

The Virtuous Social Work Researcher

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Abstract

Social workers can learn how to *conduct research in an ethical manner* or they can learn how to *be ethical in their roles as researchers*. This article explains the differences between these approaches and articulates what it means to be a virtuous social work researcher.

Key Words: research ethics, virtues, ethics of care, researcher traits

1.0 Introduction

Most social work research textbooks include at least one chapter on research ethics (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005; Rubin & Babbie, 2008). Typically, these educational materials teach students how to apply the relevant legal rules, ethical principles, and standards of practice in research situations. For instance, students learn how to apply the federal guidelines under the Common Rule (2005) for research involving human subjects. They also learn how to apply the principles and standards from the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) concerning informed consent, confidentiality, integrity, and protecting the rights and wellbeing of vulnerable research participants (Standards, 1.03, 1.07; 5.01, and 5.02). Without explicitly stating the ethical theories behind these approaches, these textbooks are incorporating deontology (the study of ethical duties) and teleology (the study of behaviors and their ethical consequences). Unfortunately, many research textbooks and courses ignore or play down the potential of a third approach, virtue ethics (Pring, 2001). Whereas deontology and teleology focus on ways of thinking and making rational choices about ethical behaviors, virtue ethics focuses on the development of good (or virtuous) character states

(Barsky, 2010; Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2009). Thus, virtuous researchers are investigators who are disposed to incorporating good values, morals, and ideals in all elements of their being (Murphy, 1999). They encapsulate virtue in their professional personae. They are not moral thinkers, but moral agents and beings. They are not simply motivated by social pressures to follow rules or the fear of punishment if they do not. Virtuous individuals act ethically because they are internally motivated to do so (Cohen & Cohen, 1999). This article proposes core virtues that define the virtuous social work researcher (SWR) and demonstrates how virtue ethics can be nurtured in the context of social work research. The virtues proposed in this article are intended to open a dialogue among SWRs regarding the virtues to which they aspire. They are not intended to be conclusive.

The following analysis begins with an overview of virtue ethics, clarifying ways in which this approach differs from a traditional approach to making ethical decisions through the rational application of rules, principles, and standards. The subsequent sections offer suggestions on the core traits of virtuous SWRs, including virtues that are common to all SWRs and others that depend on the type of research (e.g., quantitative, qualitative, or action research). The concluding section offers suggestions for teaching and nurturing virtues among social work researchers. The United States Army has a slogan, "Be all you can be." Perhaps a variant of this slogan could be used as a call to virtue among social worker researchers.

1.1 The Meaning and Import of Virtue

Aristotle, the ancient Greek philosopher, believed that all people share an ultimate human end or purpose. He suggested that a good or virtuous life

can be defined by how well each person fulfills his or her natural purpose (Cohen & Cohen, 1999; Knight, 2007). Eudemonia, living the good life, means incorporating virtue in all aspects of oneself: thinking, behaving, feeling, and being. Virtues are not simply rules or choices, but rather, enduring and transcending character traits (Boatright, 2006). Thus, a person who lives by the virtue of kindness should not only think kind thoughts, but also act kindly, emote kindness, and be kind in every dimension of his or her life.

For Aristotle, one of the overarching virtues is moderation, avoiding excesses (Parrott, 2006). Although one should not be too shy, one should also avoid being too shameless. Thus, one should be proud and self-confident, but not arrogant or brazen. Similarly, one should generally be relaxed rather than irritable, but not overly calm or blasé. A person who is overly relaxed may not be inspired to confront a social injustice. A person who is overly irritated by social injustice may react inappropriately, perhaps with violence or other counterproductive responses. Virtue requires balance rather than being “holier than thou” or taking any quality to the extreme (Murphy, 1999)

Although traditional virtue ethicists such as Aristotle, Plato, Confucius, Mengzi, and the Stoics focused on universal virtues – virtues that pertain to all people – modern ethicists have begun to explore how virtue ethics applies to specific professional groups, including educators, psychotherapists and mental health professionals, business people, and the military (Cohen & Cohen, 1999; Walker & Ivanhoe, 2007). The virtues required for one professional context may differ from the virtues required for another. Thus, a core virtue for a court judge is neutrality and impartiality. A judge should not be relational, in the sense of uniting or partnering with one party or another during a court case. In contrast, relationality is a core virtue for social workers. In order to build trust, develop a therapeutic alliance, and work effectively with clients, social workers need to partner with their clients in a collaborative, caring manner (Cohen & Cohen, 1999). That is not to say that bias is a virtue for social workers, or caring is a vice for judges. Rather, each profession may have a different set of core virtues that fits for its role or context of practice (Walker & Ivanhoe, 2007). *Difference in core virtues* does not mean that each profession’s core virtues are opposites, just different. Further, *difference in core virtues* does not suggest that one profession’s virtues are better or worse than the others. In accordance with the principle of respect for the dignity and worth of all people (NASW, 2008), social workers should not impose negative

judgments on individuals or groups who aspire to different virtues.

One of the primary arguments in favor of using a virtues paradigm to instill ethics in researchers is that the existence of ethical rules, obligations, and standards is not sufficient to ensure ethical practice. The Common Rule and professional ethical standards define what types of conduct are appropriate and inappropriate. Mandatory ethics training requirements for researchers ensure that they are informed of their ethical responsibilities. Strict regulations provide for increased accountability, as institutional review boards oversee research proposals and researchers. Thus, researchers know they may be held to account for any ethical breaches arising out of their research. Sanctions for scientific misconduct may include public or private censures, firing, financial penalties, ineligibility for future grants or contracts, and civil lawsuits to compensate those who were hurt by the misconduct (Gibelman & Gelman, 2005). Historically, many of the laws and standards of practice for human subjects research were developed in response to incidents of horrendous research practice: for instance, the Nuremberg Code developed in 1948 was in response to the sadistic experiments conducted by Nazi scientists on Jews and other vulnerable populations, and the National Research Act of 1974 and Belmont Report of 1978 was initiated in response to the Tuskegee research in which African American participants were intentionally denied information and treatment for syphilis (Drewry, 2004). But was lack of legal and ethical guidelines truly the underlying cause of the Nazi and Tuskegee atrocities? Rather, was there something in the training, culture, or social context of the researchers that allowed them to conduct research in a knowingly harmful manner? Might it be more effective to build an educational system and culture that promotes the virtues of integrity, moral courage, compassion, and empathy among researchers who work with human subjects? If we could promote virtues as internal motivators for researchers, would we need to legislate every aspect of what makes research moral or ethical? “No set of principles (and thus no ethical code) can exhaustively shape the moral deliberation which inevitably researchers are caught in” (Pring, 2001, p. 412).

In spite of the development of national and international research laws and standards, scientific misconduct continues to be a problem. The most common forms of misconduct include fabricating the process and outcomes of the research, and failure to protect human participants by giving them incomplete or inaccurate information about the risks of the research (Gibelman & Gelman, 2005). One can

speculate on the motivations for such misconduct, including pressure from universities or other employers to produce and publish research. However, the issue does not seem to be related to the lack of clear research rules, moral obligations, or standards of practice on these issues. Perhaps it is time to provide more emphasis on nurturing virtues (Pring, 2001), supplementing the current focus on teaching how to apply ethical rules, principles, and standards.

1.2 Determining “Social Work Researcher” Virtues

A key challenge in applying virtue ethics is determining which character traits are of primary importance for social workers to flourish as researchers. To guide this process, it may be useful to consider three dimensions of SWR virtues: 1) What are the universal virtues for social workers¹, and what are their implications for social workers as researchers; 2) What additional virtues are imperative for social work in their roles as researchers; and 3) How might the virtues of SWRs depend on the type of research they are conducting?

2.0 Universal Social Work Values

Ideally, the conceptualization of a set of universal social work virtues should be derived from a dialogue between social workers, including social work ethicists. Although the profession of social work has not engaged in discussions of core virtues per se, the profession has engaged a broad range of social workers to develop consensus statements on the definition of social work (International Federation of Social Workers, 2000), and the mission, values, and guiding principles of social work (National Association of Social Workers, 2008).² In addition, various ethicists have begun to discern core virtues for social work (McBeath & Web, 2002), psychotherapy (Cohen & Cohen, 1999), psychiatry (Radden, 2007), medicine (Blustein, 2007; Pellegrino, 2007), and related professions (Walker & Ivanhoe, 2007). The following analysis draws from these sources in order to offer a set of core virtues that are vital to all social workers. These are intended to serve as a starting point for discussion, rather than a final statement on social work virtues.

The aforementioned definition, mission, values, and ethical principles (IFSW, 2000, NASW, 2008) suggest that social work is a profession that helps individuals, families, and groups meet their needs and maximize their potential, while also promoting human rights and social justice at community and societal levels. Although these pronouncements do not specifically mention virtues,³

they imply that three of the most vital character traits of social workers are the virtues of *caring*, *generosity of spirit*, and *concern for others*.

Caring social workers are ones who attend to the needs of others. Caring exists in the context of relationships and it motivates people to help (Noddings, 2007). Thus, caring social workers strive to understand the needs and perspectives of those they serve, in order to respond in a client-centered manner (Banks, 2006; Vonk, 2000). Caring social workers are particularly sensitive to the vulnerabilities of populations that are affected by social stresses such as poverty, discrimination, and oppression. They do not simply respond to clients or others in a rational, technical manner (Parrott, 2006). They are aware of their emotional responses toward others and they factor in those emotional responses when making ethical choices (Gilligan, 1982). Social workers have a generosity of spirit in the sense that they prioritize service to others. In some instances, caring social workers subjugate their personal interests in order to advance the needs and interests of those they serve. For SWRs, these virtues have many implications:

- When *caring* SWRs make choices about what research interests to pursue, they do so with regard to the wellbeing of others. They may ask, “What types of research promote social justice, human growth, and social development?” rather than, “What types of research will advance my career or make me look good to others?” As altruists, they may take on research interests that are politically unpopular or pay poorly in order to give voice to those who have been disempowered or oppressed. Caring SWRs do not treat research participants as objects or means to an end, but as human beings worthy of dignity and respect (Pring, 2001). Caring SWRs avoid research that would cause harm, even to a small minority. At the same time, caring SWRs understand that it is important to include vulnerable and disadvantaged populations in their research agendas, so that these populations can benefit from research (Antle & Reghehr, 2003).
- SWRs who embrace *generosity of spirit* adopt a humble approach toward the study of biopsychosocial-spiritual phenomena. Rather than assuming that the researcher possesses all the important knowledge and expertise, generous SWRs work with clients and other stakeholders, viewing them as partners or sources of expertise and guidance. They empower others and promote social inclusion because it is the right way for SWRs to relate with others, not because it serves some other purpose.

- SWRs live the virtue of *concern for others* not simply by completing research ethics protocols and forms for informed consent established by their institutions. Virtuous SWRs ensure that research participants are not harmed by the research, even when it means going beyond what is required by the institution. If the research involves risks, concerned SWRs ensure that participants understand the risks and consent voluntarily. Concerned researchers empathize with the research participants (Murphy, 1999). In order to ensure voluntary participation, the SWRs offer participants more than one option. They understand that a participant who has only one option for services may feel pressured into accepting whatever the SWR is offering. SWRs resist self-interested temptations, such as persuading a client to accept certain risks merely because they feel pressure to solicit a sufficient sample size within a short timeframe.

Virtue ethicists suggest three additional virtues for helping professionals such as psychiatrists, physicians, and attorneys: *trustworthiness*, *fortitude*, and *phronesis* (Cohen & Cohen, 1999; Radden, 2007). These virtues are certainly relevant to social work, as they reflect many of the values and ethical principles in the NASW Code of Ethics.

Trustworthiness refers to being reliable, honest, and responsible. Trustworthy social workers provide help only in situations where they are competent to do so. They assume a relationship of fidelity or special care with clients, ensuring that clients receive the services they need and ensuring clients receive services in a safe environment. Trustworthy social workers respect client rights to self-determination, informed consent, confidentiality, and respect for their dignity and self-worth. They act honestly and with integrity. They avoid actions and relationships that put themselves in positions of conflict of interest with their client's needs. They use astute perception, purposeful self-awareness, and prudent appraisal (McBeath & Webb, 2002) to ensure they do not impose their values or beliefs on clients. They accept responsibility and accountability for their actions and continuously strive for self-improvement.

For SWRs, *trustworthiness* means maintaining the faith of the research participants, funders, government, and public. Trustworthiness is particularly important in terms of protecting research participants from risks inherent in their research. Trustworthy SWRs understand the importance of confidentiality from the participant's perspective. They take appropriate safeguards to protect private information and to help participants feel secure in sharing information. Trustworthy SWRs are disposed

toward integrity by providing participants with full information about the nature, risks, and benefits of their research. They answer participants' questions with frankness and honesty. Trustworthiness includes being honest with oneself, not just with others (Paul & Elder, 2006). Accordingly, SWRs are true to themselves about actual risks and benefits of their research. SWRs avoid deceptive practices, knowing how deception constitutes a significant breach of trust (Antle & Regehr, 2003). Although limited deception may be ethically justified for some research purposes, they consider whether and how such deception would be viewed from the research participants' perspectives. Would the form of deception proposed for this case cause research participants or the public to view the researchers as undependable or dishonest (Murphy, 1999)? SWRs possess a heightened awareness of the vulnerability of research participants. Given the fiduciary nature of their trust relationships, SWRs adopt the highest levels of transparency and integrity in their work. When they make promises to research participants, they honor their promises. When working with people of color, people with disabilities, or other vulnerable populations, trustworthy SWRs do not simply parachute in to conduct research and then quickly abscond without concern for the impact of their research on the research participants. Trustworthy SWRs safeguard the interests of their research participants whether or not others are watching, asking, or are in a position to discover possible breaches of trust (Pring, 2001). SWRs are modest about their research findings, resisting the temptation to embellish the results in their publications or reports (Pring, 2001).

Fortitude refers to having the moral courage and strength to do what is right (Paul & Elder, 2006). Fortitudinous social workers advocate for the needs and interests of clients and vulnerable populations even when they face challenges such as lack of resources, powerful adversaries, and strong systems that support the status quo. Fortitude means having the muster to act ethically even when the worker risks negative repercussions from clients, employers, government, or others. Fortitude may be viewed as a precondition for other virtues, as virtue invites people to be ethical even when the situation makes it difficult to be ethical (Blustein, 2007).

In a research context, social workers may face many pressures to act in a less than ethical manner. When evaluating the effectiveness of a social program, administrators or other stakeholders may pressure SWRs to find and report positive outcomes. When SWRs are being paid to study a particular phenomenon, they may feel pressure from the payer to produce certain types of findings (e.g., in

support of the payer's political interests). When a college dean asks a student SWR to conduct research but allow the dean to claim sole authorship and full credit, the SWR may feel pressured into compliance. Fortitude means that SWRs resist such pressures to act unethically, even when their jobs, salaries, or degrees are at stake.

Phronesis refers to practical wisdom (Radden, 2007). Social workers do not simply use information and knowledge from research and textbooks. They make use of existing scientific knowledge and theory, but also develop their own understanding of clients and interventions through strategic reflection, evaluation, and critical analysis. The practical wisdom of social workers develops over time, as workers draw from various experiences in their professional and personal lives.

For SWRs, *phronesis* has implications for research design and implementation. SWRs do not simply rely on textbook information and research protocols for how to design and implement research. They make use of their experience working with clients and research participants to determine how to act in particular situations. General research protocols may suggest, for instance, that researchers should use written consent forms. If the researcher has experience suggesting that a certain population would prefer oral consents (e.g., due to cultural issues or stress factors), the researcher may encourage the institutional review board to allow oral consents (Gordon, 2003). Once an institutional review board has approved a research application, the SWR does not simply follow the research application as written. The SWR continues to use *phronesis* to assess and respond to any ethical issues that may arise during implementation. Consider, for instance, a research application that requires the researcher to obtain the consent of guardians in order to interview individuals who have been deemed mentally incompetent (i.e., wards). While implementing the research, the SWR discovers that some wards feel restricted in what they can disclose to the SWR, fearing repercussions from their guardians (Kroch, 2009). Using *phronesis* (practice experience and wisdom), the SWR goes back to the institutional review board to suggest a revised protocol to address these concerns. SWRs who use *phronesis* understand that they continue to learn about research design and processes as they conduct research.

3.0 Researcher-Role Virtues

Virtues that are particularly vital to social workers in their role as researchers include inquisitiveness, precision, and discernment.⁴ *Inquisitiveness* refers to having a curious, questioning

disposition. Inquisitiveness is reflected in Standard 5.02 of the NASW (2008) Code of Ethics in relation to research, and in the CSWE (2008) Education Policy and Accreditation Standards in relation to scientific inquiry. Inquisitive SWRs are interested in seeking problems, asking questions, learning, building knowledge, and identifying the unknown. SWRs search for truth or insight (Pring, 2001). They strive to eliminate or reduce misinformation, error, and ignorance. They are motivated to gain a better understanding of individuals, families, groups, organizations, communities, and other social systems. They do not only seek to prove their preferred hypotheses; they are open to learning the unexpected. They are comfortable with research findings that are uncertain or conflicting with their prior knowledge or beliefs. They view research as not simply a means to answering questions, but as a vehicle to identifying new questions and problems. SWRs are open to receiving criticism of their research (Pring, 2001), as criticism leads to further questioning and inquiry.

The virtue of *precision* means concern for accuracy. Precision-oriented SWRs pay attention to detail, including the rigor of their research methods and the accuracy of their data gathering, analysis, and reporting. They guard against sloppiness and mistakes, even when presented with challenges such as limited time and resources. Precision-oriented researchers understand how vigilant attention to validity, reliability, dependability, and related research constructs foster the virtue of trustworthiness (as defined earlier).

Discernment refers to the quality of keen judgment. Discerning SWRs are not simply technically accurate in their work; they attend to issues requiring choice and make use of sound critical thinking in order to determine how to respond. Discernment is vital in many aspects of research, including determining which methods fit best for a particular research question, how a sample should be recruited, how research results should be interpreted, and how to respond to ethical dilemmas. Consider, for instance, an SWR who discovers that a research participant has been threatened by a man she describes as her pimp. The SWR is very concerned about the participant's safety, but the participant says she does not want to go to the police or take other precautions. Using discernment, the SWR considers relevant ethical principles, including individual autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and justice (Beauchamp & Childress, 2009). The discerning SWR reflects on his⁵ own values and beliefs, as well as those of the participant. He explores various options and invites help from others, including the agency's attorney (Barsky, 2010). He does not merely rely on the attorney's legal advice. He makes

sure he understands the basis for the advice and considers whether he should take other factors into consideration.

4.0 Method-Specific Virtues

Although some virtues are applicable for all methods of research, other virtues may be dependent on the specific method or approach to research. This section contrasts virtues that are relevant to quantitative, qualitative, and action research. Note that although this section highlights some of the differences between these methods, the differences should not be exaggerated. Often, the differences are a matter of degree, rather than polar opposites.

Quantitative researchers are disposed toward *impartiality*. When conducting research, they avoid situations of bias or perceived bias. They exercise judgment in an objective manner. Although they often identify hypotheses in the early stages of their research, they plan and implement research in a manner designed to identify the truth about the phenomena they are studying. They do not simply set out to prove their hypotheses. For quantitative researchers, trustworthiness is based on constructing research in a manner that is consistent with the generally accepted standards of scientific, empirical research. Traditionally, quantitative researchers favor being relatively distanced, detached, and independent, in the sense that they prefer not to be aligned with a particular individual, family, group, organization, or community (Danaher, Danaher, & Moriarty, n.d.). Pure impartiality or independence may not be possible, for instance, because a researcher may be contracted to perform a particular study. Still, the researcher strives to conduct and report research in an unbiased manner. Further, a quantitative SWR balances the virtues of impartiality and caring. As a caring social worker, the SWR attends to the dignity and wellbeing of each research participant. Thus, a SWR may need to compromise obtaining an objective (random) sample in order to ensure that vulnerable clients obtain the services they need. On the other hand, many quantitative researchers have relatively little contact, knowledge, or attachment to their research subjects, and may remain quite independent and impartial.

Qualitative SWRs do not have the same disposition toward impartiality as quantitative SWRs. Rather than seeking to identify objective and universal truths, qualitative SWRs often seek to gain understanding from an emic (within group) perspective. This virtue may be described as being *other-centered*. Qualitative SWRs gather information in a manner that reflects the subjective reality of the individuals and groups they are studying. In some

instances, such as participant-observation, qualitative SWRs embed themselves in the situation of the people they are studying. For qualitative researchers, the virtue of trustworthiness is not manifest in being an objective scientist-reporter, but in being able to give accurate voice to the concerns, views, or situations of those they are studying.

Action researchers are *collaborative* rather than independent or impartial. They act as partners with their research participants. They empower their research participants to help design the research, including the research questions, sampling, data gathering, analysis, and reporting (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2004). Decisions about research design and implementation may be affected by the interests and political perspectives of the people that the action researchers are serving (Danaher, Danaher, & Moriarty, n.d.). Action researchers are committed to action. Often, they work on behalf of disenfranchised groups, giving them voice and helping them transform their lives (Antle & Regehr, 2003). Action researchers may specifically design research to influence public policy formation and law reform (Barsky, 2009). Because action researchers are committed to advancing social justice, empowerment, and personal development, impartiality and independence are not their highest values. Action researchers maintain trustworthiness by being open to criticism about the limitations of their research methods and their affiliation with the research participants. Although action researchers are motivated to help others, they act with integrity and honesty. Consider an action researcher who is helping an African American community confront poverty. The community may ask the researcher to identify the negative impacts of poverty to help them advocate for policy change. When explaining research findings to public officials, the researcher is forthright about her research agenda and affiliation, but also describes what steps she took to ensure the trustworthiness of the research (e.g., use of generally accepted procedures for focus groups and data analysis). The virtuous researcher does not conceal who sponsored or helped develop the research (Danaher, Danaher, & Moriarty, n.d.).

Another interesting contrast between types of SWRs is the extent to which they are formulaic or flexible. Quantitative SWRs tend to embrace formulaic qualities, such as regimentation, orderliness, organization, and logical, deductive reasoning (Patton, 2008). Prior to gathering data, they make specific plans about whom to solicit into their research sample, what tests to administer, what questions to ask, and how to analyze the data (e.g., using what types of statistical analysis in order to support or reject previously determined hypotheses).

Quantitative SWRs strive to maintain consistency, asking the same questions or administering the same tests in the same way to each research participant. They avoid deviations to avoid confounding the data. They understand that in order to claim certain types of relationships between phenomena (correlations, causal effects, etc.), they must adhere strictly to their plan of study. Quantitative SWRs do not take formulism to the extreme, understanding that they are working with human beings. Consider, for instance, a SWR whose initial findings suggest the intervention being tested is harmful. The SWR decides not to wait until the findings are conclusive. Rather, she adjusts or terminates the study in order to reduce or eliminate the risk of harm. By changing the study in the midst of data collection, the SWR may taint the sample and data set. However, being formulaic does not mean staying the course when there are vital interests that require change.

Qualitative SWRs embrace flexibility, not just when there are vital countervailing interests, but as a matter of course, throughout their research. Although qualitative SWRs may begin with a well-defined plan of study, they are amenable to changing course at all stages of the research process. From a quantitative perspective, qualitative research may seem messy or chaotic. Yet this messiness and chaos allows qualitative SWRs to remain open to discovering new problems, issues, and opportunities for learning. Whereas quantitative SWRs embrace positivism (looking for patterns or theories that apply universally), qualitative SWRs embrace post-modernism (looking for local truths, within-group differences, and individual idiosyncrasies). Qualitative SWRs employ flexibility as part of their *modus operandi*. Consider an SWR studying the experiences of victims of torture (Chambon et al., 2001). Initially, she asks questions related to the ability of victims to trust others. Given the responses of the first few participants, the researcher discovers that the key issue for victims is not *trust* per se, but the *ability to form relationships* with others. In subsequent interviews, the SWR asks about the ability to form relationships, rather than asking about trust. Initially, the SWR planned to interview participants from various regions. Through snowball (nonprobability) sampling, most of the participants ended up coming from the Middle East. The SWR decides to change the focus of the research to victims of torture from the Middle East. Because the qualitative SWR is using inductive reasoning, she does not need to stay focused on her original research questions or sample (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). Qualitative SWRs view social phenomena in terms of complex, dynamic, unpredictable, and unfolding patterns, stories, and meaning (Patton, 2008).

Accordingly, they understand their role as researchers in terms of flexibility and openness to discovery.

Action researchers may use qualitative or quantitative methods, or a combination of both. Accordingly, the degree to which they incorporate flexibility or formulism into their research partially depends on which method(s) they are using in a particular context. Consider an action researcher who is helping an addictions treatment agency evaluate the effectiveness of its services. Originally, the program staff and clients contract the action researcher to help them conduct a study comparing the effectiveness of motivational interviewing versus 12-step facilitation. The researcher requires flexibility in the initial stages of the research, making use of qualitative methods to help the agency establish criteria for success and possible factors contributing to success (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2004). Eventually, they implement a large-scale, quantitative study using experimental design. This component of the study requires use of standardized (formulaic) measures and data analysis. Even when action researchers are using quantitative methods, however, the research process is iterative: The researcher makes use of a continuous feedback loop, providing information about the research process and findings, and inviting responses from the staff and clients (or other constituencies with whom she is working). If the staff and clients wanted to modify the measures of success, the researcher helps them assess the relative merits of making the changes (flexibility) and staying the course (formulism). Given that action researchers work in partnership with their research participants, they tend toward flexibility more than their traditional quantitative counterparts even when they are incorporating quantitative methods. Action research tends to be process-oriented. Thus, action researchers embrace a certain degree of responsiveness, messiness, uncertainty, and chaos in pursuing the interests and carrying out the wishes of their research partners (Brydon-Miller, Greenwood, & Maguire, 2004).

Some researchers might question whether qualities such as flexibility and formulism are moral qualities; perhaps they simply reflect amoral choices about the most effective way to conduct research. Flexibility and formulism do reflect moral choices, however, in the sense that they give priority to different approaches to generating knowledge and learning about the world. To the extent that quantitative researchers embrace formulism, for instance, they are expressing preferences for knowledge based on large numbers so that it can be generalized (Grinnell & Unrau, 2005). In contrast, flexibility among qualitative researchers reflects preferences for knowledge about the personal

realities or unique experiences of individuals, families, or other social units (Patton, 2008). The differences in preferred virtues does not mean that one approach to research is ethically superior to the other, just different.⁶ In fact, Aristotle's virtue of moderation suggests that researchers of all persuasions should be neither too flexible nor too formulaic. Hence, a researcher who primarily conducts quantitative research, should not be too formulaic (rigid), and a researcher who primarily conducts qualitative research should not be too flexible (disorganized). Balancing is required for various contexts of research, and all researchers should respect the value of alternate forms of research that embrace different virtues.

5.0 Conclusion: Future Directions for Virtue Ethics in Research

Historically, when researchers have acted in an unethical manner, the response of governments and agencies has been to develop new rules and ethical standards to govern research. Although this legalistic approach to fostering ethical research has its merits, legislation and policy cannot guarantee the highest standards of ethical conduct. Some people may act unethically by finding ways to skirt the rules. Others may act unethically because they know the likelihood of getting caught is low. Still others may adhere to the minimum standards of conduct that are enforceable by law, but neglect the highest aspirations or ethics of researchers and social workers. This article recommends virtue ethics as a means of promoting research ethics, offering a range of virtues that SWRs can carry with them in various aspects of their work.

Social work education has never been based on a simple model of transferring knowledge to students. Social work education includes providing students with opportunities for experience, reflection, and circumspection (McBeath & Webb, 2002). Thus, a virtues approach fits well for social work education. Both classroom and field education experiences provide students with a social context in which to nurture virtues (Pring, 2001). Thus, social work research education should focus on more than teaching the laws, policies, and standards that govern ethical research practice. Research education should foster inner qualities such as caring, generosity of spirit, concern for others, trustworthiness, fortitude, phronesis, inquisitiveness, precision, discernment, impartiality, other-centeredness, collaborativeness, formulism, and flexibility. Although some pairs of virtues may present researchers with conflict, educators can help researchers learn how to use moderation, balance, and critical thinking to deal

with such conflicts. Some critics of virtue ethics argue that it is too idealistic and that it ignores the need to teach about ethical duties, legal obligations, and how to assess the consequences of different courses of action (Walker & Ivanhoe, 2007). However, teaching virtue may be viewed as supplementing other ethics education, not replacing it (Pellegrino, 2007).

Creating a culture of research virtues does not begin and end with educational institutions. If we want virtuous researchers, then we need a virtuous research community (Murphy, 1999; Pring, 2001). Research institutions, associations,⁷ conferences, journals, sponsors, and support groups can play a vital role in fostering research virtues. When a researcher violates ethical standards such as confidentiality, informed consent, or protecting participants from harm, professional publications and the public media are quick to report this information. Rather than focusing only on ethical failures, research organizations should promote the best of research virtues and celebrate researchers who act as models of virtue: for instance, those who have used moral courage to do what is right in the face of risk and opposition, those who have developed and implemented more effective ways of ensuring that the rights of research participants are protected, or those who have mentored novice researchers with the highest ideals of social work research.⁸ In order to foster virtues such as fortitude, trustworthiness, and concern for others, social work research organizations could provide forums for discussing challenging issues, as well as experiential opportunities for developing and testing virtues (e.g., simulations and role-plays). Research organizations could also facilitate mentoring and other support systems for people who may reach out for moral encouragement and guidance (Murphy, 1999).

By focusing on virtues rather than rules, principles, and standards, SWRs may engage in different types of dialogues, encounters, and experiences – ones that permit SWRs to integrate and test their ethical responses, developing emotional intelligence and behavioral skills, as well as cognitive understandings and reasoning. Virtues are lived, not just discussed. What does it mean for a social work researcher “to live the good life” as espoused by Aristotle and more recent virtue ethicists? The possibilities are endless.

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Notes:

¹In this context, universal suggests that the virtues are relevant regardless of whether the worker acts as

a researcher, community organizer, policy advocate, administrator, clinician or other role.

²This article draws primarily from the NASW Code of Ethics, though one could also draw virtues from the codes of ethics of other countries.

³Values reflect enduring beliefs about what is good or desirable. Ethical principles identify types of behavior which are considered moral, right, or appropriate (Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2009). Because virtues reflect moral qualities that define the entirety of a person's being, virtues embrace values and ethics, but also go beyond beliefs and behavior to include a person's emotions, spirituality, and nature (Barsky, 2010).

⁴Given that all social workers may be involved in research and evaluation as part of their practice, the virtues in this section may apply to all social workers.

⁵For balance and simplicity, this article alternates use of male and female pronouns for different examples, rather than using the more cumbersome "he or she" and "his or her."

⁶The differences between qualitative and quantitative research have been compared to the differences between a classical French garden (as in Versailles) and a classical English garden. French gardens typically include straight, linear patterns and strong structures that apply across a vast area. English gardens are more chaotic, with hills, trees, flowers, or other components flowing more randomly and in less formal patterns. Both styles of gardens may be beautiful and functional, although in different ways.

⁷Note that an association such as the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics (n.d.) specifically promotes ethical practice and virtues in all professions (including research and social work professions). In contrast, the goals of the Society for Social Work Research (n.d.) do not even mention the promotion of ethical practice or virtues.

⁸Jane Addams is often presented as a model of virtue for social workers, particularly from a practice perspective. Consider, who are the models of virtue for social work research?