Equipping students with a critical tool with which to interrogate the world and its ethical dimensions for social work practitioners

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Introductions

LOUISE – Co-ordinator of the Integrity topic for the MSW at Flinders University

CHARITY – Student who completed the Integrity topic
Outline

Part 1: How the troublesome world impacts on social work

Part 2: What we did: Critical discourse analysis – and what we found

Part 3: Our reflections
Part 1: How the troublesome world impacts on social work
Neoliberalism vs Social Work

In the Integrity topic students were tasked with reflecting on ways we have felt our social work values were challenged in the workplace.

Some examples from Charity’s experience:

- Applying screening methods to limit access to services for people in genuine need, knowing they are already being screened out by the other services and ‘falling through the cracks’

- Feeling powerless to speak up against unfair government policy because our government employer says we must be politically ‘neutral’
Values in the Code of Ethics

Students in their reflections during the Topic identified difficulty balancing practice in line with the Code and their work environment.

What is expected in the Code?
Three core values
- Respect for persons
- Social justice
- Professional integrity
Charity’s Conflict

Does social work think it’s ‘better’ than welfare?

Where is the positive regard and equal value of others?
Part 2: What we did - Critical discourse analysis – and what we found
The WPR Method

What’s the Problem Represented to be?

The WPR method by Carol Bacchi (2009) is a tool for analysing policy and statements by asking a series of 6 questions.

In Integrity, students are asked to applied the questions in the WPR method to the AASW Code of Ethics (2010).
The WPR Method

1. What is the dominant ‘problematisation’?
2. What are the underlying assumptions?
3. How did this representation come about?
4. What is left silent?
5. What effects are produced by this representation?
6. Where was this produced & how could it be displaced?
WPR 1: The representation of the ‘problem’

What ‘problem’ is the Code of ethics a ‘solution’ to?

Overall

• Lack of social work identity
• Lack of accountability
• Unethical practice
• Sub-problem: social work is an unregistered profession i.e. adherence to Code of Ethics is voluntary
1.2 Commitment and aims of social work

The social work profession is committed to the pursuit and maintenance of human wellbeing. Social work aims to maximise the development of human potential and the fulfillment of human needs through an equal commitment to:

- working with Australia’s First Peoples
- working with and supporting people to achieve the best possible levels of personal and social wellbeing
- working to address and redress inequity and injustice affecting the lives of clients, client groups and socially disadvantaged
- working to achieve human rights and social justice through social development, social and systemic change, advocacy and the ethical conduct of research.

(AASW, 2010, p. 7)
Charity’s Analysis
WPR 1: The Problem

From Charity’s essay:

‘The problem for social workers is represented to be one of inequity and injustice in society that can be addressed by supporting people, particularly those who have been disadvantaged by inequitable systems (Q1).’

(Sims-Jenkins, 2017, p. 1)
WPR 2: Assumptions

• That social injustice and the lack of respect for people are things about which something can be done, and done by ‘social workers’.

• That the existence and practice of the social work profession can improve things (in particular, re social justice and respecting people)

• That a Code of Ethics will make social workers practice ethically

• That social workers have the power to uphold their responsibilities and to action social justice (Section 5.1.3)
Charity’s Analysis
WPR 2: Assumptions

If social workers are to address inequality for the socially disadvantaged…

…. Then social workers must be in a greater position of power to change inequitable systems than the socially disadvantaged themselves.
Charity’s Analysis
WPR 3: How did this come about?

From Charity’s essay:

‘This power misuse problematisation has developed over time in response to criticism of the application of power by social workers (Q3), most notably regarding the involvement of social workers … in oppressing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (AASW, 2004).’

(Sims-Jenkins, 2017, p. 4)
WPR 3: When and where has it been done differently?

• Aotearoa New Zealand Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (2007) which is bilingual

  • ‘The fact that the loyalty of social workers is often in the middle of conflicting interests.
  • The fact that social workers function as both helpers and controllers.
  • The conflicts between the duty of social workers to protect the interests of the people with whom they work and societal demands for efficiency and utility.
  • The fact that resources in society are limited.’
WPR 4: What are the silences?

Power:
Compared with the IFSW statement of principles: the constraints are invisible.

We practice in oppressive systems, as part of those systems: we oppress as much as we liberate or empower.
Charity’s Analysis
WPR 4: What are the silences?

Silence: Why social workers have power and how they got it

• On an individual level, there is power gained through knowledge, education and experience

• Power held by social workers in the political sphere is gained through alignment with dominant systems, i.e. the government
Charity’s Analysis

WPR 4: What are the silences?

Examples

• Mental Health Social Workers need to comply with guidelines set by the Australian government under the ‘Better Access to Mental Health Care’ initiative

• For the social work to become an accredited profession in Australia, the AASW needs to prove to the government that this is a good idea
Charity’s Analysis
WPR 4: What are the silences?

Critical view: what voices are dominant in setting the laws in government?

5.2.1 Priority of clients’ interest

a) Social workers will maintain the best interests of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others.

b) In exceptional circumstances, the priority of clients’ interests may be outweighed by the interests of others, or by legal requirements and conditions. In such situations clients will be made aware that their interests, or those of others, may be jeopardised.

[emphasis added] (AASW, 2010, p. 25)
Part 3: Our reflections
Reflection: Charity

Once I realised the inherent conflict in gaining and holding power as a social worker – we are sacrificing some of our dissention, I resolved my dilemma about whether social workers were positioning themselves as ‘better’

Power is a tool that social workers use

It is not who we are

It does not make us ‘better’
Reflection: Charity

The Social Work Professional Identity

• In a study by Harrison and Healy (2016) on the professional identity of new graduates, not everyone who studied social work identified as a social worker.

• One participant in the study preferred to be known as a disability worker rather than social worker. She may have been coming from the same position as I was (or not).

• Someone who is trying to equalise power by rejecting her own probably has the right values to be a social worker

• Contrast: as the social work profession gains power and status in our neoliberal society, there may be people who study social work for the power it brings them, (e.g. AMHSW under Medicare) without aligning with social work values
Reflection: Why this is important

• Introducing a tool to analyse the Code of Ethics can assist students to work through discrepancies between their own values and their perception/understanding of social work values

• Social workers rely on their own moral values when making a decision, rather than on consulting a Code of Ethics (Weinberg & Taylor, 2014), so we need to help students become accustomed to drilling down – they need to be aware of what values are at stake, so they can choose whether to perpetuate them – or disrupt them
References


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