

Professional virtues in the digital world: slow ethics for social work during Covid-19

SARAH BANKS
s.j.banks@durham.ac.uk



Plan

- Background on social work, digital working and Covid-19
- International survey of social workers
- A virtue ethical lens
- Ethical challenges in moving to digital communication
- Social worker responses: ethical confusion; distress; creativity; learning
- What virtues are needed for creativity and learning in relation to digital working?
- Conclusions - slow ethics and professional wisdom in times of crisis

Digital social work

- **Digital technologies include:** electronic case management and business software systems, online resources, assistive technologies, social media, informatics, data protection systems, hardware, online learning, artificial intelligence and machine learning (BASW 2020)
- **Digital working less advanced in social work** than in medicine or business (Berzin, Singer & Chan, 2015)
- **Relationship-building is important in social work** – in-person communication, home visits, use of all senses
- **Focus today** – ethical challenges caused by shift from in-person to digital communication during Covid-19, looking through a virtue ethical lens

An independent social worker in France, working as a counsellor, commented on using video calls during lock-down for the first time:



"It was humiliating but good at the same time".

Impact of Covid-19 on social work

- Restrictions on in-person meetings
- Shift to more digital working
- Reduction of services
- Increasing need
- New and complex risks



Research on ethical challenges for social workers during Covid-19

- International survey, May 2020
- Social Work Ethics Research Group & IFSW
- 607 responses, 54 countries
- Data collected in Hong Kong by Dr Michelle Shum, HKBU
- Qualitative questions: what are some of the ethical challenges; give a particular example
- Some distinctive challenges based on culture, religion, social work regime
- Many common challenges



A virtue

A moral disposition to feel, think and act in such a way as to promote human and ecological flourishing, entailing both a motivation to act well and, typically, the achievement of good ends. Virtues are often described as excellent traits of character, and entail a reliable disposition to act in certain predictable ways across contexts. E.g. courage, justice, care

[Confucius, Aristotle, modern virtue ethics]

Some virtues for social workers (adapted from Banks & Gallagher, 2009)

- *Professional wisdom* ('phronesis') is the excellence by which social workers deliberate well about what to do in their practice.
- *Care* is about how one person relates to others, related to the goal of enhancing the existence of the others.
- *Respectfulness* towards someone or something entails acknowledging the value of the person or thing, preserving and/or not destroying it and engaging with what is valued
- *Trustworthiness* is about not letting others down. A trustworthy social worker is someone who behaves as relied upon, accepts responsibility
- *Justice* is associated with fair allocation of benefits and burdens, and relies upon a capacity to make good judgements in weighing up how people should be treated.
- *Courage* is knowing what to fear and responding appropriately. According to Aristotle, 'a mean with regard to feelings of fear and confidence'.
- *Professional integrity*. In Aristotelian ethics, integrity was not regarded as a virtue *per se*, but as holding all the virtues together as a whole. In the context of social work, it means the overarching capacity or disposition to hold true to the values of the profession, and to balance other virtues as necessary.

Interpreting the survey through a virtue ethical lens

- No questions were asked specifically about virtues or character
- Examples given are largely action-focussed
- Often examples of ethical challenges are narratives featuring the teller as a moral agent
- These give a picture of what respondents judged to be ethically good social work, and by implication, an ethically good social worker.

The challenges: Six themes from the survey

1. **Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships** via phone or internet with due regard to privacy and confidentiality, or in person with protective equipment.
2. **Prioritising service user needs and demands**, which are greater and different due to the pandemic, when resources are stretched/unavailable and full assessments often impossible.
3. **Balancing service user rights, needs and risks** against personal risk to social workers and others, in order to provide services as well as possible.
4. **Deciding whether to follow national and organisational policies, procedures or guidance** (existing or new) or use professional discretion in circumstances where policies seem inappropriate, confused or lacking.
5. **Acknowledging and handling emotions**, fatigue and the need for self-care, when working in unsafe and stressful circumstances.
6. **Using lessons learned during the pandemic** to rethink social work in the future.



Focus today on

- Creating and maintaining trusting, honest and empathic relationships via phone or internet with due regard to privacy and confidentiality
- Related to this, in periods of lockdown, difficulties arise in deciding whether/when in-person communication should be used due to unavailability or inappropriateness of digital technology



Practical challenges with ethical implications

It is difficult to stay in contact with clients with lockdown in place. Social workers are fearful to conduct home visits, in case they get the virus. Our clients in townships and rural areas and informal settlements live in unhygienic circumstances anyway. So, the chance of them contracting Corona[virus] is high. Yet telephonic counselling is challenging due to poor reception. Many clients also change their cell phone numbers so you can't get them. None of them have landlines. Skype, etc, is not viable due to data costs and reception. (Social worker, South Africa)

- Non-existent/poor technology & connections
- Digital exclusion due to poverty
- Service users or social workers not comfortable with use of digital technology
- Some digital means of communication not allowed under existing rules



Digital working: not enough, uncaring, unjust ..

Not enough

I worry about children on my caseload being considered 'safe' because I did a phone call or FaceTime 'visit'. These children are not getting the proximity and presence of me in their homes, and I am not able to check that their environment is safe, that dangerous people aren't in the home, that it doesn't smell of drugs in the house, and so on. I don't feel that I am protecting these children enough. (Child protection Social Worker, UK)

The dilemma I experience in four families is that I don't have a good view on the level of tension and - possibly - domestic violence ... My ethical dilemma ... is that I actually do too little. I don't know what to do, because it is obvious that all children in these families suffer more emotional damage than normal ... and don't get it prevented ... Video call conversations have far too little depth, take less time than a home visit would take.... I can't get the children out of their situation. That's what's bothering me. (Social Worker, Netherlands)



Unjust and oppressive

I just feel that 'anti-social social work' (as I call it) fails families. Even though I understand the need to protect people; it has felt so unjust and oppressive.

... we want to get back to rolling up our sleeves and getting our hands 'dirty'; IN people's homes.

(Child and family social worker, UK)

Unjust – because people deserve more care and attention, and virtual assessments are based on inadequate evidence

Oppressive – because social workers can't 'be there for people', e.g. can't communicate bad/difficult news in-person

...

Responses to these challenges

- **Ethical confusion** – not knowing what was the right action to take, or how to work out what was right.
- **Ethical distress** – feeling negative emotions derived from knowing what would be the right course of action, but being unable to carry it out due to institutional or other constraints.
- **Ethical creativity** – making extra effort to work out what would be right in new circumstances and being flexible and imaginative in carrying it out.
- **Ethical learning** – reflecting on learning from the experience of working during the pandemic and implications for ethical practice in the future.



Ethical creativity: drawing on professional wisdom and other virtues

- Taking the initiative to move beyond confusion and distress
- Being prepared to practice outside current rules/guidance
- Seeing new possibilities
- Having the courage to act on them



Examples

- Hong Kong social workers creating digital activities to keep relationships with vulnerable children and young people
- Canadian social worker making up electronic consent form
- UK Deprivation of Liberties manager amending forms to say why in-person assessment not done – shared nationally
- Deciding when to conduct an in-person home visit rather than use digital communication (compare the Canadian and Dutch examples)

Deciding when to conduct an in-person home visit: Canadian mental health social worker

I am teleworking, my employer forbids me to ... have face-to-face contact with my clients. However, during a crisis situation, I had to go beyond this instruction, because my client's life was perhaps in danger, being isolated, without a network, having only me with whom he has contact. I decided to go to him, with the necessary protection (gloves and mask), to do my intervention face to face in order to succeed in getting my client hospitalized ... What made me take this decision? I remembered the motto of my employer at the time ... The human first! My reflection lasted two seconds and I left the house.

Does this ethical intuition fit the new circumstances?

Deciding when to conduct an in-person home visit: Dutch social worker

It is difficult and requires a lot of time and time again to consider whether visiting clients for prevention or support is appropriate. Colleagues deal with it in different ways, which leads to confusion. There is little guidance from the managers. [Here are some] examples:

- A service user who lacks daily structure and stays in bed all day.
- A service user who expresses experiencing constant fear.
- A service user who indicates that he is gloomy.
- A service user who has been out of contact for two weeks.
- A service user who indicates that it is going well, whereas the gut feeling of the professional indicates something else.
- A man with autism and an intellectual disability who has lost his mother and who lacks social support.



Might ethical confusion and ethical overload lead to ethical paralysis?

Dangers of both 'snap'/intuitive decisions and ethical paralysis ('over-thinking')

- What might be right pre-pandemic might not be so during the pandemic – this affects details of everyday practice in which ethics is embedded
- Use of professional judgement, professional wisdom – slow, deliberative work, employing both ethical reasoning and ethical imagination, requiring 'ethical vigilance'. Eg, Hong Kong social workers deciding to open their centre for the most lonely, vulnerable older people, based on individual risk assessments



How to practise ethically, drawing on professional wisdom, during the pandemic: moving from ethical confusion and distress to creativity and learning?

- **Ethical vigilance** – heightened awareness of one's own stress/anxiety; dangers of ignoring or harming people or infringing rights by reacting unthinkingly; need to look for hidden ethical issues.
- **Ethical reasoning** – weighing risks, rights and responsibilities of different people; reprioritising, recalibrating, rethinking ...
- **Ethical logistics** – practical effort and planning needed to act on an ethical judgement and ensure people's safety and dignity, etc.



Integrating digital and in-person working

- Follow-up interviews with 4 UK social workers – sometimes digital works well (eg young people, those with autism)
- Research by Pink et al (2021), distinguishes 'virtual' (purely remote) encounters from 'digital' (linked with physical environment, social relations). Eg video calls informed by what occurs in physical world and everyday life; 'anticipatory' of future in-person visits.
- Yet for many, digital is not enough: "What I have learned is that this is not the way I want to practise social work ... this isn't how I want to work with my service users. I want to be in their homes, I want to see their kids for real, you know, I want to be there for them more than this." (UK adoption social worker)
- Over time, use of garden, doorstep, walking or home visits interspersed with digital communication – the work of improvisation and integration
-



Moving children into foster care during lock-down (UK, Children's social care social worker)

A decision was made to apply for an Interim Care Order (a court order) to remove two young boys from their grandparents' home into foster care, as the grandparents were no longer able to look after them. Anticipating the care order would be granted, the social worker made a video explaining the move and introducing the foster carers, 'to help ease the transition'. The social worker attended court via teleconference. She had only met the children via video call, as had the guardian *ad litem* (appointed to look after the children's interests). When asked by the judge for her views, the social worker wondered 'could we really advocate for their wishes and feelings?'



The care order was granted. The social worker decided to move the children in her own car, 'to limit the number of people involved', instead of following the usual practice of taking a taxi. She chose to expose herself and her partner to the potential risk of having the children in her car, as she felt it was better than exposing herself and the children to the risks from a taxi. Although she had gloves and a mask, she decided not to wear a mask 'as the children were scared and confused without having a stranger wearing a mask take them away'. She was unable to maintain a social distance from the children, having to carry the baby downstairs and hold the hand of the older one while crossing a road. 'There was no other option'. She also came close to the foster carer. She also 'made the choice to spend time with the children settling them in, as opposed to leaving', while recognising this increased the levels of risk to all



The social worker remarked that she felt 'anxious throughout', receiving little guidance or emotional support from her manager. She commented: 'I am used to assessing risk in others but now I am a potential risk, and now I am at potential risk. This makes me feel very uneasy'. She concluded: '... despite how I was feeling I was determined to make the move as smooth and easy for the children as their move into foster care will be something they remember for ever'.



This account illustrates:

- Integration of digital (video recording, video call) & in-person (move in car, touch, presence in home)
- The usually hidden micro-decisions & reflections.
- The interconnectedness of practical & ethical components of any decision/action.
- The complexities and difficulties of everyday practice – assembling psychological, emotional & material resources in the right place, at the right time, for the right reasons.
- The practice of professional wisdom, drawing on ethical vigilance, reasoning and logistics

The virtuous social worker during the pandemic

- Rapid shift to digital communication challenged social workers' deeply felt sense of professional integrity – sense of themselves as caring, trustworthy, just and respectful
- Need to readjust notions of what counts as being an ethically good social worker in new contexts
- Learning how to develop empathy, trust, care online – 'digital intimacy'
- Learning how to make wise judgments about when in-person communication is necessary and beneficial, and how to integrate with digital

'Slow ethics' & professional wisdom in times of uncertainty & crisis: overall lessons from survey

- taking time to **reflect**, reaffirm values and consult with colleagues
- doing the hard work of **ethical vigilance, reasoning & logistics**
- handling and using **emotions**
- maintaining professional **integrity**
- supporting each other through the inevitable **moral distress** at what should have been done but was impossible
- and the sense of **moral injury** about what was done that should not have been
- and sharing the sense of **satisfaction**, relief or happiness over a job well-done
- being prepared to **advocate, mobilise and organise** with and on behalf of people facing marginalisation, for whom resources and services are inadequate or stigmatising

Concluding comments

- The importance of using professional judgement, based on the overarching virtue of **professional wisdom**, taking account of changed & changing contexts for practice. 'Cyber-wisdom' (Harrison and Polizzi, 2021)
- The importance of maintaining the inter-personal virtues of **care, respectfulness, trustworthiness**. 'Digital intimacy' (Pink et al., 2021)
- The role of **justice** in noticing inequities and knowing how to tackle injustice and unfairness.
- Needing **courage** to use and implement judgements in times of fast moving crisis
- **Professional integrity** to hold true to social work values and virtues, balancing the political emphasis on the public good with individual rights and needs.



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