INTERPROFESSIONAL COOPERATION AS COLLECTIVE ETHICS WORK

A contribution to inter-professional ethics

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Thesis: Ethics work (Banks 2012, 2016) is a stimulating concept for the ethical improvement of inter-professional cooperation.

Outline:
- Starting point: ideal-typical professionalism
- Introduction to ethics work
- Professionalism requires inter-professional cooperation
- Inter-professional expansion of ethics work
- Final remarks and further challenges
Social work is a profession. (cf. global definition; IFSW, 2014)

But what is a profession?

Professionalism is basically about realizing specific humanitarian values under complex circumstances within a specific domain.

Cf. the three classical or learned professions:

- Medical profession: physical domain: health
- Juridical profession: social domain: justice
- Religious profession: spiritual domain: salvation

Conclusion: professions are ethical occupations → ethics work
Professions require ethics work  (Banks 2012, 2016)

Ethics work: “the effort people [professionals] put into:
- developing themselves as good practitioners,
- seeing ethical aspects of situations,
- working out the right course of action and
- justifying who they are and what they have done.”

Aspects of ethics work:
- **Identity work**: ethical self (personal and professional), integrity
- **Framing work**: self (agency), situation, context
- **Reason work**: perspectives, decisions, justifications
- **Emotion work**: managing (suppressing, displaying, creating)
- **Role work**: selecting and positioning
- **Relationship work**: dialogue, engaging, caring
- **Performance work**: (demonstrating) actions and interactions
Professionalism: dealing with complex problems and challenges, within a specific domain and on the basis of a specific value.

However, the most complex problems and challenges are
- not confined to a specific domain.
- not confined to a specific humanitarian value.

Inter-professional cooperation is required to deal with complexity.

Note: inter-professional cooperation is ethical cooperation.

So (individual and monodisciplinary) ethics works has to be expanded to collective inter-professional ethics work.
Social work:  (cf. global definition; IFSW, 2014)

- No specific domain: “interaction between human beings and their environments”: material, psychic, social, societal etc.
- No specific core value: well-being, dignity, equality, liberty, empowerment, justice, solidarity etc. etc.

Valuation of social work:

- Classical point of view: social work is a lesser profession, a semi-profession.
- Modern point of view: social work is better equipped for dealing with complexity as well as for inter-professional cooperation than the classical professions.
Ethics work is basically about individual development within a profession, but it can be expanded as collective and inter-professional ethics work, which would be in the spirit of the work of Sarah Banks. (cf. e.g. Banks 2010)

Definition of collective interprofessional ethics work:
(cf. Banks 2012, modifications are underlined)

“the effort cooperating professionals of various disciplines put into:

- collectively_developing themselves as good practitioners,
- collectively_seeing ethical aspects of situations,
- collectively_working out the right course of action and
- collectively_justifying who they are and what they have done.”
Collective inter-professional identity work starts with developing the right attitude towards inter-professional cooperation:

- Not pessimistic (to negative)
- Not optimistic (to naive)
- Not realistic (to detached)
- But positive:
  - Looking for common ground from a humanitarian value perspective
  - Relating conflicts and negotiations (concerning values, objectives, interests etc.) to communality
Collective inter-professional identity work leads to the development of common ground for inter-professional cooperation: a collective inter-professional framework.

This framework, however, is of a dynamic nature and requires framing work as an ongoing collective and inter-professional activity.

Collective inter-professional framing work requires basically (re)framing the individual intra-professional activities as a contribution to collective inter-professional agency in a complex situation within a broader context, based on shared humanitarian values.
Collective inter-professional identity work and framing work require collective inter-professional reason work.

Collective inter-professional reason work is basically collective deliberation.

True deliberation requires besides communicative and reasoning skills above all trust, transparency, openness etc. (cf. positive attitude).
Collective inter-professional emotion work is basically about sharing emotions.

Sharing emotions should be a part of inter-professional deliberation, because emotions: (cf. Keinemans 2014)
- Help us to understand the ethical aspects of situations
- Reveal our ethical point of view
- Motivate our ethical actions

Sharing emotions requires trust, openness etc. (just like deliberation), but also empathy, compassion etc.

Suggestion for ethical deliberation: start with the question: what touched you in this case?
Collective inter-professional role work is basically combining (and altering) several intra-professional roles to a collective inter-professional script.

Creating a collective inter-professional script means relating the individual contributions to each other in order to create a meaningful whole (for the service users and based on humanitarian values).

Note: Because of the complexity of the work the script can only be developed as a rough sketch.
Collective inter-professional play work is so to speak an enlargement of the professional stage and the involved actors: from a solo performance to a collective play.

The focus of the play work is on the audience: realizing humanitarian values on behalf of the service users.

Note: Because the script can only be a rough sketch, play work (like all professional performance work) requires (quite) some improvisation.
Collective inter-professional relationship work is the dialogical basis for cooperation: creating a caring relationship.

Relationship work is omnipresent in all aspects of ethics work:
- Identity work: positive attitude
- Framing work: collective agency
- Reason work: collective deliberation
- Emotion work: sharing
- Role work: script
- Performance work: play

By way of relationship work colleagues from other professions become visible persons, partners in a collective endeavour, interlocutors in an ongoing dialogue.
Inter-professional cooperation requires collective ethics work.

Collective ethics work is related to virtue ethics (finding the right attitude towards inter-professional cooperation) and to ethics of care (caring about: oneself, other professionals, professional relationships, and above all all the service users).

Collective ethics work should be based on individual ethics work: it is an expansion in stead of a replacement.

Collective ethics work is not a panacea, but a good start.

Ethics work (individually and collectively) should be part of the training of all professionals, including social workers.
Challenges for further research:

- The influence of power, status and hierarchy.

- The representation of the service users in deliberations.

Thesis: The combination of these two points could strengthen the approach: representation of service users in ethical deliberation could not only be a valuable addition in itself, but also be a threshold for hierarchical influences in deliberations, because service users would point out that such influences don’t help them any further.

