

Script A

K111 TMA 02

- Describe how your previous experience has affected your personal values and the ways in which they have changed in response to that experience.
 - Describe your current understanding of professional social work values and how you have arrived at that understanding. Outline those issues you find problematic and want to work on during your preset placement.
 - Illustrate your answer with examples from your previous and present practice.
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Values are ethical and or moral principles that guide action. By extension personal values are an individual's ethical operating system.

Ethics, in simple terms is the consideration of the rightness or wrongness of actions, motivations or utterances and the question; is the rightness of an action inferable from its consequences?

Laws and rules limit bad behaviour, personal ethics tell an individual what is good or bad, i.e. some actions may be lawful but they are unethical. Ethics, personal and professional deal with the landscape between the universally understood 'very good' and the universally understood 'very bad'.

What were the values I had when I started work 19 years ago? I believe, reflecting on them now that they were fundamentally the same core values I hold now. Their seeds unique to me had been planted in early childhood by; my parents, wider family, teachers, friends and other influences such as the books I read and songs I listened to. These values were specific to me and yet they represented a creation of the culture in which I had been socialised. Being white, middle class, having no particular religious or otherwise spiritual convictions, my parents were socialist, my mother feminist. My father who I idolised had argued with his own mother about her racist attitudes. I am the eldest of three, big brother to two sisters. I learned responsibility and accountability in a close family unit.

At University I was exposed to great cultural diversity. I lived with a Czechoslovakian dissident, a black South African, a Welshman, and a Cockney. I was taught political philosophy by a blind tutor. My home

was in a street of condemned houses. I knew I was nothing more than a cultural tourist however these experiences created the person I was becoming.

My values were intrinsic they informed my identity. They had matured and become more sophisticated as I had grown older and my experience of the world greater. At that time as now, my values would rarely be stated as such. They were represented by my actions. I was not aware of an approved values list nor did I at the time seek to codify the values I held.

I was naïve and unworldly, I was kitted out with simple guidelines for action that could be summed up as '*treat others as you would have them treat you*'. This simple precept was allied to a keen sense of right and wrong, manifest in an intolerance of injustice.

My early employment was as an adviser/advocate. I had specialist knowledge and was able to apply it. I saw positive results. My work had value. Reflecting now, I wonder why and how did my current values take shape? In part the catalyst for change were ethical problems arising throughout my employment. Each required ethical consideration, on the basis of individual reflection or analysis in conjunction with colleagues. Such consideration of ethical dilemmas was not a conscious exercise of value revision' however the process did lead to an internalising of convictions.

My values began the process of evolution through practice as a result a key realisation i.e. recognition that my values did not address 'what if' questions. I will attempt to explain this in relation to some situations:

- I identify a fraud that is being committed by a service user to whom I owe a professional duty of confidentiality? *It is not my role to judge but to advise. Abuse of the trust will have unforeseeable negative effects. There must be a transparency of role whereby both service user and worker are able to be honest with each other.*
- I recognise incompetence or inappropriate behaviour by a colleague? *Such behaviour or incompetence should be challenged. One's personal ethical standard would mean nothing if such behaviour was not addressed.*
- I don't like the person I've got to work with? I don't agree with their politics or racial prejudices? *Whilst remaining true to my own values I must still provide a service in a dispassionate non-judgemental way. I must be honest about my own views. Failures of clarity may be construed as complicity or endorsement.*
- Faced by pressure of work I cut corners? *It is often easy to confuse ends and means. Impatience and enthusiasm for the quick fix might mean that everyone is happy. I closed case, a successful claim and all achieved quickly. Has the process empowered the service user if s/he doesn't understand what has happened? No.*

It is in addressing these and other questions that my own values have 'changed'. I believe they have and continue to undergo a process of evolution by challenge. Fundamentally the precept of: *'treat others as you would have them treat you'* had not changed however, I had arrived at the conclusion that to do so properly required an effort of deconstruction and realisation that situations are not always straight-forward. My worldview was in part a product of my experience of it, this, is the case for everyone. I understand that to recognise something is not always to understand it. Crucial in the ongoing value revision have been changes and challenges outside work, marriage, children, experience of ill health and loss. Each experience has been fed into the loop that sees my personal package of values go into work to be challenged, changed and then come home for further challenges and changes. This is a lifelong process.

If personal values guide an individual's actions, social work values represent a set of professionally agreed standards, which inform the way individual members of that profession operate.

An individual's personal values are a creation of their own socialisation. Necessarily partial an individual's values will not fully equip them to operate equitably in a diverse society. Good will is not in and of itself a match for cultural competence.

To expand on the latter point is to investigate the nature of one's understanding of social work values. In part one of this assignment I talked about my own values as a product of my life experience. My interpretation of society is and has been based on that experience. Others entering the social care professions will have their own values base similarly partial and specific to their own life experience. Each will seek to operate within a culturally diverse society applying their knowledge and skills to circumstances as they present themselves. Will our individual values in and of themselves equip or constrain us in action? One cannot know. For this reason it is necessary to establish a commonly agreed and understood code of values/principles that incorporate the intrinsically good of an individual's values whilst binding those values into a general value base designed to recognise the diversity of society. Adherence to this general value base in action will lead to specific good practice.

Nationally and internationally there have been a number of attempts to codify Social Work values. Each attempt has common themes summarised as respect for individuals and a promotion of social justice.

Often cited, as absolutes these principles are underpinned by recognition that inherent in the list will be contradictions. This does not negate the value of the principles for they are as guides to the considerations of dilemmas per se. I will attempt to explain my thinking on this point by reference to a particular case and some of the British Association of Social Workers 'Twelve principles of social work practice' Taken from figure 1 p.11 sec. 2.1 K111 Part A.

The case: Mrs F. lives alone in her own home she is 80. Physically frail and suffering from dementia Mrs F. has serial hospital admissions caused by physical and mental deteriorations that occur in spite of a considerable package of care. In hospital Mrs F. improves. She then decides to go home. She has no recollection of the circumstances of her admission or comprehension of the relationship between home and readmission to hospital. Medical and psychiatric opinion is that she would be 'safer' in a residential care home. It is also clear that Mrs F. may not have the capacity to make informed decisions. Her family agree. Mrs F. is clear. No, she will not go in to care she will not leave her home. She makes the absolutely valid point that; *'I've done nothing wrong I'm only ill'*.

This scenario suggests a series of dilemmas. Will the list of principles help? If so, how? I believe that the 'list' does not answer the ethical questions raised by Mrs F's case rather it provides a framework for considering those questions and the application of individual and organisational discretion in it.

The British Association of Social Workers 'Twelve principles of social work practice'

- Knowledge, skills and experience used positively for the benefit of all sections of the community and individuals. *There is an inherent risk in facilitating a return home. Does Mrs F. appreciate this risk? Do I use knowledge positively to facilitate choice or prevent risk? In supporting Mrs F. in the enjoyment of her personal choice there will be impact on other individuals; her carers and other critically ill people potentially denied a place in hospital at that time 'avoidably' occupied by Mrs F. There is an opportunity cost in any decision.*
- Respect for clients as individuals and safeguard their dignity and rights. *Mrs F. is rightly engaged in the decision making process. She should not be cajoled or tricked into doing something she is plainly reluctant to do. In some respects however her dignity is potentially compromised by her exercise of choice.*
- No prejudice in self, nor tolerance of prejudice in others, on grounds of origin, race status, sex, sexual orientation, age, disability, beliefs or contribution to society. *Why are the doctors so keen for Mrs F. to be safely accommodated in a residential care home? Why do I think it might be right? Are our reasons unduly influenced the category of personal she is rather than Mrs F. as an individual? There is a danger of seeing common problems, common solutions to those problems and embarking on those solutions without respect to the individual concerned. When asking why did I do that? It is not satisfactory to say; 'I did it before and it worked' or 'I did it because they told me to'.*

- Promotion of appropriate ethnic and cultural diversity of services, *Mrs F. is a product of her cultural history. Her determined independence, privacy and sense of personal freedom has value, they should not be subsumed by some corporate best fix to her presenting 'problem'.*

The focus of the 'list' is the social worker's relationship with the service users. Social work values reflect a sense of partnership explained by ex-service user; Wallcraft: P.73 sec. 6.3 K111 Part A Study Unit 1.

We no longer want services which expect us to be passive, dependent, grateful, quiet and well-behaved. We want services which enable us to be who we are, and to live the best lives we can. We want rights, not patronage.

This has broader significance as social work values put service user's lives into the context of disadvantages they face. Social workers must recognise that many of the reasons that bring service users into contact with them:

are caused by disadvantages and inequalities that are built into the structure of our society, as well as to the personal characteristics of service users. Indeed, those characteristics are affected by social inequalities.

P.76 K111 Part A Study Unit 1.

Necessarily therefore social workers cannot properly address specific difficulties without addressing wider issues of discrimination and oppression. CCETSW's own value requirements speak of the need to:

... counter discrimination, racism, disadvantage, inequality and injustice
(CETSW 1996, P.18 quoted P.79 sec 8.2 K111 Part A Study Unit 1)

The same value requirements makes the almost homely suggestion that, social workers should:

... treat people with respect and be honest, trustworthy and reliable.
(CCETSW 1996, P.19 quoted P.19 sec 3.3 K111 Part A Introduction)

Two elements of the same value requirements that characterise the essence of social work values as at once focusing on the individual but also on the place of that individual and social worker in society. Social workers subscribing to the values 'list' are committed to action against discrimination and the promotion of equality. They are required to reflect on self, others and the structural inequalities inherent in society. Inequalities that may indeed be manifest in the agencies they work for or systems they operate. As such there may be conflicts and tensions between agency and individual as one attempts adherence to a value base at the same time as responding to organisational dictate, which values 'closed cases' and services delivered in a timely manner, however, does not value in any meaningful sense the nature of the relationship between social worker and service user.

It is important to remember that there is a range of oppressions and inequalities and individuals may be the product of many not just one. It is the recognition of this factor and a continuing effort at a true level of empathy that attempts an understanding of the lives of others whilst at the same time, as '*reflecting on the privileged nature of one's own*' (Dominelli quoted on P.76 K111 Part A Study Unit 1) that, placed in the context of a busy under-resourced and stressed service represents by greatest challenge in consideration of my professional values as my placement progresses.

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References

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