

VIRTUOUS SOCIAL WORK AND CRITICAL THINKING

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The work journeys from an historical perspective of the philanthropists to current day ideas of emancipation and human rights leading to the need for social workers to adopt a more critical approach to their practice. The author poses some ideas of criticality and virtue ethics to underpin contemporary practice and shield social work professionals in their everyday work by developing along a critical questions scaffold and through using the lexicon of virtue ethics.

CHANGE, COMPLEXITY AND CHALLENGE – THE CRITICAL QUESTION IMPERATIVE FOR SOCIAL WORK IN THE TWENTY FIRST CENTURY

In most Central and Western European cultures social work has its roots in the philanthropy of the wealthy and privileged. Through the actions of those with a humanitarian approach those who were old, poor, disabled, war damaged and generally deemed to be 'deserving' were provided with a subsistence living. These ideas emanated from values and beliefs that informed social and political discourses of the age. Today, following a trajectory of ideas that meld the social, political, global and economic rationality discourses the lenses we hold up to social work are highly complex and grounded in an ever changing climate. Social work continues to fight for the right to establish itself as a profession – using as it does theory from a variety

of other disciplines. Social workers use broad-spectrum knowledge. They need to be informed about other professional discourses in order to support and challenge decisions that are made on behalf of those who use their services and their carers. They need to know when to give way to other professional discourses practicing in the law or health and when to seize the initiative in challenging discrimination and oppression where justice is not seen to be done. So change, complexity and challenge are key areas within which social workers need to operate in the twenty first century.

Yet perhaps there is not so much of a gulf between our historical philanthropist and the current day social worker. Each is informed by a commitment to social justice and to the qualities of virtue ethics. Indeed this continuity can be seen in the International Federation of Social Workers (IFWS) definition of social work values today.

Values

Social work grew out of humanitarian and democratic ideals, and its values are based on respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Since its beginnings over a century ago, social work practice has focused on meeting human needs and developing human potential. Human rights and social justice serve as the motivation and justification for social work action. In solidarity with those who are disadvantaged, the profession strives to alleviate poverty and to liberate vulnerable and oppressed people in order to promote social inclusion. Social work values are embodied in the profession's national and international codes of ethics. [www.ifsw.org].

What has been added to a contemporary agenda is the commitment to emancipation, antidiscriminatory and antioppressive practice and the context of social work in the global social and political economy. Current day social workers are tasked with the greater agenda of managing within "the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its (social work) mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work." (www.ifsw.org).

So, far from our forebears ideas of 'doing good' social work is now about "practicing beyond merely caring and helping" (Adams et al., 2009) to incorporate a challenging of the complex structures created by a post-modern society. We might even say that our existence in today's world is becoming even post-postmodern in the new creations since the rise of terrorism, the fall of traditional threats and the restructuring of country allegiances and finances. So it is fitting to say that:

Social work in its various forms addresses the multiple, complex transactions between people and their environments. Its mission is to enable all people to develop their full potential, enrich their lives, and prevent dysfunction.

Professional social work is focused on problem solving and change. As such, social workers are change agents in society and in the lives of the individuals, families and communities they serve. Social work is an interrelated system of values, theory and practice. [www.ifsw.org].

Although one concurs with this definition by the IFSW it is true that even the system of 'thinking about social work' has become even more complex. Practice deems that we should hold a coherent view of our values and mediate these through appropriate theory. In doing so we must apply the various lenses of:

...the barriers, inequities and injustices that exist in society' whilst responding 'to crises and emergencies as well as to everyday personal and social problems.' In order to do this social workers utilize 'a variety of skills, techniques, and activities consistent with its holistic focus on persons and their environments.' [www.ifsw.org].

In other words, social workers must understand and apply theories of social constructionism within their work. They may do this by taking a critical questions approach to enable them to see how personal and public problems have been constructed by social and political discourses about the people with whom they work. This approach is fundamental to deconstruct the roots of crisis and everyday work with individuals and groups if we are to challenge the victim status

and shift it to one of an emancipatory nature. This approach is held as something of an applied ideology residing in the social worker rather than one that is necessarily shared with the service user initially. It is useless to try to encourage a mother living in poverty to join an action campaigning group for better income maintenance when she has no food for her children. Yet the social worker must be able to see the potential for change in both the mother and the social systems that support or oppress her. It is in asking critical questions about this that social work can create a holistic approach, a rationale for support and a challenge to structures that maintain the status quo that discriminates in multiple ways. Additionally the critical reasoning that follows such question asking not only supports social workers to bear the emotional content of their work, but also ensures that they continue in their professional development.

A FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL QUESTIONING

Critical evaluation, critical analysis and synthesis are all products of critical thinking and consequent upon the ability to ask critical questions. If social workers, and indeed others in the caring professions, are to develop these skills they need to understand the incremental nature of this sort of thinking. It is not usually possible to take on these high level skills without some sort of developmental framework. A critical learning framework or scaffold was developed as part of a research project undertaken by the author to ascertain the use of critical thinking within a group of third year undergraduate social work students at Manchester Metropolitan University, UK in 2004. Twenty three student 'reflective critical analysis accounts' were analysed using thematic analysis and from the findings course material has been developed to promote the development of critical thinking throughout the course programme. The following framework shows what type of questions should be posed and gives examples of the type of writing that results from the questions asked. The framework is inclusive and developmental. There is no criticism of students using a fundamental style, merely that they know what position it

holds in relation to the higher levels and that it gives them a ladder to climb in order to realise the developmental strides to achieve a 'critical' status.

TABLE 1. THE DEVELOPMENTAL RELATIONSHIP OF CRITICAL QUESTIONING AND CRITICAL WRITING

FUNDAMENTAL	CONNECTING	HYPOTHESIS	CRITICAL
What do I think/ know about X?	How does X relate to Y/Z?	If X relates to Z/Y, then A.	In evaluating X, Z, Y and A what is my argument?

Suppose the given question was *Critically analyse the position of lone mothers within a social constructionist approach*. Here is an example of the type of text that might result from asking questions within the developmental framework.

Fundamental Q

I know that government policy on lone mothers focuses on giving opportunities for work to lift them out of poverty.

Connecting Q

I know that Government policy promotes this view of lone mothers because they are blamed for raising delinquent youths due to having no male disciplinarian. The view is that these women perpetuate a circle of dependency by being claimants and by raising children who underachieve and then find it difficult to obtain work.

Hypothesis Q

I also know that there is no evidence to suggest that delinquency resides with lone mother households. I have read that income maintenance for this group is inadequate, there is no access to affordable childcare, absent fathers fail to accept responsibility for their children, employers are inflexible, part time work is poorly paid and insecure and all this leads to lone mothers being stigmatised by social policy and media promulgation of blame.

Critical Q

More appropriately targeted equality measures, better community networks, advocacy and mediation services, sustainable support of income maintenance, challenging the role of women as only carers through a cabinet level office of Minister for Women would raise the profile of current oppressive policy/practice. It would make connections between feminist theories of the rights of women, the labelling from societal discourse about women as lone mothers and the position of children and young people as our next parental generation. In this way the binary of middle class male dominance would be challenged by an oppositional binary of working women and their rights to accessible and appropriate support as of right and not because they are inadequate, weak and dependent members of society.

Given these examples of writing students are able to appreciate their position on the developmental ladder and to realise the journey they must make in order to achieve criticality. In using the "One Minute Paper Exercise" (see Stead, 2005) at the end of a lecture that employed a Critical Learning Game, students were able to report how they now understood critical thinking and how they needed to develop their skills in this area. Here are some examples.

Q1. What have you learned about asking different types of questions?

I need to think about opinions and facts and use critical thinking in asking questions and realise that there is never one straight answer.

The views you hold and the depth with which you examine a question will impact on your answers.

I need to think more critically in order to create a valid argument and to be more questioning and take on other people's views more.

I have learnt that there are many different ways to answer or iden-

tify a question, and that I now understand what critical thinking is.

To question my initial views and thoughts on an issue and examine what evidence I have to back this up.

I see how our Habitus influences how we think about things.

I feel I am at the 'Connecting' level as I can appreciate different views and elaborate on them.

To use expanded arguments to look at other positions; opinions and supporting evidence are important.

I learnt to go through the four different types of questions when I answer questions and to come to a fair and critical conclusion.

To create a balanced discussion even when others do not share your views.

I now see Critical thinking as 'asking questions'.

Q2. What do you now know you must do to develop your Critical Questioning ability?

Analyse questions and improve my evaluative abilities.

I must broaden my thinking to **frame questions and look at both sides.**

I need to explore and **analyse the underlying issues** on a topic and look at ways of resolving root causes.

I must be more open minded, **ask questions for clarification** and begin to question what I read.

I need to **evaluate all opinions** and suggest and then analyse all possible answers.

Have a critical friend to work with on analysis and critically look at both sides of arguments.

I need to be **open to alternative views** and to analyse.

I need to **target my reading to do more to understand the context of topics.**

I need to look and **think beyond the basic question**, as there are always pros and cons.

Question whether I think something is the **truth or not.**

Work with a critical peer to help me to become a critical thinker.

I feel that I am between fundamental and connecting stages.

The questions have **stretched my ability** because they have made me think differently.

I need to **ask questions that I don't currently know the answers to in order to push my thinking forward.** [MMU Social Work Masters class of 2009, One Minute Paper Exercise conducted by the author].

The Critical Learning Game enabled the students to be open about their difficulties in grasping what it was to think, question, read and write critically. The role of the lecturer was to exemplify the dilemmas inherent in modern social work through the game and to ground this in the nature of social workers as mere human beings, but who possess a high moral commitment to emancipatory practice. Our actions here are grounded to a greater or lesser extent in the ideology of virtue theory being presented as an ideal but almost never fully achievable.

THE APPLICATION OF VIRTUE THEORY TO DEVELOPING CRITICAL THINKING IN SOCIAL WORK

One way of exemplifying the application of criticality in social work is to use the lense of Virtue ethics and Virtue theory.

Virtue theory emphasises the importance of the individual moral agent who has acquired virtues that fit with an existence within the good life and the well being of a defined community. This life is

subject to concepts of virtue that can be revised through using critical thinking abilities. We may assume that social work students enter their professional training because they want to help, to make a difference, to challenge oppression, to contribute to a better society, to advocate on behalf of the discriminated and to collaborate with the various stakeholders. Yet the actions and processes in constructing such work are rarely open to measurement because they involve not only the evidenced outcomes but more importantly “the nuances of how practice is done. The execution of countless tasks made up of acts of skill, intellectual and political vision, generosity and courage which individually and collectively create best practice” (Jones et al., 2008, p. 290).

Our profession needs us to think not only about the work done, but about how it is done by social actors, to recognise that social work is about defensive decision-making, accountability, risk analysis, effectiveness and efficiency, also about how we do it. Knowing that there is often no right answer, using least intervention, being ‘good enough’ resisting stress by our ability to use theory, and using emotional intelligence by being able to predict, empathise, create allegiances and control our own emotions.

From the above definition concepts like ‘good’ and ‘community’ are open to numerous interpretations from the micro- (yourself, service user and carer) to macro- (social laws, attitudes, public agencies).

Skills in virtue ethics are those which enhance a fusion of intellect/theory and intellect/practice **involving justice, reflection, judgement, perception, bravery, prudence, (tendency to evaluate and be practical) liberality (tolerance of difference views and standards of others) and temperance (self restraint)**. So in making a decision not to admit someone into residential care a social worker may reflect using critical questions and the virtue ethics lexicon, for example:

Why was this **brave**?

What could have been the **consequences** of my action? (**prudence**).

How did/would I have **defended my decision**? (**judgement**).

Who did I have to **consider** and what effects did my action have on them? (**perception**).

Could I have done it differently perhaps offered more (**temperance**)?

If I had succumbed to pressure and admitted her what might have happened? Was it a **just decision** and for who? (**liberality**).

How has this episode impacted on my continuing practice? What have I learned from it? (**reflection**).

CONCLUSION

The climate we are in calls for social workers to be 'self-flourishing' in an 'unpredictable' world. Social work can create its own moral debates which become owned by the person/profession, and there is no need to adapt to externally defined moral ground. Maybe the IFSW codes of practice help us to do this. In this system social workers become less functional and more disposed towards more creative ways of working because of the virtuous/moral debates that are promoted by critical thinking. These are shifting and non-linear and belie the notion of a homeostatic state of social work. Neither do they strive for perfection but rather for 'good enough' and defensible intervention. The Virtue ethics theory applicable to social work are seen in **Hayek** – life as a patterned process, but with unpredictable outcomes EG maturity/aging, relationships, work/life balance; and in **Kant** – actions with predictable outcomes EG. If we have efficiency in procedure and in outcome, then we should reach the most valid solution. However, all this is affected by how efficiency is measured, by who defines the procedure and by how the outcome is evaluated. If we set down process, rules and disposed outcomes which apply to all situations we would remove the need for the creativity of virtuous social work and with it the need for social workers to develop the morality of virtuous judgement that is either 'determinant' – meaning the greatest good for the greatest number or 'reflexive' – using a prudential consideration of circumstances.

So the achievement of moral virtuousness in how we do our work should lead us to feel 'good' on the basis of having made the 'best enough' decision using reflexive judgement through thinking in action. Yet how does this work in the face of dilemma and adversity where our judgement favours the employer agency, client/carer or a third party over another? This may mean that through asking critical questions and working through the lense of virtuous social work we can survive the demoralising nature of social work that seems to exist today.

The British Government now gives social work students a financial incentive to undertake a degree in social work and consequent upon this to gain their professional social work qualification. However, no amount of bursary professional support can counteract the feelings of self-worthlessness, community, public and political blaming in the case of baby deaths, where all social workers try to do is their best.

Asking critical questions leads us to better understand the moral space which the professional holds. We need to continue to pose such questions which we may not be able to answer, but which we will use to push forward the barriers to our own understanding throughout our professional careers.

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