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Reid, James

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## **To Register or Not—the Relevance of the Social Work Codes of Practice for the Social Work Lecturer**

Higher education institutions in the United Kingdom are increasingly demanding that social work lecturers are 'registered' with the UK regulatory body, the General Social Care Council (GSCC) as a requirement of appointment for the post of social work lecturer. There are many compelling reasons for such an expectation but this paper argues that such action should not be undertaken uncritically. Using Colnerud's five categories of norms a number of tensions for the lecturer are explored that indicate that the current GSCC codes of practice do not fully recognize the role of the social work lecturer.

In the United Kingdom the General Social Care Council (GSCC) Codes of Practice (2002a) define for the social work practitioner, student and employer the behaviour expected of them in their work. As such the codes confirm to the professional and the public the standards of professional conduct and practice required. They are a central tool in the regulation of the social work workforce and abiding by the standards set out in the codes is crucial to a practitioner's registration with the GSCC. As a restricted title in law only those who are registered with the GSCC are able to use the title 'social worker'. Increasingly departments of social work within universities are requiring registration with the GSCC as a prerequisite for the position of lecturer. This position is understandable and there are several arguments for registration including: maintaining close links between social workers and academics; all academics should be required to do some practice; it would not be good for academia to become an escape route for social workers who don't meet registration requirements; registration could discourage inappropriate relationships between teachers and students; and social work lecturers should seek to promote a professional identity similar to that required by nursing and the professions allied to medicine. Of course some of these reasons are more compelling than others but several dilemmas are presented to the lecturer by the demand from employers for registration, and these are now explored.

There are a number of obvious dilemmas, the first of which is 'fit' in that the codes of practice are for social care workers and their employers and they do not specifically mention lecturers of social work or the education setting. The lecturer would therefore be required to extrapolate, and whilst this would be straightforward for some it can also give rise to difficulty. Strom-Gottfried and D'Aprix (2006) applied various professional codes to the resolution of ethical dilemmas typical to social work education. Whilst they recognize 'that the codes had some use, none [was] wholly satisfying in addressing the issues that occur in academia or in meaningfully assisting faculty toward resolution'. They cite the aspirational nature of some of the standards and 'a difficulty in . . . the transferability of concepts intended for use in client\_/worker relationships to those experienced in social work education' (Strom-Gottfried & D'Aprix 2006, p. 241).

Secondly, there is an obvious contradiction that for a profession that professes to value difference an institution would seek to exclude members of the academic community from holding the position of social work lecturer. In the membership of the team to which I belong there are two colleagues who do not have social work qualifications and who

would therefore be excluded from registration and by default from applying for certain lecturing positions. The potential for exclusion of such knowledge and experience is contrary to the ethos of social work and good educational practice, particularly as such colleagues provide an essential function of providing social work education a contrary voice from within the ranks.

There are undoubtedly clear reasons for the scrutiny and regulation of the social work lecturer; Colnerud (1997, p. 628), for example, in justifying that teachers need to develop their ethical competence, offers four 'arguments'. These are applicable to higher education: firstly, teachers have power and may misuse this to the detriment of students; secondly, there is little control over the teacher's behaviour in the classroom; thirdly, students are now customers; and, fourthly, there is a need for accountability and public trust in the education system. Furthermore, it is clear that many of the dilemmas exist because of the inherent contradictions in education, for example, meeting the needs of the whole class or cohort whilst also being responsive to specific needs and thus ensuring that the individual is not disadvantaged. These arguments underpin the need for effective regulation, and Colnerud (1997, p. 630) further develops her analysis to offer five categories of norms that influence teachers and their practice:

- Ethical interpersonal norms - these include integrity, autonomy, justice and veracity and are similar to the common morality framework suggested by the 'four principles' (Beauchamp & Childress 1994).
- Internal professional norms from the task - suggestive of the goals of education, especially the broader (political) aims and objectives as measured through competencies and benchmarks.
- Institutional norms - the formal agency culture and demands in terms of bureaucracy, management expectations, conformity and the contract of employment.
- Self-protecting norms - the teacher's behaviour that is oriented to promoting their own well-being. The impact of personal biases, mores and limitations.
- Social conformity norms - the informal agency culture, including membership of groups and professional identification.

These norms go some way to encompassing the tenor and content of the codes but there is a danger in accepting them uncritically; also, it is possible to identify further tensions within each of the categories as described below:

- Ethical interpersonal norms - the 'four principles' are based firmly upon the concept of 'common morality', a combination of both Kantian and Utilitarian approaches to ethics. Principle-based approaches have value for the social work lecturer but do not fully account for the complexity of the social work task and in

particular the competing claims for action between individuals or groups, between users, carers or students, and between individuals and society. In social work, the importance or primacy of the relationship between the worker and service user is stressed alongside the worker's sense of duty to the person.

- Internal professional norms\*/the GSCC does not require but would prefer that all lecturers of social work register with it, so why are some universities insisting on lecturer registration? The trend appears to be most evident within, although not exclusive to, the post-1992 institutions and in faculties or schools that combine both health and social care provision. Whilst the continuing introduction of standardized approaches to education and continuing professional development, exemplified by the codes of practice, registration, benchmarks and the quality agenda, may seek to raise standards and the quality of service provision this does not negate a consideration of their wider impact and effect upon the lecturer. We should be wary that the procedural obligations of the lecturer and demands of the institution do not outweigh or become more important than other obligations.

The demand that social work lecturers should be compelled to register on the basis of professional equity because nurses and the professions allied to medicine are so required is understandable in light of the considerable emphasis being given by the Department of Health to common approaches and common goals across health and social care where employers and institutions are asked to 'look at the workforce in a different way, as teams of people rather than as different professional tribes. For too long we have planned and trained staff in a uni-professional/uni-disciplinary way' (cited in Meads 2006, p. 5). Subsequently the Children's Workforce Strategy (Department for Education and Skills 2006) set out plans to develop an integrated qualifications framework and Our Health, Our Care, Our Say (Department of Health 2006) set out a vision of better integration of those working in the NHS and those working in social care. Such developments may be necessary and laudable but there are a number of tensions between the inevitable influence of current political ideology and the concept of professionalism and professional accountability as defined by knowledge and understanding, skills and abilities and adherence to professional ethics and values of the lecturer. To require registration on the basis of political expediency is to ignore the breadth, qualities and requirements of the lecturing role.

- Institutional norm - /as the codes are applicable to both workers and employers should institutions also explicitly sign up? This would be particularly interesting as the GSCC is forthright in declaring that the codes of practice are part of an overall strategy for workforce 'regulation' through which the worker is aware of the conduct expected by employer and service users (GSCC 2002b, p. 5). As such, not only is the lecturer effectively demoted from a 'professional', autonomous academic to an 'employee' but it is assumed therefore that both employee and employer, GSCC and university, share the same aims, objectives, reasoning, and modus operandi. The potential for conflict and tension within the higher education sector is obvious, particularly as academic contracts of employment encourage

autonomy and controversy, albeit within legal constraints. The code's usefulness to the lecturer is unclear. The impact of deregistration would simply prevent the lecturer from practising as a social worker and therefore appears to lead into a legal fog, particularly as the GSCC does not require social work lecturers to register in the first instance.

- Self-protecting norms - the GSCC codes suggest that the needs of the individual service user (student!) should be taken into consideration when planning an intervention (teaching!). Beyond this it is difficult to reconcile the specific nature of the codes and standards with an educational context. Although the codes seek to enshrine professionalism and define conduct in terms of 'trust', 'respect' and 'honest(y) and trustworthiness' these are almost metaphors as they are unexamined, unexplained, without context and differently understood (Banks 2001); indeed, there are at least eight synonyms for trust. Whilst there is clearly a danger in reducing such concepts to the vagaries of dictionary definition and language we should consider that such concepts are also experienced, taught and learned by example and from role models. In this case the notion of narrative is crucial to understanding because definitions will be based upon 'crucial experiences during formative years' (Cowley 2005, p. 741). This points to the importance of understanding the personal in practice both for the student and the lecturer in order to avoid 'coming dangerously close to a mere exchange of inarticulate ethical intuitions . . .' (Cowley 2005, p. 741). It is noticeable, for example, that in the development of the current codes and standards the one value from the previous era that required social workers to consider their personal history, values and vigorously held beliefs - 'identify and question their own values and practices, and their implications for practice' (GSCC 2001, p. 5) - is absent.
- Social conformity norms\*/there are competing professional demands for lecturers of health and social care students\*/those of teaching and those of their original professional background (social work, nursing, physiotherapy, etc.). For many lecturers precedence is given to the latter, particularly when, as with the Nursing and Midwifery Council (NMC), the regulatory body demands that lecturers are also 'registered' with the Council. As such the teacher is required to sign up to a set of codes that relate to a profession other than teaching.

One outcome may be the teaching of predominant models or approaches of ethics that are influenced by the demands of membership of the regulatory or professional body presented through the code of practice or conduct. In such a context lecturers 'have an interest in avoiding censure' by the regulator, may adopt a 'pragmatically oriented' approach focused on the 'professional codes of conduct in operation', and seek 'to understand how these codes might be applied to their [teaching] behaviour' (HEA 2004, p. 12).

In all, the expectation of registration with the GSCC by institutions raises a number of significant dilemmas for the social work lecturer. The arguments presented do not imply

unwillingness towards oversight and regulation but rather an acknowledgement that the codes of practice as currently stated do not fully encompass the context or needs of the lecturer. It may be argued that it is preferable to register and to seek change from within (R. Adams, pers. comm. 2007) thus avoiding accusations of resistance to change and sniping from the sidelines. However, there is no evidence that such strategies are having an impact towards a review of the codes.

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