the strict sense without practical wisdom, or practically wise without moral virtue.

The role of professional ethical wisdom

Drawing both on Aristotle's account of *phronesis* and recent specialised literature on professional wisdom or *phronesis* in professional life, I will now briefly identify what I consider to be some important features relevant to my interest in ethics in the social welfare professions. Based on the account given above, professional ethical wisdom could be described as involving the work of both reason and emotion: a grasp of both universal and particular features of situations; and deliberation on both ends and means. In the context of social welfare work, which as described earlier has a social justice mission and is often located in welfare (state) systems, it is also important to develop a concept of *phronesis* that takes account of power and the political context of the work. Here the work of Flyvberg (2001), Kemmis (2012) and others is useful in emphasising the importance of understanding and analysing the workings of power and emphasising the role of *praxis* - as informed, committed action. Simmons (2012) takes this further by introducing the idea of 'anti-hegemonic phronetics', involving deconstructing dominant ideologies that serve to marginalise and oppress people.

Taking these features into account, therefore, the concept of professional ethical wisdom in social welfare work refers to 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 welfare professions in bringing this about.
- Act justly, with courage, care, trustworthiness and professional integrity.

This is based on a conception of ethics in professional life that challenges both traditional conceptions of principle-based ethics (rational problem-solving through applying abstract principles to particular cases) and managerial ethics (following prescribed rules and procedures). Both these conceptions of ethics could be described as relatively narrow and defined. Principle-based approaches tend to view ethics in professional life as about decision-making in difficult cases (ethics as decision-making, or 'traditional ethics'), while managerial approaches assume ethics is about conduct according to rules (ethics as regulation or 'new managerial ethics') (see Banks, 2011). The version of ethics in professional life on which this account of

professional ethical wisdom is based is more expansive and diffuse; it is embedded and embodied in the minutiae of daily practice (ethics as embedded, or ‘everyday ethics’) (see Banks 2016). Table 1 summarises the key features of these different approaches to ethics.

Table 1: Traditional, everyday and new managerial ethics

Traditional professional ethics	Everyday ethics in professional life	New managerial ethics
Ethics as decision-making	Ethics as embedded & embodied	Ethics as regulation
<i>Conduct</i> - focus on actions	<i>Character</i> - e.g. courage, integrity	<i>Competencies</i> - to do a specific job
<i>Codes of ethics</i> - focus on principles	<i>Commitment</i> – motivation to do job	<i>Conformity</i> - to rules
Cases - abstract, short	<i>Context</i> – political, relationships	<i>Categories</i> – filling in forms, box-ticking
<i>Core values</i> - respect, rights	<i>Core virtues</i> - care, social justice	<i>Core values</i> - Fairness, good outcomes

According to the embedded everyday ethics approach, ethics is about more than decision-making and/or rule-following. It is also about the character of the people making the decisions, the relationships people have with each other and the contexts in which decisions are made. It is about small everyday actions, thoughts and emotions as well as explicit dilemmas and decisions. It is about being and acting in the turbulent sea of professional life - ‘tacking’ as Saario (2014) describes it – requiring, if we continue the sailing metaphor, automatic small movements of muscles to balance, and tacit knowledge about which way to lean, in addition to explicit decision-making about whether to change course. On this account, the ethical is so intimately entwined with the practical that it is hard to identify in situ. As Frank (2012, p. 64) comments: ‘Practical wisdom becomes visible only at moments of confrontation when something significant is at stake’. Alternatively, using the metaphor of the dilemmatic space, only when the ever-present contradictions erupt as identifiable conflicts are the ethical dimensions of a situation brought to the fore. Then they are named and framed by the people concerned in terms of rights, responsibilities, harms, benefits, fairness and so on. This happens internally through processes of reflection and thought, and externally through dialogue with others or written recordings. So, professional ethical wisdom as a faculty or disposition, is (or should be) at work all the time, but mostly is not consciously or visibly identifiable to oneself or others. As previously discussed, the concept of professional ethical wisdom includes a capacity to think and feel ethically in professional contexts. In the light of this discussion, we should stress that it entails not only an ability to identify aspects of a situation as having ethical import, but also a capacity to make visible the

work of professional ethical wisdom itself and to be reflexively aware of oneself doing the work in a social and political context.

Making professional ethical wisdom visible: the role of ethics work

In advocating everyday ethics and stressing the importance of social justice and an analysis of power, I am clearly situating my approach to *phronesis* as a project in the social sciences as much as in philosophy. Over many years I have collected accounts of self-identified ethical difficulties from social welfare professionals through interviews (Banks, 2004; Banks and Williams, 2005) and written case studies (Banks and Nøhr, 2012). In response to requests for verbal or written accounts of ethically challenging situations or dilemmas, practitioners have given narratives from their own perspectives, constructed after the event, for a particular purpose (a research interview or case study request). This has disadvantages, in that the stories are inevitably selective – practitioners may depict themselves in a certain light (as heroine, victim) and give partial or embellished account of what they thought, felt and did. But this may not be a particularly important limitation in the context of a search for insights into the nature of professional ethical wisdom in practice. For how practitioners construct their stories tells us about their processes of ethical reflection. Indeed, the format of interviews and written case studies has advantages in that the practitioners themselves engage in a process of ‘reflection on action’, which involves abstracting what they regard as the ethical features of the situations they are describing. It overcomes the problem of an outside observer attempting to surface the ethical in ordinary everyday practice.

This collection of accounts gave me the opportunity to explore what social welfare practitioners were reporting themselves as doing, thinking and feeling when they encountered ethical difficulties in their practice. It was clear that they had to work hard on a number of fronts – rationally, emotionally, practically – both on the ground at the time, and afterwards in creating an account depicting the situations and themselves in a certain light. This led to the concept of ‘ethics work’ (Banks, 2013, 2016), as a way of describing the practice of ethics in everyday professional life. I see this as a translation of the philosophical concept of *phronesis* into more sociological terms - using the term ‘work’ in an analogous sense to its use in relation to ‘emotion work’ (Hochschild, 1979, 1983; Rietti, 2009) or ‘identity work’ (Watson, 2007; Aronson and Smith, 2011). Here ‘work’ relates to how people construct and perform identities or engender, manage and perform emotions. Often associated with social interactionism or social constructionism, it includes the moves people make psychologically, conversationally and bodily to perform or achieve a particular persona or state of mind. By ‘ethics work’ I mean 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. This ‘work’ is complex and can be discussed and explained by breaking it down into a number of over-lapping dimensions, which are summarised below:

1. **Framing work** – identifying and focusing on the ethically salient features of a situation; placing oneself and the situations encountered in political and social contexts; negotiating/co-constructing frames with others (including service users and colleagues);

2. **Role work** – playing a role in relation to others (advocate, carer, critic); taking a position (partial/impartial; close/distant); negotiating roles; responding to role expectations.
3. **Emotion work** – being caring, compassionate and empathic; managing emotions; building trust; responding to emotions of others.
4. **Identity work** – working on one’s ethical self; creating an identity as an ethically good professional; negotiating professional identity; maintaining professional integrity.
5. **Reason work** – making and justifying moral judgements and decisions; deliberation with others on ethical evaluations and tactics; working out strategies for ethical action.
6. **Relationship work** – engaging in dialogue with others; working on relationships through emotion, identity and reason work (dialogue work)
7. **Performance work** – making visible aspects of this work to others; demonstrating oneself at work (accountability work).

Dimensions of ethics work²

I will now expand briefly on each of these seven dimensions of ethics work, considering how they relate to the work of navigating the dilemmatic space of social welfare work. In the following section I will illustrate with reference to an account of an ethically challenging situation given by a psychiatric social worker.

² This section draws substantially on Banks 2016

Framing work

I am using the concept of 'framing' to refer to the ways in which people make sense of events and experiences. According to Goffman (1974, p. 8) frame analysis attends to the question: 'What is it that's going on here?' The work of 'ethical framing' (framing work in the sphere of ethics) involves making sense of what is going on specifically in relation to matters of harm, benefit, rights and responsibilities. This entails seeing situations in particular ways - being alert to what may be important but is not in the picture we first see or are given by others, and aware of the background contexts that give the picture its shape and meaning. This involves 'moral perception' (Blum, 1994; Vetlesen, 1994; Audi, 2013), that is, identifying and attending to ethically salient features of situations - for example, seeing a particular incident as a case of racism. It also entails critical reflexivity (Taylor, 2006), for example seeing the bigger picture of social inequality of which a particular incident is part and recognising one's own role both in framing the picture and featuring in it. Being conscious of one's own framing work and aware of that of others also entails a willingness and ability to re-frame – to see a situation in a different light, to see new features as significant.

Role work

Social welfare workers have available a wide repertoire of professional roles that can legitimately be assumed in particular circumstances – for example, as advocates for the rights of particular service users or carers; impartial assessors of families' needs; critics of unfair policies; campaigners for social justice; informal educators; carers or supporters. 'Role work' involves judging what roles to take with particular people in particular circumstances, how and when to shift between roles, when a degree of professional closeness or greater distance is right and negotiating roles with service users and others (see Hall et al., 2006, 71-88). In some situations a social worker must be impartial, not showing favouritism to any particular person. In other situations the proper role of the worker is to take a partial position in defending or upholding one person's or group's rights or interests. All role work has ethical dimensions – as roles are taken up, negotiated and lived out in relationships and in connection with responsibilities for other people, and have the potential to cause harm or benefit. Ethical dimensions are highlighted when conscious dilemmas and choices over role positions arise – for example between carer and controller; educator or advisor; 'friend' or professional.

Emotion work

'Emotion work' refers to the effort people make both to feel certain emotions (for example, compassion or empathy) and to handle emotions that may develop (sadness, guilt or fear). Hochschild (1983, p. 7) developed the concept of 'emotional labour' to refer to the management of emotions in work contexts, describing this process as 'the induction or suppression of feeling in order to sustain an outward appearance that produces in others a sense of being cared for in a convivial safe place'. Although she uses the term 'emotion work' to refer to the management of emotions in private contexts (Hochschild, 2003), I am using it more broadly as a generic term covering emotional labour in professional life (see, for example, Leeson, 2010; Smith, 2012). In one sense, all emotion work has ethical significance,

as emotions are about relationships with others or ourselves and our characters. But 'ethical emotion work' in a professional context would focus particularly on emotions linked to respecting, not harming, caring for and about others and being ethically good people - for example, the emotions of compassion, guilt or shame. It is useful to make a distinction between emotions and feelings. According to Vetlesen (1994, p. 78) emotions (such as empathy or shame) combine affectivity and cognition, involving a stepping back and an element of reflection (see also Goldie, 2000; Nussbaum, 2001). Feelings (such as pain or affection) are 'rawer' and can involve the person who is experiencing the feeling being almost engrossed in it.

Emotion work goes on all the time in social welfare work, and may not be noticed and/or not regarded as relevant in giving accounts of the work. It is also more exposing if a worker dwells on, for example, her fight to suppress her anger or his work on compassion towards a service user who is behaving in an awkward, rude or disrespectful way. For the dominant discourse in social work encourages practitioners to keep emotions out of the equation.

Identity work

'Identity work' is the work people do through talk, interaction and demeanour to construct and negotiate who they are – their personal and social identities. According to Sveningsson and Alvesson (2003, p. 1165), identity work is a conceptualisation of the ways people engage in 'forming, repairing, maintaining, strengthening or revising the constructions that are productive of a sense of coherence and distinctiveness'. In the context of professional work, this is mainly focused on social and professional identities, such as 'social worker' or 'competent professional' (see Taylor and White, 2000, pp. 100-106). These identities are partly constructed through available social and employer discourses, while particular identities offered by dominant discourses (for example, entrepreneur or technocrat) may be resisted (Halford and Leonard, 1999; Watson, 2007). 'Ethical identity work' (identity work in the ethical sphere) involves practitioners working specifically on their ethical selves – for example, as morally good social workers, caring professionals, committed practitioners or fair-minded people (see, for example, the account given in Weinberg, 2014). It can be understood in Foucauldian terms as 'care of the self' (Foucault, 2000) and is clearly related to constructions of moral character, and how people develop and present themselves in terms of 'virtues and vices' (Banks and Gallagher, 2009).

Reason work

The work of making ethical judgements, deciding what is the right course of action when faced with an ethical dilemma and justifying judgements and actions through use of reasoned argument are all part of the traditional conception of ethics as about rational deduction from ethical principles. Although I am arguing that there is much more to the work of ethics than this, nevertheless reasoning is a very important element, especially for professionals. Professionals deal with many different people with a range of demands and needs, and it is important that they can justify their decisions regarding to whom to give time and resources – for example, why a particular child should be removed or a punishment recommended for a young offender. But the work of 'ethical reasoning' as conceived of here is less about abstract rational processes following principles of logic, and more about practical

reasoning based on particular situations and cases and dialogue with others - what Toulmin (2001) calls 'reasonableness' as opposed to rationality. This might involve giving a coherent explanation and justification that fits with someone's character or desires, rather than one based on what any generalised person should do.

Relationship work

I am using the term 'relationship work' to cover the work of engaging with others, building relationships of trust, getting to know people and caring for and about them over time. The relationships may be with service users, colleagues, officials or members of the public. Clearly, all the other elements of ethics work are accomplished in relationship with others. Even the work of reasoning by oneself only makes sense in a context of public accountability. So in one sense, relationship work is an over-arching concept, and overlaps with role work and identity work. In my earlier accounts of ethics work, I did not separate this out. However, including relationship work helps to distinguish ethics work in professional life from the narrower concept of ethical work on the self (Foucault, 2000a). Relationship work is a key feature of the ethics of care, which highlights the importance of attentiveness (noticing the need for care), responsibility (taking care of others) and responsiveness (of others to the care given) (Tronto, 1993; Held, 2006).

Performance work

This last component of ethics work is implicit in all the others and, rather like relationship work, perhaps hardly needs a separate heading. For the term 'work' implies the performance of some kind of activity. Yet it may be helpful to discuss the ways in which ethics work is about performance. Whilst doing role work or identity work usually involves interaction with others and a presentation of oneself in a certain way, the doing of emotion work or framing work may not always be visible to others. Sometimes it is not intended to be visible. Indeed, if emotion work involves cultivating an empathy that is scarcely felt, the performance may not be about making the work itself visible, but about impression management (Goffman, 1969). However, regardless of whether the empathy is 'forced' or 'natural', it is important that the professional can 'bring off' an empathic performance. Similarly, being trustworthy entails not only acting reliably and ensuring one does not let people down, but also giving plausible performances as a trustworthy person (Banks and Gallagher, 2009, p. 146).

Illustrating ethics work: a psychiatric social worker's experience

In order to illustrate the concept of ethics work, I will focus on just one account by a psychiatric social worker of her relationship with and responsibilities towards a particular service user she encountered in her work in a hospital. Before summarising the social worker's account, it is important to put this case in context. Psychiatric services tend to be under-resourced and low prestige. Drugs are often used, since talking therapies and alternative forms of treatment are more costly, time-consuming and may not be available. If people are regarded as a danger to themselves or others they can be compulsorily admitted to hospital for observation or treatment. Here I will briefly summarise the social worker's much longer first person written account, which can be found in Banks and Nøhr (2012, pp.77-79). Names have been changed.

Marian worked as a psychiatric social worker in a 30-bed hospital unit in rural Virginia, USA. She gave an account of her work with a man named Carson, who was committed as an involuntary patient (under a Commitment Order) due to bizarre behaviour in the community and at work, and aggressive behaviour when first admitted to hospital under a Temporary Detention Order. A Commitment Order requires the patient to remain hospitalised until discharged by a psychiatrist.

Carson was a 40-year old man, who was bright, well-educated and worked for a prestigious company. He had a history of bipolar disorder and had been hospitalised previously. He maintained he was creative and high spirited rather than bizarre. Carson agreed to take Lithium (a mood stabilising drug used to treat bipolar disorder) as he felt it was a natural salt his body lacked. But he refused any other medication, including anti-psychotic drugs, due to side effects experienced previously.

The psychiatrist felt Carson would benefit from an additional mood stabilising drug (Depakote) and a low dose of a neuroleptic, and asked Marian to convince Carson to take these additional medications. Otherwise an Order to Treat would be invoked. Marian was reluctant to take on this responsibility, as she felt Carson should be allowed to make his own decisions. She describes her 'dilemma' about what role to take with Carson, her differences of opinion with the health care staff, the uncomfortable atmosphere in the Unit as Carson threatened legal action and engaged the support of other patients.

Marian worked with Carson in the face of his insulting behaviour and advocated with the psychiatrist for Carson's right to decide on medication. Carson did agree to take Depakote (but not the neuroleptic), and after a week or so his condition had improved and he was discharged. For several weeks he sent hostile letters about his treatment by hospital staff, singling out Marian and sending her insulting notes. Marian reports that she was saddened to hear that he had died several years later after an encounter with the police in relation to involuntary hospitalisation.

Framing

Marian frames this situation as a dilemma for her, making this comment in her account:

The *Order to Treat* was a dilemma for me as a social worker in this hospital setting. It seemed to me that a client should have the last say about whether he or she takes a medication. If the client refuses the prescribed medication, then a member of the nursing staff gives the medication by injection while the client is restrained.

Yet, as she adds later:

I questioned whether he could make an informed decision considering his unstable mood state.

She identified client self-determination as a key issue at stake, yet felt other staff did not view the situation in this way:

This flew in the face of my professional values of self-determination. I had always been passionate about client self-determination. I noticed that the other staff had little of my own conflict about this situation with Carson and clearly saw him as 'crazy' and in desperate need of medication.

Role work

Marian questions what role she should take in this case, particularly whether she should be put in the position of persuading Carson to accept medication:

My dilemma was whether it was my responsibility to inform him of the potential benefits of the additional medications and let him make an informed decision.

She felt she had taken on a role of advocate for him, and later when Carson sent insulting letters singling her out, she comments:

I believed that I had advocated on his behalf with the psychiatrist for his right to refuse the additional medications. I had spent a great amount of time with him.

Emotion work

Marian clearly felt strongly about this situation. She talks about being 'passionate' about self-determination. At the time when she was in the midst of working with Carson about whether or not to accept the additional medication, she seemed to have been feeling worn down by the situation:

I became tired of Carson accusing me of being a 'lackey for the system' and found myself wishing he would simply be quiet.

Later when he was sending the insulting letters, she comments that she felt 'muddled and irritated'. Marian does not recount the details of the work she did on her emotions, but from the way she tells the whole story and the brief mentions of feelings and emotions, we get the impression that it was a very emotionally charged case, requiring her to work hard at an emotional level, as well as in terms of reasoning.

Identity work

Marian's account of this case does not depict her as doing a great deal of overt identity work. However, she is clearly very conscious of her professional identity as a social worker, speaking of the dilemma 'for me as a social worker' and of 'my professional values of self-determination'. She distinguishes herself from the health care staff, who did not share her conflict about the situation.

Reason work

In thinking about the right course of action in relation to her dilemma about whether she should inform Carson about the benefits of the medications and let him make an informed decision, Marian refers to herself as questioning 'whether he could make an informed decision given his unstable mood state'. Marian then obviously did quite a lot of work with Carson to enable him to make an informed decision, although she does not report the details of the conversations. Similarly, in advocating for him with the psychiatrist she would be offering reasons for her recommendation that Carson should be allowed to refuse medication.

Relationship work

The relationship with Carson is at the heart of Marian's account, although she does not go into details of exactly what it entailed. After describing the period when the Unit was uncomfortable as Carson threatened legal action, she also says:

Meanwhile, the psychiatrist believed that I was being 'sucked in' by Carson since I expressed reluctance to carry out her recommendations for medication compliance.

Marian had to work with Carson to gain his trust and attempt to have a rational conversation with him about the medication, in the face of him accusing her of being a 'lackey of the system'.

Performance work

In Marian's account she does not explicitly describe how she performed as an ethically concerned social worker to her colleagues, and a caring advocate to Carson. However, we can sense from what she writes that she was probably working hard at doing this in order for her views and her professional position to be taken seriously and regarded as credible: 'I believed I had advocated on his behalf'; 'I had spent a great amount of time with him'.

At the end of her account, Marian concludes by reflecting on the significance of her experience of working with Carson and tells us what happened to him several years later:

My experience working with Carson has been one of those cases I have often referred back to both in reflection and as part of my teaching. My reactions to working with him have illustrated for me that some of our most uncomfortable practice experiences can actually be our most fertile learning opportunities. I was extremely saddened several years later to learn of Carson's death. He died after a physical encounter with police that occurred during a screening, once again, for involuntary hospitalization.

Here she is performing the qualities of a reflective, caring social worker through how she writes this account. The good social worker is one who is able to reflect and learns from difficult experiences. She presents herself as feeling appropriate emotion (sadness) in relation to the death of a service user with whom she had a relationship, albeit a difficult one.

Concluding comments: surfacing professional ethical wisdom through ethics work

One of the professional problems to which the concept of professional ethical wisdom is a response is the increasing technicisation of professional practice. This leaves a 'negative space' which is often occupied by practitioners' professional ethical wisdom, although not necessarily named as such in the limited vocabulary of managerialist professional discourse. It is, therefore, important to develop and elaborate on the concept positively, not only to make visible the role and work of professional ethical wisdom, but also to reclaim the ground lost to the domain of the technical and managerial. This involves the work of both deconstruction (of powerful structures of current discourse) and reconstruction of the ethical relationality of the social welfare professions, relevant to their practice in a twenty-first century social and economic climate.

This paper has taken Aristotle's concept of *phronesis* alongside more recent variations on *phronesis* in professional life (professional wisdom) as a starting point for exploring the work social welfare professionals do in their everyday working lives that can be identified as falling within the broad domain of the 'ethical'. I introduced the concept of ethics work as a more sociological take on professional ethical wisdom, illustrating with reference to one written account from a psychiatric social worker of her work with a service user and relationship with her colleagues. While acknowledging the limitations of searching for elements of ethics work in professionals' written narratives about their work, the narratives do have the advantage of being constructed by the protagonists as stories with ethical import.

Another approach to studying the ethics work that is part of professional ethical wisdom is to observe and audio/video record everyday professional interactions in situ. The problem with this approach is that the ethical features are not identified or highlighted by participants themselves. So the exercise becomes an anthropological study where ethics, practice and culture are merged (see Brodwin, 2013) or a discourse analysis in which it is hard to capture the reflective ethics work that turns

an interaction into a situation of ethical import (see Sidnell, 2010). The ethical dimension is inevitably imported by the observer/analyst. Having said this, I am currently embarking on a collaboration with colleagues in Finland, which will look at this issue of surfacing the ethical in everyday professional interactions using audio-recordings of multi-professional assessment meetings in mental health and homelessness agencies (see Juhila *et al.*, 2017)

This prospective research addresses one of the theoretical debates to which professional ethical wisdom is also response – namely the contested nature of ethics and approaches to its study. This can be summed up as the challenge to principle-based ethics (deontology and consequentialism) from character and relationship-based approaches (virtue ethics, the ethics of care). The latter stress the importance of seeing ‘ethical dimensions’ in context.

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