

# **Mind the Gap! Students' Understanding and Application of Social Work Values**

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## **Abstract**

This paper discusses a research project that explored the development of student social workers' values during the first year of professional education at one Scottish university. Questionnaires, based on a vignette, and focus groups established baseline information at the outset of the study. These methods were reapplied a year later to identify the extent to which students' values framework had developed, and the factors that had supported this. The study revealed that, by the end of that year, students could both identify and apply values to support them in their work with individuals to a greater extent than they could those to help them challenge structural discrimination. The study also highlighted the need for university-based teaching, and practice learning experiences, to provide more opportunities for reflection and discussion to support the development of values in student social workers.

**Key words:** evaluation; outcomes; social work education; structural discrimination; values

# **Mind the Gap! Students' Understanding and Application of Social Work Values**

## **Introduction**

This article is based on a research study, conducted in Scotland, which explored the development of students' values. The motivation for the study was a growing recognition amongst social work academics and practice educators (social workers who supervise students while they undertake practice placements) that students struggle to articulate what values are and how they might guide practice. This seemed particularly the case when students considered the values associated with recognising, and taking action to counter, structural discrimination. The study was conceived following the introduction of a new degree in the UK, designed to improve social work education. The study also coincided with new moves within social work education to explore how outcomes might be measured (Burgess and Carpenter, 2008). As a result, the study sought to learn more about the nature of this apparent 'problem' with values by exploring changes in students' understanding and application of values in the first year of professional social work education. It also aimed to identify factors that supported students to acquire and develop values for professional practice.

It is important to clarify at the outset that there are both similarities and differences in the way social work education is delivered across the four countries that make up the UK – England, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales. The countries have in common new honours degrees, registration of individual workers and codes of practice for social care workers. Increased devolutionary powers in Northern Ireland, Scotland and Wales, however, mean that social work education is now the responsibility of separate national regulatory bodies, which both accredit and monitor degree programmes. Scotland also retains a four year honours degree rather than the three year route to undergraduate qualification that features in the three other countries.

This paper begins with a discussion of the perceived 'problem' with values and an explanation of the way in which values were defined for the purposes of the research study. It then moves on to outline the context for social work education at the Scottish university where the study was based. Methodological issues are then considered in some depth before the main findings from the study are presented, including a reflection on the strengths and weaknesses of this small-scale pilot study. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications of the findings for the authors, as social work lecturers, in particular the importance of studying both process and outcome in social work education.

## **The 'problem' with values**

Whilst working with student social workers in classroom, tutorial and practice learning settings, the authors began to identify a problem with students' articulation of values. Though it was apparent that students embarked upon social work education with a commitment to helping and supporting people, they found it easier to talk and write about a skill (active listening, for example), or a discrete piece of

knowledge (task-centred practice, for example), than they did about the values and ethical issues that underpin practice decisions. A literature review undertaken early in the study demonstrated that the 'problem' with values was recognised by social work academics and practice educators across the UK and identified possible reasons for this (for example, Clifford and Burke, 2005; Gilligan, 2007; Hugman, 2005).

Part of the 'problem' is that the ethical, moral and value stances that characterise professional social work are neither fixed in time nor shared by all players (Gray and Webb, 2010). Recent years have seen several attempts to pin down what social work values should be. For example, Higham (2006, ch.5) provides a breakdown of the different dimensions of values. Firstly, 'values for working with individuals' (p.115) focus 'on the relationship between the social worker and the individual.' Secondly, 'structural values' recognise the existence of societal discrimination and the need for social workers to 'respond with appropriate policies and practices to redress the power imbalances' (p.131). Thirdly, 'emancipatory values' reinforce the expectation that social workers will work alongside service users to 'confront injustices that individual values cannot address satisfactorily' (p.136). Despite values being spelled out for students in this way, they still seem to struggle with the application of both structural and emancipatory values. It has to be acknowledged that values, in particular, alongside critical, reflective thinking more generally, have long been thought important in social work education but, at the same time, are recognised to be difficult to teach (Coleman et al, 2002; Johnston, 2009). In acknowledging these challenges, Hugman (2005: 542) suggests that the task of social work education is to support students to develop a 'framework for thinking', one that tries to incorporate the three dimensions of values alongside reflective practice.

Another aspect to the 'problem' is the wider current political context in which social work takes place (Banks, 2006; 2007; Harris and White, 2009; Mackay and Woodward, 2010). For example, it can be argued that social work has been subject to an increasingly powerful process of managerialism in recent years, of which standardisation is one tool used by policy makers and senior managers seeking to modernise social services. Additionally, social work as an ethical, value-based profession is now under threat from cuts in public services, growing inequality and increasing structural discrimination (Ferguson and Woodward, 2009).

The literature underlines the 'slippery' nature of values (Shardlow, 2009) but if values are to be researched a clear definition is needed. The authors, therefore, adopted the term 'values framework' for the study, which represented both Higham's (2006) three dimensions of values and Hugman's (2005) framework for thinking. The emphasis for the study, therefore, was on a values framework that accommodated '...structural and cultural awareness and...reflective thinking as well as traditional, interpersonal values (Mackay and Woodward, 2010: 634).

### **The Scottish context of the study**

The Scottish version of the new degree in social work is based on the Standards in Social Work Education (the SiSWE – Scottish Executive, 2003). With six standards and 22 learning foci, which students must meet to gain their professional

qualification, the SiSWE can be seen as an example of standardisation in action, where the emphasis is on achieving a multiplicity of outcomes rather than developing an integrated framework for practice. To illustrate, the first learning focus (1.1 – ‘Preparing for social work contact and involvement’) requires students to *understand*:

Social processes such as racism, poverty, unemployment ...and other sources of disadvantage...associated with risk of crime, marginalisation, isolation and exclusion (Scottish Executive, 2003: 26).

This seems an encouraging recognition of the harm caused by structural disadvantage. Thereafter, however, students are not actually required to demonstrate application of this understanding to practice. Instead, they must demonstrate competence to (Scottish Executive, 2003: 26):

- Review agency notes and other relevant literature...
- Contact and work with relevant professionals and others...
- Engage and relate effectively with people who use services, their families and other carers, and other professionals...
- Evaluate all information to identify the best form of initial involvement.
- Develop and record an initial action plan.

Additionally, Scottish students are required to meet Key Capabilities in Child Welfare and Protection (Scottish Executive, 2006). Key Capabilities were introduced in Scotland only to promote good child care practice, based on effective knowledge, skills and values. Nonetheless, they are another set of standards which students have to achieve (Mackay and Woodward, 2010). The Code of Practice for Social Service Workers (GSCC, 2002; SSSC, 2003) poses a similar challenge for students because it focuses on rules of individual conduct and, as such, contributes to what Gray and Webb (2010: 223) describe as a denial of ‘the plurality of values’ in social work. As Webster (2010) argues, there is ‘an ‘anti-ethical’ tendency in all codification’ (p31) but the Code of Practice, in particular, ‘militates against a lively and expansive ethical environment in social work’ (p40).

The study was based in one Scottish university that offers an undergraduate and postgraduate route to social work qualification. In semester 4<sup>1</sup> of the undergraduate degree, students come together with beginning postgraduates in what is termed the ‘professional studies’ part of the programme. The first year of professional studies includes three university-based modules covering law and policy, theory and practice and human development; and one practice placement based in an agency and supervised by a practice educator who is a qualified social worker. The introduction of the SiSWE afforded the opportunity for the social work team at this Scottish university to reflect upon the previous professional studies programme and plan a revised version. In doing so, it was recognised that a stand-alone ethics module most likely did not help students to incorporate values into their academic and practice-based work. Instead, to emphasise the centrality of values, it was decided to

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<sup>1</sup> The university has a two semester academic year and, like the rest of Scotland, a four year honours degree. Undergraduate student social workers, therefore, undertake eight semesters of study. Postgraduate students normally complete their MSc degree in five semesters.

incorporate value and ethical issues in each module; values were to be 'threaded-through' the programme rather than 'tacked-on' to it. This new version of the qualifying social work programme was launched in autumn 2004. Students, however, still appeared to struggle with the structural and emancipatory dimensions of values, hence the authors' decision to conduct the research study.

## **Methodology**

Given the concern about the development of students' values framework and the authors' desire to explore what supported or limited students' learning, the following study aims were established:

- To build a picture of what students understand at the beginning of their degree about values and structural discrimination.
- To explore the extent to which students' understanding of values had changed one year on.
- To identify the influences on the development of students' values during this first year of professional education.
- To develop and test research tools to capture the complex nature of values.

## *Design*

This was the authors' first study of educational processes associated with social work values and, therefore, similar past projects were explored. Much of the UK research literature on social work education was based upon evaluation of modules (Burgess and Carpenter 2008; Carpenter 2005). The situation has improved somewhat since the evaluation of the new degree in England (Evaluation of Social Work Degree Qualification in England Team, 2008 – hence Evaluation Team) and the Evaluating Outcomes in Social Work Education Project (Burgess and Carpenter, 2008).

The study aims indicated the need for a design that would:

1. measure the development of students' understanding of values;
2. identify factors that supported or hindered such developments.

The aims also required a two-stage approach. Students do not come to education as 'blank canvases' (Redmond et al, 2008: 881) therefore stage one, at the start of professional studies, set out to establish a baseline of what students already knew about values, about their relevance for social work and about the factors that had influenced this understanding so far. Stage two occurred one year later when the same methods were applied to identify changes in students' understanding and application of values, and to isolate some of the factors behind this development.

### *Measuring the development of students' values framework*

Carpenter (2005) acknowledges the challenges associated with evaluating the outcomes of social work education. He argues that researchers should be clear about what they are trying to measure and select tools that can isolate these from other aspects of learning. In seeking to measure outcomes, it was decided to use a self-administered questionnaire, based upon a vignette (a brief description of a practice situation), as vignettes have 'the potential to supply a greater focus and uniformity in data' (Wilks 2004: 82). Recently, vignettes have been used in social work research to measure changes in students' application of theory to practice, acquisition of knowledge and development of critical thinking (MacIntyre and Green-Lister, 2010; Orme et al 2009). It is acknowledged, however, that vignettes do not measure what students actually do in practice; rather what they think about a particular scenario (Wilks, 2004).

Students' written responses were sought, rather than conducting interviews, because this allowed for more participants and was less time-consuming (MacIntyre and Green-Lister, 2010). Different vignettes were used at stages one and two, based on the authors' practice experiences and designed to give students the opportunity to answer questions without the need for subject-specific knowledge. Therefore, scenarios presented common aspects that can be found in many families who have social service involvement: lone parents, financial problems and children in need; disability; addiction, and mental distress. Structural disadvantage was also built into both vignettes along with factors which could lead to discrimination. As such they presented the same level of opportunity for student's to use their values framework. Pre-testing by final year students demonstrated the suitability of the vignettes although it is acknowledged that these students were more advanced in their studies. With hindsight, it might have been better to seek the assistance of students earlier in their education.

The next consideration was the type of questions to be used; either open or closed. Attitudinal scales permit respondents to select from a series of responses, the one that most readily fits their view. Alternatively, there may be a series of statements with a five-point scale rating, for example, how strongly participants agree or disagree. While both options provide limited measurable data, their use was rejected on three counts. First, the development of questions with pre-set responses requires time and testing to ensure validity and reliability (Burton 2000). This was outside the scope of the study. Second, pre-defining responses could encourage students to identify value issues which they might not otherwise have considered. Finally, open-ended questions 'reorientate(s) research towards the meanings respondents ascribe to situations' (Wilks 2004: 83), and thereby delve into the complexity surrounding social work values. The questions were:

1. What ethical or moral issues are apparent in this vignette?
2. In what ways might the mother and her children be discriminated against?
3. How might you begin to define the values required for work with the mother and children?

Question 1 aimed to explore students' ability to recognise the potential rights and wrongs of the situation and identify areas of concern. Question 2 was deliberately worded as a prompt for students to help them explore structural influences on the family. Question 3 was designed to help students articulate their understanding of professional values. By the second stage of the study it was possible to draw upon the work of the Evaluation Team (2008), and one of its questions was added: 'What are the most significant factors for you in the situation?' This was because analysis of stage one data indicated that some students seemed confused between general intervention in a situation and specific application of values.

*Identifying factors influencing the development of students' values framework*

The questionnaires provided data on what students understood by values and how they might apply them but did not identify factors that influenced the development of values. This required more in-depth engagement with students, either through individual interviews or focus groups. Focus groups were chosen because when participants challenge each other's stances they are helped to clarify their own opinions and the factors that influence them (Dobson, 2004). Two focus groups were run at each stage, one for postgraduates and another for undergraduates. Stage one (Table 1) explored what students understood as values and the influences upon them to date. Stage two (Table 1) then considered how students' values had developed during the first year of professional education and the factors that had supported this development. The discussions were recorded and transcribed.

**Table 1: Focus Group Questions – Stages 1 and 2**

<b>Stage 1</b>	<b>Stage 2</b>
1. What influenced the development of your own value base?	1. How has your understanding of social work values developed over the last year?
2. What influenced your understanding of structural discrimination?	2. How has your understanding of structural discrimination developed over the last year?
3. What aspects of the course so far encouraged you to reflect upon values and structural discrimination?	3. What aspects of the course so far helped you to develop your understanding of values and structural discrimination?
4. You may have recognised areas of potential tension between your personal values/ideals and the realities of social work practice. If so, what are these tensions?	4. What aspects of your first practice placement helped you to develop your understanding of values and structural discrimination?
5. Social work has a stated aim of social justice. What does this term mean to you?	5. To what extent do you consider that social work should retain its commitment to social justice?

### *Participants*

All students in the 2008 cohort received an invitation to participate in the study. At stage one, 21 students, and, at stage two, 22, completed the questionnaire, approximately 40 per cent of the student group. Students who completed the questionnaires were asked to participate in the focus groups and each involved between six and eight students. Their size was limited by the number of participants who volunteered.

### *Data Analysis*

Written responses to the vignettes were analysed quantitatively and qualitatively. Guided by the Evaluation Team's approach (2008), a recording grid was developed listing value issues that could be discerned from the literature for each question, such as poverty, respect or social justice. It then rated their use on a five-point scale, from 'not mentioned' to 'emphasised strongly'. It is important to stress that the authors did not have a set view about how students should score against this matrix at either stage one or two. Indeed, part of the rationale for this pilot study was to provide greater clarity about what students bring to professional education and what they gain during it in relation to values. The written responses were then entered into a qualitative data software package (NVivo 8) to conduct a thematic analysis of how students were describing and applying values. Thematic analysis was also undertaken for the focus groups transcripts.

### *Ethical considerations*

Approval was gained from the university school's ethics committee. The main ethical challenge was the authors researching their own students therefore processes were established to ensure students gave informed consent and participated voluntarily. Also, the research design, process and records were kept separate from course data and were not accessible to other staff. Research assistants were employed to conduct information and focus group sessions and to administer vignettes, which took place outside class time. It was, however, possible that this study would affect the wider staff group and, as a result, colleagues were kept informed of findings and publications.

### *Discussion of methodological issues*

The authors have learnt much about the process of researching students. Firstly, sessions outside the teaching timetable were poorly attended compared to those within, which may be due to students' caring or employment commitments. Secondly, it was not possible to compare students' demographic information because only one student was from a non-white ethnic background, few men participated and undergraduates outnumbered postgraduates by two to one. This reflects the overall composition of the student group, and has been found to limit similar analyses in other studies (Redmond et al, 2008). Thirdly, while the questionnaires generated helpful data, they did not afford the opportunity, as in interviews, to explore why some students were confused about what values actually were. Additionally, the style of writing varied: some students used bullet points and others gave a detailed narrative, which weakens the claims that can be made on the

basis of such data. This problem was found by MacIntyre and Green-Lister (2010) and, similarly, the authors could have given more time to students and provided more guidance about the style of written responses. Another approach, for example, comparing students' reports from practice placements one and two, may provide different types of findings and partly answer why students struggle with values. This would generate a much greater volume of data, however. Fourthly, students were prepared to speak honestly about the course even where the researchers were members of staff. They were able to see the study as separate from course evaluation and assessment processes. As such, the findings could have been presented to this student cohort to explore whether they felt it accurately reflected their learning at stages one and two. It was, however, possible for the authors to identify individual students from the focus group transcripts so additional care had to be taken during analysis and writing-up to reflect all voices anonymously. Finally, the advantage of researching one's own university was that the findings could be used to inform the most recent course review. The study also generated a baseline for the previous course and tested tools with which to measure the impact of the changes made.

## **Findings**

This section presents the findings from the questionnaires and focus groups, which highlighted variable development in students' values framework and identified aspects of the course that both supported and limited this development.

### *The vignettes*

At stage one, most students could identify sources of discrimination and use discrimination 'labels', for example, being a 'lone parent' or experiencing 'mental ill health'. As one student noted:

(The mother) has too many pressures on her and it is understandable that her mental health suffered.

Students at stage one varied in the extent to which they defined the professional values that would support work with the family in question. For example, the majority was able to name values, such as 'respect' and 'unconditional positive regard' whereas six of the 22 did not do so. Rather, they described what they would do to listen to or support the service user. Additionally, in response to question 3 at stage one, three students identified a structural or emancipatory component to their values framework. There were clear indications that students' values framework had developed in the year between stages one and two. Adding the extra question at stage two reinforced that students could now identify structural elements within the scenario although these were mainly absent when it came to discussing how values would inform their approach to this practice scenario. Compare, the first quote, which represents most students, with the second, which is a rare example:

I would act in a respectful and non-judgemental way.

Anti-oppressive practice...non-judgemental, honesty...these values are essential as the family will probably be facing discrimination, oppression and may be feeling judged...

Also, some students appeared uncertain at stage two about what is meant by values in that they associated value-based practice with tasks rather than attitudes, principles or ethical stances. For example, one student highlighted values in practice as 'making a good assessment' while another considered values to mean 'effective joint working'. Most students, however, were more aware of ethical issues by stage two. For example, six recognised tensions associated with professional power, six highlighted that professional standards were not always in keeping with service users' interests and 13 noted that social workers had to manage conflicting needs and rights between children and parents. To summarise, the second vignette exercise shed light on where students' values framework had developed and where the gaps lay. A number of questions remained, however, mainly relating to why some students' understanding of values had yet to reach a critical level by the time they were half way through professional studies.

### *The focus groups*

At the beginning stage, most students understood the dominant nature of societal values and that some widely-held, yet discriminatory, views on class, gender and 'race', particularly, were not in keeping with social work's value base. A few argued also that the new social work degree, including Key Capabilities, seemed designed to (in the words of one student) 'churn out' social workers to do a particular job rather than develop creative practitioners. More widely, students hoped that social work education would help them develop their political awareness and the confidence to challenge the status quo where it served neither the interests of workers nor service users.

The second stage focus groups were helpful when it came to identifying the factors that supported and hindered the development of values in students. In terms of the social work programme, students highlighted that practice learning offers an excellent opportunity for linking academic knowledge, skills and values to practice:

Placement opened new avenues of thought.

(It helps) being out there and...doing it, and realising that it links with what you learned in class.

At the same time, however, students also reported that how much they learned in practice depended on the skills and values of the practice-based assessor, as well as the nature and ethos of the agency:

If you get a practice teacher you get on with it really benefits you.

It's more about what was available in the agency rather than what suits the person's needs.

University-based teaching also had its strengths and weaknesses. For example, students appreciated the extent of the knowledge and skill base that they had acquired. In particular, they identified: a better understanding of professional power and its potential to help and harm; a stronger awareness of the extent to which wider economic, social, policy and managerial constraints make it difficult for values to be applied in practice, and improved levels of self-awareness and critical thinking.

The terminology remained unclear to some:

'Values' is just a word that's put out there...we don't actually understand what they are.

(Students and educators) trot out key words in class – non-judgemental and anti-oppressive – but what do they mean?

While this reflects the “elusiveness” of ‘values’ (Banks, 2008: 28), it is acknowledged that university programmes need to provide sufficient clarification of values on an ongoing basis. Students recognised that teaching staff were themselves pressured to fit ‘huge amounts of information’ into the course. The bottom line, though, is that students would have liked more opportunities to discuss and debate the knowledge, skill and value base, with staff, service users, carers and each other. They noted that public services, generally, and social work, particularly, had been ‘squeezed’ in recent years, and that opportunities for critical thinking and creativity had been reduced:

A lot of social work nowadays is filling in forms whereas we know we want to talk to and support people.

Social work has got really political but in the wrong way – league tables, performance indicators and budgets.

Students expected academic staff to lead the way in challenging the state of play, although several suggested that the professional hierarchy (defined as Social Care Councils, policy makers and senior managers) did not encourage the ‘thinking outside the box’ (Johnston, 2009) that students wanted and needed:

Lecturers are being pushed into a procedural corner.

The hierarchy of social work has a vested interest in constraining how much debate there is.

On revisiting the study aims, it is apparent to the authors that the study provided greater clarity about what students bring to social work education in terms of their understanding of values and structural discrimination. There is also greater awareness now not only of how students’ values framework developed during one year of professional studies but also of what influenced this development, in terms of practice learning and university-based teaching.

## Discussion

This paper considered the aims, methodology and findings of a small-scale research study motivated by a wish to find out more about why students struggle with a values framework. What is clearer now is *why* some students battle with values, either to understand them in the first place or, once they are understood, to apply them to a practice scenario. Two particular factors can be identified. First, it is apparent that students were much better talking about values within focus groups than they were writing about them in vignettes. This underlines what is already known about students; that some thrive on written challenges while others communicate more effectively in oral form. Second, there is confirmation that some features of values are simply hard to grasp. There was evidence that students could identify and apply values for work with individuals to a greater extent than they could those addressing the structural and emancipatory aspects of the values framework. While most students could identify the existence of structural inequalities by stage two, due to poverty and unemployment, for example, this recognition was limited in range. What remained weak was students' ability to articulate how they would apply the entire values framework. Linked to this is that few in social work are clear about the differences between values, morals, ethics or rights (Banks, 2006; 2008; Clark, 2000). It is not surprising, then, that this study highlights disparity amongst students. Apparent also, is that, when students are confused, they fall back on the actual tasks in hand, such as making a good assessment (on *what* they would do), rather than articulating the ways in which values influence the process of assessment (*how* and *why* they would do it).

Reflecting on the findings, it is acknowledged that students had passed their first practice placement. In doing so, they had met the requirement of the SiSWE to *understand* structural disadvantage. However, the application of this knowledge mirrored the procedural outcomes of the SiSWE – assessing, planning and reviewing; there was little about how students might address the social and personal disadvantages that the service users in the vignettes faced. This perceived gap between knowledge and application may have been partially created, as participants suggested, by the course being 'knowledge-heavy' at times, leaving less space for discussion. There is a balance to be achieved between, on the one hand, the desire to impart as much knowledge as possible and the need to cover the requirements of the SiSWE, and, on the other, creating enough space for students to reflect upon and critique the material. It is important to put the study findings in perspective, however. This study was completed when students were half-way through the professional studies element of their degree. Also, as discussed previously, this particular Scottish university is by no means alone in struggling with values in social work education. Students also learn in different ways and at different paces (Evaluation Team, 2008). As noted in the findings, practice placements are a key factor in helping students to develop their values framework and experience suggests that it is often in the second, longer placement that students' criticality is enhanced.

The fourth aim of the study was to develop research tools to measure change in the development of students' values framework. This was the authors' first experience of moving beyond standard course and module feedback to evaluating 'the *outcomes* of education' (Burgess and Carpenter, 2008: 899). While acknowledging the limitations of the sample, and recognising that different methods would be equally

useful, it is apparent that the study, as it stood, did produce evidence of the teaching and learning factors that both helped and hindered the development of students' values framework. The study was timely because the degree programmes were about to be reviewed internally and revalidated externally by the Scottish Social Services Council. This gave staff an opportunity to draw upon the findings of the study in reconsidering the structure and content of the courses. In brief, the professional studies component of the programme now has fewer modules and fewer summative assessments with the aim of allowing more space for discussion and debate.

The study highlighted the benefits of evaluating outcomes of social work education. For the authors, as educators, it has been useful to have evidence of effective, and not so effective, approaches to the teaching and learning of values. The next step ought to be an examination of the 'new', new degree and of the extent to which the changes have helped or hindered the development of a values framework in students.

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