

**‘WHAT SHOULD I DO?’:**

**A STUDY OF SOCIAL WORK ETHICS, SUPERVISION AND THE  
ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

**Submitted by**

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## **STATEMENT OF SOURCES**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in this thesis received the approval of the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

Marian Esler

November 2007

## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the ethical development of social workers and the role of supervision in that development. It begins with an examination of the social work context for the study, including the early history of social work and the ways in which it was influenced by the major social and cultural movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, concluding with a discussion of both the threats posed and the possibilities emerging for social work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It then considers the ethical context for the study. It investigates the ethical theories and traditions that have contributed to the development of social work ethics and the role of professional ethics (including codes of ethics). It then proposes that a pluralist approach to social work ethics is the most appropriate way forward. This is followed by an examination of ethical development and the importance of reflection. Various models of ethical decision-making are compared and an inclusive, reflective model is found to be the most appropriate for social work in terms of both particular dilemmas faced and the overall development of workers as ethical decision-makers.

The focus of the thesis then moves to supervision, exploring its history, its central place in social work and some of the problems that can arise for both supervisors and the social workers they supervise. It is argued that the reflection required to develop as ethical decision-makers is most logically located within the relationship and processes of supervision and that supervisors have an important role in guiding that reflection and development.

The next part of the thesis describes the qualitative and action research strategies employed and examines the results emerging from the data. Participants in the focus groups were

social workers who supervise other social workers, and they each met for two sessions, six months apart. Between the two sessions, they were asked to trial in supervision a framework for reflection on practice. The data emerging from the groups reflected the theoretical development begun in the early chapters, including the importance of reflection and the role of supervision in assisting the ethical development of workers, particularly in terms of deconstructing dilemmas and being able to articulate the reasons for decisions made.

The thesis concludes that no one ethical theory is sufficient to support the ethical decision-making required for the practice of social work. Rather, a pluralist approach that allows a dilemma to be considered from a number of theoretical perspectives is more appropriate. Alongside this, an inclusive, reflective model of ethical decision-making reflects that pluralist approach and supports the ethical development of the individual worker. Supervision is vital in guiding the reflection required to make justifiable ethical decisions and to develop as ethical decision-makers.

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*From the beginning of their careers, most professional helpers know they have embarked on a moral undertaking.*

(Abels, 2001, pp. 202-204)

# 1. INTRODUCTION

## ***1.1. Where it all began: a personal reflection...***

My interest in the ethical dimension of social work developed gradually alongside my growing commitment to and understanding of social work itself, in terms of both the particular setting in which I was working and the broader perspective of the profession.

There were, inevitably, a number of stages in the development of my understanding. As a beginning social worker, the focus of my learning was divided between the complexity and unfamiliarity of the setting itself (a hospital social work department) and the need to develop the range of particular skills required in that setting. Accordingly, these were also the focus of my own supervision sessions.

I then went to a community mental health setting, where my learning priority, within and outside supervision, was the development of counselling skills, particularly when working with individuals and families for whom mental illness was an issue. During this time, I ventured into family counselling, and became more aware of the dilemmas that can arise from the competing interests (or wishes) of the individuals making up a family group. When I moved to a non-government welfare agency, I continued to develop my skills in family work, with a new focus on working with children and young people, sometimes also dealing with other family members. This complexity was exacerbated by the fact that I was working in a secondary setting, as I was employed by the agency to work as a school counsellor. This arrangement entailed workers (including me) facing additional ethical dilemmas resulting from the range of stakeholders within the school who were often involved in various ways with individual student clients.

In all these settings, I had the benefit of clinical supervision provided by experienced supervisors who were prepared to help me reflect on both the ethical and practice decisions facing me and to provide the support I needed to make and implement those decisions. I was aware that this guidance and support were important to me and I gradually developed the skills required to use supervision well.

However, it was not until I became a supervisor that I fully realised the importance of being able to support workers to recognise the ethical dilemmas facing them, to identify and assess possible options and, finally, to make an ethically justifiable decision. This insight first arose from my concern for workers who seemed not to recognise or understand the ethical dimensions of their practice and, indeed, seemed to be engaging in practices that I regarded as ethically doubtful. In other cases, workers were clearly grappling with, and seeking assistance in resolving, situations they had identified as either practice or ethical dilemmas, or a combination of the two. As a supervisor, I felt some responsibility for the actions of my supervisees, at least with regard to their working within the values and objectives of the employing organisation (to which I felt some considerable commitment) and providing the best possible service to its clients.

During that period, I embarked on this research and, inevitably, my experience dealing with these issues also influenced the directions I took in my reading, at least in the early stages. At the same time, my growing understanding of both ethical theory and the nature of supervision started to have an impact on how I approached the issues I was facing in the workplace. Particularly significant was the discovery of virtue ethics and Aristotle's notion that *we become ethical by practising being ethical*. It began to occur to me that, as social workers face ethical dilemmas at least on a daily basis and are constantly required to make decisions about those dilemmas, they need to reflect on both the dilemmas they face and the

decisions they make. It further occurred to me that supervision was the logical place for that ethical reflection to occur.

Gradually, it also became apparent that it was not enough for the organisation to leave this responsibility to individual supervisors and workers, but that it was obliged to do what was required to support the development of ethical practice at all levels within it. For me personally, this meant organising professional development opportunities for workers within the particular context of their practice in schools and within the values and objectives of the organisation.

The next event critical to my growing understanding of the complexity of ethical education was what took place during these professional development sessions. While I had assumed that workers with similar professional backgrounds (mostly social work) and facing similar workplace dilemmas (within schools) would come to the same conclusions about particular dilemmas, it soon became apparent that this was not the case. Workers came to such different conclusions about the same scenarios that I was forced to question most of my personal assumptions about how we make ethical decisions. My initial reaction was to think that some of these workers must be 'missing something', but as the discussions progressed, it was clear that, in most cases, other workers had come to conclusions that, while different from mine, nevertheless represented ethically justifiable decisions.

This made me wonder about both the ways in which individuals identify and resolve ethical dilemmas and the formation of the individual's ability to make ethical decisions. How could such a variety of conclusions represent a consistent ethical approach? Further, were all such decisions acceptable within the stated objectives and values of either the employing organisation or the profession? I began to realise that promoting the individual ethical

development of workers may result in the organisation relinquishing control of the decisions made by individual workers – although this was likely to improve the overall quality of decision-making.

## ***1.2. The emerging research***

This parallel development in my theoretical understanding of both ethics and supervision and my experience in the workplace began to shape the direction of this research project. I recognised that there were a number of issues I was seeking to resolve and that my own dilemmas were leading me to focus on these issues from the perspective of ‘supervisor’. I also realised that, although I worked with both social workers and psychologists and had supervised and been supervised by both social workers and psychologists, I wanted to locate this research within social work specifically. This was because, even in the early stages, I understood that my own professional and ethical development had taken place within the values and principles of social work and I knew that supervision within social work has a particular role and characteristics not shared exactly by other professions, even psychology.

For all those reasons I decided to have as participants in this study social workers who supervise other social workers. My experience had helped me identify what would have helped me as a supervisor, and that included guidance on how to help workers I supervise to recognise and then make decisions about the ethical dilemmas they face in their daily practice. I hoped that this, in turn, would support their development as independent ethical decision-makers.

Alongside these issues relating to the practice of social work supervision, I was beginning to realise that the knowledge of ethical theory available to social workers at that time (and

historically) was very limited. While there have been improvements in the ethical education of social workers, particularly in recent years, there may well be many workers practising without a thorough understanding of the ethical theory underpinning social work. As I developed my own understanding of ethical theory and its place in social work, I discovered that there were new approaches to ethics which were not yet widely evident in social work's articulation of ethics. Social work was changing and so was ethical theory, but the connection between them was unclear. For example, the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) conducted a widespread consultation process leading to the new Code of Ethics released in 1999 (the second edition was published in 2002). Yet the new code did not reflect the trend evident in other codes of ethics away from prescriptive and towards aspirational approaches (it was more prescriptive than the 1989 Code of Ethics) and failed to provide useful guidance on ethical decision making. This helped me to shape the two key research questions:

- *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?*
- *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?*

This thesis represents an integration of theory and practice vital to social work and contributes both to our understanding of supervision and its role and processes, and to supporting the ethical development of social workers in the context of ever-developing social work ethics. All the themes and assumptions mentioned above helped to shape the final directions of my research and recur throughout this study.

### **1.3. *The structure of the thesis***

The thesis reflects the theoretical and empirical journey briefly outlined above and the relationship between the developments in theoretical understanding and practical knowledge emerging from the study itself. Chapters 2 and 3 review the relevant literature and establish, respectively, the social work context and the ethical context in which the study was conducted. The two following chapters search for a way forward in terms of both ethical education and decision-making (Chapter 4) and the nature and importance of supervision in social work, especially as it relates to the ethical development of workers (Chapter 5). Chapter 6 describes the research strategies employed in the study, while Chapters 7 and 8 examine the data emerging from the empirical part of the study. Finally, Chapter 9 offers a concluding analysis and a way forward for social workers and supervisors committed to ethical practice.

**Chapter 2** describes the social work context underpinning this study and is in three sections. The first section begins with an overview of various aspects of social work – its history, its values and the centrality of ethical dilemmas and decision-making in social work. It then examines the place of women in the history of social work. The next section of the chapter focuses on the major intellectual and cultural movements of the late twentieth century, particularly as they relate to social work. Marxism (and Marxist-based radical social work), humanism, post-modernism and feminism all contribute to the developing theoretical basis of social work, and there is some discussion of the tensions between these approaches. The final section in Chapter 2 begins to explore current challenges to social work and the importance of ethical practice as a defence against those challenges.



**Chapter 3** explores Australian social work's ethical context and has four sections. The first section begins with a brief exploration of some of the traditional ethical theories and traditions that have shaped the development of Western ethics. I examine utilitarian and deontological ethical theories and their place in professional ethics, particularly in social work. I then describe virtue ethics, its relationship with other ethical theories and the significant contribution it makes to our understanding of ethical development and education. Finally, I examine the ethic of care and its importance in our changing understanding of social work ethics.

The second section of Chapter 3 centres on professional ethics, including a discussion about social work ethics within the context of professional ethics more generally, in an attempt to clarify the context in which Australian social workers seek to be ethical. Following this, section three explores codes of professional ethics, including analysis of the contents, advantages and shortcomings of the Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002). This discussion leads to a preliminary consideration of ethical decision-making in social work and the ways in which workers make use of codes of ethics and other resources, followed by a consideration of the possible future for codes of ethics in professions like social work. The last part of that section describes possible future directions for the Australian Code of Ethics. The final section in Chapter 3 describes a possible future shape for social work ethics in Australia, based on ethical pluralism, which sets the scene for the discussion of ethical education and decision-making in the following chapter.

**Chapter 4** examines how social workers, and others, learn to be ethical and begins to address the first of the key research questions: *How can social workers learn to become ethically autonomous decision-makers?* In the first section, there is an exposition of ethical education and its place in social work, including reflection on practice and its importance in

ethical decision-making and the ways in which workers learn, through reflection, to become better at making ethical decisions. As part of this discussion, the differences between reflective, reflexive and critical thinking are teased out and there is some consideration of reflective practice and its importance in both ethical development and social work practice.

The next section presents and compares different models of ethical decision-making and considers the range of resources available to social workers faced with ethical dilemmas.

The final section of Chapter 4 reiterates the ways in which we learn to make ethical decisions and the importance of reflection in the ethical practice of social work.

**Chapter 5** examines in detail another vitally important aspect of social work, namely supervision. The first section begins with a description of the central place occupied by supervision in the history and practice of social work, then moves on to an analysis of supervision itself, including its multiple functions. The next section explores the nature of the supervisory relationship from a number of perspectives, including a narrative approach, the role of supervision as a ‘window’ on the practice of social work and the role of supervision in supporting the development of ethical organisations. The following section explores the shortcomings of supervision, including the dual relationships sometimes experienced, the difficulties that can arise in terms of the various functions of supervision and the problems that can be experienced by a worker receiving inadequate supervision. The next section of the chapter deals with the role of supervision in promoting ethical decision-making and practice. I argue that the reflection on practice required to support the development of workers as ethical decision-makers is most logically located within the relationship and processes of supervision. The final section looks briefly at the relationship between reflection and accountability in supervision.

In **Chapter 6**, I describe the research strategies employed in this study. The first section begins with a description of qualitative research and its relevance to my subject, including the links between its theoretical basis and the actual methods adopted in this study. I describe the inclusion of action research principles and strategies in the study and the importance of feminist research and particularly feminist research ethics. The last part of this section examines the use of focus groups and the strong nexus between the subject and method evident in the study. The next section describes the ethical issues considered in the design phase, the process of gaining ethical approval from the university and issues that subsequently arose during the conduct of the focus groups.

The second half of Chapter 6 describes the actual research strategies used, from recruitment of participants and a description of their characteristics, through to the questioning routes used in both sessions of each group and a description of the framework for reflection discussed and trialled by participants. While I describe many aspects of what happened in the groups, the focus in this chapter is on the *processes* within the groups, and the ways in which data emerged and were collected over the course of the eight group sessions. The next section discusses the strategies used to interrogate the data and begins the process of theoretical development. The final section considers issues of reliability and validity and suggests some possible limitations of the study and its research design.

Chapters 7 and 8 set out the results and both contain significant passages from the transcripts of the group sessions. In this way, the participants contribute more directly to the growing understanding of ethics, supervision and the relationship between them developed and described in this thesis. Those direct quotes also bring to life to some extent the strength of feeling experienced by workers and supervisors alike facing ethical dilemmas. They also reflect the sometimes lively debate that took place between participants over particular issues

and exemplify my own experience that different conclusions can be reached about the same set of circumstances, even among experienced practitioners and supervisors.

**Chapter 7** is an exploration of the dilemmas most commonly faced by workers and their supervisors in the course of their practice of social work, with a focus on those they find most difficult to resolve. In the Introduction to this chapter I define ethical dilemmas and describe the inevitability of dilemmas in social work in the light of workers' close involvement in people's lives and the conflicts of values which often emerge. Throughout this discussion, I try to differentiate between ethical issues, problems and dilemmas, and practice dilemmas. The first section of the chapter proper sets out the most common and complex dilemmas, grouped in terms of their shared characteristics. Participants almost unanimously identified boundaries as the area of practice giving rise to the most (and most difficult) ethical dilemmas, although the nature of the issues described varied widely in terms of their scope and nature. Other dilemmas described by participants included client-related dilemmas and dilemmas relating to a worker's role within an organisation.

The following section of the chapter deals with the particular dilemmas faced by participants arising from their role as supervisors. These dilemmas include the supervisor's identification of an ethical dilemma (or even transgression) of which the worker seems unaware and the related accountability role of the supervisor. The final section explores the resources available to workers and supervisors facing ethical dilemmas, including the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002), their own experience, consultation with peers and supervisors and other resources. A theme that recurs throughout this chapter and the next is the importance of being able to identify and name the dilemma as a first step towards resolving it.

**Chapter 8** specifically addresses the role of supervision in helping workers deal with the ethical dilemmas they face in their practice and, through the ongoing processes of reflection, assisting and supporting workers in their development as ethical decision-makers. The first section describes participants' perspectives on the argument made in Chapter 5 about the central place of supervision in the history and practice of social work and explores the advantages and disadvantages of what some participants described as the 'culture of supervision'. The next section of Chapter 8 concentrates on the reflection on practice that ideally takes place within supervision. Again, this reflection is considered from a number of perspectives, starting with the dilemmas most likely to arise for workers in their practice and the various ways in which they can be helped to deconstruct those dilemmas. The next aspect discussed is the development of options, which is part of the reflection process within supervision. This was seen, in part, as a way to give workers both skills and confidence in their own decision-making. The elements constituting reflection in supervision are also analysed in terms of the framework for reflection presented to participants in the first session and revisited in the second session of each group. This discussion again demonstrates the range of responses participants had in terms of the extent to which they encourage workers to reflect on dilemmas and develop options on the way to resolving them.

The next section identifies situations or worker characteristics which exacerbate the tension for supervisors between encouraging worker self-determination and autonomy, and ensuring that the accountability function of supervision is maintained. These include where there were particular organisational or statutory sanctions against a particular course of action, where a proposed action might jeopardise the well-being of clients, or where workers themselves are determined to act in a certain way. The final part of Chapter 8 explores the relationship between reflection on practice and other methods of ethical education described in Chapter 4, including the importance of workers being able to internalise the values and

develop the skills required to make and articulate ethically justifiable decisions. All participants expressed interest in, and commitment to, contributing to the ethical education of workers, as well as a desire to continue to maintain their own personal ethical education and development.

**Chapter 9** draws together the various theoretical perspectives and practical experiences of participants to explain how social workers develop as ethical decision-makers and the role of supervision in supporting that development in the context of a changing ethical environment. The first section returns to the changing social work context in which the study is located, including assessing the influence of particular social and intellectual movements. The second section re-examines the changing ethical context for the study. It reiterates the development of a pluralist approach to ethical theory, which makes more sense for Australian social work than previous attempts to choose individual theoretical approaches. In similar way, it is argued that the development of an inclusive model of ethical decision-making is the most appropriate to date for Australian social work and is best suited to the ethical pluralism already described.

At the same time, it is important to consider the development of individual social workers within this changing context. The next part of this section proposes that the ethical development of individuals depends on learning to reflect on their practice in a manner which helps them to identify, articulate and make decisions about the particular ethical dilemmas they face in their practice. It depends, too, on workers developing knowledge about the ethical framework in which they work and a growing confidence in being able to articulate how and why they made a particular decision. Finally, a response to the first key research question is then outlined.

The third section of the chapter summarises the contribution of this study to our understanding of how social workers learn to be ethical decision-makers and the role of supervision as an opportunity for reflection in that learning. It returns to the functions of supervision, including both the overlap and tensions between them and again examines the importance of reflection in supervision in both resolving individual dilemmas and developing as an autonomous ethical decision-maker. A response to the second key research question is proposed.. The final section identifies possible directions for future research.

## **2. THE SOCIAL WORK CONTEXT**

### ***2.1. Introduction***

I have already described how my interest in social work ethics and supervision developed from within my experience as a social worker and supervisor over many years (see Chapter 1). Accordingly, social work in Australia is both the subject of and the context for this study. Before turning to the nature of social work and social work ethics today, it is important to understand its history, values and principles as they have developed from its beginnings in the nineteenth century. Many modern writers point to the wish to ‘do good’ as the central motivation of many people who, since then, have undertaken social work as a career, either paid or unpaid. This does not seem adequate, however, to explain the complexity of social work theories or the relationship between these activities and a broad range of activities which come under the banner of ‘social work practice’. Furthermore, any consideration of the nature of social work needs to be located within changing approaches to welfare more generally, particularly the emergence and the later demise of the welfare state.

The first section of this chapter explores the nature of social work in Australia today, including its historical antecedents in both Britain and the United States, the development of social work values as they are now understood, the centrality of ethics and ethical dilemmas in social work practice and the important role of women in social work. In the next section, I examine the impact on social work of the great intellectual and cultural movements of the late twentieth century, focusing in turn on Marxism (especially its influence on radical social work), humanism, feminism and post-modernism. The final section considers Australian social work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, particularly in terms of the challenges it faces from within



and outside the profession and the importance of ethical practice in meeting those challenges.

## **2.2. What is social work?**

Welfare has been described as changing over time, as understandings around issues like poverty, and ways of dealing with them, have been influenced by changing social and economic conditions (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). The British *Poor Law 1601* (like other European Poor Laws of the same period) focused on categorising people as unable to work because of illness or disability, who were supported (albeit frugally) by local parishes, the able-bodied, who were found work (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005) or put to work in houses of correction (Payne, 2005b) and children and orphans, who were apprenticed to trades where possible. Subsequent reforms in 1662 and 1834 gradually increased control over those who needed assistance by reducing the amounts they could be paid and curtailing their movement between parishes (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). In this context, the friendly visitors of the early 1800s can be seen as the first welfare practitioners – middle class women who were ‘motivated by Christian charity’ and whose aims were to ‘reform the character and modify the behaviour of the poor’ (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 26).

Camilleri (1996) describes the foundation of modern social work as largely stemming from the Charity Organisation Societies and the later Settlement movement. The Charity Organisation Societies, emerging in England in the 1840s, were staffed by volunteers (many of whom were friendly visitors) who provided direct service to individuals and contributed to community efforts to solve social problems (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005), although the Societies were opposed to ‘incontinent alms-giving’ (Payne, 2005b) or encouraging dependence on charity. The Charity Organisation Societies soon spread to America,

Australia and elsewhere. One example is the Benevolent Society, which was established in Sydney in 1813 and is still operating there. An important feature of the Charity Organisation Societies was that they were determined to establish a scientific basis for their work and established procedures for assessment, data collection and follow-up of individuals and families. Mary Richmond, working in this tradition, set up the New York School of Philanthropy in 1898, which was later to become the Columbia University School of Social Work (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005).

The Settlement Movement began in London 1884 with the establishment of Toynbee Hall. An important development inherent in the Settlement approach was the importance it attributed to the social context and its commitment to social reform rather than a strict adherence to the notion of the deserving poor which had been at the heart of both the poor laws and the Charity Organisation Societies (Camilleri, 1996; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Payne, 2005b). Jane Addams, after a visit to Toynbee Hall, was responsible for the development of the Settlement Movement in the United States, starting with the establishment of Hull House in Chicago in 1889.

The Charity Organisation Societies and the Settlement movements represented, respectively, the need to work with the individual to enhance his or her coping skills, and the desire to ameliorate the effects on the individual of an unjust social order by reforming society (Mullaly, 1997). Addams' commitment to assisting the individual while trying to achieve social change is intrinsic in our modern understanding of the potential of social work, while most practitioners in the 21<sup>st</sup> century would acknowledge the complexity involved in achieving these dual aims. I believe that, to some extent, we are still faced with the 'twin' motivations of helping the individual and social reform as the basis for much social work practice today. This is, of course, an over-simplification of the value base of social work and

does not explain the complexity of either modern social theory or modern social work practice.

If we look in more detail at the history of social work described in a number of commentaries (Camilleri, 1996; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Mullaly, 1997; Payne, 2005b), it is apparent that the 'friendly visitors' of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century are indeed the predecessors of modern social workers. It is also interesting that in his history of supervision in social work, Kadushin (1992) describes as its antecedent the supervision provided by (eventually) paid workers of the large numbers of volunteers who carried out the daily work of the Charity Organisation Society. It is also possible to identify in the educative tasks of those early supervisors a major focus of the modern supervisor, namely training (Kadushin, 1992). The importance of supervision in social work generally and in the ethical development of social workers is central to this thesis and is the subject of Chapter 5.

But what is social work today? Commentators in the last thirty years have identified problems within social work that were not explored by their more idealistic predecessors. British writers have tended to concentrate on the social control role of social work, not just for those workers with statutory responsibilities and powers, but more generally of agents of control within the welfare state (Banks, 2001; Clark, 2000). But they are not alone. Much of the 'radical social work' literature of the 1970s and 1980s, informed by both Marxist (Bailey, 1980; Bailey & Brake, 1980; Corrigan & Leonard, 1978) and feminist theory (Marchant, 1986; Wearing, 1986; Wilson, 1980), was searching for a way for social work to avoid becoming a tool of the welfare state. Later writers have continued to investigate the possibility of radical social work within defined roles (Fook, 1993).

To the extent that social work is linked so closely with the lives of people, especially those who are the most disadvantaged or vulnerable within their respective societies, it is inevitable that its history will be affected in some way by the development and demise of major social, economic and political movements. As noted above, radical social work had clear antecedents in Marxism, as both were directed, among other things, towards achieving the change required to overcome structural disadvantage. Feminism, too, had a significant impact on how social work came to understand social issues like domestic violence within the context of its gendered origins. Later, post-modernism was seen as a challenge to the central place social work had built for itself within Western, welfare states and social work searched for new ways to define its role outside the dominant ideologies and social and economic movements. The influence of all these movements is described in more detail later in this chapter.

Ife identified a 'disillusionment with social work, due to the political, economic and ideological environment', that is 'fundamentally contradictory to the values of the profession' (Ife, 1997, p.1). Payne, too, describes the growing ambiguity of social work that accompanied dwindling social and economic support for the welfare state in Britain (Payne, 2005b), and the situation in Australia is similar. For Ife (1997), this hostile environment then shapes social work itself as it seeks to survive so that it becomes part of agendas that it might normally resist, such as economic rationalism, managerialism, modernist rationality and the pressure to develop competencies as a way of defining social work. He looks, in turn, to post-modernism, feminism and humanism to help articulate alternative constructions of social work practice. While each approach has something to contribute, they are also limited in their scope and Ife settles on a critical approach to social work based on three key aspects of critical theory: interpretive understanding, the politics of liberation (particularly through empowerment) and the structural perspective of post-modernism. His insistence that

social workers must participate in the debate about social and economic goals and be aware of the links between the personal and the political (Ife, 1997) is reflected later in this chapter in the need for workers to be involved in the ongoing ethical debate within social work.

### **2.2.1. Social work values**

In addition to looking at how social work has defined itself at various stages in its history, it is also worth examining changes in its underlying values. Biestek (1957) noted that in the history of social work, developments in practice always preceded those in terminology. He examined in some detail attempts in the literature to describe the casework relationship, which he saw as the ‘soul’ of casework. On the basis of this review, he arrived at the following definition: ‘The casework relationship is the dynamic interaction of attitudes and emotions between the caseworker and the client, with the purpose of helping the client achieve a better adjustment between himself and his environment’ (Biestek, 1957, p. 12).

In Biestek’s (1957) view, it is a conviction of the social work profession that every request for help from a social agency is psychosocial. He describes what he sees as the basic human needs of people with psychosocial problems and from those ‘needs’ develops his seven principles of the casework relationship. These seven principles are ‘individualization, purposeful expression of feelings, controlled emotional involvement, acceptance, non-judgmental attitude, client self-determination and confidentiality’ (Biestek, 1957, p. 23).

There are a number of difficulties for the modern reader in Biestek’s work. For example, Banks (2001) notes problems with both the ‘list approach’ and the sole focus on the worker-client relationship, as such ‘broad general principles can be interpreted variously, and there are confusions both within and between writers using the same terminology’ (Banks, 2001, p. 29). Secondly, ‘little indication is given of the status of the different

principles' (Banks, 2001, p. 30) and, finally, there is no assistance given with what should be done in the case of conflicting principles. Clark also criticises the 'list approach', saying that 'to promote a multiplicity of core values leads to nowhere but confusion' (Clark, 2000, p. 26). However, in my view, Clark's conclusion that only a prescriptive approach is appropriate for professional ethics (even with examples of how to deal with apparent conflicts between principles) is not the only possible conclusion and it limits the possibilities for an ethic for social work. In spite of these reservations about Biestek's (1957) list of values, and the observation by some of their origins in Christian ethics (Beckett & Maynard, 2005), many of those values would still be regarded by modern social workers in a variety of settings as basic social work values. Indeed, some of Biestek's principles are still evident in the values underpinning modern social work ethics.

Timms (1983) also describes as problematic the 'list approach' to values in social work, preferring the development of what he calls 'value-talk'. He notes that there is a history of compiling lists of social work values and to highlight the problems in this approach, he compares a number of such lists (including Biestek's) and notes that the discrepancies between them are often unremarked and unresolved. He then analyses a number of specific values common to the lists studied and identifies a number of problems. For example, 'acceptance' is not only defined differently by different writers and difficult to put into practice, but can often move easily into avoidance of moral or condemnatory judgments. Furthermore, Timms (1983) asks whether acceptance is an attitude or a technique used to achieve certain goals.

He says that two examples of explicit references to values are the concern with results which governs much social work practice, and the notion of the 'morally good' social worker doing 'good social work' (Timms, 1983, p. 7). There is a clear connection between this approach and Aristotle's virtue ethics, described in the next chapter. Timms (1983) explores in some

detail the different ways in which 'values' appear in different parts of the structure of social work and its literature and the problems of trying to establish any standardised set of values. He then examines the role of conscience in social work, which he frames in terms of the question: 'What ought I, or the client, to do in a particular situation, from a moral point of view?' (Timms, 1983, p.33) This stance is reflected in Beckett and Maynard's (2005) description of the word 'value' as being about both choice and 'to ideas about what we *ought* to do' (Beckett & Maynard, 2005, p. 7).

Timms (1983) believes that social workers should not only respect conscience, but should also support its formation. However, Timms does acknowledge that sometimes there may be conflict between the conscience of the worker and that of the client, and discusses the types of conflicts that can arise between various values. These issues are central to my consideration of ethics and its place in social work practice and will be dealt with in more detail in Chapter 4 and in the later analysis of the data.

The role of the client is itself an interesting subject. Traditional works on social work by Biestek (1957) and others place the client in an almost revered position and deserving respect, acceptance, affirmation and so on. Such works might be described as presenting the ideal. Even without this idealisation, it seems impossible to define social work without some consideration of 'client', even in social work practice which deal with groups or communities rather than the individuals described by Biestek (1957). Payne (2005a), for example, describes the creation of clienthood as one of the three sets of forces which combine in the social construction of social work. However, Pithouse (1987) describes organisational views of clients which rely a great deal on often negative stereotypes and seem hard to reconcile with the 'value base' described above. I believe that across the broad spectrum of social work practice, the view of the client will vary substantially between

settings. The way in which the culture of an organisation can affect the attitudes and practices of workers, will also be dealt with below.

### **2.2.2. The centrality of ethics in social work**

Ethics is intrinsic to, and holds a central place in, every individual's daily activities (Preston, 2001), and particularly in the theory and practice of social work. As Clark (2000) notes, 'Social work is about the business of ordinary social living, and thus social workers potentially have to deal with almost all the morally vexing questions that affect human society' (Clark, 2000, p. 10). Reamer (1998) also notes that ethics has always been a central feature of social work, and that 'social workers' core values and ethical beliefs are the profession's linchpins' (Reamer, 1998, p. 488).

Hugman and Smith (1995) declare at the very beginning of their introductory chapter that 'ethical issues are at the heart of a discipline such as social work'. They then continue:

Social work is concerned with the care of people who have a variety of needs, with family relationships, with social responses to offending and with needs arising from structural causes (such as poverty). These are each, in different ways, moral concerns, embedded in the *mores* of society, and so are laden with social values (Timms 1983; Horne 1987). Herein lies the crux of the problem, because value statements, being views about what is desirable in society, are highly contentious.

(...) The choice for social workers, therefore, is not whether their work has an ethical dimension, but whether or not ethical questions are addressed explicitly and how they are to be explored. (Hugman & Smith, 1995, p. 1).

I have quoted this at length because it touches on many of the core issues of this thesis.

Firstly, dealing with people necessarily involves making decisions that will affect them or some aspect of their lives and also often brings up a contrast between the ethical stance of the worker and that of the client. Examples that are likely to occur in everyday practice, at least in a medical setting, include abortion and euthanasia. Then, there is the fact that people



live within a social context (which the worker may or may not be seeking to affect) which has a whole range of influences on them – including the values they carry. This can lead to conflict in a whole range of areas, like child-rearing practices, attitudes to work and so on. Finally, the wider circumstances of the client may well be the ‘target’ of the worker, which can lead to a whole range of conflicts - not just with the client, but also with the wider social or political group. This is particularly likely for workers engaged in community development or other forms of community or political activism. I agree with Hugman and Smith (1995) that it is not possible to carry out social work that does not have an ethical dimension. Much of the purpose of this study is to explore and develop new ways of helping workers to address those inevitable ethical questions.

As noted earlier, the focus of Chapter 3 is the ethical context of this study. In the meantime, however, it is worth looking more at this ethical dimension of social work. Many writers have commented on the importance of considering a client’s context in making decisions in social work (Banks, 2001; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Clark, 2000; Congress, 1999; Hugman, 2005; Hugman & Smith, 1995; Reamer, 1998). This ranges from dealing with the conflicting interests of various stakeholders in the client’s life to assessing the potential power relationship at the core of the worker-client relationship, and many others in between. In some cases, it is dealing with the worker’s own values, particularly where they may be in conflict with those of the client, the employing organisation, or even the profession itself.

The question of dealing with the ethical dimension of social work practice is broader than making a ‘correct’ decision in the face of a particular dilemma. Indeed, many writers would argue that there is no ‘correct’ decision. It is more about the very essence of workers and the ways in which they approach and understand social work itself, as well as the dilemmas which arise. With respect to workers with statutory authority, Hugman and Smith (1995,

p.12) ask: ‘Do we really want these powers to be exercised by people who have no vocabulary with which to ask ethical questions of their own practice ...?’ I agree with their response that ongoing ethical debate ‘is essential for the moral health of social work, and that ethically informed practice is essential if the rights and welfare of service users/clients are to be protected’. Furthermore, it is necessary for all social workers, not just those with statutory responsibilities and powers.

If it is true that the ethical issues arising in the practice of social work are often contentious, and I believe that they are, then another question arises: How can we not only encourage ongoing ethical debate among social workers, but also support them through the inevitable tension or emotional toll it is likely to take? It is not just about teaching them the vocabulary, although this is crucial, it is also about giving them the resources required to have the (informed) conversation on a regular basis and then to make that conversation the basis of their practice. As Hugman (2005) notes, while the ethical basis for workers’ decisions may often be taken for granted, ‘there are also times when the professional ought to give conscious attention to the reasons why one choice seems better or worse than another’ (Hugman, 2005, p. 1) The purpose of this study is to investigate how supervisors might support social workers in achieving this end.

### **2.2.3. Women in social work**

Reading the history of social work makes it clear that the role of women was critical to its early development. Not only did large numbers of women do most of the early work, either in a paid or unpaid capacity, and often on a full-time basis in what was considered by some an acceptable alternative to marriage, but the early thinkers and writers in social work were also women. Mary Richmond’s *Five Steps in Social Service Treatment: A Textbook for*

*Caseworkers* (1911) and her later *Social Diagnosis* (1917) are a testament to the theoretical input of these early women, with *Social Diagnosis* being ‘acclaimed as the “first” true social work text’ (Camilleri, 1996, p. 46). Jane Addams, too, managed to combine assisting individuals, working for social change and writing about the ethical foundations of social work (Addams, 1907; Beauchamp, 1991).

Camilleri (1996) notes that the ‘equal partnership of men and women’ at the heart of early social work made it unique and quite different from, for example, teaching and nursing, in which women were allowed, in subordinate roles, into professions and workplaces largely dominated by men. It seems, however, that as social work was legitimised in the community and began to receive funding from governments, the administrative and management tasks were carried out more and more by men, although women still by far outnumbered men in social work. The recent experience of Schools of Social Work, certainly in Australia, shows that women still dominate the numbers of social work students and this trend continues among practising social workers. It can be difficult to obtain accurate information on the number of women in social work management positions. However the trend to employ social workers in generic professional positions such as ‘counsellor’ has meant that it has become more difficult to identify social workers in the workforce and more and more female social workers have come under the professional control of male managers in health and human services (Camilleri, 1996; McDonald & Jones, 2000).

In addition, the co-operative structures which had characterised women’s organisation of early social work were also replaced by more hierarchical and bureaucratic structures (Camilleri, 1996). It is noteworthy that, as the women’s rights movement made it possible for women to combine careers and families, women took time out to have children and later

found it difficult to obtain management positions and to regain the role of 'equal partners' in the organisation of social work.

Nevertheless, the vital role that women have played in the development of social work cannot be overestimated. Even as social work became more accepted as a 'profession', there was an ongoing synergy between the traditionally low salaries and the high numbers of women undertaking the work. At the same time, more and more women (as well as men) began to write about the theory and practice of social work, and to take up teaching positions in Schools of Social Work.

In addition to the growing theoretical understanding of social work, some women commentators (Marchant, 1986; Wearing, 1986) focused on the particular role of women in social work and the importance of using feminist understandings of society and social relations to inform the future of social work theory and practice, especially in combination and in contrast with other significant movements such as Marxism. This feminist critique of social work was also apparent in the use of feminist ethics to inform the development of an ethic for social work. Indeed, attempts to understand social work through a feminist lens encouraged investigation of the developing field of feminist ethics and its application to social work.

### ***2.3. Later influences on social work***

Ife (1997, p. 48) describes in some detail how social work theory and practice have been influenced by the major movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century and investigates how these movements might assist social work through the crisis it is currently facing. This section explores these influences on social work.

### **2.3.1. Marxism and radical social work**

The radical social work movement of the 1970s and 1980s drew on the social reform aspects of the early history of social work, but essentially relied on a Marxist analysis of the structure of society. Proponents of radical social work were adamant that social work must be about changing the oppressive structures of society and not about blaming individuals for their situation by dealing with them in isolation. While many writers attempted to ground radical social work's desire for structural social change in Marxist accounts of how society operates, they also had to face the basic paradox of trying to change the structures of society from within the welfare state. It has been argued that radical social work is not possible in an institutionalised setting (Statham, 1978).

Timms (1983) also points to some contradictory values inherent in attempts at conceptualising a Marxist social work and gives some examples: traditional social work values, such as becoming 'truly human', are at odds with Marxism's opposition to humanism; ideas and theories are pitted against the experience of being involved in the struggle to change the social order; and, human freedom contradicts the notion of social, historical and material determinism. Later writers, however, describe the critical aspects of radical social work as belonging to good social work practice rather than to a strictly socialist or Marxist approach. For example, Fook (1993) notes that there is not much to distinguish radical social work from good social work and Ife's (1997) argument about the development of a critical empowerment approach to practice, particularly in respect of the linking of theory and practice, is quite similar. Nevertheless, radical social work represents an important phase in social work theory and education and many of the present generation of practising social workers would have formed their values and attitudes to practice in the period when radical social work theory was most influential.

### 2.3.2. Humanism

Humanism is also considered one of the significant movements to have contributed to the development of social work theory and practice (Ife, 1997; Payne, 2005a). Ife (1997) acknowledges that the core of social work is in fact humanist in terms of the value it places on the worth of the individual, 'wanting to help people' and social justice, but notes that this core 'commitment to humanity' was at risk during the 1970s and 1980s of being 'swamped by social work's obsession with positivism' (Ife, 1997, pp 99-100). He also discusses at some length the tensions present in the humanist discourse, especially those between individual and collective notions of humanism and between the universal discourse of humanity and the discourse of difference. Ife's (1997) view is that, while humanism is an important part of developing an alternative social work, it is not sufficient because there is no structural analysis of oppression and disadvantage. Social work needs to balance the competing narratives of unity and difference. This, then, leads him to the view that what is needed is a critical humanism.

Critical theory resolves some of the dilemmas of modern social work through its interpretive understanding of reality, which facilitates the link between theory and practice. It also draws on the traditions of social work, particularly in terms of values like empowerment. Ife (1997) draws on the consciousness-raising and empowerment techniques advocated by Freire, whose *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1972) became a central work in the liberation theology which developed from the 1970s onwards and can be seen as having much in common with radical social work, particularly the empowerment of the most marginalised through education.

According to Ife (1997), it is the linking of policy and practice which is crucial for developing modern social work theory. This leads him to what he calls the 'critical

empowerment' approach. He says that working in this way with marginalised people and groups is legitimising their voices and validating their experience. He sees the 'critical empowerment' approach as the most likely to succeed in bringing social work through its present crisis and into the 21<sup>st</sup> century. This resonates to some extent with Payne's (2005a) view of the importance to social work of two particular aspects of humanism. These are its belief in the capacity of conscious human beings to reason, make choices and act freely and its belief in their capacity to value and participate with one another in controlling their destiny (Payne, 2005a, p. 183). Later in this chapter, I investigate how the reflective aspect of critical humanism also has much to contribute to our understanding of the importance of reflection on practice in social work, especially in terms of developing the ability to make ethical decisions.

### **2.3.3. Feminism**

I have already discussed the place of women in the history of social work and the next chapter considers the importance of feminist ethics. However, it is important at this stage to explore the contribution that feminism has made to social work on a theoretical level. Marchant (1986), writing in the radical tradition, sees some incorporation of feminism into social work theory as critical and she explored the ways in which feminism and systems theory could be used together to overcome structural oppression in our society. She concludes that 'gender ought to be a central concept in social work practice, but by no means to the exclusion of class and ethnicity' and suggests that, for the sake of both social work and its female practitioners, 'one way forward is to build feminist theory into social work theory as foundation knowledge' (Marchant, 1986, p. 32). Wearing (1986) further develops these links between feminism and various forms of structural analysis by describing, in turn, Liberal feminism, classical Marxist feminism, radical feminism and socialist feminism and

their place in the development of social work theory and practice. She sees each of these approaches, which overlap to some extent in social work literature, as important for an understanding of women both as social workers and as clients (Wearing, 1986).

In contrast, Ife (1997) believes that while feminism has a lot to offer social work, it also has limitations. Structural feminism clarified the patriarchal structures of society which oppress women, while post-structural feminism showed how patriarchy is maintained through the discourses of power and domination. While feminism has helped the understanding of structural oppression in general and contributed to the development of alternative discourses, it has not acknowledged sufficiently that the oppression of women is only one of several significant dimensions of oppression. Wise (1995) also notes that while the feminist critique has developed and matured over the years, there has been little theorising about what feminist social work practice might look like. Her major emphasis is on the empowerment of women through practice, which focuses on where the real power is in the relationship between worker and client and the overall movement towards anti-discriminatory practice.

These tensions between different theoretical perspectives were the subject of much attention in the literature in the 1970s and 1980s (Corrigan & Leonard, 1978; Galper, 1980; Marchant, 1986) in terms of which theory had the most to offer social work theory and practice. More recently, Payne (2005b) notes feminism's contribution to the growth of anti-discriminatory practice, particularly the ways in which feminism highlighted both the oppressive practices of social workers and the male domination of social work management. On balance, feminism has contributed significantly to the development of our understanding of social work and the next chapter explores the ways in which feminist ethics and the ethic of care help us to understand the values underpinning social work and to practise within a developing social work ethic.



#### 2.3.4. Post-Modernism

In terms of social and philosophical movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, it is also important to consider how post-modernism can help articulate an alternative approach to social work practice. Ife (1997) sees post-modernism, which emerged from the humanities rather than from the social sciences, as crucial for developing an alternative paradigm for social work. Payne argues that '*postmodernism* refers to the changes in the way in which we think about our societies and the way in which we create and understand knowledge' (Payne, 2005a, p. 15). Accordingly, post-modernism denies a single rationality or discourse. Foucault, in particular, defines power in terms of discourse rather than structure. So, the role of deconstruction is critical. Pulling apart the construction of a phenomenon in order to understand its meaning within a particular context or discourse is important for understanding both social work in its context and how social workers can work with clients in ways that empower them. The problem for social work, Ife (1997) says, is that post-modernism does not give any direction or prefer any values. This is a problem for those who believe that there is a set of positive values (such as social justice) which form the basis of social work.

However, in his later work, Ife (2001) maintains that even within post-modernism, it is possible (and desirable) to practise social work from a human rights perspective. Rather than trying to define a particular set of human rights, Ife suggests that social work is part of the ongoing human rights discourse and that working out human rights in a particular context is important. This position can also be understood in terms of Payne's (2005a) argument that the construction approach to social work theory means that theory will inevitably respond to current social realities, which will include the theoretical, occupational and service contexts. In this case, the emergence of a human rights perspective within social

work theory and practice represents a new construction reflecting current understandings both within and outside social work.

## **2.4. Social work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century**

The problems identified by Ife (1997) as inherent in social work in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century are still evident. If anything, the trends towards managerialism, centralised, top-down planning and the growth of competencies as the basis for employment have continued to strengthen in the early years of this century. What, then, are the implications for social work? If social work is to maintain its relevance over the next 20 years, it must continue to meet such challenges and to build on its history of absorbing the important and related elements of new social and philosophical movements as they develop.

### **2.4.1. Still a profession under threat?**

The trend towards employing people with the skills and knowledge to perform required tasks is likely to continue, so social workers will need to be able to demonstrate not only that they can compete on those terms with professionals from other backgrounds, but also that they can work cooperatively with them to achieve results for clients and communities.

As a profession, social work needs to continue to clarify what sets it apart if it is to maintain its central and possibly unique role within the caring professions. While many skills and competencies are common to the caring or social professions, the way in which social work has responded to and embraced movements like those described above is quite unparalleled. It is possible that the key to social work's ability to adapt and evolve is its capacity for reflection. This ongoing focus on reflection, followed by critical reflection, has given social

work the opportunity to keep abreast of and operate within changing social and philosophical understandings.

#### **2.4.2. The importance of ethical practice**

In the context of these challenges to the profession overall, it is important that individual social workers are also able to articulate their knowledge and skills, and the basis for their practice and the decisions they make within it. As scrutiny increases, the need to be able to make ethically justifiable decisions becomes even more important.

Accordingly, a reflective approach to practice is also important to individual workers as they make sense of their work environment and the nature of their practice, and attempt to resolve the ethical dilemmas that arise on a regular basis. Throughout this study, the theoretical and empirical focus is on supporting workers to develop the skills they need to reflect on their practice in a changing philosophical context, particularly in terms of the emerging understanding of social work ethics, and to be able to articulate the reasons for the decisions they make. In terms of the profession more generally, ‘systematic attempts to highlight, address, and monitor the ethical dimensions of social work practice will, in the final analysis, strengthen the profession’s integrity’ (Reamer, 2001b, p. 41).

### **2.5. Conclusion**

This chapter has focused on establishing the social work context for addressing the first key questions identified in Chapter 1: *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?* I have looked at the development of Australian social work and its

values and considered the impact of the major social and cultural movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The next chapter establishes the ethical context for dealing with the key questions. It explores the major Western ethical traditions and their relevance to social work, and then examines the growth of professional ethics and the role of codes of ethics in social work. Finally, it considers evolving social work ethics, including the importance of care and human rights and the consideration of context in making ethical decisions.

## **3. THE ETHICAL CONTEXT**

### ***3.1. Introduction***

In the previous chapter, I explored the social work context for this study, including the development of its values and the ways in which it has been influenced by the major ideas of the late twentieth century. This chapter establishes the ethical context for this study, beginning with some of the major ethical theories which form the basis of Western moral philosophy and which have, in turn, shaped the development of professional ethics in the late twentieth century. I am not attempting to explain the basis of contemporary moral philosophy, nor even that portion of it known as ‘ethics’. I am neither a philosopher nor an ethicist. My purpose in this chapter is to illustrate the recent changes in ethics, particularly professional ethics, which have affected Australian social work’s understanding of ethics and to explore ways in which ethics can be conceptualised to provide meaningful support for Australian social workers looking to strengthen the ethical dimension of their practice.

This chapter has four sections. The first section briefly describes those strands of ethical theory which have framed and formed the ethical theories and traditions put into practice by social workers. Against this backdrop, the following section explores the notion of professional ethics generally, as well as recent analyses of social work ethics based on changing understandings of professional ethics. In particular, this section sets out the theoretical context in which social work seeks to be ethical and encourages social workers to be ethical. The next section of the chapter examines codes of ethics and their usefulness in

ethical decision-making, especially for social work, including a critique of the Australian Association of Social Work Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002)<sup>1</sup>.

The final section considers the possible future shape of social work ethics, which forms the theoretical context for addressing my key research questions:

- *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?*
- *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?*

It describes the major directions in Australian social work ethics in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century and sets the scene for the examination of ethical education and decision-making developed in the following chapter.

### **3.2. Ethical theories and traditions**

Many works on social work ethics include an examination of traditional ethical theories (Banks, 2001; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Hugman, 2005; McAuliffe, 2000; Reamer, 2001a) and ways in which they have been incorporated and adapted to meet the changing conditions under which social work is practised. This part of the chapter identifies the major elements of the most important traditions in Western ethical theory regarded as relevant to social work. Banks' (2001) categorisation of ethical approaches into 'principle-based' and 'character or relationship-based' approaches has been an important influence on both my understanding of ethics in social work and the ways in which the different traditions have different contributions to make to social work ethics and the

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<sup>1</sup> The old AASW Code of Ethics (1989) was updated following a broad consultation among Australian social workers and other stakeholders and the new version was first published in 1999 and republished in 2002. Any references to the current AASW Code of Ethics are to the 2002 edition.

development of social workers as ethical decision-makers. I build on this categorisation in this chapter.

For the purposes of this study, I want to simplify this categorisation for examining the ethical traditions which are the most relevant to social work. It is possible to divide the major ethical theories into two categories: those that focus on the act and those that focus on the person. If we adopt this simple division, it will also make it easier in the later discussions to consider the advantages and disadvantages of the major approaches. Those theories which focus on *the act* are generally concerned with *what I do*. They can be further divided into two major types, consequentialist and prescriptive approaches. Within a consequentialist approach, the act cannot be fully assessed ethically until after it has been committed and the consequences are known. Utilitarian ethics generally falls in this type, although rule utilitarianism overlaps these two to some extent. Prescriptive ethics, in contrast, is influential before the act is committed by telling me what I should do. Deontological approaches, which provide a guide to help me know my duty before actions are carried out, are an example of this type.

There is another major category of ethical theories which focus on *the person* and are more concerned with *who I am*. Again, they can be divided into two major types. The first centres on the character of the individual and has been described as ‘agent-centred’ (Noddings, 2002). This approach is characterised by (and can be developed through) formation, leadership and mentoring. Virtue ethics is the most obvious example of this approach. The second type of ethical theory in the category of the person centres on the notion of relationship and can be regarded as based on mutuality, vulnerability and nurturing. The ethic of care belongs in this type.

This structure will be important in the examination of ethical education and decision-making in the next chapter. For now, I will follow it in general terms by dealing in turn with the act-focused approaches, utilitarianism and deontology, and then the person-focused approaches, as exemplified by virtue ethics and the ethic of care.

### **3.2.1. Utilitarianism**

The focus of utilitarianism is on the act, particularly on its likely consequences.

Utilitarianism fits within a broader category of consequentialism, within which actions are judged right or wrong according to their consequences, rather than to any intrinsic characteristics, like honesty. It differs from other forms of consequentialism in its focus on the consequences for everyone. In contrast, *ethical egoism* focuses on the consequences for the person carrying out the action, while *ethical altruism* focuses on the consequences for everyone except the person carrying out the action (Beckett & Maynard, 2005). So, in utilitarian approaches to ethics, the ‘rightness’ or ‘wrongness’ of an action depends entirely on the consequences it is likely to produce for a whole group, even though those consequences may be unknown at the time of the action (Bowles, Collingridge, Curry, & Valentine, 2006).

John Stuart Mill, probably the most well-known of the original proponents of utilitarianism, based his theory on what was most likely to achieve the greatest happiness, maintaining that actions are right in proportion to the extent that they promote happiness (Mill, 1863). This notion of ‘happiness’ or pleasure, although never easy to define (Hugman, 2005), gradually came to be understood as the value or goodness arising from particular actions, or even broader concepts such as preference satisfaction, interests or welfare (Clark, 2000). As time has gone on, this understanding has continued to develop, particularly in the context of



professional ethics, where the notion of utility has come to mean promoting the greatest good or even the welfare of the group. Many of the ethical issues faced by social workers today, as in the past, hinge on the conflict between the wishes of the individual and what others see as being in his or her best interests, so that social work is still practised in a paternalistic context.

Further distinctions are made between ‘act utilitarianism’ and ‘rule utilitarianism’. The first refers to particular, individual actions to produce the best consequences, or maximise utility, while the second allows for actions in accordance with rules or principles that ought to produce the best consequences or maximise utility for the society (Beauchamp, 1991; Beckett & Maynard, 2005; Hugman, 2005).

There is some evidence of utilitarianism, particularly rule utilitarianism, in the history of social work ethics, particularly in the codification of rules into various codes of ethics which have been adopted over the years – at least in Australia, Britain and the United States. However, Banks (2001) notes that existing codes rely less on utilitarian principles than on the rights and duties typified in the deontological approaches discussed below.

### **3.2.2. Deontological ethics**

Many of those critical of utilitarianism see the solution in an ethical approach based on a notion of duty or obligation. As noted above, this approach also focuses on the act rather than the actor, but the ethical choice can be made before the act is committed.

‘Deontological theories are based on the idea that there are certain things that we should or should not do, irrespective of the consequences’ (Beckett & Maynard, 2005, p. 33). Derived from the Greek word ‘*deon*’, meaning duty, deontological ethical theories are predicated on

the notion of pre-existing duties and obligations (Beckett & Maynard, 2005). A problem inherent in utilitarianism, as a consequentialist approach, is that it fails to recognise that some acts or rules can be regarded as 'right' regardless of their consequences. In contrast, deontologists believe that there are moral standards which are independent of utilitarianism's emphasis on ends and that morality is more than just means and ends (Beauchamp, 1991). The corollary is that actions can be intrinsically wrong independent of their possibly beneficial consequences. This appears most commonly in the question, 'Does the end justify the means?'

One of the major proponents of deontological ethics was Immanuel Kant, who developed the 'categorical imperative' to 'act only on that maxim through which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law' (Kant, 1964, quoted in Clark, 2000, p. 71). In other words, each of us should 'act in such a way that our actions could become a rule for everyone without creating a contradiction' (Beckett & Maynard, 2005, p. 57). Banks (2001) also highlights Kant's view that 'we should treat others as beings who have ends (that is choices and desires), not just as objects or means to our own ends. The individual person is worthy of respect simply because she or he is a person' (Banks, 2001, p. 24). However, implicit in that worthiness is Kant's further assumption that others are rational beings capable of making those choices for themselves. Regardless of their wealth or status, they are capable of acting as moral agents, and 'morality consists in faithfulness to the universal law of reason' (Clark, 2000, p. 71).

Beckett and Maynard (2005) note that there are different deontological approaches relevant to social work. The first is a human rights approach, which informed documents such as the American Declaration of Independence, the United Nations Declaration of Human Rights and the European Convention on Human Rights and carries with it duties to respect the

rights of others. This approach is clearly evident in the idea of ‘respect for persons’ fundamental to many social work codes of ethics across the world and expressed in very similar terms relating to respecting human value and dignity (Banks, 2001).

A second deontological approach centres on the concomitant duty to respect the rights of others and there are clear links between this position of respect for the other and some basic social work principles, such as client self-determination and confidentiality (Beckett & Maynard, 2005). This duty to respect others regardless of their ability, status and so on is particularly important for social work in its work with the marginalised and the oppressed.

There are also some variations within deontological ethics. For example, deontologists have different bases underpinning their principles of obligation. Some appeal to divine command, others to the intrinsic moral value of particular actions, and others again to principles such as justice or rights (Beauchamp, 1991; Clark, 2000; Rawls, 1999). The ethical principles regarded as central to social work, as well as those individual-based ones described above, include justice, fairness and equity.

Just as deontologists are critical of utilitarian approaches to ethics, so do utilitarians identify problems in the deontological approach. For example, a utilitarian would say that a strict adherence to duties (possibly expressed as ethical rules) fails to take into account the personal situation or circumstances of an individual or community, and can lead to decisions that may have unethical consequences. It also fails to provide an answer where two or more ethical duties are in conflict. Again, this challenge has important implications for the processes of ethical decision-making in social work practice discussed in detail in Chapter 4.

Having considered utilitarianism and deontology, which both focus on the act itself, I now turn to those theories which focus on the person. The first of these theories is virtue ethics, which centres on the character of the person.

### **3.2.3. Virtue ethics**

Another perspective on moral questions is virtue ethics, which dates back to Plato and Aristotle, but was largely ignored in the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. In 1958, Elizabeth Anscombe argued that modern philosophy should stop thinking about duties, obligations and rightness, and return to a virtues approach based on Aristotle (Rachels, 2003). However, generally speaking, virtue ethics did not come back into favour until about the 1970s, and even then it was largely seen as a useful add-on for utilitarians and deontologists until it gradually regained its proper status as a rival ethical theory with its own contribution to make (Hursthouse, 1999). In the case of professional ethics, attention to virtue ethics emerged in the aspirational codes which became common from the 1990s (Hugman, 2005).

In virtue ethics, the morality of an action depends on neither the consequences of the action nor the duty underpinning it, but on the moral character of the person carrying it out (Banks, 2001, 2004; Beauchamp, 1991; Beckett & Maynard, 2005; Bowles et al., 2006; Hugman, 2005; Hursthouse, 1999). An action is regarded as right if it is what a virtuous person would do in the circumstances, and a virtue is described as ‘a character trait a human being needs to flourish or live well’ (Hursthouse, 1997, quoted in Banks, 2001, p. 43). The other feature of Aristotle’s concept of a virtue (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II) is that it is not excessive, so that a vice may either be the absence of a virtue or having that virtue to excess. Beckett and Maynard (2005) give the example of the virtue, courage, and the corresponding vices, cowardice and recklessness.

Aristotle conceived of virtue ethics in terms of both the character of the person and their activities, and emphasised the relationship between virtue and excellence. A virtuous person excels in terms of their personal morality and the quality of their actions and the motive for a particular action is also important in determining whether or not the action is virtuous. We are not born virtuous, but must be trained so that virtuous activity becomes habitual (Aristotle, ; Beauchamp, 1991). In this study, the notion that we can learn to be ethical and the links between virtue and excellence are central to the key questions and are dealt with in detail both in the next chapter on ethical education and decision-making and again in the later data analysis.

There is much in deontological theories of ethics like Kant's which is useful for social work, as it is for other professions. By the same token, the virtue ethics of Aristotle and others in a sense encapsulates the values which have been at the core of social work since the end of last century and also provide a framework for including practice excellence in considerations of what constitutes ethical practice. One of the great pioneers of social work, Jane Addams, is presented by Beauchamp as a remarkable example of Aristotle's 'virtuous person' (Beauchamp, 1991, pp. 209-212) and Addams herself draws on Aristotle when trying to explain how to teach morality to others (Addams, 1907). This discussion on the growing importance of an Aristotelian approach to ethics is also echoed in modern work on the purpose of modern codes of ethics across a variety of settings and occupations . The trend in recent codes of ethics away from prescriptive and towards aspirational codes will be discussed later in this chapter.

In the late 20<sup>th</sup> century there was considerable debate about the relative merits of virtue, utilitarian and deontological ethical approaches and consideration of the extent to which they can co-exist. For example, Beauchamp (1991) outlines the arguments for the primacy of

virtue ethics over both consequentialist and deontological ethics and concludes, among other things, that one is more likely to have confidence in the ethical decisions made by the virtuous person with an ingrained motivation to do what is right than the rule follower. In terms of social work ethics, McBeath and Webb (2002) argue that virtue ethics is more appropriate for social work than either utilitarian or deontological approaches, although Beckett and Maynard (2005) are critical of their easy dismissal of utilitarian and deontological approaches and argue that, although virtue ethics is important in social work, it cannot 'provide an alternative to thinking about the consequences of actions, or of having clearly defined duties' (Beckett & Maynard, 2005, p. 42). Rachels (2003) also argues that the theory of virtue should be regarded as part of an overall ethical theory rather than as an ethical theory in its own right. These issues are taken up again in the last section of this chapter.

#### **3.2.4. Ethic of care**

Finally, this section focuses on the second kind of person-based ethical approach identified above, that which is based on relationship. An important link between the character and relationship-based approaches to ethics described by Banks (2001) is emotional responsiveness. Alongside the commonly identified virtues, such as honesty and courage, are more relational ones such as empathy and compassion, which become important when considering questions about what sort of person one should be in relation to others.

Interestingly, Hugman (2005) identifies a third ethical strand based on compassion which (alongside virtue and care) also developed in the late twentieth century. Banks (2001) discusses Okin's view that virtue ethics, for the ancient Greeks as well as more recently, has tended to focus on those virtues expected to be exhibited by men rather than 'female' virtues, such as nurturing and teaching (Okin, 1994, quoted in Banks, 2001, pp. 46-47).

Hugman (2005) describes the growing interest in ethic of care as emerging largely from the debate between the psychologists Gilligan and Kohlberg about moral development. Gilligan had been influenced by Kohlberg's (1976, quoted in Gilligan, 1993) work on moral development, but challenged Kohlberg with the argument that women's experience, more centred on empathy with and involvement in the lives of others than men's experience, resulted in a different understanding of 'right' and 'wrong'. Gilligan has made a significant contribution to our understanding of moral development by differentiating between the moral development of men and women and identifying care as the basis of women's morality.

Baier (1994) also explores the issue of women and moral theories, discussing the issues of both what women want in a moral theory and what kind of theory might be produced by a woman, focusing on the importance of trust. It is interesting that Baier also examines in some detail the work of Hume, particularly around the notions of 'connectedness' and 'communal reflection' (Baier, 1994). Hume stresses the importance of reflection in developing morality within a community, which is especially relevant in terms of the development of ethical communities.

Another major feminist contributor to the development of the ethic of care is Noddings (Noddings, 2002; 2003). Noddings' background is in education rather than social work, but she has much to contribute to our understanding of ethics in social work. She draws on the work of Hume, particularly his contention that morality is founded upon and rooted in feeling, and 'that which renders morality an active virtue ... depends on some internal sense or feeling, which nature has made universal in the whole species. For what else can have an influence of this nature?' (Hume, 1967, quoted in Noddings, 2003, p. 79). Noddings then goes on to differentiate between 'ethical' and 'natural' caring, noting that there is some

effort required in ethical caring, that it involves both recognising and responding to observed need with the feeling that 'I must' do something to help. In Gilligan's terms, it results in an ethic of caring and responsibility.

It has been noted that, although the ethic of care is the ethical view 'most closely associated with modern feminist philosophy', 'not all women philosophers have been self-consciously feminist; nor have all feminists embraced the ethics of care' (Rachels, 2003, p. 167).

Further, women philosophers have not been alone in identifying care as a vital ethical principle. Fuller (1992, p. 12) stressed the importance of interconnectedness, saying we must aim at a 'full understanding of the individual's relationship with the wider web of life' which is only possible from an interdisciplinary perspective. He then explained ethics as the effort to reflect on how we might best go about caring for ourselves and others in day-to-day living. His ethic of care is not rooted in feminism so much as in an awareness of the interdependence of life and a deep commitment to a wider ecology which recognises 'humanity's place in the web of life' (Fuller, 1992, p. 19). Fuller discusses traditional moral theories and acknowledges that, as all needs cannot be met, decisions have to be made.

Moral principles thus emerge in our effort to develop generalisations that best resolve the conflicting obligations we confront in day-to-day living. ... Care becomes moral ... when it patterns its actions in such a way as to build an adaptive and nurturant strength, both in ourselves and others (Fuller, 1992, p. 64).

While the ethic of care has generally been regarded as having a particular connection to feminist ethics, there has been significant resistance among feminists to attributing an ethic of care specifically to women. Banks (2001) notes that this can 'reinforce essentialist views of women as "merely" carers and leave unquestioned whether the caring role itself can have a negative and damaging effect on carers' (Banks, 2001, p. 47). In addition, seeing caring as a woman's role also ignores the reality of particular cultural groups (for example,



Afro-Americans) who stress cooperation and collective responsibility as important as the basis of their communities (Banks, 2001).

Another problem identified in the ethic of care has been its apparent incompatibility with justice. Banks (2001) has summarised the differences between the approaches, including the way in which care's reliance on relationship limits the applicability of issues like justice, fairness and equality. Banks (2001) argues that the ethic of care and the ethic of justice are not mutually exclusive, but complementary, and a broader conception of the ethic of care has been proposed which takes context into account and, under the influence of post-modernism, posits a contextual and situated form of feminist ethics (Banks, 2001; Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

However, Hugman (2005) argues that the complex relationship between care and justice 'prioritises care as basic' and 'in the context of the neo-liberal political economy this may not be sufficient to construct a strong ethics' (Hugman, 2005, p. 84). Furthermore, the debate about the connection between the ethic of care and the ethic of justice 'is vital for those who seek both to care and to be accountable in professional life (Hugman, 2005, p. 85). This discussion will be revisited in the final section of this chapter, where I suggest an emerging shape for social work ethics based on my experience as a social worker and social work supervisor. The next section deals with professional ethics, especially the relationship between ethics, the professions and accountability, before moving on to codes of ethics.

### **3.3. Professional Ethics**

Within the wider context of ethical theory, the late 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an exponential growth in the field of professional ethics. The growth of economic rationalism and managerialism has had an impact on social work and many other professions (Bowles et al., 2006; Ife, 1997)

such that the growth of applied ethics was boosted from outside its philosophical core (Beauchamp, 1991). This begs the questions of what distinguishes professional ethics from ethics in general and, indeed, what constitutes a profession? The integrity of moral rules is important in the wider social context in which they are established. Clearly, this has significant implications for the adoption of a set of rules and/or practices by a particular group within a society, such as a profession. Presumably, they are agreed to within the profession as offering the best way to ‘maximise social utility’ (Bowles et al., 2006) in the practice of that profession. This can be complex within a profession like social work where there are often conflicts between which rules should apply in particular circumstances, or whose interests are best served by following a particular rule. There may be conflicts between the interests of, for example, a parent and a child, or a person with mental illness and his or her carer. In addition, there may be conflict between which ‘rules’ apply and which take precedence in particular circumstances – in a given situation, should confidentiality or self-determination be the rule which guides the worker’s actions?

### **3.3.1. Ethics, professions and accountability**

What, then, is professional ethics? Clearly it has more practical implications than its purely theoretical predecessors, but there are also strong links and commonalities. It was demonstrated earlier that both utilitarian and deontological ethics have been important influences in the development of professional ethics, including in social work. However, it has been noted that a purist approach to philosophical ethics does not meet the pluralistic need of professional ethics, and that it leads to ‘unconvincing or unworkable solutions’ (Clark, 2000, p.68). A purist approach is one based on a single ethical theory, such as utilitarianism, or the ethic of care. This chapter, thus far, has demonstrated that no one

approach can answer all the issues arising in a particular situation. A purist approach is not enough.

Before continuing this discussion, it is worth looking at the essential link between ‘professions’ and ethics. It became common in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century to define a field of work as a profession only if it met the criterion of having a code of ethics (Banks, 2001; Bowles et al., 2006). This somehow separated it from other endeavours, including the trades. Sinclair (1996) notes that:

codes, of course, have traditionally been associated with professions. Much of their persuasiveness as quality control devices stems from a historic respect and status accorded to professionals and the expectation that the professions would have meaningful ways to sanction recalcitrant members’ (Sinclair, 1996, p. 88).

From the perspective of the general public, this distinction has blurred somewhat in the last 20 years, with many fields of work laying claim to some kind of code – at least of practice, if not ethics – usually linked to the membership of a professional (or trade) association. Nevertheless, the common understanding of ‘professionalism’ seems to encapsulate notions of minimum practice standards as well as certain ethical standards, both of which function to provide some protection for the consumer and, indeed, the general public.

Some writers have further described professions as ‘those occupations that have as their explicit purpose the delivery of one or more basic goods that contribute to human flourishing’ (Oakley and Cocking, 2001, quoted in Bowles et al., 2006, p. 34), in which case the most important elements are:

- adherence to a code of ethics or ethical standards,
- good judgement,
- client-centred practice,
- independence of thought or action, and
- competence (Bowles et al., 2006, p. 34).

This is clearly reminiscent of Aristotle's notion of human flourishing (Aristotle, ; Banks, 2001; Bowles et al., 2006).

Bowles et al (2006) agree with this ideal description but note that not many social workers are in private practice (compared to, say, doctors or lawyers) and that their independence can be limited by their employment, particularly in government-funded services. Furthermore, social work as a profession has been adversely affected by the new managerialism, particularly in terms of application of private sector models to traditional human services delivery (Bowles et al., 2006).

Banks (2001), while critical of the trait approach to defining professions, notes that social work has often been regarded as a 'semi-profession' precisely because it does not meet all the required traits. Banks draws on the list of attributes developed by Greenwood (1957, quoted in Banks, 2001, p. 84):

1. a basis of systematic theory;
2. authority recognised by the clientele of the professional group;
3. broader community sanction and approval of this authority;
4. a code of ethics regulating relationships of professional with users and colleagues;
5. a professional culture sustained by formal professional associations

Banks argues that social work, while it does have professional associations and codes of ethics, has trouble laying claim to a firm theoretical base, exclusive skills, authority or community sanction (Banks, 2001, p. 85). While it is the case that social work shares many skills and much knowledge with a number other social professions (Banks, 2004), in Australia at least, I believe that social work has attained some authority and community sanction, demonstrated by both the range of work undertaken by social workers and the willingness of individuals and governments to use social work services.

The very concept of 'professionalism' has come under attack from within social work as undermining its core values and principles. Ife (1997) describes social work's yearning for professionalism as evidence of its desire to achieve legitimacy within economic rationalism. These issues are not new, but can be traced back to very early tensions within social work between caring and trying to establish some kind of scientific basis for its activities (Freedberg, 1993). Hugman (2005) examines professions in some detail, beginning with the view of a profession as having developed claims to particular status, power and authority within a society and then considering the 'trait approach' which was popular through much of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and he identifies traits like 'systematic knowledge gained through formal education, discrete skills, a corporate body, autonomy sanctioned by the community, and a code of ethics' (Etzioni, 1969, quoted in Hugman, 2005, p. 31).

Hugman (2005) then explores the idea that power is vested in professionals by the societies in which they operate, including their basis in trust and the extent to which their autonomy is 'delegated or negotiated authority' (Hugman, 2005, p. 32). Banks (2001) also describes the power invested in social work and the criticism this has drawn from 'many quarters, ranging from right to left' (Banks, 2001, p. 87). Because professionals can abuse the power derived from their position, it is important to have formal statements of ethics. Even though they can be 'employed as bids for status and privilege', codes of ethics can be 'utilised by service users and others as a means of holding professionals accountable, both individually and collectively, for their actions' (Hugman, 2005, p. 33).

Accordingly, for individual practitioners, belonging to a profession implies some commitment to the standards and ethics of the profession, including from a consumer perspective. Professional ethics in general have been described as the codification of the special obligations arising from the role of the professional (Dolgoff, Loewenberg, &

Harrington, 2005). In particular, professional social work ethics helps social workers ‘to recognize morally correct practice and act ethically in any professional situation’ (Dolgoff et al., 2005, p. 4).

The concepts of ‘professionalism’ and ‘accountability’, and their synergy with ethics, affect individual practitioners and the expectations under which they operate. It appears that the public, or at least the users of services, believe that they are afforded some protection by the professional affiliation of the practitioners and their implicit commitment to uphold certain prescribed standards. In the case of social workers, members of the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW) are required to abide by the Association’s Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002), and ethical complaints against members are heard by Branch Ethics Committees – at least in the first instance. Banks notes that in Britain, ‘the title of social worker has not been protected by law’, at least until recently (Banks, 2001, p. 87) and this is still the case in Australia. One of the reasons that the AASW supports registration of social workers is that the public has those expectations regardless of whether or not the individual is a member of the AASW (and therefore bound by its code of ethics).

### **3.3.2. Ethical organisations**

Does all this mean, however, that the sole responsibility for meeting ethical standards lies with the individual practitioner? Surely an organisation which employs social workers, for example, also bears some responsibility for the ethical behaviour of its employees. Many of the participants in this study, on the basis of their experience as workers, supervisors and managers, shared the view that organisations both share ethical responsibility for services provided by workers and are responsible for enhancing the individual ethical development of those workers.

Preston (1994), writing of the public sector generally, states that it is crucial for both the culture and the structure of organisations to reflect a real commitment to ethical practice and discusses the dangers of management using ethics education as another management technique. Other commentators have developed the notion of the ethical organisation, including some definition of the role of management in ensuring that the work carried out by the organisation, as well as its very structures, reflect its ethical base. For example, Petrick and Quinn (1997) focus on the enhancement of managerial performance by integrating managerial and ethical competence. Interestingly, they also spend some time examining traditional ethical theories and explaining their relevance to management ethics, including not just utilitarian and deontological theories, but also virtue ethics, which they see as critical to excellence in management (and organisations). Furthermore, they argue that that the organisation itself, led by its managers, must strive to be ethical, and not rely on the ethics of its individual employees. They describe this notion of ‘systems development ethics’ as follows:

*Systems development ethics theories* maintain that the nature and extent of the supportive framework for continuous improvement of ethical conduct determines the ethical value of actions. Managers who are sensitive to the need to assess and develop work cultures supportive of ethical conduct implement ethical development systems that will sustain integrity-building environments. Managers who rely exclusively on the character of employees to sustain sound business practices ... are unintentionally exposing their organizations to future ethical risk (Petrick & Quinn, 1997, pp. 53-54).

Petrick and Quinn (1997) include as part of ethical development an understanding of ethical theory and they also note that sound ethical decisions depend on an acknowledgement of ethical complexity. In terms of my later consideration of the usefulness of codes of ethics (see Chapter 4), they take the view that ‘managers will not achieve developmental integrity by merely controlling connivance or enforcing compliance of oneself or others’. What is needed is a ‘mind-shift to a principled concern for others’ (Petrick & Quinn, 1997, p. 122).

A number of other commentators on organisational ethics have focused on the best way for an organisation to promote ethical practice, which also relates to ethical education. Preston (1994) suggests a 'web' or network style of organisation which creates an environment in which ethical autonomy can be cultivated. McCurdy (1998) agrees that developing mechanisms to address ethical issues is critical to becoming an ethical organisation, but also questions whether an organisation can be ethical apart from the individuals who constitute it. He puts forward as one test of an ethical organisation, that it establishes standards for the conduct of its affairs and for the conduct of the individuals it employs, then monitors 'compliance' with those standards. However, he is adamant that any standard developed must be 'provisional and reviewable' (McCurdy, 1998, p. 27). An ethical organisation, for McCurdy, is one that is continually reflective about its moral responsibilities and the ethical questions it faces.

Like Preston (1994) and Sampford (1994), McCurdy (1998) sees value in gathering staff to consider the kinds of ethical dilemmas they will face as part of their work within the organisation. In a profession like social work, which has in its history and at its centre a culture of supervision, these discussions can also take place within supervision. Indeed, the potential for open and honest discussions of the options might be facilitated more productively within the supportive, individual supervisory relationship than in the context of a meeting with a group of peers, although the use of groups for such a purpose can still be extremely effective. The data in this study consistently demonstrate the importance of supervision in assisting social workers in both their reflective practice and their ethical development. At least one implication for organisations is that, if they employ social workers or other helping professionals, they face ethical obligations around the provision of supervision and other opportunities for reflective practice.



Reamer (2001b) developed the 'Social Work Ethics Audit: A Risk Management Tool' for practitioners (and organisations) to help them 'identify pertinent ethical issues in their practice settings, review and assess the adequacy of their current practices, design a practical strategy to modify current practices as needed and monitor the implementation of this quality assurance strategy' (Reamer, 2001b, p. 3). This audit tool is clearly intended as a risk management strategy and can be regarded as evidence of social work's acceptance of the new managerialism. However, McAuliffe (2005b) has examined the use of the ethics audit and its relevance in Australian human service delivery organisations and suggests that 'the benefit of explicit focusing on practice and the legitimacy that an ethics audit gives to addressing issues of ethical sensitivity', concluding that 'ethics auditing ... could be a positive contribution to both the social work profession and to organisations that are genuinely concerned with ensuring better than acceptable standards of accountability, equity and care' (McAuliffe, 2005b, p. 368).

The next section deals with professional codes of ethics, particularly in social work. It describes the apparent trend towards aspirational codes and their theoretical basis and contrasts this with the reality of the more and more detailed prescription within codes which have emerged in an increasingly managerial context over the last thirty years. It also deals with both the limitations and advantages of using a code-based approach to resolving ethical dilemmas.

### **3.4. Codes of Ethics**

A major component of the growth of professional ethics described above has been the development of professional and organisational codes of ethics. Many professions, including social work, have chosen to develop codes which reflect their ethos and state their

principles to those outside the profession against which members of the profession can be held to account. Codes of ethics have been significant for many professions and much time and effort is expended in developing, disseminating, inculcating and reviewing professional codes. However, there is a growing body of literature that questions their helpfulness in actually forming people as ethical practitioners.

The focus of this chapter is the ethical context for this study, particularly social work ethics in Australia. However, a few remarks about organisational ethics are relevant. One of the advantages of organisational codes of ethics is that they provide an opportunity to transmit values of organisation and to teach workers to make ethical decisions within the values and the practice situations faced by workers in that organisation.

A strong theme emerging from the data in this study is the importance of workers being able to make ethically justifiable decisions. This includes both making the decision itself in terms of what is appropriate in the context and being able to articulate the reasons for the decision. Accordingly, the language in which the code is written is important (Fullinwider, 1996; Sinclair, 1996), regardless of whether it is an organisational or professional code. Sinclair says that ‘an effective organisational code will be expressed in language which resonates with employees’ experiences. Codes can provide organisations with a new internal rhetoric, a vocabulary of motives and legitimate reasons for doing things’ (Sinclair, 1996, p. 100).

Before looking in detail at a specific code of ethics for social work, it is worth considering Lichtenberg’s question, ‘What are Codes of Ethics for?’ (Lichtenberg, 1996). She looks at common reactions to and descriptions of codes of ethics (platitudinous, controversial, vague) and explores their major functions (prescriptions, sanctions). She then addresses Ladd’s (1992) argument that codes of ethics contradict the ‘notion of ethics itself, which presumes

that persons are autonomous moral agents', and that ethics 'cannot be imposed from without' (Ladd, J, 1992, quoted in Lichtenberg, 1996, pp. 14-15).

While agreeing that this would be the case if ethics was only concerned with acting for the right reasons, Lichtenberg concludes that we also need ethics to get people to behave 'in ways that have been determined (by whatever means) to be morally desirable or required' (1996, p. 27). Lichtenberg further asserts that codes can be useful for expressing a group's 'commitment to some moral standard', and that their success will depend on 'whether the provisions are framed as requirements or aspirations (or something in between), and on whether or what sanctions are attached to non-compliance' (1996, p. 27).

Banks (2001) uses the factors identified by Millerson (1964, quoted in Banks, 2001, pp. 89-90) to determine the need for a code of ethics, concluding that the fiduciary nature of social work and its clients' limited comprehension of its techniques are the most important factors for social work. It is of some concern that social work does not meet the ideal conditions for the introduction of a code of ethics described by Millerson (1964, quoted in Banks, 2001, pp. 89-90) - a single form of training, involvement in one type of work and a strongly organised and registered profession. This may partly explain some of the difficulties inherent in describing social work as a profession, as well as those identified in the Australian Code of Ethics.

Nevertheless, Banks (2001) identifies two possible explanations for social work's development of codes of ethics. These are its aspiration to be regarded as a full profession and the desire to 'generate a sense of common identity and shared values amongst the occupational group' (Banks, 2001, p. 91).

### **3.4.1. A Case study: Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics**

Skene (1996) considers that there are two main categories of codes, and locates both prescriptive and aspirational codes within those 'designed to maintain standards of practice within the profession and to protect the community'. Skene continues:

These provisions may be *prescriptive* – duty-directed, stating the specific duties of members. Or they may be *aspirational* – virtue-directed, stating desirable aims while acknowledging that in some circumstances conduct short of the ideal may be justified (Skene, 1996, p. 111).

A second type of provision in a code of ethics is designed to protect the (particularly financial) interests of the profession and its members and covers issues like qualifications and loyalty to other members of the profession (Skene, 1996). The AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) (the Code) is described in detail below, but may be regarded as trying to incorporate all these and other objectives in a single document. The remainder of this chapter explores the various tensions at the heart of professional ethics, particularly social work ethics, through an analysis of the AASW code.

This chapter has already described a range of ethical theories and the ways in which they have been adapted over the years to meet not just developments in moral philosophy, but also the changing needs of society in general and the professions in particular. Alongside this theoretical development, there have been corresponding changes in the nature and function of codes of ethics within professions. To a large extent, the early codes of ethics represented a combination of deontological and utilitarian approaches. That is, they tried to provide guidance on both the duty of the worker in accordance with their role within a particular discipline, but also on how to weigh up various options in different situations in

terms of their likely consequences for the client or other stakeholders. Codes of ethics developed for social work tended to reflect these aims regardless of the setting.

Reamer (1990) notes that a utilitarian approach to social work ethics is popular because it seems to ‘foster generalized benevolence’. However, inherent problems include the difficulty of calculating the good that might result, deciding on what kind of consequences should be the aim, and subordinating the rights of a few for the greater good (Reamer, 1990, pp 19-20). Similarly, a major problem in purely deontological approaches is making a decision about the appropriate action in particular circumstances without considering the likely consequences. One problem with existing codes of ethics, including the present AASW Code (2002), is that they tend to combine both these approaches without recognising or resolving the tensions between them. More broadly, Banks (2001) describes ‘the many layers of often conflicting duties that social workers have to balance and choose between’ and argues that ‘the critical or reflective practitioner needs to be aware of these and to make informed ethical judgements about which duties have priority’ (Banks, 2001, p. 158).

More recently, the re-emergence of virtue ethics has been evident in the formulation of aspirational codes of ethics (Preston, Sampford, & Connors, 2002), although they cannot be described as a complete representation of virtue ethics. The limitations of a prescriptive approach (with or without accompanying sanctions) were somehow overcome by avoiding the issue altogether and framing codes of ethics either as invitations to morality, or as lists of the values which should underpin the activities of a particular group or profession. The aim of developing the morally competent individual professional was held up as the ideal, but was in some ways confused by the need to abide by the lists of values that were seen to characterise particular professions, such as social work.

For many groups, however, there is still a perceived need to regulate the conduct of their members. In some cases, this is achieved by developing a separate code of conduct. For example, the Australian Nursing and Midwifery Council mandates core competencies, a code of professional conduct and a code of ethics. Other approaches, such as the AASW (2002) code, contains a mixture of aims and approaches. The AASW code encompasses a mixture of aspirational, deontological, utilitarian and other approaches and objectives.

The development of codes of ethics can be seen first in the need to be established and recognised as a profession with shared values, then to protect both users and the wider community as well as the profession and its members and, later again, within a wider context of managerialism and accountability. Social work shares these aims with many professions, although Ife (1997) argues that the impact of the managerialist agenda has been greater on social work than on many other groups because the political, economic and ideological environment which produced managerialism fundamentally contradicts the values of the profession.

The major objectives for Australian social work have been the provision of a statement of the values and principles underpinning social work for those within and outside the profession and the guidance and regulation of social work practice, at least for members of the AASW. This is consistent with Banks' (2004) list of characteristics of codes of ethics across a number of professions and countries. These are:

- statements about the core purpose or service ideal of the profession
- statements about the character/attributes of the professional
- ethical principles
- ethical rules
- principles of professional practice
- rules of professional practice (Banks, 2004, pp. 108-109)

Hugman (2003) notes that the Australian code of ethics (AASW, 2002) combines both Kantian and utilitarian approaches, resulting in a synthesis expressed in terms of broad aims such as social justice and respect for the individual.

While prescriptive codes have had a place in professional ethics over the last thirty years, it has become apparent that this approach to ethics has some limitations. The literature and the data collected in this study suggest that a code based solely on prescription reduces the ability of workers to develop as ethical decision-makers, as they are not required to reflect on the presenting dilemma and make informed decisions based on the particular context. The worker is less likely to develop the skills required to reflect on the various dimensions of the presenting dilemma and make an ethically justifiable decision, particularly when the kind of guidance to be found in the Code is limited. These issues, particularly their importance in ethical decision-making, will be examined in detail in the next chapter.

Codes of ethics are said to be one of the signs of a profession and a feature of modern codes is that they are regularly reviewed to ensure that they take into account changing circumstances, issues, technologies and so on, while still connecting practice with the moral purpose that underpins it (Fullinwider, 1996). It was partly such a desire to address the changing face of social work which led the Australian Association of Social Workers to develop its new Code (AASW, 1999, 2002) to replace its earlier 1989 version (AASW, 1989).

The new Code was not developed in a vacuum, but was the result of a widespread process of consultation in the social work community (members and non-members of the AASW), with employers of social workers and with consumers of social work services. These

consultations informed the development process, which also included consulting experts in the field of professional ethics and consideration of comparable developments in other countries and within other professions (AASW, 2002).

When the present Code was developed, the AASW was trying to achieve a number of aims. These included bringing the old Code (AASW, 1989) more into line with traditional social work principles and values, making it more aspirational than prescriptive, making it easier for social workers to obtain guidance around ethical dilemmas and making breaches of the code (and sanctions for those breaches) easier to determine (AASW, 2002).

Alongside these general aims, there were important advances in the profession's understanding of processes like ethical decision-making which, it was hoped, would provide a general direction for the ethical development of the profession and the individuals within it. Section 2 outlines the nature and purpose of the Code and states that its purpose is to:

- identify the values and principles which underpin ethical social work practice
- provide a guide and standard for ethical social work conduct and accountable service
- provide a foundation for ethical reflection and decision-making
- guide social workers when determining what demands they may legitimately make on their employers, colleagues and the AASW
- provide clarification of social workers' actions in the context of industrial or legal disputes, and
- act as a basis for investigation and adjudication of formal complaints about unethical conduct (AASW, 1999, p. 3)

Its first stated purpose, to identify the values and principles underpinning ethical social work practice, is its primary one and should set the tone for the whole document. The next purpose seems more appropriate in a code of practice than a code of ethics, but the third stated purpose is extremely important. Together, these three stated purposes exist comfortably within the theoretical and practice history of social work (Addams, 1907;



Camilleri, 1996; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Payne, 2005b) and include what I believe are the most important aspects of professional ethical behaviour. Particularly important in the context of this study are the notions of ethical reflection and decision-making, which encourage the development of the individual's ethical decision-making abilities (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005). The final three issues listed under 'Purpose' are more problematic and are discussed in more detail below as part of the discussion of the Code's limitations.

Section 3 of the Code describes the values and principles underpinning social work. It is the part of the Code which is most aspirational in nature, describing features of a just society which social workers should be trying to achieve through their practice. It uses language that encourages social workers to work according to certain principles and with integrity. Again, this is consistent with virtue ethics and the notion of the virtuous person acting in different situations and also with the principle-based approaches described earlier.

Section 4 of the Code defines in some detail what is meant by ethical practice. It attempts to translate the general principles and values from Section 3 into appropriate and specific ethical behaviours. Generally, the intentions behind the practices described are clear (for example, the section on confidentiality). However, a number of difficulties arise, including the Code's attempt to include as many different activities undertaken within social work as possible, such as management, education, research, alongside different contexts in which social work takes place, including in private practice. Attempting this contradicts one of the features of professional codes described above, involvement in one type of work (Banks, 2001). These difficulties will also be examined more closely in the next section.

Section 5 of the Code, 'Guidelines for Ethical Decision-Making', tells us:

This Code offers guidance in making decisions that are ethically justifiable, but it intentionally does not specify what to decide in particular situations.

*Ethical decision-making* is the process of critical reflection, evaluation and judgment through which a practitioner resolves *ethical issues, problems and dilemmas* (AASW, 1999, p. 22).

This is potentially the most important part of the Code of Ethics. While it draws on the directions set out above, this section gives primary responsibility to the individual social worker to develop her or his ability to resolve the dilemmas which arise in day-to-day practice. Also implicit is the fact that there is an ongoing process of reflection involved in the worker's ethical development. This is important for assisting social workers to internalise the values underpinning social work and to develop as ethical beings, but still reflects a utilitarian desire to arrive at decisions that will do the most good (or the least harm) in a given situation.

It is clear from this brief summary of the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) that it has multiple aims and tries to apply to multiple social work functions and settings. As noted above, the tension between prescription and aspiration is not addressed and the Code also tries to include other roles and responsibilities within the profession. The next section deals with the specific difficulties in the Code (AASW, 2002), while the following section begins to explore alternatives. Reflection and ethical decision-making are addressed in the next chapter.

### **3.4.2. Limitations of the AASW Code of Ethics**

In terms of assessing the effectiveness of any measure, it is appropriate to begin with its stated purpose. Accordingly, this section deals, in turn, with each purpose in the list cited above. The first purpose listed is *to identify the values and principles which underpin*

*ethical social work practice*. Unfortunately, Section 3, which deals with Values and Principles, is somewhat confusing. It has chosen two possible basic underpinning values - human dignity and worth and social justice - without explaining why these particular values have been chosen over any others, or what others may have been discarded in the process. It then moves on to values relating more to the motivation or qualities of individual practitioners, service to humanity, integrity and competence, although service to humanity could be placed just as easily in the first category. The principles attached to these five values are also a mixture of underpinning core values and service delivery-type principles. Furthermore, no indication is given about which values and principles should be given priority in cases of conflict. I believe that much more clarity and differentiation are required to help social workers identify the value base of their work.

The next purpose identified is *to provide a guide and standard for ethical social work conduct and accountable service*. This is also a problem. Section 4 of the Code, 'Ethical Practice', comprises the bulk of the Code and lists in great detail a mixture of principles, practice standards and specific ethical guidelines. However, there is little guidance about when, if ever, any should take precedence over the others or how this might be decided. Rather than outlining genuinely foundational values and principles, the Code seems to be trying to cover every possible variation in social work practice, its context and potential relationships. While this produces a comprehensive document, it does not assist individual workers to interpret what these principles mean for them or how they might incorporate them into their daily practice.

The third stated purpose is *to provide a foundation for ethical reflection and decision-making*. In terms of this study, this is the most promising, but again the Code disappoints. Section 5 ostensibly deals with the consideration of ethical dilemmas and ethical decision-

making, but raises more questions than it answers. Social workers are advised that they should reflect on ethical problems and dilemmas ‘in the light of the values and principles outlined in this Code’. While sound, this seems at odds with both the complaints and adjudication functions of the Code. The mention of possible conflicts between the Code and various legal and other requirements is more realistic, noting that many dilemmas will not be readily resolved by giving priority to one over the other, but that the underlying moral dilemmas remain. What is missing is some clarification around issues of competing accountabilities or competing claims of different stakeholders and guidance on making decisions when there seems to be a conflict between values and principles.

International research highlights both the absence of any ‘hierarchy of values’ in modern codes of ethics and the reluctance of social workers to rank ethical principles in terms of importance (Landau & Osmo, 2003). It seems that the Australian Code (AASW, 2002) is consistent with international observations in this respect. It does not adequately support the ethical development of the individual, as it neither assists the social worker in dealing with many of the dilemmas which arise in practice by providing a hierarchy of values, nor provides a framework for critical reflection on the dilemmas faced by the profession.

The next two stated purposes of the Code (AASW, 2002) are *to guide social workers when determining what demands they may legitimately make on their employers, colleagues and the AASW* and *to provide clarification of social workers’ actions in the context of industrial or legal disputes*. It seems appropriate to deal with these together. While guidance on dealing with colleagues generally (for example, with respect) would be appropriate, this would seem to apply mostly to industrial issues or other issues between workers and their employers and seems entirely out of place in a code of ethics. While it may be appropriate

for the AASW to provide advice to its members on such issues, they do not belong in the Code of Ethics.

The final stated purpose of the Code (AASW, 1999) is *to act as a basis for investigation and adjudication of formal complaints about unethical conduct*. The use of this Code in its current form in the investigation and adjudication of formal complaints about unethical conduct is problematic. Many parts of the Code use language which does not support a complaints process. Generally this is because the language is subjective or too general to be assessed objectively, or because it assumes knowledge of the motive of the worker in a given situation. For example, assessing a complaint about conscientious objection would depend on being able to know the motivation of the individual worker. Paradoxically, in addition to creating difficulties around adjudication, subjective or general language also encourages the lodgement of complaints, possibly based on a perception or interpretation of the motivation or intention of individual social workers or their actions.

The establishment of a separate document, framed in clear, unambiguous language, may well solve these problems, but such a document may not be possible.

The legal effect of particular provisions in codes of ethics is not always clear. One reason is the variation between the purpose and substance of provisions. Some are clearly not intended to have any legal effect. They are value statements, designed to set ideals or to promote moral self-understanding in the professions rather than to impose a specific duty the breach of which may give grounds for complaints and sanctions (Skene, 1996, p.112).

In my experience, another problem with the complaints function of the Code (AASW, 2002) relates to the accompanying processes for hearing complaints. The Branch Ethics Committees designated by the AASW to undertake this role all comprise volunteer members who are members of their local branch of the Association. There was general acknowledgement by participants that these part-time members are experienced social

workers with a wealth of understanding of the ethical dimensions of social work practice and this is a positive contribution to the creation of an ethical community within social work. However, it inevitably puts pressure on the individual members in terms of both time and potential conflicts of interests, particularly in small branches. Even if committee members do not know personally the AASW member against whom a complaint has been made, they are very likely to have some knowledge of the agency or system in which the event occurred. This is particularly the case in a small branch as in the case of the Australian Capital Territory where the social work community is small and many workers know each other and/or have worked in the same agencies at some time. However, such problems may be overcome by administrative changes such as cross-branch investigations which would maintain the benefits of the ethical community without creating additional problems for the individuals involved. The AASW has recognised that there are problems in the present process for hearing complaints and is working towards developing a new complaints process. To this end, the investigation of complaints has been suspended from January to at least June 2007 (AASW, 2007).

The fact that complaints can only be made against members of the AASW is also a problem for maintaining ethical standards across the profession because the majority of social workers in Australia are not members of the AASW, and the investigation of complaints against members can be thwarted if they relinquish their membership of the AASW (McAuliffe, 2000). As mentioned earlier, this is one of the main reasons that the AASW supports registration of social workers in Australia.

### **3.4.3. What are the alternatives?**

What, then, should a code of ethics for social work look like? To adopt a more contemporary approach would entail greater emphasis on the ethical development of individual workers and would more explicitly acknowledge the contribution of different ethical approaches to the shape of the code itself, with some attempt to resolve the ambiguities between them. In addition, the various aims of the code might be clarified. What may be useful is a brief code of ethics which sets out social work's core values and principles and an explanatory document which might guide workers' reflection on practice and decision-making. Such a document would also fulfil the requirements that a professional code 'supports moral understanding by connecting a profession to a moral purpose, thereby helping professionals to see their practices as "performance for the public good"' (Fullinwider, 1996, p. 73). However, it would still be important to maintain some mechanism for hearing complaints and imposing sanctions. Ideally, this would be clearly linked to relevant competencies, appropriate professional standards and a code of ethics.

The question as to what other kind of document could be developed for social work is very open. Further development of the AASW's Practice Standards (AASW, 2003) into a document under which complaints could be made may be of some use, but would suffer the same limitations as those described above in terms of membership of the AASW. In the next chapter I analyse the processes of ethical decision-making in more detail, including the various resources available to social workers.

In spite of these limitations, the Code (AASW, 2002) still has an important part to play in the ongoing development of social work ethics in Australia. The final section of this chapter draws together the developments in ethical theory and professional ethics articulated throughout this chapter to provide a theoretical context for the ethical education and

decision-making explored in Chapter 4. Combined, these discussions support my exploration of the key research questions.

### ***3.5. The future shape of social work ethics in Australia***

Each of the theoretical approaches described in this chapter has made a significant contribution to the future of social work ethics. The division between act-focused and person-focused approaches and their sub-categories outlined at the beginning of this chapter has been useful for understanding the importance of each, and identifying the nature of their specific contribution. Although there has been considerable debate about which is the most appropriate for social work, it appears that no one ethical approach can provide all the answers and that we can validly look at ethical issues from a number of perspectives (Banks, 2004; Beckett & Maynard, 2005). The rest of this chapter explores the possible future shape of social work ethics and the way in which it forms the basis for the ethical education and decision-making described in the next chapter.

#### **3.5.1. Ethical pluralism**

This chapter has described how traditional ethical theory, including professional ethics, has influenced the development of social work ethics. Furthermore, the return to virtue ethics and the emergence of the ethic of care have also been shown to be extremely influential in social work. It has become apparent that all these approaches have something to contribute to the future of social work ethics and that a pluralist approach incorporating aspects of each might be the most appropriate way forward.



McBeath and Webb (2002) address the question of what is moral in a changing (post-modern) world, concluding that virtue ethics has a lot to contribute to social work ethics, particularly in the priority it gives to the individual moral agent who has acquired virtues, which are then manifest in his or her actions. McBeath and Webb (2002) further note that communitarian ethics is underpinned by virtue ethics, and reinforces the notion of virtues determined from within an ethical community.

McBeath and Webb (2002) also consider how these more recent ethical theories are more appropriate for social work than utilitarian or deontological approaches. Virtue requires more of the individual worker than simply doing one's duty or assessing the possible consequences of different proposed actions. 'Virtue calls upon the inner sense of the essential rightness of one's stance commensurate with the situation and the determinants of a moral dialogue with the rest of society' (McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1033). Both deontological and utilitarian approaches have limitations, with neither promoting a moral and social richness between the worker and the client. However, this dismissal of utilitarian and deontological ethics undermines the way in which the values and principles underpinning social work contribute to its ethical foundation, as each has been influential in the development of social work values, principles and ethics (Bowles et al., 2006).

The ethic of care, described above as developing from within a feminist perspective, has clear links with virtue ethics. Both Gilligan (1993) and Noddings (2003) regard care as both a foundation on which virtue rests and a path to virtue, achieved through practice. Jane Addams (1907) also defined the 'social ethics' intrinsic to social work as based on virtue. Hugman's (2003) description of feminist ethics as plural and discursive, without seeking a point of certainty, resonates with both the human rights discourse favoured by Ife (2001) and the post-modern reluctance to privilege any particular set of values. Hugman (2003)

describes the connection between virtue and relational ethics and says that we need a social understanding of ethics that deals with the diversity of post-modernity, describing the ethic of care in social work as an integration of a moral dimension with technical choices. Fuller's (1992) work on the ethic of care and its relationship to traditional ethical approaches also focuses on how moral judgments are translated into moral acts, and why that is important. Although not specifically addressing the post-modern context of ethics, he stresses that translating our care into effective action is demanded by the 'unfinished and evolving character of our universe' (Fuller, 1992, p. 71). Also clear in Fuller's (1992) work is the link between virtue and care, where making a moral judgment requires deciding how I can go about caring in a particular situation. Important in this construction is both caring and the need to make decisions in the context of the particular circumstances.

Other ways in which approaches to ethics have been linked by various commentators include Ife's (2001) work on human rights, which offers a discursive approach to human rights as an answer to the questions raised by post-modernism and removes the danger of 'social workers drowning in a sea of relativism' (Ife, 2001, p. 108). It could be said that a human rights discourse as a basis for social work ethics returns social work to its traditional values (as much as possible in a post-modern context) by giving voices to the marginalised, moving away from trying to find one 'right' answer to ethical dilemmas and legitimising diversity (Ife, 2001).

### **3.5.2. The importance of context**

A major contribution of post-modernism to our understanding of social work ethics lies in its emphasis on context. The earlier discussions indicate that deontological and utilitarian approaches have both advantages and limitations when social workers are faced with

particular (usually complex) situations in the lives of people and the ethical dilemmas which arise from those situations. While the processes of ethical decision-making are examined in the next chapter, it is worth noting here that considering the context of the dilemma is always important (Banks, 2001, 2004; Clark, 2000; Congress, 1999; Hugman, 2003, 2005; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005; Reamer, 1990, 1998). A broadly post-modern approach might say that no particular ethical approach should be privileged over any other and that the individual practitioner must decide the best course of action based solely on the situation, but to take that stance may still risk operating in a moral vacuum.

In Ife's (2001) terms, rather than searching for a 'grand narrative' to inform our choices, we need to note that people's understanding of their own existence is 'grounded in the local and the everyday' (Ife, 2001, p. 109). Accordingly, entering into their individual, family or group narratives, particularly from a position of power deriving from a 'professional' role, means that social workers need to be careful to enter into the human rights discourse with their clients rather than imposing any other discourse, such as control. One of the implications of this is that, rather than looking to external ethical frameworks to help us resolve dilemmas, we need to develop a discursive approach to the dilemmas which arise in practice. If that discourse is grounded in human rights and care as well as the values and principles underpinning social work, and involves the clients and their own understanding of their context, then the decision emerging is more likely to be ethically justifiable.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

This chapter has described the ethical context in which social work is practised. In particular, it has made the distinction made between act-focused ethics (comprising consequentialist and prescriptive ethics) and person-focused ethics (comprising

agent-centred virtue ethics and the relation-centred ethic of care) (Noddings, 2002), noting the different contribution to social work ethics that is made by each approach.

There has been a significant movement over the last ten years towards a pluralist approach to social work ethics and codes of ethics have developed over time in a way which reflects this pluralism (Banks, 2004; Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). The literature reviewed in this study indicates that no single ethical approach provides a sufficient ethical framework to support the range of ethical decisions that need to be made on a daily basis within social work practice. In fact, it has become apparent that any social worker facing an ethical dilemma might draw on a range of principles, duties, ethical frameworks and attitudes, including the code of ethics, to decide on the most appropriate course of action in a particular situation. From a supervisor's perspective, the task is to help the worker identify and define the dilemma and then to assess the practice and ethical alternatives that might contribute to its resolution, including being able to articulate which particular ethical approach informs the decision-making processes.

The next chapter, *Learning to be Ethical*, investigates ethical education, ethical decision-making and a possible future for Australian social work. This provides an important perspective on how workers learn to make ethical decisions. It is important in terms of both supervision, which I have argued is the primary context for ethical education, and professional development generally, that individual social workers have the opportunity to learn to make ethical decisions.

## **4. LEARNING TO BE ETHICAL**

### ***4.1. Introduction***

The previous chapter described the ethical traditions which have contributed to the development of social work ethics today, including professional ethics and codes of ethics. I suggested that a pluralist approach to social work ethics is appropriate and necessary. In this chapter, my aim is to discover how individual workers learn about the ethical context in which they practise and learn to make the ethical decisions that are at the heart of that practice. This discussion will directly address the first of the key questions in this study: *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?*

I am not an educationalist and my focus in this chapter is not on proposing a theoretical approach to ethical education. Rather, based on my experience as a social worker and supervisor trying to encourage other workers to reflect on the ethical dimensions of their practice, I explore the importance of reflection and reflective practice in the development of individual workers as ethical decision-makers. I then examine various models of ethical decision-making and the extent to which they might be useful for social workers when they face the ethical issues and dilemmas that will inevitably arise in their practice.

### ***4.2. Ethical education***

How can social workers, supported by their supervisors, learn to be aware of, and to address explicitly, the ethical dimensions of their practice? If we return to the Aristotelian approach described in Chapter 3, ethical practice by social workers would seem to depend on their own level of virtue and their motivation for doing the work. Importantly, however, Aristotle

also maintained that it is possible to get better at being virtuous through practice. How then can social workers practise being ethical? This part of the chapter focuses on various aspects of reflection and their importance in both ethical education and ethical practice. The next section explores particular models of decision-making that have been developed from within and for social work and attempts to assess their relative merit.

#### **4.2.1. Education and virtue ethics**

Within the context of social work practice and the wide variety of work that it entails, an ethically autonomous practitioner is one who makes practice decisions, relatively independently, within a clear ethical framework on the basis of reflection on practice. There is a strong correlation between this 'ethically autonomous practitioner' and Aristotle's notion of the virtuous person who becomes virtuous by training or habituation - by practising the virtues. According to Aristotle, virtues are acquired by being exercised (Aristotle, *Nichomachean Ethics*, Book II).

The practice of virtue is a concept that deserves further consideration in its own right. Implicit is the notion that there is some improvement in the individual's level of moral virtue. This cannot happen in a vacuum because, presumably, a person of questionable morals can practise being immoral, or at least amoral. Perhaps the highly moral individual is capable of objectively assessing their behaviour in a particular situation as to its intrinsic moral worth, and adapting their future behaviour accordingly. Indeed, that is the state we aspire to as independent moral agents. However, for most of us, some guidance is required in this process.

Jane Addams, a student of Aristotle's work and one of the forerunners of modern social work, quoted an 'ethical lecturer' as saying, 'We arrive at moral knowledge only by tentative and observant practice. We learn how to apply the new insight by having attempted the old and found it to fail' (Addams, 1907, p274). Given Addams' own story, this is significant. Although she was described by those around her, and judged by history, as a virtuous person, she herself recognised that we need to continue to develop moral knowledge and practise moral virtue (Beauchamp, 1991).

This implies that both knowledge and practice are important in the development of virtue, and the three components identified more recently as critical for the ethical development of social workers are virtues, ethical skills and ethical knowledge (Bowles et al., 2006).

Addams is recorded as having come to know, value and practise virtue through the example of her father (Beauchamp, 1991). Hursthouse (1999) describes the importance of moral education of even very young children. They must, she says, be given the means, including language, to help them, as they mature, to understand and articulate the emotional and rational bases of morality.

Hursthouse (1999) is clear about the notion of responsibility for ethical education. For children, that responsibility lies with parents, in the first instance. She says:

And thereby, good parents start inculcating the virtues – developing the character traits on the standard list – in their children from a very early age, in the belief, conscious or unconscious, that this is indeed preparing them for their lives, laying the foundations that will enable them to live well. (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 175)

Within social work, how is this 'parental' responsibility relevant? We presume that beginning social workers will emerge from universities with at least some knowledge of the 'standard list of traits' we expect to find in those embarking on a 'moral undertaking'.

Perhaps we even expect them to have chosen social work in the first place because of some

ingrained virtue, described elsewhere as an urge to ‘do good’, or ‘help people’. But is that enough? In this study, I explore the notion that, in addition to the basic training that takes place within our schools of social work, a major part of the responsibility for helping practising social workers to learn to act as ethical agents resides in the process of supervision, and is shared by the worker and the supervisor. In addition, the ethical education of social workers needs to include the different ethical traditions earlier and the ways in which they combine to provide the ethical context in which social work is practised.

For example, while virtue ethics and the ethic of care have much in common (Noddings, 2002), including that they are both agent-based, there are also important differences. Care ethics is not a variety of virtue ethics. It is ‘relation-centred rather than agent-centred, and it is more concerned with the caring relation than with caring as a virtue’ (Noddings, 2002, p. 2). Accordingly, ethical education from a caring perspective is slightly different from the virtue ethics education already described. The emphasis is more on the relationship and the caring context than on specific individual virtues and the stories used as examples are more likely to focus on the difficulty of dealing with a dilemma and arouse feelings like sympathy than to feature heroes or inspirational accounts (Noddings, 2002).

In an ideal world, beginning social workers would have even more access to ‘ethical’ supervision than their more experienced peers. Organisations would invest heavily in helping social workers to learn to act as the ethical agents their profession assumes them to be and in the particular context of the services provided by the organisation and the characteristics of its clients. But within the organisation, should this responsibility fall to the supervisor? Why, and how, should supervisors bear this burden? What support do the supervisors themselves require for this task? As I show below, there is certainly a function of supervision that relates to maintaining accountability within service provision –



accountability to clients, funding bodies, the general community and others. Wider than this issue, however, is the notion that a beginning social worker, once equipped with the basic knowledge and skills needed for 'doing' social work, still needs to learn to act as an independent ethical agent within the parameters of daily practice and within their employing organisation.

Ethics is much broader than accountability. It relates, at least, to the overall moral and values context in which a person operates in pursuit of particular goals. In the case of the social worker, this context includes the history of the profession and its values, as well as the major ethical traditions which have informed its direction. In the case of individual workers, it also includes their own values and ethical position, as well as those of employing organisations.

#### **4.2.2. Reflection and ethics education**

Supervision is central to this study, and supervision's history, theoretical basis, importance in social work and role in the ongoing ethical education of workers are examined later (see Chapter 5). In this section, I will concentrate on the ways in which reflection is central to ethical education. Sampford (1994) discusses the desirability of developing a 'critical morality' in which individuals working within an organisation can debate, discuss and criticise majority views. He suggests the establishment of what he calls 'ethical circles' to work through real or hypothetical problems or ethical dilemmas. This reflects my own experience of trying to 'teach' ethics in the workplace and the relative success of having workers discuss real or hypothetical dilemmas in small groups.

Related to this idea of involving workers in discussions about ethics is Woodward's (1994) argument that ethics must be part of 'real work', and not something imposed from above or outside. Similarly, Preston (1994) says that ethics education programs should emphasise autonomy and empowerment rather than control and compliance. Preston (1994), Sampford (1994) and Petrick and Quinn (1997) all argue that over-regulation will lead to a less responsible and autonomous workforce. Woodward's (1994) 'bottom-up' approach to ethics bears some similarities to Ife's (1997) notion of worker involvement in critical practice mentioned earlier. As noted earlier, the wide process of consultation which contributed to the revision of the Australian Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) can be seen as an attempt at a bottom-up approach within the profession. Woodward is also opposed to the imposition of codes of ethics from outside, saying that it is important for codes to be agency-specific. In addition, Jackson (1994) addresses the question of teaching ethics, drawing on principles of adult education like the use of people's prior knowledge and experience and an awareness of how learning styles differ between individuals.

What needs to be considered within these approaches? If the aim is for individuals to develop as independent moral agents, then there must be some process by which they gradually internalise the ethical principles they seek to follow. Simply abiding by prescribed behaviours seems to contradict the notion of independence we seek to achieve. Similarly, being able to give apparently 'correct' answers to how a dilemma might be resolved does not necessarily indicate the respondent's true moral worth. As Hursthouse (1999) notes with respect to the ethical development of children, teaching them to produce a good answer to a moral question does not necessarily give them 'moral understanding on the spot' (Hursthouse, 1999, p. 144). This, it will become apparent later, was the case with social workers supervised or taught by participants in this study.

Accordingly, the aim of reflection and discussion is not just to give individuals the language of morality and ethical practice (which is important), but also to help them internalise the values that underpin their practice in a way which will support their future decision-making and actions in the face of ethical dilemmas. Banks' (2001) view of what learning to be ethical entails reflects the ethical pluralism described in the previous chapter, as it includes knowledge of the ethical principles, becoming a person of integrity and the development of good judgement (Aristotle's 'practical wisdom') within the context of the 'real-life decision' needing to be made in the particular practice context (Banks, 2001, pp. 50-54).

In a similar vein, Rawls (1999) described a method in ethical theory called 'reflective equilibrium' which sees ethics as a 'reflective testing of our confident moral beliefs' in order to make them as coherent as possible. In Rawls' terms, the worker learns to reflect on specific situations or dilemmas in the light of known principles, such as a professional code of ethics or the values of the agency, in order to bring coherence to the whole system.

In general terms, the crucial factors in ethics training revolve around the knowledge and internalisation of ethical principles, consideration of ethical dilemmas arising in the context of practice and the opportunity to practise and reflect upon ethical actions. In the next section, I will consider this in the particular context of social work in Australia.

#### **4.2.3. Ethics training in social work**

As described above, some of the responsibility for the ethical education of social workers lies with the schools of social work in which they train. Although there are inevitable differences between the approaches taken within schools, all are required to provide some training in ethics which would include both education in ethical principles, including those

encapsulated in the AASW Code of Ethics (2002), and discussion about how to deal with the kinds of ethical dilemmas they are likely to encounter in practice. Social work students need to be trained in the *ethical knowledge* which will support their practice as well as beginning the process of developing *ethical skills* (Bowles et al., 2006).

The data analysed later (see Chapters 7 and 8) provide examples of the use of scenario-based discussions to help students identify the underlying ethical dilemmas present in particular situations and to tease out their own personal and professional responses to those dilemmas. The value of this approach is also supported by both my own experience using the same model when providing ongoing professional development for workers, and Sampford's (1994) wider use of 'ethical circles' within a workplace. These discussions can potentially increase workers' ethical knowledge and give them practice in assessing the relative merits of the choices inherent within a dilemma, often deconstructing many layers of values and principles within what may seem to be a single decision.

In this study, I concentrate on the ongoing ethical education which workers should receive as they practise social work. My basic premise is that workers learn to be more ethical by practice, which includes reflecting on the ethical dilemmas they face in the light of the principles underpinning their work. It is useful for ongoing training in ethics to be conducted from time to time within a workplace, combining the models described with some appropriate discussion of ethical theory. However, I am convinced that the ongoing reflection which will have the best long-term impact on workers' ethical development is most logically located within the processes of supervision (see Chapter 5). Furthermore, providing supervision for individual workers is one of the responsibilities of the employing organisation. The earlier discussion of accountability and ethical organisations (see Chapter 3) demonstrated that providing supervision also goes some way towards ensuring that the

organisation and the services it offers are themselves ethical. This issue is taken up again in the exploration of ethical decision-making later in this chapter.

#### **4.2.4. Reflection, critical thinking and reflective practice**

Before turning to the reflection on practice required particularly for the ethical development of social workers, I will explore the use of critical thinking and reflective practice more generally. One of the main legacies of post-modernism is that we now question not just what we know, but how we know it (Fook, 2002). In the case of social work, there has always been a critical potential inherent in social work, stemming in part from the early concerns of people like Richmond and Addams with the social and systemic dimensions of the problems faced by individuals seeking help (Camilleri, 1996; Fook, 2002; Payne, 2005b). This critical thinking was also evident in the radical social work of the 1970s already discussed (see Chapter 2). Fook (2002) describes a number of ways in which post-modern and critical approaches have challenged traditional understandings of immutable scientific knowledge:

- by asking what constitutes ‘acceptable’ knowledge, and whether and why some forms of knowledge are valued over others;
- by focusing on how we know, as well as what we know;
- by drawing attention to different perspectives on what and how we know;
- by drawing attention to the perspectives of the knower, and how it influences what is known and how it is known (reflexivity) (Fook, 2002, p. 34).

Fook (2002) then outlines the nexus between knowledge and power and the ways in which post-modernism has challenged the privilege of professional knowledge. This has particular implications for social work, which sees itself as standing with and for those who are disadvantaged and marginalised in our communities.

Further divisions apparent in social work are those evident between theory and practice, practitioner and researcher and worker and client. From a post-modern perspective, it is important to ‘question this rigid and hierarchical division between theory and practice’ (Fook, 2002, p. 38), as well as the others noted. One way to achieve this is through critical reflection, ‘which can assist us in subjecting our practice to a more critical gaze, at the same time allowing us to integrate our theory and practice in creative and complex ways’ (Fook, 2002, p. 39).

Argyris and Schon are credited with the development of a reflective approach to professional education (Argyris & Schon, 1976 cited in Fook, 2002, p. 39). They attributed the crisis in the professions to the gap between the theories that professionals are taught and what they do in practice. The reflective approach which grew out of this observation recognises that what professionals do in practice is often based more on the ‘practice wisdom’ which develops directly from practice experience than on what they have been taught formally (Fook, 2002).

Schon (1987) further develops the knowing-in-action and reflection-in-action observable in everyday tasks like riding a bicycle and then applies them to professional practice.

A professional’s knowing-in-action is embedded in the socially and institutionally structured context shared by a community of practitioners. *Knowing-in-practice* is exercised in the institutional settings peculiar to the profession, organized in terms of its characteristic units of activity and its familiar types of practice situations, and constrained or facilitated by its common body of professional knowledge and its appreciative system (Schon, 1987, p. 33).

Schon believes that practitioners ‘are in transaction with their practice worlds, framing the problems that arise in practice situations and shaping the situations to fit the frames’ so that they have ‘a way of constructing the world as they see it’ (Schon, 1987, p. 36).

Furthermore, this 'knowing-in-practice' occurs in two groups of circumstances: familiar situations where the practitioner can solve the problem using routine skills and procedures and unfamiliar ones where there is no obvious fit between the requirements of the situation and the knowledge and skills usually applied. In these cases there needs to be a diagnosis-like process characterised by 'rule-governed inquiry' (Schon, 1987, p. 34), which in turn can require the practitioner to respond outside his or her routine, and sometimes 'invent new rules on the spot' (Schon, 1987, p. 35). This reflection-in-action may become the basis for the practitioner to continue to develop new responses to unusual or difficult problems, as well as new understandings of familiar ones. In addition, Schon (1987) describes the dialogue between coach and student as consisting of both words and 'performance', noting that, 'when it works well, it takes the form of reciprocal reflection-in-action' (Schon, 1987, p. 163). This relationship may be seen as parallel to that between supervisor and social worker and is particularly important in this study in terms of the nature and quality of the reflection that takes place in supervision. In the context of a reflective practicum in counselling, Schon observes:

When coach and student are able to risk publicly testing private attributions, surfacing negative judgments, and revealing confusions or dilemmas, they are more likely to expand their capacities for reflection in and on action and thus more likely to give and get evidence of the changing understandings on which reciprocal reflection depends (Schon, 1987, p. 302).

In terms of this study, reflection on the ethical dilemmas which arise in social work is itself improved through practice. It will be demonstrated that the trust implicitly identified by Schon as important is also required for a successful supervisory relationship in social work. Fook (2002) notes two important ideas common to reflective, post-modern and feminist approaches to knowledge, that knowledge is both contextual and subjective. This means that reflective practitioners are able to situate themselves in their practice context, and respond holistically using a range of skills and perspectives.

Critical reflection, which ‘challenges domination in ... external structures, social relations and personal constructions’, supports and extends this contextual and subjective approach by enabling workers to reconstruct their practice in ways which are ‘inclusive, artistic and intuitive’ and ‘responsive to the changing (uncertain, unpredictable and fragmented) contexts in which they work’ ...and ‘in ways which can challenge existing power relations and structures’ (Fook, 2002, p. 41). Fook (2002) further acknowledges that there are significant similarities between reflection and critical reflection, noting that the main difference lies in critical reflection’s potential for ‘emancipatory practice’. Critical reflection can play an important role in the reflection on practice discussed throughout this study and as part of the ethical decision-making models discussed below, as it provides the opportunity and the tools for deconstructing the understandings and assumptions underlying our decisions and practices.

However, as Banks (2001) notes, the decisions that are made by social workers in their daily practice require more than knowledge of values and principles and a wish to preserve the rights of clients and other stakeholders. The individual worker’s ‘virtues’ and caring relationship with the client are also important factors in being able to prioritise principles and rights to make an ethically justifiable decision (Banks, 2001, p. 184). The next part of the chapter focuses on the range of influences and processes which contribute to ethical decision-making.

### ***4.3. Ethical decision-making***

Much of the literature of both social work and ethics over the last 20 years has focused on the processes involved in ethical decision-making. This section examines different models of ethical decision-making that have been proposed for social work over the years and



considers their relevance to social work today. Important in this study are the ways in which decision-making models can reflect the ethical pluralism which now characterises social work and the ways in which workers can be supported in their development as ethical decision-makers, particularly within the processes and relationship of supervision.

#### **4.3.1. What is an ethical dilemma?**

The central place of ethics in social work means that ethical dilemmas and, accordingly, ethical decision-making, are inevitable in the practice of social work. What is an ethical dilemma? Several commentators (Banks, 2001; Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; McAuliffe, 2005a; Reamer, 1990) have considered this question and tried to differentiate between ethical issues, problems and dilemmas, while noting that not all workers will see the same situation in the same way. In this study, I have adopted Banks' (2001) description, which is also taken up by Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005):

- *Ethical issues* - pervade the social work task (including what appear to be 'legal' or 'technical' matters) in that social work takes place in the context of the welfare state premised on principles of social justice and public welfare and the social worker has professional power in the relationship with the user. (...)
- *Ethical problems* – arise when the social worker sees the situation as involving a difficult moral decision (...)
- *Ethical dilemmas* – occur when the social worker sees herself as faced with a choice between two equally unwelcome alternatives which may involve a conflict of moral principles and it is not clear which choice will be the right one (Banks, 2001, pp. 10-11).

However, according to their own values, experience, understanding of the broader social context and so on, different workers are likely to differentially regard a situation as an issue, a problem or a dilemma, which will in turn affect the extent to which they regard 'ethical decision-making' as necessary. In the later discussion of the data (see Chapters 7 and 8), it becomes apparent that this has been the case for workers supervised by participants in this

study and, further, that another layer of complexity can occur when supervisors and the workers they supervise see a situation differently.

#### **4.3.2. Models of ethical decision-making**

The Code of Ethics (AASW, 1999) includes some very general guidance on ethical decision-making, which it regards as necessary for workers faced with an ethical dilemma. Consistent with Banks' (2001) definition, the Code describes an ethical dilemma as when 'a practitioner must make a choice between alternative courses of action, each of which is supported by moral considerations and each of which will result in an outcome that is, in some way, undesirable' (AASW, 1999, p. 22). The guidance offered is indicative of the complexity inherent in trying to resolve ethical dilemmas:

When ethical values and principles conflict, social workers have a responsibility to decide which will take priority. While it may be difficult to arbitrate between values and principles which, in the circumstances, appear to be of equal importance, it is necessary to do so in order to come to a decision and achieve an ethically achievable result. (...)

In evaluating morally complicated situations it is important to examine both the *nature* and the *context* of the issues, as well as the potential *consequences* of the available courses of action (AASW, 1999, pp. 22-23).

Apart from exemplifying the mixture of ethical approaches in the Code discussed earlier, this passage highlights the range of factors to be taken into account by the worker faced with an ethical dilemma. This framework-based approach to ethical decision-making has been very useful in encouraging social workers to systematically consider the dilemmas they face in their practice and to draw on appropriate resources and supports.

There have been a number of different kinds of models proposed for ethical decision-making in social work over many years (Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; Reamer, 1990, 1999) and it has also been noted that

there are different ways of classifying decision-making models (Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). These include examining their underlying meta-ethical assumptions (how right and wrong are understood and defined) and determining whether they are descriptive (describing how people behave) or prescriptive (telling them what to do), in which case they are likely to fall into one of the categories described above (see Chapter 3), such as deontological, consequentialist or even virtue ethics approaches (Bowles et al., 2006).

Focusing more on the ways in which decisions are made, Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) describe the major categories of ethical decision-making models as process, reflective and cultural, with process models being the most commonly used in social work. Process models are characterised by clear, linear structures and tend to include these steps: explore values, apply the relevant code of ethics (sometimes in a hierarchical manner), develop alternative options and weigh up their respective consequences and, finally, evaluate the decision (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). Reflective models are seen as emerging from a feminist perspective which encourages the inclusion of clients in decision-making, explores both the 'rational-evaluative' and feeling-intuitive' aspects of decision-making and focuses on consultation and learning (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, pp. 89-90) A reflective model of decision-making is very similar to the processes of action research (see Chapter 6) and both can be seen as part of the development of excellence in practice. Cultural models generally include elements of both the process and reflective approaches, with the major focus on the cultural context in which the decision is to be made (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 90). Chenoweth and McAuliffe have combined these three groups of approaches into what they call the 'Inclusive Model' (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 90).

In this section, I will concentrate on the process models of ethical decision-making and then describe the inclusive model. It is important to note that the order in which these models are discussed does not represent any chronological development of the models themselves and that many models incorporate more than one approach. Different ethical theories are evident in these models to varying degrees and in different combinations. For example, Congress (1999) describes Reamer's model as a deontological approach based on Rawls' theory of justice, but incorporating Gewirth's ranking of conflicting duties. She then notes that Lewis, on the other hand, includes both deontological and teleological approaches, but proposes, like Beauchamp (1991), that in the case of conflict, the deontological approach should prevail (Lewis, 1984, quoted in Congress, 1999, p.31).

## **Process models**

In general terms, process models outline a number of steps which the decision-maker should undertake when assessing the ethical dilemma and within that category there is sometimes a hierarchical component which can assist the decision-maker by offering guidance about which ethical principle should take precedence when one or more principles are in conflict. As already noted, many models of ethical decision-making used in social work contain some combination of these approaches.

Congress (1999) has developed one of the most simple but comprehensive process models for ethical decision-making produced in recent years. I explore it in some detail here because she locates it well within prevailing approaches to ethical decision-making and because it offers a comprehensive explanation of the various components of decision-making which can be applied in any setting. Congress (1999) offers a five-element model based on the relatively simple mnemonic, *ETHIC*. The first requirement is to *examine* relevant

personal, societal, agency, client and professional values as they relate to the dilemma at hand, an examination which reflects a deontological approach to resolving ethical dilemmas. She also suggests that workers *think* about how the appropriate code of ethics (or other relevant framework, such as the law) should be applied.

The next step is to *hypothesise* about possible consequences of different decisions and to explore alternative ways of resolving the dilemma. As part of this process, the worker needs to *identify* who could benefit or be harmed by the proposed actions. These two steps are clearly informed by a utilitarian approach, which considers the likely consequences of different proposed courses of action. Finally, none of these processes should be undertaken by the worker in isolation, so Congress (1999) exhorts workers to *consult* with their supervisor or colleagues about the dilemma at hand, to help them clarify all the relevant issues and their possible implications.

In terms of the earlier discussion about codes of ethics, Congress' model of decision-making is based on a number of ethical approaches, and requires examination of each new dilemma from these different, but sometimes conflicting, perspectives. Particularly relevant to the present study is the element of consultation, which provides the opportunity for the reflection required for resolving ethical dilemmas, which can be located more formally in supervision.

The issue of what approach should prevail in a conflict between ethical principles is critical to our present understanding of how ethical decisions are made and is part of the approach to decision-making developed in this study. Reamer (1990) agrees that a systematic approach to ethical dilemmas is important and sets out ways in which decisions about competing values and approaches can be made. He explores a range of theoretical constructions around issues like justice, rights and needs and explores them in the context of different ethical

theories. Finally, he applies those considerations to a variety of social work settings in order to offer workers some guidance on how to make an ethical decision (Reamer, 1990). This approach is still evident in his later model for ethical decision-making.

Reamer's (1999) process model includes identification of the ethical issues, relevant values and possible courses of action. Then, the thorough examination of reasons for and against proposed courses of action requires considering and weighing up different ethical principles, first in terms of the underlying ethical approach (What would a utilitarian do? What would a deontologist do?), and then in a hierarchical manner. For example, 'rules against basic harms to the necessary preconditions of human action (...) take precedence over harms such as lying or revealing confidential information' (Reamer, 1999, p. 84).

Dolgoff, Lowenberg and Harrington (2005) also offer a linear model of decision-making which includes a hierarchical ranking of values as an important step. Like Reamer (1999), this model begins with the identification of the problem and its contributing factors, the stakeholders and their values and so on and then concludes with implementation of the decision, monitoring (especially for unanticipated consequences) and, finally, evaluating the results and identifying additional problems (Dolgoff et al., 2005). One difference between this model and the Congress (1999) and Reamer (1999) models is that this model presents these steps in the first of a number of larger stages, described as 'screens', which support the processes involved in making ethical decisions (Dolgoff et al., 2005, pp. 57-70). They are described as:

- the ethical assessment screen,
- the ethical rules screen, and
- the ethical principles screen.

As already noted, the *ethical assessment screen* includes the steps generally evident in linear models of decision-making. The *ethical rules screen* focuses on the ethical principles in the relevant code of ethics and states explicitly that they should take precedence over the worker's own values. In the event that the code of ethics does not address the particular problem, or two or more rules within the code are in conflict, the worker should then turn to the *ethical principles screen*. This consists of a list of ethical principles in order of priority, although the authors acknowledge that it reflects their perception of the priorities and there is not yet general agreement about the order (Dolgoff et al., 2005, p. 65). The order is:

1. Protection of life [of clients and others]
2. Equality and inequality [so that people in the same circumstances are treated the same and people in different circumstances are treated differently]
3. Autonomy and freedom [but individuals don't have the right to harm themselves or others]
4. Least harm
5. Quality of life [which can apply to individuals or communities]
6. Privacy and confidentiality
7. Truthfulness and full disclosure (Dolgoff et al., 2005, pp. 66-67).

This approach has a number of inherent problems. The first is the fact that it is a list, which immediately has the potential to impose inflexibility and undermine the importance of context in making decisions. Secondly, any list is open to criticism of the particular order of priority established, as the authors themselves acknowledge. Finally, this particular list indiscriminately combines consequences with actions by workers, the rights of clients and others and general ethical principles like equality. These problems and the strict reliance on rules underpinning the use of the 'ethical rules screen' weaken the rest of the model, which does attempt to consider context, the values of the various stakeholders and possible alternative courses of action as part of resolving an ethical dilemma.

In addition, these last two models (Dolgoff et al., 2005; Reamer, 1999) appear to be as concerned with risk management as with encouraging good ethical decision-making and

practice in social work, which reflects Reamer's (1998) view of the 'Ethical Standards and Risk Management Period' in the evolution of social work ethics as representing a 'maturation' in the profession's approach to ethics (Reamer, 1998, p. 492).

## **The inclusive model**

The inclusive model developed by Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) includes elements of process, reflective and cultural models of ethical decision-making. There are four essential dimensions in the inclusive model:

- *accountability* – the ability to make decisions that can be clearly articulated and justified and take into account the personal, professional, organisational, legal, cultural and social context
- *critical reflection* – the ability to make decisions that can be scrutinised by others, clarify practice and lead to better practice in the future
- *cultural sensitivity* – the ability to make decisions that are culturally appropriate, taking into account different value positions and drawing on cultural expertise
- *consultation* – the ability to use resources wisely and to engage in appropriate discussions with others who may assist accountability, cultural sensitivity and personal reflection (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 90).

These four dimensions reflect the complexity of ethical decision-making described so far and also include several of the important features of supervision explored later (see Chapter 5).

In addition, the 'steps' examined below form a cycle of action, reflection and evaluation that resonates with both the cyclical nature of action research (see Chapter 6) and the ways in which critical reflection contributes to both learning and practice in social work. The steps which comprise the 'inclusive model' (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005) can be undertaken by a worker facing a dilemma or another person (such as a supervisor) supporting a worker facing a dilemma.

As in the process models already described, the first step is *defining the ethical dilemma* (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 91). This includes deciding if there is an ethical



dilemma, or if the problem can be broken down in a way which avoids any conflict between ethical principles. Clarifying the dilemma helps frame the required action and also helps the worker decide if he or she is the one who must make the ethical decision. The next step, described as *mapping legitimacy* (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 92), involves identifying the legitimate ‘others’ in the situation, including those affected by the potential decision, as well as those who may be able to support the worker through the process of making it. For example, it may be appropriate to share the dilemma with the client.

The next step is *gathering information* (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 93), which includes exploring the values of those involved (including the worker facing the dilemma), checking ethical responsibilities such as the code of ethics and considering a range of contextual issues such as the organisation, cultural factors and experience in dealing with similar dilemmas. After all the information is collected, identifying *alternative approaches and action* is more achievable. It is at this stage that the ethical basis of a worker’s practice becomes both apparent and important, as it will determine how the dilemma is approached. For example, a utilitarian will assess possible alternative actions in terms of their likely consequences, while a person relying on virtue ethics will try to work out what a morally good person would do if faced with this situation. This highlights ‘the necessity for reflective practice’ (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 95) to help the worker unpack how and why the decision is made.

The final step is *critical analysis and evaluation* of the decision and its impact on the worker and others in order to improve future decision-making and practice. This is the key step in the link between reflective practice and ethical education described earlier and it supports the importance of supervision in the ethical development of social workers which is the subject of this study.

The combination of the four major dimensions and the steps which comprise the model are depicted in the following diagram (Figure 1) which highlights the model's circular, reflective nature:

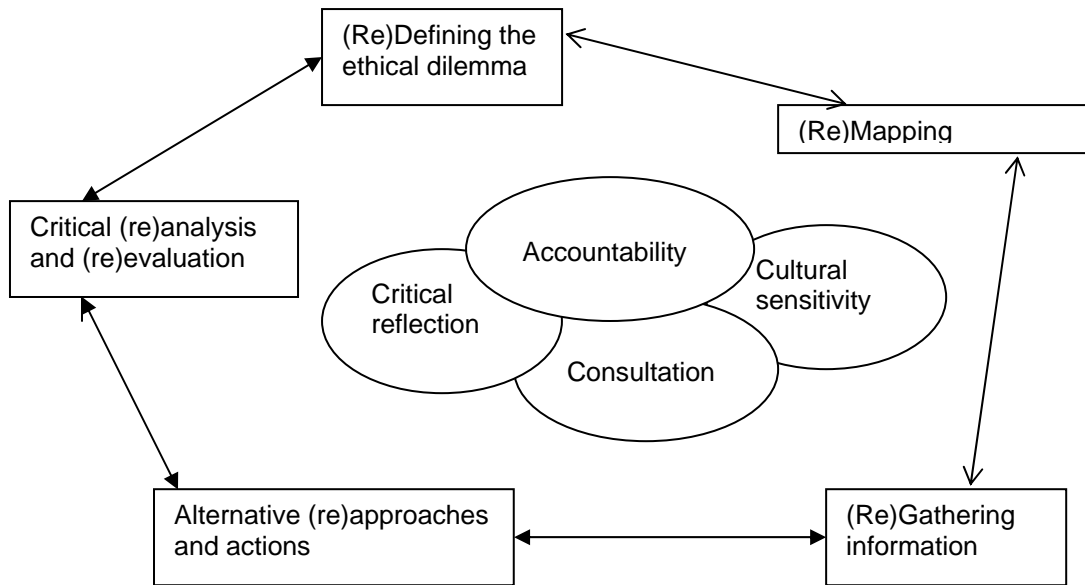


Figure 1  
An inclusive model of ethical decision-making (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 96).

It has been suggested that this inclusive model, while ‘an invaluable tool for mapping aspects of a specific moral problem’, does not place enough emphasis on ethical theory to support a pluralistic approach to decision-making (Bowles et al., 2006, p. 205).

Furthermore, although the inclusive model described here is based on a multi-faceted circle of reflection and action, which reflects the ongoing nature of practice and ethical decision-making, it has been criticised for sharing with other models a structure which simplifies ethical decisions, but fails to deal with the complexity of real world situations or moral theories (Bowles et al., 2006). It is argued that ‘ethics is a process, not a structured procedure that can be applied mechanically’ (Bowles et al., 2006, p. 215).

The 360-degree assessment proposed by Bowles and her colleagues is based on the assumption that no single ethical approach can reflect all the relevant ethical theories or the complexity of the context in which ethical dilemmas occur and it aims to establish an overall ethical framework in which a worker can operate. It 'can be presented graphically as the circle of reflection, representing the various principles, virtues, goals, standards and ethical modes' (Bowles et al., 2006, p. 212). Although presented as a new and different approach, substantive differences between the Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) model and the 360-degree assessment proposed by Bowles and her colleagues are not obvious. Each promotes a circle of reflection and action informed by a range of skills, influences and knowledge and including an understanding of relevant ethical theory.

#### **4.3.3. Resources available to workers**

In addition to the decision-making models described above, there are other factors which have an impact on how social workers make decisions including a range of resources which they may or may not use (McAuliffe, 2000, 2005a; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005). McAuliffe (2000) categorises the factors influencing the management of ethical issues as situational, personal, organisational and professional and she describes the reasons workers in her study gave for either using or not using those resources in the particular circumstances of the dilemmas they faced.

Situational factors include political timing and geographic location, with rural settings and the resulting isolation having a particular impact on her participants. Personal values and experiences had an impact on most of McAuliffe's (2000) participants, which supports Congress' (1999) view that examining personal values and their impact is an important part of ethical decision-making and also resonates with Zubrzycki's (2003) work on a social

worker's use of self and the intersection between the personal and the professional as a 'site of complexity, creativity and tension' (Zubrzycki, 2003, p. 1).

Organisational factors are described as rigidity, flexibility and vulnerability, each of which can affect the worker in significant, albeit different, ways. The professional factors described by McAuliffe (2000) focus on the 'material resources' and 'professional practice frameworks' that were important to her participants (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 197). In particular, she describes her participants' familiarity with and attitudes towards the Code of Ethics (AASW, 1989) and the extent to which they actually used it when facing a significant dilemma. In terms of consulting others about the dilemma, McAuliffe (2000) categorises the human resources available to her participants as professional supervision, colleague support, personal supports and external consultation.

It is significant that participants in McAuliffe's study (2000) relied heavily on family, social and colleague support when faced with an ethical dilemma. This included both discussing various aspects of the dilemma itself and seeking the emotional and personal support required to deal with the stress engendered by the dilemma (McAuliffe, 2000; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005). A worrying aspect identified by McAuliffe and Sudbery (2005) is the unsatisfactory quality of the supervision often provided in critical situations, as the apparent focus on organisational issues (such as performance management and staff control) failed to provide appropriate support for workers when it was most needed.

McAuliffe's (2000) analysis of her participants' use of the Code of Ethics (AASW, 1989) is extremely relevant to my study and worth exploring in some detail. While the revised AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) was under development at the time McAuliffe conducted her study, it is safe to assume that most of her participants would have had access

only to the old code (AASW, 1989). While the later version addresses some of the issues raised in McAuliffe's (2000) study, I believe her discussion of the code and its usefulness to practitioners facing ethical dilemmas is still highly relevant. In terms of familiarity with the Code (AASW, 1989), responses varied between three who said they were completely unfamiliar with it, to six with a reasonably sound familiarity. The rest described their familiarity with the Code as limited and stemming largely from their university education. McAuliffe (2000) notes that those reasonably familiar with it were more able to identify and articulate ethical dilemmas and use language embedded in ethics literature and the Code itself. Even more significant is the fact that 'only three of the 25 experienced participants reported actually referring to the AASW Code of Ethics at some point during the ethical issue' (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 200). The reasons for not referring to the Code included lack of knowledge, regarding it as irrelevant, simply not thinking of it and having confidence in their own ethical awareness and ability to make ethical decisions.

McAuliffe argues that, even for those with the skills in decision-making, referring to the Code could have added 'weight to justifications for actions' (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 202). She further describes different attitudes to the Code evident among her participants, including not seeing it as helpful with a particular dilemma and as a 'professional construct that lacked power' (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 203).

As discussed above, the present AASW Code of Ethics (2002) gives a number of examples of the situations in which dilemmas might occur and explains the nature of ethical decision-making as choosing between courses of action which are each supported by moral considerations and each of which will result in an outcome that is, in some way, undesirable. However, it has been established that it is unlikely that an Australian social worker will return to the Code of Ethics each time she or he faces an ethical dilemma (Noble &

Briskman, 1999) and Banks (2001) noted that codes of ethics generally are not considered useful by workers facing complex dilemmas. McAuliffe (2000) notes that very few of her participants referred to the Code of Ethics (AASW, 1989) at all, suggesting that ‘participants relied primarily on existing knowledge’ (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 209). It is worth looking in detail at the conclusions she draws from this:

These findings indicate that while social work ethics and values are well-entrenched in the repertoire of experienced front-line workers, greater attention needs to be paid by the profession to ensuring that its Code of Ethics is a resource that is relevant to practice. It also needs to be able to be used for guidance in complex ethical matters if necessary, taking into account the difficulties of multidisciplinary teams and organisational mandates that may be at odds with the primary goals of social work (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 210).

This has implications for what resources are available to a worker facing a dilemma. It indicates that experienced workers seem to see themselves as having internalised social work’s values and ethics, and that they do not readily return to the Code of Ethics (AASW, 1999) for guidance on particular issues. This gives rise to a number of related questions. What role can a Code of Ethics have in assisting workers in making ethical decisions? What sort of code might be helpful? What is the role of supervision in supporting workers who are facing ethical dilemmas? How do workers, or their supervisors, know that the values that they have internalised are appropriate in the given situation? Are there other ways of judging a worker’s ethical decision-making skills? The first two of these questions and the requirements for ethical education are addressed in the rest of this chapter. The importance of supervision is examined in detail below (see Chapter 5) and again emerges in the discussion of the data (see Chapters 7 and 8).

It is apparent from both McAuliffe’s work (McAuliffe, 2000, 2005a; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005) and the data emerging from this study that the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) is not a resource on which workers call as a matter of course. It also appears that supporting the

ethical development of social workers involves more than improving the code of ethics itself or simply encouraging workers to use it more often and more effectively.

To adopt a more useful approach to ethics in social work would require more emphasis on the ethical development of individual workers within the context of the ethical pluralism already described (see Chapter 3) and with the assistance of a model of ethical decision-making like the inclusive model described in this chapter (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005).

#### **4.4. Conclusion**

It is appropriate at this stage to return to the first key research question, *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?* I have argued in this chapter that social workers (and others) learn to be ethical through practice, which includes processes like reflection, consultation and consideration of ethical dilemmas from a number of perspectives. In addition, a number of models of ethical decision-making have been considered, with Chenoweth and McAuliffe's (2005) model appearing to be the most appropriate so far developed for social work.

If learning to be ethical depends on acquiring or developing the virtues, ethical skills and ethical knowledge (Bowles et al., 2006) which together are needed for ethical practice, then social work as a profession needs to facilitate this development of individual workers. Schools of Social Work and professional development programs need to provide training in relevant ethical theory and the use of ethical decision-making models like the inclusive model (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005) described in this chapter, as well as training in critical reflection.

In spite of the earlier criticism of the inclusive model that it deals with individual dilemmas rather than developing social work ethics overall (Bowles et al., 2006), I think it does assist social workers in learning to be ethical. The circle of action and reflection, informed by the appropriate ethical theory, knowledge of the cultural and organisational context and consultation with supervisors, peers and others, provides the opportunity to practice being ethical and to continue to improve social work's ethical understanding.

In the next chapter, *Supervision and Reflection*, I focus on the history and functions of supervision and then address the second key research question, *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?* The ways in which supervisors can support the ethical education and the development of workers as ethical decision-makers is examined in some detail.



## 5. SUPERVISION AND REFLECTION

### 5.1. Introduction

This chapter examines another of the assumed foundations of social work: the importance of supervision. More importantly, in terms of this study, this chapter returns to the second key research question: *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?* The previous chapter examined ethical education and ethical decision-making, and the importance in both of reflection on practice. This chapter focuses on the appropriateness of conducting that reflection within supervision.

The first section examines the traditions of social work supervision and its functions, including the ethical responsibility for workers to ensure that they utilise supervision and considers different models of supervision. The second section examines supervision from a number of different but complementary perspectives and the third section describes some of the problems that can arise within supervision for the worker, the supervisor or the organisation.

In the final section, I address the relationship between supervision and ethical education and argue that the reflection on practice necessary for resolving ethical dilemmas is most logically located within the relationship and processes of supervision. In addition, within supervision, the worker should receive the support required to deal with the emotional toll of facing dilemmas on a daily basis. Finally, I look at circumstances in which a supervisor may need to direct a worker to take, or not to take, a particular course of action.

## **5.2. Supervision in social work**

Supervision may be described variously as a process or a relationship in which a supervisor, often (but not necessarily) a more experienced practitioner, meets with a supervisee (called the worker in this study) with the purpose of fulfilling a number of functions. Munson (2002) limits the notion of supervision to that received by social workers in casework settings whose work largely focuses on counselling the individual, the couple or perhaps the family. However, in this study, the notion of supervision is potentially as broad as social work itself. The Australian Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) includes in its definition of social work not only traditional casework, group work and even community work tasks, but also advocacy, policy development, research, consultancy, education, supervision evaluation and management tasks.

One of the limitations identified in this study is that most of the participants and, accordingly, the examples discussed in the focus groups, were from casework settings. Nevertheless, I believe the discussion of supervision which follows also applies to the supervision of workers from a range of different settings, as all the roles listed above require that workers can operate as independent ethical decision-makers.

### **5.2.1. The Importance of supervision**

It is apparent that supervision has always been important in social work, and is one of the defining features of the profession (Cousins, 2004; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Hughes & Pengelly, 1998; Kadushin, 1992; Munson, Handbook of Clinical Social Work Supervision; Pepper, 1996; Pithouse, 1987; Tsui, 2005). Social workers are introduced to supervision from their first student placements, which are almost as much about learning to use and value supervision as about learning the skills required in a particular setting. Especially for

students and beginning social workers, supervision is regarded as the forum which best facilitates the integration of theory and practice. This integration is critical to the ways in which supervision is conceptualised within this study, and is an important part of the reflection on practice which contributes to the development of workers as independent moral agents. In particular, supervision provides both the opportunity and the guidance social workers need to be able to articulate both their theoretical approach and the rationale for particular decisions within that.

However, the ethical responsibility to participate in supervision is not limited to social work students and new graduates. The AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) clearly articulates that responsibility in the following terms:

Social workers will, throughout their professional careers, utilise available supervision and consultation, or take active steps to ensure that they receive appropriate supervision, as a means of maintaining practice competence  
(AASW, 2002, 4.1.5 Practice competence)

Supervision is also important in the transmission of culture, particularly to beginning social workers or workers new to a particular agency. Pithouse (1987) describes the ways in which workers draw on shared language, understandings and assumptions when giving accounts of their work in supervision. He sees this as important in helping the worker to make sense of the particular work practices of that organisation and in demonstrating their competence in that setting. He notes that ‘good work is seen to have occurred when the worker shows she can “dismantle” the family through descriptions of private lives and relationships’ (Pithouse, 1987, p. 108). As this study demonstrates, supervision is also an opportunity for the workers to take on and be able to articulate the values and ethic of the particular organisation. Tsui’s (2005) work on the culture which forms part of supervisory relationships also supports this view of organisations and is discussed in some detail below.

Set in the context of economic rationalism, the ever-increasing contracting of social work services and the more detailed requirements of funding bodies, supervision has achieved a certain respectability in the social work marketplace. It is often included in tender documents as a necessary safeguard in terms of both quality assurance and maintaining professional practice. The notion of professional supervision has been accepted as part of the process of contracting social work and other human services. Graduates of social work courses, largely because of their experience during fieldwork placements, tend to emerge from universities valuing supervision as a necessary part of ongoing practice. Supervision is regarded by workers, employers and purchasers of social work services as a necessary component of professional social work.

What is it about social work that maintains supervision as one of its basic characteristics? It is doubtful that the value base of social work provides sufficient explanation. Even if we accept that the early training of social workers can be seen historically almost as a form of supervision, that does not fully explain its ongoing importance. Nor am I convinced that it has become simply a means of meeting the demands of economic rationalism and that social work as a profession is committed to supervision only because funding bodies demand it. Governments have accepted the importance of supervision, although I suspect that what they expect supervision to deliver in terms of accountability is only part of the overall package of roles and relationships that make up social work supervision. Indeed, Phillipson (2002), echoing Ife's (1997) view of the impact on social work of a number of movements in the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, notes that social work supervision seems 'largely untouched by these seismic upheavals' (Phillipson, 2002, p. 244). It appears that the importance of supervision in social work is related to the nature of the work itself and, as this study demonstrates, to the importance of doing that work effectively and ethically.

### **5.2.2. Supervision: What is it?**

Kadushin (1992) referred to the paid workers who supervised the volunteers who carried out the work of the Charity Organisation Society (COS) in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century and stated that these can be regarded as the forerunners of modern supervisors, although Tsui (2005) argues that, at least in the early days of the COS, it is unlikely that the upper class volunteers (board members of the agency) would have taken direction from the paid staff drawn from the middle and lower classes. Tsui (2005) also questions the common view that what most characterised those early supervisors were both the educative and support functions they undertook, describing it as the ‘ideal, not the reality, of the history in the social work field (Tsui, 2005, p. 2). While it appears that these supervisors eventually ran training around fairly specific parts of their work, their early role is likely to have been administrative. Even that administrative supervision, however, would not have begun until the work was largely carried out by paid staff. The training that was provided later - Tsui (2005) dates the first social work training from 1898 - was gradually formalised to develop eventually into the schools of social work now located in universities.

Kadushin’s (1992, 1st Edition 1976) work on supervision is widely regarded as the seminal work on the subject and his view of the three major functions of supervision as education, support and administration has been the basis of much subsequent work. The remainder of this section will examine these functions in some detail. The tensions between these three groups of functions, and other problems that can arise in supervision, will be addressed later in the chapter.

### 5.2.3. Education

The education function of supervision has clear antecedents in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century training of volunteers and the first paid workers mentioned above. Most social workers and commentators today still see the role of the supervisor as including a range of educational activities such as helping workers make practice decisions by providing a range of options and guiding their choice, identifying professional development needs and providing other advice about appropriate resources and other relevant services. In the case of workers new to either social work or a particular agency, there is often also substantial education about the agency and its culture, the role of the worker within it and a range of other issues that might help workers settle in and begin to provide quality social work services. Hawkins and Shohet (1989) describe the central task of supervision as ‘to develop the skills, understanding and ability of the supervisee’, but acknowledge that there are other functions (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 41).

It is also significant that this central educative function, and others, are located firmly within the supervisor-worker relationship. Hawkins and Shohet (1989) note that Hess (1980) defines supervision as ‘a quintessential interaction with the general goal that one person, the supervisor, meets with another, the supervisee, in an effort to make the latter more effective in helping people’ (Hess, 1980, quoted in Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 41). They also note ‘the other most commonly used definition of supervision’ as ‘an intensive, interpersonally focused, one-to-one relationship in which one person is designated to facilitate the development of therapeutic competence in the other person’ (Loganbill, Hardy and Delworth, 1982, quoted in Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 41). These two complementary aspects of supervision, education and the relationship within which it occurs, are equally important in terms of the development of social workers, including their development as independent ethical decision-makers.

#### **5.2.4. Support**

The support function of supervision is also important for the worker's development, well-being and, in some cases, even survival, within social work. It, too, is located within the supervisory relationship and depends even more on the quality of the relationship itself than do the education and administration functions of supervision. Tsui (2005) notes that this support can be emotional as well as practical. He cites research conducted in Norway (Himle, Jayaratne and Thyness, 1989, quoted in Tsui, 2005, p. 81) that considered four kinds of social support, emotional support, appraisals, informational support and instrumental support, concluding that informational and instrumental support may reduce psychological stress and relieve burnout and job dissatisfaction.

This approach supports the views of other commentators, who discount the value of support as a function of supervision in its own right, preferring to see it as an attitude or approach to undertaking the other functions rather than as an end in itself. Hughes and Pengelly (1998), for example, describe the 'supportive attitude' that is required to adequately address other issues in supervision. However, while it is true that education and accountability are most likely to be effective for workers if they take place in the context of a supportive relationship, in my experience supervisors and workers alike see support as one of the primary functions of supervision. This support can be appropriate in a variety of situations, ranging from supporting the worker through very busy or otherwise demanding periods, to helping worker through a particular difficulty, such as when there is a strong nexus for the worker between personal and professional events or experiences. Pithouse (1987) regards these stressful times as inherent to the nature of social work, and almost a necessary rite of passage for the worker wishing to be fully part of the profession.

It becomes apparent later in this chapter that workers are unlikely to use supervision to reflect on the dilemmas they face in their practice if they do not find the supervisor or the processes of supervision to be supportive and affirming, as it may be difficult for them to expose any doubts or indecision in the context of an unsupportive relationship. McAuliffe's (2000; McAuliffe, 2005a; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005) work reflects this reluctance in the context of difficult supervisory relationships.

### **5.2.5. Administration**

Kadushin (1992) described the third major function of supervision as administration. This is a broad term which includes not just assisting the worker with their administrative responsibilities within the agency, but also monitoring the work done in terms of the agency's responsibility to clients and funding bodies. There is, then, a strong element of accountability inherent in 'administration', and recent pressures on the welfare sector in general and social work in particular have resulted in accountability becoming even more important within supervision. Hughes and Pengelly (1998) cite two major reasons for this development as the impact of the child abuse scandals of the preceding 20 or more years and the new emphasis on financial accountability and political control, particularly in government agencies and government-funded organisations.

Kadushin (1992) agrees that there has been a growing tendency towards the importance of accountability in supervision, but notes that the balance between the three major functions of supervision has varied widely over the last 80 years. However, this does not diminish the importance of administrative supervision which, although it has many different elements, is essentially an aspect of organisational administration. Supervision assists with the



coordination of the group and can increase the probability of achieving organisational goals and objectives (Kadushin, 1992).

One of the difficulties which arises in terms of the administration function of supervision is the overlap often evident between supervision and line management. This tension was discussed at some length by participants in this study as being an issue for both supervisors and workers. Hughes and Pengelly (1998) further note that this tension is seldom acknowledged, but always influences the supervision process. They note Brown's (1984) view that 'this managerial-professional duality in supervision is often denied or at least obscured by participants, but it will always influence the transactions between them' (Brown, 1984, quoted in Hughes & Pengelly, 1998, p. 24). This issue is addressed in the later analysis of the data.

#### **5.2.6. Supervision and risk management**

Another trend in modern business management, including in the human services, is the use of a risk management approach to both managing the organisation itself and service delivery. Reamer's (2001b) risk management tool for supporting social work ethics audits discussed above (see Chapter 4), adopts the accepted method of identifying and rating risks according to the likelihood they might occur, although less attention is paid to the possible impact on service delivery, the organisation or its clients if they were to occur. Nevertheless, it is noteworthy that one of the 17 possible areas of risk identified by Reamer (2001b) is supervision. He identifies a number of risks associated with inadequate or inadequately documented policies and procedures around supervision, covering the range of educational, supportive and administrative functions of supervision.

Clearly, the kind of rigour he attaches to the ethics audit is well suited to a thorough assessment of an organisation's attention to a range of likely ethical risks. However, it would also seem appropriate to incorporate some of the items developed in the risk management tool within the regular processes of supervision. The framework for reflection developed as part of this study and described in detail in the next chapter could also include some questions based on the identified areas of risk.

### ***5.3. Perspectives on supervision***

The previous section of this chapter considered the overall place of supervision in social work and its traditional functions. This section examines supervision from various perspectives which, together, help to tease out the different contexts within which workers and supervisors experience supervision and begins to explore the importance of supervision in supporting the ethical development of social workers.

#### **5.3.1. The relationship**

The quality of the supervisory relationship will always be a critical factor in the quality of the supervision, in terms of both dealing with the tensions inherent in supervision and providing an environment which can facilitate all its intended functions for the individual worker. Tsui describes the supervisory relationship as 'a relationship with administrative, professional, and psychological components. For each component, supervisors must fulfil a number of supervisory tasks, and, therefore, they must assume a range of roles' (Tsui, 2005, p. 43). The three processes identified (use of authority, exchange of information and expression of emotion) are described as representing the three major functions of supervision described above.

Hawkins and Shohet (1989) describe the importance of the relationship in determining the quality of the supervision:

Good supervision, like love, we believe, cannot be taught. The understanding, maps, and techniques that we provide in this book cannot, and perhaps should not, protect supervisee and supervisor alike from times of self-questioning and doubt. At these times it is the quality of the relationship that has already been established between them that contains the supervisee in times of crisis and doubt. How we personally relate to our supervisors and supervisees is far more important than mere skills, for all techniques need to be embedded in a good relationship (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 157).

Pepper (1996) describes the supervisory relationship as powerful and intimate, but also as one which must be nurtured and sustained. The potential difficulties she identifies in supervision are described in more detail later in this chapter, but it is important not to overlook the importance of the relationship itself. Pithouse (1987) regarded the relationship between supervisor and worker as important because supervisors rely on workers' accounts of their interventions with clients and Pithouse believes these will be more reliable in the context of a supportive, helpful relationship (Pithouse, 1987). This study demonstrates that the importance of the supervisory relationship cannot be overestimated, and that it has a number of different impacts on workers, their work and the decisions they make.

In addition to the consideration of the relationship between the supervisor and the worker begun above, it is also important to consider that relationship within the context of the organisation within which they both work. The traditional analysis of supervision involves a triangular structure where the three points of the triangle represent supervisor, worker and client. This is also known as the 'therapeutic triad' (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989).

In this model, the supervisor is regarded as affecting the life of the client through the processes of supervision and, although the client rarely meets the supervisor, they are linked through the worker. To some extent, the relationship between the worker and the supervisor

can be seen as reflecting or mirroring the relationship between the client and the worker. In some supervisory relationships the way in which supervisor and worker relate is seen to represent explicitly the way in which the worker relates to the client.

While this is a valid construction and does much to inform our understanding of supervision, more modern work also includes the role of the organisation when analysing the structure of supervision. It is important to do this, as part of the function of the supervisor is to carry the ethos, values or mission of the organisation to the worker and to help the worker develop as a practitioner within the values of the organisation. This aspect of supervision is linked to the accountability function of supervision in that it ensures that the type of work being done sits within the parameters of the organisation, including its purpose and target group and increases the likelihood that the development of ethical practice facilitated within supervision is consistent with the ethics and values of the organisation. In addition, the organisation is able to support the individual worker through the supervisor and hopefully, the supervisor is able to carry worker concerns to the organisation.

This aspect of the supervisory relationship can also be represented as a triad, in this case consisting of the worker, the supervisor and the organisation. It is important not to regard these two 'triads' as mutually exclusive, but to consider the ways in which they are related. The combination of these two triads provides a three-dimensional pyramid which far better reflects the complexity of the processes of supervision and the multi-directional nature of the relationships which form the basis of supervision. The pyramid does not necessarily imply a hierarchical structure, as each 'direction' is as important as all the others; each will be prominent at different times and all the elements are related directly to and dependent on all the others.

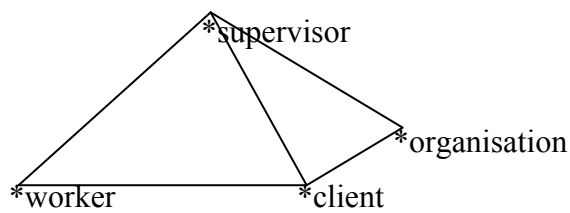


Figure 2  
The supervision pyramid

However, Tsui (2005) argues that if we adopt this four-party model of supervision, then the organisation becomes ‘an integral part of the supervision process’ and can no longer be ‘the context for social work supervision’ (Tsui, 2005, p. 44). In fact, each of these four parties is embedded in a culture, which becomes the major context in which supervision takes place. This raises further questions about how the cultural context is understood, the different meanings that the parties may ascribe to either the context or supervision itself and the need to understand supervision within particular cultures or multicultural settings (Tsui, 2005).

While it is helpful to understand the complexity of these various relationships and their interdependence within supervision, it does not allow for development over time by either individual parties or the broader context. To try to capture these notions of development and movement, I have tried to examine how the principles of a narrative approach to working with clients might be applied to supervision.

### 5.3.2. Narrative supervision

Much of the basis of narrative theory (Freedman & Combs, 1996) lies in the notion that the client is the ‘expert’ on his/her own story. The role of the counsellor is to facilitate the re-authoring of the story by the client. This is not to say, however, that the worker does not require a certain amount of knowledge and skill to achieve this and a narrative approach is

certainly not an excuse for anything less than competent and ethical professionalism from the worker. The underlying principle, however, is that the client determines the course of his or her own story.

In the context of supervision, the narrative approach seems to be about facilitating workers' understanding of their own developing story as individual workers and as members of particular organisations, within the broader cultural context. It is about empowering workers to take charge of their development within the parameters of the organisation and its functions. In this case, the organisation invests a certain amount of responsibility in the worker which is not unlike the concept of client self-determination. In the same way, however, the role of the supervisor is to help the worker understand the real constraints that are in place and how they affect the developing story.

It is relevant here to consider the shape of ethics as conceived by some narrative therapists. Freedman and Combs (1996) maintain that narrative therapy is more an approach and a mindset than a particular set of techniques. It is significant that they see it more as respectful listening, understanding and interpreting than as expert intervention. In that context, implicit in narrative supervision is the intention to empower workers to make ethical decisions by providing them with the skills and support necessary to reflect on the ethical dimensions of their practice. Organisations can facilitate that process by providing quality supervision, within which these processes of reflection are most logically located.

### **5.3.3. A window on practice**

Pithouse (1987) described social work as a largely 'invisible trade' which is made visible through the processes of supervision. The form of supervision described by Pithouse is

found in a number of social work settings, typically those with statutory responsibilities. In the later examination of data (see Chapter 8), different kinds of supervision are discussed in terms of both the setting and the ability and willingness of the individual worker to reflect on different aspects of their work. The reflection on practice which ideally takes place in supervision is explored later in this chapter.

It is worth noting the particular characteristics of the supervision observed by Pithouse (1987). His study was undertaken in a child welfare-type setting where there is a great reliance on process recording. Whether or not the written records are actually seen by the supervisor, the likelihood of that happening may influence the nature of case recording. In such a setting, then, both written records and supervision sessions comprise detailed descriptions of both the situation of the client family and actions taken by the worker. Another characteristic of such settings is decision-making by a more senior person in the organisation's hierarchy rather than by the front-line worker.

Within that kind of organisational context, I believe that Pithouse is right. It is only through supervision and its associated support processes that social work can become visible.

However, in many settings, the supervisor is given a far less detailed picture of the work done and workers often have far more autonomy in terms of decision-making. The extent to which social work is 'made visible' through the processes of supervision in settings where the supervisor has less information and less control over either supervision or service delivery is questionable.

This raises a number of other issues. The first relates to the part played by either worker self-deception or worker deception of the supervisor. It can be difficult to determine the extent to which the worker is telling the supervisor either what they think the supervisor

wants to hear or what the worker would like to have said or done. Although the importance of reflection is examined in detail later in this chapter, a number of issues arise here. In a context where the worker is recounting every aspect of a case, but the supervisor is making the decisions, there may not be an opportunity for the worker to reflect on various aspects of practice. There is a limit to how reflective a worker can be if he or she is only recounting events and following instructions. If supervision is not really reflective, there is a question about the extent to which it is contributing to the development of independent ethical decision-makers. In the context described by Pithouse, however, these questions may not matter. If the organisation's priority is child protection, for example, the individual worker (even if there is ample opportunity for reflection) may have little autonomy in making practice or ethical decisions. These issues are explored in some detail in the later data analysis chapters.

In what circumstances, then, is social work supervision more likely to encourage the kind of reflection on practice which will lead to more ethical decision-making and, therefore, more ethical practice? Clearly the various functions of supervision described above need to interact to contribute to the development of the worker. One of the central issues explored in this study is how to maximise supervision's potential for encouraging and informing reflection on the ethical dilemmas that inevitably arise in the practice of social work.

#### **5.3.4. Supervision and ethical organisations**

The nature of supervision described above requires consideration of the ethical development of individual workers within the context of the ethical development of the organisation itself. The processes which contribute to the ethical development of the individual worker should be considered within the context of the organisation and the wider culture in which they



occur. Tsui (2005) notes that the organisation's goals, structure, processes and culture provide the environment for professional practice. Further, at least from a risk management perspective (Reamer, 2001b), there is some obligation on organisations to regularly conduct an ethics audit. In terms of this study, it is important to consider the relationship between the 'ethical organisation' and the practices and attitudes of individual workers within it.

McCurdy (1998) questions whether it is possible for an organisation to be ethical apart from the individuals who constitute it. He argues that an organisation must hire 'ethical people', who in turn bear responsibility for the ethical nature of the organisation (McCurdy, 1998, p. 26). But the organisation itself must take some responsibility. It is important that the organisation's own ethical framework and its relationship to relevant professional ethics are clearly stated and understood by staff. Equally important is the organisation's readiness to continually reflect on both the relevance and effectiveness of its ethical stance, possibly using processes like those described by Reamer (2001b). McCurdy adds that organisations can either support or discourage individuals from 'doing good and right things' and that developing mechanisms to address ethical issues is critical to becoming an ethical organisation. He describes an 'ethical organisation' as one that is continually reflective about its moral responsibilities and the ethical questions it faces (McCurdy, 1998, p. 27).

This notion of the ethical organisation echoes both Preston's (1994) work on the development of 'web' or network styles of organisation and Sampford's (1994) idea of 'ethical circles' as the basis of ethical development within an organisation (Sampford, 1994, p. 17). Sampford suggests that within the 'circles', 'employees could discuss ethical issues to develop their own critical morality and move towards a shared morality' (Sampford, 1994, p. 18). Preston poses two central questions: 'Can ethics be taught?' and 'How are we to

build an ethical organisation or workplace culture?’ (Preston, 1994, pp. 6-7). In response to the first, he states:

My own experience teaching ethics over many years convinces me that ethics can be taught, if that means that students can learn to think more reflectively and systematically about the ethical impact of life-decisions as well as everyday practice. They can come to embrace and rehearse a mode of self or collective evaluation which is based on autonomously chosen values, purposes and justifications (Preston, 1994, p. 6).

This has obvious relevance for social work as well as for other professions and workplaces. Supervision can provide workers with the opportunity for ‘thinking reflectively and systematically’ about their practice and for evaluating that practice in the context of their ‘values, purposes and justifications’. Preston later emphasises the ‘importance of interactions between “engaged academics” and “reflective practitioners” so that each can learn from the other’ (Preston et al., 2002, p. 163). As noted earlier, such reflection can be guided by a consideration of the possible risks identified in Reamer’s (2001b) ‘Risk Management Tool’. If supervision is working well, such reflection and evaluation will be at its centre and will take into account the ethical base of the organisation as well as the worker. Accordingly, reflective practice and the models of ethical decision-making described earlier (see Chapter 4) can be undertaken within supervision, which itself takes place within the organisation and its wider cultural context.

For Preston (1994), the web or network style of organisation has two major benefits. Firstly, it may create an environment in which ethical autonomy can be cultivated. Secondly, it will foster a more democratic style of leadership which will emphasise autonomy and empowerment rather than control and compliance, which may be even more important for social work than for other groups (Ife, 1997). Sampford (1994) also notes that ‘bottom-up’ ethics are far more likely to be accepted and internalised than those imposed from above. If

one combines this network style of organisation with Sampford's (1994) 'ethical circles', there emerges a valuable approach to ethics training which both reflects and complements the processes within supervision in social work. Not only can such reflections be undertaken in supervision groups, but professional development programs can use the same model to encourage workers to reflect on real or hypothetical dilemmas they are likely to encounter in their practice.

This will be a particularly useful model for professional development provided within an organisation, as the organisation's own ethic can be invoked as a framework for reflection. Furthermore, these groups can contribute to and participate in the development of an agency-specific code of ethics which has the advantage of contextualising the problems likely to be encountered by workers. Supervision can serve to transmit the ethical values of the organisation to the worker and to provide feedback to the organisation on the everyday dilemmas facing workers.

Organisations, and their managers, always have the responsibility of ensuring that, among other things, services are delivered, that they are quality professional services, that they are managed within the allotted budget and that they are delivered in an ethical manner.

Nevertheless, change is always part of the delivery of human services. Priorities of funding bodies, needs within communities and the ways in which services are provided are all part of the changing face of welfare. In that ever-changing context, how do managers balance the sometimes competing needs of all the stakeholders? How do they ensure that quality, professional, ethical services are delivered without sacrificing the potential contributions of either clients or staff?

It is not only within the human services that such questions are considered. Petrick and Quinn's (1997) work on management ethics is based within the business sector and describes the challenges facing the managers of huge multinational corporations. Nonetheless, their work around leadership and frameworks for ethical decision-making is just as relevant for social work. Their preference for enabling rather than controlling workers is particularly relevant. They explore the concept of the 'effective follower', who is characterised as being active and taking initiative in the organisation and as exercising independent, critical thinking. Effective followers are described as being people who can 'critically assess and respectfully challenge organisational authority and propose constructive alternatives'. Such workers may sometimes be perceived as a nuisance or even a threat within an agency and they may even be called 'troublemakers'. Yet Petrick and Quinn argue that 'effective followers can play a vital role in enhancing organisational performance by improving leader-follower interactions so that the wisdom of mature followers can be brought to bear on complex decision making' (Petrick & Quinn, 1997, p. 215).

Within social work, Hawkins and Shohet (1989) have argued that sending individual staff members to professional development courses is not enough, and that organisations must develop a learning culture. Similarly, supervision is not an isolated event, but 'an ongoing process which should permeate the culture of any effective helping organization' (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 139). These observations mark a return to the education function of supervision, and clearly share responsibility for learning and development between the individual worker, the supervisor and the organisation itself.

## **5.4. Difficulties in supervision**

So far, this chapter has described the place and functions of supervision within social work and the role of the organisation in promoting accountable and ethical practice. However, it is important not to assume that supervision always delivers these goals for the organisation, or even that it is always a positive experience for the worker or the supervisor. Indeed, some writers describe at length the potential problems in supervision, including those arising from an idealised picture of either the supervisor or the process itself (Hughes & Pengelly, 1998; Pepper, 1996). This section describes some of the problems that can arise in supervision, and a range of potential consequences of those problems. The first issue is the possible confusion between supervision and line management responsibilities. The second is the supervisory relationship itself and the difficulties which may arise within it. The final part of this section will focus on the implications for workers, clients and organisations when there is inadequate, unsatisfactory or even no supervision.

### **5.4.1. Line management**

Firstly, it is important to clarify further the differences between the administrative function of supervision and line management. For example, helping a worker to reflect on the extent or limitations of a particular service is part of the administrative function of supervision. Speaking to a worker about not coming to work on time is a management issue. Line management in this context often refers to ensuring that the worker is actually delivering the program as contracted. Agencies delivering social work services need to continue to develop new understandings of supervision and to respond to the changing requirements of funding bodies, while maximising the potential for supervision to meet the needs of both individual workers and the organisation itself.

However, the distinction between the administrative function of supervision and line management is not always easy to discern, especially when a worker's supervisor also holds a line management position with respect to that worker. In fact, in many settings, the role of the supervisor includes a line management function (Tsui, 2005) and so tasks often listed as part of administrative supervision are actually management tasks. Although not the only conflict inherent in the supervisory process, as all the functions of supervision overlap and can occasionally be in conflict, the difference between the administrative function of supervision and line management responsibilities is the one most frequently described in the literature and by participants in this study.

Jones and May (1992), while acknowledging the educational and supportive functions of supervision, also highlight the administrative and management aspects of supervision, describing it as:

‘the procedure whereby the actions of front-line workers are carefully and closely scrutinised and reviewed by more senior workers who hold either direct administrative authority or professional authority acknowledged by the organisation. Supervision is often viewed by human service professionals primarily in terms of professional development and personal support. Important though these are, supervisory roles in organisations are typically more complex than this. Supervisors, whether or not they hold direct managerial responsibilities, are to some degree viewed by managers as responsible for what happens in the front-line, that is they are part of the organisational control structure (Jones & May, 1992, p. 279).

This reflects the way in which line management and the administrative function of supervision are often interwoven. While historically, this has been most apparent in statutory settings (Pithouse, 1987; Tsui, 2005), it appears that it is becoming more widespread in medical, counselling and other community settings, especially as organisations become larger and, possibly, more bureaucratic.

Hughes and Pengelly (1998) describe the tensions in supervision at some length, characterising the supervisor's position 'managing the tension between professional and organisational accountability' as 'piggy in the middle' (Hughes & Pengelly, 1998, p. 24). While they highlight the influence of the supervisor, for good or bad, and the legacy that can still be felt by the worker many years later, they note that this ambivalence has always been part of supervision. Not all the tension in supervision can be attributed to a recent managerialist agenda. Hughes and Pengelly (1998) suggest that two main elements contribute to the tensions intrinsic in supervision. 'First, organisations and individuals may have very mixed feelings about this key encounter, which embodies the often painful and unequal meeting of human need and limited financial, organisational and professional resources' (Hughes & Pengelly, 1998, p. 29).

The second element they identify relates to the use of the term 'supervision' itself, and its unfortunate resonance with the control and monitoring aspects of social work, particularly in statutory settings. Phillipson (2002) notes that, while the tension between monitoring and support is often addressed openly in the context of a trainee teacher's practicum, in social work, there is often a reluctance to acknowledge the power dynamic in supervision which leads to supervisors sidestepping the power issue, 'thus confusing the supervisee' (Phillipson, 2002, p. 246).

Hughes and Pengelly (1998) refute the attitude that, as workers become more experienced, they no longer need supervision. They support Westheimer's (1977) argument against providing supervision only for relatively inexperienced workers. Westheimer rightly points out that this assumes that people can act independently (and, by implication, competently) in all situations and it ignores the support provided by supervision in dealing with the emotionally draining aspects of social work (Westheimer, 1977, quoted in Hughes &

Pengelly, 1998, p. 29). From the perspective of this study, neglecting to provide supervision for experienced and senior workers may deny them both much-needed support and the opportunity to reflect with another senior practitioner on the dilemmas that arise in their practice and, as noted earlier, ignores the AASW Code Of Ethics' support for ongoing supervision (AASW, 2002).

In any case, it is important for supervisors and workers, preferably within the processes of supervision itself, to be able to recognise and articulate the role and impact of the administrative functions of supervision and to differentiate those functions from any managerial relationship the supervisor may have with the worker. Like all factors which may have an impact on the supervisory relationship, it is important to openly discuss the roles of both the supervisor and the worker within the organisation.

It would seem that over the last ten years, at least in Australia, our understanding of supervision has developed and is now perceived as important for workers in a range of roles, including management. Also implicit in this development is the notion that experienced workers can provide each other with peer supervision. This, too, shifts the emphasis from monitoring and controlling to providing opportunities for reflection and working through issues and difficulties that arise in practice.

#### **5.4.2. Problems in the supervisory relationship**

The early parts of this chapter focused on the various functions of supervision in social work and the importance of the relationship between the supervisor and the worker. It is clear from the preceding discussion about line management that the supervisory relationship itself is vitally important in avoiding or minimising any problems which may arise in supervision.



At the same time, difficulties within the relationship itself can be the cause of some potential problems for the worker or the supervisor. Such difficulties can certainly undermine the intended functions of supervision and have a serious impact, not just on the individuals involved, but on the wider organisation and its clients. I have already alluded to what Hughes and Pengelly (1998) call the 'piggy in the middle' problem, where supervisors can be operating under significant pressure from the organisation on the one hand, and their understanding of the problems and dilemmas facing the worker on the other. This can relate to a range of issues, including inadequate resources, the demands of the organisation or its funding body, working within a statutory context or even the levels of stress to which the worker is subjected (Hughes & Pengelly, 1998).

However, the quality of the relationship itself can have an enormous impact on the worker and can be the determining factor in whether or not supervision achieves its intended purposes. Pepper described the supervisory relationship as a 'powerful and intimate' relationship which grows and develops, but one which needs to be 'nurtured and sustained' (Pepper, 1996, p. 56). She made a number of suggestions about the formation of the relationship, including clarifying in the early stages any issues likely to cause difficulties. These usually include issues like the limits of confidentiality and the clarification of agreed goals. Whether or not there is a formal, written supervision contract, and most commentators would recommend that one be drawn up in the first sessions, Pepper stresses that there needs to be 'periodic renegotiation of the supervision contract' (Pepper, 1996, p. 56).

Pepper (1996) then analyses the potential problems inherent in the supervisory relationship in terms of the three functions of supervision identified by Reamer (1998), as well as possible remedies for those problems. In terms of the administrative function, Pepper's

position may be summarised as clarification. She accepts the hierarchy inherent in supervision, but insists that each aspect be clarified and negotiated at every stage of the development of the relationship. This largely seems to revolve around the language used, such as clarifying the distinction between power and authority within the parameters of this particular relationship and making clear both the possibilities and limitations of confidentiality, feedback and other variables within the supervisory relationship. Such an approach would alleviate some of the problems identified above in the overlap between administrative supervision and line management.

In terms of the education function, Pepper (1996) again emphasises the importance of the relationship over the role. She notes the importance of the supervisor having a strong theoretical and practical understanding of a range of approaches to both practice and supervision, as well as flexibility and willingness to learn more about the worker's theoretical approach (Pepper, 1996, p. 56). However, her emphasis is on the relationship being a space in which the worker can admit to gaps in knowledge and ask for advice and assistance without fear or anxiety. What needs to be avoided is the supervisor appearing omnipotent, as this may increase the worker's reluctance to raise issues and general level of confidence as a practitioner.

Finally, Pepper (1996) addresses the support function of supervision and how it can be jeopardised by a dysfunctional relationship between worker and supervisor. In some ways, this is the most obvious aspect of supervision to be influenced by the quality of the relationship itself, but Pepper's remedies are useful. She identifies problems to be avoided, but also notes those that can at least be identified and clarified if they can't be avoided. These include the worker's previous experiences of supervision and any dual relationship the worker and supervisor may have outside supervision. Pepper (1996) also suggests that a

foundation for offering ongoing support is clarification at the beginning of the supervisory relationship about what will be disclosed and what will not. It is possible to renegotiate levels of self-disclosure over time, but it is important not to make assumptions about such issues.

Hawkins and Shohet (1989) also deal with the quality of the supervisory relationship and the need to clarify particular issues early in the relationship. With respect to the need for equality between worker and supervisor, they state:

In stressing the essential equality of the relationship we do not want to overlook the fact that in most supervisory relationships there is a managerial responsibility carried by the supervisor. The supervisee needs to be aware of this, and both parties need to work at integrating the managerial aspects of supervision so that they do not invalidate the opportunity for equality (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 30).

In summary, supervision's functions will only be adequately achieved in the context of a strong, open and mutually respectful relationship characterised by trust. Where the supervisory relationship is threatened or weakened by any of the issues described by Pepper (1996), the supervision provided will be unlikely to meet the needs of, and may be harmful to, the worker, the supervisor, the organisation or perhaps even the client.

### **5.4.3. Inadequate Supervision**

In spite of the many potential difficulties described above, supervision is still regarded as an important part of social work. Hawkins and Shohet (1989) locate the need for supervision in the 'helping' at the heart of social work and other helping professions.

The supervisor's role is not just to reassure the worker, but to allow the emotional disturbance to be felt within the safer setting of the supervisory relationship, where it can be survived, reflected upon and learnt from. Supervision thus provides a container that holds the helping relationship within the 'therapeutic triad' (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 3).

What, then, are the implications for workers, organisations and clients if the workers do not receive adequate supervision? The above quote would suggest that, without supervision, a worker may not survive, reflect on or learn from their interactions with clients. Can a social worker function without the administrative, educative and supportive guidance of a supervisor?

Clearly, many do. In spite of the AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002), the reality is that many social workers receive little or no supervision, or what they do receive would not be regarded as adequate in the terms set out above. The ongoing emotional support required to deal with people experiencing a range of difficulties on a daily basis should come from supervision, but can be provided by colleagues, family and friends or other external sources (McAuliffe, 2000). Similarly, many workers use their colleagues or other networks for advice around particular cases or issues, including trying to reflect on the ethical dilemmas that they face in their practice. Workers employed in organisations will normally be subject to some kind of line management, which may include some of the administrative functions that are normally part of supervision. What is missing for the worker who receives inadequate or no supervision is regular access to those benefits in the context of a supportive relationship. Any reflection or consultation that does occur is dependent on the worker's own initiative and the availability of experienced workers to consult. McAuliffe (2005a) describes in some detail the extreme physical responses to stress experienced by some workers who did not have either adequate supervision or any of the other supports on which workers typically rely when facing a significant ethical dilemma.

An organisation employing workers without adequate supervision would likewise deny itself the benefit of a supported, reflective workforce and may increase the likelihood of burn-out

among its staff (Tsui, 2005). Hawkins and Shohet (1989) maintain that not supporting workers can lead to long-term difficulties for the organisation.

All helping organizations are, by their very nature, importing distress, disturbance, fragmentation and need. This is usually met by individual workers, who, if they are empathically relating to the client's distress, will experience parallel distress and sometimes disturbance and fragmentation within themselves. How much of this they will be able to contain and work through will depend on the size of their emotional container (or bucket), will relate to their personality, their emotional maturity and professional development, the amount of pressure and stress they are currently under at work and at home and, most important, the quality and regularity of the supervision they receive.

What is not contained at this level will lead to decreased functioning in the worker and can also lead to fragmentation in the team (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 121).

While individual workers may be operating within the values of the organisation, possibly due to strong line management, the transfer of those values to (or their internalisation by) individual workers is unlikely. McAuliffe (McAuliffe, 2000, 2005a; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005) has examined the experiences of a number of social workers who had previously dealt with significant ethical issues in their practice and explored the supports which were available to those workers while they were facing the dilemma. Their use of supervision was varied. While most at least mentioned the ethical issue to their supervisor, and some discussed it in detail, there are a couple of interesting facts worth noting. The first was that workers with external (privately paid) supervisors were more likely to discuss it in detail with their supervisor than those with a supervisor within the organisation. Even more interesting was the fact that the participants in McAuliffe's study who found discussions about their dilemma of 'minimal' usefulness had supervisors identified as acting more in an administrative than a supportive role. 'Supervision was more concerned with the practicalities of case management and resource allocation than with professional development of individual staff members' (McAuliffe, 2000, p. 219). In that situation, the ethical development of the individual practitioner is left much more to chance than in an

organisation which provides supportive and educative supervision around the ethical dimensions of social work practice.

Finally, what is the impact on clients of workers receiving inadequate supervision? While this is unlikely to have been the subject of any empirical study, it is doubtful that clients would benefit from a lack of supervision for workers. Neither the absence of ongoing support provided by the organisation nor a gap in the ongoing development and consultation opportunities for workers could be seen as a benefit to the client. I believe it is safe to assume that the quality of work provided in these circumstances would be less than optimal. This does not mean that there are not good workers who happen to work in organisations that do not provide supervision. However, the worker must take some responsibility for obtaining supervision and, as McAuliffe (2005a) notes, there are alternatives to the expensive purchasing of supervision criticised by Ife (1997) such as peer supervision, even by telephone if necessary (McAuliffe, 2000, 2005a).

### ***5.5. Supervision and ethical practice***

Implicit in the concepts of both process and relationship in supervision is the notion of development. In addition to the educative function of supervision described earlier in this chapter, supervision provides workers with an opportunity to reflect on their practice from a number of perspectives. The previous chapter described the importance of reflection on practice, particularly in terms of learning to be ethical. The rest of this chapter will concentrate on the reflection on the ethical dimensions of practice within supervision which informs workers' development as independent moral agents, examine other resources available to workers and consider circumstances in which a supervisor may need to over-ride worker autonomy.

As well as reinforcing the organisation's purpose, values and processes and identifying the worker's need for external professional development, supervision can provide the worker with the opportunity to assess and evaluate various aspects of practice and to discuss possible alternatives. It is also possible to use supervision to help understand the impact of the work or of specific incidents on the worker as a person, or the ways in which the worker's personal life might be affecting his or her practice. Most importantly in the context of this study, supervision is a relationship in which workers can reflect on the ethical issues which arise in their daily practice, assess the options within the presenting dilemma and make an ethically justifiable decision.

Because of the level of trust required for such self-disclosure to be possible, it is important that trust develops during the course of a particular supervisory relationship. Pepper (1996) has contributed a great deal to understanding these processes through her examination of the restraints and barriers that can operate in supervision and the strategies she suggests to minimise their impact. As noted above, one of her major themes is the need for the supervisor to be clear and open about all aspects of the supervisory process, such as the limits of confidentiality. This approach both models an ethical approach to supervision and maximises the opportunities for the worker to reflect on the ethical dimensions of his or her own practice. In terms of the supervisory relationship itself, this approach creates an environment in which trust is most likely to develop.

### **5.5.1. Practising ethics**

In social work practice, and all the various roles that entails, an ethically autonomous practitioner is one who makes justifiable decisions within a clear ethical framework on the basis of reflection on practice. There is a strong correlation between this ethically

autonomous practitioner, or independent moral agent, and Aristotle's notion of the virtuous person who becomes virtuous by 'habituation' or practice of the virtues (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II). This was examined in some detail above (see Chapter 4).

This study argues that supervision in social work is critically important in the development of the ethically autonomous practitioner. It is within the processes of supervision that the worker learns to reflect on practice dilemmas in the light of existing personal and professional values and to make ethically justifiable decisions. In Aristotle's terms (Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, Book II), workers become virtuous by practising virtue. They make ethical decisions on the basis of previous ethical decisions, or as a result of reflecting on how earlier decisions either were ethically justifiable or may have been improved by choosing a different option.

In addition, Aristotle's notion of virtue incorporates the pursuit (and achievement) of excellence. In the conception of supervision developed in this study, supervision can support workers to become better, even excellent, social workers. Given its educative, administrative and support functions, supervision provides workers with the opportunity to reflect continuously on their practice, try to incorporate new approaches and understandings and then reflect on their effectiveness. Supervision can provide social workers with a cycle of action and reflection which supports their development as excellent practitioners in a way which is parallel in time and nature to their development as independent moral agents.

### **5.5.2. 'Teaching' reflection and decision-making**

Various approaches to ethical education were described in Chapter 4 and an earlier part of this chapter described approaches to teaching ethics which depended on reflection and



discussion among peers (Preston, 1994; Sampford, 1994) and included teaching workers to think ‘reflectively and systematically’ (Preston, 1994, p. 6) about the dilemmas they face.

Throughout this study, I argue that for social workers, while discussions with peers in group supervision or professional development are useful and important, this reflection is most logically located within the relationship and processes of supervision. Not only can the supervisor guide workers as they learn to think ‘reflectively and systematically’ and ‘test their moral beliefs’ against the dilemmas they face, they can also provide the ethical education which will underpin workers’ reflection. While some would see this largely in terms of using the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) to inform this reflection, the previous chapter also demonstrated the important role of supervision in providing the consultation recommended in several models of ethical decision-making. In addition, supervision (particularly when internal to an agency) offers the worker the opportunity to reflect on the decision to be made in terms of both the organisational, worker and client context, including a consideration of values and alternative approaches.

### **5.5.3. The importance of context**

Ethically justifiable decisions cannot be made without considering the context in which the decision needs to be made. This assumption is foundational in both traditional (Bauman, 1993; Congress, 1999; Preston, 1994; Reamer, 1990; Sampford, 1994) and post-modern approaches (Ife, 2002; Bauman 1993) to ethical decision-making in social work (see Chapter 4). The role of the supervisor is to help the worker understand the context of a particular dilemma from a number of perspectives. In the later analysis of the data, this is described as ‘unpacking’ a dilemma (see Chapter 8). In broader terms, the supervisor is also

encouraging the worker to practise these skills in order to develop as an ethically autonomous practitioner.

Firstly, the facts of the case itself need to be considered, for no case is exactly like any other. The supervisor can help the worker identify the points of similarity and difference compared with other cases. It is also important for workers to consider their own role within a particular case. In the focus groups conducted for this study, I introduced a framework to assist supervisors and workers to unpack the various elements of an ethical dilemma, which was itself revised and improved as a result of the focus group process. The role of the supervisor is to help the worker ask all the questions which will make both the context and the nature of the dilemma clear, including organisational and other relevant factors, and assist and support the worker in making an ethically justifiable decision. This role was discussed at length in the focus groups and is examined in detail below (see Chapter 8).

#### **5.5.4. Support in supervision**

The support function of supervision has already been described in some detail in this chapter, particularly in terms of dealing with the ongoing stress which arises from the very nature of social work. Several commentators (Hawkins & Shoet, 1989; Hughes & Pengelly, 1998; Kadushin, 1992; McAuliffe, 2000, 2005a; Tsui, 2005) have noted the ongoing emotional stress on workers dealing with client need and distress and facing even minor dilemmas on a daily basis, as well as trying to provide services with ever-decreasing resources.

However, support has particular implications in a situation involving an ethical dilemma, particularly a serious one. McAuliffe (2000; McAuliffe, 2005a; McAuliffe & Sudbery,

2005) examined in detail the emotional toll on workers who have had to deal with a serious ethical dilemma and explored the patterns of support accessed by participants in her study. While some participants in her study found their supervisors supportive around the emotional aspects of facing the dilemma, these were mostly external supervisors, who were seen as more objective and therefore more able to assist with reflection and support. This relationship between reflection and support is also clear in Banks' (2001) observation that 'there is often an acute sense of confusion, anxiety and guilt around the decisions that social workers have to make and the roles that they play' (Banks, 2001, p. 162). Sometimes the role of the supervisor is to help the worker reflect on the decision and the context in which it was made in order to understand better that, even though difficult, it may still be an ethically justifiable decision. McAuliffe's (2000) study highlights the tension between the supportive and administrative roles in supervision and the impact on workers when this tension is not satisfactorily resolved.

## ***5.6. Reflection, direction and accountability***

Having established the importance of reflective practice in making ethically justifiable decisions and continually developing practice skills and located that reflective approach within supervision, it is also important to note those situations in which a supervisor may need to direct a worker to take, or not to take, a particular course of action, thereby limiting the worker's autonomy in that situation. This issue was discussed at some length by participants in the focus groups, who largely agreed that, while they always encourage reflection, there are times when the administrative function of supervision, including accountability, simply must take priority.

In general terms, such circumstances include the worker wanting or intending to do something illegal or unethical or in conflict with the values or the purpose of the organisation and situations where the supervisor needs to protect the client or there are strict statutory requirements relating to the possible actions of the worker. Participants' discussions around these issues are examined in detail below (see Chapter 8).

As noted earlier, there is a constant tension between the different functions of supervision.

As Hawkins and Shohet (1989) note:

In many settings the supervisor may carry some responsibility for the welfare of the clients and how the supervisee is working with them. Supervisors may carry the responsibility to ensure that the standards of the agency in which the work is being done are upheld. Nearly all supervisors, even when they are not line managers, have some responsibility to ensure that the work of their supervisee is appropriate and falls within defined ethical standards (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989, p. 42).

This would appear to be most important in areas like child protection or corrections, where the worker's role is often strictly defined. The Area Office described by Pithouse (1987) certainly falls into this category, and his description of supervision is characterised more by monitoring and evaluation than by development towards independent decision-making.

## **5.7. Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have considered the place of supervision in social work and described supervision from a number of perspectives, as well as noting the difficulties that can arise in supervision. I have also considered the relationship between supervision and ethical practice.

I argue that informed reflection on practice in social work is required for the development of ethically autonomous practitioners and that it is within the processes of supervision that such

reflection is most logically located. I believe that this applies across a variety of occupations and types of organisation. But it is within social work that this study is most relevant, due to both the centrality of supervision in social work and the extent to which dealing with ethical dilemmas is a central part of the everyday work of the social worker. Ethics is central to the daily practice of social work. Throughout a working day, a social worker will face any number of decisions which may be framed as ethical dilemmas. It is vital that workers habitually reflect on their practice in terms of the ethical framework in which they are operating. It is evident that the best place for this reflection to be located is within the processes and structures of supervision.

Supervision holds the key to developing ethical social work practice. If we accept that reflection on real or hypothetical situations is the ideal way for workers to internalise particular values and that virtue is acquired through habituation, the reflection on practice which takes place in supervision is an obvious starting point. Supervision has a significant contribution to make to the development of quality, accountable practice and to the achievement of excellence in social work. Supervision is critical in developing an ethical approach to social work and in helping individual workers to internalise the ethical values of social work. Ongoing training of supervisors in the areas of reflection and ethical practice, particularly within the context of the particular organisation and its clients, will obviously assist this process. I will return to the importance of supervision in the discussion of the data from the focus groups (see Chapters 7 and 8).

In the next chapter, I describe my research strategies. I begin with an exploration of the theoretical basis of my research, describe the recruitment of participants and the processes which comprised this study and, finally, I describe my approach to data analysis.

## **6. RESEARCH STRATEGIES**

### ***6.1. Introduction***

This chapter describes how I conducted this study, from the early design stage through to completing the data analysis and from both theoretical and practical perspectives. I present the theoretical bases of qualitative and action research and describe in detail how and why I developed the strategies used. In particular, I discuss the rationale for using a combination of qualitative and action research approaches and link them to the principles underpinning feminist research. An important feature of this research, discussed in detail in this chapter, has been the strong connection between its subject and the research strategies used. For example, I examine the connection between feminist research practices and their underlying ethics (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002) in terms of the ethical developments in social work examined in this study.

I also reflect on the ethical dimensions of this research, including the process of gaining the approval of the University Ethics Committee, the ethical purpose of the study and a number of ethical issues that were considered before and during the focus groups themselves.

Again, I examine the strong nexus between the subject and process of the study in terms of ethical theory and practice.

The structure of the study was a series of four focus groups which were repeated after six months, during which time participants were asked to trial a particular approach to supervision. I describe how I recruited participants and set out detailed information about their experience as social workers and supervisors and their workplace at the time they participated in the study. I then describe the processes of the groups themselves and the

framework for reflection which the participants were asked to trial. The extent to which this trial was actually undertaken after the first focus groups varied between participants.

Nevertheless, the second series of groups built on the first in terms of further developing an understanding of supervision.

The final section of this chapter deals with the collection and interrogation of data. It describes my early concerns about the quality of the data I had obtained using the electronic data analysis tool, NUDist. As a result, I conducted a manual analysis of the data before returning to NUDist to strengthen and confirm my own analysis and interpretation of the data.

## ***6.2. Research approaches***

Many texts on research strategies describe the basic differences between a quantitative and a qualitative approach, while noting that in recent years it has not been uncommon to adopt a research strategy incorporating both (Alston & Bowles, 2003; D'Cruz & Jones, 2004; Humphries, 2003). Having to choose between these two approaches was not necessary in this study. As noted in Chapter 1, this research project grew out of my experience as a social worker and supervisor over many years. In that sense, I had already begun the process of developing an understanding of and insight into the many aspects of supervising for ethical practice in social work which are the subject of this project. The following sections describe the theoretical basis for the choices I made around research strategies.

### **6.2.1. Qualitative research**

Minichiello, Aroni, Timewell and Alexander (1995) describe the aim of quantitative research as being to count and measure things, whereas qualitative research tries to capture people's meanings, definitions and descriptions of events. They further differentiate between quantitative and qualitative research in terms of their conceptual and methodological approaches. While quantitative research argues that its 'subjects' have only a blurry understanding of their social world and its methods are based on statistical analysis, qualitative research explores how people attach meaning to their lives and then develops themes to make that understanding accessible to others (Minichiello et al., 1995).

This study was about investigating the meaning attached to supervision by those most involved in it – social workers who supervise other social workers. Their experience as workers and supervisors provided a rich source of data about all aspects of supervision. As I will demonstrate below, their stories (and the stories they told about their supervisees) and the ways in which those stories extended our understanding of supervision clearly demonstrate the narrative dimension of qualitative research.

Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe the aim of qualitative research as the development of 'grounded theory'. The use of a qualitative approach, resulting in the building of a theory which explains events and their interpretation, was clearly appropriate for my research. The processes described in the literature about qualitative research have been followed in this study:

- The process of questioning and looking for new meaning began in my own practice.
- Through the literature review, I investigated existing theoretical understandings of the issues, trying to make sense of the questions arising from my own experience.



- In the focus groups I had the opportunity to reflect with groups of social work supervisors on their own experiences of dealing in supervision with the ethical dimensions of social work practice.
- The final stage of building knowledge and understanding from these different sources to develop a new theoretical understanding will be achieved through the writing of this thesis and the incorporation of the theoretical and empirical understanding developed in recent years.

To begin a research project with a review of the relevant literature is standard practice regardless of the particular approach chosen, because the researcher (or research team) uses it to discover the level and nature of the knowledge so far developed in a particular subject area as well as to identify particular questions or problems that have arisen for other researchers in the same field. It also alerts the researcher to gaps in existing research. Minichiello et al. (1995) discuss the role of the literature review in qualitative research as the starting point in the development of new theory. This means that future developments, incorporating the results of field research and data collection, are grounded in the theoretical history of the subject. They also note that it is important throughout the research process for the researchers 'to be constantly engaged in checking perception and understanding against many sources' (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 177). In this study, I have achieved this through returning to the literature at various stages to investigate theoretical developments that have occurred since I first completed my preliminary literature review and comparing those developments with the information emerging from the data.

It is important to examine the process of developing grounded theory in more detail. As a concept, it represents more than the inclusion of new theories into the research process or text. In qualitative research, grounded theory emerges from the synthesis of theoretical

developments in the field and the coding of data arising from the research process itself. Strauss and Corbin (1990) describe in some detail the stages in the coding of data which lead to the development of grounded theory. The processes I describe below in relation to my data analysis reflect those stages. In particular, the development of categories for the analysis of data was a key step. Strauss and Corbin describe open coding as the 'part of the analysis that pertains specifically to the naming and categorising of phenomena through close examination of data' (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 62). This basic step makes way for later more complex processes such as naming, questioning and renaming categories which give way, in turn, to the process of axial coding, through which data are re-categorised in new ways after the open coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). In the following sections, I describe these steps in my analysis of the data from the focus groups, both manually and through the use of the electronic data analysis system, NUDist.

Narrative theory deserves some attention in this discussion about qualitative approaches to research. Minichiello et al. (1995) describe the writing of an analytical file which becomes denser and whose main threads or story-lines become clearer as the study progresses. This resemblance to narrative is extremely important in qualitative research generally, and particularly in this study. The discursive dialogue between the researcher, the literature and other sources reflects both the processes of supervision and the processes of front-line social work discussed in supervision. Narrative approaches to social work and supervision will be discussed below in the context of the relationship between the subject of this study and the research strategies employed.

### **6.2.2. Action research**

It was envisaged from the beginning of this project that, as well as qualitative research, the research strategies would incorporate an action research approach. ‘Unlike other forms of social inquiry, action research deliberately sets out to create change’ (Alston & Bowles, 2003, p. 158). In practical terms, the two most striking features of action research are the central role of research participants and the circularity of the action research process. Action research is based on participatory research and a cycle of planning, action, observation and reflection.

In this study, both those elements are present. The fact that the participants were my peers in the social work community mitigated against their becoming ‘subjects’ of the research as understood in more traditional quantitative approaches to research. Their role in the focus groups was about contributing as experts in the field reflecting on their own practice. Berg describes action research as:

‘one of the few research approaches that embraces principles of participation, reflection, empowerment, and emancipation of people and groups interested in improving their social situation or condition’ (Berg, 2004, p. 195).

This also reflects the feminist conceptualisation of participation as a means of overcoming the power differential often present in other research strategies. For these reasons, as well as the fact that they were my professional peers, I have consistently used the term ‘participants’ to describe those who took part in my focus groups.

In addition to this central concept of participation and the reflection on their practice required in the groups, participants were asked to trial a framework for supervision in the six months between the first and second session of each group. In the second session, they were asked to reflect on that experience. Even in the case of those participants who did not

consciously trial the framework, their reflection in the second session of their group fits well within the action, observation, reflection model of action research. In terms of both the trial between group sessions and the general reflective nature of the groups, participants were reflecting on their actions within supervision and considering how their practice of supervision might be improved. This is a feature of action research.

It is apparent that there are significant similarities between qualitative and action research principles. For example, Flick notes that a central feature of grounded theory is the ‘circularity of its processual (sic) parts’, and the fact that it ‘focuses the researcher to reflect on both the whole research process and on particular steps in the light of other steps’ (Flick, 1998, p. 43). This blending of qualitative and action research approaches strengthened the overall research strategy, facilitated the collection of robust data and, as I demonstrate below, contributed to the consistency evident between the subject of this study and the research strategies used.

### **6.2.3. Feminist research**

This discussion about research strategies would not be complete without separate consideration of the place of feminism and feminist research in the development of modern approaches to research. At the same time as philosophers were working to develop an approach to ethics more in tune with women’s psychological and emotional development (see Chapter 3), (mostly) women social researchers were coming to understand the limitations of traditional research methods in trying to understand the social reality experienced by women in a range of contexts. This growing understanding led to the development of ‘feminist research’, with its particular emphasis on an ethic for research which valued and respected the experience of women. Within social work, too, researchers were beginning to explore the particular experiences of women.

Recent literature highlights the impact of feminism on research, in terms of both its objectives and the strategies employed by the researcher (Berg, 2004; Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). As noted above, there is a clear relationship between action research and feminist notions of participation and empowerment. Berg notes that those who used to be regarded as subjects, in feminist research become ‘participants and contributors to the research enterprise’ (Berg, 2004, p. 196). And again, feminist and action research are described as having in common this emphasis on the importance of research participants and their experience to the research process itself (Minichiello et al., 1995), even considering them co-researchers (Alston & Bowles, 2003; Brewer, 2000). This conceptualisation of research participants is vastly different from traditional quantitative and even ethnographic models of research. In addition to these methodological aspects of feminist research, it is worth examining the ethics and politics of feminist research in this context.

So far in this chapter I have considered the differences between quantitative and qualitative approaches to research and explored options such as participatory research and feminist research. In this section I will concentrate on the contribution of feminist research methods to feminist ethics more broadly. One issue worth pursuing here is the notion of evidence and its influence on how we approach research. Since the 1980s, there has been a growing trend towards evidence-based practice across a range of professions in Western countries, generally in response to increasingly regulatory environments, and partly resulting from the growth of economic rationalism and its attendant ideologies. Humphries (2003) notes that ‘*evidence* is seldom without ambiguity, and is contingent to unique, local contexts’ (Humphries, 2003, p. 82) and that evidence-based research often does not take into account factors such as the wider socio-economic or cultural context. She also notes that even feminist research, while focusing on women’s experiences of oppression, often fails to note

that their situation and behaviour may vary across geographical, cultural, class and racial boundaries.

Nonetheless, feminist research has made its own important contribution to the strategies and ethics of research. One description, from within a group of feminist researchers, notes that ‘we continue to work in the gap between public and private tensions of women’s experiences and the practices of creating academic knowledge’ (Birch & Miller, 2002, p. 3). As already noted, feminist research can also be easily located within the broader participatory research, which transforms subjects into participants and values their authentic voice and their own interpretations of their experience. It also provides an alternative to the collection of evidence within a context of managerialism.

Many commentators contrast feminist research strategies with more traditional approaches to research. Not only are the strategies different, but their starting point is often different from the formal ethics approval process now assumed to control the ethics of modern research, both within and outside universities. Birch and Miller (2002) argue that established ethics approval processes cover only limited aspects of research and that the ethical issues arising in research are far more wide-ranging and permeate the qualitative research process. They identify the aim of feminist research ethics as being to ‘suggest ethical ways of thinking rather than to provide answers or rules to be adhered to’ (Birch & Miller, 2002, p. 3) and they characterise their meetings as a group of researchers as ‘a space in which to express doubt and admit the possibility of unanswerable questions, rather than falling prey to the certainty of academic rhetoric’ (Edwards and Ribbens, 1998, quoted in Birch & Miller, 2002). In this context, it was important for me to reflect on this research project from an ethical perspective, including valuing and respecting the experience of the participants, as

well as operating within the requirements of the University's Ethics Committee. This is addressed in more detail later in this chapter.

Birch and Miller (2002) also discuss the relevance of using either a deontological or a consequentialist approach to ethics in the context of feminist research, concluding that 'over-dependence on these two Western dominant philosophical traditions may mask the complexities of ethical considerations that can be encountered in qualitative research'. Furthermore, they highlight the importance of contextualised ethical reasoning, as opposed to appealing to abstract rules and principles, and promote a 'more reflexive model of ethics where the self is placed within the ethical negotiations' (Birch & Miller, 2002, p. 6). Later in the same volume, Edwards and Mauthner contrast deontological and consequentialist approaches to ethics with what they call a 'virtue ethics of skills', in which the emphasis is on the researcher's 'moral values and ethical skills in reflexively negotiating ethical dilemmas' (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 20).

They further maintain that for feminists the basis of reflection on ethical action, whether engaged in research or practice, is an emphasis on care and responsibility rather than on outcomes, justice or rights, although they do propose that justice and care need not be opposed to each other, as justice can be incorporated into and informed by care (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002). It will become clear that there are strong parallels between this approach to ethics in research and the approach to social work ethics that is developed during the course of this study. In general terms, both have care as their fundamental purpose and both rely on reflective decision-making in particular situations.

#### 6.2.4. Use of focus groups

The nature of qualitative research necessitates the collection of detailed information from informants, including an understanding of the meaning they give to various events or phenomena. In this study, the participants had a significant understanding of both supervision and the ethical dimensions of social work practice to which I wanted to gain access. While one option would have been the use of individual in-depth interviews with a number of practitioners, I decided to conduct a series of focus groups. This approach was expected to have a number of advantages.

Firstly, the group setting allows participants to ‘react and build upon the responses of other group members’ (Minichiello et al., 1995, pp. 65-66) and if administered properly, can be extremely dynamic. Berg (2004) adds:

Interactions among and between group members stimulate discussion in which one group member reacts to comments made by another. ... The resulting synergy allows one participant to draw from another or to *brainstorm* collectively with other members of the group. A far larger number of ideas issues, topics and even solutions to a problem can be generated through group discussion than through individual conversations (Berg, 2004, p. 124).

This was the case in my groups. The experience and confidence of participants produced some lively discussions, which elicited more information than may have been possible on an individual basis. It was also expected that conducting groups was likely to be quicker than running a series of individual interviews. However, the amount of time spent arranging and rearranging times for the focus groups was substantial and caused significant delays in the commencement of the fourth group. I am not convinced that it was quicker than individual interviews, but it did deliver the other expected advantages.



In addition to these practical advantages, there were strong theoretical reasons for using focus groups. Minichiello et al. (1995) describe in some detail the relationship between in-depth research interviews, including in a focus group setting, and the clinical interview, highlighting the relationship between interviewer and interviewee and the skills required to conduct the interview. Given my extensive clinical experience, not only with individuals and families, but also in therapeutic and educational groups, I was confident that I had the skills required to successfully run a series of focus groups. Minichiello et al. (1995) also describe the relationship between clinical practice and research as being based on the shared interest in and respect for meaning. They also have in common the narratives they construct to develop and support their individual life meanings (Minichiello et al., 1995). In the next section, I will highlight the importance of this parallel and extend it to include the processes of reflection and the development of meaning and shared understanding that takes place in supervision. I will also discuss the relevance of a narrative approach to an in-depth understanding of the development of workers through the reflective processes of supervision.

### **6.2.5. Relationship between subject and method**

There are many levels on which the research strategies chosen for this study resonate with its subject. I have already mentioned the parallel between the clinical interview and the in-depth interview used by researchers. Importantly, there is also a parallel between the clinical interview carried out by workers and the supervision process itself. Many of the examples cited in the next two chapters refer to the skills needed in both counselling and supervision. At a theoretical level, Minichiello et al. (1995) describe the challenges of in-depth interviewing, particularly for the inexperienced researcher or, by implication, the participants.

The reflection required of participants in the focus groups mirrors that required of the workers they supervise, either individually or in groups. Conversely, the research interview or, in this case, the focus group, provides an opportunity to reflect on the processes of supervision that the participants conduct with workers. The combination of these processes enhances and enriches our understanding of each process and can be interpreted from a number of perspectives.

The focus group requires participants to provide a verbal account of social reality which is similar to the account that they, in turn, require of their supervisees. In both cases, meaning is attached to events that have occurred outside the current setting. In theoretical terms, these processes can be interpreted in terms of narrative theory. The stories of the participants and the workers are shaped and interpreted by their experiences and the ways in which they attach meaning to those experiences. In narrative therapy terms, the processes of counselling, supervision or participation in research give individuals the opportunity to tell their story and to reflect on and reinterpret the meanings they have previously attached to events in order, potentially, to change their future direction (Freedman & Combs, 1996). The role of the counsellor, supervisor or researcher is to listen to the stories, challenge previous meanings and provide opportunities for new ones. In terms of modes of social work practice other than counselling or direct practice, the strategies for reflection on practice described in this study are still applicable, as is the potential for the worker's story to be challenged in supervision.

The particular focus of this study is the way in which supervisors can assist workers in dealing with the ethical dilemmas that arise in their practice and help them develop the ability to make ethical decisions. Such a focus on ethics necessarily demands an understanding of the ethical framework in which the worker and supervisor are operating. In

this area, too, there are strong parallels between the subject of this study and the chosen strategies.

Earlier in this chapter, I discussed the influence of feminism on both qualitative and action research approaches. Another important way in which feminist research is relevant to both the subject and methodology of this study is in its approach to the ethics underpinning research. Feminist approaches to research, based on an ethic of care, can be seen as reflecting the approach to ethics which I investigate in this study. Whereas research ethics generally, particularly in mainstream institutions, mostly concentrates on the research processes themselves, feminist research relies heavily on the underlying motivation for carrying out the research being embedded in an ethic of care. Birch and Miller (2002) describe this in terms of ‘suggesting ethical ways of thinking rather than providing answers or rules to be adhered to’ (Birch & Miller, 2002, p.3). Further, they describe the limitations of traditional approaches to research ethics which concentrate on potential risk or harm, preferring an approach based on ‘detailed ethical discussions at all stages of the research process’ (Birch & Miller, 2002, p. 5). In this study, this contrast between approaches to research ethics is reflected in the move from deontological and consequentialist approaches in social work ethics to a reliance on virtue ethics and the ethic of care which underpins social work.

## **6.3. *Ethical considerations***

### **6.3.1. Ethical research**

Given that the subject of this study is ethics in social work, it was important that all stages of the planning, data collection, analysis and writing be conducted in an ethical manner. The

first question, then, is about what constitutes ethical research. Minichiello et al. (1995, p. 9) describe ethics in research as ‘the system or code of morals we apply to the research process’. They include for consideration elements such as the morality of the practices used, the personal and professional morality and integrity of the researcher and social justice in relation to the informants, the community, the profession and society at large. They regard the questions ‘Who is it for?’ and ‘What is it for?’ as the ‘central ethical and political questions that must be asked of any research programme’ (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 9).

Earlier in this chapter, I dealt with some aspects of these questions in terms of the overall aims of the study, including the importance of ethics in feminist approaches to research. However, they deserve further consideration in the context of this discussion about ethical research. In the case of this particular research project, these two questions evoke much the same response. Its purpose is to assist supervisors in the processes of supporting social workers in their development as ethical decision-makers. In a sense, the ‘who’ and the ‘what’ are the same. It is hoped that the social work profession as a whole, its clients and, by implication, the wider community, would reap some benefit from social workers learning about and getting better at making ethical decisions. Minichiello et al. (1995) also describe how researchers are subject to a number of influences:

Choice of research topic and research design are influenced by who you are, what group you belong to and the allegiances you recognise, the socialisation processes that you have been involved in (both personally and professionally) and the social and political climate of the era (Minichiello et al., 1995, p. 192).

As noted above, this research developed from within my personal experience as a social worker and a supervisor. The principles and values underpinning social work were the ones motivating my interest in and commitment to ethical education. In addition, I was influenced by the values and mission of the organisation in which I worked, where there was

a strong commitment to both supervision and the promotion of ethical practice. On a wider social and political level, the increasing importance of professional ethics and accountability were having an influence on social work as on other professions. In particular, there was a growing awareness of the need to protect service users from unethical or sub-standard practices. These influences were described in Chapter 1. However, I still needed to ensure that the research processes I used to achieve the desired outcomes were themselves ethical. How was I to assess what constituted ethical research methods?

Firstly, I needed to satisfy the various requirements of the university in order to obtain ethical approval for the study. These are described in detail in the following section. Many researchers draw on the ethics of their respective professions as a guide to how they might conduct research, particularly their professional codes of ethics. In this case, I think this was apparent at two levels. The provisions of the AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) which relate to research as a separate activity (Section 4.2.5) list what are called ‘specific ethical responsibilities’ to be undertaken by social workers involved in research. These responsibilities are very similar to the requirements of the University Ethics Committee, including requirements relating to informed consent, storage of data and the need to consider any possible consequences for participants. There were no apparent conflicts between the two sets of requirements.

However, my personal history within social work and my commitment to ethical practice also influenced my research at a broader level. The research design, my approach to recruitment and the conduct of the groups were clearly informed by social work ethics and values. In some ways, I was demonstrating what participants in the study were later to describe as ‘internalised values’ (see Chapters 7 and 8). I was committed to processes such

as informed consent, confidentiality and respect for participants as well as to the overall intention that participants would benefit from their involvement.

Some of the literature concentrates on avoiding ethical problems in terms of the design of the research project. The major focus is often about preventing any harm to participants, including putting them under any pressure or causing them stress. Alston and Bowles (2003) draw on Beauchamp to describe what they call ‘five ethical criteria for research’:

- Autonomy/self-determination (includes informed consent and confidentiality)
  - Non-maleficence (not doing harm)
  - Beneficence (doing good)
  - Justice (are the purposes just?)
  - Positive contribution to knowledge
- (Beauchamp, 1st Edition, 1982, quoted in Alston & Bowles, 2003, p. 21)

The research processes undertaken in this study meet these criteria. This is demonstrated by both the broader aims of the study, including the educative benefits for participants, and the more detailed requirements of the University Ethics Committee, which are discussed below.

In addition, the strategies employed in this study also fit within the characteristics of feminist research practices and ethics described above. The participants were very much approached as equals with expert contributions to make to the study. I will discuss conducting research with peers in more detail below, but note here that feminist understandings of research ethics, including regarding participants as equal partners with whom issues should be negotiated as they arise, were intrinsic to my research design. Even more relevant is the notion ‘that feminist discussions of the research process and of ethics of care have a lot of concerns in common’ (Edwards & Mauthner, 2002, p. 15).

### **6.3.2. University Ethics Committee**

Because the study involved people as participants, I was obliged by the Australian Catholic University to gain the approval of its Ethics Committee. This involved submitting a detailed research proposal, particularly as it related to any potential impact on participants. The format required both specific responses to specific questions about methodology and a detailed description of the proposed research (See Appendix 1). In addition, I had to lodge with the committee the flier used to recruit participants, the letter to participants explaining the research process and the informed consent form to be signed by each participant (Appendix 2).

### **6.3.3. Ethical issues that arose during the study**

A major issue which warrants discussion is confidentiality within the groups. One of the issues I identified in the original application to the University Ethics Committee was that it would be impossible for my research participants to be anonymous. Most of the participants knew each other professionally and/or personally. This meant that I needed to rely on the concept of confidentiality within the groups to ensure some protection for participants. As they were all senior practitioners, I was confident that this level of confidentiality could be maintained.

In addition, in the first session of each group, we discussed the issue of protecting the identity and confidentiality of the workers supervised by participants. It was agreed that participants should de-identify their supervisees as they shared their stories of supervision and also that, in the event any of the supervisees were identified by other participants, they would not share that information with other group members, including me. As experienced

supervisors, participants readily agreed with the importance of respecting and maintaining, as far as possible, the anonymity of their supervisees.

Once the groups started, it became apparent that there was some concern from at least one participant that they could be identified by their stories. I had to reassure participants that their stories would be ‘de-identified’ sufficiently for recognition to be virtually impossible. In addition, before actually starting the groups, I had decided to use a simple alphabetic code in the transcripts to protect the identity of participants. However, once I began writing I realised that I needed to assign names to participants to improve the clarity and readability of the thesis. In the writing process, I have tried to ensure that no ‘stories’ are recognisable by concentrating on the ethical issues raised and the processes of reflection rather than on the anecdotes themselves.

## **6.4. *Forming the groups***

### **6.4.1. The recruitment process**

This study approaches the relationship between ethics and supervision in social work from the perspective of supervisors. It explores the problems supervisors encounter when trying to assist workers with the ethical dilemmas they face in their practice. The fact that supervision is seen as central to social work practice (Cousins, 2004; Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Hughes & Pengelly, 1998; Kadushin, 1992; Munson, Handbook of Clinical Social Work Supervision) was also an important factor in this decision.

I was keen to locate this enquiry within social work as a profession, partly so that the values and principles underlying practice were likely to be shared, at least to some extent, by



participants. In order to reduce the likelihood of vast differences in professional values and approach between participants in the study and those they supervise, I decided to recruit social workers who supervise other social workers.

I had some difficulties with this in the recruitment phase and, as discussed below, not all participants were supervising social workers at the time the groups were conducted.

However, the vast experience within the groups, including experience in supervision at other times in their careers, if not during the study, ensured that all the participants were extremely knowledgeable about the theoretical and practical aspects of supervision relevant to the study.

To recruit participants, I used a variation of what is known as snowball sampling (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Snowball sampling is itself a variation of the strategy for recruiting participants that Krueger and Casey call nomination, which relies on asking people in a community to suggest the names of people who fit the criteria set for participation in the study. Participants are then selected randomly from that list. In a snowball sample, those you ask for nominations are those who have already passed the screening process. In this study, the ‘community’ consisted of social workers in the ACT and those asked to nominate themselves or others were senior social workers. This meant that there was very little that was random in the process, but that was almost inevitable given the nature of the target group. Of course, qualitative research is about understanding context, diversity, experience and meaning – not generalisability.

I prepared a flier (Appendix 2), which was distributed to key workers in agencies in the ACT which employ social workers. People who were interested in participating in the study were then asked to return the flier to me by facsimile with their contact details inserted. I then

rang respondents and explained the study, setting out in detail what would be required of them.

I had originally intended to establish four focus groups with 6-8 participants in each and to convene each group on two separate occasions, six months apart. These numbers proved impossible to achieve, but four groups did each meet twice. A major problem encountered in the recruitment process was the size of the social work community in the Australian Capital Territory, a problem which was compounded by the criteria established for participation. I was unable to recruit the 24-32 social workers I had intended to recruit into the target sample. In addition, not all those who participated in the first round of groups were able to attend the second session. One was unable to attend the final session due to illness and another had moved to a different employing organisation and her participation was no longer possible.

#### **6.4.2. The participants**

Because I wanted participants in the study to be social workers who supervise other social workers, it was likely that potential participants would be experienced social workers. The social work community in the Australian Capital Territory is quite small and many workers know each other, often having worked together. In this study, most of the participants knew each other on a professional or personal level, or both. This was discussed above as one of the ethical issues to be addressed in the study.

My adaptation of snowball sampling meant that the senior social workers within organisations to whom I sent the fliers were generally known to me personally. I called many of these and asked them to distribute the fliers among their staff who would meet the

criteria I had established. A number of those I contacted themselves volunteered to participate in the study and encouraged their peers to do so. A positive result of the recruitment process was that the supervisors who did take part in the study were generally very experienced, with a significant number in senior positions within their employing organisations. While these high levels of experience had a positive impact on the quality of data collected, it was also enhanced by the broad range of social work contexts in which the participants worked – both at the time of the study and previously.

At the same time, the fact that the participants were so experienced resulted in my having to face an ethical issue quite early in the research process. This centred on asking senior practitioners to give up a substantial amount of time to participate in the study. Because I was asking that they participate in two focus groups, six months apart, and to consider between sessions the framework I presented in the first session of each group, I was asking for a considerable commitment of time and energy. However, having been a social worker and supervisor in the Australian Capital Territory for some years, I was aware that there were very few opportunities for professional development in either supervision or ethics. In addition, I had been involved in providing ethics training for practitioners on behalf of the Australian Capital Territory Branch of the AASW. On the basis of this experience, I knew that there was very little professional development available and surmised that most practitioners would welcome the opportunity to participate in a process which might assist them in their practice. Discussions within the focus groups supported the soundness of this prediction. The following comments were made in respect of this issue:

*..and when it comes to workshops on supervision, they're pretty thin on the ground (Georgia)*

*This has been really useful, because it's hard to get the advanced supervision stuff* (Frances)

Between the first and second session of each group, the growing awareness of the importance and function of reflection experienced by some participants demonstrates that, from their perspective at least, their practice improved. Most reported in the second session that between groups they had been aware of and, in some cases, made a conscious effort to use, the framework for reflection they were given during the first session. What emerged, then, was that participation in this study constituted an important learning opportunity for participants, as well as providing important data for this study.

Table 1 describes the participants in terms of the context in which they worked at the time the groups were conducted, their years of experience, as social workers and as supervisors, and their gender. I have also noted whether the participants were involved in direct practice with clients or in management or another aspect of social work. As noted above, to facilitate reading the thesis while protecting the identity of participants, I have assigned them all pseudonyms.

Table 1: The Participants

Name	Gender	Years in SW	Years in sup	Social work context	Direct	Man/other
Georgia	F	15-20	9	Hospital	√	√
Helen	F	25	24	NGO		√
Frances	F	30	20+	Hospital	√	
Jill	F	25	20+	University		√
Ian	M	25+	25+	Child protection	√	√
Kelly	F	25	20+	Private Practice	√	
Leonie	F	25	25	Government	√	
Monica	F	30	28	Child protection		√
Olive	F	30+	15-20	Health	√	√
Abby	F	20	10	NGO	√	√
Peta	F	20+	10	Hospital	√	√
Rachel	F	20+	10	NGO		√
Charlie	M	15	13-14	Health +private prac	√	
Daphne	F	4 (15)	1	NGO	√	
Zoe	F	20	10	Government		√
Nora	F	20	16	University		√

A number of interesting features emerge from this table. The most obvious is the participants' years of experience as both social workers and supervisors. A number of participants commented that they became supervisors very soon after graduation, often after only a year of social work practice. While Daphne seems to be the exception in terms of the length of her social work experience (4 years), I have added 15 in parentheses, as this is the length of time she has worked in the field. She completed her social work qualification only 4 years before taking part in this study but is an experienced practitioner. Overall, the

average length of time practising social work was around 18 years, and the average length of time supervising was around 15 and a half years.

Another feature that stands out is that women comprise the majority of participants - only two of the 16 were men. However, this reflects the fact that women dominate numbers in the profession overall, certainly in Australia .

Finally, the variety of social work contexts represented by the participants in this study is remarkable. Most of the major employers of social workers in the Australian Capital Territory are represented and even where particular organisations are not, there are social workers from the same kinds of service types participating in the study. Of the 16 participants, five work in the non-Government welfare sector, five in Health (one of whom also works part-time in private practice), three in other government organisations (including child protection), two in universities and one works solely in private practice. Another characteristic of the participants not shown in this table is that all have also worked in other fields of social work practice. This means that they have experience of other types of social work practice and the nature of supervision in different settings, as well as shared experience of a number of social work contexts. For example, most of the participants had worked in health at some stage of their careers and a significant proportion had experience in child protection. In addition, participants working in different sectors (Government or non-Government, for example) often work with very similar client groups and workers in their respective organisations face the same kind of ethical dilemmas in their practice, albeit from sometimes different perspectives.

I have also recorded the nature of the work undertaken by participants at the time of the study. Six of the 16 participants describe themselves as being involved in direct work with

clients, six as holding a management position or some other role in social work and four as both doing direct practice and/or 'other'. Roles described as 'other' in the table include policy development or teaching.

## **6.5. *The group process***

Having decided to use focus groups and having recruited a significant number of senior practitioners, the next task was to develop the questioning route for the groups themselves. I had already decided to present the participants with a framework for supervision and to ask them to trial it over a six-month period between the first and second sessions of each group. As discussed above, this framework for reflection was based directly on the theoretical assumptions underpinning the study itself, that supervision provides the best opportunity for the reflection on practice which helps workers develop as ethically autonomous practitioners. So, the empirical part of the investigation had three stages:

- Session 1 gave participants the opportunity to identify the kind of ethical dilemmas faced by social workers and the ways in which they, as supervisors, might assist their supervisees to deal with those dilemmas. Dilemmas arising from their role as supervisor were also discussed. The framework for reflection was presented during that session and initial reactions invited.
- The framework for reflection was to be trialled by participants between groups. All participants agreed to do this, but not all managed to carry it out. However, most were able to reflect on it in more depth in the second session of their group.
- Session 2 gave participants another opportunity to reflect again on the ethical dilemmas present in the daily practice of their supervisees as well as on their own practice as supervisors. It also provided the opportunity to discuss reflection on practice and its relationship to learning to be ethical.

The groups were designed to maximise information provided by participants and to facilitate discussion among them. The following three sections of this chapter describe the structure and process of the three stages of the study, including any problems encountered. The following chapters will focus on the content of the group discussion.

### **6.5.1. Session 1**

The major aim of Session 1 was to help participants start reflecting on their practice *as supervisors* and to relate this to what they saw as *ethical practice*. Inevitably, this included participants considering the ethical dilemmas they themselves encountered in their practice, both as practitioners and supervisors.

I have discussed my use of focus groups early in this chapter. The literature on focus groups provides a number of ways of structuring the groups themselves. The aim is to elicit as much information as possible on a given subject as might be provided by the participants. However, it was important to structure the groups in a way which would maximise information collection and encourage discussion between very experienced participants.

In this study I adopted the structure for focus groups suggested by Krueger and Casey (2000) which ensures that the questions asked in the group do not distract participants from the purpose of the study. This structure has a number of features which I found appropriate to the study and the characteristics of the participants. It is an approach which both ensures a gentle entry into the questions to be discussed and allows experienced participants to contribute knowledgeably to the discussions. The overall direction of the questions is from the general to the specific – it helps participants to focus on the important questions. As outlined by Krueger and Casey (2000), the questions are grouped in a particular way to



facilitate quality contributions to the study. While the same structure is used for the first and second sessions of each group, it can be seen from the following discussion that the questions themselves are quite different and that there is distinct movement between the first and second sessions. As will become evident from this discussion, the second sessions clearly build on the first sessions. The extent to which the intervening experience contributed to that development will be discussed in more detail below.

For the most part, I used the questioning route described by Krueger and Casey. They describe five different sorts of questions to be used:

- *Opening questions* help participants to feel comfortable and get them talking
- *Introductory questions* introduce the topic for discussion and get participants thinking about their connection to it
- *Transition questions* move the conversation towards the key questions that drive the study
- *Key questions* drive the study and are the centre of the data analysis
- *Ending questions* bring closure to and allow reflection on the earlier discussion. Usually, they include an ‘insurance’ question – ‘Have we missed anything?’ Ending questions may also ask for advice on how future groups around the same topic might be improved (Krueger & Casey, 2000, pp. 44-46).

To suit the characteristics of my participants and the overall two-session structure of the study, I adapted the model in a number of ways. Firstly, I combined the introductory and opening questions. I did not think that a group of extremely experienced social workers, who mostly knew the other participants, would need very much help to feel comfortable or talk to each other.

Secondly, many of the key questions in the first session centred on the framework for reflection I was asking them to trial. I wanted to gain their first impressions of the framework and their views on whether they would feel comfortable using it in their own supervision practice. Accordingly, the end of the first session was more of an introduction to the next stage of the study than an ending in the usual sense. In fact, the two questioning routes together follow the typical route described above. They are set out in Appendix 3.

The scope of the issues raised during the first session of each of the four focus groups is both wide-ranging and incisive and reflects the experience of the participants. It also supports the assumption that participants would themselves derive considerable benefit from taking part in the study. It was clear that most appreciated the opportunity to reflect on both the dilemmas faced by those they supervise and the issues that arise for themselves as supervisors. The willingness of participants to trial the framework for reflection on practice is also indicative of their openness to the opportunity for professional development around supervision.

### **6.5.2. Framework for reflection**

The introduction of the framework for reflection and its place within this study warrant some discussion. The framework itself is not presented as a result of the study. That is, its primary purpose was to assist the participants to consciously use reflection on practice as a tool in supervision. The intention was that, by helping their supervisees to reflect on the ethical dimension of their practice for six months, the participants would develop a greater understanding of the processes of reflection and the ways in which they might help workers to unpack a dilemma and articulate a possible solution. It was also hoped that they would

gain more insight into how they might support the ethical development of the workers they supervise and bring this insight back to the group in the second session.

The framework for reflection, although fine-tuned for use with the focus groups, had been developed over time and early versions of the framework were used in a number of settings. Some questions had emerged from professional development sessions around ethical practice I had conducted with school counsellors, particularly those relating to boundaries and the worker's role in a secondary situation of the school. Another version was used at a workshop I gave for school principals in 1999, which focused on helping principals to work with teachers who appear to be having difficulties with issues like maintaining boundaries.

In each case, the questions were used to help participants deconstruct the elements of a problem to understand its nature more clearly and, in the case of a dilemma, to weigh up the alternate views or courses of action. For the principals, it also aimed at helping them to frame questions which they could ask their teachers to help alert them to the potential problems.

Accordingly, although the framework for reflection was not piloted specifically for use in the focus groups, the previous successful use of similar (and, in some cases, the same) questions gave me confidence that they would be appropriate for their purpose in the focus groups - as a tentative framework for the kinds of questions participants might find helpful as a tool in supervision.

The framework was never intended to be adhered to strictly, but comprises a group of questions which might assist supervisees reflect on their practice by focusing on the underlying issues. It attempts to help the worker, with the assistance of their supervisor, to

reflect on situations from a number of different perspectives, including those of the client, the employing organisation and other stakeholders. It also helps the worker clarify the underlying ethical issue in terms of identifying the client, the goal of the intervention and other relevant factors. The framework for reflection used in the focus groups is also provided at Appendix 3.

The framework should assist supervisors to help workers identify and deal with issues not previously recognised as potential or actual ethical dilemmas. This is particularly useful in situations where a supervisor has concerns about a worker or their conduct in a particular case, but the worker seems to be unaware that there is a problem. Circumstances in which such an approach is unlikely to be successful are discussed in more detail below (see Chapter 8).

### **6.5.3. Session 2**

The second session of each group began with participants being asked to report on whether they had used the framework and, if so, whether they had found it useful. The groups then discussed how the framework might be improved and other resources or approaches that might help them as supervisors. Finally, they reflected again on the broad issue of the ethical dilemmas faced by social workers and how they, as supervisors, can help workers develop the skills and knowledge they need to make ethical decisions.

There were significant variations between participants in terms of the extent to which they consciously trialled the framework. Some had totally forgotten about it, others had used it partially or unconsciously, and a few participants had made an effort both to use the framework in supervision and to evaluate its usefulness. Those who had consciously trialled

and assessed the practical utility of the framework were able to reflect in detail on its value as a tool in supervision, as well as on when it might or might not be appropriate or useful. However, all participants were able to reflect on its value from the perspective of their experience as supervisors and some made detailed suggestions about how it might be improved.

The content of the second session of each group further developed themes such as ethical education, accountability, balancing conflicting ethical precepts and the development of workers as ethical decision makers. The next two chapters describe these discussions in some detail. Finally, all groups reviewed what had already been covered and identified issues that required further consideration.

## **6.6. *Interrogating the data***

Transcription of the data was the most onerous part of the research process. Its major advantage, however, was that it gave me an extremely good feel for the content of the groups and the slightly different emphasis that developed within the different groups. However, it also gave rise to some concerns in the early stages of the study.

### **6.6.1. Early concerns**

One of my first impressions was that there may be gaps in the data and that there may have been areas important to the study which were simply not discussed within the groups. In hindsight, this concern stemmed partly from my own inexperience in conducting focus groups and partly from the time it took to complete the transcription process. However, as the transcription advanced, it became apparent that ‘saturation’ had occurred. This refers to

the stage in the research process ‘where you have heard the range of ideas and aren’t getting new information’ (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p. 26). Before commencing, I had been confident that the experience of the participants would overcome any possible disadvantages arising from their relatively small number. Once the transcription was complete, this confidence was borne out in the range of issues canvassed and the depth to which they were discussed and even analysed within the groups.

I then began preliminary analysis of the data using NUDist. My original decision to use a computer-based data analysis software package was based on the assumption that it would significantly strengthen my analysis of the data obtained from my focus groups. I assumed, and was advised, that it would give the analysis a structure and cohesion that would be hard to achieve manually. The choice of NUDist was based on its reputation as a tool capable of handling the complexities of qualitative data analysis and its common use for those purposes in Australia. The fact that it was developed in Australia inspired confidence in its application to local research conditions and practices and facilitated access to support should I need it. A number of colleagues had first hand experience of its use and application and confirmed its relevance to my study.

I began by using NUDist to do preliminary searches for what I considered to be key words or phrases likely to reflect the themes or ideas I was expecting to emerge. After using this approach for the first analysis of the data, I became concerned that my searches were based on what I had predicted before I started collecting data. Accordingly, I was concerned that I was only accessing data that I was looking for, and that I could have been missing important themes or ideas. I knew that this process was not entirely random because I had been in the focus groups and transcribed their contents, so I had a good idea by that stage of what the main themes had been. Nevertheless, I was concerned that I was imposing my expectations

on the data. I decided that I needed to do a systemic manual coding of the data, then to use NUDist to ensure that the data was searched as thoroughly as possible to support (or otherwise) that coding. For all these reasons, I decided to recommence with manual coding of the data.

### **6.6.2. Manual coding**

Firstly, I set up tables divided by the likely categories into which the data might fall, leaving some without headings to accommodate categories I had not predicted. I then went through the transcripts manually and assessed data, entering it into the table as appropriate.

Generally, I ended up with the same set of categories for all the Session 1 groups. I presumed that this was a consequence of using the same questioning route for each group. It was interesting that some categories that had a lot of input from some groups, but very little for others. I then started to analyse the data from the second session of each group.

At first, I had a number of new categories, then I realised that I also needed to repeat the Session 1 categories, as a number of groups revisited earlier issues. In general terms, session 2 of each group built on session 1. The results of these iterative processes amounted to a categorisation of the total data set for each of the eight groups. In a dedicated column in these tables, I made notes linking various categories and highlighting the apparent intention of comments that seemed to be important in the overall context of each group transcript.

The next step was to compile composite data sets for Session 1 and Session 2. Table 2 shows the categories that emerged from the consolidation of Session 1 and Session 2 themes. There is clearly considerable overlap between the 'categories' emerging from the data and, as noted above, Session 2 data appears to build on Session 1 data.

**Table 2: Categories emerging from the Data**

<b>Session 1 Categories</b>	<b>Session 2 Categories</b>
Comments on framework	Comments on framework
	Types of cases/uses
	Types of issues raised
	Approach in supervision
	Success using different approach
Organisational context	Organisational issues
Accountability	Accountability Managerial perspective
Pressure on workers	
Conflict	Conflict between ethical precepts
Ethical Issues	Ethical issues
Supervision	Supervision
Direction by supervisor	Direction by supervisor
Reflection/Education	Reflection/education Ethical education
Social work	Social work
Other resources	
Other issues	Other issues

Finally, I went through the data in the categories listed above and summarised the major issues emerging. These separate stages in the manual analysis process gave me confidence that the final use of NUDist was based on the themes which actually emerged from coding the data rather than on my expectations of what might emerge. The final section of this chapter describes the way in which I used NUDist to enhance my analysis of the data.



### **6.6.3. Strengthening the analysis: Using NUDist**

I then returned to NUDist to search the text for the themes emerging from the manual analysis and to link them with those already identified. This enabled me to examine in much greater detail the ways in which issues raised in the groups were interconnected and to further explore their complexity. I was able to look at the composite data in terms of constantly recurring ideas, as well as ideas that only arose once or sometimes. This improved the depth of my analysis because I had a much better idea of the relative importance of different ideas, as well as the relationship between them.

Looking at the consolidated data also reassured me that saturation of data had been achieved. Being able to follow themes through the groups and consider how they recurred in different ways in different contexts showed me that participants had fully explored both their experience of supervision and the potential for using it to help workers reflect on the ethical dimensions of their practice. In addition, there were no new themes emerging in the later groups. There were different examples, but the ethical issues they represented had been discussed in earlier groups. In fact, the data show that participants returned to earlier topics to discuss them in more detail or from different perspectives.

Returning to NUDist to search for particular themes also gave me a better understanding of how the data could and should be categorised. This categorisation, in turn, shaped my interpretation of the data and supported the development of an appropriate structure for the following chapters, 'The Dilemmas Emerging' and 'Supervising for ethical practice'.

#### **6.6.4. Reliability, validity and limitations of the study**

Within the chosen research approaches, questions about reliability and validity of data take on meanings different from those they enjoy in positivist research. It has been noted that the emphasis on reliability and validity which is intrinsic to quantitative research is less relevant to qualitative and participatory methods (Alston & Bowles, 2003). This, however, leads to questions about how interpretive methodologies should be judged, especially in terms of how the knowledge is acquired and the validity of the claims made (Altheide & Johnson, 1994).

McAuliffe (2000) suggests that Lincoln and Guba's idea of 'trustworthiness', established by asking the question 'How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of' (Lincoln and Huber, 1985, quoted in McAuliffe, 2000, p. 87), is relevant here. Credibility, which for qualitative researchers can be a more appropriate measure than reliability (Alston & Bowles, 2003), can be assessed by checking with participants and giving them opportunities to dispute findings and interpretations (McAuliffe, 2000). Alston and Bowles (2003), using slightly different definitions, locate this rechecking of findings with participants within the assessment of validity, adding that participants strengthen qualitative research because their perspective, or world view, dominates that of the researcher.

In the present study, participants had the opportunity, by trialling the framework for reflection between sessions and providing feedback in the second session of each group, to engage with the researcher in interpreting the ways in which workers can be assisted to reflect on their practice. In addition, it was important to maintain ongoing interaction between the processes of data collection and analysis and parallel developments in theory. The validity of a research study can also be assessed in terms of its transferability, which is

supported by keeping thorough records of the research process to establish clear audit trails, which in turn can facilitate replication of the study (McAuliffe, 2000). Such records were kept throughout this study – from the initial literature review and development of the research questions, through the design and data collection stages and into the analysis and writing stages.

All social research studies have limitations – some a result of the strategies chosen, some due to external factors (Alston & Bowles, 2003). Some limitations, of course, are more significant than others. Earlier in this chapter, I described the difficulty I had recruiting sufficient participants who met my criteria - social workers who supervise other social workers. Partly the problem arose from my choice of research strategy, and partly from the size of the social work community within the Australian Capital Territory. The self-selection of participants could also be a limitation of the study, as presumably only those with a particular interest in the topic would have volunteered. However, given the characteristics of participants described above, I do not think self-selection can be regarded as a limitation in this case.

It is also possible that some potential participants were discouraged by the prospect of having to attend two groups, six months apart. However, I believe that the advantages of the proposed approach in terms of the richness of the data and having the opportunity to check out my early understandings with participants outweighed any possible limitation in the number of participants.

## **6.7. Conclusion**

In this chapter I have located my chosen strategies within the range of research traditions described in the literature and have justified my use of the particular combination of approaches evident in this study. The strong nexus between the subject and the research strategies reinforces the theoretical basis for my decisions. Alongside the parallels between the collection of qualitative data, the processes of supervision and what happens within worker intervention with clients, there was also a strong connection between the principles of feminist research informing this study and the feminist ethic of care which emerged from it. In addition, my decision to have social work supervisors as participants was borne out in the quality of the data collected. There was a clear parallel evident between the quality and nature of the reflection on practice which took place within the groups and the reflection on practice which I was suggesting that supervisors might use with workers.

My use of a combination of manual and electronic (NUDist) coding methods and the range and complexity of the data give me confidence in the data collected and presented for this study. The next two chapters contain the results of that data collection and analysis and I believe that a deeper understanding of both the ethical dilemmas that arise in social work and the importance of supervision in the ethical development of workers will emerge.

## **7. THE DILEMMAS EMERGING**

### ***7.1. Introduction***

The focus groups centred on the personal experience of the participants as supervisors and the ways in which social workers can be assisted in their interaction with clients, in understanding their role within their employing organisations, in developing and maintaining relationships with co-workers and in defining their place within the profession more generally. An important part of many of the ethical problems and dilemmas discussed during the course of this study relates to the potential conflict that may arise between the values of the individual worker and the employing organisation or system within which they work. This resonates with recent research on the nature of social work in Australia today (see Chapter 2) and the challenges faced by social workers and supervisors trying to redefine their role in a changing context (Ife, 1997; McDonald & Jones, 2000).

In this chapter I examine the kinds of ethical problems and dilemmas that most commonly arise for participants and their supervisees and those that they find the most difficult to deal with, as well as the wide range of situations or conditions likely to give rise to an ethical dilemma. I then describe the particular dilemmas experienced by supervisors which arise from their role as supervisor. Finally, I explore various resources supervisors use when facing a dilemma themselves or supporting another social worker facing an ethical dilemma, including the AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002), supervisors' own experience and other resources. The focus of the following chapter is on the participants' experience of the processes of supervision and the place of reflection within supervision and in the ethical education of social workers.

### **7.1.1. What is an ethical dilemma?**

As noted earlier (see Chapter 4) I rely in this study on Banks' (2001) definition of an ethical dilemma, which occurs 'when the social worker sees herself as faced with a choice between two equally unwelcome alternatives which may involve a conflict of moral principles and it is not clear which choice will be the right one' (Banks, 2001, p. 11). However, it will become apparent that the participants in the focus groups did not consistently use this approach, so some of the discussions are based on broader understandings that would fall into Banks' 'ethical problems' or even, in some cases, 'ethical issues' (Banks, 2001, p. 11).

### **7.1.2. Why do they occur in social work?**

In the examination of the social work context of this study (see Chapter 2), I explored the ways in which ethical dilemmas are at the very heart of social work, arising as they do from the social worker's involvement in the lives of clients. A number of participants' comments supported this view, although, as noted above, many used the term 'dilemma' quite broadly:

*There's always going to be those dilemmas, I don't think you can ever get around them. Everybody is different, everybody's an individual. There's individuals working with individuals, because within all that becomes one person's own views and values which influence the decisions they're making and I guess that's what supervision is about. It's about putting the facts on the table, looking at what the options are, finding out whether the client fits into all this and what they want to do; assessing all the facts and then making that professional decision. (Georgia)*

*It's interesting in some areas. I think in child protection, for example, there are constant ethical dilemmas around. Questions come up about the appropriateness of foster carers and balancing what you know against moving a child to a placement, and often children are moved several times. I think there are constant things that are thrown up for workers around balancing those elements. (Ian)*

One of the aims of this study has been to examine how workers identify and resolve the dilemmas inherent in their work, and how supervisors can assist them to do that. To recap, the two key research questions are:

- *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?* and,
- *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?*

## **7.2. Problems and dilemmas arising in practice**

The ethical dilemmas faced by social workers in their daily practice generally centre on conflict between values or principles. The participants in this study described a range of dilemmas brought to them by the workers they supervise, although many of those workers could not articulate the nature of the ethical dilemma and were more likely to describe it initially as a problem or a difficulty. Participants also recounted dilemmas they faced which seemed intrinsic to their role as supervisors. The dilemmas described by participants, essentially based on a conflict between ethical precepts, fall into a number of major categories including commonly encountered issues in areas like boundaries and confidentiality, the conflicting needs or wishes of clients and other stakeholders and conflict between the worker and the employing organisation or its requirements. This range reflects the kinds of problems identified in the literature (Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Reamer, 1999). Participants in the study shared the view that dealing with such dilemmas, although often very stressful for those involved, was part of the normal business of social work, for both workers and supervisors. The relationships between workers and clients and between supervisors and workers will be shown to share many parallel characteristics, including the dilemmas arising from involvement in another's life.

As the following discussion demonstrates, there may be different problems or dilemmas present in a given situation. For example, one situation may give rise to value conflicts between the values of the worker and those of the employing organisation, between the worker and the client, between the client and the organisation.

*It was challenging for the worker personally because it challenged her own values and also made her look I suppose in terms of, I suppose not in a way of putting her own values aside, but looking at it. ,Ok how do we stand because if we support this woman in what she is saying she wants to do, are we supporting suicide? But we are also doing something which is illegal, as well as against the values of the hospital. So it was quite tricky. (Georgia)*

It was evident from both the literature (Munson, 2002; Tsui, 2005) and the focus groups that one of the major functions of supervision is to help the worker deconstruct those kinds of complex situations and understand the range of factors, including the mission of the organisation, which influences how they make decisions. In terms of the models of ethical decision-making already described (see Chapter 4), particularly the inclusive model (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005), the supervisor's role includes helping the worker with processes like defining the ethical dilemma, mapping legitimate stakeholders, gathering information, developing alternative approaches and, finally, evaluation and analysis of the decision made (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). The supervisor may experience additional pressure if value or other conflicts arise between them and their supervisee, or when vulnerability or power becomes a significant issue within the supervisory relationship.

The next section describes the kinds of problems and dilemmas that participants identified as commonly arising for the workers they supervise, as well as in their own practice. These resonate with the kinds of problems identified in the literature as commonly occurring in social work practice (Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Reamer, 1999).



### 7.2.1. Boundaries

Many issues raised by participants related in some way to boundaries, although this term evoked a wide variety of meanings, even within this group of experienced social workers.

Firstly, there are the boundaries between workers and clients.

*I think one of the things that comes up is about boundaries. That's been a fairly big issue in supervision, it's a fairly consistent issue, I guess. I'll give you an example. The situation was that one of the group leaders lived nearby to one of the clients and actually knew them from their other work and this client wasn't able to come along to the group because we couldn't provide suitable transport. And so the proposal of this group leader was that "well, she's sort of on my way, I'll just pick her up". The other group leader felt very uncomfortable about this, really bending the boundaries between professional and personal lives. (Peta)*

Implicit in these comments is an assumption about what social work values are and, by implication, what professionalism might mean in the context of social work practice. A related issue is the way in which different 'professions' or work groups might give a different meaning to a particular situation or set of circumstances. After describing the leader wanting to provide transport for the client, Peta added:

*...anyway, it caused lots of debate and discussion and it also had a follow-on effect further onto other boundaries within the group and self-disclosure and that was, partly I think, came from different backgrounds, they had different experiences in their work life and one of them had worked in a (different setting) and there the boundaries were much less clear, I guess, so for her this was just an extension of supporting people (Peta).*

Peta had done formal social work training after some years working in the field and was able to clarify how her social work training directly affected how she now assessed situations:

*I certainly think that from my social work training, those boundaries were drawn very clearly between, in a whole range of different areas. And because I supervise*

*some folk who aren't social workers, the position I'm in at the moment, there very different ideas of, mostly because they've had different areas of work where that's accepted and, that actually has been quite a large issue, and has been some point of conflict between different professions.*

The differences between how social work and other helping professions regard supervision is revisited in the next chapter. Another arena in which boundaries arise as an issue is within the supervision relationship itself:

*So I mean I think when I've had a staff member who has had personal issues and things, I've been an empathic colleague and supportive, but there's, I think he needs to talk to somebody, why don't you go to the Employee Assistance Program? Why don't you go and see somebody? Maybe not quite as harshly as that, but that kind of thing, but keeping it separate. (Peta)*

*And yet part of that boundaries stuff has been about being careful that you're not actually their therapist, or perhaps social working people as well ... "if you have personal issues, it's not my role to be your personal social worker". (Olive)*

Although many of the skills required for supervision are similar to those used in counselling or other interpersonal activities, these two examples demonstrate that participants in this study were quite clear about the differences between the roles and their responsibility as supervisors to keep them separate. They saw 'social working' their supervisees (that is, treating them as clients) as a clear boundary violation, but also as somehow affording workers less respect than they deserve as colleagues.

Nevertheless, some knowledge of, and even interaction with, the worker's 'personal life' seems inevitable if supervisors are to help them deal with significant ethical issues,

particularly when a client's situation resonates with events in the worker's own life.

A supervisor may well need to support the worker through various personal issues.

*I find the stuff to do with personal stuff the hardest because you've got to get to know the person and their values and their, you know, what's going to be an ethical dilemma for them might not be for me. You've got to know where they're coming from and be able to work with that, and unless someone's willing to, or until someone's willing to, be open about that sort of stuff, then you're fishing in the dark. And you never know whether you're actually saying the right thing or not (Daphne)*

Another way in which the supervisory relationship can operate at different levels is when the supervisor also has line management responsibilities with respect to the supervisee. This has significant implications in terms of both the accountability role of supervision and the extent to which a supervisor can use supervision to help the worker reflect on the practice dilemmas they face and make an appropriate and justifiable decision. For example,

*I think one of the conflicts that a lot of people have described to me is the fact that their line manager is their supervisor. Now, even if they've had quite good relationships and good informal connections with somebody, as soon as you put the line management role in there, people do become much more careful about what they say and how they say things and what they keep secret. And do self-protection (Leonie)*

And in another group:

*Because clinical supervision is about facilitating in a safe environment, I guess, where that police role almost denies that. And people are going to be worried about what they say and how it will be seen, and what it will do to their career and all that (Charlie)*

These issues will be dealt with in detail in the next chapter, but it is noteworthy that a number of participants raised them in the context of discussions about boundaries. In my own social work practice, there were numerous examples of workers, especially new workers, feeling uncomfortable about having the program coordinator as their supervisor. They felt that this impeded the extent to which they could be frank in supervision, particularly when they were feeling inadequate or inexperienced around a particular issue. They often expressed the view that they could not obtain maximum benefit from supervision because revealing their hesitation might be held against them in some way later, for example in terms of their reputation within the agency. However, some participants in this study noted that in most social work settings, it was inevitable that the clinical supervisor would also be a line manager, because that is how most organisations are structured. Nevertheless, being a line manager can also make supervision more difficult from the supervisor's perspective.

*Yeah, I find that the most difficult supervision situation, actually, being the line manager, because, it is, I think it is difficult to get into professional development.*  
(Rachel)

*There wouldn't be many situations where you weren't in that type of situation, where you weren't some type of manager of people that you supervise.* (Zoe)

I would now like to return to the issue of boundaries more generally. Although widely accepted as integral to professional social work practice, boundaries can also be described as a social construct within a narrowly defined notion of social work practice (Zubrzycki, 2003). In fact, trying to maintain strong boundaries can be seen as inappropriate or irrelevant in a range of settings, most notably indigenous communities, rural and remote communities and within some ethnic or other well-defined social groups.

*This is an area that's hard when you're working with indigenous people, because they're always told the model is that they have to yarn and there'll be much fewer boundaries and more flexible, which is the antithesis of what social, what professional relationships are. And that's a real dilemma (Olive)*

These issues were also raised by Ian:

*It's interesting, because Michael White has addressed some of this stuff and he talks about boundaries being an excuse for not doing something, so in some ways, a lot of that post-modern stuff is about breaking it right down, isn't it? Well, in that model he has with reflective family therapy, it's actually fairly substantial self-disclosure. And I think when you look at the Jones research too, you know, you look at the indigenous issues, just how caring, how that influences your practice, there are issues around indigenous cultures, that boundary issues have lead to the issue. (Ian)*

This comment raises a number of issues that warrant further discussion. Firstly, Ian raises challenges that have been made in the literature to the 'sanctity' of boundaries as one of the basic tenets of social work. To adopt a narrative perspective on the issue, he reminds us that entering into a client's story will mean vastly different things in different contexts and that the client's own story to that point will affect his or her expectations of the whole helping process. This resonates with both the parallel and the distinction drawn earlier between counselling and supervision. While supervisors do become part of workers' stories, that involvement is usually only in the part of those stories relating to their development as social workers.

Secondly, Ian alludes to how traditional understandings and limits which have defined social work are challenged by the notion of caring. The importance of the ethic of care within social work ethics has been examined (see Chapter 3). However, it is interesting that Ian identifies this apparent conflict between what most social workers would see as their prime motivation and a commonly accepted principle underpinning social work practice.

### 7.2.2. Other client challenges

In addition to boundary issues, other dilemmas commonly brought to supervision included confidentiality, balancing the conflicting rights or responsibilities of stakeholders and a whole range of other situations where there were conflicts between ethical principles. Participants in the study reported that workers they supervise are generally able to make decisions about breaking confidentiality in particular circumstances (for example, when there are issues of child protection). It was also recognised that some quite clear principles can be less meaningful in particular contexts:

*Well, I will say that that is the case, because I mean particularly because I supervise a lot of rural practitioners and there are quite different rules around confidentiality (Nora)*

This led to a discussion about where the ethical 'rules' sit in terms of practice.

*They're actually more ethical precepts, you know they're not in black and white, 'you should do this'. They're guidelines. It's almost about how you're going to operationalise them (Jill)*

One of the functions of supervision identified by participants in this study was helping workers to decide how to 'operationalise' these precepts in a given situation.

Decision-making is seen to be more difficult when there are several issues present, particularly around how and when to involve other stakeholders.

*And I guess the other thing, particularly if it involves a child, for example, and the issue of whether to involve say a teenager who might be engaged in potentially self-harming things and the dilemma might be about whether to involve parents or whatever, or the child welfare authorities to look at the law, the legal requirements, I think. You have to, really, I mean you might not have a choice, in fact. (Rachel)*

Or again,

*I mean that can be with adults, too when (..) issues are involved, when it's necessary to (protect) a suicidal person, or when to involve significant others ..and if there's violence issues and if a young person, or an adult, is being discharged back to the family, as to how much the family needs . (Frances)*

Other participants noted that there are a variety of issues affecting how a particular problem might be approached.

*And also the age-appropriateness of things, I mean if you were talking about a 16 year old, there's quite a different level of independence, although they're not adults, than an 11 year old or a 7 year old. (Leonie)*

This reflects the importance of context for a worker or supervisor trying to deconstruct an ethical dilemma or decide on a course of action. There are a number of models of ethical decision-making which include consideration of context as a critical part of the process (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; Reamer, 1999). It is often the context which reduces the possibility of making a black and white decision in a given situation.

*You always apply it to the context, so regardless of whether it's rural practice, as compared to working in a large institution, like a hospital (Jill)*

Context is always important, particularly when dealing with issues like 'respect for human dignity and worth' and 'client self-determination', which are also regarded as core social work values. The presence of other stakeholders, such as family members, will almost inevitably give rise to other interpretations of the best interests of the client, and others' rights to self-determination. The complexity of such situations often contributes to the emergence of an ethical dilemma, particularly in cases where the client is a child or where

the client or a family member is dealing with some form of real or perceived impairment. This means that apparently simple principles, such as the client's right to self-determination, may be quite complex in reality and may have harmful unintended consequences for clients or those around them. These issues arise typically, but not exclusively, in cases involving children, aged family members or family members with an intellectual disability or mental illness.

*Well, the difficult ones for me are you know, when a teenager and a parent are...over freedom issues, freedom and safety issues. So there is no .. child protection issues.....It's conflict resolution issues. (Frances)*

There was some discussion about how social work practice has changed, including changes in the way we regard clients

*An issue, a big issue in Mental Health, where for many years patients, or the clients, were seen but the worker had the relationship with the family or carer, which excluded the clients. For some workers it's a major shift to actually see the family as part of the client. (Ian)*

These were also situations where a worker's own values may be in conflict with those of either social work or the employing organisation and different workers may hold quite different values around a particular issue.

Another factor which can contribute to the impact of a dilemma on a worker is the seriousness of the client's situation. The following comment from Rachel is interesting because she identifies the core of the dilemma as relating to boundaries, but others would see this situation as affected by the client's right to confidentiality. The setting in which Rachel works is characterised by a very vulnerable client group and a significant number of workers



who have very ill-defined boundaries, and would be likely to become very involved with a client at risk of self-harm.

*Boundaries, I think, is another one, particularly involving the threat or the risk of harm, self-harm, client self-harm, or the client may be harming someone else, like their child or something like that and the worker's dilemma over what to do about it.* (Rachel)

*Because often you do find that the reason that people have got a concern about it is not that they really think that they've done the wrong thing, but actually because they think that under the code, they (might be breaking the rule).* (Jill)

*Sometimes people need it more for validation and support around the decisions or whatever that they've made.* (Nora)

And again:

*Some of the ones that I've had are not really seeing it as a dilemma as such, more as needing support to stand up against it, and I guess they're just checking out where they are, that is that the right thing to do,* (Georgia)

These comments by participants reflect how supervisors can use models of ethical decision-making, and a range of other resources including the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002), to help workers make an ethical decision, or to assess whether that decision was ethical in its particular context. This is discussed in more detail later (see Chapter 8).

A number of participants noted that in some situations, workers were able to deal with the dilemma itself, but needed support facing the consequences of the decision they made.

*...situations like that, where there are very difficult decisions for the worker to make, I think what you have to bring into the discussion, too, is the impact on the worker, you know, how are they going to cope with whatever decision they make, and set up*

*sort of you know, like a little 'safety net' thing so that they can do whatever the decision is. (Rachel)*

*I've actually found that that's actually a bigger issue than the decision. Most of the time, people have the answer about the decision or can come to that fairly quickly by going to what ever it is about the agency or the law or whatever it is. It's about how they're going to deal with that decision and how they're going to deal with their client or the result or whatever. (Daphne)*

Taken at face-value, these examples relate mostly to the support and educational functions of supervision. However, it has been demonstrated that an important part of the supervisory relationship is that the supervisor assists the worker to reflect on the process of decision-making and to deal with the emotional toll that it has taken. Much of the focus of McAuliffe's work (2000; McAuliffe, 2005a; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005) is on the impact on the worker of having to face and resolve a serious ethical dilemma, which she approaches from the perspective of a critical incident for the worker. Interestingly, they describe some cases where the supervisor was either not able or not asked to provide the worker with the support required and this resulted in serious consequences for workers, including burn-out and physical illness (McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005).

In fact, it appears that the quality of the supervisory relationship is a critical factor in supporting a worker facing a serious ethical dilemma and that support is far more important in producing ethical outcomes for clients (and workers) than the administrative function of supervision, including specific emphasis on worker accountability or control (McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005). These issues will be dealt with in more detail in the following chapter, which focuses more directly on the participants' experiences of the processes and functions of supervision.

Other kinds of dilemmas that arise for workers and may be brought to supervision are those experienced within employing organisations, particularly in terms of value conflicts with the organisation or its procedures or the limitations of the service provided by that organisation. Again, these have been identified as common kinds of ethical problem for social workers (Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Reamer, 1999).

### **7.2.3. Organisational issues**

Most participants in the study reflected at some stage on the dilemmas that workers can face within their employing organisations. These dilemmas fall into a number of different categories, many of which may be dealt with in supervision, but may also develop into dilemmas for the supervisor. They include workload, the emotional stress that can be experienced, workplaces that do not value social work and dealing with change.

The support role of supervision is most overtly experienced in relation to helping workers deal with the pressure they experience from a number of sources. The most obvious are high workloads and dealing with the emotional stress that can be experienced when working closely with people, often people in distress.

*Often it's worker stress, either brought on by a particular client that they feel overwhelmed by their situation and unable to help or workload, the place that they're working in and the workload that's put on them and seeking assistance with managing their general... and I think a lot of them, you know, blame themselves and feel that they're kind of not coping. (Rachel)*

As well as supporting workers in dealing with these daily stressors, several participants also identified workload pressure as the origin of many ethical problems for workers. The most obvious kind of problem arising in this situation relates to the need to either prioritise client

needs in a way which seems unsatisfactory or to feel obliged to provide a lower quality or degree of service than they would normally offer to clients.

*I think that's the issue often for agencies, that it's about access and equity become an ethical issue as agencies move towards a narrowing of core business. I mean when you're in the Emergency Department and they're telling you there are no beds in the psychiatric unit or whatever ward you're looking for, you have great concerns for the client (Ian)*

Additional pressure can be felt by workers in multi-disciplinary settings where they feel that social work is under-valued and/or under-resourced.

*That's a big one actually and, particularly with increasing demands within the workplaces within limited time and decreasing resources and trying to get some, not just existence at work, but some quality and satisfaction, I suppose. (Georgia)*

*Well, for me, there's, how, what are the priorities of the person that I'm supervising, I mean like, there are time constraints, maybe demands that are placed upon the social worker, to justify, to develop social work within the hospital...it's a dilemma, you know, how to fit in all the things that are demanded . (Frances)*

*There's an enormous pressure from the hospital for us to keep providing more and more and more services with the same number of staff and you just can't do it, and we can turn around and say, 'No we're not doing it' to management, but then it comes in small drifts, so we can say 'No, we're not going to touch that', but then, 'It's only one, it won't take up much time'. And before you know it you've actually opened the flood gates and that can be really hard. (Georgia)*

It is clear from these comments that this was an important theme among participants in the groups and also reflected the extra pressure on supervisors in management roles who also felt some pressure to protect their staff from excessive demands from the employing

organisation. Participants also identified other pressures on workers that are likely to arise in supervision, including those related to doing social work within a particular organisation and these pressures can be seen from a number of perspectives. Relevant again here is the notion of how social work is regarded by other professionals and the organisation as a whole.

In some cases, workers feel pressure around not being able to provide a particular service that might be needed by a client; in others it may relate to how long they can continue to see a client, especially in a busy agency.

*There's often ethical issues in agencies around, often tremendous pressure on staff to move clients through. And to address this tiny sliver of a client's life, where I think social work training is, the value of social work is that it takes a broad generalist view and that it can move between broad issues and specific issues. So I think in some, I mean it's probably the ways agencies have moved, but there's often tremendous pressure on staff to move clients through when in individual interactions with clients staff feel that they could benefit from longer term work. (Ian)*

The role of the supervisor in these situations is generally to help the worker both deal with the pressure of the situation and deconstruct it in order to make an ethical decision about an appropriate course of action. The worker may also need to be supported in implementing the decision, especially when clients have been 'prioritised' away from receiving a service.

Another issue in organisations that may need to be dealt with in supervision is change.

Whether it relates to changing organisational structures or different client groups or approaches, change usually has some impact on a worker. Supervision can be useful to help the worker understand and deal with their reactions or get the help necessary to work in a different way. The importance of reflection and the ability to unpack a situation to identify personal values and possibly develop particular skills are important in such circumstances.

A number of participants pointed out that the role of the supervisor may also include helping a worker to develop alternative approaches to a particular situation. Avoiding a dilemma by developing a different approach is often an appropriate way of resolving it (see Chapter 8) and, as Frances notes, this process is also part of the development of the worker within supervision.

*I think lots of my supervisory work has been trying to help the worker to look at alternatives and to explore options as to how she wishes or may wish to ...which therapy she may wish to use, practical things to follow up on, but trying to help the person to work, extend the person a bit such that they're working, it becomes their decision, not my decision. (Frances)*

Many of the dilemmas described by participants in this study relate to conflicts experienced by workers between their own values and those of their employing organisations. In some cases, the conflicts involved the worker's personal values; in others, the conflict was defined as being between the organisation and the supervisee as a social worker. That is, a conflict was identified between the principles and values underpinning social work and those of the organisation. Ian highlighted the role of the supervisor in helping a new worker reconcile the values developed through their social work education with the realities of the workplace:

*Certainly ethical considerations have been on my mind. I've got a student at the moment and that's one of the things that he's been actively talking about ... I think he has an idealistic view of what social work is and what it can achieve in a open plan workplace in a large bureaucracy in a statutory agency (Ian)*

In another discussion about how a worker can feel powerless in the face of the policies or procedures of the organisation, Georgia said:

*I guess that's the conflict of roles, isn't it, where you're expected, you're employed by an agency and you're there to sort of, in a way, to support that agency in their actions yet that might be a conflict to what you need to do as a social worker (Georgia).*

Sometimes the clash of values is not just with an individual worker, but with the core values of social work:

*Well again, I think they are general organisational things, but the sort of things I was alluding to before, when often the actual philosophy, perhaps, or an organisational service delivery model seems to be at odds with a lot of the social work values. (Jill)*

*Another one that I'm thinking of is the competing demands between your social work practice and the organisation's expectations. This person has to be discharged; this person has to be whatever. There is often a conflict with your values and your ethics. I don't know what the framework is, but that's another concern is that what I'm being expected to do strikes me as being very unfair. I mean I suppose one of these, discharge of clients at all costs sort of thing, and what is my responsibility and how can I get around it? (Olive)*

An interesting variation on this was described by Leonie, a situation where overtly social work values were so strongly entrenched that it became difficult to actually do social work:

*I think that sometimes confidentiality gets to the point where people are keeping secrets. I actually worked in an agency where that was the culture. It was horrendous. It was so difficult to function, because there have to be times when information is shared and there are assumptions around sharing things with professional persons, that there will be a degree of confidentiality that you actually have to take a risk. It's an interesting one to tease out, because it's very organisationally, individually and contextually different (Leonie).*

Some individual professionals were so rigid in their definition of confidentiality that they impeded normal team communication and functioning. Such an attitude seemed counter-productive at the time and I believe that it is a potential danger of ‘blindly’ following prescriptive approaches to ethics that have been evident to some extent in social work and other professions for the last 20 years, but are now being questioned. It is an approach that might be avoided if workers and supervisors learn to use more reflective models of ethical decision-making, particularly like the inclusive model already described (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005).

The next chapter focuses on the centrality of supervision in social work and the important role it has in supporting the development of workers who can make ethical decisions. However, one of the difficulties often experienced by workers is a lack of adequate supervision within their employing organisations. This issue was identified earlier (see Chapter 5) and is borne out by the data in this study. It is often the case that the organisation does not support supervision, either by not budgeting for it to take place or by not insisting that it happen – it is seen as a low priority activity whose priority is even lower when workers are busy. The pressures on social work resulting from an ‘economic rationalist’ environment also contribute to the likelihood of supervision having a low priority within an organisation. Ironically, this is happening at a time when funding bodies (often Government departments) have realised the value of supervision as a quality assurance measure and it is one of the conditions that organisations must meet to retain ongoing funding. It is unfortunate that Government agencies which directly provide front-line services often provide inadequate or irregular supervision for their own workers.

Several participants identified lack of supervision as an ethical issue, although individual workers are often powerless to affect the operations of a large organisation.



*It certainly raises an issue for me that is an ethical dilemma, and that is that people work without having supervision. I mean to me, I think supervision is really quite crucial. However, it's not a common practice. (Peta)*

Monica raised the issue from another perspective, based on her experience in senior management. While she is committed to supervision in social work, and has always insisted that her staff receive appropriate supervision, she is able to see the issues that arise when one profession has particular requirements in the workplace. Such demands may not be appreciated by the organisation, especially when there are other professionals doing similar work without making similar demands.

*(One problem is) the perception of social work as being extremely precious about these sorts of issues and that it's easier to employ people that get on with the job and don't have all these mystical expectations. And I've found myself fighting a difficult battle; it's really quite difficult to continually advocate for the profession and to demonstrate why the profession is the right one to be employed in this organisation. (Monica)*

The role of social work managers in such an organisational context often includes articulating the value of social work and of supervision as an integral part of social work. Perhaps future conversations may include the argument that quality supervision will contribute to the development of their staff as ethical decision-makers and, in turn, contribute to the development or consolidation of an ethical organisation.

Earlier in this chapter, I described the problems that can arise for workers when their supervisors are also their line managers. This problem can be resolved by either the individual or the organisation through the use of external supervision, as can organisation-based problems such as a shortage of staff with sufficient experience or

appropriate expertise. While this can be an effective solution to such problems, external supervision also brings added complexity to most supervisory relationships.

*But it's been a great challenge, I think, to meet an expectation around providing high quality professional supervision. We've tried at times to deal with it by employing people externally, I have to say that that has not been all that successful. What happens, invariably, and I don't quite know why this happens, because I would think that skills that professional supervisor needs to be able to manage that session in such a way to keep focused on development issues, but what has invariably happened is that staff, and it's really not professional staff, tend to use the session to focus on organisational problems. And then what has tended to happen is that there's sort of a division set up and reinforced and then brought back to the workplace and I guess that's been problematic. (Monica)*

This issue of organisational problems becoming the focus of supervision was also raised from the perspective of supervisors providing external supervision. Virtually all the participants who provide external supervision raised as an issue the difficulty of helping workers to move beyond problems they experience within the organisation to focus on practice or client issues.

*In fact, it's been really challenging and very demanding to keep people focussed so that it doesn't end up in the talk-fest but also that it doesn't end up in agency-bashing because the people that I've had have been very, very burnt-out in addition to whatever else is going on. You're kind of managing a whole reservoir of issues, particularly burn-out. (Leonie)*

A number of participants also attributed the use of an external supervisor to workers not being given the opportunity in their workplace to reflect on the ethical dilemmas that arise in their practice. In most instances, this is another example of the organisation not providing adequate internal supervision, but it can also relate to social work values and principles not being prominent in the organisation.

*People that approach me for supervision tend to be social workers who are working in agencies where there isn't a strong social work identity and associated with that, and it seems to be over a period of time, emerging a whole lot of potential for both values and ethical conflict for people (Jill)*

Another issue which arose consistently among these participants relates to the accountability function of supervision. Many expressed some discomfort about not being able to feed back to the organisation problems that might need to be addressed at an organisational level.

These external supervisors described a range of situations that they might want to feed back to the organisation, including structural problems across the organisation or clinical problems relating to the work of the individual supervisee. The other side of the problem was that an external supervisor may be unable to verify information about the organisation that is being provided by the worker, or may not have sufficient knowledge of the organisation to challenge what is presented by the worker.

*Very, very strongly for me, in both internal and external supervision, the organisational ones, but I think they become more difficult with external supervisors, with how you feed that back in, given that you may not really know, what is happening in an organisation except from what you're hearing from one side and then if you try and get another side then the message is from another point of view (Nora)*

*Yeah, it's an interesting one isn't it in terms of some of the external supervision that I've done, this has been one of the concerns for me. I don't know whether it ends up being an ethical concern or not, really, but that you can be quite clear that it's a supervisee's responsibility to bring stuff in, particularly as an external supervisor, you have to have that because you don't really know what's going on in the organisation unless they do that (Nora)*

Kelly also discussed the issue of taking information back to the organisation and framed the dilemma in terms of who initiated (and paid for) the supervision, implying that she is more likely to do so if the organisation has the 'contract' with the supervisor:

*..doing external supervision, if you're engaged by the worker rather than the organisation, there are different limits and perhaps responsibilities than if you're engaged by the organization. (Kelly)*

It is worth noting that many of these issues also relate to supervision within organisations and highlight some of the problems inherent in the accountability function of supervision. The most obvious of these is confidentiality. Given that supervision is usually established on a foundation of a confidential, supportive relationship, in my experience it is always difficult for a supervisor when an issue arises that has wider implications for the worker or the organisation. The dilemma for the supervisor is how the organisation can be alerted to such an issue without breaking the confidentiality of the supervisory relationship.

#### **7.2.4. The environment**

I have already examined in some detail the various social and theoretical influences on social work and ethics over the last 40 years (see Chapter 2). In this section, I describe the dilemmas raised by participants that can be seen to derive from working in the context of those influences, either as a front-line worker or a supervisor.

The first category relates to the measurement of social work, which has become increasingly important in an environment dominated by economic rationalism (Ife, 1997; Payne, 2005a). On a broad social level, social work has been caught up in the need to justify expenditure by proving the effectiveness of services and demonstrating client outcomes.

*So, I mean we have qualitative reports, feedback reports and most of our clients incorporate comments on practice (Helen)*

*I'm just saying that there are a number of issues, part of it is the bottom line, but part of it is the push about evidence-based practice, which social workers have been notoriously bad at, not only articulating, but documenting what they do and what works and what hasn't. (Jill)*

This reference to social workers being able to articulate the basis of their practice and their decisions is taken up in the next chapter, but the need for it is certainly heightened in an economic environment which requires accountability and justification of all decisions about expenditure and service delivery.

Within organisations, this has been extended in many cases to justifying why social work is the most appropriate profession to provide particular services and can be demonstrated by the trend to advertising generic 'professional' positions.

*Yeah, that's a good point, definitely, our conflict was between other disciplines, particularly as a lot of other disciplines now have components of counselling in their job description, and there really is a blurring of roles and trying to work out where the edges are, where they cross (Georgia)*

*But then there's the other dilemma for us, and that's open to move in other areas, that is if we don't do it, it will be done less proficiently by another discipline. Do we then also lose some of our, I was going to say, 'power base'. (Frances)*

Another way in which the economic environment has an impact on social work is through what seem to be ever-dwindling resources for the human services sector. In an environment where services are competing for funding and the budget for welfare services across the

board seems to have been reduced relative to other priorities, lack of adequate funding is an issue faced on a daily basis by Government and non-Government agencies alike.

*It's interesting all this stuff, because I think there are real issues there in terms of, if you don't fund or resource a service appropriately, sometimes people get caught in trying to make the best out of what they have. ... Because I suppose I feel increasingly that there are other bigger structural issues that impact on our ability to do our job. (Ian)*

In addition to the ongoing stress caused by inadequate funding, there are many dilemmas that arise as a consequence in the daily practice of social work. Some of these were described above in terms of the organisational dilemmas faced by workers under pressure to minimise the services they provide. But there are also issues faced across services because of the structures imposed under the demands of economic rationalism. Ian gives one example of this, but there were others raised by other participants.

*And I think that the other thing that's impacted on confidentiality is outsourcing. Whereas for instance in substitute care, it started that the Child Welfare Department might provide residential and foster care, now it's wholly provided by non-Government services. So there are issues there about how much you share, and they would say, share everything. (Ian)*

These tensions can result in a range of dilemmas for workers in both the service delivery and the funding agencies as they try to establish a working relationship without breaching client confidentiality. Related to this is the need to ensure quality services provision in the services to which we outsource:

*It's an issue particularly for government. One of our issues has been around how can we satisfy ourselves that the agency we fund is recruiting appropriate people as foster carers. And that's a difficult thing to handle. It's a worry. And appropriate*

*staff in residential facilities, because you know that when something goes wrong, it will come back. (Ian)*

Quality assurance in service delivery agencies has taken on a greater prominence in the economic rationalist environment which has given rise to the purchaser provider model and spawned whole industries based on organisations' need to prove they have appropriate quality systems in place.

### **7.3. Dilemmas for supervisors**

Most of the problems and dilemmas discussed so far in this chapter are likely to be experienced by all social workers, whether they are front-line workers, supervisors or even social work managers. I have also described some of the dilemmas that arise in the supervisory relationship itself relating to issues like boundaries and confidentiality. In this section, I look in particular at the dilemmas arising for supervisors by virtue of their supervision role within an organisation.

#### **7.3.1. Ethical problems identified by supervisors**

Most participants in the focus groups raised the difficulty that arises for a supervisor when workers seem not to recognise the ethical dimensions of their practice, or when a worker seems to be carrying out or even considering a course of action that appears to the supervisor to be unethical. Some workers can also be involved in situations that are more complex than they appear to realise. There was significant discussion in all the groups about how these issues might be addressed. Among the dilemmas for the participants were the need to balance worker rights with service delivery considerations and a general tendency to giving priority in supervision to helping workers reflect on their practice. The graduation from

reflection and worker self-determination to situations in which the supervisor feels obliged to take a more directive role are discussed in the next chapter.

I want to focus here on the dilemmas arising for a supervisor in these situations. At one end of the spectrum are workers who seem to be aware that they are uncomfortable with some aspect of a case, or their practice more generally, but are unable to articulate what is bothering them.

*I think that in supervision if something's worrying someone, it is probably an ethical thing that's worth picking up on. You know, "What is my body telling me?" (Kelly)*

In this case, it is not so much a dilemma for the supervisor as a situation where he or she needs to be sensitive to the worker's needs and experience, both personal and professional. The earlier discussion of the parallels between counselling and supervision also recur in this context:

*I guess all we can do is use the same sort of principles we use in working with clients, you know, recognising that everyone's got you know, their sort of resistances and what have you and it's often about um ? principles, you know you establish to try and work on the relationship that you've got with the person, so actually try to establish some sort of trust and rapport and what have you and see if that's going to do the trick. (Jill)*

Situations that are more difficult for the supervisor are those where the worker seems unaware that there is an issue or where the supervisor perceives a conflict between the values of the worker and those of either social work or the employing organisation. It is important to recognise that a value conflict between the supervisor and the worker as individuals may or may not be an issue.



*Well I mean as a supervisor, my ethics are right and the supervisee's are wrong?*

*No! It's not true. (Olive)*

However, one of the accepted roles of the supervisor is to bring the values of the organisation to the worker (Munson, 2002). In that respect, a supervisor may well need to make a worker aware if there is a serious value conflict between the worker and the mission of the organisation. That situation might then give rise to a dilemma for a supervisor trying to respect the worker's position and avoid being directive.

*Because an ethical stance is about looking at as broad a generalisation as you can, and maybe both of us have got to, respecting people's values but from different viewpoints. I mean, is my value always going to be right? Or are my ethics always going to be right? I think you do need to discuss it. (Olive)*

Through all these discussions, it became apparent that, while many social workers would describe their role in terms of the principles and values underpinning social work, different workers can translate those values into completely different views of a situation. That often leads to different opinions about the most appropriate course of action in a particular set of circumstances. As I noted before (see Chapter 1), my interest in this aspect of social work practice originally grew from conducting professional development in ethics in my workplace and observing the different interpretations that were possible for (what seemed to me) straightforward situations.

This experience reflects theoretical work in social work ethics which recognises the importance of context in recognising a dilemma and making an appropriate (and justifiable) ethical decision (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005). In fact, it is because context is so vital to making an ethical decision that reflection on practice is such an important part of both ethical decision-making

and ethical education. I argue in this thesis that ongoing reflection in supervision is critical for the ethical development of the individual worker and teaching ethics to groups is best achieved through the use of scenario-based discussions.

### **7.3.2. Accountability**

In addition to the dilemmas that can arise for supervisors when they have a conflict of values with the worker, other dilemmas can derive from the responsibility the supervisor bears for the worker's practice. In addition to the role of educating the worker in the values of the organisation, the supervisor usually has some role in monitoring the quality and quantity of work produced. This was discussed above in terms of the potential difficulties in the supervisory relationship, but is also relevant in terms of the dilemmas that can arise for a supervisor.

*If one is in a managerial position, one's view can be more from the agency perspective than somebody whose close affiliation is with the single client and their needs at the moment. (Helen)*

This can lead to problems for the supervisor, who may need to encourage the worker to prioritise his or her work so as to provide service in a different way, to meet client demand or the parameters of the service delivery model. This can be a more serious dilemma for a supervisor trying to support workers and affirm their way of working. As noted elsewhere, what is required is for the supervisor and worker to 'unpack' the dilemma together to come to an acceptable solution. However, in a case where the worker refuses to change his or her approach even after discussing the issues, the supervisor may need to direct the worker to work in a particular way.

A related but slightly different dilemma arises for the supervisor who becomes aware that a worker is doing something which may put the client, the worker or the organisation at risk in some way. The following comments were made in different groups, but all reflect different aspects of this kind of dilemma.

*And ethically as supervisors, if we know that there is something going on, we've got a duty to respond to it, to raise it and explore it and to give people options about how they're going to manage it, but you can't just, because they're hiding it, you can't just let it continue. (Leonie)*

*But it's also about what you were saying, balancing the needs of the worker as against the needs of the agency, and the clients as well. And it's about, depending on your position within the agency, it's about, sometimes you just have to say, 'well, this is what our agency will or won't do and this is how we will or won't do it' (Daphne)*

*..recognising that this is actually a very privileged position we're in and that we really have to treat it very gently and respectfully and that's not for us to be sort of barrelling in. (Olive)*

All these comments reflect the responsibility borne by supervisors for their supervisees, even when they are not necessarily in line management positions with respect to the worker. They also point to the ongoing dilemma arising from trying to get the worker to do something differently without resorting to direction if at all possible.

Another aspect of accountability which should be addressed in supervision relates to the 'ethic of excellence'. That is, one role of the supervisor is to be continuously engaged with the worker in moving towards excellence in practice. This was discussed earlier (see Chapters 3 and 4) in the context of Aristotelian ethics, in which the achievement of excellence is regarded as integral to the development of virtue. This is a critical part of the

education role of supervision but also relates to its important role in accountability. Users of social work services have a right to expect the best possible service, and providers have a responsibility to work towards delivering it.

## **7.4. Resources for dealing with ethical dilemmas**

An important thread running through the groups was the issue of resources. That is, what resources can a supervisor draw on to resolve their own dilemmas or to assist a worker in the process of resolving theirs? In the rest of this chapter, I concentrate on the Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) and other resources identified by the participants in this study.

### **7.4.1. Code of ethics**

The single resource which was discussed the most in the focus groups was the AASW Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002), with attitudes ranging from regarding it as invaluable to having serious reservations about its usefulness in many situations. The most emphatic response came from Monica:

*Is it a tool we use much?* (Researcher)

*God yes!* (Monica)

Most participants agreed that it was a tool they could draw on in particular situations, and most of the examples provided were about ‘returning to basics’ or clarifying in some way the values and principles of social work.

*And that was really good for her, that was important to have the Code of Ethics and I've been really grateful when I had no real direction and it got back to values and*

*ethical issues last year and so it was really useful to be able to go back ABC and help me work out what I wanted to do about that situation. (Kelly)*

*Because similarly, when issues come up [...], often that is one of the first things I'll do is go look and see how it defines something and say let's see how this will be vaguely useful, so, in helping me to think through. (Nora)*

*I think it's essential that it's there and you can go back, because a lot of it that might be internalised, but it's still quite useful to be able to go and look at it for a particular issue, to refresh yourself or to review a situation in the light of the framework. (Kelly)*

In all these examples, participants were looking for a way of helping their supervisee to reflect on a dilemma by using the Code as a guide. It was seen as a tool which would help them clarify the issues at the heart of the dilemma. It is interesting that in each case, they seem confident that the Code will provide the answers they seek.

However, other participants raised problems with the Code which they saw as limiting its usefulness in helping workers deal with dilemmas in their practice. Nora, in particular, expressed the view endorsed by others that most real dilemmas that occur in practice are extremely complex, so that the Code alone is not sufficient to help workers resolve those dilemmas. This reflects the need for models of decision-making which include references to the appropriate code of ethics as well as a number of other resources and focus on processes like reflection and consultation (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005). Even fundamental notions such as confidentiality often need to be understood and implemented in circumstances which are too complex to be resolved by simple reference to the Code. The reflection on practice and 'unpacking dilemmas' discussed in detail in the next chapter answer some of these needs for supervisors.

*I think that it's not always that helpful, like I think the old one wasn't in lots of ways and I think it wasn't good culturally; I just think the classic confidentiality clause, you know, in social work practice, we feel, which we think we hang onto so dearly, it means that very different things in different contexts and I'm not convinced even now that we teach very well how to do that. (Nora)*

*One of the issues often comes up around the Code of Ethics, you know, the formation of confidentiality, we hold so dearly, but in practice it's so complex. I therefore always find that difficult when supervising people around confidentiality issues, because I know that in practice in most organisations with many social workers around lots of issues, it's not simple, as maybe we were taught. And I guess that's the problem I struggle with a bit. (Nora)*

The limitations of traditional codes of ethics have been discussed in some detail (see Chapter 4). These comments by Nora and a subsequent discussion about community work exemplify those limitations. What may apply to some (but not all) casework situations almost certainly will be meaningless, counter-productive or even harmful, in a community setting.

*I've found that often within the community sector, where people come with a rather, it's not a thing that really worries them about their principles, [...] and you know if say you can't tell the people that, that's banned because of confidentiality. (Kelly)*

*What are we trying to do? What are we trying to do for these people if not to link them in with a network [...] if not at the top there's some kind of flexible relationship. (Monica)*

*Also, you've got to be useful, or they're not going to use you; you're not going to this, so somewhere along the line you've got to get a pathway. (Kelly)*

*You can't actually build communities by keeping secrets. (Nora)*

These participants seem quite clear that the crux of community work is building connections between people and groups and traditional notions of confidentiality and boundaries are meaningless in those circumstances. It was also noted within the focus groups, that these issues become even more problematic in the context of particular cultural groups, and particularly among indigenous Australians. In those cases using the Code for guidance was supplemented by much more ‘thoughtful, skilful’ interventions with supervisees:

*...that it's actually, really interpreting lines that are fairly black and white in quite, in a very thoughtful skilful way. There's a whole process around that and I guess I just wanted to say, because I've had the experience of [...]social workers that are aboriginal and they have very different understandings of community and I don't know really, I mean there are the issues around like, well what is appropriate practice in that context, because it's not you know tidy, clinical. (Kelly)*

So, while the present Australian Code of Ethics (AASW, 2002) is useful in some situations, particularly with respect to clarifying basic social work values, it is less helpful in community settings or when faced with complex dilemmas resulting from conflicts between values in a given situation. Other participants noted that they may ask workers to abide by the AASW Code or there may be codes of ethics within their own organisations:

*And in our setting too, is it Catholic Health Care? That's just put out the Code of Ethics and in fact that's actually what I did pull out and go through and look at, so yeah, which gave the agency's values and perspective on it. (Georgia)*

Organisational codes would appear to have similar advantages and limitations to the AASW Code (AASW, 2002), although the particular mission and values of the organisation may be clarified through an organisational code, which may assist with the resolution of some dilemmas.

#### 7.4.2. Experience and other resources

In addition to the Code, participants tried to identify what other resources they draw on to assist with resolving ethical dilemmas in their practice or that of their supervisees. Another resource cited by participants was consultation with peers or their own supervisor, or even with other relevant experts in ethics or perhaps in fields like organisational theory. This fits in well with the models for ethical decision-making discussed above (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005).

*Somebody raised using the Code of Ethics as a resource and it triggered me into thinking about what other resources I've used over ethical issues. And I've certainly used the AASW to sort out a professional ethical problem; That took us about 5 months of struggling, because it was really complex, the St James Ethics Centre in Sydney and my own supervisor as well. But I actually think that it's important for us to have resources, that assuming that we can manage it, within just the worker and the supervisor. (Leonie)*

Another important resource identified by participants in the study was their own experience as workers and supervisors, as well as, in some cases, knowledge of the organisation's history and values.

*Plus your own experience. You know, if similar things happen you think well this was the outcome, this is what I can forecast. (Zoe)*

*And also, what informs your values is your experience, so I think it's unpacking it, too. We had an issue recently with one of our adoption assessors where she's pregnant and one of the staff had a real reaction and said well she shouldn't working here any more. And when we talked about it with the team, it was about the worker's own experience of being pregnant and working there and the reactions she got. (Ian)*



Supervisors' use of their own experience to help workers reflect is at the heart of the supervisory relationship and the reflection on practice which it enables in supervision. Clearly, it also fits within the models of ethical decision-making examined already (see Chapter 4), which employ a range of resources and processes to support workers needing to make an ethical decision.

## **7.5. Conclusion**

This chapter presented the range of ethical problems and dilemmas which participants in the study identified as commonly encountered in their practice as social workers and supervisors and explored the kinds of organisational and other circumstances which contribute to ethical problems and dilemmas which arise for social workers. It examined how social workers and supervisors deal with those ethical problems and dilemmas and the resources on which they draw to help resolve them. It has been demonstrated that there are dilemmas commonly experienced across organisations that workers deal with by drawing on a range of resources. There are also dilemmas that arise particularly for supervisors, who draw on a similar range of resources for dealing with them. However, these dilemmas can be complicated by the particular accountability function inherent in the supervisory relationship.

The next chapter concentrates on the participants' views about the nature and role of supervision in helping workers to identify and resolve particular dilemmas and to support workers in their development as ethical decision-makers. Assisting the worker to articulate the reasons for a decision is an important role for the supervisor. For many participants in this study, workers' ability to articulate and justify the decisions they make in practice is evidence of the extent to which they have developed as a social worker. The next chapter

demonstrates that developing skills in critical reflection and being able to apply those skills to the ethical dilemmas encountered in practice are even more important.

## **8. SUPERVISING FOR ETHICAL PRACTICE**

### ***8.1. Introduction***

In the previous chapter I examined the range of dilemmas faced by social workers and supervisors in their daily practice and the variety of resources on which they draw to help resolve those dilemmas. This chapter deals more directly with supervision in social work and the relationship between supervision and the ethical development of social workers.

The literature on supervision in social work already described (see Chapter 5) identified, among other things, the importance and functions of supervision in social work. The following analysis of the participants' experiences of supervision both supports the current theoretical understanding of the different functions of supervision (Munson, 2002; Tsui, 2005) and provides valuable insight into how supervisors can maximise the potential for reflection in their supervisees and support their ethical development.

Firstly, I examine participants' experience of the importance of supervision within social work, considering some advantages and potential problems that can arise for both supervisors and workers. In the next section, I explain how the participants in the study support the workers they supervise when those workers face ethical dilemmas, using reflection to help them deconstruct the conflict central to the dilemma, develop options and make ethical decisions.

The following section deals with the tension between the accountability function of supervision and worker self-determination and it focuses particularly on the need to support the purpose and values of the employing organisation and try to ensure the safety and

well-being of clients. In the final part of the chapter I return to the themes of reflection and ethical education and examine participants' views on how they can most effectively use supervision to support social workers' development as ethical decision-makers.

## **8.2. Supervision in social work**

I have already demonstrated the centrality of supervision in social work in terms of both the history and nature of the profession (see Chapter 5). From both the literature and the focus group data, it is apparent that there is a culture of supervision within social work which gives it a privileged position at the centre of the profession, almost as its principal symbol of excellence and accountability. Part of the socialisation as a professional that begins in Schools of Social Work in Australia and continues in the workplace is about entrenching supervision as one of the foundations of the profession.

It also appears that social workers have views and expectations of supervision that are different from those of other helping professionals. For example, Nora and Kelly both reflect on the complexity that can be present when supervising workers from different professional backgrounds, in terms of both expectations of supervision and the underlying professional values:

*The issues around social work can be often quite different as well from what the organisation considers supervision to be. I think that with this group that I'm currently working with, with (Organisation), I think, there are [a mixture of] social workers and psychologists and one of the things we've had to work through is the different views about what supervision is actually about, before we do any supervision. So they, both groups consider it professional supervision, but the psychologists have tended to be much more task-focused, case-focused and not professional development-focused in quite the same way, except very specifically in terms of what that can do for them. You know, do for the particular client. And I*

*think that there probably are some ethical issues that arise as a result of that for social workers. They're much more clear about professional issues than about specific case issues. (Nora)*

*With social work, people do have that value base, it means there is some basis, something that is written down that you can refer to and is there, but if you are working with someone who hasn't got that in a way it becomes, well it's a little bit more complex. (Kelly)*

These issues around the nature of social work and the central place of supervision have been addressed (see Chapter 5). It has also been noted that social work's defining characteristics may themselves pose a risk to the profession in an environment of economic rationalism where employers may define generic 'professional' positions as requiring a range of skills not necessarily confined to those with social work training.

This culture of supervision in social work was described in a number of different ways in the focus groups. Some participants regarded this culture as a positive feature of the profession, taking its importance for granted and arguing strongly for its continuation. Others, as noted in the previous chapter, saw social work's preoccupation with supervision as a potential impediment to the promotion of social work in the workplace, or at least a point of distinction between social work and other professions.

*I suppose one of the issues that's emerged from the workplace that I've come from has been around, I suppose the professional group that has dominated wasn't social work, and [...] supervision was a bit mysterious to them. It wasn't part of their professional culture. So in a sense, I think that means to get time to supervise and to make that part of social work staffing becomes an issue. (Ian)*

Ian also highlighted the fact that there is often a difference, in social work and other helping professions, between the official esteem in which supervision is held and the reality of how often it occurs in practice. Other participants echoed this observation, discussing at some length the ways in which supervision falls prey to various pressures in the workplace.

*The other thing I've noticed is that in other professional groups that do have a supervision culture it's interesting when you talk to them because sometimes, while it's seen as sort of very holy and upheld, supervision - when you actually ask people how frequently they receive it - may have been years. So, I think it's interesting that everyone talks about how important it is, but it's not received as frequently as it should be. (Ian)*

*People give verbal value to supervision, but when it comes to the practicalities of it, supervision gets dropped off every time. Every time there's a crisis or a meeting or somebody's got a different agenda, supervision is the thing that gets dropped. (Leonie)*

Kelly takes this observation even further, describing neglect of supervision as a 'serious abrogation of social work ethical practice':

*It's a feature of social work that it's something that's supposed to be an essential part of our practice but in reality, to what extent does that get honoured? ... I guess I'd call it a really serious abrogation of social work ethical practice that if the commonplace is that someone isn't given supervision and if that's allowed continually. (Kelly)*

Participants shared the view that it was unacceptable to let social workers practise without appropriate supervision, but accepted that it was often the reality that supervision either does not occur at all, or that it can be the victim of 'priorities', especially in a busy workplace. In some workplaces, supervision is not seen as important or made a priority for staff.

However, participants also agreed that, when workers are under stress, supervision is even more important in helping them manage their workload and continue to make good practice decisions. The centrality of ethical dilemmas and the parallel importance of supervision lie at the heart of social work. I argue in this thesis that this nexus is extremely important in supporting workers to develop as ethical decision-makers. Nevertheless, as acknowledged by participants, inadequate access to supervision is an ongoing problem in many social work settings.

This can be a challenge for social work managers, particularly in workplaces that are more likely to test the workers' ability to make clear decisions or maintain appropriate boundaries. In such contexts, it is a manager's responsibility to provide appropriate supervision.

*I'm thinking of outreach workers. Perhaps [when a worker is] connecting at a more grass-roots level with clients, there's in fact more potential for boundary violations and ethical issues and agencies and workers need to be mindful of that, make sure that there are appropriate processes in place in terms of supervision and support, and there's also more potential for burnout, I think. (Ian)*

Ian's comment also reflects the multiple functions in terms of both the agency's and the worker's needs and expectations. This is considered in detail in the next section.

### **8.2.1. Supervision and accountability**

I have already examined the accountability role of supervision and the extent to which accountability tends to be an organisational objective, rather than one shared by supervisees (see Chapter 5). In this section, I describe participants' views about this issue in general terms. I return to it in the third section of this chapter, which deals with the tension between the supervisor's role in ensuring accountability and worker self-determination. Most

participants in this study agreed that accountability is one of the major functions of supervision. In my view, that consensus was partly the result of the significant collective experience of participants within the social work community in the Australian Capital Territory and their seniority within their employing organisations. The groups provided anecdotal evidence of how supervision is viewed and a number reflected that, as supervisors become more senior in the profession, they are more likely to emphasise the accountability functions of supervision over the others.

This trend reflects the broader organisational perspective that develops as a worker, then supervisor, absorbs the values of the organisation and gradually takes more responsibility for carrying out its mission. Senior managers in organisations often see accountability as the most important function of supervision, and the reason they are prepared to spend considerable resources ensuring that adequate supervision is provided for their staff.

*But [that's] the reality for organisations such as mine, which are highly scrutinised and have very high levels of accountability in relation to the delivery of the service. Supervision is imperative around task supervision, around case supervision, around ensuring quality service delivery definitely takes over from the other. Our most skilled social work supervisors are able to combine the two and I think by necessity have to combine the two. (Monica)*

In the context of this study, an interesting perspective on accountability is that a supportive supervisory relationship has been shown to be more important for quality, ethical service delivery than any overt attempts to ensure accountability or quality control (McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005).



### 8.2.2. The importance of contracts in supervision

The different roles and functions of supervision were raised by several participants and there was some consensus about the need to clarify the expectations and purpose of supervision, including through the use of supervision contracts with individual workers. Some participants went on to consider the problems that can arise when there is conflict between the worker's view of supervision and that of either the supervisor or the organisation.

*I think there's an absolute whole range of things. ... I think it just depends on the supervisee and their expectation of supervision, as to what they actually bring. And so, sometimes, you know they, some people just want to give an account, you know, tick the box that you're doing all the right things; others, debriefing after a particular event; Others um are really into practice dilemmas and really teasing (them) out. (Abby)*

Abby's comment reflects the range of functions that can be present within supervision from the perspective of worker expectation and the related issue of what workers 'bring' to supervision and how they use it.

Given the different individual values, knowledge and experience likely to be evident in any group of social workers, it cannot be assumed that all workers will understand the purpose of supervision in the same way. Within social work, and even within the same organisation, expectations of supervision can vary markedly. For this reason, Kelly notes:

*Establishing contracts about the supervisory process is really critical and I think that that step is often overlooked, probably particularly in an organisation where it's assumed, both roles are assigned, so therefore it's true and under that sort of assumption, there's a whole lot of stuff that is never stated, so everyone's probably got very different assumptions, it's the same as when people come for a session and they're there for a different reason. (Kelly)*

In this case, developing the contract would help the supervisor and the worker to establish a shared view of the purpose of supervision. However, the supervisor has a significant responsibility to ensure that the accountability and education functions are included as part of the contract. To neglect them, for example to negotiate a contract that centres only on support, would be an abrogation of the supervisor's responsibility. Cases in which, in spite of a sound contract, the roles of supervision are sabotaged by workers are discussed below. Another use of a supervision contract is to define the roles and expectations of the worker and the supervisor. This also provides an opportunity to measure progress against agreed goals or to help return to set objectives if the supervision process has strayed too far from its agreed purpose.

*So I guess I would say that it is also therefore incumbent upon supervisors in the early stages of a supervisory relationship to actually take the lead in explicating and actually saying what it is you're sharing... A contract should be a sharing of expectations and developing some sort of contract around that. (Kelly)*

*Yeah, a contract in which you define the sort of areas that you're going to try and look at in each session and I think if you combine that with taking brief notes, then it helps you to trace progress, to pick up any problems that are growing. You can sort of can become aware, well hang on, we'd better talk about these things, the agenda's been hijacked, we weren't quite with it. (Zoe)*

Rachel extends this notion to include openly using the contract to define the parameters of supervision by comparing the supervisory relationship with that of a worker with an involuntary client. The approach suggested by Rachel would also help the supervisor to support the accountability of the worker's practice.

*Remember that article about working with involuntary clients, and I actually thought it was a good model for working with workers. And the model that this particular*

*writer was putting forward, was what he called 'Negotiated Casework', which is about being very clear up front about what is not negotiable and what is and where there is room to move and where there isn't. And I think that sometimes that can be a suitable model for workers. (Rachel)*

All participants in the study agreed on the importance of contracts, particularly when difficulties arise in supervision. In the next section, I describe the external and internal challenges to supervision, including when workers fail to accept their shared responsibility for the relationship and processes of supervision.

### **8.2.3. Problems that can arise for workers**

The problem of supervision not being valued by an organisation was described above in the section on organisational dilemmas, but it can be an ever-present tension for social workers in both social work and multidisciplinary teams, particularly those that have inadequate resources. A related issue is the neglect of supervision that can be as evident in social work as in the other helping professions. As noted in the previous section, several participants observed that many social workers pay lip service to supervision, but are not prepared to make it a priority in their busy practice situations. Participants shared the view that such an attitude is unacceptable.

*This is why I think supervision is SO (Leonie's emphasis) important, and the stuff I hear about supervision, the comments that social workers make, that they don't need it, they don't get it, they don't make sure they get it, they're not interested in getting it, and I think shit, this is stuffed. (Leonie)*

A problem related to paying lip service to supervision is when workers make poor use of supervision. This was identified as one of the major challenges to supervision, and one that can be most frustrating for supervisors. Certainly my own interest in this topic grew, in part,

from my frustration as a supervisor and my attempts to provide good quality supervision, sometimes in the face of opposition from workers.

*Well, people who assure you that everything's fine and they know exactly what they're doing and they've got wonderful skills and they're not really willing to, I mean, they might have wonderful skills, but they're not willing to build on them, they're not willing to look at themselves. I find them the most difficult. (Rachel)*

*I think a lot of, the lack of solution-focussed perspective that staff have around issues troubles me greatly. I have great frustration with the tendency to bring to supervision huge problems without trying to move on from the problem to its solution. (Monica)*

Both these comments relate to the frustration experienced by supervisors when workers are unable or unwilling to take advantage of the development opportunities that are part of supervision. A similar example of such resistance is when workers look to supervisors to provide solutions without going through the problem-solving process themselves:

*Yeah, demanding the solutions, but even when you try constantly to pull back and facilitate some answers and solutions, there seems to be a real resistance, and I just find that frustrating. It doesn't happen so much to me in direct supervision with managers, but I definitely find with staff there's a real culture, and I don't think it's just our agency, around identifying problems and not being able to move on, having a framework around dealing with them. (Monica)*

There were numerous other comments by participants about the responsibility they bear for trying to get workers to maximise the benefits of supervision. In addition to the development of solutions to practice or organisational problems, all participants saw helping workers to reflect on their practice as a major purpose of supervision and experienced frustration when workers seemed to resist that reflection. Daphne touches on the issue with

the following comment about workers being unable to accept the limitations of their workplace:

*Part of it too, I believe, is that some people still feel like the solution has to be perfect, so they're not willing to come up with a solution that's not perfect, whatever perfect is. (Daphne)*

Some participants also discussed the supervision relationship in terms of creating a safe place for workers to examine their practice, including their vulnerabilities, and noted that they needed to deal with workers' emotional issues before they could get them to move on to reflection on their practice. This is consistent with the importance of supporting workers facing ethical dilemmas to help them improve their ethical decision-making and quality service delivery (McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005).

*If that was me in that situation, I think before you even get to all the ethical stuff, you know it's almost like counselling the person about how they feel about that, just all the how angry and pissed off they'd feel and all the stuff about concerns about their reputation and all those things before you even got to any of the ethical stuff. (Jill)*

*And what I heard is, it's about also creating the space where it's safe for the person to raise whatever the issues might be and then to explore them. (Kelly)*

Overall, participants translated worker reluctance to use supervision well as both a source of frustration and a challenge to them to improve their practice as supervisors.

#### **8.2.4. Problems that can arise for supervisors**

All participants were conscious of their responsibility as supervisors, including the need to provide the best supervision possible. They reflected on their individual performance and striving for excellence and also addressed the overall problem of the quality of supervision

across the profession and in particular workplaces. Part of the role of a good supervisor is to redress the balance for workers who have previously had inadequate or even bad supervision.

*I think quality of supervision is a key thing. My experience in (agency) when I had to do quite a lot of supervision was having real difficulty in gauging whether the number of social work staff who had experienced fairly horrendous supervision and were quite, I think, sort of disheartened, traumatised. I mean, various types of supervision. But, there are major issues there, I mean when we say that it's responsible, the agency's responsible, but also individuals are responsible. (Ian)*

The challenge in such cases is to retrain the worker to value supervision and to make the most of the opportunities for development which it offers. Ian's next comment relates to workers who try to avoid really being challenged by choosing a supervisor who is unlikely to challenge them. The problem of friendships either developing or already being present between worker and supervisor can be difficult to avoid, particularly in small agencies or in large agencies where staff have been there a long time.

*I think another issue is who people choose as a supervisor. Sometimes I get concerned that people choose those supervisors with whom they have a cosy, chatty relationship. (Ian)*

Most participants in the study described their own ongoing effort to provide quality supervision. It was recognised that many became supervisors without receiving specific training and that ongoing professional development in supervision was hard to find. It is worth noting that most saw participation in this study as an opportunity for professional development around supervision and ethics. Individual participants shared techniques they use to help keep supervision on track, such as taking notes. This is very similar to the use of case notes made during or after sessions with clients, which can be useful in both reviewing

progress on a case and helping the practitioner decide on possible future directions or strategies.

*So I find just making a few short notes very helpful in terms of thinking about what actually happened in the session and where you might want to, what you might want to raise next time. (Rachel)*

In a different vein, Helen raised a concern relating to supervisors losing touch with resources in the community as they move further away from front-line practice. Others noted that, as you become more senior, your peers are also in management positions in their own organisations, so you have fewer contacts with people who can directly help the worker's clients.

*I think the other thing, as one gets further removed from direct practice, is that your knowledge of some of the networks and whatever, whilst you still maintain a network, it may be different from that that relates to direct practice ... And your appreciation of what the issues are that matter might be quite different from the workers you're supervising. (Helen)*

So far in this chapter, I have examined the importance of supervision in social work and the difficulties that can arise when supervision is inadequate or under-utilised by workers. The next section addresses reflection in supervision and its role in the ethical development of workers.

### **8.3. Reflection on practice**

Throughout this thesis, I have explored the importance of both reflection and supervision in social work and I have focused particularly on the role of supervision in supporting and guiding workers' reflection on their practice. In this section, I examine this process of

reflection from the perspective of the practice and ethical dilemmas that arise for workers. In some cases, issues are identified and raised by the supervisor rather than the worker. In all cases, it can be seen that the process of reflection helps the worker to develop competence and confidence in making ethical decisions.

### **8.3.1. Supervision and ethical education**

It has already been established that reflection is important in helping workers to respond to both familiar and unfamiliar problems (Fook, 2002; Schon, 1987) and to develop new, but appropriate, responses to them. The quality of the relationship between supervisor and worker is a very important factor in successful reflection and it is worth revisiting Schon's view of this 'reciprocal reflection':

When coach and student are able to risk publicly testing private attributions, surfacing negative judgments, and revealing confusions or dilemmas, they are more likely to expand their capacities for reflection in and on action and thus more likely to give and get evidence of the changing understandings on which reciprocal reflection depends (Schon, 1987, p. 302).

An important implication of this for social work supervisors is the importance of reflecting with the worker on dilemmas which arise. While the supervisor's role may often be to provide information or advice (as part of the education function), it is also important, even though some vulnerability may be revealed, to model careful consideration and reflection.

*(Modelling reflection) takes a bit of the value judgment out of things, it takes a bit of the frustration out. It says, well hold on a second, things aren't just black and white, they're a bit grey, but you can still get a bit of control in your mind about what they really mean. It then becomes clearer about what you can do about those things. And as well as looking at the code of ethics and saying well what can we really do about this, they can be, sometimes you just can't do things about it, so how can we somehow think of a lateral way around those things? And some people don't like going around, they just stop looking at why they do those things as well. But if it's*



*written down, people think it's legitimate and they feel more empowered to do something. (Charlie)*

Similarly, neither workers nor supervisors should take on cases clearly outside their area of expertise without appropriate training and /or supervision:

*And then that raises another ethical issue, which is, how ethical is it to take on a client in an area which one is not particularly skilled in. You know, when is it ethical to be developing one's expertise at a time, how ethical is it to take on a client that one hasn't got the (expertise to deal with)? (Frances)*

In addition to modelling reflection and a thoughtful approach to resolving a range of practice and ethical issues arising in practice, it is important that supervisors also demonstrate the virtues and caring for the client that underpin ethical social work practice and contribute to being able to prioritise principles and make ethically-justifiable decisions (Banks, 2001). Nevertheless, it is not safe to assume that a group of social workers will assess in the same way either what constitutes an ethical dilemma or how it might be resolved. Indeed, a serious dilemma for one worker may not even be identified as a dilemma by another (Banks, 2001).

### **8.3.2. Deconstructing a dilemma**

Participants in this study discussed various processes involved in resolving a dilemma which reflect many components of the ethical decision-making models already considered (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005; Congress, 1999; Dolgoff et al., 2005; Reamer, 1999).

Some described deconstructing a dilemma in order to identify their own or someone else's values or to recognise and implement the underlying principles. In other cases, it included assessing the relative value of various courses of action or developing alternative approaches

in order to make a decision. The following examples describe various aspects of how they might help a worker to deconstruct a dilemma:

*I think sometimes, well first of all it's the person raising the issue, I don't know what the issues are unless the person raises it, the whole thing is then to clearly articulate what the issues are and then trying to get it into, to look at principles, you know I mean one of the common ones is self-determination, also hierarchical issues, power issues and also confidentiality. (Frances)*

*It would be a process of talking, getting them to kind of describe what the issue is, some level of analysis about what they consider the problem is, or the issue. You know, so the first part is identifying the issue, then what that raises for them as a social worker. (Nora)*

*It's sort of modelling for the worker how to partialise the problem and how to you know, if they get bound up in the thing, just take a step back and see what the issues are, that's what I think (Olive)*

Frances, Nora and Olive all describe a process of deconstructing a dilemma to identify the underlying issue or problem. Once workers have done that and possibly also recognised what was the 'sticking point' for them, they can then start making decisions about the most appropriate course of action.

Related to assisting workers to make practice decisions is helping workers to recognise and articulate their theoretical approach to an issue or situation. From Nora's perspective, this is important in terms of both making good practice decisions and making ethical decisions.

*The difficulty with (working automatically) is then you, at what point would you even know if your practice was ethical or not? If you're doing that? Because I can relate*

*to that as well, that whole thing that you're know, or you think you do, that you're doing the right thing, but unless you actually go back and unpack it again, (Nora)*

Participants agreed that it is important for workers to be conscious of how and why they are making particular decisions in their practice, but also discussed the gradual internalisation of values that takes place as workers develop in the profession. It was noted that, while workers internalise social work values, it is still important to be able to articulate both their values and their theoretical approach. This also applies to learning to make ethical decisions, which require a combination of the three components identified as critical for the ethical development of social workers: virtues, ethical skills and ethical knowledge (Bowles et al., 2006). Nevertheless, several participants conceded that social workers are notorious for not being able to either articulate practice decisions or explain the theoretical basis of their work.

In addition to helping workers address issues arising in their direct practice, supervisors can help workers to deconstruct other dilemmas that arise in the workplace. For example, Leonie discussed using supervision to help a worker recognise that she had become a scapegoat in the workplace and to escape from that role safely:

*Well, by making them a whole lot more conscious of the fact that they're in the scapegoat role, that quite often there's huge boundary issues that have been broken all over the place, they've been given responsibility for things that they couldn't possibly manage, they don't have the mandate to be practising or to be doing whatever it is that they're expected to do, and they've been set up to fail. So making that knowledge base a lot more concrete and very specific. And then they choose what they take on. (Leonie)*

### 8.3.3. Developing options

All participants in this study described assisting workers to develop options as an important part of deconstructing and resolving any dilemma. As the following examples show, the development of options related to a whole range of decisions ranging from every-day practice decisions to the ultimate decision about whether or not to stay in a workplace, a number of value and role-related choices in between and decisions about ethical dilemmas. The development of options and the issue of choice are part of the process of reflecting on practice. As the examples in this section and the next demonstrate, there are a number of factors which influence the extent to which supervisors rely on guiding workers in reflection on their practice. However, participants generally identified the development of options as their preferred approach:

*Hopefully most of the work is about options, I'm not a supervisor who'll say "you must do this, or you must do that", you know, it's not nice to be supervised by people who give you very little option. (Frances)*

*I guess I try to look at, with the person, what the various possibilities are and what the consequences would be of each of those and which ones could you live with and which ones couldn't and that sort of thing, but trying to actually explore every sort of like a sort of decisional balance thing. (Jill)*

*I think lots of my supervisory work has been trying to help the worker to look at alternatives and to explore options as to how she wishes or may wish to ...which therapy she may wish to use, practical things to follow up on, but trying to help the person to work, extend the person a bit such that they're working, it becomes their decision, not my decision. (Frances)*

What is common to participants' responses is their apparent attitude to supervisees, that they should give them guidance in same way as workers work towards client self-determination.

Related to helping a worker develop options is the need for a supervisor to see a situation and their own role within it from a perspective different from that of the worker. This may include prompting workers to reflect on why they are making a decision or considering a particular course of action. It also involves raising workers' awareness of how and why they make decisions and forms part of assessing the context in which the decision is made.

*And again that's come up definitely in supervision for me before, it's something about why are you disclosing, for what purpose? And is that ethical? Is it helpful, or I mean I think that because we are working with issues that often touch us as well, yeah? And that can be really challenging, because we can connect with some of the issues that your clients might be raising so there can be a point where you know, perhaps even unconsciously you're having a need yourself to talk about things. So I think managing - that is something that's very important for me in supervision, you know, Why are you doing this, Whose needs are being met? (Peta)*

*Whereas I think in supervision, you raise the issues, they go away and think about them and they deal with them. If you're going to lay everything out there and then, you're going to have to deal with everything there and then. I don't know. (Zoe)*

Many aspects of reflection and decision-making canvassed generally over the course of the eight groups were refined somewhat during discussion specifically focused on the framework for reflection.

#### **8.3.4. Using the framework for reflection**

There was considerable discussion about the framework, both in the first session of each group when it was first presented, and when participants returned after six months for the second session of their group. In this section, I will present participants' first impressions of the framework, then analyse their more considered responses in terms of the major themes of this chapter.

## **Initial reactions**

Participants in the first session of each group generally felt that the framework already contained some of the questions they would ask anyway, but there soon developed a process of trying the questions in the framework and suggesting others that would help the worker to deconstruct, understand and resolve the dilemma.

*They're very typical examples (Abby)*

*Who is the client? That's one we often ask, yes (Olive)*

*They're certainly the things that I'd be thinking of, yes. (Peta)*

Even as part of their first reactions, participants suggested supplementary questions: *What are your own values in this situation? How might they be coming into play?* These were identified by group members as constituting a key step in understanding and then resolving a practice dilemma. Also identified in early discussion was the core question:

*What is the issue and why is it an issue? (Olive)*

Much of the reflection valued by participants consisted of helping workers to explore their values, motives and intentions in particular situations and making explicit the basis of their decisions, including (as noted above) their use of a particular theoretical approach in a given situation.

*I guess by reframing it and actually exploring what were the issues underneath it, we can actually address some of that and I agree with you, the patient still has the ultimate choice. (Georgia)*

Initial comments on the framework centred on particular questions and the extent to which participants felt likely to use them. In some cases, participants acknowledged that they

already ask those questions in supervision. In their immediate reactions to the framework, participants seemed to be drawn to those questions which seemed most familiar to them, and many were drawn to the same questions:

*So I think that's the 'Do you think this might be confusing for whoever?' is a good question. That's probably going to get you further than 'how do you think the client feels?'. (Olive)*

*I guess I did perceive it like that, that these were examples and these were the kinds of questions, so it really is probing questions to get the worker thinking sort of outside the square a little. (Georgia)*

*I think that question, 'why are you giving out your number?' is a good one. It raises a lot of things ... I think you can ask, why are you giving it out to this person and not to another person ... But often it's worth exploring - they're looking for the reason why it is that person who they identify as needing more of (their time). (Zoe)*

*I suppose, for example, giving out the home phone number, ok, how long are you, obviously they've got it for good, it's just going to go on forever, and they may be ringing you in 20 years time, sort of on a daily basis. (Charlie)*

What interested me as a researcher was the extent to which the suggested questions, which had grown largely out of my experience as a supervisor and trainer, resonated so strongly with most of the participants. Most of them immediately recalled situations where these very issues had arisen and where such questions either were or would have been useful in helping workers take the early steps towards making ethical decisions.

### **Later comments on the Framework**

As participants had more time to consider the framework, their responses changed to include suggestions on how it might be improved. In particular, they felt there should be more focus

on helping workers to identify the issue at the heart of the dilemma. They agreed that the nature of the issue would then determine the nature of the supplementary questions that would be appropriate. In theoretical terms, this would involve identifying the ‘choice between two equally unwelcome alternatives which may involve a conflict of moral principles and it is not clear which choice will be the right one’ (Banks, 2001, p. 11).

Participants appear to use the word ‘issue’ to express the conflict at the heart of the dilemma.

*I'd actually add another column at the beginning, and I'd have issues, like what are the issues. Because the concerns may not be evident until you've looked at what the issues are. (Charlie)*

*That's interesting, because I wondered when I looked at this again whether the second column is that question of, it's about prior to asking that question, what is the issue, so it might be boundary violation or it might be being judgmental or whatever. (Ian)*

*Yes, that's probably why we're having, there's these questions, but before you get to these questions, there's 'why are we feeling uncomfortable about this?'... Yeah, you need to identify the dilemma or the issue. (Olive)*

*What are the values underlying the concerns? And then the actual questions, I mean looking at these, you're trying to highlight what the values are by the questions, whereas I think probably there's a second between them, there's the values, what values are raised. (Frances)*

As the discussions progressed within the groups, participants generally moved from a focus on the identification of the issue and how to deal with it in supervision, to wanting to explore the ethical dimensions of those issues for themselves and their supervisees. The discussions became more overtly ethical in nature, and there was considerable discussion about the resources they might draw on to help them solve ethical dilemmas. As I will discuss in more



detail below, there was also more consideration of how they might use issues arising in supervision to teach their supervisees about ethics and ethical decision-making.

*I think there's a step, another step you need to make before you start off at all and that is 'What is ethics? What's ethics, which is, what is ethics, that is, your ethical practice, are you working within the Code of Ethics? [pause] What are ethical practices?' And they may not be, they're not at odds with one another ... And I think that would then make it clearer too, it would make it unique. (Frances)*

*I've just made a bit of a list of some of the things that I would see as fitting into that column, and one is values, and that could be the (client's) as well as your own, and the conflict that that creates, the code of ethics, as you've put down here in some other parts, the agency's purpose, the goal of the interaction, or the therapy, who is the client, just the last few things that we've talked about and duty of care, as well as the legality. (Georgia)*

And again,

*Yeah, because that's actually made it a lot clearer for me because with these, it was sort of up here, and I guess this is the underlying (level), but we hadn't got down to that, until today, ... but it's a basis on which then to put it. I think that it's a good model. (Georgia)*

*You do say, you explore, I mean when you're looking at that first example, you tease out with the worker what their role is, who is the client, who is our responsibility, what is the legislative framework under which we operate, all those statutory responsibilities. So I think that these are the questions we ask, whether consciously or not consciously. (Olive)*

Rachel told us in her second group session that she had been able to use the framework to help one of her staff (a coordinator) to develop a strategy for dealing with the resistance of

one of her workers. This was an important example of how useful this approach can be at a variety of levels, including as a tool for teaching the use of reflection in supervision.

*one of the people I supervise is a coordinator of a service and I did actually discuss with her what kind of questions she might ask her worker when the ... issue that arose was the worker needed to confront the client about something that they were doing, ... and the worker was avoiding dealing with it. So we worked out what kind of questions you know she might use, what would help the worker, and she said that was helpful because the problem for her, the problem that she brought to me was "Well, I've done it before, I've told this worker what to do and she doesn't do it." So what can I do that's different to get the worker to in fact get over her reluctance to confront the client? (Rachel)*

All the kinds of questions canvassed by participants can be seen as consistent with the reflective, inclusive model of decision-making already described (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 90), as well as with the specific role of supervision as the logical place for that reflection to take place.

### **Reservations about Framework**

In spite of the generally positive response to the framework among participants, some expressed reservations about how useful it might be for them personally. In some cases, this related to the importance of the supervision relationship itself, so that particular questions would only be useful if they formed a natural part of the ongoing relationship patterns of communication. Similarly, others felt it would need to be integrated into their personal practice style to be useful.

*So I have reflected on what one might say in supervision, and it's really to me a similar set of skills that one uses in counselling in as far as you all, there's a, I mean*

*it's a function of the relationship you've got with the person, how well you know them, what your perception, sense is of what their boundaries are. Like what their tolerance levels are as to what exactly you would say that would be accepted by them. So I mean, so I might ask a question along these lines, but that's something that I would do um anyway. Does that help you, in this context? So actually having particular questions is not that useful for me, but it might be useful for someone else. So I might ask questions that are comparable to these, but, as I said, the particular questions would really be a function of the circumstances. (Kelly)*

*Looking down at your questions here again and going, what's my role? And who's my client and you know, like all of those are really useful questions. But I guess ultimately your own personal practice model to some degree is going to impact on all of that too and where you see, you know what you see ultimately what you need to do, what I think I ultimately need to do in terms of my integrity as a practitioner or as a supervisor around these issues. (Nora)*

Charlie was more directly sceptical, noting that there seems to be a hidden agenda in the questions given as examples in the framework.

*For example, the questions for reflection almost have an agenda in them, like 'what's your role in this situation?' assumes, almost, that you know what their role is and that you're trying to say what they think their role is, isn't their role. You know what I mean, there's an implicit agenda there that can build resistance, I guess. (Charlie)*

From one perspective, the proposed questions reflect the educative and accountability functions of supervision, in that the role of the supervisor is to extend workers' understanding of and insight into their roles in particular situations. However, comments such as these support the view already expressed that the quality of the supervisory relationship and the levels of support provided within it are more important in producing ethical outcomes than an explicit focus on control or accountability functions (McAuliffe & Sudbery, 2005).

## **8.4. Accountability and worker self-determination**

While all participants were committed to encouraging workers to reflect on various aspects of their practice, including the ethical dimension, most participants also agreed that allowing worker self-determination in supervision may not always be appropriate, that there may be times when a supervisor needs to be more directive with a worker. There was considerable discussion about what might influence this decision, including the attitudes or intentions of the worker, the nature of the workplace, including any statutory requirements, and the particular context being considered. The accountability function of supervision was implicit in all these discussions, particularly relating to the safety or wellbeing of clients.

### **8.4.1. Supervising resistant workers**

A particular source of frustration for participants in the study was the situation in which workers resist reflecting on their practice, which can occur for a range of reasons. A related experience was supervising workers determined to see or do things in a particular way. The situations described here do not relate specifically to trying to get a worker to follow a particular course of action, but rather to workers unwilling to be open to the processes of reflection or development in supervision.

*I think I've had a difficult situation where one person has a huge amount of difficulty reflecting on themselves as a person and so her want is OK, We did this, we did that, what should I do next, but not that personal stuff. And no matter how many times I asked her questions like this, I still don't get an answer. So that's tricky, because it's, I still feel she needs to develop that, but you also can't be there asking her questions when she won't give you an answer that relates to herself. That's a tricky one. (Daphne)*

*..but if they were sort of saying, “No, this is my view and this is the way it’s got to be” then I’d actually be quite concerned about them being a social worker full stop, actually, if they’re unable to see the way they impact on their work. (Georgia)*

*It does remind me of the need for supervision - so they can talk through these things. And they are very hard, and they may seem very black and white, but they’re not. (Monica)*

All these examples demonstrate the kind of frustration that can be experienced when supervising workers who are reluctant to be open to the opportunities possible in supervision. As noted elsewhere, most participants saw this kind of situation as a challenge to them to develop their skills in supervision, but some admitted to simply giving up when faced with this kind of resistance in workers.

*I’ve had situations in a previous life where I tried to get them to be reflective, met a brick wall, made a decision that the person doesn’t respect reflection and concluded with a clear direction, “This is what I’m saying to you. Are we clear with each other?” (Monica)*

#### **8.4.2. Statutory and legal requirements**

Workplaces with clear statutory requirements, such as child protection services, were clearly identified as settings in which reflection might need to be supported by direction within the supervisory processes. However, it was recognised that workers in most settings have to deal with statutory requirements at various times and may sometimes need to be given direction around that by their supervisor.

*So I think when, perhaps people operating in a statutory sort of setting, it’s different from say a counselling-type setting, where the client and the worker have limited*

*choices, perhaps there is less room for, you know, just going with a reflective style.*

(Rachel)

*So I mean that's, there is a statutory responsibility that will arise in most workplaces, even if it is not necessarily on a day-to-day basis.* (Frances)

It was generally recognised that there is always a place for reflection and that, in a statutory setting, this might focus on helping a worker deal with the complexity of the work itself and the need to make decisions with which they may not be entirely comfortable. When asked when a supervisor should become directive rather than allowing worker self-determination, Zoe said:

*Well, there's a point where you have to do that, particularly if you are working under specific legislation or that stuff. I think there comes a point, particularly if you're their line manager, that if they're going in the wrong direction, you have to say 'Change it'. I mean you talk it out afterwards. I mean hopefully, they can.* (Zoe)

As part of this discussion, participants considered the extent to which different supervision styles were more or less prevalent in different sorts of agencies. There was a general view that, even apart from the need to be directive in particular situations, agencies with statutory functions were less likely than other agencies to have a mostly reflective style of supervision. This echoed one of the assumptions I made at the beginning of the research process: that organisations with strong lines of accountability tended to highlight that function of supervision. Experience of such statutory settings over many years indicates that there are high levels of worker burn-out and staff turnover in such agencies, which often give less attention to supporting their staff and giving them the opportunities to reflect on various aspects of their practice.

*Well there's parallel process arising. More statutory agencies tend to be a bit more black and white and more fuzzy agencies tend to be a bit more fuzzy.* (Charlie)

*But even the fuzzier agencies, as we call them, (I don't know which ones you specifically mean) have their own policies and guidelines, that workers have to stick to. (Zoe)*

Apart from the statutory requirements of a particular workplace, it was recognised in the groups that another role of the supervisor is to try to prevent workers from doing anything illegal. This was another dimension of the issues which supervisors regard as non-negotiable.

*'You're not to do it!' You find that, basically there's more than one way to skin a cat and that it could affect her whole career in the public service if she had a conviction against her. So I suppose that was a 'You're not to do it and it's illegal'. (Olive)*

### **8.4.3. Purpose and values of the organisation**

One of the functions of supervision is to assist with the socialisation of the worker into the mission and values of both the profession and the organisation (Munson, 2002). As workers become supervisors, or even join an organisation at a more senior level, they bear more responsibility for transmitting and implementing the values of the organisation. This responsibility should also reflect their own competence and confidence as ethical decision-makers, but sometimes results in their having to give workers quite clear directions, rather than allowing them to reflect and make their own decisions.

*Except that I believe there comes a point where you have to, you're in your role as a supervisor, you have to say, 'well ... you're doing this particular job and I'm responsible for this agency or this program or whatever it is, and you need to do the job in the way it needs to be done. You know, for the clients'. (Daphne)*

*There will be times when I have to say, this is how you're going to do it, because I've got the agency in my head in terms of what is appropriate. (Monica)*

There can be some tension between the need to act in accordance with the values of the organisation and the general principle that supervisors should encourage reflective practice in workers and nurture their skills in ethical decision-making. I believe this is a paradox which can be resolved in the context of a supervisory relationship that encourages reflection and worker self-determination, even if there is sometimes a need for direction. As with other aspects of supervision, successful resolution of this paradox depends on the worker as much as the supervisor, and in some situations, the supervisor must put the needs of the client or the organisation before those of the worker.

*I guess if the other person was not actually being reflective or was being determined that the view that they held was the only one that was right and it was against the (agency) policies, procedures and values, and that's something that (Name of agency) certainly has, then I'd be left with no choice but to say, 'well you can hold that view, but this is the direction that you must take because of the reason.' Or the other option I would have is to even say look, if this is going to impact on the patient, then I will take that case off you. If they weren't able to say, 'OK, fine, I can put that aside and I can do what I'm being directed to do, but'. Yeah, if they can just put aside their views and say OK well if this is what the (agency) wants me to do I can then go and do it". But if they are still saying 'well, you know I can't, because this is what I'm going to do' then the other option would be to say, 'well I'm not going to allow you to continue with that case. Because you're not coping, not only from the ethical side of things for patients, but there's also the legal implications'. (Georgia)*

This long quote illustrates the difficulty Georgia experienced trying to work through these issues. As she considered each alternative approach, she thought of more possible variations that might arise.



#### **8.4.4. Safety and well-being of clients**

In some cases, the need to protect the safety or wellbeing of a client is a clear priority.

Participants felt that, with new workers in particular, there was often a need to give clear direction in order to protect the interests of both clients and workers. This will be taken up again below in the section on teaching ethical decision-making.

*I mean there are some cases where there are safety issues concerned, where you have to be able to act in a certain way. (Frances)*

*Certainly when I've been running a social work service, like in mental health, with new workers coming in, I've always been very clear about setting limits and boundaries. Because in mental health you certainly get some of those sorts of issues important for setting limits and boundaries, so I would do the 'don't do it'. (Jill)*

*And you continue to explore it in supervision, but there is a lot of stuff, particularly around mental health. Like you're talking about: transporting people, touching people, just some particular issues around all that where I think you really for the sake of any new workers, you've got to be really clear and up-front. (Jill)*

*I think that's a 'boundaries' question, setting limits and I think in your area of work, it actually has to be stated like, 'this is the line, kid and don't even think about phone numbers'. (Jill)*

There were some differences of opinion between participants in terms of their apparent willingness to simply tell a worker what to do. It was interesting to me that participants with a background in statutory agencies were more prepared to be directive than those from other, more community-based settings, although this could also have been a reflection of the different levels of management experience between participants, or even personality differences.

*I don't ever say just don't do it, I can't really imagine that Monica does either.*  
(Nora)

*But the bottom line is, you explore it and then say 'Just don't do it'.* (Monica)

#### **8.4.5. Context**

Even apart from protecting the well-being of (particularly vulnerable) clients, there are some situations where a worker, even a normally reflective one, may need to be given more direct assistance.

*I've found that if people are in crisis, that their reflective process is much, much more difficult ... when things are quieter and more relaxed, yes the reflective stuff is fine, and when they're not, it just doesn't.* (Leonie)

Monica, a highly experienced practitioner and manager, was able to corroborate this from her own experience of facing a completely unfamiliar and difficult task:

*I've had an interesting... situation which was quite stressful. My chief executive called me in, and she was extremely directive and I found it enormously helpful. I didn't know what I was getting into for a while. It was very clear, very informed, and really, it was around the respect issue, I mean the fact that I was respected helped enormously. I was extremely grateful for 'You are going to [do this and this, in this manner].' It was an extraordinary learning experience and I found it very, very helpful. I didn't want any kind of drawing together. Just tell me what to do. 'You've got the expertise, I haven't. How do I deal with this?'* (Monica)

While she is able to be reflective and make autonomous decisions in most circumstances, Monica was able to recognise one in which she needed direction. It is noteworthy that she went on to point out that being given direction by her manager was acceptable to her because she knew that their relationship was based on mutual respect. Again, the quality of and the

trust within the supervisory relationship are important elements in terms of both education and accountability, as well as support.

## **8.5. Reflection and ethical education**

The earlier parts of this chapter describe supervision and its processes, including the importance of encouraging workers to reflect on their practice in order to deconstruct and resolve the dilemmas they face. This final section begins by examining participants' views on two processes which are important for social workers learning to make ethical decisions: reflective practice and the internalisation of values. The last part focuses on teaching ethics and, more specifically, ethical decision-making.

### **8.5.1. Reflective practice**

All the supervisors who participated in this study regard assisting workers to reflect on their practice as one of the principal roles of the supervisor, and this chapter describes the ways in which supervisors can help workers reflect on the practice and ethical dilemmas that frequently arise. In addition, it is important to consider the broader notion of reflective practice. This was a term which gained currency as part of the development of radical social work in the 1970s and remained a feature of the later critical social work movement (see Chapter 2). As noted earlier (see Chapter 4), Fook (2002) highlighted the ways in which critical reflection challenges dominant constructions and supports a contextual, subjective approach. One of the challenges facing social work supervisors is to support workers in developing emancipatory practice while working within a particular organisational or other context, to make decisions which are consistent with the values and principles underpinning social work.

Leonie uses the word 'critical' in a way which evokes the challenge made to workers in supervision to question their assumptions and their actions, as well as to examine the theoretical basis of their work. As such, it is clearly an important part of the ongoing education of social workers.

*I thought there was actually some research done that said that people were looking for, they were actively looking for critical supervision and wanted more that gave them clearer messages than simply just saying 'well, that's OK' rather than actually saying 'do you think that there are other things you could have done here; What about we look at it from another direction'. You know, things that help people to think more broadly than just simply getting an OK message. (Leonie)*

I have argued in this study that supervision plays a central role, not just in ongoing professional education and the support for workers facing particular dilemmas, but in the broader ethical education of social workers. There is, then, a relationship between supervision and moral education, particularly in a situation where the informal philosophy of an organisation is a problem for workers. Workers can use supervision in that way, to clarify what agency policies might mean for clients, or to clarify their own values with respect to those of the agency.

However, the ethical education possible in supervision is a much broader moral education than helping workers understand their employing organisation. It includes all the functions described so far in this chapter and the last – unpacking dilemmas, clarifying values, identifying (ethical) issues, articulating practice models and so on. In addition, participants confirmed that they use supervision to teach workers about ethics and ethical decision-making, which includes the whole range of ethical and practice decisions already discussed, as well as the link with being able to articulate the theoretical basis of their work.

*The other thing is, if we want to go back to talking about ethics and decision-making, that I think actually being able to do that is really part of ethical practice. You really have to be able to articulate what you're doing and why you are doing it. It's a responsibility. (Jill)*

Another aspect of supervision which should not be overlooked is that it does not apply exclusively to new or front-line workers. All participants shared the view that supervision remains important throughout a worker's career. It is interesting that even professions without a culture of supervision value some kind of supervision for their senior managers. It may be called mentoring or even coaching, but it gives those with decision-making responsibilities the opportunity to reflect on the reasons for or the possible impact of their decisions. The nature of social work makes this opportunity important from a worker's first day in the profession.

The following from Peta underlines a number of the ways in which supervision is important throughout a social work career.

*And I think to me that that's one of THE (her emphasis) most critical things in supervision, that regardless of who you are, it's very difficult to step out of that situation and that supervision is a forum, and this is for me as well when I'm being supervised, if I'm being supervised by somebody helpful, is where they actually provide an opportunity to tease out some of those issues and really challenge some of your hypotheses maybe, or you know, 'Why are you thinking that? Or what makes you?' And really work some of that through, I guess, to come up with some ideas and it may be through that process that you work out, the worker works out, really, that what they were experiencing was really way off beam or affirming that what they were thinking was really probably spot on, you know. And to me that's really effective supervision because that then allows that person, it's reflective practice and it allows them also to not be so, well, to step outside of that. (Peta)*

While ethical development is implicit in all those functions, participants in the study had all reached a stage in their work as social workers and supervisors, in the same way I had in my own practice, where they were looking for ways to teach ethics to workers.

### **8.5.2. Internalisation of values**

Just as important in teaching workers to reflect on the ethical dimensions of their practice is the extent to which they have internalised the values of social work in general, or their agency in particular.

*It's also something about social work, social work being a profession that really does have this very clear value base and a thing about ethical practice. And I just wonder if you know, somehow, well obviously it's what we hope to do in training potential supervisors, even training potential social workers, that you somehow socialise them into the values or getting them thinking in a particular way, or what ever, but I just wonder if as you were saying, questions and mixture of sort of counselling skills, values, ethical practice, all become sort of intertwined after a period of time, which I think is a very valuable thing, but I just notice some real differences in approaches to work with some people who don't seem to have had that specific stuff in their background. (Jill)*

Again, while participants felt that most workers were able to develop successfully in that way, it was also acknowledged that some workers never achieve that and are likely to need direction, at least in some situations, throughout their careers.

*It would also be their training and their personality. Some people, they have an internal frame of reference, so everything they think about, they can adjust themselves, all you've got to say is one word and they're off doing it. And other people have an external frame of reference and they need to be told. (Charlie)*

This internalisation of values is very like, and clearly linked to, the theoretical development in workers which enable them to articulate the theoretical basis of their work and understand why they make particular practice decisions. These two aspects of understanding ourselves as social workers should not be separated. The problem can be expressed this way:

*It's people not being able to articulate what they're doing and why they're doing it... I don't think somehow social workers probably don't understand organizations, but they're notoriously bad at being able to articulate what they're doing and why they're doing it and you often get these waffly terms, 'I'm supporting them, I'm doing this and I'm doing that'. They are doing all sorts of thing, but they can't explain it.*

(Jill)

*But once supervision was supposed to help you articulate it. (Kelly)*

*I think a lot of us, as we internalise the skills, we stop that process in a conscious way and we take it up unconsciously and then if somebody asks questions, you actually can't name it because it's become so much a part of how you function that you lose touch with it. But personally I find being able to name exactly what I do is absolutely essential. (Leonie)*

These comments reflect the ways in which the potential tension between the dual aims of internalisation of values and reflective practice can be reconciled within the processes of supervision. The critical reflection which takes place within supervision, in addition to identifying the core issues within the problems faced and challenging the assumptions which underlie them, can support the worker to articulate the underlying knowledge, skills, values and principles. As with more general practice issues, it is important to be able to articulate the underlying theories and values:

*It's interesting, but in a sense articulating and identifying those values can help. I mean it's like this, why am I? What are the issues for me when I read this scenario? What buttons is it pushing for me? And what questions come up? (Ian)*

### **8.5.3. Teaching ethics and decision-making**

A central question discussed in all the groups related to the dichotomy between teaching ethical rules, possibly in 'black and white', and teaching workers to consider the ethical dimensions of the dilemmas they face and making ethically sound decisions. This both reflects and is an extension of the dichotomy already discussed, between telling workers what to do in some situations or giving them the chance to reflect on practice dilemmas and make their own decisions.

*But then, it's hard to actually teach values and ethics, isn't it? I mean what do you do? Do you set up a real dogmatic thing and say you will not sleep with your client and you will not. ... I remember having this discussion years ago, just how far do you go with this, a really dogmatic thing, or whether you get people to tease out values and ethical precepts from that, because you certainly do get people interpreting things differently. (Jill).*

Participants' views on this issue varied markedly, although there was general agreement that workers generally become better at making ethical decisions as they gain more experience and that students and new workers might require more direction than seasoned workers. There was still significant discussion about the way in which workers learn to be ethical.

*But in some ways you have to teach it in a black and white fashion to start with, and then you introduce shades of grey, don't you? (Leonie)*

*I don't know that, I think that, my sense would almost be that it's better to teach them the questions. (Nora)*



*Yeah, I guess that's my approach, because otherwise I worry about people getting really reductionist. (Jill)*

The use of scenarios was raised as a good way to teach ethics, and it can be used in supervision (with an individual or a group) or in designated training or professional development settings. This resonates with my own experience as a worker and supervisor over many years.

*Yeah, but I still find it a much easier thing to deal with in a sense, if you pose a particular scenario. In a class situation, someone will actually say this, and you will look at how their views are challenged and how they deal with that, and I think it's much better to have a discussion around it than just to come in and say 'this is what you will now believe from now on'. (Jill)*

However, there were a number of qualifications to this general principle. The first related to workers being able to say what was expected, but having quite different private views of various scenarios. The second related to the resistance to reflection discussed earlier in this chapter, the degree to which workers are able to internalise values or, as Charlie says later, 'to develop an internal frame of reference'. Nora made the point that even when discussing a hypothetical scenario, students or workers can still resist being personally involved in the decision-making.

*Can I just say one of the things that became obvious to me recently, and partly doing the group supervision, was that, often you know we do ask all kinds of questions and we talk through, you know, ethical issues kind of quietly and one of things I noticed with a group of people is that they were really very good at answering the questions; you know, they could actually, because they knew what they should be saying and what they should be doing around all of that and but I just had a sense that you know that, Yeah, I mean not intentionally, like they were not, they thought they were doing the right thing and I actually set up a couple of case studies where I then challenged*

*everything they said. You know, just put myself in the role of, the situation I set myself up, I was a worker, I mean I hadn't even intended to do that, but it just came up at the time. (Nora)*

She then described a situation where she moved into a role-play model, and engaged with the workers as if she were a 'client', rather than as a teacher or supervisor.

*It's the client that actually should be (the focus. I modelled that )... in the organisation and actually got them to try and deal with me as the client and it was really quite interesting how much more movement there was in them through that than there had been when they were really just talking through 'well, what would you do here and how would you do that?'. (Nora)*

Nora's contribution is extremely important in terms of what is required to successfully challenge workers or students to examine their own values closely and to practise making decisions in particular situations. Her experience was that even in general hypothetical discussions, students could give acceptable answers without really considering how their own values and attitudes might affect their decision. There was strong support for this flexible approach:

*What I'm hearing here is Nora being quite creative and devising a tool that enabled that sort of reflection and analysis without necessarily being directly sort of confronting or making people feel, or running the risk that they couldn't engage with it. (Kelly)*

Ian also highlighted the importance of such exercises regularly and at particular points in the life of the organisation or the worker:

*Ethics is a really important issue that needs to be discussed as part of teams, regularly. I just think it's very easy to not do it. We did this exercise recently, actually with the new director, where she had us in small groups articulating*

*personal values and organisational values. And initially everyone thought this is a waste of time, but it was quite useful. And then walking through some quite specific scenarios that triggered people's value issues really. And I think that those sorts of exercises can be quite helpful. It's often things that we carry with us but we don't articulate or talk about or reflect on. (Ian)*

This consideration of the personal values and attitudes of the worker came up often:

*Another thing I'm thinking of too is actually asking the worker what it is that they're feeling and thinking at the moment. That's a really important idea that you're thinking about, what's going on for them, because that can be quite telling as well, the way they see the situation. (Peta)*

In light of the range of ethical decision-making models discussed above (see Chapter 4), the combination of accountability, critical reflection, cultural sensitivity and consultation which comprises the inclusive model (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005) appears to best reflect the range of needs and priorities expressed by participants in this study. The challenge for Australian social work in the next few years is to train workers and supervisors alike to make the best possible ethical decisions. Incorporating Chenoweth and McAuliffe's (2005) model (or one which shares its central characteristics and advantages) seems a way forward which answers the questions and problems raised by participants in this study.

## **8.6. Conclusion**

This study, particularly this chapter focusing on participants' views on supervision and its role in learning to make ethical decisions, has demonstrated that supervision plays an important role in helping an individual worker understand their personal relationship with their work, including being able to articulate both their values and motivation and their theoretical approach to social work. It has examined participants' views about the role

supervision in social work, including problems that can arise. It has also examined how supervisors can assist and support workers facing ethical dilemmas and highlighted the tensions between accountability and worker self-determination and the difficulties inherent within the processes and relationships of supervision. Finally, this chapter has demonstrated the importance of reflection and reflective practice in the ethical development of social workers by increasing their understanding of the ethical paradigm within which they operate and improve the ways in which they make practice decisions.

Furthermore, the use of particular models of ethical decision-making, especially Chenoweth and McAuliffe's (2005) inclusive model, appear to offer a way forward for ethical decision-making in Australian social work which needs to be explored further. In the next and final chapter, I attempt to draw all these threads together to examine the relationship between supervision and ethical decision-making and to propose a coherent approach to the future of ethical education in Australian social work.

## 9. THE ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS

### 9.1. Introduction

Social work is a moral endeavour. Its involvement in the lives of individuals, families and communities makes inevitable the range and complexity of dilemmas faced by workers in a variety of social work contexts. It is of paramount importance that social workers have the ‘virtues, skills and knowledge’ (Bowles et al., 2006) required to recognise and resolve these dilemmas and to explain their decisions in ethically justifiable terms. Furthermore, it is important that supervisors are able to support workers facing ethical dilemmas in ways which encourage the workers’ development as autonomous ethical decision-makers. This study has addressed two key research questions:

- *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers? and,*
- *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?*

In this chapter I draw together the major themes of the thesis and propose answers to these key questions. The first section explains how the traditional values and principles of social work have combined with and been influenced by a number of major cultural and intellectual movements to produce the context in which Australian social work is practised today. Social work’s response to the various challenges it faces will determine its relevance and effectiveness as we move into the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The second section describes the changing ethical environment in which Australian social work will be practised in the future. I reiterate how a number of ethical theories have each contributed in different ways to the ethical pluralism which characterises social work ethics

today. That is followed by an exploration of models of ethical decision-making, culminating in an inclusive model appropriate for the theoretical pluralism already described and then some discussion of the importance of reflection and reflective practice in the ethical practice of social work. In the final part of section two, I return to the first of the key research questions: *How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?*

The third section focuses on supervision and its importance in ethical development. It first revisits the traditional functions of supervision and explores participants' views of how those functions interact in practice. The second part examines the importance of reflection in supervision in terms of supporting workers making a range of practice and ethical decisions and supporting their overall ethical development. The last part of section three addresses the second key research question: *How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?* The fourth and final section in this chapter identifies possible areas for future research.

## **9.2. The social work context**

Chapter 2 described a number of influences on the development of Australian social work. These included its historical antecedents in Britain and the USA, the core values and principles that have been part of social work from the very early days and the impact of more recent movements such as Marxism, humanism, feminism and post-modernism on the nature of social work today.

The Charity Organisation Societies and the Settlement movements represented, respectively, working with individual to enhance their coping skills (and make them less dependent on charity), and reforming society to reduce the impact of unjust structures on individuals

(Mullaly, 1997). The combination of intervention in the lives of individuals to effect change and seeking to change the broader social circumstances in which those individuals live which characterised some early social work is still evident in Australian social work today, at least theoretically.

It is argued in this study that social work has been influenced by each of these major social, economic and political movements at different times and has incorporated aspects of them in different ways. In the same way, it has been affected by their demise. As noted above, radical social work (and the Marxist approach from which it developed) aimed at overcoming structural disadvantage and feminism had a significant impact on social work's understanding of social issues like domestic violence and gender-based power imbalances. Clearly, the ethic of care, whose links with feminism were described above (see Chapter 3) also had a significant impact on how social workers understand their relationship with their clients.

Humanism was also important, but seen as having limitations. Ife (1997) proposed a critical empowerment approach, based on critical humanism, for working with marginalised people and groups by legitimising their voices and validating their experience. Related to this is Payne's (2005a) view of the importance to social work of two particular aspects of humanism, its belief in people's ability to make their own choices and to value and work with each other. Later, post-modernism challenged social work to search for new ways to define its role outside dominant ideologies and the importance of context in reconstructing our understanding of various realities was recognised as central to making both practice and ethical decisions in social work.

Participants in this study did not explicitly address the impact of these social and cultural movements on the way in which social work is practised in the Australian Capital Territory. However, many of the issues discussed reflect the ways in which the profession has been influenced by such movements. For example, discussions about boundaries, clients' rights to make decisions about their own future and the gendered nature of many of the problems faced by their clients all reflect these influences.

### **9.2.1. Facing new challenges**

The threat to social work that has evolved in a context of economic rationalism and managerialism (Ife, 1997; Payne, 2005a) makes it even more important that social workers understand and can articulate the theoretical basis of their practice and the decisions they make, including ethical decisions. Many of the problems described by supervisors participating in the study reflected the hostile environment described by Ife (Ife, 1997). One example is a lack of adequate resources to provide a particular service, which can be linked to economic rationalism. Another relates to the 'new managerialism, which can make it difficult for managers to employ social workers, as opposed to 'generic' professionals with the competencies required for a particular job, or to justify meeting social work's demands around issues like supervision (see Chapter 7).

Implicit in all the discussions in the focus groups were the participants' commitment to the core values and principles of social work and the challenges they described related to ensuring that those values and principles are evident in the practice of the social workers they supervise.



### **9.3. The ethical context**

Alongside these developments in social work's understanding of its values and place in Australia today, there have also been changes in how ethics is understood, particularly professional ethics. Chapter 3 described the impact of a number of different ethical traditions on the development of social work ethics. Utilitarian, deontological, virtue and care ethics were all shown to have made significant contributions to the shape of social work ethics today.

Banks' (2001) categorisation of ethical theories into those that are principle-based and those that are character or relationship-based has been influential in my developing understanding of the ethical context of Australian social work and supports an explanation for the appropriateness of ethical pluralism in social work. Another way of describing these categories (see Chapter 3) is to divide the major ethical theories into two categories: those that focus on the act and those that focus on the person and this division has been useful in this study.

#### **9.3.1. Ethical pluralism**

Those theories which focus on *the act* are generally concerned with *what I do*. Within consequentialist approaches such as utilitarian ethics, the ethical decision is based on the likely consequences of the act. Deontological ethics is an example of an approach that helps me know my duty before the act is carried out. Theories which focus on *the person* are more concerned with *who I am*. The examples considered most relevant in this study are virtue ethics, which centres on the character of the individual and has been described as agent-centred, and the ethic of care, which centres on the notion of relationship and focuses on the nurturing relationship between the actor and the other.

This study has demonstrated that these all approaches have contributed to the current shape of social work ethics and that a pluralist ethical approach incorporating aspects of each is the most appropriate way forward. I have demonstrated that, in spite of arguments for or against particular individual ethical theories (see Chapter 3), all those discussed are important for social workers facing dilemmas in their daily practice. It is important to recognise that each ethical decision faced by an individual social worker requires a consideration of all these elements: what might happen, what duty requires, what a virtuous person might do and, finally, what a caring response might be. Accordingly, it is important for all social workers, including supervisors, to be aware of the ethical theories which underpin their practice and the ways in which they interact in the processes of ethical decision-making.

The framework for reflection used in the focus groups represented my own attempts to help workers focus on these kinds of issues when faced with ethical dilemmas in their social work practice, although at that stage of the study I was only peripherally aware of the need to consider all these dimensions. Nevertheless, I was aware of the need to support ethical decision-making by introducing some kind of system for considering different aspects of an ethical dilemma. As noted earlier, ‘systematic attempts to highlight, address, and monitor the ethical dimensions of social work practice will, in the final analysis, strengthen the profession’s integrity’ (Reamer, 2001b, p. 41).

### **9.3.2. Models of ethical decision-making**

These considerations lead to an examination of the models of ethical decision-making most appropriate for social work. It has been noted earlier (see Chapter 4) that there are various ways of categorising models of ethical decision-making, including according to the ethical theory on which the model is based. However, in the context of the ethical pluralism that

appears to be the most appropriate approach to social work ethics, it seems that an approach based on how decisions are made would be more relevant. Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) describe the major categories of ethical decision-making models based on how decisions are made. Process models are based on a number of steps and sometimes include a hierarchical approach to choosing between ethical precepts, reflective models have emerged from a feminist perspective and cultural models focus on the cultural context in which the decision is to be made (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). Chenoweth and McAuliffe have combined these three groups of approaches into what they call the 'Inclusive Model' (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005, p. 90).

The inclusive model has four essential elements: accountability, critical reflection, cultural sensitivity and consultation. These four dimensions reflect the complexity of ethical decision-making also include several of the important features of supervision already explored (see Chapter 5). The cyclical nature of the inclusive model resonates with the cyclical nature of action research (see Chapter 6) and underlines the importance of critical reflection in social work, particularly in the relationship between theory and practice. The inclusive model (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005) can be used by both workers and those who support them when they are facing a dilemma. The data from the focus groups indicate that such a model would be likely to meet the needs of participants, who often described trying to balance the functions of supervision.

### **9.3.3. How can social workers learn to become autonomous ethical decision-makers?**

This study has supported the argument made in the early stages, that reflection on practice is vitally important for the social worker's development as an ethically autonomous

decision-maker, particularly in terms of the notion inherent in virtue ethics, that we become virtuous by practice. Reflection is an integral part of reflective models generally and the inclusive model of ethical decision-making in particular, and critical reflection's potential for 'emancipatory practice' (Fook, 2002) can potentially improve the way in which the reflection that takes place is firmly embedded in the values and principles of social work.

However, this study has demonstrated that reflection alone is not enough to support the ethical development of social workers. The circle of reflection and action in the inclusive model is informed by a range of skills, influences and knowledge and includes an understanding of relevant ethical theory. In the same way, Banks (2001) argues that the decisions made by social workers require more than knowledge of the profession's values and principles and a wish to preserve the rights of clients and others. The individual's virtues and caring relationship with the client are also key elements required by the worker seeking to make an ethically justifiable decision (Banks, 2001). Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2005) describe the step of 'critical (re)analysis and (re)evaluation' as representing the ability to make decisions that can be scrutinised by others, clarify practice and lead to better practice in the future. Making ethically justifiable decisions depends on being able to clearly articulate the basis on which the decision has been made.

In short, workers must acquire the 'virtues, skills and knowledge' (Bowles et al., 2006) required for their development as autonomous ethical decision-makers. This includes an understanding of the significant ethical theories that have contributed to the development of the pluralist approach to social work ethics today, as well as an appreciation of how each of these approaches may need to be addressed in the context of an ethical dilemma. Social workers with the appropriate virtues, skills and knowledge and with access to an appropriate decision-making model are very likely to develop as autonomous ethical decision-makers.

## **9.4. Supervision and ethical development**

Alongside the growing understanding of social work ethics and ethical decision-making described above, one of the most important results of this study has been the affirmation of the importance of supervision in supporting the development of social workers generally, including their ethical development. This is not just achieved through the traditional functions of supervision, but also through the reflection on practice, most logically located in supervision, which supports workers facing both practice and ethical dilemmas and in the acquisition of the virtues, skills and knowledge required for their overall ethical development.

### **9.4.1. The functions of supervision**

This thesis has described the central place of supervision in social work and its three major functions, support, education and administration (see Chapter 5). The overlap, interaction and tensions between these functions and the more general role of supervision in helping workers to integrate the theory and practice of social work have been addressed from the perspectives of both the available literature and the experience of participants in the focus groups, who were all social workers and supervisors.

It has been shown that the traditional functions of supervision are all important in terms of the ethical development of workers at the centre of this study. The *support* provided in supervision helps workers deal with the stress and the emotional toll that can result from involvement in the lives of other people, including where there is a particular resonance with events or experiences in the worker's own life. As discussed above (see Chapter 5), this support is also important to workers facing (or having faced) significant ethical dilemmas, ranging from the potential consequences of a decision for clients or other stakeholders, to

any of the many dilemmas that can arise from the organisational context in which the worker is operating, such as lack of resources or having a different ethical framework from that of the organisation.

Participants in the focus groups confirmed that supporting workers was one of their most important and time-consuming tasks in supervision. They agreed that workers require support with respect to a wide range of issues, but found it most frustrating trying to support workers in an environment of inadequate resources or in the context of rigid organisational policies or objectives. Some participants also noted the problems inherent in trying to support a worker in conflict with the organisation, a situation requiring particular skills in the supervisor. This highlights tensions between the different functions of supervision and the possible ethical dilemmas that can arise for supervisors themselves.

The *education* function of supervision is just as important in the context of this study. Chapter 5 outlined the ways in which workers are educated within supervision, including orientation to the employing organisation or sector, assisting workers with finding appropriate resources and making ongoing practice decisions and, of course, helping workers to identify, assess and resolve the ethical dilemmas they face on a regular basis. Education has an ongoing role within supervision, but as workers become more experienced, it often becomes more a function of the interaction between the two than the imparting of knowledge by the more experienced practitioner, with the benefits flowing in both directions. Many participants in the groups commented on the benefits they themselves derive from the dialogue and reflection which take place within supervision. This resonates with Schon's (1987) description of the 'reciprocal reflection' ideally inherent in the supervisory relationship.

The focus groups considered the education function of supervision in some detail. Most participants agreed that their role as supervisors was to provide options and alternatives rather than solutions to workers. They also emphasised the importance of helping worker develop the skills required to reflect on the ethical dimension of their practice generally and on the particular dilemmas that arise. It is clear that supervision is an appropriate means for assisting the worker to develop the virtues, skills and knowledge required for their ethical development. If the required ‘virtues’ are not always discussed overtly, it is important that the supervisor models them.

In the context of participants’ discussions about the reflection that takes place in supervision, there was some consideration of the circumstances in which supervisors direct workers to take certain actions, rather than leaving the decision-making to the worker. This is clearly related to the third major function of supervision, administration. As originally described by Kadushin (1992, originally published in 1976), this function includes not just assisting workers with their administrative obligations within the agency, but also ensuring that the agency meets its responsibilities to clients and funding bodies. This accountability aspect of administration has always been an important part of supervision, but some have argued that it has become even more important over the last twenty years in response to pressure from outside social work (Hughes & Pengelly, 1998). This accountability aspect of supervision is one of the reasons that funding bodies and others have begun to insist that human service providers must provide supervision to practitioners working with (particularly vulnerable) clients (see Chapter 5).

There was general agreement among participants, which reflects the literature on supervision (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Pithouse, 1987), that while reflection is always appropriate and supported, there is often a tension between encouraging that reflection and allowing worker

self-determination. Participants agreed that independent decision-making is less likely to be allowed in settings where workers have statutory responsibilities and supervisors need to ensure that certain actions are carried out. The groups also discussed situations where workers seemed unwilling to reflect openly on their practice, or to change how they approach particular situations. This was a particular problem for workers whose supervisees were proposing a course of action which was either illegal or unethical.

Implicit in the above discussion is the importance of the supervisory relationship. The literature (Hawkins & Shohet, 1989; Hughes & Pengelly, 1998; Pithouse, 1987) and discussion in the focus groups each reinforced the relationship between supervisor and worker as the foundation on which the functions of supervision are established. The supervision relationship has been described as powerful but in need of nurturing (Noble & Briskman, 1998; Pepper, 1996; Tsui, 2005), and the participants shared this view. It was generally agreed that none of the functions described above is possible without a supportive, respectful relationship between supervisor and worker.

Participants in the groups also agreed that the supervisory relationship needs ongoing work, including the clarification of roles and responsibilities and the regular renegotiation of the objectives and methods to be employed. In the focus groups, participants agreed that contracts are an extremely important part of the negotiation process, and should be revisited regularly to ensure that supervision continues to meet the specific needs of the worker and the agency. In the context of this study, it is also appropriate to explicitly include in the supervision contract reflection of the ethical dilemmas that arise in practice and support with resolving those dilemmas.



Some of the problems identified both in the literature and by participants related to problems in the relationship, including lack of support, role confusion and the unwillingness of the worker to reveal any deficiencies in their practice. The last of these was a particular problem in situations where supervisors also had some line responsibility with respect to the worker. It has been noted at various stages of this study that this is more likely to be the case in the kind of statutory settings described above, a factor which may contribute to the less frequent use of reflection on practice and the higher likelihood of directive styles of supervision in those settings

Another aspect of supervision discussed in this study and referred to above as part of the education function of supervision is the transmission of language and culture. Pithouse (1987) described the socialisation into the profession and the agency which is conducted through supervision, including the ways in which workers learn the shared language of the agency and its attitude to other agencies and even clients. This clearly also involves transferring the values and ethic of the organisation to new workers. While Pithouse (1987) highlighted some negative characteristics of this transfer of values, it is an important part of the ethical development of workers and warrants further consideration.

Participants in the focus groups emphasised the importance of workers having a language of ethics, which they saw as vital for workers needing to deconstruct an ethical dilemma, make a decision and be able to articulate the reasons for that decision. Just as the ability to articulate a theoretical framework and explain practice decisions contributes to excellence in practice, workers need that same ability specifically with respect to ethics if they are to develop as independent ethical decision-makers (Banks, 2001; Bowles et al., 2006; Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005). It also became clear that the most appropriate context for the reflection on practice which supports that development to take place is within the

relationship and processes of supervision. Accordingly, one of the challenges facing social work is the provision of ongoing ethical education for workers and supervisors. The next section addresses the relationship between reflection and development of social workers as ethical decision-makers.

#### **9.4.2. The importance of reflection**

During the course of this study, the concept of ethical development has become increasingly important. In the social, economic and political context in which social work now strives to redefine itself (Ife, 1997), being able to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas has become both more difficult and more important for practitioners. Central to the notion of ethical development as it was envisaged at the beginning of this study is the principle that social workers can become more virtuous (or ethical) through practice. The assumption was that social workers can become better at making ethically justifiable decisions about the dilemmas they face in their daily practice through practising making those decisions and continually reflecting on them. This aspect of development reflects the strong connection in virtue ethics between virtue and excellence, so that ethical development and development towards excellence as a social worker can be seen as different aspects of the same process.

This understanding of development has been enhanced through this study to include an acknowledgement of the additional need for workers to acquire the skills and knowledge to develop as ethical decision-makers. In order to continue to develop ethically, workers need an ethical framework to inform their decisions and their ability to articulate those decisions and they need to be supported in their ethical development within the relationship and processes of supervision. The rest of this section deals in more detail with these issues by

returning to the understanding of ethical development which emerged from both the literature review and the focus groups.

One aspect of supervision considered in Chapter 5 was the variety of ways in which supervision supports the development of social workers. One of the most relevant in terms of reflecting on ethical dilemmas which arise in practice is the use of supervision to help workers develop options or alternative approaches to particular problems. While this function often relates to practice decisions, it is also useful in helping workers to develop alternative courses of action to resolve an ethical dilemma. Participants in this study acknowledged that helping workers to develop options is one of their most important roles as supervisors and included it as both part of the overall development of workers and as a critical part of the ethical development of workers. They considered that, alongside learning new skills and being able to use the most appropriate set of skills in different situations, supervision can help workers facing an ethical dilemma to clarify their role and determine the most ethically appropriate course of action. These two aspects of supervision are often combined and can give the worker different perspectives on the same problem.

Also important here is the role of the supervisor in assisting workers to identify and name an ethical dilemma and consider possible solutions. It emerged from the focus groups that this process of reflection consists of naming the particular issue, identifying the various stakeholders and their respective rights and responsibilities and, most importantly, understanding their own role and objectives in the situation. As already noted, participants in the study agreed that the processes of reflection in supervision should not just regard the context as the client's individual or family circumstances, or even the wider socio-economic conditions. Accordingly, supervisors must help workers to define context as broadly as

possible and include factors such as the role of the worker and even the organisation when trying to develop ethical solutions to presenting dilemmas.

This understanding of how supervisors can support the ethical development of social workers also needs to be considered in terms of both the pluralist theoretical approach to social work ethics and the use of the inclusive model of ethical decision-making (Chenoweth & McAuliffe, 2005) described in this study.

### **9.4.3. How can supervision provide the opportunity for the reflection that is critical to that ethical development?**

The previous section of this chapter concluded that social workers with the appropriate virtues, skills and knowledge and with access to an appropriate decision-making model are very likely to develop as autonomous ethical decision-makers. This section focuses on how supervisors can provide the opportunity for that reflection on practice that is critical to their development as ethical decision-makers.

Reflection on practice is critical to all the functions of supervision described in this chapter and throughout the study. In addition, it provides the opportunity for supervisors to extend workers' understanding and insight by incorporating a range of other perspectives and knowledge that are relevant to the dilemma faced. The inclusive model favoured in this study encourages workers to engage in discourse with all elements of an ethical dilemma. These include the individual, group or community with whom they are working, the ethical approaches relevant to the particular dilemma, including resources such as the code of ethics, and a consideration from different ethical perspectives, such as what the consequences might be or what a virtuous person might do in the circumstances.

The supervisory relationship appears to be the most likely place for this reflection and questioning to take place, especially since it also has the potential to provide support for a worker facing a serious dilemma. However, this is based on two central assumptions: firstly, that the supervisor has the virtues, skills and knowledge required to provide the required support and guidance and, secondly, that supervisory relationship is sufficiently robust to support the doubt and questioning that must be part of such reflection. While this may often be the case, the profession needs to take some responsibility for providing the training and other resources that will make these assumptions realistic.

### **9.5. *Future research directions***

This study has extended our understanding of social work ethics in Australia today and the ethical development of workers, as well as the importance of supervision in supporting that development. It has also raised a number of issues that warrant further investigation.

Firstly, there needs to be further investigation into how relevant ethical education for workers and supervisors might be provided, particularly in the hostile environment described by Ife (1997) and later by Payne (2005a), which makes it even more important for social workers to be able to make ethically justifiable decisions and to articulate the basis of those decisions.

Related to this is the issue of how workers are most appropriately and efficiently supported in their ethical development. If, as I have argued in this thesis, it is through the ongoing reflection on practice which takes place in supervision, it may be worth examining how the tensions inherent in supervision can be resolved in ways which nonetheless support the combination of functions it currently undertakes. It will also be important to provide

training in supervision that concentrates as much on the quality of the supervisory relationship as on the functions of supervision.

Finally, further empirical work may be warranted on the ways in which different ethical approaches and models of decision-making combine in Australian social work to improve the quality of ethical practice and how they might be shared with both supervisors and social workers.

# APPENDICES

## *Appendix 1.1: Application for ethics approval*

### APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL RESEARCH PROJECTS WITH HUMAN PARTICIPANTS

#### Attachment to Question 2.6:

#### Detailed Outline of Research Objectives, Research Design and Methodology

This project forms part of my research into ethical practice in social work and the role of supervision and the supervisor in assisting the development of social workers as ethically autonomous practitioners.

The research project itself has a number of **key objectives**:

- To investigate the key issues in social work supervision.
- To investigate the relationship between supervision and ethical development.
- To trial a model for reflection on ethical dilemmas which may be used in supervision.
- To develop that model into a tool which would be helpful for social work supervisors in assisting those they supervise to develop as ethically autonomous practitioners.
- To develop a better theoretical understanding of ethical practice in social work and the processes which assist its development.

Clearly there are a number of assumptions underlying the choices I have made about the nature and the structure of the study and the profile of the participants. The theoretical part of the thesis will describe the important place that supervision has within social work and the ways in which the value base of social work has developed from and stands within various theories of ethics. It will also examine the ways in which considering ethical dilemmas is a central part of the daily practice of social work (Reamer, 1990; Hugman and Smith, 1995). I argue that the process of ongoing reflection which leads to the development of ethically autonomous practitioners is most logically located within supervision and that there are ways of assisting supervisors with facilitating that development.

Because the objectives of the study are fairly complex and interrelated, the research design itself has a number of elements. In basic terms, I intend to use a combination of qualitative and action research methods. The major focus is a qualitative study whose aim is to construct a theoretical understanding of ethical development in social work and the role of supervision in that development. The use of qualitative methods is consistent with the manner in which knowledge develops within social work, as in other fields. There are also parallels between the processes of reflection in supervision and those inherent in the interview processes which are part of qualitative research (Minichiello, 1995).

In addition, I will use action research methods in the sense that participants will be presented with a practice model for dealing with a particular aspect of supervision and will be asked to trial that model. They will then return and we will reflect on its effectiveness and make changes according to the experience of the trial. In addition, the new understanding gained

through this action research exercise will contribute to the theoretical development which is central to the qualitative research process

If we examine the respective processes of these two approaches, there are significant similarities. Qualitative research builds theories through a series of processes of studying the literature, collecting data, analysing that data and testing it against the literature and, finally, building a new theory (Strauss and Corbin, 1990). In action research, too, the starting point is usually the existing literature or practice wisdom. We then move through the development of a new approach, testing it in practice, evaluating that trial and, finally, deciding on the relative usefulness of the new approach (Stringer, 1996). In both cases, the final point of any given study or process should be regarded as simply the next stage in the overall theoretical and/or practice development, but there has been an increase in the overall body of knowledge in a particular area (Atkinson, Shakespeare and French, 1993; Crotty, 1998)

Quite early in the research process, I decided to use focus groups as the central element in my project. Focus groups are a widely accepted method within qualitative research and will give me the greatest access to the views of experienced social workers who are also supervisors. In addition, my experience with similar groups is that the interaction itself between the participants produces an amount and quality of data that is less likely to be achieved in individual interviews. I also believe that experienced workers are more likely to participate if the project includes the opportunity for them to discuss these important issues with a group of their peers (Platt, 1981).

I propose the following research design. The format for the focus groups is included in this outline.

### **FOCUS GROUP I**

It is expected that there will be three groups, run in three consecutive weeks. The duration of each group will be 1½ to 2 hours.

#### **Introduction**

- Welcome participants, thank them for attending and ask them to introduce themselves and say a few words about their practice setting and role.
- Restate purpose of study, outline the proposed structure of the project and check whether any participants have questions before commencement.
- Remind participants about confidentiality and the need to respect other participants. Check that all participants have completed and given to me their Informed Consent forms.

#### **Discussion**

- What are the issues that arise most often when you are supervising workers?
- What are the most difficult issues that arise when you are supervising workers?
- To what extent do the workers you supervise use supervision to assess or reflect on the ethical dilemmas that arise in their practice?
- To what extent do you think they make decisions about ethical dilemmas on the basis of that assessment/reflection?
- How do you go about helping workers with the assessment of/reflection on ethical dilemmas?



## **Presentation of Model**

- Brief explanation of how training workers in reflecting on ethical dilemmas can assist their ethical development.
- Description of a range of possible questions that they could ask both themselves and those they supervise with respect to ethical dilemmas.
- Answer any questions participants may have about the model itself or how they will trial it.

## **THE TRIAL**

Participants will be asked to use this model of questioning during the 6 months between groups when ethical dilemmas arise during the normal course of supervising workers.

They will also be asked to think about the usefulness of the model in helping those they supervise to make ethical decisions and to become more able to reflect on ethical dilemmas in a systematic manner.

## **FOCUS GROUP II**

As far as possible, participants will be placed in the same group as before. Again the duration of the groups will be 1½ to 2 hours, with the three groups being run in consecutive weeks.

### **Introduction**

- Welcome participants and thank them for returning. Remind them of the need to maintain confidentiality.

### **Feedback**

- Ask participants if they trialled the model and if they have any feedback to share on its effectiveness.
- Were any parts more useful than any others?
- If they used it consistently with a particular worker or workers, what was the outcome?
- Did they change or develop any part of the model?
- Did they combine the model with any other approaches?
- Did they use alternative ways of dealing with ethical dilemmas?
- Did knowing about the model make them more aware of or more likely to ask about the ethical dilemmas facing their supervisees?

### **Further Development**

- Do participants see the model as helpful?
- How might it be improved?
- Do participants wish to add any comments about the whole notion of the ethical development of social workers?

### **Debriefing**

- Do participants wish to make any comments about taking part in the study?

- Were any aspects difficult for them in any way?
- Does anything still need to be resolved?

### **Conclusion**

- Thank participants for taking part in the study.
- Inform participants of the proposed course of the remainder of the study.
- Undertake to get some feedback to them within a certain time e.g. 2 months.

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**Appendix 1.2: Notification of Ethics Approval**



COPY

AUSTRALIAN CATHOLIC UNIVERSITY

HUMAN RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE  
ETHICS CLEARANCE FOR A RESEARCH PROJECT – APPROVAL FORM

Supervisor:	Assoc. Prof. P Camilleri, Signadou Campus
Student Researcher:	Ms M McCann, Signadou Campus
HREC Number:	N2000/01-15
Project Title:	<b>SUPERVISION FOR ETHICAL PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK.</b>

Ethics clearance has been granted for the project:

For the period: 01/03/2001 to 01/03/2002

subject to the following conditions as stipulated in the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans, 1999*, issued by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NHMRC) in accordance with the NHMRC Act, 1992 (Cth).

- b) that principal investigators provide reports annually, on the form supplied by the Institutional Ethics Committee, on matters including:
- security of records
  - compliance with approved consent procedures and documentation
  - compliance with other special conditions; and
- b) as a condition of approval of the protocol, require that investigators report immediately anything which might affect ethical acceptance of the protocol, including:
- adverse effects on subjects
  - proposed changes in the protocol
  - Unforeseen events that might affect continued ethical acceptability of the project

The Committee received the application (ref: HREC2000/189) and reviewed it in detail. The following matters were noted for forwarding to the Supervisor:

- Section 5.2(b): Data must be stored on ACU premises in a locked cabinet for a minimum period of five years following the completion of the study.
- Letter to Participants: Please mention the statement of confidentiality that participants are to sign (see 6.2.c of the application form).

**A Final Report Form will need to be completed and submitted to the University Human Research Ethics Committee within one month of the completion of the project.**

Mount Saint Mary Campus 25A Bsrker Road, Strathfield NSW 2135 • Locked Bag 2002, Strathfield NSW 2135, Australia  
Telephone: (61 2) 9739 2100 Facsimile: (61 2) 9739 2105

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**Appendix 2.1: Flier**

**SUPERVISION  
and  
ETHICS  
in  
SOCIAL WORK**

**Social Work Supervisors are wanted to take part in 2 Focus Groups,  
One in April/May and one in October/November 2001.**

These groups are part of the research being undertaken by **Marian McCann** towards her **PhD within the School of Social Work at the Australian Catholic University**

Supervisors will have the opportunity to discuss with a group of their peers the kinds of issues that arise for them as supervisors, particularly with respect to ethical matters.

They will also be given and asked to make suggestions about the draft of a model for helping the social workers they supervise to reflect on the ethical dilemmas that arise for them in their practice.

After trialling the model for about six months, supervisors will be invited to a second focus group. Again, they will be given the opportunity of reflecting with their peers on its usefulness and making suggestions about how it might be improved.

This combination of action research and qualitative research will provide participants with a unique opportunity for being involved in the development of supervision theory.

If you are interested, please contact:

**Marian McCann** Ph: 6295 4314(bh) 0407 295 784(mob) 6254 2368(ah)

**Or fax this sheet back and you will be contacted. FAX: 6239 7171**Questioning route

- I wish to participate in the study "Supervision and Ethics in Social Work"
- I would like more information about the study "Supervision and Ethics in Social Work"

Name:.....Agency:.....  
Telephone:.....(bh).....(mob).....(ah)  
Email:.....

## **Appendix 2.2: Letter to participants**

(ACU National letterhead)

*TITLE OF PROJECT: SUPERVISION FOR ETHICAL PRACTICE IN  
SOCIAL WORK*

**RESEARCHER: MARIAN McCANN**

**Dear .....**

Thank you for your interest in participating in this project, which forms part of my postgraduate research within the School of Social Work at the Australian Catholic University, Signadou Campus.

The purpose of this study is to investigate how supervision is used in social work to reflect on the ethical dilemmas which occur in everyday practice. The study will be based on two focus groups, approximately six months apart. Participants will be asked to trial, between the groups, a model for helping workers to reflect on and make decisions about ethical dilemmas.

Participants will all be experienced social workers who provide professional supervision for other social workers. While participation in the study will require a commitment of time, it is expected that there will be some benefit in terms of having the opportunity to discuss these issues with senior colleagues from other agencies. There are no foreseen risks or adverse effects.

Each focus group will take between one and two hours and the groups will be approximately six months apart. Trialling the model for ethical reflection between groups should not involve any extra time, as participants will already be committed to supervising staff during that period.

This study should increase supervisors' understanding of the processes of reflection on ethical dilemmas and their place in supervision. It is in the nature of social work to deal with people at the most vulnerable periods in their lives or, alternatively, with the most vulnerable members of society. It is of utmost importance that the social work service provided is as ethical as possible. Increasing ethical decision-making in social work has potential benefits for the profession as a whole and for its clients in a variety of settings.

If you decide to participate in the study, you will be asked to sign a consent form before its commencement. It is important that you understand that you are free to withdraw your consent or to stop participating in the study at any time without giving a reason. This consent form includes a statement of confidentiality with respect to the proceedings of the group.

Any questions regarding this study may be directed to me, Marian McCann, on 6295 4314 or to my supervisor, Associate Professor Peter Camilleri, Head, School of Social Work, Australian Catholic University on 6209 1110.

This study has been approved by University Research Projects Ethics Committee of the Australian Catholic University.

In the event that you have any complaint about the way you are treated during the study, or a query that the researcher or her supervisor are unable to satisfy, you may write care of the nearest Office of Research of the University. This address is available from the Reception Desk at Signadou Campus, Watson, ACT. Any complaint made will be treated in confidence, investigated fully and the participant informed of the outcome.

If you agree to participating in this study, please sign both copies of the Informed Consent form, retain one copy for your records and return the other copy to the researcher.

Marian McCann  
School of Social Work  
Australian Catholic University  
223 Antill Street  
WATSON ACT 2602

Thank you in anticipation

Marian McCann

**Appendix 2.3: Consent form**

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT:

**SUPERVISION FOR ETHICAL PRACTICE IN SOCIAL WORK .....**

NAME OF RESEARCHER (if student) :

**MARIAN McCANN**

*I ..... (the participant) have read and understood the information provided in the Letter to the Participants and any questions I have asked have been answered to my satisfaction. I agree to participate in this activity, realizing that I can withdraw at any time*

*I agree that research data collected for the study may be published or provided to other researchers in a form that does not identify me in any way.*

NAME OF PARTICIPANT .....  
(block letters)

SIGNATURE .....

DATE.....

NAME OF RESEARCHER (if student) **MARIAN McCANN.....**  
(block letters)

SIGNATURE .....

DATE.....

## **Appendix 3.1: Questioning route, Session 1**

### **QUESTIONING ROUTE**

### **FOCUS GROUP I**

#### **\*Opening/Introductory**

1. \*Welcome. Thank you for coming
2. \*Many of you already know each other, but could you please introduce yourselves, say where you work and give us some idea of how long you have been a supervisor?

#### **\*Transition**

3. \*What are the kinds of issues that come up most often when you are supervising?
4. \*Which issues are the most difficult for you as a supervisor?

#### **\*Key Questions**

5. \*What would help you as a supervisor deal with these difficult issues?
6. \*What do you use now to help workers reflect on the ethical dilemmas they encounter in their practice?
7. \*I would like to suggest a simple framework for reflection that may help with these issues. [Run through typical questions; Point out that others may be relevant in different situations] What do you think of this framework?

#### **\*Ending Questions**

8. \*Can you suggest anything that is not in the framework for reflection that might improve it?
9. \*Can you think of any problems you might have trying this framework with social workers you supervise?
10. \*Is there anything you want to add before you try the framework for reflection?



### Appendix 3.2: Model for reflection on practice

What are my concerns? (examples)	Questions to assist worker's reflection	Supporting resources/issues
Worker seems to be taking one part in conflict between child/parents	What is your role in this situation? Who is your client?	}The agency's target/client group }Agency's parameters re service delivery
	Are there any other stakeholders? Other possible or likely beneficiaries?	}
	What are you trying to achieve with this intervention?	}Any statutory responsibilities?
	What might be the effects of taking one side?	
Worker is giving home phone number to clients	Why are you giving out your number?	}Agency policies and procedures }
	How else might this result be achieved?	}Notion of "professionalism" – Code of }Ethics etc
	Can you think of any problems that might arise from the clients having your phone number?	}Level of responsibility to clients? }Respect for clients? }
	How will you be able to deal with any problems that arise?	}
		}
Worker seems to be developing a friendship (or an antagonistic relationship) with the client	From my perspective, your relationship with X seems to be changing. Do you think it is?	} <b>Code of Ethics:</b> 1.Dual relationships, }boundaries etc
	Do you think this might create any difficulties for X? Or if they say "no", If I think it is changing, is there any chance that X might think so too?	} } 2. Respect for clients } }
	Do you think this might be confusing for X?	}
	Do you think you can you maintain a professional relationship if there is any confusion of roles?	}
	How might you return this relationship to a purely professional one?	}

## **Appendix 3.3: Questioning route, Session 2**

### **\*QUESTIONING ROUTE**

### **FOCUS GROUP II**

#### **\*Opening/Introductory**

1. \*Welcome. Thank you for coming back

#### **\*Transition**

2. \*In the last 6 months, have you been able to use the framework we looked at last time?
3. \*Did you find it helpful?

#### **\*Key Questions**

4. \*Can you tell me how you used it?      What kind of issues/situations?  
Different questions?
5. \*Were there any situations in which the framework was unhelpful or unsuitable? Why?  
What sort of situations were they?
6. \*How could the framework be improved?
7. \*Are there any other tools or resources that were or would have been useful?

#### **\*Ending Questions**

8. \*After going through this whole process, what do you think are the key issues we covered?
9. \*Is there anything you think is important that we haven't discussed?

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