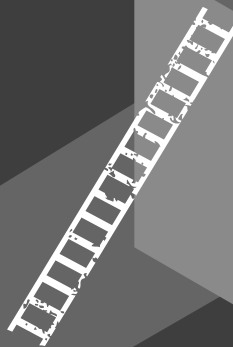


# SOCIAL WORK

AN INTRODUCTION

3<sup>RD</sup>  
EDITION

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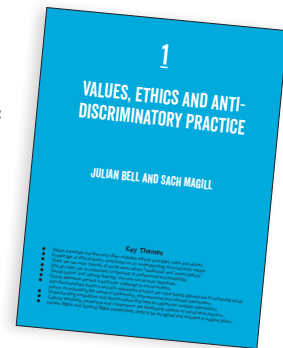


# GUIDED TOUR OF THE BOOK

*Social Work: An Introduction*, third edition, is structured over four parts – Part 1: Knowledge Base; Part 2: Assessment; Part 3: Models of Intervention and Part 4: Interventions in Practice. Across the entire book each chapter contains similar learning features to enable you to navigate the text, critically engage with the material presented and reflect on what you have learned. Within each chapter you will find:

## KEY THEMES

A summary of the main issues and content discussed in the chapter.

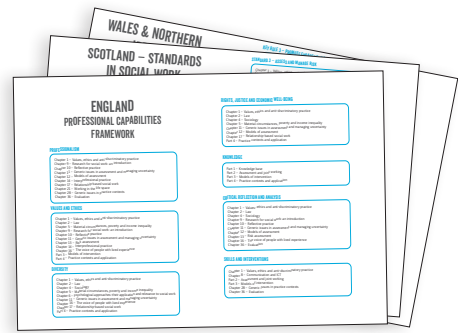


## INTRODUCTION

To set the scene and place the chapter in context.

## CASE STUDIES

Cases and practice vignettes to help illustrate particular key points and issues, as well as demonstrate how theory translates to practice.

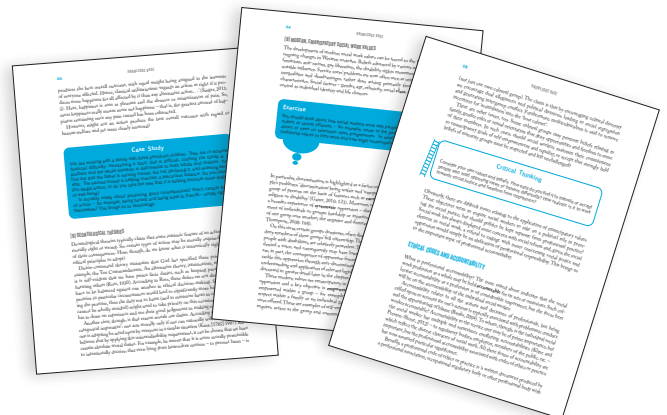


## EXERCISES

Activities and exercises to help you test your understanding.

## CRITICAL THINKING BOXES

To enable you to pause for thought implications of particular points.



## CONCLUSION

To summarise the key points made in the chapter.

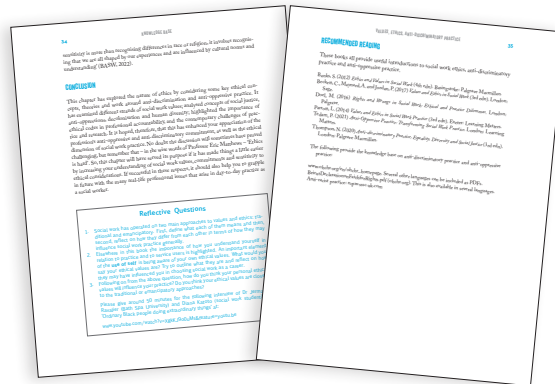
## REFLECTIVE QUESTIONS

To encourage you to review what you have learned and engage with the core content of the chapter.

## RECOMMENDED READING

Suggested further reading to help you develop your understanding.

At the end of the book you will also find a Glossary to help you get to grips with those terms that may not be familiar. Glossary terms are emboldened in the text on the first mention.



# 1

## VALUES, ETHICS AND ANTI-DISCRIMINATORY PRACTICE

**JULIAN BELL AND SACH MAGILL**

### Key Themes

- Values permeate our lives and often underpin ethical principles, rules and virtues.
- Knowledge of ethical theory contributes to an understanding of social work values.
- There are two main strands of social work values: 'traditional' and 'emancipatory'.
- Ethical codes are an important component of professional accountability.
- 'Social justice' and 'valuing diversity' are core social work objectives.
- Ethical dilemmas present a particular challenge to social workers.
- Anti-discriminatory practice and anti-oppressive practice are value-based approaches to achieving social justice, incorporating the values of partnership, empowerment and minimal intervention.
- Understanding inequalities and discrimination that lead to oppression enables intervention.
- Cultural sensitivity, awareness and competence are developing aspects of social work practice.
- Human Rights and Spiritual Rights perspectives need to be recognised and included in support plans.

## INTRODUCTION

Social workers are involved in many aspects of people's lives, including problematic family relationships, financial difficulties, homelessness, ill health, drug dependence and crime. Given this wide-ranging and sometimes intense involvement, social workers can do much good, but there is also the **risk** of causing harm. So, social workers must always be sensitive to the ethical dimension of their practice.

Indeed, it might be claimed that this ethical dimension of practice has assumed even greater importance during the period that government austerity policies have been implemented in the UK and elsewhere. A variety of ethical issues have become more prominent. Does the social work profession have an ethical responsibility to oppose reductions in key services, or at least to highlight the possible harmful effects on those with lived experience? If eligibility criteria for services have to be tightened, how should social workers establish which types of **need** should be given priority? Also, how can social workers ensure that new, apparently beneficial, approaches to service delivery – such as personalisation and self-directed support – are not being introduced to obscure the reality of cutbacks in available resources (Beresford, 2014)?

Not all of these issues – which may be seen as part of the 'changing moral landscape of social work' (Doel, 2016: 22) – can be addressed directly here. Nevertheless, by providing a general introduction to the ethical dimension of social work practice and introducing anti-discriminatory and **anti-oppressive practice** as value-based approaches to challenge and meet the evolving moral aspects, this chapter should assist you in thinking about these and many other important issues. First, there is an analysis of key ethical concepts. Then, some ethical theories are outlined and their relevance to social work is considered. Next, different strands of social work values are examined and ideas concerning social justice and valuing human diversity are explored. Attention then turns to accountability, ethical codes and the difficulties posed by ethical dilemmas. This is built upon to include key definitions and discourse around anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice. It introduces areas for consideration around multiculturally diverse populations that are part of everyday inclusive social work practice and explores the need for developing culturally competent workers who understand the necessity of tackling **discrimination** and minimising oppression on a personal, structural and societal level.

## VALUES AND RELATED ETHICAL CONCEPTS

What makes your life worthwhile? Friends? Music and art? Creating a fairer society? If so, these may be particular values of yours: friendship, beauty and social justice. Explaining the general nature of values is more challenging (Clark, 2000), but basically, values are those elements of life that one believes should be cherished, preserved, promoted or respected. So, if you value friendship, you cherish your friendships because of the joy they bring.

Values, then, are not mere personal likes: we believe that others consider, or should consider, them important too. This indicates that values typically derive from social group membership. Indeed, culturally embedded values – ethical, political, legal, spiritual and aesthetic – pervade our lives and yet may be taken for granted. Consequently, we do not always appreciate how deeply values permeate our actions, thoughts and feelings. Language, for instance, embodies values – derogatory terms, such as ‘scroungers’, being clearly value laden.

Our main concern, in this chapter, relates specifically to ethical values, which determine what we ought to do. How do ethical values relate to other concepts? First, a distinction may be drawn between values and principles. We value human dignity, and the principle relating to this value is ‘don’t behave in a way that undermines human dignity’. So, an ethical principle usually specifies required moral behaviour and there may be a corresponding moral right that people possess – for example, an entitlement ‘to be treated in a dignified and respectful manner’.

However, the general nature of values, principles and rights leaves them open to differing interpretation and, therefore, more specific rules of conduct may be needed to provide detailed guidance. A rule such as ‘don’t open someone else’s correspondence without permission’ may help to ensure protection of the more general right to privacy.

Morality is not, though, just about behaviour; it is also concerned with character, the sort of person one should be. Individuals may possess virtues (desirable **traits**) and/or vices (undesirable traits). Any such virtues can be linked to values – for example, if we value truth, we will regard honesty as a virtue.

**Table 1.1** Examples of values, virtues, principles and rules

<b>Values (Things we cherish)</b>	<b>Virtues (Valued character traits)</b>
Truth	Honesty
Liberty	Autonomy/Independence
<b>Ethical principles (Fundamental moral requirements)</b>	<b>Ethical rules (More specific moral requirements)</b>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don’t deceive other people</li> <li>• Restrict people’s liberty only if necessary to prevent harm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don’t falsify qualifications in job applications</li> <li>• Ensure care home residents can move freely, unimpeded by unwarranted obstructions</li> </ul>

## ETHICAL THEORY

At this point, let us think about two types of theory.

### (A) CONSEQUENTIALIST THEORIES

Consequentialist theories claim that promotion of some general values – for example, human well-being, is the basis of morality. The morally right action is the one that

produces the best overall outcome, with equal weight being assigned to the interests of everyone affected. Hence, classical utilitarianism ‘regards an action as right if it produces more happiness for all affected by it than any alternative action. . .’ (Singer, 2011: 3). Here, happiness is seen as pleasure and the absence or minimisation of pain. So, more happiness really means more net happiness – that is, the greatest amount of happiness remaining once any pain caused has been subtracted.

However, might not an action produce the best overall outcome with regard to human welfare and yet seem clearly immoral?

### Case Study

You are working with a family with three preschool children. They are in extreme financial difficulty: maintaining a basic diet is difficult, clothing the family is a problem and the whole situation is detrimental to both adults and children. You find out that the father is earning money, but not declaring it, and receiving benefits. The earned money is helping maintain a precarious balance. Do you report this illegal action, or do you take the view that it is helping promote some degree of well-being?

Is morality solely about producing good consequences? Aren’t certain kinds of action – for example, being honest and being loyal to friends – simply right in themselves? This brings us to deontology.

## (B) DEONTOLOGICAL THEORIES

Deontological theories typically claim that some intrinsic feature of an action makes it morally right or wrong. So, certain types of action may be morally required regardless of their consequences. How, though, do we know what is intrinsically right and what ethical principles to adopt?

Divine-command theory maintains that God has specified these principles – for example, the Ten Commandments. An alternative theory, intuitionism, maintains that it is self-evident that we have prima facie duties, such as keeping promises and not harming others (Ross, 1930). According to Ross, these duties are not absolute and may have to be balanced against one another in ethical decision-making. So, if keeping a promise in particular circumstances would lead to significantly more harm than breaking the promise, then the duty not to harm (and to minimise harm in cases where harm cannot be wholly avoided) might need to take priority on this occasion. The individual has to draw on experience and use their good judgement in making such a decision.

Another view, though, is that reason reveals our duties. According to Kant, there is ‘a categorical imperative’: one acts morally only if one can rationally will that the principle one is adopting be acted upon by everyone in a similar situation (Kant, [1785] 1997). Kant believes that by applying this universalisability requirement, it can be shown that we have certain absolute moral duties. For example, he asserts that it is never morally permissible to intentionally deceive, that even lying from benevolent motives – to prevent harm – is

morally unacceptable. There is disagreement, however, about which duties can be derived from the categorical imperative, but to Kant, telling the truth is a moral absolute.

Many consider this absolutist position untenable. They also question whether Kant provides a plausible account of how conflicts between moral duties should be resolved. (Should telling the truth always take priority over prevention of harm?) Nevertheless, Kant's principle of **respect for persons** is very important: persons must be treated as ends-in-themselves; one must never treat another person 'solely as a means' to attaining one's own goals (Kant, [1785] 1997: 38). So, respect for persons would appear to be an absolute moral obligation.

## OTHER THEORETICAL PERSPECTIVES

Adherence to principles is regarded by many as crucial to moral conduct. Some, though, question this. Virtue theorists believe that living a good life requires certain moral traits, acquisition of life experience and mature judgement. Moreover, many feminists claim that theories focusing exclusively on principles and rights constitute a male-centred ethics of justice. In contrast, they advocate **ethics** of care which highlights compassionate caring; maintaining intimate relationships; attention to particular circumstances (rather than application of general principles); plus compromise (rather than appeal to rights) as a means of resolving conflicts.

The distinction being drawn between these two ethical approaches may be open to question. For example, any set of ethical principles featuring in an ethic of justice would typically include a principle of beneficence – that is, a principle requiring us to do good to others, to promote other people's welfare. Anyone espousing such a principle will surely acknowledge that caring for others – by providing them with material and emotional support – is a very important component of such beneficence. Furthermore, surely any adequate approach to morality needs to include proper consideration of both care and justice. Hence, where care is provided as part of a state-funded professional service – for example, by doctors, nurses or social workers – it should be provided in a fair and just way. So, for example, any failure to meet care needs resulting from **prejudice** relating to an individual's **ethnicity**, gender or sexual orientation would be ethically unacceptable.

Nevertheless, the ethics of care does place caring at the heart of morality, focusing on the importance of relationships, particularly close personal relationships, in human life.

Having now considered some broad ethical theories, let us turn our attention to social work values themselves. In examining these values, you should be able to see how general ethical theories have influenced the values of the profession, at least in some important respects.

## SOCIAL WORK VALUES: 'TRADITIONAL' AND 'MODERN'

Discussions of social work values have become increasingly complex (Gray and Webb, 2010), but we will focus here on the key distinction between 'traditional' and 'modern' values – the latter also being described as radical, anti-discriminatory, anti-oppressive and emancipatory.



## (A) TRADITIONAL SOCIAL WORK VALUES

The traditional values were formulated as social work developed (Barnard, 2008; Payne, 2005). They reflect Western liberal values, being ‘an ethic of personal service rooted in recognition of the value, uniqueness and intrinsic worth of every individual who must be respected’ (Whittington and Whittington, 2007: 89). Hence, our analysis will begin with the principle of respect for persons. Also, particular reference will be made to Biestek’s influential account of these traditional values.

Despite its fundamental status, interpretation of respect for persons is controversial. First, should all human beings be regarded as persons? On one view, persons are beings possessing a capacity for practical rationality and self-determination. Hence, those lacking these characteristics may not qualify as persons: infants being classified as potential persons and individuals with dementia as lapsed persons (Downie and Telfer, 1980). Many, though, favour a more inclusive definition of personhood which embraces a wider range of characteristics, including abilities to communicate, experience emotions and express affection. Moreover, possessing just some of these typical features may be considered sufficient to be counted as a person.

Let us assume, therefore, that all humans are persons. What, then, constitutes respect? Sometimes, respect means to admire or hold in high esteem: an individual merits this kind of respect because they possess a valued characteristic, such as honesty, to a high degree. But respect for persons is rather different, as this form of respect must be shown to all persons, no matter their individual characteristics. It is a universal form of respect that applies to both the caring, responsible citizen and the sadistic, violent offender. Generally, respect for persons requires one to see the world from the other person’s point of view; take account of their beliefs; consider their needs; and assist them, where appropriate, to achieve their aims. It means not exploiting the individual, not using them solely for one’s own purposes.

Next, individualisation requires the individual be treated ‘not just as a human being but as this human being’ (Biestek, 1961: 25). The person’s unique qualities must be recognised. Moreover, in order to provide an individualised service, the social worker must be considerate, listen to the individual’s own story, enter into their feelings and move at their pace. This links to two other principles: allowing ‘purposeful expression of feelings’ means the service user may share experiences freely, while the social worker’s ‘controlled emotional involvement’ requires sensitivity to the person’s feelings and an appropriate response to them.

In addition, acceptance means the individual being valued as a person and dealt with as they are, with both strengths and weaknesses. The social worker, ‘while seeing the client’s negatives realistically, maintains an equally real respect for them’ (Biestek, 1961: 70–1). Closely linked, the non-judgemental attitude suggests that ‘assigning guilt or innocence, or degree of client responsibility for causation of the problems . . .’ should be excluded from social work (Biestek, 1961: 90). Assessment should focus on need, not ‘deservingness’. Aid, not punishment, should be the objective of social work. So, social workers should realise that judgements of the person – for example, ‘they are a lifelong spendthrift’ – are irrelevant, merciless and hazardous. Even so, moral judgments of the service user’s attitudes and actions are permissible.

Next, the principle of self-determination supports the right of service users 'to freedom in making their own choices and decisions' (Biestek, 1961: 103). This requires activating potential for self-direction and providing guidance about resources. Nevertheless, self-determination must sometimes be curtailed to protect vulnerable others – for example, where children are at serious risk, parents' rights may be removed. Second, limits may be placed on self-determination because of deficiencies in the individual's own 'capacity for positive and constructive decision-making' (Biestek, 1961: 103). Some may lack the ability to assess risks, so the social worker may need to be directive and act paternalistically to prevent the service user making choices that would harm them. For Biestek, then, self-determination is the capacity to make rational, informed and morally grounded decisions.

The principle of confidentiality requires responsible care of information relating to service users (Prince, 2000). However, a number of people within the social work agency, or who form part of a multiprofessional, integrated service, may require access to this information on a 'need-to-know' basis. Thus, there is 'a circle of confidentiality' encompassing those with whom the service user's personal information may be shared without there being any breach of confidentiality (Brown et al., 1992). The service user should, though, know who is included in this circle. Also, grounds for exceptional disclosure – revealing confidential information to a third party without the service user's permission – require explanation. Confidentiality, then, relates specifically to information, but should be recognised as part of a wider right to privacy that has both physical/spatial and informational aspects.

These, then, are some traditional social work values. In emphasising the rights of the individual, they mirror values widely held in British society. So, why have they been criticised and are these criticisms warranted?

One criticism of traditional values is that they are said to be so 'generalised' that they fail to provide adequate practical guidance (Hugman and Smith, 1995: 10). However, values and principles are inevitably broad and open to interpretation. Often, they may not indicate precisely what is to be done in particular circumstances, but they identify crucial ethical considerations and can be supplemented by specific rules. Second, it is said that these principles often conflict with one another – for example, respecting service user self-determination and guaranteeing other people's safety may clash. However, advocates of traditional values do recognise these conflicts between principles and the resulting need to weigh up competing ethical considerations – for example, Biestek stresses that the social worker's duty to respect the service user's rights is 'accompanied by the duty to respect the rights of others' (1961: 109–10).

It is more difficult, though, to counter a third criticism – that is, that traditional values focus almost exclusively on the relationship between the social worker and service user. Furthermore, advocates of traditional values often assume that social workers should simply help service users to adjust to the existing social environment and they fail to analyse fully the social injustices affecting people's lives. In short, this criticism – that insufficient consideration is given to ethical issues concerning social inequality and injustice – seems more telling. Indeed, the two sets of values seem to differ most sharply in their views of society and individual identity.

## (B) MODERN, EMANCIPATORY SOCIAL WORK VALUES

The development of modern social work values can be traced to the 1970s and reflects ongoing changes in Western societies. Beliefs advanced by various social movements – feminism, anti-racism, gay liberation, the disability rights movement, etc. – have had a notable influence. Service users' problems are now often seen as originating from social inequalities and disadvantages, rather than arising primarily from purely 'individual' characteristics. Social factors – gender, age, ethnicity, social **class**, etc. – are regarded as central to individual identity and life chances.

### Exercise

You should think about how social workers work with people who have committed violent or sexual offences – for example, some of the people you will have read about or seen on television news programmes. To what extent can they apply traditional values to their work and how might emancipatory values be applied?

In particular, discrimination is highlighted as a factor contributing significantly to people's problems, 'discrimination' being unfair and 'unequal treatment of an individual or group of persons on the basis of features such as **race**, age, sexual orientation, gender, religion or disability' (Gaine, 2010: 123). Moreover, such discrimination forms part of a broader experience of **systematic** oppression – that is, 'Inhuman or degrading treatment of individuals or groups; hardship or injustice brought about by the dominance of one group over another; the negative and demeaning use of **power**' (Thompson and Thompson, 2008: 198).

On this view, certain groups dominate, often disregard the rights of other groups and deny members of these groups' full citizenship. These other groups, such as women and people with disabilities, are relatively powerless. Their members are subordinated, often denied a voice, and consequently may have lower self-esteem. Service users' problems are, in part, the consequence of oppressive forces, and social work interventions need to tackle this oppression through anti-discriminatory and anti-oppressive practice, and an understanding and application of relevant legislation. Both concepts will be defined and discussed in greater detail later in the chapter.

These modern values are emancipatory in that their objective is to free people from oppression and a key objective is **empowerment**. Obviously, an individual might be empowered within a group – for example, a teenager's views being accorded more respect within a family or an individual gaining increased choice with regard to services offered. These are examples of self-empowerment, but arguably full empowerment requires action at the group and community level, not just in relation to individuals.

Certainly, a radical approach involves ‘mainstreaming the concerns of marginalised or dispossessed groups’ (Dominelli, 2002: 117). It requires collective empowerment, support for groups to realise their own power and act for themselves. This might, for instance, mean enabling groups of people with learning disabilities to speak out about abuse, influence social policies affecting their lives and gain enhanced opportunities for independent living arrangements for group members.

Clearly, empowerment is linked to advocacy, participation and partnership. Participation in policy formation and decision-making concerning service provision increases the influence of previously disempowered people. More generally, working in partnership is important – professionals and service users working collaboratively to identify problems and decide how to tackle them. This implies that social work is a shared process, ‘a collective endeavour with people, rather than something we do to them or for them’ (Thompson and Thompson, 2008: 199).

Nevertheless, advocacy may be needed to ensure that people’s views are considered. Advocacy means representing people’s interests by ensuring that their voice is heard. It involves an individual, a group or their representative ‘pressing their case with influential others, about situations which either affect them directly or . . . trying to prevent proposed changes which will leave them worse off’ (Brandon, 1995: 1). Here, there is a timely reminder that policy changes – particularly in an economic recession – are likely to impact most severely on vulnerable people who may be especially reliant on publicly funded services.

## SOCIAL JUSTICE, EQUALITY AND DIVERSITY

Emancipatory values, then, are ‘anti-oppressive’. As the International Federation of Social Workers proclaims, social workers have a responsibility to ‘challenge social conditions that contribute to social exclusion, stigmatisation or subjugation, and to work towards an inclusive society’ (IFSW, 2004: Principle 4.2.5). This brings social justice – along with equality, human rights and diversity – very much into the picture (Clifford and Burke, 2009: 124–5). But what is social justice?

Justice has two aspects. First, legal/criminal justice is concerned primarily with punishment and its justification, and there are issues here for social work consideration. Is, for example, harsh sentencing as a deterrence to others a morally legitimate objective of punishment? Should social workers favour rehabilitative, reparative and community-based punishments?

Second, there is social justice – the core of the broader ethical aspirations of social work (Clark, 2000). One view of social justice relates it to the distribution of benefits and burdens throughout society. Such burdens include taxes, while benefits relate to ‘wages, profits, housing, medical care, welfare benefits and so forth’ (Heywood, 2004: 294). Social justice is, therefore, about the ethics of resource allocation and the proper distribution of wealth in a broad sense (Johns, 2017: 35). Hence, it is also often called distributive justice as it is concerned with who should get what. Some argue that this should be decided on the basis of merit; others identify need as the relevant criterion.

Social justice with regard to need may sometimes requires equality of outcome – for example, nutritional needs being met by ensuring everyone has a diet containing required nutrients. Obviously, though, this would not mean providing the same diet for everyone; some will have special dietary requirements, so resources may have to be distributed unequally to ensure equality of outcome.

Advocates of a merit-based conception of social justice may be more concerned with equality of opportunity rather than seeking equality of outcome. Such meritarians may argue, for example, that individuals should receive rewards ('benefits' in a broad sense) that match their individual contributions to society. So, it may be claimed, levels of pay for different occupations should vary in accordance with these considerations. While huge pay gaps seem highly questionable, most people regard some income differences relating to types of work as fair in view of the significant differences in required expertise, effort, etc. For example, doctors being paid somewhat more than road-sweepers seems acceptable. However, fairness in terms of equality of opportunity may be crucial here: a level playing field – with everyone having an equal chance to gain qualifications and compete in the job market – may be considered essential. This requires fair procedures for selecting people for educational places, appointment to posts, etc. But such procedures will not be enough to secure equal opportunity if the playing field remains significantly uneven in other ways. Basically, while some have a far better start in life than others (in terms of education, family support, etc.), social disadvantage makes such equality of opportunity a distant prospect.

In addition, equality of access to services as a means of ensuring justice in the distribution of social work and other resources is vital. Hence, an understanding of the factors that impede access to services is needed. Such barriers range from the stigma attached to certain services to the location of social work offices, and taking measures to remove them is one important way that social workers can promote social justice. Indeed, as the British Association of Social Workers 'Code of Ethics for Social Work' emphasises, social workers 'should ensure that resources at their disposal are distributed fairly, according to need' (BASW, 2021: 9). But if social work is to be guided by a needs-based conception of social justice, the concept of 'basic human needs' requires some critical consideration.

Meeting basic human needs involves providing services to meet psychological and social, as well as material, needs. But should all of them be classified as basic human needs? If so, should they all be met as a matter of social justice, rather than, say, as an expression of collective charity? What if needs appear to be self-inflicted? Finally, what procedures are required to ensure fair assessment of needs by social workers?

Furthermore, in allocating scarce social work resources, should factors other than social justice be considered? Some refer to a duty of realism (Beckett et al., 2017) or suggest that utilitarian considerations require us to maximise the effectiveness of our use of scarce resources. This might imply directing resources to where they produce the greatest benefit – that is, the maximum effect, rather than always giving priority to those with the greatest needs.

## Exercise

How would you respond to a service user who insisted that a computer is now a basic need as so many claims now have to be made online? Has COVID-19 impacted your thinking on the provision of such resources?

So far, we have outlined ‘a distributive model’ of social justice that focuses particularly on allocation of resources. Nevertheless, the concept of oppression strongly suggests that injustice does not arise solely from unfair allocation of benefits and burdens. It also stems from powerlessness; exclusion from decision-making; experience of violence and harassment; and being stigmatised and treated as of lesser worth. Many believe that social work can address the full range of these matters best by adopting a human-rights conception of social justice. Certainly, human rights as outlined in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights include important social and economic rights (relating to education, employment, standard of living, etc.), as well as political and civil rights (relating to liberty, political participation, etc.).

In addition, we must consider the idea of ‘human diversity’, human differences ‘with social significance, diversity that makes real differences to people’s lives’ (Gaine and Gaylard, 2010: 2). Differences are of concern when they lead to unfair discrimination – for example, being treated unfavourably at a job interview on the basis of a ‘protected characteristic’ – such as race, age, religion or sexual orientation – not relevant to the post. Concern with diversity also means adopting a positive attitude to most human differences relating to beliefs and behaviour. So, it is not a matter of just putting up with, or refraining from interfering in, other people’s lives. Rather, valuing diversity means celebrating human diversity: welcoming, respecting and supporting the cultural differences between social groups.

This, though, raises the issue of ‘multiculturalism’, broadly viewed as the positive endorsement of communal diversity with respect to racial, **ethnic**, religious, linguistic, and other differences (Heywood, 2004). This may require recognition of multicultural or minority group rights to engage in certain practices – for example, maintaining faith schools, undertaking rituals concerning food preparation, language preservation or wearing symbols of religious commitment. Optimistically, Heywood suggests that ‘multiculturalism brings the benefits of diversity: a vibrancy and richness that stems from cultural interplay and encourages tolerance and respect for other cultures . . .’ (Heywood, 2004: 215).

There are, though, criticisms of multiculturalism. Some argue that to have a stable, well-ordered society, we must see ourselves as citizens, sharing common values, having an allegiance to the one state and a feeling of membership in the wider society



(not just our own cultural group). The claim is that by encouraging cultural diversity we encourage dual allegiances and political divisions, leading to social segregation and generating intergroup conflict. Furthermore, multiculturalism is said to remove incentives for 'assimilation' into the 'host culture'.

There are other issues, too. Some cultural groups may promote beliefs relating to family, gender roles or sexual orientation that deny opportunities and freedom to some of their members. In such cases, should social workers maintain their commitment to emancipatory goals of self-empowerment and equality, or accept that strongly held beliefs of minority groups must be respected and left unchallenged?

### Critical Thinking

Consider your own values and beliefs. How easy do you find it to tolerate or accept people who hold opposing views or behave differently? How realistic is it to work towards social justice and freedom from oppression?

Obviously, there are difficult issues relating to the application of emancipatory values. These objectives seem to require social workers to take on a political role in pressing for social justice, but should politics be kept separate from professional practice? Social work has always displayed some concern with social reform and, given the social element in social work, a refusal to engage with issues concerning social justice and oppression would simply be an abdication of professional responsibility. This brings us to the important topic of professional accountability.

## ETHICAL CODES AND ACCOUNTABILITY

What is professional accountability? The issue raised above indicates that the social work profession as a whole may be held **accountable** for its acts or omissions. Such collective accountability as a profession is of considerable importance, but the focus here will be on the accountability of the individual social worker.

Accountability relates to all the actions and decisions of professionals, but being called upon to account for one's actions is typically associated with problematic conduct and the apportioning of blame (Banks, 2004). To whom, though, is the individual social worker accountable? Accountability to the service user may be of prime importance, but the social worker has multiple and sometimes conflicting accountabilities (Kline and Preston-Shoot, 2012) – to regulatory bodies, employers, members of the public, etc. – which reflect the diverse character of social work. All these forms of accountability are important, but the professional accountability associated with codes of ethics or practice has now assumed particular significance.

Broadly, a professional code of ethics or practice is 'a written document produced by a professional association, occupational regulatory body or other professional body with

the stated aim of guiding the practitioners who are members, protecting service users and safeguarding the reputation of the profession' (Banks, 2004: 108). Social work in the UK is now governed by Codes of Practice and Standards of Conduct, relating to both social workers and other social service workers, introduced by the various councils set up in England, Wales, Northern Ireland and Scotland to regulate social services. (Another, complementary, code sets out the responsibilities of employers in the regulation of social service workers.)

Basically, these codes and standards specify standards of professional conduct and practice required of social service workers. Across different jurisdictions of the UK, the codes and standards have slight differences, but the following, from the Scottish Social Services Council (SSSC), is broadly representative. This code, revised in 2016, takes account of the SSSC's move to a fitness to practise model of professional regulation and defines responsibilities of social service workers in the first person. Presumably, the intention is to bring home to the individual social service worker that he or she must have a real, personal commitment to these standards:

The Code of Practice indicates that social workers must:

- protect and promote the rights and interests of people who use services and carers;
- create and maintain the trust and confidence of people who use services and carers;
- promote the independence of people who use services while protecting them, as far as possible, from danger and harm;
- respect the rights of people who use services, while striving to make sure that their behaviour does not harm themselves or other people;
- uphold public trust and confidence in social services;
- be accountable for the quality of their work and will take responsibility for maintaining and improving their knowledge and skills (SSSC, 2016).

With regard to each general requirement, the SSSC Code specifies particular obligations, although these too are sometimes fairly broad in character. For example, the social service worker must be 'truthful, open, honest and trustworthy' (SSSC, 2016, 2.1) and must not 'abuse, neglect or harm people who use services, carers or colleagues' (SSSC, 2016, 5.1).

Professional misconduct is conduct that falls short of the standard expected of someone registered with the Council, having regard to the requirements stipulated by the Code. Where a social service worker is found guilty of misconduct, the sanction imposed may range from admonishment to removal from the register. In short, this is the Code that has statutory force.

There is, though, also 'The Code of Ethics for Social Work' adopted by the British Association of Social Workers (BASW). BASW is a membership organisation representing the interests of social workers and its code has a longer history, being first produced in 1975, and then revised in 1986, 1996, 2002, 2012 and 2021.

The BASW Code of 2021 is more detailed than the SSSC Code of Practice and it states that its values are based on respect for the equality, worth and dignity of all people. Three central values and ethical principles are identified:



- Human rights
- Social justice
- Professional integrity.

In addition, the BASW Code highlights the need to treat people with compassion, empathy and care. It also enumerates 17 more detailed ethical practice principles. These principles relate to such matters as empowering people; challenging the abuse of human rights; acting with the informed consent of service users; maintaining confidentiality; assessing and managing risk; striving for objectivity and self-awareness in practice; and taking responsibility for continuing professional development.

A full analysis of the two codes cannot be attempted here, but some important matters need to be considered.

- The ‘Code of Practice’ is the basis of regulation of the profession in Scotland, specifying relevant standards regarding both guiding and disciplining members of the profession. So, does the BASW ‘Code of Ethics’ now serve any useful purpose?
- Is the ethical content of the codes significantly different? How strongly do traditional and emancipatory values feature? In addition, do both codes also incorporate a ‘governance stream of values’, reflecting government policies in recent times, and including ‘probity, efficiency, partnership, the importance of managing risk, the right to high quality, effective services, involvement of service users and accountability to stakeholders, who include taxpayers, government, and service users’ (Whittington and Whittington, 2007: 90)?
- Is there a danger that the existence of codes might induce ‘ethical torpor’ arising from ‘a sense that someone else has done the thinking so we don’t have to’ (Doel, 2016: 6)?
- Do the codes and standards assist social workers to resolve particular ethical problems and dilemmas they may face?

## ETHICAL DILEMMAS

The last two questions, concerning the usefulness of ethical codes, highlights the challenges for social workers in making ethically sound decisions in real-life situations. Such decision-making often must take account of the welfare and rights of many people, establishing which is most important. Sometimes it is clear which carries most weight: where there is reason to believe that parents are seriously harming their child, the child’s right to protection will be considered of greater importance than parental rights to privacy and self-determination.

However, when ethical considerations appear to be evenly balanced, an ethical dilemma may arise. Such a dilemma occurs when there are two (or more) possible courses of action, both (or all) of which have undesirable features. It requires ‘a choice in which any alternative results in an undesirable action’ (Rhodes, 1986: xii). It may be difficult to clearly identify a correct choice because of a conflict of ethical values (Banks, 2012) – that is, it is not clear which of the competing values/ethical principles should be accorded priority in the circumstances.

## Case Study

You are a hospital-based social worker and a patient with a life-threatening illness wishes to discharge herself. The doctor argues that more treatment will extend her life; the patient argues that she does not want to continue the suffering and indignity of the treatment. The doctor wants your support to persuade the patient to stay; the patient wants your support to return home. What might your response be?

It is worth noting that usually the alternative courses of action have both undesirable and desirable features, negative and positive aspects. Resolution of dilemmas typically involves weighing up very carefully the interests and rights of all those involved. Furthermore, decision-making may be made even more challenging because of uncertainty concerning the probable outcomes of the alternative courses of action. Some have argued that certain social work principles should always take priority over others (Reamer, 1995). It seems doubtful, though, whether it is possible to produce an overall ranking of ethical principles that will be generally accepted by social workers as being applicable to social work in all contexts.

Perhaps the best that can be done is to identify all the relevant ethical principles and consider the interests and rights of all involved. Consultation with colleagues – or perhaps more broadly ‘wise professionals’ (Doel, 2016: 8–9) – to try to reach a reflective and considered assessment will be especially important. It allows a sharing of experience and professional wisdom, as well as testing one’s own perceptions and provisional judgements against those of others.

## ANTI-DISCRIMINATORY AND ANTI-OPPRESSIVE PRACTICE

Strengthening your value-based orientation within social work practice needs understanding of the umbrella terms of ‘anti-discriminatory practice’ (ADP) and ‘anti-oppressive practice’ (AOP), which in turn should direct you towards the fundamentals of understanding discrimination – for example, race, religion and age – to highlight a few that can lead to the oppression of individuals and groups within society as introduced above. Before exploring the ability to apply the ADP and AOP orientation to counter discrimination and oppression in practice, we need to consider what constitutes both at a personal, professional, group and structural level.

### For reflection

Given what you know so far, have you personally or through association been discriminated against and in what way? Note your thoughts and feelings around this to revisit after further reading.

Encouragement is given to find your own examples of these before you read further that will help you to explore and understand the following content.

The Equality Act 2010 legally protects people from discrimination in the workplace and in wider society. It replaced previous anti-discrimination laws with a single Act, making the law easier to understand and strengthening protection in some situations (Government Equality Office, 2015). It encapsulates the following eight protected characteristics:

- age;
- disability;
- gender reassignment;
- marriage and civil partnership;
- pregnancy and maternity;
- race;
- religion or belief;
- sex.

The full Act and guidance can be accessed at: [www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance](http://www.gov.uk/guidance/equality-act-2010-guidance)  
To define anti-discriminatory practice and anti-oppressive practice, we turn to Neil Thomson:

There are four types of discrimination that you need to be aware of when working with individuals, groups and society:

**Direct** discrimination is treating someone less favourably than others in association with a protected characteristic.

**Indirect** discrimination is about putting rules or regulations in place that apply to all, but would put someone with a protected characteristic at an unfair advantage.

**Victimisation** is treating someone unfairly because they have complained about discrimination or harassment.

**Harassment** is unwanted behaviour linked to a protected characteristic that violates someone's dignity or creates an offensive environment for them.

Anti-oppressive practice as a means to achieve social justice has increasing relevance when you take into consideration and understand your own moral compass and values, ethical theory and human rights concepts, as well as being able to identify the risks to **self** or others while working within the systems. You will engage with people and balance the many ethical dilemmas you will come across. It will give you a framework to embed this into your daily practice.

## UNDERSTANDING INEQUALITIES AND 'PROTECTED CHARACTERISTICS'

Understanding inequalities and discrimination that lead to oppression enables those who take up the social work role to act against forms of discrimination such as sexual orientation, disability or gender differences and challenge them in daily activity, highlighting

and breaking down barriers that lead to oppression at societal level. As previously mentioned above, this is not an easy task for the worker as it takes a degree of knowledge, skill and understanding of the consequences of the Act itself and of the repercussions that picking up that mantle might have on the self, individual or group being discriminated against or oppressed. Add to this the increased understanding that oppression is structural and built into the fabric of the provision of services, we must be able to adapt quickly to our environments and learn to work within the structures to enable the best outcomes for those we work for and within practice.

One way of exploring this further is through Personal, Cultural and Structural (PCS) analysis.

## CULTURAL SENSITIVITY, AWARENESS AND DEVELOPING COMPETENCE

Several factors have affected freedom of expression and movement within the UK in the past few years, and certainly the political landscape and particularly the country's divorce from the European Union through Brexit has had an enormous influence on borders. This has evoked a significant collective uprising in groups who have been characteristically discriminated against and oppressed, giving rise to such movements as Black Lives Matter. This movement gathered momentum following the death of George Floyd on 25 May 2020 in Minneapolis, USA, when police forcibly removed him from his car (following a call from a grocery store accusing him of using a false \$20 note) and handcuffed him. He was murdered by Derek Chauvin, who was a white police officer, who pressed his knee on his neck for almost 10 minutes, while he was restrained and held face-down on the floor, joined by two other officers while subduing him; a fourth officer stopped anyone intervening. This ignited a collective positive voice that developed into a movement highlighting racial discrimination across the world of people of colour. We have also seen a rise in anti-LGBTQ+ groups and anti-Muslim groups because of developments whose origins, at least in part, lie in austerity and the exploitation of anti-immigration attitudes, all of which are a growing problem within the UK. This highlights a divided society, following increased neoliberal and austerity policies, which have also contributed to growing right-wing extremism and a concern with individualism. The implementation of more right-wing policies, including income support and immigration policy (Griffiths and Yeo, 2021), have led to greater human trafficking, undocumented migrants and displaced families due to global conflicts and precarity. The UK government has not had a robust humanitarian response in place to aid in this area (Weller et al., 2019) and often the support for these individuals and families falls to social workers (Jolly, 2017) or third-sector organisations. The UK government's increasingly hostile environment has also contributed to the undermining of migrants who are already settled (Slaven, 2022) and continues to discriminate and oppress. This is necessitating a forward movement towards developing a much stronger and wider cultural morality and sensitivity awareness, and poses questions around the development of cultural competence within social work students and the workforce. In this regard, a quote from BASW which identifies that 'Cultural

sensitivity is more than recognising differences in race or religion, it involves recognising that we are all shaped by our experiences and are influenced by cultural norms and understanding' (BASW, 2022).

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has explored the nature of ethics by considering some key ethical concepts, theories and work around anti-discrimination and anti-oppressive practice. It has examined different strands of social work values; analysed concepts of social justice, anti-oppressions, decolonisation and human diversity; highlighted the importance of ethical codes in professional accountability, and the contemporary challenges of practice and research. It is hoped, therefore, that this has enhanced your appreciation of the profession's anti-oppressive and anti-discriminatory commitment, as well as the ethical dimension of social work practice. No doubt the discussion will sometimes have proved challenging, but remember that – in the wise words of Professor Eric Matthews – 'Ethics is hard'. So, this chapter will have served its purpose if it has made things a little easier by increasing your understanding of social work values, commitments and sensitivity to ethical considerations. If successful in these respects, it should also help you to grapple in future with the many real-life professional issues that arise in day-to-day practice as a social worker.

### Reflective Questions

1. Social work has operated on two main approaches to values and ethics: traditional and emancipatory. First, define what each of them means and then, second, reflect on how they differ from each other in terms of how they may influence social work practice generally.
2. Elsewhere in this book the importance of how you understand yourself in relation to practice and to service users is highlighted. An important element of the **use of self** is being aware of your own ethical values. What would you say your ethical values are? Try to outline what they are and reflect on how they may have influenced you in choosing social work as a career.
3. Following on from the above question, how do you think your personal ethical values will influence your practice? Do you think your ethical values are closest to the traditional or emancipatory approaches?

Please give around 50 minutes for the following interview of Dr Jermaine Ravalier (Bath Spa University) and Diana Katoto (social work student) on 'Ordinary Black people doing extraordinary things' at:

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgkKJ9o0uMs&feature=youtu.be](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XgkKJ9o0uMs&feature=youtu.be)

## RECOMMENDED READING

These books all provide useful introductions to social work ethics, anti-discriminatory practice and anti-oppressive practice.

- Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work* (4th edn). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Beckett, C., Maynard, A. and Jordan, P. (2017) *Values and Ethics in Social Work* (3rd edn). London: Sage.
- Doel, M. (2016) *Rights and Wrongs in Social Work: Ethical and Practice Dilemmas*. London: Palgrave.
- Parrott, L. (2014) *Values and Ethics in Social Work Practice* (3rd edn). Exeter: Learning Matters.
- Tedam, P. (2021) *Anti-Oppressive Practice: Transforming Social Work Practice*. London: Learning Matters.
- Thompson, N. (2020) *Anti-discriminatory Practice: Equality, Diversity and Social Justice* (3rd edn). London: Palgrave Macmillan.

The following provide the knowledge base on anti-discriminatory practice and anti-oppressive practice:

[www.ohchr.org/en/ohchr\\_homepage](http://www.ohchr.org/en/ohchr_homepage). Several other languages can be included as PDFs.  
[BeirutDeclarationonFaithforRights.pdf](#) (ohchr.org). This is also available in several languages.  
Anti-racist practice: [nqsw.sssc.uk.com](http://nqsw.sssc.uk.com)