

# VALUES & ETHICS IN SOCIAL WORK

3RD EDITION

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London EC1Y 1SP

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2455 Teller Road  
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

SAGE Publications India Pvt Ltd  
B 1/1 Mohan Cooperative Industrial Area  
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Typeset by: C&M Digitals (P) Ltd, Chennai, India  
Printed in the UK

© Chris Beckett, Andrew Maynard and Peter Jordan 2017

First edition published 2005. Reprinted in 2005, in 2006 (twice), 2007, 2008, 2009 (twice) and 2010

Second edition published 2013. Reprinted 2015 (twice) and 2016

This third edition first published 2017

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**Library of Congress Control Number: 2016959204**

**British Library Cataloguing in Publication data**

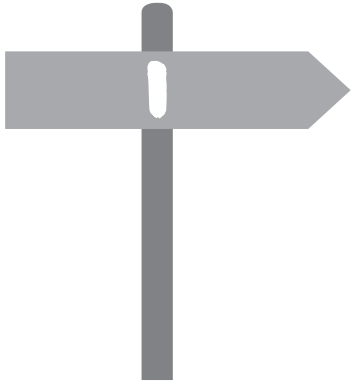
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 978-1-4739-7480-7  
ISBN 978-1-4739-7481-4 (pbk)

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# What are values and ethics?

- What do we mean by 'values'?
- Values and value systems
- Values and social work
- Personal values
- Societal values
- Values in tension
- What do we mean by 'ethics'?

Values occupy a central position in social work because the job, like that of other helping professionals, constantly places us in the position of having to make ethical decisions: decisions about what is the right thing to do, not in a technical sense, but in a moral one. This book explores issues to do with values and ethics that you will encounter, both in your training and in practice. Since this first chapter will begin by discussing what we mean by those terms, you might like to put the book down before you go any further, and attempt to write your own definitions so you'll be able to compare your own perspective with ours. What are values? What are ethics?

What do we mean by 'values'?

## value

- 1 '... the regard that something is held to deserve; the importance, worth or usefulness of something: [as in] *your support is of great value ...*'.
- 2 '... principles or standards of behaviour: one's judgement about what is important in life: [as in] *they internalize their parents' rules and values ...*'. (Oxford Dictionary of English, 2010)

The word ‘value’ is used in a number of ways which, at first sight, do not seem to have a huge amount in common. It is used in a financial way, as in ‘gold has a higher value than lead’, or in a personal way, as in ‘I value your company’. Or we can speak of values in a cultural sense, as in ‘Islamic values’, ‘liberal values’, ‘value systems’.

However, although ‘the value of gold’ and ‘value systems’ seem like very different kinds of idea, there is nevertheless a common ground of meaning. It lies in the notion of preference or choice. When we say to someone ‘I value your company’, what we are really saying is that their company is important to us, and that we would choose their company over other things. If an expert on jewellery values your gold ring at £200, he is saying that given the choice between the ring and a sum of money, you should not choose the money unless it is £200 or more.

Similarly, when we speak about the ‘value system’ of a particular culture, we are referring to the things that culture gives a high priority or importance to when making choices. In a liberal democracy, for instance, a high value is given to personal freedom (‘Everyone has the right to liberty’, says the European Convention on Human Rights). In other societies, personal freedom may be seen as less important than other things, such as the observance of religious rules, or family loyalty, or social cohesion. Different cultures use different sets of criteria to make choices, presumably as a result of different circumstances and different traditions.

Of course, even within a single culture, people have different values. In the UK, the 2016 referendum on ‘Brexit’ from the European Union revealed a sharp divide between different parts of the country, different age groups and different social classes as to what should be the priorities of the country as a whole. Because we tend to associate with people who have similar views, in real life and on social media, we are not always very aware of the diversity of views that are out there. The outcome of the referendum came as a shock to a lot of people who voted ‘remain’, perhaps in part because many had only discussed the subject with people whose views were like their own, and therefore imagined that most people felt the same as they did.

Our values are the basis on which we act. Imagine you are driving to an important meeting – about, say, the future of a child in care – to which you feel you have an important contribution to make. You are on a motorway driving at over 70 mph, but due to being held up earlier in the journey, you are in danger of arriving late. Should you drive even faster? If you go faster, you are more likely to make your meeting on time and be able to make your contribution, but you are also more likely to have a crash and hurt someone, and of course (in the UK) you would be breaking the law. These are the facts of the matter. However, the facts alone cannot tell you what you *ought* to do. All they can do is tell you the available possibilities. (This principle is sometimes known as Hume’s law, after the eighteenth-century philosopher David Hume, 2007 [1739]: 335, and is often summarised as ‘you can’t derive an ought from an is’.) In this case your decision as to what you ought to do will be based on what *value* you place on arriving on time as against the value you place on not endangering yourself and other drivers and/or on sticking to the law.

In the social arena, the word ‘ought’ usually carries the implication of some sort of obligation either to others or to our own future selves (as in ‘I really ought to stop smoking’), and it refers to a duty to be fulfilled by either an individual or a group of individuals. The question as to how precisely we arrive at these duties, or ‘oughts’, is something that we will come back to in the next chapter.

## Values and value systems

At any given moment of time, we value different things, and this may vary according to our mood or circumstances, but most of us also subscribe to a set of values, a ‘value system’, that is not so readily changeable and which some of us may even be able to give a name to: ‘I am a Muslim’, ‘I am a socialist’, ‘I am a feminist’, ‘I am a conservative’.

For most of us, beliefs of these kinds are an important cornerstone of our existence, acting as a filter which defines the things we accept or reject, and as a driving force that makes us jump one way as opposed to another. They shape the way we think, the judgements we make, the perceptions we hold about people, and the companions we choose to spend our time with. They are an important part of how we define ourselves, and yet they are never completely our own creation. It is even sometimes argued that whole nations can be defined in terms of a kind of value system:

David Cameron [the former British Prime Minister] will today signal a sea-change in the government fight against home-grown terrorism, saying the state must confront, and not consort with, the non-violent Muslim groups that are ambiguous about British values such as equality between sexes, democracy and integration.

To belong in Britain is to believe in these values, he will say. (Wintour, 2011)

One might well ask if it is *really* possible to say that someone who doesn’t believe in democracy or in the equality of the sexes is somehow not really British. After all, until 1928, most women in Britain were denied the vote, but presumably the people who lived then were not less British than we are now!

The very contentiousness of Mr Cameron’s remarks illustrates an important aspect of value systems. They are usually *contested*. Two British people may both be proud of their British values, and yet disagree profoundly about what British values consist of. (Again, the 2016 referendum springs to mind!) Two Muslims may both be strongly committed to Muslim values, yet may still disagree at a very basic level as to what Muslim values are. And this applies to ‘social work values’ too. We can all agree they are important, but we may still disagree as to what they include, or how they should be applied.

These are complicated questions, but for the moment we suggest you might like to give some thought to your own value system, and how it interacts with the value systems of others.

### Exercise 1.1 The values behind your choices

The following are examples of different kinds of choice. Think about how you would decide on what choice to make in each case, and ask yourself what set of values you would base your choice on:

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- Your daughter is exceptionally able academically. A wealthy relative offers to pay for her to attend a prestigious private school, where she will be able to have much more individual attention from teachers and a programme much more tailored to her individual needs than she would at your local comprehensive. Do you accept the offer?
- In a supermarket you have a choice between buying two packets of tea of similar quality: one is more expensive because the company that produces it pays a good price to the growers; the other is cheaper because the company that produces it pays the absolute minimum to the growers that it can get away with. Which one do you choose?
- You are married. Your partner's best friend tells you that they find you very attractive and suggests an affair. Do you tell your partner about this incident?
- You are a social worker. You are visiting a single parent who is struggling emotionally and financially. She tells you that she is supplementing her income by dealing in crack cocaine, and asks for your assurance that you will tell no one about it. What do you say?

## Comments on Exercise 1.1

The choice you make will probably be based in part on your estimation of the likely outcomes of the various choices available to you. (Do you think your daughter would enjoy being in a private school and do well there?) But it will also be based on what value system you subscribe to. (Do you believe in private education? Do you think openness is always the most important thing in relationships, or is it sometimes better to keep things to yourself?) Often these kinds of decisions are difficult because they entail balancing competing, and perhaps contradictory, values. ('I think my daughter would be happier in the private school and I believe I ought to do my very best for my daughter, but I also disapprove of private schooling'; 'I want to be truthful with my partner, but I don't want to wreck a friendship'.)

In the last example, however – where your client admits to dealing in drugs – the decision to be made is not simply a personal one. Your agency would have its own expectations and perhaps written guidelines about how to deal with such a situation (for example, guidelines about confidentiality and its limits).

## Values and social work

The final example in Exercise 1.1 illustrates that when we move from our private life to our professional life, the concept of 'values' takes on an additional dimension. Value questions don't go away when we put on our professional 'hat' – far from it – but they cease to be purely personal. As Kerstin Svensson observes:

Outside the organization, 'doing good' is just a personal matter ... Within the organization, social work does not just entail 'doing good' but also includes the exercise of power and influence ... It is thus necessary to understand the concept

of ‘doing good’ from a perspective where the organizational aspects are taken into consideration. (2009: 235)

In other words, when you are a paid professional, you cannot just pretend that your relationships with your clients are of the same kind as your relationships with people you know in your private life, for you carry the powers and responsibilities conferred on you by your job. All professions therefore have ethical codes which aim, among other things, to prevent the abuse and misuse of power, and social workers in particular, because they typically work with the least powerful people in society, need to be aware of the exercise of power and control that they are actually engaged in on a daily basis.

In social work, you will be constantly involved in judgements in which competing values have to be weighed up, and you will have a number of different frameworks, sometimes contradictory or contentious, within which to make these decisions.

### The Level of Legislation

Various principles are enshrined in the framework of laws, policies, government guidelines and agency rules within which social work operates. These principles are based, implicitly or explicitly, on certain values, as Exercise 1.2 illustrates.

## Exercise 1.2 values implicit in laws

In English and Welsh law, the 1983 Mental Health Act, Section 3, states that an Approved Social Worker (or an Approved Mental Health Professional, following the changes made by the 2007 Mental Health Act) can make an application for a person to be admitted to hospital and detained there for treatment, only if certain conditions are met, including that:

- he is suffering from mental illness, severe mental impairment, psychopathic disorder or mental impairment and his mental disorder is of a nature or degree which makes it appropriate for him to receive medical treatment in a hospital; and
- in the case of psychopathic disorder or mental impairment, such treatment is likely to alleviate or prevent a deterioration of his condition; and
- it is necessary for the health and safety of the patient or the protection of other persons that he should receive such treatment and it cannot be provided unless he is detained under this section.

What values are implied by this? What alternative viewpoints might there be?

## Comments on Exercise 1.2

One thing that you might notice about the law is that a person *cannot* be detained simply because they are mentally ill, but only if their own health or safety is at risk, or if they are

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endangering others. It therefore tries to strike a balance between protecting individual liberty and protecting the welfare of mentally ill people and the public. So there are competing values embedded here, with the law attempting to strike a balance between:

- the right to personal liberty;
- the right of the general public to protection; and
- the right, in some circumstances, to be protected against ourselves.

Because it is a compromise, this means that some people who are mentally ill, and are unhappy as a result, cannot be made to accept medical help, even if that help would make them feel better. Those who drafted the legislation obviously felt that this was a price worth paying in order to protect liberty. But this is a value judgement, and you may disagree. You might think that it should be made easier to compulsorily treat people who are not able to make rational judgements about their own best interests.

On the other hand, you may well think the legislation makes it too *easy* to detain people. After all, the usual principle is that a person cannot be detained unless they can be proved to have done something wrong. It would not normally be regarded as acceptable to deprive someone of their liberty just because it was thought they were likely to do something wrong in the future. So why should it be possible to detain a person who happens to be (in the opinion of doctors) ‘mentally disordered’, even if they haven’t as yet harmed anyone?

The position you take really depends on the relative value you place on welfare and liberty.

The principles enshrined in legislation are not necessarily in harmony with one another. They can and do conflict. Nor are they necessarily in harmony with other aspects of government decision-making. For instance, the legislation may enshrine one principle, but government policy, at the local or national level, may make that principle impossible to achieve in practice (for example, if there is insufficient funding). The principles enshrined in legislation may also conflict with professional ethics. Donald Dixon (2009: 266), writing in particular about the child protection field, notes that ‘ethical and legal standards are not always co-terminous’. He points out that there are ways of behaving that are not illegal, but still not ethical according to normal professional standards (for example, it is not actually illegal to be rude and overbearing with service users), and there are also ways of behaving that may be illegal, but which some social workers may feel to be their ethical obligation. (We will come back in Chapter 4 to the dilemmas faced by social workers asked to implement policies they believe to be wrong.)

### The Level of Policy and Procedure

In addition to the framework provided by the law, government provides guidelines and procedures which agencies are required to follow, and individual agencies have their own documents ranging from broad ‘mission statements’ to detailed procedural manuals. Sometimes these documents include explicit statements about an organisation’s values, and about the ethical principles it attempts to follow. This is particularly the case with mission statements, such as the following from the British children’s charity Barnardo’s:

Barnardo's believes in children regardless of their circumstances, gender, race, disability or behaviour. Our purpose as a charity today is to transform the lives of the UK's most vulnerable children.

We believe in the abused, the most vulnerable, the forgotten and the neglected. We will support them, stand up for them and bring out the best in each and every child.

We do this because we believe that every child deserves the best start in life and the chance to fulfil their potential.

We use the knowledge gained from our direct work with children to campaign for better childcare policy and to champion the rights of every child.

With the right help, committed support and a little belief, even the most vulnerable children can turn their lives around. Barnardo's is regulated by the Charity Commission. Being a registered charity means that we must always be accountable and transparent. (Barnardo's, 2016)

Often, guidelines and policy documents do not make explicit statements of values in the way that Barnardo's do above. Nevertheless, it is always possible to discern the value assumptions that lie behind such documents, just as it is possible to identify the values underlying laws, as we showed in Exercise 1.2.

### The Level of Agency Priorities

What people say and what they do are not necessarily the same. If someone said 'I really value your opinion' but then never let you get a word in without immediately interrupting or contradicting you, you might well question whether they really *did* respect your opinion so very much. Whether looking at yourself, or some other person, or an organisation – or indeed a whole society – it is necessary to look behind words and stated intentions to get an idea of the values that really guide actions.

If you want to understand an agency's values, therefore, it is important to look at its priorities *in practice* as well as its stated intentions. Consider, for instance, an agency that stated that it was committed to working *preventatively* or *proactively*. If you looked at the way it responded to new referrals and found out that they were only ever followed up if they were dire emergencies, you would have to conclude that, in fact, working preventatively was not a priority for that agency, whatever it might say or whatever its staff might like to think. Words and deeds are not necessarily the same thing, but it is not uncommon in social work for virtuous-sounding words ('partnership', 'empowerment', 'person-centred') to be used rather freely, as if words themselves were equivalent to actual behaviour. (For more on 'virtuous words', see Beckett, 2009. We will come back to this in Chapter 5.)

So, part of the values framework within which a social worker operates is their agency's *priorities* and its expectations *in practice* about the ways things should be dealt with, which may or may not be reflected in the agency's public statements about its values.

### The Level of Professional Ethics

Doctors, lawyers and accountants all have their codes of professional ethics, and so do social workers (we discuss them further in Chapter 6). Underlying all these formal

codes typically are certain values which are seen as being core to that profession. These guidelines, and the professional values that lie behind them, set a different kind of framework of expectations around professionals which is distinct from those created by legislation, policies and agency priorities. The job of a doctor is different in different settings – a heart surgeon and a GP have very different tasks to perform – and yet certain ethical principles, and a certain professional ethos, are supposed to be common to all doctors. The same is true of social work. And it can happen that professional values come into conflict with the values inherent in legislation or policy or agency guidelines.

## Personal values

A professional social worker – or indeed any other professional – cannot *only* be guided by her personal values, but she cannot simply disregard her personal values either. Personal values, after all, lie behind her decision to go into social work in the first place, rather than into some other occupation. Many people who go into social work are motivated by a belief that it is important to do something for those who are excluded or disadvantaged by society at large. Some are motivated by religious beliefs or political convictions. Your own personal values will also inevitably influence how you do your job and the decisions and choices that you make, so it is as well to think about what they are.

### Exercise 1.3 Your personal values

List some of the basic beliefs about what is 'right' and what you think is 'wrong' that you feel most strongly about. For example, what would your friends identify as things that you feel most passionately about?

Examine these beliefs and ask yourself which ones you would regard as the most central and enduring. Which would you most readily describe as being 'part of who you are'?

Identify some of the influences upon your life that have helped shape those beliefs. Would you identify any of them as being part of a 'value system'? If you are Jewish, for instance, you might identify some of your beliefs as having been instilled in you by Jewish culture. Or you might subscribe to a set of beliefs which you describe as 'socialist' or 'feminist'. Even things like what newspaper you prefer to read might to some extent loosely define a value system to which you subscribe.

Consider how your beliefs/values might have shaped you differently if you were brought up in a different country or at a different time in history.

Consider how your beliefs/values might be different if you had been brought up in a different family or a different social class.

To what extent do you think your gender makes a difference to the way you view the world and the values you consider to be important?

In what ways have your values changed over time? Are the values you hold now different from the ones you were brought up with?

## Comments on Exercise 1.3

We don't know, of course, what you may have come up with in this exercise. We can only say that the three authors of this book subscribe in many respects to very different value systems, which can be seen as in part the product of personal choice and in part the product of very different backgrounds. One of us is black, the other two are white. One of us has a strong commitment to a particular religion (Christianity), the others do not. As a result of these sorts of differences, we bring different priorities and assumptions to our work. (And yet, in spite of these differences, we also find that we have a good deal in common and are fully able to collaborate on this book!)

Sometimes your duties as a social worker may require you to act in ways that conflict with deeply held personal convictions. This could happen, for example, if you believed on religious grounds that abortion was morally wrong under all circumstances, but your job required you to advise service users about abortion without trying to influence their choice. We will say a little more about these kinds of dilemma later in the chapter.

But as well as conscious beliefs that may or may not be consistent with what we are asked to do at work, we all also have unexamined values, unconscious biases which affect our decision-making even though we ourselves might question them if we really thought about them. For this reason, it is important to be as aware as possible of what those values are and where they come from.

## Exercise 1.4 Daycare priorities

Resources are necessarily finite and social workers are often involved, in all kinds of ways, in decisions about who gets a service and who does not.

Imagine that you work for an agency which provides some financial help for lone parents under pressure who would like daycare for their children. You are part of a panel which decides on the allocation of funds. There is just enough money in the budget to provide assistance to one family, and you have four applicants. On what basis should you make your recommendation? And why?

- a. The parent and child you like the best.
- b. The parent or child who reminds you of your own personal circumstances.
- c. The parent who you think is most intimidating and likely to be 'difficult' if not given the place.
- d. The parent and child whose circumstances you find the most touching.
- e. The parent you regard as most deserving of help.
- f. The ethnic background of the parent or child.
- g. The gender of the parent.
- h. The needs of the child.
- i. The needs of the parent.
- j. The needs of the playgroup.

## Comments on Exercise 1.4

You will probably agree that (a)–(d) are not an appropriate basis on which to make such a decision: we are being paid to perform a specific role for society, not to indulge our private preferences. But if you have ever been in a situation of this kind, you will know that it can be quite difficult to eliminate such factors from one's thoughts, particularly in borderline situations.

What about the question of which applicant is the most 'deserving'? This seems to us to be a moral judgement about which of the applicants is the 'better' person – and does not fit with a professional role. Who are we to judge in this way? In the nineteenth century, however, welfare agencies did make a very sharp distinction between the deserving and the undeserving poor.

You almost certainly said that ethnic background is not an appropriate basis for such decision-making. This is not to say, however, that specific services should never be targeted at specific ethnic groups. African or African-Caribbean children in the looked-after system, to give one instance, may require specific help in connection with hair and skin care, which is different from the help required by white children. But this is a question of different needs, not of giving preferential treatment to one group over another.

When it comes to gender, it seems to us, differential treatment can be justified only if it can be demonstrated that one gender has different needs from the other. (Lone fathers are rarer than lone mothers, for instance, and it is possible to argue that they have different support needs as a result.)

You may well have thought that both the needs of the parent and of the child were appropriate bases for decision-making. In fact, under the 1989 Children Act, it is ultimately the need of the child not the parent that is supposed to be the determining factor, but in practice the needs of parent and child are usually interconnected.

The needs of the playgroup itself must also be relevant, since if the playgroup's needs are not taken into account it would in the long run be all the group's users who lost out. Thus, even if she is clearly identified to be most in need, it may not be appropriate to recommend a child to the playgroup who is known to present difficult and disruptive behaviour, if this seems likely to jeopardise the functioning of the group as a whole.

The point that this exercise is intended to illustrate is that there are certain kinds of value judgement that we as individuals inevitably make (such as whether or not we like a person) which should have no place in our practice as professionals. The appropriate basis for the kinds of decision illustrated by the exercise should be an assessment of needs. But we should be under no illusions that by focusing on needs we have somehow avoided the problem of value judgements. Weighing up one person's needs against another is a matter of judgement and cannot be done without making decisions about what kinds of needs are more or less important than others. In most situations, there are also questions of competing and perhaps conflicting needs – the needs of the parent, the child and the playgroup in the above example – which have to be weighed up one against another.

Your judgements in practice are almost inevitably going to be influenced by your own beliefs and your own life experience. If you have personal experience of poverty or of lone parenthood or of domestic violence, for instance, you may take a different view of cases where poverty or lone parenthood are factors than a social worker without

personal experience of these things. If you have strong views that small children should, as far as possible, be cared for by their parents and not left with professional carers, then you may take a different position from a person who believes very strongly that lone parents should, as of right, be given the necessary support with childcare to allow them to pursue a career.

It is impossible to eliminate these personal values from professional decision-making. It is possible, though, to keep our values and assumptions under review, be open to other arguments and ideas, and to recognise the possibility that our own background has resulted in us having some unconscious biases which others are entitled to challenge. It is also possible to recognise that certain preferences or beliefs are irrelevant to the task in hand and should be disregarded.

## Societal values

We were sceptical earlier about the idea of ‘British values’. The views and priorities of people who live in a whole society are just too diverse to be neatly encapsulated in a single set of values. Nevertheless, it is true to say that each society, at a given point in time, has some generally accepted norms.

In Britain, for instance, there has been a huge shift in the last 50 years in what is generally regarded as acceptable sexual behaviour. Premarital sex is nowadays accepted as the norm and, generally speaking, has no stigma attached to it where it once would have done. Homosexual relationships have shifted from being prohibited by law to being a form of relationship that can be formalised by marriage just like heterosexual ones. By contrast, premarital sex is a punishable offence in some countries, such as Saudi Arabia, and ‘in five countries and in parts of two others, homosexuality is still punishable with the death penalty, while a further 70 imprison citizens because of their sexual orientation’ (BBC News, 2009, 2014).

Corporal punishment is another example. Fifty years ago, caning and other forms of corporal punishment were seen as normal and acceptable in schools and at home in Britain. Now, any form of punishment that leaves a mark could result in criminal prosecution of parents, and teachers are not allowed to use corporal punishment at all in Britain (Children’s Legal Centre, 2008). In 49 countries all corporal punishment of children is illegal (Global Initiative to End Corporal Punishment of Children, 2016), but in many other countries beating of children is not only legal but still the norm. Clearly societies do have different prevailing values. But social work offices typically include people from different social backgrounds, different ethnic and religious communities, and different parts of the world. Not everyone will agree with the prevailing values of society.

And it often also happens that even widely-held values, with which few people would disagree, will frequently come into conflict *with one another*. In Exercise 1.2, we looked at the 1983 Mental Health Act in England and Wales, and noted that it attempts to balance important yet fundamentally contradictory principles: (a) the state should respect individual liberty; (b) the state should protect the public and vulnerable people. It is in the nature of social work that it tends to find itself in these kinds of difficult places where deeply held societal values collide. And, since this involves making compromises in which one principle is partly sacrificed for another, this can often result in social workers seeming, in the eyes of others, to trample on one or other of those deeply held values. The idea that family life is sacrosanct and private, for instance, is a deeply held belief in our society and, for this reason, social workers intervening in families can easily be seen

as interfering and oppressive, transgressing against a deep taboo. On the other hand, since it is also a strongly and widely held belief that childhood is precious and that children should be protected from harm, the failure of social workers to intervene in families to protect children may be greeted with horror and *also* be seen as transgressive.

And because these societal values exist not only outside of us but also inside our own heads, social workers need to be prepared not only for the condemnation of others, but also for powerful feelings of guilt. The example in Exercise 1.5 illustrates this.

## Exercise 1.5 Taking Geraldine's baby

Geraldine, aged 23, was a victim in childhood of sexual and physical abuse, emotional rejection and neglect. She is a vulnerable person who has very low self-esteem, has made several suicide attempts and is very easily led. As an adult, she has a history of entering into relationships with violent, abusive men. She is a heroin user. She has just given birth to her third child, a baby boy.

Her two previous babies have been adopted. The first baby, whom she had at the age of 16, was taken into care when Geraldine disappeared for two weeks, leaving the baby in the care of a 13-year-old girl to whom she gave £5 to look after him. The second was brain-damaged as a result of shaking by Geraldine's then partner. This occurred when Geraldine had moved in with him in secret, while pretending to live at another address. This had been against a specific undertaking that she made to the professional agencies to allow no contact between him and the baby in view of his known history of violence to other children.

The new baby is likely to present particular management problems due to Geraldine's heroin use during pregnancy. (The effect of withdrawal from heroin on a newborn baby is known as Neonatal Abstinence Syndrome and can produce a range of effects, including irritability, sleeping and feeding problems, prolonged screaming, fever, vomiting and diarrhoea.)

Geraldine's current boyfriend, who is not the father of the baby, is another man with a history of violence against Geraldine and others.

A decision has been reached by a pre-birth child protection conference that Geraldine's baby should be removed from her immediately at birth. Because of Geraldine's history of hiding from the authorities and running away, the conference exceptionally decided that Geraldine should not be informed of this decision in advance.

As a social worker, you and a police officer are to attend the hospital to arrange for the removal of the new baby to a foster home under a police protection order. When you arrive, Geraldine is nursing the baby, looking radiantly happy. She knows you, and when she sees you she smiles and tells you that this time she knows she is going to get it right and give this little boy all the love she herself never received.

How would you react?

## Comments on Exercise 1.5

However necessary it was for the baby's safety for him to be taken from his mother, there can be few people who would not feel very badly about removing a child from a mother under such circumstances. There is surely no society in which the bond between mother and



baby is not seen as something precious. And in any case, it feels wrong to shatter the happiness of a young woman who has experienced so little happiness in her life.

In such situations, one may be tempted to back-track on the agreed plan in some way, or to dilute the painful message that needs to be given.

Nevertheless, if a decision has been reached, after proper consideration of the possible consequences of all the available courses of action, then it would be wrong to allow your own feelings to deflect you from carrying out that course of action – and in fact you are not at liberty to do so, since the plan is not your individual one but one that has been agreed between all the agencies.

None of these arguments, however, is likely to change the way that you and the police officer will feel about carrying out the case conference decision.

## Values in tension

Social workers are called upon to perform many complex tasks that involve difficult human interactions and in some instances involve overruling what would normally be regarded as an individual's rights (compulsory detention under mental health legislation, or separation of children and parents under childcare legislation being cases in point). In trying to come to the right decision about how to respond in any given situation, the social worker struggles not only with her own personal feelings, the limitations of her own skill and knowledge, and the constraints imposed by the real world of limited options, she also struggles with a plethora of competing values – societal values, personal values, professional values and the prevailing values of her agency (see Figure 1.1 on the next page).

This struggle may be experienced as conflict *within* the individual between different and competing personal values and/or internalised societal values (as we tried to illustrate in Exercise 1.5). In some situations, a social worker's personal values may be very sharply in conflict with what she is expected to do as part of her duties. We used the example of a social worker opposed to abortion earlier, but it could also happen if you were opposed on moral grounds to any kind of immigration controls, but the law required your agency to report suspected illegal immigrants (a scenario we discuss in Chapter 4), or if you came from a cultural background where corporal punishment of children was generally accepted to be the right thing to do, and you were asked to take on, as a child protection case, a child with the exact same cultural background as yourself who had been beaten in a way that would have been perfectly acceptable in your own community. In such situations, the social worker may be involved in a very painful sort of 'cost-benefit' analysis, weighing up the benefits and costs of setting aside the values of her own community (and her loyalty to, and perhaps even her standing in, that community), as against the benefits and costs of staying true to her own community and perhaps being unable to carry out her professional duties as a result.

But the struggle between competing values may also take the form of disagreements with others. For instance, it can involve disagreement with colleagues about how to proceed. (Your strongly held view might be that 'Mrs Brown may be a little confused but we should still respect her right to take risks if she wants to do so'. Your colleague's strongly held view might be that 'We owe it to Mrs Brown to take steps to protect her against the consequences of her own impaired judgement'.) It may entail disagreements



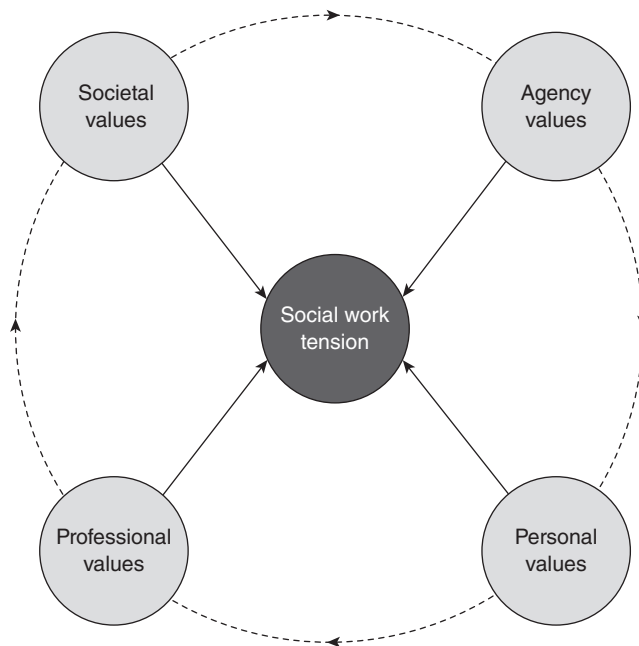


Figure 1.1 Competing values

with service users. (Your position – and your agency’s position – may be that ‘beating your children is unacceptable’. A parent’s position may be: ‘You have no right to tell me how to bring up my children. I was always beaten and it never did me any harm at all’.) It may involve struggles with managers or other agencies. There are endless arenas, internal and external, within which value conflicts are played out. Figure 1.2 (on the next page) attempts to illustrate these wider complexities.

## What do we mean by ‘ethics’?

Although we have explored the word ‘values’, we have not yet attempted a definition of ‘ethics’. It is a word with several meanings, but all of them rather narrower and more specific than that of ‘values’. Ethics relate not just to our overall stance on life, or to our general notions of what is important, but to actual rules, codes or principles of conduct. Since these rules and principles will always ultimately be based on a values system of some kind, ethics can be seen as the practical application of values. ‘Human life is sacred’, for example, is a pretty universal value, from which flows the ethical principle that it is wrong, at least in most circumstances, to kill. Likewise, ‘privacy is important’ is a value which forms the basis of professional obligations to respect the confidentiality of clients. Dubois and Miley (2008: 111) suggest that ‘whereas values are the implicit or explicit beliefs about what people consider good, ethics relates to what people consider correct or right.’

In social work, a distinction can also be made between, on the one hand, professional ethics – the principles of conduct, enshrined in various codes, which are broadly similar to those followed by other professions – and, on the other hand, the ‘emancipatory

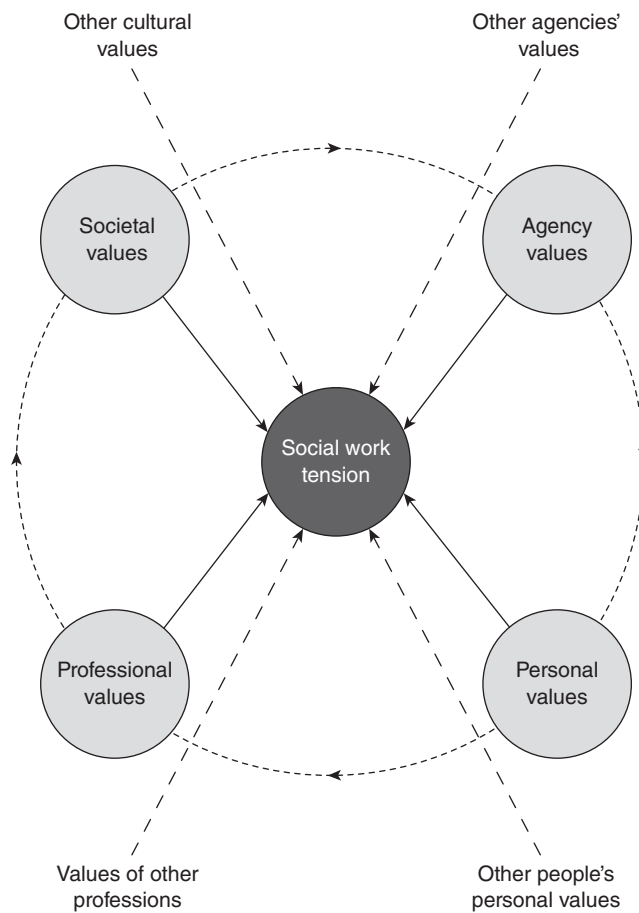


Figure 1.2 Competing values: the wider picture

values', broader and more political in character, which are particularly characteristic of social work. This reflects the fact that while other professions (teachers, doctors, lawyers) work with people from across the whole of society, social workers' particular focus is on the least powerful groups in society.

## Chapter summary

This chapter has been an exploration of what we mean by 'values' and 'ethics'. We have considered the meaning of the words themselves, arguing that 'values' are a basic component of decision-making, whether in a personal or professional context. We have looked at different kinds of values, including the values that are contained, implicitly or explicitly, in laws, policies and agency practice, as well as societal and personal values. We have

*(Continued)*

*(Continued)*

considered the tensions and contradictions that can arise between competing values, and we have offered a view of 'ethics' as rules of principles of behaviour that flow from values.

A more specialist use of the word 'ethics' is a name given to the branch of philosophy, also called 'moral philosophy', that considers the nature of morality. This is the topic we explore in the next chapter.



## Further reading

We hope that this book will offer a balanced introduction to the subject of values and ethics in social work, but of course every book necessarily reflects the views (and indeed the values) of its authors. We therefore recommend that you read more widely and also look at other introductions to the subject. These include the following books by Sarah Banks and by Lester Parrott:

Banks, S. (2012) *Ethics and Values in Social Work*, 4th edn. Basingtoke: Palgrave.

Parrott, L. (2014) *Values and Ethics in Social Work Practice*, 3rd edn. London: Learning Matters.