



ETHICS IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE: IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING, TEACHING AND STUDYING

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1.1. ABSTRACT

This short study offers some reflections on features of the traditional professional ethics literature, focusing on codes, conduct and rational decision-making in difficult cases. It is argued that this kind of approach offers a rather artificial, abstract and narrow conception of ethics. Consideration is then given to what might be the implications for learning and teaching of shifting emphasis towards a more embedded conception of ethics in professional life, with a focus on the commitment and character of professional practitioners and the specificities of the contexts in which they work. While contributing to theory and policy, these findings should stimulate further dialogue to enhance the constructive development of relevant ethical frameworks for managing teacher ethical conduct in Educational Institutions.

1.2. KEY WORDS:

Professional Ethics, Social Professions, Character, Codes of Ethics, Conduct, Commitment, Context, Learning, Teaching and Study.

1.3. INTRODUCTION

As one encounters “professional” plumbers, professional life insurance salespersons, and others who make claims of their professionalism, it’s getting harder to define “professional.” Generally, many authors and scholars would offer three simple definitions: 1. Relating to a job that requires special education, training, or skill. 2. Done or given by a person who works in a particular profession. 3. Paid to participate in a sport or activity.¹ To say in nutshell, characterized by or conforming to the technical or ethical standards of a profession. Simply advertising that one is “professional” then doing little to demonstrate heightened performance level results in altered characterizations from the public and an erosion of trust awarded the

¹Banks, S. (2006), *Ethics and Values in Social Work*, 3rd edition, p. 67.

extended group. The ethic of health care has always been that the patient/public good is placed in the primary position. The ethic of business historically places profit in the primary position. Even casual observation will find rationalizations that have risen to support the “merging” of health care ethics and those of business.

1.4. THE CONCEPT OF PROFESSIONAL ETHICS

“Professional Ethics” as a discipline (an area of study) and as a practice (what professional practitioners say and do) is constructed through the academic and professional literature and the practices of organizations and workers. Learning and teaching in the field of professional ethics is heavily influenced by textbooks in the specialized subject areas (social work, nursing, and medicine, for example) and documents published by professional bodies, particularly codes of ethics or conduct. In this literature, “professional ethics” is often equated with codes, rule- following, analysis of difficult cases and the development and use of ethical decision-making models.² I will briefly summarize what I characterize as the traditional approach to professional ethics, outlining what I see as three main features.

1) Codes of Ethics – There is a tendency to associate both the study and practice of “professional ethics” with ethical codes. Codes of ethics are written or implicit sets of norms that usually identify the core purpose of the profession and outline ethical principles and rules or standards of professional practice. They are generally written and controlled by professional or regulatory bodies and play a role in demarcating the profession, promoting professional identity, guiding and regulating practitioners and protecting service users.³ These norms can be characterized as “externally generated” in that they originate from outside the individual professional practitioner. They comprise general principles and rules that apply impartially to anyone in the profession in question. In Britain, and perhaps other countries too, the proliferation of codes of ethics, conduct or practice, particularly exemplified by increasing concern with ethics in public life and ethics in the practice of research (the latter being monitored and enforced by research ethics committees/institutional review boards), has contributed to an image of “ethics” as being about conformity to rules and standards.

2) Conduct – Professional ethics tends to focus on the conduct, that is, actions, of anyone in the role of professional practitioner. There is a concern with deciding what ought to be done and judging whether the actions taken were right or wrong with reference to impartial general ethical principles. Codes of ethics tend to encourage us to think in this kind of way, as do many of the textbooks, which often make substantial use of action-focused cases for illustration or discussion.

3) Cases - The cases that feature in professional ethics textbooks often take a particular form. They are abstracted from time and place and give little indication of the character, emotions, or specific circumstances of the actors involved.⁴ This is particularly true of the typical short case used in teaching,

² Beckett, C. and Maynard, A. (2005) *Values and Ethics in Social Work: An Introduction*, p. 89.

³ Banks, S. (2003) ‘From oaths to rulebooks: a critical examination of codes of ethics for the social professions’, p. 139.

⁴Chambers, T. (1997) ‘What to Expect from an Ethics Case (and what it Expects from you)’, p. 178.

where minimal contextual details are given of a situation or event and students are asked to discuss and decide what the protagonists in the situation should do, or what they, the students, would do in such a case. Often these cases may be framed and referred to as “dilemmas” (choices between two equally unwelcome alternatives) and sometimes students are encouraged to use a decision-making model.

1.5. ETHICS IN PROFESSIONAL LIFE

In order to free ourselves of some of these associations, it might be helpful to make a conscious effort to shift from the concept of “professional ethics” as an area of study to thinking instead about “ethics in professional life”. The use of the phrase “in professional life” draws attention to the idea of “professional life” as a whole: it is lived by people; it has a past and a future; it may have a texture and a particular context. The suggestion is that “ethics” as an area of study can be found embedded in the life, and ethics as values and norms are lived in and through the life. This does not mean abandoning professional ethics, but it means broadening the scope of focus from codes, conduct and cases to include commitment, character and context. It means including more relevant approaches from moral philosophy that stress the situated nature of ethics, such as virtue ethics, care ethics and moral phenomenology (including moral perception, imagination, empathy). Such approaches are beginning to be advocated for in the literature on ethics in social work, but often at a philosophical and theoretical level, rather than in terms of how this might influence teaching and learning. We can also draw on empirical studies by social work academics and practitioners, which offer accounts from practitioners and service users about what they say, think, feel and do in practice. These empirical studies are often not linked to the literature on professional ethics, but can be very useful in offering narrative accounts and analyses of moral discourse and practice. Three elements of ethics in professional life are identified below.

1) **Commitment** – This involves paying attention to the internally generated value commitments of those who take on the roles of professional practitioners, that is, seeing them as having commitments to a range of values, including personal and political, as well as professional and societal. It entails taking account of people’s motivations for doing the work, including the role of passion and “vocation” in people’s professional lives.

2) **Character** – Considering the importance of character or people’s moral qualities leads to a focus on the person rather than on their actions or conduct. Important questions for consideration include: “How should I live?” “What kind of person should I be?” “How can I be caring, courageous or just as a professional practitioner?”

3) **Context** – This involves acknowledging that practitioners work in particular contexts where politics, policy, the profession and employing agency define what is relevant. It entails a holistic approach, situating the practitioner in webs of relationships and responsibilities, taking into account the importance of moral orientation, perception, imagination and emotion work.

1.6. IMPLICATIONS FOR LEARNING, TEACHING AND STUDY

Quite a lot has been written at a theoretical or speculative level about the potential of situated approaches to ethics (ethics of care, virtue ethics, existential and relational ethics) to contribute to understanding ethics in the context of the work of social professionals.⁵ Less has been developed, however, to show how this would work in practice and how such approaches can be incorporated into teaching and learning about ethics. Some points are noted below for further elaboration from a virtue ethics point of view.

1) **Seeing ethics Everywhere**– Rather than separating ethics as a discrete area of study and abstracting ethical issues from practice learning, we can see ethics as embedded in practice learning and across the curriculum.

2) **Working with contextualized living stories/accounts** – In addition to working with short cases framed as dilemmas or involving difficult decisions, students and practitioners can be encouraged to give longer, more personal narrative accounts of their everyday professional lives, including their feelings, imaginings, hopes and fears.

3) **Balancing logic (analysis) with passion (Feelings, Emotions, Imagination)** – Whilst recognizing the importance in professional work of being able to justify decisions, reason logically and argue coherently, it is equally important to develop the capacities of students and practitioners to be morally perceptive, sensitive and compassionate.

4) **Use of role plays, simulation, literature, poetry, drama** – In education and training for the social professions the use of role play and other creative methods is well-established, especially in teaching communication skills. These approaches are equally valuable in learning and teaching about ethics.

5) **Focusing on developing the capacities of practitioners to do ‘ethics work’** – The idea of “ethics work” is a concept of “emotional work”, which one introduced in relation to the study of flight attendants to encapsulate the work that goes into being caring, attentive and compassionate in situations where this would not be our natural response. We could characterize as “ethics work” the hospice social worker’s use of imagination and moral sensitivity. Ethics work involves emotional work, but has added dimensions of:

- Moral perception or attentiveness to the salient moral features of situations;
- Recognition of the political context of practice and the practitioners own professional power (reflexivity);
- The moral struggle to be a good practitioner– maintaining personal and professional integrity while carrying out the requirements of the agency role. This would include handling the moral distress that comes from seeing what ought to be done but not being able to do it. It involves developing the moral qualities of courage and professional wisdom.

⁵Clifford, D. (2002) ‘Resolving uncertainties? The contribution of some recent feminist ethical theory to the social professions’, p. 39.

These preliminary reflections on the concept of “ethics in professional life” are part of a developing trend in philosophy to broaden the study of ethics from rational, principle-based action to include virtues, relationships and emotions. It is particularly important to develop such approaches to ethics for the social professions, as rational, managerialist trends push in the opposite direction.

1.7. CONCLUSION

This paper provides some knowledge about the content of teachers’ codes of ethics. It demonstrates that Teachers’ codes of ethics are more likely to be amenable to ethical conduct if there is clarity of purpose, structured to include appropriate language and tone that endears its users towards ethical practice, is specific to the task, responsibility and practice of teaching and focuses on building teacher agency for ethical practice.

The study has limitations because it did not engage deeply with the two contexts, nor explore the effectiveness of the two codes of ethics. The findings are thus limited to the document analysis of two codes of ethics and cannot be generalized to other contexts. A comprehensive research is needed to determine how users engage with the content of codes of ethics in these contexts, and others to get a broader picture. However, the findings offer some important thought for conversations about the construction of codes.

This study gives valuable insights about teacher codes of ethics in developed versus developing education contexts. It proposes that teacher codes of ethics should be aligned to the professional function or practical realities of teachers and should be constructed to elicit response, acceptance and commitment from its users. As teacher practice becomes globalised, more attention should be given to perspectives that inform the content of teachers’ codes of ethics and ethical practice.

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