THE ETHICAL SENSITIVITY OF SOCIAL WORKERS

A contribution to a theory of practice

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Ethical sensitivity: research

Set up:

- Focus on ethical agency, of which ethical sensitivity is a part
- Best practice unit (i.e. a community of practice with inquisitive objectives): cooperation of 12 social workers (of 6 different welfare organizations) and 2 researchers (UAS teachers)
- Practice based co-research: involving social workers as reflective and inquisitive professionals with regard to their own practice
- Phenomenological design: focus on (interpreting) experiences

Ethical sensitivity: research

Set up:

- **Focus on ethical agency**
- **Best practice unit**
- **Practice based co-research**
- **Phenomenological design**

Approach: alternation of reflective writing, group discussion and synthesizing writing

- **Write down a case concerning a morally charged situation (a moral dilemma)**
- **Write about how you knew the charge was of a moral nature**
- **Several cycles of collectively discussing, analyzing and synthesizing the results**

Ethical sensitivity: research

Set up:

- **Focus on ethical agency**
- **Best practice unit**
- **Practice based co-research**
- **Phenomenological design**

Approach: alternation of reflective writing, group discussion and synthesizing writing

Outcome: elements for a theory of practice concerning the ethical sensitivity of social workers

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

- **All stages of professional performance**
  - **Professional wisdom: judging, deciding, acting**

    (cf. Banks & Gallagher, 2009)

- **All aspects of ethical language**
  - **Terms: good, values, rules, virtues, (conflicts of) interests, (choosing between) alternatives, (facing the) consequences**   (cf. De Jonge, 1995)

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

[2] Being professionally moved

Being moved:

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

[2] Being professionally moved

Being moved:
- **Primary signals (during action)**
  - **Basic: restlessness, ambivalence, discomfort**
  - **Specific: fear, worry, suspicion**

Ethical sensitivity: theory of practice

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

[2] Being professionally moved

Being moved:

- **Primary signals (during action)**
    - **Basic: restlessness, ambivalence, discomfort**
    - **Specific: fear, worry, suspicion**
- **Secondary signals (after action)**
    - **Retrospective: disappointment, guilt**
    - **Prospective: performance anxiety, desperate**

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

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Being moved:

- **Primary signals (during action)**
    - **Basic: restlessness, ambivalence, discomfort**
    - **Specific: fear, worry, suspicion**
- **Secondary signals (after action)**
    - **Retrospective: disappointment, guilt**
    - **Prospective: fear of failure, desperate**

Professionally: (self-) conscious, reflective, regulation (cf. ethics work)

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Note: positive ethical functions of emotions (Keinemans)

- **Informing about the ethical problem** (e.g. suspicion)
- **Revealing ethical values** (e.g. anger)
- **Motivating ethical conduct** (e.g. touched)

Ethical sensitivity: theory of practice

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

[2] Being professionally moved

[3] Collegial support

- **Asked: giving advises**
- **Unasked: signaling blind spots**

    (note: collective sensitivity: diversity)

Ethical sensitivity: theory of practice

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Addendum: conditions for sensitivity
- **Responsibility**
- **Openness**
- **Contact**

Essence: sincere involvement with service users

Ethical sensitivity: theory of practice

[1] Break down of flow and virtuosity

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Conditions for sensitivity: sincere involvement

I have become more aware of moral tensions in daily practice.
(10 respondents)

- **I completely disagree: 0%**
- **I disagree: 10%**
- **I agree: 50%**
- **I completely agree: 40%**

For me it has become more clear when and how I notice moral tensions in daily practice.

(10 respondents)

- **I completely disagree: 0%**
- **I disagree: 10%**
- **I agree: 40%**
- **I completely agree: 50%**

Reflection

Challenges for further research concerning ethical sensitivity:

- **A remark of one of the participants: more attention should be paid to individual and cultural differences in ethical sensitivity**

- **Ethical sensitivity is not restricted to dilemmatic situations**
(cf. Handelsmann, Knapp & Gottlieb, 2009)

- **Experiences, ideas and reflections of social workers concerning ethical sensitivity could be confronted with critical approaches of social work and professionalism**