Being Pono: Ethical dilemmas as learning tools for student social workers

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ABSTRACT

Social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are bound by codes of practice and ethics, including the three Māori values of tika, pono and aroha. Ethical dilemmas occur frequently in practice situations for social workers. Student social workers on practicum may have to face these issues not only in regard to work with service users, but also in the behaviour and actions of the social workers and staff in the agency in which they are placed. Given the evidence regarding the disjuncture of learning transfer between theoretical and practical settings, this article argues that ethics and whistle-blowing issues faced by social work students are beneficial experiences in terms of translating theory and belief into practice.

Introduction

Registered social workers in Aotearoa New Zealand are bound by the Social Workers Registration Board (SWRB) Code of Conduct for social workers (SWRB, 2016), and guided by the Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers' (ANZASW) Code of Ethics (ANZASW, 2013). In Māori social work practice, three values of *tika* (being correct and appropriate), *pono* (acting with integrity) and *aroha* (actions motivated by empathy and compassion) are central (Young, McKenzie, Omre, Schjelderup & Walker, 2014). Registered social workers in New Zealand are specifically expected to practice social work according to these values. For social work students placed within agencies and organisations for practical placements, these, along with the policies and procedures of the placement organisation, provide a framework for appropriate actions and behaviour. But what happens when the student becomes aware of a gap between policy, procedure and practice? This paper aims to highlight the learning potential of such situations, both in terms of personal learning for student social workers and as a 'spot check' on students' abilities to practice in an ethical way.

Ethical decisions and consequences

Rodie (2008) highlights some of the ethical issues that can arise for students while on practicum, and the potential consequences for the student both personally and professionally. She also notes the actual and perceived power relationships between social work students and employees in the placement organisations, and how these relationships may affect the student's ability to act in completely ethical ways. Of course, these power relationships also exist between employees and management within social services agencies, and bring similar considerations in terms of employee self-interest and ethics (Mansbach & Bachner, 2009). It is not the intent of this paper to reiterate Rodie's (2008) work; rather, it will examine the potential benefits of such unfortunate ethical problems with regard to the transition from social work study to social work practice.

Delaney (2007) notes that in a professional setting, ethical dilemmas and conflicts do occur: for example, when addressing tensions between what a social worker is *allowed* to do versus what they morally

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feel may best serve the client (Delaney, 2007; Preston-Shoot, 2011). Similarly, Dickens (2012) highlights the difficulties social workers often face in navigating the complex relationships between laws, ethics, and agency policies. Mansbach and Bachner (2009) note that there will be times when social workers must face the question of whether to 'blow the whistle' on illegal, unethical or immoral practices within and outside their organisation. Their research findings suggested that student social workers *felt* able to do this, however the authors themselves noted that such an intention may not actually be acted upon in practice. This is an issue faced worldwide by social workers, who frequently find themselves in unenviable ethical quandaries (Preston-Shoot, 2011).

The gap between learning and practice

Research suggests that despite being 'taught' ethics as part of their studies, some social workers do not consistently practice in ethical ways (Davidson, 2005, Lafrance & Gray, 2004; Terry, 2007 (cited in Preston-Shoot, 2011)). Davidson (2005) describes a teaching module which aims to develop in social work students an awareness of potential pitfalls and the ability to act in ethical ways. While these approaches are positive in that they explicitly encourage students to develop an understanding of the 'grey' areas of ethical practice, as Barsky (2009) points out, this type of learning is of little use if it does not then flow into action. And therein lies the rub, research in social psychology describes the tendencies of people to act in ways that go along with perceived social or group norms: such as obeying orders from figures in authority, or in accepting a 'we do it this way' attitude (Smith, Mackie & Claypool, 2014). In some organisations, unethical behaviour can actually become the norm (Zhang, Chiu & Wei, 2009). This suggests that, for student social workers, bringing oneself to act in accordance with what is right may be a very difficult task. Indeed, newly qualified social

workers can find it quite challenging to hold on to learned values when transplanted even in to the 'real' world of time and budget pressures (Marsh & Triseliotis, 1996, cited in Preston-Shoot, 2011), let alone when they find themselves in a culture of ethical complacency.

Research has noted the difficulty in encouraging student social workers to transfer the learning from the classroom to the field (Campbell, Scott-Lincourt & Brennan, 2008), as well as highlighting the disparity between academic performance and the internalisation of appropriate values and ethics (Tam, 2003). As Lemieux and Allen (2007) note, the point of field practica is to assist students in developing their knowledge and skills. Being in an ethically uncomfortable position within a social work placement can therefore be seen as an example of the precise type of real-life challenges which students will have to face when working in the field. As difficult as these experiences can be, it is my contention that they are in some ways more valuable than theoretical ethics exercises: social work skills which are 'taught' in academic settings may result in students thinking about what they *should* do rather than *doing* it (Rossiter, 1995). Being faced with an actual ethical concern in a practicum situation necessitates decisions, actions and consequences; practicum acts as a proving ground where the student's values, and those of the profession, are put to the test (Reisch & Jarman-Rohde, 2000 (cited in Barton, Bell & Bowles, 2005)).

Blowing the whistle on unethical practice

Dickens (2012) describes the act of whistle-blowing, or drawing attention to unsafe or illegal practice, as an act of courage. He notes that those who blow the whistle may be vilified within their organisation, despite upholding their ethical integrity. Greene and Latting (cited in Mansbach & Bachner, 2009) assert that the ability to be

a whistle-blower should be viewed as an essential tool for social workers in their role of upholding the rights of clients. In Aotearoa New Zealand, disclosures made by employees of organisations in the public interest are protected by law from being penalised or disciplined by their employer, and the right to anonymity is guaranteed under the Protected Disclosures Act 2000. The legal status of students on placement, however, does not seem to fit within the classification of employee, thus removing a presumption of protection. In the context of whistle-blowing, then, being aware that an action by a person or agency is not *tika* and taking action to remedy iniquity in the interests of the public good, student social workers are in exactly the ethical position that they may find themselves in when in practice.

Conclusion

For student social workers in this country, as in other social work settings around the world, there are challenges to ethical practice. Students face difficulties in terms of unequal power relationships, the knowledge that a disclosure may not be protected by law, and the awareness that, in many cases, whistle-blowers are punished or lose status in the eyes of other so-called professionals. Nonetheless, finding oneself on the horns of a dilemma while on practicum provides an important learning opportunity for students, including the opportunity to put into practice that which has been learned in academic settings.

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