MORAL AGENCY AND THE SERVICE IDEAL

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Paper presented at:

IMPROVING PRACTICE BY RESEARCH:
USING EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICE IN THE WORKPLACE
Olive Stevenson Seminar Series
Research Conference

Friday 7th November 2008

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Abstract

The reported experience of many front-line social workers and of others in the social welfare field is of an increasingly top-down managerialist practice environment that is driven by detailed regulation, procedural routines, and targets subject to continuous monitoring. This experience is matched by diminishing opportunity for professional judgement and relationship-based practice that values process as well as outcomes. The economic, political and policy factors behind these developments are described and the resulting tension within the social welfare professions is analysed in terms of 'two moral voices': an instrumental utilitarianism on the one hand and a more traditional ethics of the 'service ideal' on the other (Banks, 2004). While both 'voices' are required in any public service endeavour, the former is currently submerging the latter to an extent that is dangerous because, in the current authoritarian policy climate, instrumentalism can be observed to slip into amoral techno-rationalism.

The author defends the importance of individual moral agency that is associated with the service ideal and he argues this needs to be proclaimed and, to an extent, recovered in professional practice. A 'good practice' framework – or typology – is presented that identifies the features that a practitioner can demand of any practice setting. The typology can be used to interrogate the practice setting to establish whether it offers the potential for congruity between the realities of daily practice and the interrogator's sense of service ideal. The typology covers four areas: the regulatory framework (in terms of negative and positive freedom), the values of practice, the support and development of staff and the knowledge framework. It should not be seen as providing fixed standards but rather as presenting a spectrum of behaviour in defined areas, which the practitioner can use for guidance in exercising moral judgement.

The typology is based upon the author's own practice and career experience within and around the probation service, which is a good 'test bed' for the practitioner because it has provided a singularly challenging environment for the exercise of a social work service ideal in recent decades. The typology is a product of a process of practice, research, reflection, teaching, in-service training and formal study for higher qualifications and the resulting writing for publication. Relevant published work covers a period of twenty years, culminating in a PhD by publication.

'Worked' examples from the author's own reflective practice, research and academic study – all of which have been published – are provided to illustrate the

tensions that exist within the values, policy and practice dynamic of the probation / correctional field. The author demonstrates how standards of moral agency and service ideal may be actively sought. Indeed, our response to the modern practice environment challenges us to hone our understanding of what we mean by 'good practice' and to develop and expand our sense of grounded ethical practice.

Moral Agency and the Service Ideal

1. Despair or a new accountability?

> I now have to work much harder that I have ever worked in my life. You are expected to work much faster with no breaks. It is no wonder that so many social workers are off with stress and on long term sick. It is appalling and it is going to get worse now we have all these league tables that are beginning to drive things.
>
> Social work is more and more about numbers with managers wanting to hit so many targets which involves turning cases over quickly. They want a case in, sorted and pushed out --- I think this emphasis on turnover is cosmetic to make it seem that we are giving a service to the public. But we don't give anything. We have nothing to give. (Jones, 2001, pp.553-4)

Those are two of the 'voices from the front line' of state social work – to quote the article's title – that Jones captured in a seminal paper published in 2001. Other voices have been captured in subsequent research (for example Farrow, 2004). But these subsequent voices are not all despairing. Banks (2004, chp.6; quotation p.158) identified a 'new accountability', a regulated proceduralism that can make social work decisions more equitable and transparent:

> I think back to when I first did child protection in the mid-80s --- it's just horrific to think people could --- have a meeting about people and they wouldn't even know it was taking place --- [today it is] about being open to scrutiny, open to accountability, much more inclusive in the way that information is used and shared.

In this paper, I will analyse some of the factors that contribute to the tensions identified above. I will then present a framework for assessing specific agency settings against certain good practice benchmarks. This framework has been developed from my own practice experience, practitioner research activities, reflection and writing based upon working in the probation service --- but first some background context.

2. The revolution in public welfare service

Compared with the earlier post-war welfare settlement, public sector workers now occupy a more complex and insecure world because in a neo-liberal and globalized environment it is the market, not state funded services, that reigns supreme (Jordan, 2006). The public sector, meanwhile, comes in for denigration from political leaders and much of the media (Jones, 2001, pp.560-1). This has been the orthodoxy for thirty years. The current collapse of the financial markets will not mark the end of a globalized economy but it will usher in a new age of government financial and regulatory intervention in the markets (Foley, 2008; Lordon, 2008), which may rebound favourably for the public sector ethos.

However, the recent orthodoxy has meant that public services have become characterized by managerialist marketization: competition, the separation of purchaser and provider, out-sourcing and bidding for fixed term contracts are seen as mechanisms to drive up efficiency in the expenditure of others' hard earned taxes.

Government, therefore, has the dilemma of a fragmented, marketized public sector that is difficult to control with an imperative that this sector must provide high quality services to the consumer and do so reliably over the long term. Hence the plethora of centrally driven targets supported by monitoring, audit and the award (or denial) of star ratings: the surveillance world that we now inhabit.

But the private sector is also exposed to similar pressures. No country is protected from capital flight to cheaper, more competitive countries. In particular, leading edge high technology companies – which New Labour governments have taken as their modernising exemplars for the public sector (Sennett, 2006) – face merciless and continuous jostling for competitive advantage. Such companies operate on fixed term projects and short term commitments in a consumer culture that is restless for the next product up-grade. What perhaps many of us had not realized was the extent to which the financial markets and banks partook of this same way of doing things.

This environment creates a sense of insecurity and anxiety in society. Such emotions create fear of one's own failure and of the perceived threats posed by others. Fear leads to authoritarianism and a punitive attitude towards those who do not fit (Cooper and Lousada, 2005).

People who do not fit include outsiders, the marginalized and disadvantaged, all those who are reviled – offenders, mentally ill people who are deemed to pose a

threat to others – and those who fail to take responsibility for themselves within this opportunity society.

For the public sector, the above combines to create a risk-focused policy context that features a peculiarly harsh instrumental utilitarian ethics.

Utilitarianism is strong on accountability and equity for achieving, in a transparent fashion, the greatest good for the greatest number. It will ration fairly within approved eligibility criteria. It sits comfortably with predefined procedure and targets.

But these qualities can flip over into a harsh instrumentalism when, ultimately, the ends come to justify the means. For example, if the end is to reduce reoffending for the security of the majority, then it is logical to achieve this by technically the most effective means regardless of the intrinsic 'moral merit' (Robinson and McNeill, 2004, p.296) of the means chosen. Technical rationality favours measurable outputs – just like the private sector – which leads to activities that are short term and project based. For the unfavoured and 'undeserving', this can degenerate into public services that are punishing and controlling.

3. Two moral voices

Banks (2004, pp.53-60, 151-8, 174-8) refers to two 'moral voices'. On the one hand is the 'predefined rule-following and targeting' of instrumental utilitarianism and, on the other hand, is the more traditional ethics of the 'service ideal'. The latter involves a commitment to the provision of a service, a 'public good', as an end in itself. It stems from Kantian respect for persons and from virtue ethics, namely vocational practice as an intrinsically moral statement.

This second moral voice features professional discretion, relationship, the importance of *process* and long term timeframes. It asserts that professional skill is most needed in unique and complex situations for which rules and procedures do not provide the answer. This is the world of 'the swampy lowland [where] messy confusing problems defy technical solution' (Schon, 1987, p.3) in which professional expertise requires the development of reflective practice. Together, these features capture what Jordan (2007, p.xii) calls the 'defining feature of social work', namely its particular capacity to enhance social well-being through engaging inclusively and collaboratively with the conflicts and reciprocity of relationships, community and power structures (Jordan, 2007, pp.126-40).

In public services, however, a balance between the two moral voices is required. The laments of the first two social workers quoted at the beginning of this paper reflect that this balance has been lost and the second moral voice is becoming submerged – or suppressed. But the observations of the third social worker quoted indicates that the two moral voices should not be seen as mutually exclusive.

4. Moral agency

Working within the probation service, I struggled with this shift to a greater authoritarianism as probation moved from being an avowed social work agency to an agency within the correctional services complex. In my career I have moved between practice, training, management, research and academia and, in the process, have undertaken two advanced in-service awards – a Diploma in Management and a portfolio-only Advanced Award in Social Work – that have allowed me to adopt different perspectives and to reflect upon my practice and its values and policy contexts.

I have explored the possibilities of maintaining professional *agency*, by which I mean acting with autonomous moral agency but within the responsibilities and duties of the increasingly controlling culture of my practice setting. The end result has been a series of publications (recent examples are: Elliott, 1995, 2001, 2003) in which I have charted this dynamic between values, policy and practice and reflectively charted my own practice within this dynamic. The conclusion that I reached is that practitioners have choices over the practice settings they move to and they also have influence to shape their working environment. Charles and Butler (2004, p.64) similarly argue that it is possible for practitioners to 'perceive themselves as initiators rather than victims' and they go on to explore, in the detail of day-to-day practice, how such agency can be achieved by practitioners as opposed to becoming simply 'accommodators' with the managerialist practice realities that they find themselves in: an approach given eloquent testimony by front-line probation officers' continuing espousal of 'people work' as the quintessence of probation practice (Annison, Eadie and Knight, 2008).

This process of reflection has led me to identify certain features – or a good practice framework – that one should expect of a practice setting. Today's policy and practice world is fluid and changeable whereas the service ideal involves a value base that requires underpinning stability. The framework provides an interrogation about

the nature of any social work institutional, policy and practice setting which serves as a mechanism for examining the congruence between the individual's service ideal and the requirements of practice. This congruence is vital for a practitioner's sense of personal integrity. Lacking it will result in stress and burn-out.

But the questions do not imply absolute standards. They address spectra of behaviours. Practitioners' sense of service ideal will vary according to their theoretical stances (Howe, 1987, pp.15, 49-51; Elliott, 1995) and every practice setting is deficient to some extent but open to influence. The framework, therefore, poses questions that can apply to all settings but judgement is required in how the individual assesses a setting in the light of those questions.

5. The framework

The framework comprises four areas of practice that are of concern, the 'factors', namely the regulatory framework, values of practice, support and development of staff, and the knowledge framework. Against each 'factor' are set certain good practice 'criteria'. An agency's performance may be appraised in relation to these 'criteria'. The third column poses 'questions' that provide a focus when making that appraisal **(see Table below)**. The 'criteria' are:

- *Negative freedom* (Berlin, 1969, pp.122-31), namely the exercise of constraints or coercion on the person. To what extent is practice bounded by regulation, with professional responses to problems and issues being predetermined? All safe public welfare work has boundaries and, as publicly accountable professions, practice takes place within a regime of law, policy and procedure. But the degree of regulation between settings can vary and extremes of regulation deny space to both practitioner and service user to act with moral agency.

- *Positive freedom* (Berlin, 1969, pp.131-4). This concerns the opportunities for practitioners to pursue their own projects and the extent to which such initiatives are encouraged. Reflection in practice entails questioning the routine, acceptance of clinical uncertainty and 'experimentation, exploration and evaluation' in one's practice (Redmond, 2004, p.144). Is there opportunity within the practice setting for such an approach?

- *Values criteria*. The professional ethical codes are critical in providing alternative reference points when considering the ethical standards of practice pertaining in a work setting. Within UK social work, the Care Councils' *Codes of Practice* (General Social Care Council, 2002) set out principles of practice that over-ride the requirements of targets and agency procedure. The registered social care worker and employer are accountable to these codes and the process of registration brings social work and social care in line with other regulated professions. It is important, however, that ethical discourses range beyond regulatory bodies that themselves have complex political and policy relationships with governments (Whittington and Whittington, 2007, pp.84-90, 94-5). The independent British Association of Social Workers (BASW) (2002) *Code of Ethics* contributes to plurality of debate, while the International Federation of Social Workers and International Association of Schools of Social Work, whose definition of social work underpins the BASW *Code,* ensure international benchmarks in ethical debate. The probation service in England and Wales lost these external reference points when the requirement that probation officers should be qualified as social workers ended in 1995. Probation at that point ceased to have a readily defensible and principled identity beyond whatever the policy makers of the day deem to be proper for it.

- *Practice and staff development*. To what extent does the practice setting support tripartite – administrative, educative and supportive – supervision? This is the traditional model of social work supervision and, if properly provided by the agency, it is the locus where the anxiety generated by the work may be contained and the craftsmanship of reflective practice nurtured (Hughes & Pengelly, 1997). Canton and Eadie (2004, pp.215-20) provide a case example from youth justice's highly regulated procedures. They demonstrate how high accountability can be combined with high professional discretion. The lynch pin to achieving this is an open and understanding supervisory relationship between the practitioner and the line manager. The manager needs to trust the worker's assessment if early enforcement,

involving a return to court, is to be avoided and the worker needs the manager's authorization to gain the time and opportunity to get alongside and, in turn, acquire the trust and active engagement of the young person.

- *Knowledge criteria.* Does the field of practice contain a zone of academic freedom? Does knowledge creation and learning have independence from employer interests? This is especially required at the levels of professional qualification and research. Such independence and plurality can also be achieved – although not exclusively so – by practitioners as knowledge creators in their own right (Gould, 1999, pp.66-9). The relationship between government, employers and academia is complex and can be contested, as the recent history of criminal justice research demonstrates (Smith, 2004), but what is essential is that there is space for tolerance of dissent and an independent research culture.

6. Some 'worked' examples

The typology above is drawn from my own experience of moving in and out of practice in the probation service, during which time I researched, reflected upon and wrote about my own practice and about policy developments within the probation service and how these impinge upon front-line practice. There follow some 'worked' examples, about which I have written, of the typology given above:

- *Negative freedom:* I explore these boundaries within the probation service as penal policy and the revisions to national standards made practice increasingly punishment and enforcement oriented. The response proposed for the practitioner is to ensure his/her practice is well rooted ethically and is explicit in terms of its methods, evidence base and evaluative approach. 'Real life' practice examples are given (Elliott, 1995, pp.17-21; Elliott, 2001, pp.22-38).
- *Positive freedom:* An example of having space to develop such a project is given with the Offending and Relationships Group, which was a 'process' group set up at borough level within a probation service at a time when cognitive-behavioural practice was almost

exclusively gaining approval for development at the expense of 'process' approaches. The passage cited describes the theory base and operation of the group; its value for probation in terms of relational and client-centred practice; and comments on evaluation (Elliott, 2001, pp.38-41).

- *Values criteria:* I develop a typology that is an exercise in benchmarking practice against a set of values criteria. The typology involves the tests of imposition, oppression and coercion in relation to practice with service users in probation and other areas of social work practice not as a set of absolutes but as a spectrum of behaviours within which moral judgement may be exercised (Elliott, 1995).

- *Practice and staff development:* The dilemmas of creating a 'trusted' supervisory space within an organization that emphasizes managerialism, monitoring and inspection are explored in relation to an action research project I undertook in the probation service. The importance of team culture, boundaries and clear contracting are highlighted (Elliott, 2003, pp.339-40).

- *Knowledge criteria:* The action research activity referred to above provides an example of practitioner research within 'cycles of planning, acting, observing and reflecting' (Kemmis, 1993, pp.177-80) to bring about change and improvement. Being involved in externally validated and supervised learning within the workplace is seen as important because this provided a framework, focus and quality-controlled discipline to the research activities engaged in (Elliott, 2003).

7. Conclusion

Today's practice environment requires multiple skills, flexibility and continuing education and training. 'Portfolio careers' (Cooper and Dartington, 2004, pp.133-5) and the growing freelance sector in social work reflect the drivers that exist and how people respond to them. This world of networked services and 'enabling' governance (Johansson and Hvinder, 2005) creates pressure and anxiety but also new spaces and opportunities within which to operate. Continuing professional development and

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one's portfolio of achievement can lead to honed skills and professional confidence, which in turn generate personal authority and empowerment through which moral agency may be exercised.

The framework that is set out above articulates a set of expectations that professionals can reasonably demand. An active culture of analysis, critique and demands by professionals for ethical standards within supportive practice contexts can act as a restraint on the drift to an amoral instrumentalism and serves as a means of maintaining a balance between both the moral voices of practice.

Table 1

Factors	Criteria	Questions
Regulatory framework *Worked Example* – Probation national standards and enforcement *Worked Example* – Offending and Relationships Group	Negative freedom Positive freedom	What is the balance between negative and positive freedoms for the practitioner? Are both types of freedom present in an appropriate way that caters for individual autonomy?
Values of practice *Worked Example* – social work that does not impose, oppress, coerce	Opportunity for relational work and empowerment Plurality of codes of ethics	How does the choice of methods and delivery of services measure against the values benchmarks? Are the values of practice upheld through the ethical norms of daily conduct?
Support and development of staff *Worked Example* – Guidelines for creating a 'trusted' supervisory space in a managerialist organization	Tripartite supervision: administrative educative supportive	Does the management and practice environment enable a boundaried, accountable and supportive culture of curiosity, learning, development and space for professional judgement and discretion?
Knowledge framework *Worked Example* – action research project to achieve change and improvement	Continuum of pre to post qualifying learning and accreditation Generation of new knowledge	Is there freedom of enquiry and a supported and open dialogue in knowledge creation between practitioners, management and academia?

Note

This paper is based upon, summarizes and develops Nigel Elliott's Kingston University PhD (2006) and article, 'The Global Vortex: Social Welfare in a Networked World', *Journal of Social Work Practice,* 2008, vol.22, no.3, pp.269-87.

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