


TRANSFORMING SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE



3rd Edition

# Values & Ethics in Social Work Practice

Lester Parrott

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Lester Parrott



Los Angeles | London | New Delhi  
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**Series Editors:**  
Jonathan Parker and Greta Bradley



Learning Matters  
An imprint of SAGE Publications Ltd  
1 Oliver's Yard  
55 City Road  
London EC1Y 1SP

SAGE Publications Inc.  
2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/1 1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
Mathura Road  
New Delhi 110 044

SAGE Publications Asia-Pacific Pte Ltd  
3 Church Street  
#10-04 Samsung Hub  
Singapore 049483

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Editor: Kate Wharton  
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Project management: Swales & Willis Ltd, Exeter, Devon  
Marketing manager: Tamara Navaratnam  
Cover design: Wendy Scott  
Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in Great Britain by Henry Ling Limited at The Dorset Press, Dorchester, DT1 1HD



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First published 2006 by Learning Matters Ltd.

Reprinted 2007 (twice)

Second edition published 2010

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2014947110**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: 978-1-4462-9387-4

ISBN: 978-1-4462-9388-1 (pbk)

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This new edition is dedicated to my children: Frances, Zoe and Joseph.



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## *About the author*

Lester Parrott is a Lecturer in Social Work at Keele University. He has written a number of books and articles on ethics and values in social work and has just had published *Poverty and Social Work* by Policy Press.



# *Introduction*

Welcome to this new edition of my book. Since the first edition was published, social work has, as ever, faced a number of challenges to its status as a profession. Firstly, the deaths of children such as Daniel Pelka provoked public concern and, as the subsequent public inquiries and serious case reviews show, social work as part of the patchwork of services wrapped around children has much to do to improve its effectiveness. Secondly, the scandals at Winterbourne View showed that, for some learning-disabled people, the public provision of services contracted out to private firms has resulted in poor standards of care and abuse by some of the staff employed by such firms. Thirdly, the further reduction in social work services to older people and the continuing pressure to care for an increasingly older population without the necessary resources to cope mean that home care services have become increasingly rationed to the most serious cases. Fourthly, mental health services are near collapse as social workers struggle to support people with mental health problems in the community, resulting in the admission of people into hospital. Finally, challenges from the Coalition government, which is intent on further privatising as many aspects of public provision as it can, has led to discussions as to the feasibility of privatising children's services, including child protection.

Social workers must face these challenges and do their best within a climate that is increasingly unsettled. The consequence for social workers is that they have become further regulated by managerial procedures and policies which seek to cover responsibility for actions whilst limiting the scope of social workers to deal flexibly and effectively with the problems they confront. Therefore, the values and principles of human rights and social justice which social workers must uphold become the touchstone by which they can hold on to a sense of mission to create decent lives for the people they serve. To be allowed to work with people when they may not necessarily want you to help them requires social workers to keep a firm grasp upon the reasons why they do the work that they do. It is only the values of human rights and social justice, in my view, that can enable them to do so.

This new edition has some changes which reflect the new environment in which social work finds itself and, therefore, any application of social work ethics and values must take account of the existing social context. To this end, Chapter 1 sets out this context as applied to social work. The following chapters remain faithful to the spirit of the first edition but the material has been updated and amended where I felt it appropriate. Chapter 2 then considers the core of social work – anti-oppressive practice – whilst Chapter 3 considers the different ethical approaches taken to apply social work ethics in practice. Chapter 4 deals with the issue of professional

accountability; the recent events at Stafford Hospital and the subsequent Francis Report are included in this chapter to highlight some of the issues raised when professionals decide to blow the whistle on dangerous practice in the organisations that employ them.

Chapter 5 discusses the issue of risk in social work and how risk, which is often managed through the application of models of risk assessment, has become an issue that is almost exclusively discussed in terms of risk avoidance. This has the consequence of producing social work which takes the path of least resistance and in which the notion of a risk as an opportunity as well as a threat is removed from the conversation. The impact of restricting the autonomy of people who use social work services then becomes a serious problem when assessments of the social circumstances of individuals seek to remove all risk from their lives.

Chapter 6 looks at the issue of advocacy and the conflicts and dilemmas faced by social workers if they decide to advocate on behalf of service users. This issue has taken on increased significance with the appointment of advocates within mental health services as a result of the Mental Capacity Act in 2005, in considering the best interests of service users and the decision to deprive individuals of their liberty.

Chapter 7 considers the ethics of working in partnership and suggests that there are particular ethical issues which require serious consideration when working with others. It requires a commitment to be open and transparent when working together which, again, may pose serious ethical conflicts and dilemmas, for example, when to share information about a service user with another professional, which may involve issues of confidentiality.

Chapter 8 deals with the ethical challenges of working within social work organisations and asks you to consider what the proper balance is between following rules of procedure and the exercise of professional discretion. Such guidelines, at their most effective, try, for example, to create fair rules of access to services. However, when a social worker may assess that a person requires a service, even though the individual may not fit the criteria, how should he/she respond?

Finally, Chapter 9 is a new chapter which argues that social work has to understand the process of globalisation. There will be service users who move to the United Kingdom who may have quite diverse cultural requirements which are not necessarily accommodated by social work services or who, in some cases, hold values which may be antithetical to social work's mission to uphold human rights and social justice for all.

In my view, for social work to be effective, it has to reflect upon itself continually to determine how well it is achieving its mission. Individual social workers in turn must engage in this process in order to overcome organisational and professional inertia; to stand still using the same tried and tested approaches is not an option if those approaches are not subject to regular evaluation, reflection and scrutiny. I have planned this new edition as a reflection of such a process. I hope you will enjoy engaging with the issues presented within these pages and I would value any feedback which you might want to give, so please do not hesitate to contact me via my email address at Keele University: [I.parrott@keele.ac.uk](mailto:I.parrott@keele.ac.uk).

# Chapter 1

## The context of social work practice

### ACHIEVING A SOCIAL WORK DEGREE

This chapter will help you meet the following capabilities, to the appropriate level, from the Professional Capabilities Framework:

- Values and ethics: Apply social work ethical principles and values to guide professional practice.
- Contexts and organisations: Engage with, inform and adapt to changing contexts that shape practice.

It will also introduce you to the following academic standards as set out in the social work subject benchmark statement:

5.1.3 Values and ethics, which include:

- the nature, historical evolution and application of social work values.

Social work has been subject to much criticism by the media, successive governments and service user groups. In response to a succession of scandals involving the abuse of adults, for example, at Winterbourne View, and a number of child deaths, such as Daniel Pelka, social work and social work education have been perceived as failing to respond appropriately to the needs of service users and failing to prepare social work students adequately for the practical realities of social work. There has been a plethora of government-sponsored reports scanning both the previous Labour and the current Coalition government and commentaries from professional bodies, such as the British Association of Social Workers (BASW), suggesting a range of remedies to solve such seemingly intractable problems. Examples of recent reports include:

- **All Party Parliamentary Group on Social Work** (2013) *Inquiry into the state of social work*. [http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw\\_90352-5.pdf](http://cdn.basw.co.uk/upload/basw_90352-5.pdf)
- **British Association of Social Workers** (2012) *The state of social work survey*. [www.basw.co.uk/resource](http://www.basw.co.uk/resource)
- **British Association of Social Workers** (2012) *Voices from the frontline*. [www.basw.co.uk/resource?id=499](http://www.basw.co.uk/resource?id=499)
- **Croisdale-Appleby, D** (2014) *Re-visioning social work education: An independent review*. [www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment\\_data/file/285788/DCA\\_Accessible.pdf](http://www.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/285788/DCA_Accessible.pdf)

- **Macalister, J** (2012) *Frontline: Improving the children's social work profession*. [www.ippr.org/publication/55/9705/frontline-improving-the-childrens-social-work-profession](http://www.ippr.org/publication/55/9705/frontline-improving-the-childrens-social-work-profession)
- **Munro, E** (2011) *The Munro review of child protection: Final report, a child-centred system*. London: The Stationery Office.
- **Nairey, M** (2014) *Making the education of social workers consistently effective*. London: Department for Education.
- **Social Work Reform Board** (2010) *Building a safe and confident future: One year on*. London: Department for Education.

This blizzard of reports shows just how concerned government and sections of wider society are about the nature of social work. It also asks us as practitioners and students to think clearly about the role and purpose of social work. In particular, in the light of such criticism it requires us to be very clear as to what principles should inform our practice. It therefore involves a very serious consideration of the ethical principles which underpin the work that we do. In essence, social workers who are very skilled and knowledgeable will not be successful in helping people who use social work services unless they have a clear idea as to what the purpose of their intervention should be. An appreciation of the ethical and values implications of social work intervention will enable us to know why we are intervening in the way that we are and on what basis we are deploying our knowledge to achieve a satisfactory outcome for the people we are employed to help. Michael Gove, former Minister for Education, whilst arguably being 'appreciative' of the role of social workers and what some social workers achieve, is also highly critical of the state of social work practice and education. In a speech to the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children he had this to say on the subject:

*In too many cases, social work training involves idealistic students being told that the individuals with whom they will work have been disempowered by society. They will be encouraged to see these individuals as victims of social injustice whose fate is overwhelmingly decreed by the economic forces and inherent inequalities which scar our society.*

*This analysis is, sadly, as widespread as it is pernicious. It robs individuals of the power of agency and breaks the link between an individual's actions and the consequences. It risks explaining away substance abuse, domestic violence and personal irresponsibility, rather than doing away with them.*

*Social workers overly influenced by this analysis not only rob families of a proper sense of responsibility, they also abdicate their own. They see their job as securing the family's access to services provided by others, rather than helping them to change their own approach to life. Instead of working with individuals to get them to recognise harmful patterns of behaviour, and improve their own lives, some social workers acquiesce in or make excuses for these wrong choices.*

(Gove, 2013)

A BASW survey (2012) of just over 1000 social workers found that social workers were being stretched to breaking point, with 77 per cent reporting unmanageable caseloads as demand for services escalates. In addition, pressures on services for adults were reflected in 69 per cent of social workers reporting that their local authority had further limited the criteria for receiving services at home, resulting in a revolving door of admission and readmission to NHS care.

The impression given by Gove suggests some social workers are gullible fools operating with too many abstract ideas about the nature of service users' problems which deny any responsibility to service users for the problems they experience. It is one thing to suggest that service users are at the complete mercy of social forces outside their control, which for many (despite Gove's assertions) is the case; to deny that people should take responsibility for their own actions is something completely different. In essence, it would appear that Gove moves in the opposite direction, assuming that social factors should not be accounted for in cases such as drug misuse, child neglect and so on. His approach is informed by an individualistic ethos which, in particular, accepts that the nature of people's problems and the amelioration of such problems rest solely with individuals themselves. An example of this approach comes from Gove's statements regarding the use of foodbanks: he has suggested that the pressures faced by families having recourse to foodbanks were *often the result of decisions that they have taken which mean they are not best able to manage their finances* (House of Commons, 2014).

#### REFLECTION POINT

*How far do you feel people are the authors of their own circumstances?*

This is a very complex question and social philosophers have argued constantly about the precise relationship between the choices individuals make and the conditions which may influence the choices they make. In the social sciences this is usually described as the relationship between social structure, that is, the recurrent patterned arrangements which influence or limit the choices and opportunities available, and our agency as human beings, that is, the opportunity and capability of persons to act independently to make their own free choices. As you develop your understanding of social issues you may change your understanding of this relationship. It is interesting to note that research presented to the House of Commons (2014) lists a number of factors outside individual choice that influence foodbank use. Some of these factors are as follows.

### Food prices

Food prices in the UK (including non-alcoholic drinks) rose by 11 per cent in real terms between 2007 and 2013.

## **Reductions in earnings from work**

The economic downturn has also had a significant impact on those in work. Average UK weekly earnings increased by 1 per cent in the period December 2012 to February 2013, compared to the same period a year previously. This equates to an earnings cut in real terms as inflation (as measured by the Consumer Prices Index) was 2.8 per cent from February 2012 to February 2013.

## **Benefit conditionality and sanctions**

Benefit claimants deemed not to be satisfying the conditions for entitlement to benefit may find that their benefit payment is temporarily suspended or reduced, or their claim 'disallowed'. Figures published by the Department for Work and Pensions (2014) on 15 May 2013 show that the number of Jobseeker's Allowance sanctions and disallowances increased from 279,840 in 2001 to 684,030 in 2010, with the main increase happening after 2006.

## **Impact of incorrect sanctioning**

Under the current regime, in 2012 as many as 68,000 people on Jobseeker's Allowance had their benefits taken away by mistake and faced unnecessary hardship as a result (House of Commons, 2014). In addition, some examples of how claimants will lose money as a result of reform to the social security system, including the introduction of Universal Credit, are given below.

Parents of disabled children who formerly received Disability Living Allowance get a 'disability element' top-up to their Child Tax Credit of £53.62 per week for each disabled child. This money is used to pay for the additional costs involved in bringing up a disabled child, like wear and tear to clothes and equipment. Within Universal Credit, the equivalent 'disability addition' will fall to £26.75 per week.

## **Changes to Housing Benefit Bedroom Tax**

Working-age claimants who are deemed to have a spare bedroom in their council or housing association home are faced with a reduction in their housing benefit. Those affected persons claiming housing benefit faced these reductions from 1 April 2013. The government hopes this will force tenants to move to a smaller property to free up larger properties for families. The government's own impact assessment describes that affected households will lose between £13 and £14 per week, with some 40,000 households losing all their entitlement to housing benefit.

## **Impact of Universal Credit**

Brewer et al. (2012) have produced a preliminary analysis of the likely winners and losers as a result of the introduction of the Universal Credit scheme. From the analysis not everyone on low incomes will benefit from these changes. The analysis assumes full take-up of benefits under the old regime and under Universal Credit. Overall, out of some 6.4 million families, 1.4 million families will lose out.

(All examples from Parrott, 2014)

Given these examples (and more could be provided), it is clear that, irrespective of individuals' ability to affect their own circumstances, changes in social security policy far beyond the influence of individuals to alter will result in claimants receiving less money to live on than previously. It is not surprising that the leading foodbank charity, the Trussell Trust, in its report for 2014 observed:

*Trussell Trust foodbanks gave emergency food to 346,992 people nationwide in 2012–13 financial year, 170 per cent more than the previous year – the biggest increase since the charity began. One third of those helped were children – 76 per cent increase in numbers of foodbanks launched in past year. In the last 12 months alone we have launched over 150 foodbanks nationwide. The exceptional need, a growing awareness of foodbanks and our highly effective social franchising model has enabled the Trussell Trust to launch three new foodbanks per week, compared to two per week in the previous year. We currently have almost 350 foodbanks launched nationwide.*

(Trussell Trust, 2014)

The weight of evidence using the example of food poverty suggests that forces beyond the immediate influence of individuals are clearly placing more and more people into food poverty. Nonetheless, an individualistic philosophy argues that society has less responsibility for the problems people face and that we as citizens owe little to one another. This has the effect of weakening the social ties and social support that we all rely upon in certain stages of our lives. Within the welfare sector, services which were previously provided on a social basis through the provision of state and local authority services, social work and social care services are increasingly put out to tender to the private and voluntary sectors. The 'social' element of 'social work' is therefore subject to a concerted assault, which undermines the collective provision of services which individuals in general are unable to provide for themselves. As society is increasingly atomised, then the nature of social problems is seen as emanating from a lack of responsibility of individuals rather than the retreat of the social, understood here as the retreat of the state from protecting citizens against such social harms as unemployment, poor health and homelessness (Kwong Kam, 2012).

These developments present challenges to social workers, whose professional vocation is to work towards social justice for those groups of people who are unable to achieve this of their own volition.

In any consideration of ethics and values in social work then the social, economic and political context in which social work operates is crucial in influencing what is ethically possible or what is ethically desirable. An ethic of individualism will, if not challenged, prove significant in shaping the way social workers understand their duties and responsibilities. This book will consider these issues to be critical in any development of ethical practice for social workers and will challenge such an ethic when it becomes an impediment for effective social work practice. People who use social work services have a right to be treated as individuals with their own history and their own particular understandings of the world in which they live. People who use social work services also have a right to

be treated fairly through a consideration of social justice. In other words, how their problems may not be dissimilar to others when, for example, millions experience unemployment as a result of the recent global economic crisis. In the UK this has led governments, for example, to increase sanctions against unemployed and disabled people through the withdrawal of benefit or a reduction in supporting services. A famous sociologist, C. Wright Mills, had this to say about such problems:

*When, in a city of 100,000, only one man (sic) is unemployed, that is his personal trouble, and for its relief we properly look to the character of the man, his skills, and his immediate opportunities. But when in a nation of 50 million employees, 15 million men are unemployed, that is an issue, and we may not hope to find its solution within the range of opportunities open to any one individual.*

(Mills, 1959, p9)

Social work has been defined in a number of ways by professional groups representing social workers; look at the definition below, adopted by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW). This definition has also been accepted by professional associations of social work across the world (including BASW in the UK).

## Definition

*The social work profession promotes social change, problem solving in human relationships and the empowerment and liberation of people to enhance well-being. Utilising theories of human behaviour and social systems, social work intervenes at the points where people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.*

(<http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work>)

### REFLECTION POINT

*Does this definition define social work as only concerned with individuals separate from their environment and society?*

As you can see from this definition, social workers across the world define social work as both involving human relationships and well-being and also understood within a wider social context. This means that social workers should therefore understand that their intervention focuses upon the interaction between people and their environment. Recent critics other than Gove have sought to undermine this focus and the Narey Report (2014), which investigated the appropriateness of social work education for children and families, had this to say about the IFSW definition:

*It's not that it's an appalling definition. But in terms of describing the work of a Children's Social Worker in England it is, I would argue, thoroughly inadequate. We need a more satisfactory and relevant definition. And we need a definition that concentrates on that work, generally carried out in the statutory sector, which is about protecting children.*

(Nairey, p13)

Nairey does not elaborate on why he thinks the IFSW's definition is inadequate and in general provides little evidence of sufficient quality to suggest what should be included in the definition that he is seeking.

This book takes the IFSW definition as one which best encapsulates the profession of social work and will ask you at all times when considering your ethical practice to think about how ethical practice can best be understood within the context of the interaction between individuals' circumstances related to the wider social context in which they find themselves.

## Markets and managerialism

In terms of understanding the context of service users' lives, we have argued that social work has to see people as situated in the social environment and look for solutions to the problems in the way that they experience these as involving an interaction between the individual and social level. Increasingly, as has been argued above, social work has to work alongside the private and voluntary sectors. Social work is, on the one hand, increasingly involved in brokering services on behalf of people, for example, around the personalisation of services. In addition, there is a continuing narrowing of its responsibilities towards protection of adults and children in terms of safeguarding.

These two central tasks involve:

1. an understanding of the way services which have been privatised involve the role of markets in delivering social work, creating service users as consumers of services;
2. an understanding of how social work is now controlled by the belief that the close monitoring of individuals to protect them from harm is the only feasible approach to keeping people safe.

Underpinning both of these approaches is the pervasive control of social workers by a burgeoning managerial ideology. This belief in the ultimate efficacy of management is assumed to lead to better outcomes in terms of an increased efficiency and effectiveness in service delivery. Many critics (for example, James, 2004; Rogowski, 2011) see these claims as chimerical, undermining the professional expertise of social workers and diminishing effective contact with service users. Social workers and service users are therefore subject to an increasing commodification of their interactions through

the market and a cumulative increase in the procedures which police their face-to-face practice relationships.

### **Definitions**

- Commodification is the transformation of goods and services, as well as ideas or other entities that normally may not be considered goods, into a commodity that is something which is bought and sold in a market. For example, social care in the form of support to live independently is increasingly rationed so that more service users are paying for their own home care.
- A market is the place where buyers and sellers of a specific good or service come together in order to facilitate an exchange. In the context of social work the local authority which employs the social worker will purchase social care services from a range of providers in the area. The social worker, after assessing a person's needs, will then access a particular service for which either the service user will pay or it will be provided by the local authority. Who pays is usually determined by assessing the ability of the service user to pay, usually described as a means test.
- Managerialism gives priority to the managerial and economic concerns of service funders and providers, focusing on service costs and efficiencies. Some social workers believe this is at the cost of direct face-to-face work with clients. With consumerism, managerialism further promotes service provision by non-state agencies. The role of the social worker moves towards assessment of individuals' needs and the regulation of services delivered. Although the service user is seen less as a 'client' whose needs are determined by a professional perspective, there is nevertheless concern that managerialism as it applies to social work attaches more importance to budgets and targets than to meeting the particular needs of individuals. The managerialist approach removes much frontline social work from professionally qualified social workers and allows service provision to be determined by the market (Asquith et al., 2005).
- With consumerism there is a shift towards the client becoming a consumer able to choose services, rather than being merely a recipient of them at the discretion or judgement of the social worker. The market becomes an important and powerful force in the availability of services to meet needs and the balance of the relationship between social worker and consumer begins to look less hierarchical. However, the relationship is still biased in favour of the social worker because of his/her authority to carry out assessments and knowledge of what the market has to offer. Protection for the consumer is very limited (Asquith et al., 2005).

Having defined these terms, it is important to understand that these particular terms have been closely related to the way in which society has been transformed by a particular form of capitalism, known as neo-liberal capitalism (Harvey, 2005).

# What is neo-liberal capitalism?

## All areas of life dominated by the organisation of the market

This means that we see ourselves as individuals whose role in life is to maximise our self-interest both in the market as consumers as well as in our private and social relationships. Self-interest dominates over other values such as altruism.

## The lean state: less state, more private enterprise

This results in the state taking less responsibility for social harms such as unemployment and ill health, and less responsibility for ensuring that children are cared for or that older people can lead a dignified life in old age. The social programmes that remain are residualised, providing a basic low level of support. If individuals require more than basic care then these functions are privatised so that the quality of care that people receives becomes increasingly tied to their capacity to be consumers of, and therefore purchasers of, such services.

## Economic globalisation

This relates to the promotion of free trade throughout the world and the removal of duties and tariffs which prevent free trade between countries. It also encompasses the idea that national economies have to compete for inward investment from the major corporations, resulting in a lowering of social protection (e.g. levels and environmental standards to reduce levels of taxation seen as costs to business, which prevent them from investing in states with higher levels of taxation).

## Deregulation

Deregulation does not mean the removal of state regulation. It does mean the use of such regulation to support competitive economic performance and profit from capital. Where regulations are seen to hamper the profit motive, for example, hours of work, health and safety or environmental regulations, then they are limited. An example of this is zero-hours contracts, where it is estimated that some 300,000 care workers are employed on such terms.

The problems of free unregulated markets can be explained by the next exercise, which asks you to think of a society which is devoid of any intervention by the state in regulating how markets operate. Individuals are free to make whatever choices they want, to purchase those things which will make them happy. Our example is taken from residential care. Let us assume that some people will choose to purchase residential care for themselves when they can no longer remain living independently in their own homes. The assumption is that people are, therefore, free to purchase residential care for themselves and that there is no regulation to ensure the quality of care in the residential homes in which they reside. The only regulation is with individual purchasers who can, if they find the quality of the care to be deficient, move to another home where they consider the care to be of their liking.