RESEARCH ON ETHICAL AGENCY

Symposium: empirical ethics in social work

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Outline

- Introduction of the research project
- Empirical turns during the research
- Sketch of the research framework
- Evaluation of the learning outcomes
- Conclusion: possibilities and challenges
Objective: ethical aspects of social work (esp. at home)

→ main reasons (cf. Van Doorn, 2008)

- increase of moral dilemmas (growing complexity)
- decrease of shared frames of reference (growing diversity)
Research project: introduction

**Objective:** ethical aspects of social work (esp. at home)

**Structure:** cooperation of the research group of UAS Utrecht Netherlands with six regional welfare organizations
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**Method:** practice based ethics research

- Focus on professional practice: learning from moral experiences in frontline practice (cf. Van Doorn, 2008)
- Hybrid approach: combining theoretical resources and professional practice (cf. Banks & Gallagher, 2009)
- Mixed methods: desk research, interviews, best practice units (BPU), development of ethical tools
Shift in language: from moral dilemma to moral (fields of) tension
- No theoretical discussions
- But practice based research
Shift in language: from moral dilemma to moral (fields of) tension

**Shift in focus:** from moral expertise to ethical agency
- Not looking for objective and normative criteria
- But starting an intersubjective and reflective dialogue
Research shifts: empirical turns

Shift in language: from moral dilemma to moral (fields of) tension

Shift in focus: from moral expertise to ethical agency

Shift in cooperation: from relatively passive sources of information to active participants:

- Welfare organizations as co-owners of the research
- Social workers as reflective and inquisitive practitioners and as change agents
Developing a light model of ethical agency as an open frame for research

The metaphor of an iceberg: not original but effective: empowering social workers

(cf. e.g. McClelland about competencies)

- Surface: action
- Depth: motivation
- Width: position
- Length: alteration
Please valuate on a scale from 1 to 10 the general learning effects of participation in the research project (10 respondents)

Average: 7.6
- 6: 20%
- 7: 10%
- 8: 60%
- 9: 10%
The quality of my work has improved by becoming more sensitive to moral tensions in daily practice.
(10 respondents)

- I completely disagree: 0%
- I disagree: 0%
- I agree: 50%
- I completely agree: 50%
Conclusions: possibilities and challenges

- Practice based ethics research demands for a dialogical and cooperative approach, which provokes an empirical turn.

- Active participation as a reflective and inquisitive professional in a practice based research can have a strong learning (and empowering) effect.

- A best practice unit appears to be an apt model for combining practice based research and professional development. This combination of theoretical and practical goals is a strength of empirical ethics.

- Challenges for our research project are integrating the perspectives of the service users.