

RIGHTS AND WRONGS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE: WHO GETS TO SAY?

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In a recent research on ethical decision-making in social work, five determinants that influence decision-making were identified and this presentation will discuss one of them: that decisions are defined by the effectiveness of legitimation of choices. In her research, the author aimed to explore, how social workers in Slovenian statutory social work services make decisions and what is considered to be ethical social work practice from the perspective of practitioners. The main question to be answered was not what do social workers do, but how they do it and why they choose to do it as they do. The study combined 15 half-structured interviews, participant observations, online questionnaire (N=412) and 30 narrative interviews. The core collected data (narrative interviews) were analysed with documentary method which made it possible to distinguish between theories, norms and intentions, between acts and practices, which are habitualized and not intentional. The analysis showed that decision-making in social work practice is not a predominantly rational or rule-based endeavour, where choices are a result of the calculation of the best options (for the 'recipient' of the decision), but a continued negotiation process – between different voices, interests, powers, and values. The main concern of the decision-maker is usually not whether the decision is ethical or not, but whether it is 'right' from the perspective of acceptability, implementation, and legitimation. Building on moral intuitions, judgements, and emotions, social workers enter relationships and negotiation processes (entailing different uncertainties, as well as different interests) with service users and authorities (managers, other professionals, legislation, resources), and make choices based on the optimal combination of possibilities and consequences. For ethical practice and accountability in social work, education approaches and support in practice are of crucial importance, as this presentation will also aim to show.