

International and National Professional Social Work Codes of Practice: Australia & Policy & Practice w/Older People

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Abstract

This paper explores the relationship between the IFSW code of ethics and the Australian Association of Social Workers code of ethics. It begins by conceptualising the notion of “ethics” before interrogating the respective standpoints, differences, and commonalities of IFSW and AASW. The paper not only highlights the problems of social work ethics in national and international contexts, but also raises serious questions relating to the impact on service users. In particular, there are implications for the quality of social care for older people despite the rigidity of codes of ethics. The paper ends by examining the important differences between international and national social work codes of ethics and implications for older people as service users.

Key Words: Ethics; IFSW; AASW; Older People; Australia

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to examine the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW) code of ethics, which will also be compared with Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) code. The paper explores the experiences of older people by assessing factors such as embedded ageist attitudes of both the State and helping professions that may hinder codes of practice being realized. The article will raise three questions about the ethics and values underpinning professional practice. The first section of the article conceptualises ethics and moves to outline the aims and objectives of both national and international codes of ethical practice. The second section considers some of the implications of professional practice in incorporating these codes and values given the critical context that service users may have experiences that do not relate to these codes. In this case, the example draws on the service group of older people and social work. It is not suggested that there is an absence of good practice in social work for older people in Australia but to reveal the problems attached to such international and national issues on codes of practice.

Definition of ethics

Ethics involve or encompass norms that are deemed to be universally beneficial to all. They tend to set a standard by which all action can be judged. At an individual level, ethics are value systems that enable individuals to apply a set of principles to their actions and to work out their obligations to others (Powell, 2006).

Although they determine codes of conduct, they appear to have an in-built system of flexibility that allows for shifting of goal posts to facilitate a resetting of boundaries at any given time. Representing an organisation's deeply held and enduring beliefs, an organisation's values openly declare how it expects everyone to behave and are often embedded in its vision.

If this is to be achieved, there are implications for both the government and the social work and allied professions to achieve this objective. It demands a level of commitment of resources from the state and the appropriate intervention from the professionals to acquire the knowledge and skills required to enable them to work effectively and efficiently in the interest of older people. The interest and enthusiasm shown in other areas of social work should be equal when addressing the needs of older people. With the competing demands from other service groups, the advocacy role is key to this process. Ageist beliefs and practice must be eradicated from all systems, and practitioners must engage in efficiency, in assessment and provision of need, research, and policy development, to ensure that long term goals are set and achieved.

In the context of an increasing ageing population and decreasing numbers in the younger age groups, there is an urgent need for strategic planning and the development of social policies to provide for these changes. The question we are dealing with, therefore, is how does social work training and practice respond to older people in the light of their code of ethics? What value base dominates in this field? How far into the future does their range of vision go?

Codes of Ethics

The next section addresses the policy principles that lie at the heart of IFSW and AASW.

International Federation of Social Workers

The International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) is a global organisation striving for social justice, human rights, and social development. The principles of human rights and social justice are the building blocks of social work. The IFSW has as its mission to enable all people to enrich their lives and to prevent dysfunction.

IFSW describes social workers as agents of change in society and in the lives of individuals, families, or communities that they serve. It sees social work as “an interrelated system of values, theory and practice.” The values underpinning practice, stem from “humanitarian” and “democratic ideals” and therefore encompass respect for the equality, worth, and dignity of all people. Meeting basic human needs and developing human potential are central to the activity of social workers. The profession is highly motivated in its aim to confront poverty and liberate and empower oppressed/vulnerable people. The social work profession has progressed and developed immensely since its inception more than 100 years ago.

The organisational agenda has had to embrace a wide range of issues to keep up with the societal and structural family changes of the postindustrial/postmodern world. The stakeholders involved in the care of aged communities include formal and informal care networks, statutory organisations, profit-making, and not-for-profit organisations. The role of the social worker has also had to adjust in order to address the new challenges that are constantly emerging in the field of social welfare. The golden image of “good listener” has had to make way for the care manager whose role is to assess and purchase services from a wide range of providers (Phillipson, 1998). Reflexive juggling acts may be central to the platform of increasing demands amidst reducing resources. Political correctness and idealistic policy statements also have a bearing on the world in which social work is practiced. Through all these changes, it is reassuring, however, to note that the basic values and principles integral to the social work profession remain unchanged. This may result in IFSW presenting greater challenges and demands on the individual practitioner, but it also provides good guidance and support for practice.

The key concepts that should be evidenced in the commitment are the requirement to meet basic human need whilst acknowledging the individual’s self-worth. Respect for the individual is implicit in this. There remains an expectation to acknowledge “human potential.” All individuals, whatever their age, health, and personal circumstances, have potential! It is therefore incumbent on the social worker to be mindful of this and, in assessing and addressing needs, to ensure that the individual’s full potential is realised in the care planning and provision process. There is an expectation that those who are in contact with the profession have a right to human dignity. Therefore, in an ever-changing world of social care, the common denominator (i.e., the building blocks of social care) remains unchanged—human dignity, individual self-worth, and anti-

oppressive practice. The inevitable result, therefore, should be an enhancement of the life experiences of all those who are in need of care (Phillipson, 1998).

The Australian Association of Social Workers

The AASW is the professional representative body of social workers in Australia. It was formed in 1946 at the federal level, although a number of state branches had formed prior to this. It has a code of ethics that contains a set of principles agreed to by all members. These principles guide all social work practice.

AASW claims that social work is committed to five basic values:

- *Human dignity
- *Social justice
- *Service to humanity
- *Integrity
- *Competence (AASW Code of Ethics 1999, p. 8)

The principles involved require practitioners to respect the inherent dignity and worth of every person; respect basic human rights of individuals or groups as expressed in the United Nations Universal Declaration of Human Rights; foster individual well-being, autonomy, and personal/social responsibility; and recognise and respect group identity and interdependence and the collective needs of particular communities (AASW Code of Ethics, 1999, p. 8). 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 workers intervene at the points at which people interact with their environments. Principles of human rights and social justice are fundamental to social work.

The code stresses the importance of working in the best interest of the client and of keeping each client's affairs confidential, except when there is over-riding legal, moral, or ethical reasons (AASW, 1999, p. 15).

The AASW Code of Ethics confirms the profession's commitment to human well-being. As social work operates at the interface between the individuals and their environment, it has to engage on several different planes to do this:

- Personal difficulties of vulnerable adults and children
- Public issues
- Social policy development
- Social justice
- Research/training /education

So, the AASW serves as a governing body that sets standards and provides guidance to professionals with the stated objective of achieving positive outcomes for the recipients of their care. It defines its objectives as:

- promoting the social work profession
- establishing, monitoring and improving standards of practice
- contributing to the development of social work knowledge and research
- actively supporting social structures and policies in their pursuit of social justice (AASW, 1999)

The aim of practice standards is to provide a guide to practice and achieve standardisation of practice throughout Australia. It is fair, therefore, to expect that with provision from the State, a good standard of education and training and ongoing support from organisations such as AASW, social workers are well-equipped to serve those in need of their care and help and provide a quality service that is fair and equal for all (AASW, 1999).

User Led Implications

Whilst this is an idealistic narrative, there are several implications for service users such as older people, despite these policy and ethical statements. Indeed, it is evident that Australia, like the rest of the world, is facing a growing older population. The proportion of the population aged 85 years and older will increase from 1.5% as of June 2002 to between 6% and 9% by 2051. This age group will experience the highest growth rate of all age groups. Women in Australia tend to live longer than men. Consequently, women make up a greater proportion of Australians (65%), and their predominance increases with age. In 2001, the proportion of women in the 65-74, 75-84, and 85 and over age categories were 52%, 58%, and 69%, respectively (Powell, 2006). In 2004, the number of older persons aged 65 years or older in Australia was estimated to be 2.6 million, or around 13% of the total population (ABS, 2005). The proportion of older people in the population is projected to increase over time to 26% in 2051, and to 27% in 2101 (Series B) or to 28% and 31% respectively (Series C) (Australian Institute of Health and Welfare, Nov. 2007, National Report).

Longevity itself, however, often is accompanied with complex health and social care needs. State policy statements are often more specific about the principles of practice than they are about the commitment of resources to achieve those high standards of care. The social work profession is based on core humanitarian values that lend themselves to principles in the policy statements,

but they can be compromised by the pressures created by the shifting of goal posts to suit budgetary constraints/restraints.

A key question is: how does every day social work practice reconcile the current service outcomes with the IFSW's five principles whilst acknowledging the plight of older people referred to above?

The social work profession aspires to high standards of practice with the specific intention of safeguarding the welfare and well-being of all citizens. By its very nature, social work is categorised as a “caring profession” with certain principles and values integral to its practice. The inevitable outcome of social work intervention, therefore, should guarantee sensitivity and quality care toward the recipient and integrity and competence on the part of the professional.

At the macro level, the community's needs are assessed and planned for in the social, political, and economic context in which they emerge. These factors will ultimately determine the level of commitment that will be made in response to them. The social policies are developed to guide the service planning and the provision of resources to meet needs and provide care in the community to those who require it.

From policy to provision, service planning and design must enable the organisation to operationalize strategies that enable it to meet objectives that enhance the quality of life for those whom it serves. Recognition of the potential contribution of older people to define need, and guide service development, would ensure that the provision made is appropriate and suitable for the community for whom it is intended.

At the individual practitioner/manager (micro) level, the professionals are expected to implement those policies and deliver a standard of care that reflects the principles and values outlined by the IFSW. As “agents of change,” there is an expectation for them to prevent, not promote, dysfunction. Human dignity and social justice are key objectives that they must achieve for the service user/client. The process that they engage in should enable the individual to participate in the assessment of need and exercise some choice in the services that are provided to meet that need. The assessment should be a consultative process. Respect and dignity are essential to practice. The outcome for the recipient should be a high standard of care /social justice and for the professional, “competence.”

The alarming picture painted in the earlier sections of this paper, however, portrays growing communities with increasing levels of need and state provision in Australia. At best, it lacks the required level of commitment and, at worst, lacks any required sense of responsibility.

The inevitable consequence, therefore, for older people is a life experience that reflects injustice instead of social justice, and abuse instead of care. For the organisations, incompetence rather than competence is prevalent in practice and service delivery.

In those circumstances, it would appear that “the agent of change” is caught up in a web of confusion arising out of the conflicting priorities of the service user and the agency. The increasing level of need that accompanies advancement in age competes with the increasing demands of the limited agency resources. The political, socio-economic, and ethical framework within which social work exists may, to some extent, explain the problems encountered when one attempts to address the issues raised earlier. The agent of change concept may have a greater emphasis on agent than on change. Many old people are informal providers of care for older and frailer people. Provision of care often occurs at a cost to the informal care provider whether young or old. Sometimes that pressure can account for the abuse. The level of need is becoming more complex in this group. There is acknowledgement of this phenomenon by politicians, managers of care, and professionals in the allied care professions. This, tragically, is not accompanied by the commitment of resources to provide a basic standard of care for those who need it. There are, therefore, unintended consequences of codes of ethics as there is ample evidence of “unmet need” and indeed abuse experienced by this vulnerable group of people:

...the place of aged care in social work has long been ambiguous. Social work (as do other comparable professions) often displays a reluctance to place practice in this field within the core of the profession that embodies aspects of ageism in contemporary society. Working with older people is frequently characterised as “mundane,” “routine,” and not real social work. He concludes that unless social work affirms practice with older people and their families, we will fail to be congruent with our own values. (Hugman, 2000, p. 3)

Alongside this, professional practice is becoming more critical in its analysis of social problems and more sophisticated in its intellectualisation of improving professional practice. In my view, the principles outlined by the IFSW mirror many policy documents of good intent issued by the Inspectorate and various governing bodies overseeing/monitoring the quality of care for older people internationally.

Hugman (2000) suggests that this is equally true of Australia. Practitioners and academics have been slow to conceptualise and implement practice that fits social work objectives. Hugman (2000, p. 5) suggests three major roles in aged care social work:

- The management of access to supportive services,

- Coordination and development of services, and
- Provision of supportive care to informal carers.

Hence, there is, however, a gap between the intention to provide and the actual financing and support of the service.

Conclusion

The social work profession has been in existence for more than a century and has shaped and reshaped itself to address the postmodern era. In addition to the agency codes of practice, Australia has an affiliation to the IFSW and has adapted its “Ethics and Values” principles to encompass those of the IFSW. There is also a great deal of evidence to suggest that older people are faced with a poor quality of life, lacking not only the resources, but courtesy and care in their dealings with health and welfare organisations. It is evident that Australia has an increasing ageing population. There is a clear recognition of the health and welfare needs that manifest themselves in later life. There are well developed social policies that, potentially, have scope for a high standard of care for all. However, the monetary commitment by the state is questionable. In addition to this, the ageist practice ingrained in our institutions has to be eradicated.

The question that arises, therefore, is: *how do we bridge the gap between professional codes of practice in the interest of older Australians?*

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