British Journal of Social Work (2019) **0**, 1–18
doi: 10.1093/bjsw/bcz106

Searching for Virtue Ethics: A Survey of Social Work Ethics Curriculum and Educators

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Abstract

This article discusses whether, and to what extent, virtue ethics is covered in the social work ethics curriculum and views of social work ethics educators in Australia. Drawing on a survey of social work ethics curriculum and education, it presents the nature and scope of social work ethics subjects in terms of learning outcomes; overall curriculum content; textbooks used; teaching approaches, challenges and strategies for teaching; and social work ethics educators' views about teaching virtue ethics. It argues that attention to virtues is largely absent in terms of consciously developing certain qualities and character. The findings, conclusions and implications of the study will be useful to social work researchers, educators and practitioners alike.

Keywords: character and qualities, social work ethics curriculum, social work education, social work educators and students, virtue ethics

Accepted: August 2019

BASW
The professional association for social work and social workers
www.basw.co.uk

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Introduction

The main objective of this article is to find out whether and to what extent virtue ethics, or the development of ethical qualities and character of social workers, is covered in the social work ethics curriculum in Australia and what social work ethics educators think about the role of virtues in social work ethics learning and teaching. In simple terms, virtues are qualities, character, good habits or attributes of practitioners that help them to achieve excellence in their practice. In social work practice, the concept of virtues is constructed by linking values/principles, and qualities and attributes with roles and functions (Hugman and Smith, 1995; McBeath and Webb, 2002; Pawar *et al.*, 2017). Pawar *et al.* (2017) state,

> virtues are an integration of values or principles, qualities or attributes, roles and functions of a social worker in a broad sense. In other words, virtues are a relative mix of values, roles and functions buttressed by certain qualities and attributes that are consistently—in tangible and intangible ways—expressed and observed through actions and inactions in terms of emotions, words, deeds, outputs and outcomes. (p. 5)

Drawing on a survey of social work ethics curricula and the perceptions of social work ethics educators in Australia, this article presents the nature and scope of social work ethics subjects in terms of learning outcomes, overall curriculum content, textbooks used, teaching approaches, challenges and strategies for teaching and assessment methods and practices. It also discusses social work ethics educators' views about teaching virtue ethics. Overall, it argues that there is no conclusive evidence to suggest whether or not virtue ethics is covered in social work ethics subjects, given the above conceptualisation of virtue. Virtue ethics is addressed in terms of values and principles, whereas attention to virtues is largely absent in terms of consciously developing certain qualities and character, though the development of some qualities may occur naturally. Furthermore, in-depth research is needed to explore the place of virtue ethics in social work ethics subjects.

Virtues in social work ethics

It has been argued that virtue ethics has remained largely ignored by social work ethics. In a key paper, McBeath and Webb (2002) asserted that social work ethics was caught in a continuous debate between Kantian deontology and consequentialism, especially in the form of utilitarianism. Other writers in the discipline similarly argue that, if not totally excluding attention to virtues, social work ethics tends to be tilted markedly towards deontology and consequentialism as dominant paradigms (Hugman, 2005, 2014; Bowles *et al.*, 2006, p. 61; Gray and Lovat, 2007; Banks, 2008, 2012; Webb, 2010; Pawar, 2014; Pawar and Anscombe, 2015). Whilst the inclusion of ‘professional integrity’ in recent iterations of some applied documents such as the Australian (AASW, 2010) and British codes (BASW, 2012) suggests moves to reconsidering this emphasis, virtue approaches continue to be an under-examined aspect of social work ethics. Similarly, although some textbooks (Bowles *et al.*, 2006; Banks and Gallagher, 2009; Hugman, 2014; McAuliffe, 2014; Pawar, 2014; Pawar and Anscombe, 2015) make some reference to virtue ethics, it remains unclear to what extent virtue ethics is part of the social work ethics curriculum and what social work ethics educators think about it. Yet, those who discuss this aspect of ethics largely argue that explicitly focusing on virtues, qualities and character of social worker’s being/self can help to correct that tilt and so contribute to a more effective understanding of ethics for practice (Hugman and Smith, 1995; Clark, 2000, 2005; McBeath and Webb, 2002, p. 1,020; Hugman, 2005; Bowles *et al.*, 2006; Gray and Lovat, 2007; Banks, 2012). In an earlier discussion, we have argued that it is vital to strengthen certain qualities and virtues as an integral part of social workers’ being/self to serve people better (Pawar *et al.*, 2017). In view of this frequent gap in the literature and to explore the possibility that virtue ethics is largely ignored, the survey discussed in this article set out to explore the curriculum content of social work ethics subjects and to ascertain social work ethics educators’ views about learning and teaching of virtue ethics to social work students. The specific research questions were as follows:

1. What is the curriculum content of social work ethics subjects?
2. What are the resources and learning/teaching methods used to teach social work ethics subjects?
3. What is the extent to which virtue ethics is covered in the social work ethics curriculum and explicitly taught to social work students?

Research method

Using a semi-structured qualitative survey approach (Padgett, 1998; Pawar, 2004; Liamputtong, 2013), data were collected from two sources for this study. First, an open-ended questionnaire was mailed to all social work ethics educators at the then thirty-two Australian accredited schools of social work offering bachelors and qualifying masters programmes recognised by the Australian Association of Social Workers (AASW). The questionnaire covered broad areas of teaching resources and methods, ethics curriculum content, coverage of virtue ethics, assessment practices and the professional background of respondents.

Twenty-two completed questionaries were returned, which is 68.75 per cent of the possible tertiary providers. These included one each from the Australian Capital Territory, Northern Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia, two from South Australia, five from New South Wales, six from Queensland and five from Victoria. This is approximately proportional to the distribution of programmes across the country. In addition to completing the questionnaire, the respondents were asked to provide their social work ethics curriculum, which was the second source of data. In addition, the social work ethics curriculum was directly downloaded from the publicly accessible website of another university. Of the twenty-two questionnaire respondents, no ethics curriculum was received from three universities as they did not have a separate ethics curriculum and it was spread across several subjects, whilstothers had separate curricula at bachelors and masters levels. Professional qualifying programmes in social work are offered at both bachelors (BSW) and masters (MSW(Q)) levels in Australia. This sample includes both levels without distinguishing between them, as the requirements for accreditation are the same at both levels with regard to ethics education (AASW, 2012). Altogether, twenty-two social work ethics curricula (fifteen BSW and seven MSW) were collected. This research was conducted according to research ethics guidelines approved by the Charles Sturt University's Human Research Ethics Committee (protocol no: 2014/057), which conforms to internationally and professionally accepted ethical guidelines.

Both data sets, questionnaire and social work ethics curriculum, were analysed manually (Williamson *et al.*, 1977; Mayring, 2000). Some basic descriptive statistics about the respondents were tabulated. Responses to the open-ended questions were then analysed inductively by identifying/developing appropriate themes and categories. However, as is consistent with a semi-structured survey questionnaire, most of the responses were very brief, so the following discussion is not able to present direct quotes but rather works with the inductive readings of responses in comparison with the curricula documents provided or obtained. Objectives and outcomes, curriculum content, assessments and suggested and prescribed reading material were considered. Each social work ethics curriculum was examined to explore whether virtue ethics and/or the development of character or qualities is covered. In addition, specific terms such as virtue(s), values, character, qualities, principles, social justice, human rights, professional identity, professional integrity, relational ethics and Aristotle were searched for as the concept of virtue can be linked to these terms.

The following findings need to be read with an awareness of the limitations of this research approach. In particular, the detail and depth of responses to the questionnaire greatly varied. Also, some responses were provided after a prompt reminder was sent out and, although this is normal in a postal survey, it is not possible to identify if this had any effect on the answers that were returned. Then, as with any qualitative study, it must be acknowledged that the content of curricula has been explored inductively, so that the ideas and meanings identified by the research team must be seen as their reading of the data. Since most of the curriculum covered the AASW code of ethics and the code contains both implicit and explicit elements of some virtue ethics, it is possible that some educators consider that these have been included by reference to the code. To overcome the weakness in this research approach, the questionnaire directly asked ethics educators whether and how they cover virtue ethics in their social work ethics learning and teaching. We consider that the analysis of these data sets together enable us to draw some tentative conclusions about our objectives and research questions. At the same time, further research is suggested to look in more depth at some of these questions.

Background of participants

To understand the background of those providing ethics education in Australian social work programmes, some basic descriptive statistics were collected in respect of the age, sex, location and qualifications of the respondents. As in some categories, some respondents did not answer, in each case we focus on the percentages although the total number of twenty-two responses is small.

First, 60 per cent were aged fifty-five years and over, with a further 20 per cent aged between fifty and fifty-four years; none were younger than forty-four years. Over two-thirds, 68 per cent, had taught it for six - years or more (including 28 per cent of the total actually teaching it for eleven years or more). Broadly speaking, ethics is taught by very experienced social work educators.

Secondly, the figures suggest that social work educators' teaching ethics do not quite match the profile of social work in Australia. Fifty-seven per cent of participants were female and 43 per cent were male, which possibly overemphasises men. Sixty-two per cent of the participants' universities were located in urban areas, 19 per cent in regional areas and the same proportion in rural areas (which possibly overemphasises regional and rural social work education). In addition, all but one person had a Bachelor of Social Work, with 73 per cent of the total having a Ph.D. and 27 per cent holding a master's degree as their highest qualification. The only educator not qualified as a social worker also held a Ph.D. Sixty-four per cent were members of the AASW, whilst 36 per cent were not. In addition to a common social work disciplinary background, a small number of them also related their disciplinary backgrounds to sociology, community education, legal education, nursing, law, management, education, humanities, political science or science.

Social work ethics subjects

Whilst each programme has its own title for the ethics subject, they can be divided into two equally sized groups: those that are 'stand-alone' (teaching only ethics) and those that are 'combined' (including ethics with one or more other topics). Of the stand-alone subjects, all the educators stated that in addition ethics is also covered in an embedded way across the social work curriculum, although there was no noticeable pattern in relation to the specific subjects. In the combined subjects, the most frequent other topic is law (with 36 per cent of the total being combined ethics and law subjects). Just over half of these are in qualifying masters programmes (4/7), which relate at least partly to the scope of two-year rather than four-year time frames. In other respects, the differences between BSW and MSW programmes are not so great and subject outlines revealed only minor variance in assessment tasks and outcomes, whilst most of the content by and large remained the same. Thus, it can be said that there are two broad ways of configuring ethics subjects in social work programmes.

Goals of ethics subjects

In the subject outlines, the goals are usually stated in terms of learning outcomes. In the twenty-two social work ethics subject outlines that were obtained, altogether 128 outcomes were identified. Our inductive reading of these materials suggests that these outcomes may be categorised under eleven broad areas. Some of these goals are not focused on ethics as such (which might be expected given the combined structure of some curricula), including 'knowledge of theories' and 'organisational and legal contexts of practice'. The others that were explicitly ethics focused were as follows:

- Understanding of dilemmas/issues.
- Understanding philosophy relating to ethics.
- Ethical decision-making framework/models.
- Reflecting on/thinking about self-values and professional values.
- Justifying/defending/reasoning.
- Identifying values and principles in the code of ethics.
- Identifying, critiquing and assessing values and principles.
- Ethical aspects relating to cultural competency.
- Application of the code of ethics.

Within these goals, there was also frequent mention of learning about specific ethical principles, predominantly human rights and social justice.

Most of the curricula aimed to achieve the outcome of identifying, understanding and analysing ethical dilemmas/issues/challenges in a range of practice contexts, including legal and organisational. In some subject outlines, a broad understanding of philosophy and different philosophical views relating to ethics was sought. Many goals focused on helping students to develop critical awareness of overall context in which they work, particularly with reference to their implications for practice. In relation to this, a small number of outcomes focused on ethical aspects relating to working with Aboriginal population groups, multicultural populations in diverse contexts, cultural appropriateness and knowledge. Other outcomes related to exploring the nature of power and its implications, the evolution of the human rights regime, factors behind access to justice, generic practice skills, social action and the integration of social work theories and the development of professional identity. It was stated in many subjects that at the end of the study, the subject would expect students to critically understand ethical decision-making models/frameworks and apply them in resolving ethical issues, including the development of the ability to reason, defend and justify certain solutions/decisions/options in the light of ethical considerations. Some outcomes stated in the documents suggested the significance of examining or reflecting on one's own values and professional values, and personal and professional self. So, in broad terms, there is an emphasis on ethical reasoning and decision-making, with a goal of developing responsible and accountable practice, although this was not seen in all subjects.

Curriculum content

The analysis of the curricula documents revealed extreme diversity in the topics included in the subject. The accrediting body, the AASW, does not specify how ethics should be taught or the amount of coverage that the subject should have in a curriculum, so this may not be surprising (AASW, 2012). Altogether 146 different topics were identified, the most common curriculum topic was ethical decision-making models or frameworks (in all but two documents), followed by AASW code of ethics (59 per cent). Other content occurring across curricula included ethical dilemmas, ethical theories, human rights, organisational context, legal context and social justice, each at approximately 36 per cent. Importantly for this project, only four subject outlines explicitly included the topic of virtue ethics. There was a further group of topics that each occurred only in three instances (including feminist ethics, postmodern ethics and critical theory).

About half of the educators used the concept/theories relating to deontology, utilitarianism and virtue ethics. This may be expected, as it matches the structure of the AASW (2010) Code of Ethics, which is based on ‘human dignity and worth’, ‘social justice’ and ‘professional integrity’. Teaching approaches differed, with a number of social work ethics educators utilising the code of ethics, whereas a smaller number drew on specific theoretical perspectives such as critical social work, anti-oppressive practice and human rights. There were also a few educators who taught ethics and law either together as a subject or by linking ethics to legislation. Ethical decision-making as an overarching concept for framing the ethics, the subject was noted by the majority of participants.

Interestingly, a majority (59 per cent) of the curricula used elements of virtue ethics, such as respect, integrity and character, but at the same time, there was only a very occasional reference to the overall concept as such (occurring once in each of four documents).

Textbooks

We also inquired about the main literature/textbooks used to teach such diverse social work ethics curriculum content. In about one-quarter of subject outlines, no textbook was prescribed. In the remaining subject outlines, seventeen prescribed textbooks or other reading material was stated. Social work ethics educators listed fifty-six main literature/textbooks and they draw on to teach social work ethics. Amongst these, just six books occurred in five or more curricula, and of these, five were by Australian authors: Bowles *et al.* (2006), AASW (2010), Ife (2008), Chenoweth and McAuliffe (2014) and McAuliffe (2014). The other is from the UK (Banks, 2012).

The long lists of materials show that social work ethics educators use a vast array of texts and readings to support their teaching across their ethics subjects. These texts ranged from human service ethics, moral philosophy, law, social work and human service values and human rights. However, this is only a partial picture as in most of the subject outlines educators had prescribed and recommended reading lists that included textbooks, journal articles and websites according to weekly topics, which have not been analysed here. In one subject outline, only philosophy-related references were found. The literature and textbooks listed were as diverse as the curriculum content (see above). However, this summary indicates in general terms the most common resources used to teach social work ethics.

Approaches to teaching social work ethics

Although, as with other elements, social work ethics educators used a wide range of approaches to teach ethics to students. In total, eighteen were identified, but of these, three broad approaches stand out by being used in five or six instances each. First, some provide a broad overview of ethical theories, critical reasoning and then move on to AASW code of ethics, dilemmas and decision-making. Secondly, some were grounded in human rights and social justice, anti-oppressive practice and critical theory and then focus on the content of the code of ethics. Thirdly, some others focused on law, courts, ethics and organisational contexts. Although the depth and breadth may differ, most of them covered the AASW code of ethics emphasising values and principles, ethical dilemmas and decision-making. This variation may be due to the way the subject curriculum is constructed; as already stated, some offered social work ethics as a stand-alone subject, whereas others merged with social work theory or law depending upon curriculum space constraints.

When asked to suggest the best way to teach the social work ethics subject, most participants (68 per cent) felt case studies offered students the ability to immerse themselves in practice examples to stimulate thinking about ethical issues and dilemmas in a way they had not previously done. There were comments made around how the students benefitted from having to think about actual cases, so that they could apply the theory and ethical frameworks to real people in situations of vulnerability. Coupling case studies with theoretical knowledge and reflective practice were common. Other, less frequent, approaches included practitioners discussing practice, either as a guest speaker or the teacher discussing her/his own practice (27 per cent). Raising students' awareness of their own values is also a shared method of teaching ethics education (27 per cent). Others were of the view that the use of the online environment, reflection, placements, activities concerning Indigenous Australians and challenging assessments facilitates ethics teaching (between one and four in each case). It was also generally seen as important for educators to model ethical practice through the teaching, valuing the lived experience of students and not teaching specific ideological preferences.

Challenges and strategies for teaching social work ethics

Educators stated a diverse range of challenges to teaching social work ethics to students. Some of these challenges may be attributed to students, some to educators and some relating to resources. Lack of resources in terms of time, space and logistical issues, and dated reading materials was stated in seven responses. Other instances included: AASW course requirements caused difficulty in fitting it all in; prevailing neo-liberalism focusing on fiscal outcomes appearing to have diminished the significance of ethics.

To some educators, the challenge of teaching ethics emanates from students not knowing what an ethical dilemma is, how to apply theory to practice and not understanding ethical theories. Helping students to differentiate between decision-making and judgement, and understanding the differences between religious and moral beliefs and ethics is also challenging. Some educators find it difficult to help students identify their own views and lived experiences and how to challenge/change them. It is also challenging to remain non-judgmental about a range of students' beginning values and cultural differences and be inclusive. Dealing with emotional responses to sensitive issues also poses additional challenges to educators. In practical terms, a lack of basic academic skills adding to difficulties and the challenges faced by online and international learners were also mentioned by one participant each.

Across the range of participants, the strategies suggested for dealing with these challenges can be divided broadly into four groups. First, just over half mentioned using case studies for group work, assessments, quizzes and so on. Secondly, encouraging and enabling students to engage in critical reflection, situating ideas with their sense of self, understanding 'ethics as a way of being' and social work as being 'driven by ethics' also were identified by just over half. Thirdly, a small number of emphasised modelling discourse and debate, getting groups to establish group rules and respecting students as learners were all important learning strategies. A further smaller number addressed practical approaches, such as inviting guest lecturers and partnering with the field (with some implied connections to the ideas of case examples as a learning device). One person clearly stated that using an explicit framework of human rights-based practice provided the means to address ethics, and one person advocated using virtue ethics in a similar way.

Most of the respondents mentioned more than one way of overcoming challenges. Given the small numbers, it is not possible to identify any overarching pattern. Indeed, the one common feature (as with other aspects of this survey) is that the diversity reflects the independence and creativity of social work educators in constructing the subjects they teach based on what is, in effect, a national curriculum framework (AASW, 2012).

Coverage of virtues/character/qualities in social work ethics teaching

As the survey discussed in this article is part of a larger project on virtue ethics in social work, we were particularly interested to see whether their teaching focuses on developing virtues/character/qualities in social workers and how this is achieved in the classroom. Moreover, we looked at the question of 'if it is not covered in the teaching, is there any need to include it and how it can be done?'

Less than one-quarter of the respondents clearly stated that their social work ethics focuses on developing virtues/qualities/character in social workers and less than one-fifth of them taught by focusing on values. Nearly, 10 per cent of social work ethics educators categorically stated that their teaching does not cover the development of virtues/qualities/character and a similar percentage of educators stated that it is an ideal that they strive for to some degree but that more could be done. The remaining educators provided differing responses that included focusing on social work ethics, professional integrity, pluralist approaches, qualities, knowledge and skills, ethical thinking, 'doing the right thing' and qualities, knowledge and skills. Based on these responses, it may be inferred that about half of the schools do not focus on developing virtues/qualities/character in terms of attributes in social work ethics education. Yet the majority of social work educators were of the view that it is necessary to have this perspective, regarding virtues/qualities as having a role in social work practice and that 'what social workers are' is as important as 'what they do'.

Respondents identified an extensive range of teaching methods used to develop qualities and virtues. These are as follows:

- Challenging students' assumptions in relations to particular issues/values.
- Students exploring what it means to be a good social worker.
- Discussion on the use of self.
- Modelling and applying professional values and ethics to teaching and their interactions with students and other staff members.
- By example and by demonstrating, the kind of public discourse and debate expected of students as well as how programmes are run.
- Creating an environment that models relationships, which are respectful, assertive, and considerate of each other.
- Identifying what constitutes the qualities of social worker who has integrity (and what the opposing qualities might be).
- Reflecting on the values they drew upon to make decisions, what conflicts they experienced in this process and what this might say about their own beliefs, qualities and priorities.
- Seeing ethics as the value base that motivates practice.
- Comparing the code of ethics and human virtue and direction as a starting point.
- Emphasising the character of a social worker that is guided by the code of ethics.
- Relating it back to living out the core values of social work.

The above list suggests that there are many innovative and creative ways of teaching ethics that develop or strengthen certain qualities. Given that majority of social work ethics educators in our survey expressed the view that it is important to have a virtue perspective in social work ethics training and about half of the schools seem to be missing such a perspective suggest that there is a need to develop and provide virtue-led practice training for social work and human services professionals.

The majority of social work ethics educators thought that it is possible to embed a life-long commitment to the development of virtues in social work students. To achieve this, they offered various strategies. Two themes in particular were prominent: professional development and supervision. In contrast, three educators (14 per cent) thought that it is not possible to embed a life-long commitment to the development of virtues. One suggested that there is a portion of students who come to social work with hidden agendas and these people are not capable of change in their behaviours to allow them to develop assumed positive qualities: for example, a sexual predator. Another educator doubted whether empathy that is felt inwardly by the student can be taught through ethics. In the third respondent's view, there was simply not enough space in the course to impact personal development in this way, although two others thought this is possible, even if it is a difficult task.

Discussion

The main purpose of this study was to find out whether and to what extent virtue ethics is included in social work ethics subjects and what social work ethics educators think about teaching virtue ethics. Towards that end, this review of social work ethics curricula and analysis of views of social work ethics educators presents a mixed result. In social work programmes, the ethics subject is covered in one or the other form, whether a subject fully focusing on ethics, combined with another subject or integrated within other subjects. The data also show that social work ethics is an important subject in the social work curriculum, in so far as most educators do not offer credit to the subject simply because a student has completed a similar subject elsewhere.

There is a great diversity in the social work ethics curricula and educational approaches, though most of the educators belong to the same generation in terms of their age and socio-political socialisation. Possibly, this comes from each educator's knowledge base and ideology, so that preferences for particular topics vary. Such divergence across ethics curricula may suggest a markedly different understanding of ethics acquired by students and so may create differences in ethical decision-making in practice. This appears to place great weight on the professional code of ethics to provide coherence and consistency, which reflects the accreditation standards that apply to all these programmes (AASW, 2012).

The analysis of subject outcomes revealed no explicit reference to the development of qualities or character of social workers, though some outcomes aimed to achieve reflection on their own and professional values, and personal and professional self, which may help develop the attribute of self-awareness and critical reflection. The practice of critical reflection was emphasised in some curricula as promoting the quality of 'being critically reflective'.

Limitations on the curriculum emanated from competing demands on the curriculum space, particularly when social work ethics subjects are combined with other subjects such as law, human rights and social work theory. Thus, the balance of content can sometimes be determined by other pressures, such as what is dealt with in other places. Even if it is stated in the curriculum, it did not ensure that ethics was covered as much as it might be; for example, one educator stated (in a casual comment) that she allocated just one lecture for ethics in the whole subject.

Although a few subject outlines did cover virtue ethics, overall it appeared that virtue ethics did not find a noticeable place in the social work ethics curriculum. Despite so much diversity in the curriculum content, almost all subject outlines had a focus on ethical dilemmas and decision-making, and the AASW code of ethics (2010). In some respects, professional integrity as stated in the AASW code of ethics has an element of virtue ethics but that needs to be critically unpacked to see what virtues are covered in it and how they are understood. To address ethical dilemmas for making appropriate decisions and action, purposeful virtue ethics input is needed but seems to be mostly missing. As McBeath and Webb (2002) asked more than a decade ago, why are our codes of ethics still mostly dominated by deontological and consequential orientations? Contrarily, there is an argument for employing a pluralistic ethical framework that provides space for all ethical perspectives (Berlin, 2003; Hugman, 2005; Banks and Gallagher, 2009) not just duty-based and consequential. Many other professions such as medicine and nursing draw on virtue ethics (Robertson and Walter, 2007; Radden and Sadler, 2010; Gelhaus, 2012), but why has the social work profession lagged behind on this? Often practitioners find organisational and legal contexts challenging, particularly when they contradict professional and their own value-base. Under such situations, it is often virtue ethics that gives strength to them to deal with those challenging contexts on daily basis (Banks and Gallagher, 2009).

Recognising this question, most of the social work ethics educators appear to be of the view that it is necessary to have a virtue ethics perspective and that virtues/qualities have a role in social work practice, irrespective of whether or not they covered virtue ethics in their teaching. Most of them also believed in the feasibility of embedding a life-long commitment to the development of certain qualities in social work students. This opens up opportunities for social work ethics curriculum designers and code enactors to incorporate virtue ethics perspectives. Furthermore, curriculum exercises may need to be undertaken towards achieving this and it requires more explicit thought.

As everyone understands the term ‘virtue’ differently, there are also questions about the development of a common conceptual understanding of virtue—indeed whether this is necessary or feasible. Our conceptualisation of virtue combines values/principles, qualities and attributes, roles and functions, so it is highly complex, even compared to the other central pillars of social work values human dignity and rights and social justice. Taking this into account, we should also note that the evidence from the survey presented here does not suggest conclusively that virtue ethics is not taught in social work programmes. Given that values and principles, reflection and the subject of professional integrity covered in the AASW code of ethics are related to the concept of virtue and they are very much reflected in the curriculum, it may be concluded that some aspects of the virtue ethics are partly covered in social work ethics subjects. On the other hand, it may be reasonable to conclude that explicit focus on the development of certain qualities and character or virtues was not found by this study, though some educators may be trying to do this without explicitly stating or making any claims.

In summary, it would appear that in some programmes concerns about the characteristics or qualities of good practice are regarded not as ethical matters, but in terms of the capacities of students to integrate knowledge and skills in their assessed practice (compare with Sheppard *et al.*, 2018). Indeed, the very concept of virtue can be regarded in that way (for example, in the notion of a clock having the virtue of telling the time accurately: see Pawar *et al.*, 2017, pp. 2–5). However, in so far as the relevant professional code of ethics (AASW, 2010) contains a section on professional integrity (and to which it draws on the international statements of social work ethics), social work clearly engages with virtue ‘ethics’. From this, we might expect that more Aristotelian notions are regarded as central, such as compassion, courage, honesty, justice, prudence, and so on, all integrated through practical wisdom. Virtue ethics speaks of these characteristics or qualities as moral, rather than technical (as relating simply to matters of technique). Such a difference in focus is partly reflected in the way that, for example, attention to human rights is considered by some to be part of ethics education, yet by others as quite definitely not but as legal or political issues. Similarly, the list of six qualities identified in Sheppard *et al.* (2018, p. 1859), altruism, warmth, compassion, insight, deliberation and assertiveness, are discussed as matters of (emotional) ‘intelligence’ and critical ‘thinking’, whereas these are regraded as questions of ‘ethics’ elsewhere (such as

Reamer, 2001, 2013; Hugman, 2005, 2014; Banks and Gallagher, 2009; Banks, 2012).

As noted earlier, the narrow fiscal focus of neo-liberalism has reduced the importance of ethics, broadly in the public sphere. However, another reason that ethics in general, and virtue within it, can be marginalised and that neo-liberalism has privatised the moral impulse, along with wider questions of belief (Bauman, 2004). In this world, such concerns are thus removed from the public space; for many, morality (and hence ethics) has become separated from collective action or commitment to the common good (Shaw, 2018, p. 415). The development of virtues by social work students can, in that way, become seen as a matter of personal growth and of personal responsibility that can only be addressed through assessment of competence in practice.

Yet, even those programmes in which ethics is addressed as a discrete subject, what we have seen is that the emphasis on deontological and consequential principles, about which McBeath and Webb (2002) complained, tends to be predominant—even that virtue ethics is sometimes completely absent. This seems surprising, in that one of the three pillars of social work ethics identified in the relevant code of ethics (AASW, 2010) is professional integrity. Because of the survey method of this research, we are not able to comment further, but only to identify this as a remaining question, as to whether virtues are hard to teach, that educators are reflecting an aspect of the Aristotelian tradition that virtues are learned through practice or some other reason for their relative absence from social work ethics curricula.

Conclusion

This research posed three research questions: what is the curriculum content of social work ethics subjects? What are the resources and learning/teaching methods used to teach social work ethics subjects? Whether or not virtue ethics is covered in the social work ethics curriculum and taught to social work students? The systematic analysis of the social work ethics curriculum and social work ethics educators' responses presented in this article clearly shows a great diversity in the curriculum content, textbooks used, teaching methods followed and assessment methods/practices. Despite this diversity, the greatest degree of commonality was the focus on ethical dilemmas and decision-making and AASW (2010) code of ethics. Our conceptualisation of virtue included the integration of values/principles, qualities and attributes, roles and functions, and although the curriculum explicitly reflected values and principles and some qualities such as critical thinking and reflection, the same was not true in relation to virtue qualities and character. Some educators clearly stated that they do not cover virtue ethics in their curriculum and teaching. Nevertheless, a great majority of the educators were of the view that it is necessary to have a virtue ethics perspective and virtues/qualities have a role in social work practice, and more needs to be done. These findings have important implications for the revision of the social work ethics curriculum and the code of ethics, and preparation of future social workers.

However, these findings and conclusions need to be read by keeping in mind some of the limitations of the study. Social work ethics subject outlines/curricula do not provide a full picture of what and how social work ethics are taught and our analysis fully relies on what is explicitly stated in the curriculum, which is partial. It is an inductive analysis and we were looking specifically at the curriculum from the point of view of whether or not virtue ethics is covered in it. In that process, some other important elements of the curriculum may have been missed. Some questionnaires were completed at length, whereas some others came in with short responses and some after several requests. So, there was a great variance in the approach taken by respondents. Social work students as recipients of ethics training were not included in our research. Future research may need to focus on further in-depth analysis of social work ethics subjects moving beyond subject outlines. Rather than a questionnaire, interview with educators may offer deeper insights. Specific questions on the AASW code of ethics may be pertinent. It is also important to include social work students' views and learning experiences about virtue ethics. Notwithstanding these limitations and suggestions for future research, we consider that we were able to address our research questions and objectives. We hope these findings, conclusions and implications of the study will be useful to social work researchers, educators and practitioners alike and will help to prepare virtuous and flourishing social workers to practice well.

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank all those who participated in the survey and peer reviewers of this article for their comments and suggestions.

Funding

This research was supported under the Australian Research Council's Discovery Project funding scheme (DP140103730; project title, Virtuous Practitioners: Empowering Social Workers).

Conflict of interest statement. None declared.

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