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Global Ethics for Social Work: Problems and Possibilities

Papers from the Ethics and Social Welfare Symposium,
Durban, July 2008

Sarah Banks, Richard Hugman, Lynne Healy, Vivienne Bozalek and Joan Orme

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Global Ethics for Social Work: Problems and Possibilities

Papers from the Ethics and Social Welfare Symposium, Durban, July 2008

Sarah Banks¹, Richard Hugman², Lynne Healy³, Vivienne Bozalek⁴ and Joan Orme⁵

This piece comprises short presentations given by contributors to a symposium organised by the journal *Ethics and Social Welfare* on the theme of global ethics for social work. The contributors offer their reflections on the extent to which universally accepted international statements of ethical principles in social work are possible or useful, engaging with debates about cultural diversity, relativism and the relevance of human rights in non-western countries.

Key words: global ethics, social work ethics, universalism, human rights, cultural relativism

Introduction

Sarah Banks

The journal sponsored a symposium at the 34th Biennial Congress of the International Association of Schools of Social Work held in Durban, South Africa from 20th to 24th July 2008. The theme of the congress was *Transcending Global-Local Divides*. We decided to organize the symposium to give particular consideration to the role of international statements on ethics in social work. Several members of the editorial and advisory boards of the journal had been involved in drafting the joint statement of ethical principles agreed by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) and International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) in 2004. This statement is due to be reviewed

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during the next two years leading to a revised version in 2010. We are very aware that all such international statements have their critics and their advocates. This statement is relatively brief and remains at the level of general principles, clustered around two overarching principles of respecting and promoting human rights and social justice. We know from previous consultations in 2004 that there are some who feel the IFSW/IASSW statement is too 'western' in its language and approach (particularly the language of universal principles, individual rights and self-determination). Indeed, the question has been raised as to whether such an international statement with universal relevance is either possible or desirable. On the other hand, equally cogent arguments have been made that the language of universal human rights is very important, especially in contexts where inhumane treatment, such as torture, imprisonment without trial or denial of benefits to asylum seekers, is taking place, and in which social workers may be implicated or involved.

The aim of the symposium was to engage four key speakers and our audience in critical dialogue and debate about the possibilities and problems of international statements on ethics in social work. Four questions were identified in advance around which to focus our discussion as follows:

1. What role, if any, can international statements on ethics in social work play in promoting social justice?
2. Does 'rights' talk get in the way or is it essential for an international statement?
3. Must recognition of cultural diversity lead to ethical relativism or is it compatible with a modified form of universalism in ethics?
4. What are the implications of these debates for the framing of international statements on ethics, such as the current IASSW/IFSW document?

In this account of the symposium, we include accounts of the short presentations made by our four speakers (Richard Hugman, Lynne Healy, Vivienne Bozalek and Joan Orme), a summary of some of the key points from the discussion and concluding comments by the chair of the symposium (Sarah Banks). We hope this will contribute to the debate on these issues and, in particular, to the process of revising the international statement on ethics in social work.

1. Ethics in a World of Difference

Richard Hugman

In an article that I published recently in this journal (Hugman, 2008) I began by commenting that international statements about social work ethics have been criticized as imposing western values in non-western contexts. I identified two forms of this criticism in recent literature, one 'strong' in that it calls for each cultural context to generate its own relevant values, exemplified in a recent article

by Yip (2004), the other 'qualified' in that while it seeks basic common values it calls for these to be interpreted with cultural sensitivity, exemplified in a recent article by Healy (2007). Such arguments raise a particular problem with the notion of human rights as a foundation for social work ethics. In response, I suggested in the article that the idea of a plurality of values is more fruitful and the concept of 'human capabilities' (Nussbaum, 2000) could be regarded as a basis for dialogue about values that cross cultural differences.

At the symposium I developed further some of the arguments articulated in the article, suggesting that international statements have a role to play in the form of guidance that has to be understood and responded to in context. I argued that 'rights talk' is useful if it is understood as a means to assisting people to live a 'fully human life' (Nussbaum, 2000). It creates argument in so far as it either exposes vested interests in maintaining relationships that are to the benefit of some at the detriment of others (which it correctly challenges) or when it imposes one view of the good life inappropriately on another culture or world-view (when it must be reconsidered). It is the reconsideration in such a way as not to undermine the idea of rights as the expectation of a fully human life that is difficult.

In response to the question about whether recognition of cultural diversity necessarily leads to ethical relativism, or whether it is compatible with a modified form of universalism in ethics, I made the following point: cultural diversity is separate from ethical relativism - the latter is neither necessary nor helpful, while the former is both. Ideas of ethical pluralism may help us, but these are complex and we have only just started to think them through in social work.

I then commented on the implications of these debates for the framing of international statements on ethics, such as the current IFSW/IASSW (2004) document. I argued that it means that we must find better ways to maintain and develop dialogue in which different voices can be heard, which seek to find new ways to approach the core values that the profession shares across cultural differences.

2) Global Ethical Principles: Universalism and Complexities of Meaning

Lynne Healy

In the 2007 article referred to by Richard Hugman, I presented a brief case vignette in order to explore the complexities of ethical decision making in the context of the universalism-relativism debate (Healy, 2007). The follow up discussion of the case in the article by Richard Hugman (2008) and the additional questions he raised, continued the dialogue about universality and underscored the core point that complexities face social work practitioners as they wrestle with ethical dilemmas. The extent to which social work ethical principles are universally applicable is also being examined as prelude to reconsideration of the

2004 document, *Ethics in Social Work, Statement of Principles* by IFSW and IASSW. In this brief commentary, I raise two additional issues for consideration regarding universality. These are prioritizing values when they are in conflict, and discerning the meaning attached to the principles by service users in diverse contexts. Thus, even if the profession agrees on a set of universal values or ethical principles, there may be culturally based disagreements over the meaning of these principles and how they should be prioritized.

Practitioners are bombarded with legal mandates, agency regulations and procedures, and the often competing values expressed in the profession's ethical documents. Even the relatively brief joint IFSW/IASSW document identifies a number of core ethical principles. Challenges arise when all principles cannot be optimized. One approach to competing values is to rank order them in a hierarchy of principles that can be used in situations when multiple principles conflict (Harrington and Dolgoff, 2008). The hierarchy of principles proposed by Dolgoff, Loewenberg and Harrington (2005) identifies and rank orders seven ethical principles: preservation of life; equality; autonomy and freedom; least harm; quality of life; privacy/confidentiality; and truthfulness and full disclosure. A single case may involve some or even all seven principles (as in the case discussed in Healy, 2007). Recent informal research indicates 'very little consensus on the ordering of the ethical principles' but general support for the use of value hierarchies (Harrington and Dolgoff, 2008, p. 190). It is likely that culture and context influence rank ordering of ethical principles even when there is agreement on the importance of the principles themselves. Thus national professional associations may wish to consider more particularized value screens or hierarchies, 'prioritizing the universal values in a more culturally relevant hierarchy' (Healy, 2007, p. 24).

Additionally, social workers and service users/clients may attach different meanings to some of the ethical principles, adding a further layer of complexity in considering whether principles can be universally applied. In utilizing global ethical statements, it is important to ask whether the important ethical principles in fact mean the same in all contexts. Or, is the challenge to determine their meaning to the service users, whether individuals or communities? The ethical practitioner should be encouraged to search with the service user or client for the meaning attached to the principles or rights involved. The principle of avoiding doing harm is particularly interesting. Indeed, Harrington and Dolgoff's (2008) informal research identified least harm as the highest ranked ethical principle when rank orderings were averaged. Yet least harm and quality of life are principles that are particularly difficult to apply universally. Drawing on the example of social work in situations of domestic violence, it is possible that the same professional practice or actions cause different levels of harm to the service user, depending on the meaning she attaches to independence, agency, and affiliation. These meanings in part derive from cultural context.

Social work ethics have been linked to human rights concepts and the discussions over universalism/relativism are therefore tied to similar debates within the human rights arena. Hugman (2008) explores the work of Nussbaum (2000) on the capabilities approach as an alternative to human rights. While interesting, I do not find that the capabilities approach resolves the dilemma of conflicting and competing values or the issue of assigning meaning to core concepts in diverse cultures. In practice in domestic abuse situations, for example, capabilities for a life with bodily integrity and for a life with affiliations raise the same tensions as are embedded in applying a human rights perspective.

As we move forward with a review and possible revision of the international statement of ethical principles for social work, the perspective of culturally aware universalism may best suit the profession. I hope views on wording and meaning from cultures that are more communalist in their outlook will be assertively solicited to ensure expression of principles in a way that captures ideas about caring, reciprocity, community-building and cooperation for incorporation into social work ethical principles. This is not an endorsement of relativism nor is it advocating retreat from social work's important emphasis on human rights; rather it is an appreciation that defining and applying ethical principles within and especially across cultures is complex.

For the practitioner, it is particularly important to be as aware as possible of the impact of her or his own culture on interpretation of principles and strive to be open to alternative interpretations, especially those of the service user/client. As a feminist from the most highly individualistic culture in the world (Hofstede, 1980), I have moved from a position of assertive universalism to a slightly more moderated stance. In practice, this would mean promoting universal rights or perhaps, capabilities, while recognizing culture as one of those rights and acknowledging that my definition and valuation of harm and quality of life may differ from those of others. As the revised 'golden rule' states, we should treat others not as we wish to be treated but as they wish to be treated.

3) The Role of International Statements on Ethics in Social Work in Promoting Social Justice

Vivienne Bozalek

I agree with Richard Hugman that international statements are important in promoting social justice for social work. Such statements can provide a form of accountability for social workers towards service users and for the profession as a whole. These statements also set minimum standards that are helpful for social workers, particularly, for example, in countries where there are abuses of human rights. In these contexts international statements can be called upon in order to advocate for better arrangements and conditions for both service users and

providers. For example, historically, social work in South Africa was developed to alleviate the poor white problem in the 1930s by the architect of apartheid, Hendrik Verwoed, well known for his racist and anti-Semitic ideas. Social work in South Africa was thus a racially exclusive system associated with Afrikaner nationalism. International statements of ethics based on notions of social justice in social work could have been used to legally challenge such abuses of human rights which excluded groups of citizens, which in the South African case was the majority of the population.

International statements are also useful in that they can be used to strengthen social workers' positions in locations where they may be co-opted by corrupt states. In apartheid South Africa, social workers were complicit in removing babies from mothers who were anti-apartheid activists detained for their political beliefs and activities as a form of punishment for these mothers. Those in detention were not able to challenge these abuses of their rights, as they did not have access to international statements on ethics to defend and promote their rights. Similarly, international human rights documents were developed in response to complicit behaviour by medical practitioners in concentration camps in Nazi Germany (Sevenhuijsen, 2003a) and in prisons under the apartheid regime. (see Baldwin-Ragaven et al, 1999 for more details on this)

While acknowledging the positive contribution that international ethical statements can play there are, however, critiques of relying solely on these statements for ethical practice in social work. I will outline some of the issues that have been raised as problematic with international ethical statements and discuss how the political ethics of care as developed by Tronto (1993) and Sevenhuijsen (1998) could be used as an alternative frame of reference to address these problematic areas.

International ethics statements as legalistic

International ethics statements can be regarded as legalistic, adversarial and mechanistic (Code, 1995; Sevenhuijsen, 2003a). This might entail having to fight for one's rights against a legal system or against someone else – and in some cases the outcomes may not be adequately followed through (O' Neill, 1988). Codes of ethics do not always guarantee ethical behaviour. I wonder how many of us have sat through tedious ethics committee meetings at higher education institutions and wondered whether the ethical practice is in fact ever properly followed through after all the assurances have been given?

Self reliance and independence as goals

A further problem that has been identified with international ethics statements is the focus on 'self reliance' or having independence as the ultimate goal, with non-interference rather than active intervention seen as a positive attribute (Sevenhuijsen, 2003a). Both Eva Kittay (2002) and Joan Tronto (2002) point out that theories of justice, such as that of John Rawls (1971), upon which international ethical statements are based, fail to take dependency and care into

account. The idea of 'rational economic man' who is disembodied, autonomous, independent and equal is the normative ideal of a citizen that Rawls had in mind. This man is furthermore able to enter voluntarily into exchanges of goods and social cooperation with other citizens for his own benefit. From this perspective, rights are regarded as a means to ensuring fairness.

An assumption of sameness for equality

Another criticism of international ethical statements is that they have a limited ability to deal with difference, otherness and plurality. A political ethic of care allows a vision of otherness and takes into account inequality, vulnerability, finiteness and difference in human interrelationships, which a rights-based or justice perspective elides in its concentration on equality and sameness for all. A rights-based approach which assumes sameness does not provide enough nuances to deal adequately with the particularity of peoples' needs. Incorporating human dependency into an idea of citizenship foregrounds the notion of interdependence and relationality in that all human beings need assistance and are socially dependent on each other to provide the resources and means with which to meet our needs. If it is acknowledged that we are all dependent and need care at various points in our lives and that caregivers as citizens should be provided with the means to carry out care to the best of their ability, it follows that an ethically just society should provide the arrangements to make this possible. The political ethics of care proposes a relational self, continually in the process of changing, which is in contrast to the universalist rights-based atomistic view of humans with predetermined identities (Sevenhuijsen, 1998).

The politics of needs interpretation

Tronto (2002) raises some important questions, which arise from the political ethic of care in relation to the distribution of resources. For example, in order to decide how to distribute resources in a just way, we must first establish what needs exist. However, how needs are defined and who defines the needs in a particular context are contested as Nancy Fraser (1989) has pointed out in her *politics of needs interpretation*. Tronto (2002) also alerts us to the dimensions of power and privilege that exist in caring relationships. She reminds us that those who are more powerfully positioned in society assume the position of demanders of care, whilst at the same time underplaying their dependency on others. She suggests this is crucial to their ability to carry out responsibilities in the public sphere. In terms of the care perspective, the public private is a false dichotomy as care impacts on one's life in both the public and private spheres and the responsibility for care provision and arrangements need to be considered from a societal and personal viewpoint.

Agency versus abstract principles

The political ethics of care is based on the practice of care rather than a set of abstract principles that can be followed and takes into account responsibilities and relationships. It takes as its starting point the needs of the other in examining

what should be done. Rights-based approaches, in contrast, examine the potentialities of citizens rather than their agency in the present (Cockburn, 2005).

Particularity versus universality

What is regarded as adequate care will differ from one context to another. The political ethic of care allows decisions to be made in specific situations rather than applying universal principles. Both the political ethics of care and the human capabilities approach as articulated by economist Amartya Sen (1999) and philosopher Martha Nussbaum (2000) provide the perspective which allows one to ask the question: 'what are actually concrete human beings able to do and to be and what is necessary for human flourishing?' This concrete other is perceived in particular circumstances and within relationships, in contrast with Rawls's (1971) 'generalised other' about whose circumstances and preferences nothing is known (Benhabib, 1992). Nussbaum (2000) has identified ten basic human capabilities, without which she maintains that one would not be able to achieve a fully human life. These are: life; bodily health; bodily integrity; senses, imagination and thought; emotions; practical reason; affiliation; other species; play; and control over one's environment.

Dialogue and voice versus the impartial view

The care ethic as developed by Tronto (1993) incorporates attentiveness, responsibility to act on caring needs, competence and responsiveness. Sevenhuijsen (1998; 2003b) has added trust, which has to do with conditions of vulnerability. Good caring practice requires negotiation and dialogue between those giving and receiving care, rather than an abstract, impartial view as required by rights-based approaches. Service users can discuss the sorts of resources and assistance that they would need. The political care ethic draws attention to the voice of both the caregivers and the care receivers and foregrounds the narrative process of needs deliberation. Attentiveness requires listening to what people are saying in words and what they are not saying, as well as paying attention to the particularity of their unique needs (Barnes and Brannelly, 2008, p.387). The ethics of care also involves reflexivity in that the practitioner has to reflect on the caring process, which is a dialogical one.

4) Global Ethics for Social Work: Problems and Possibilities

Joan Orme

My aim is to problematise the notion of a global statement of principles, not to stifle debate but to provide a context for the discussion provided by others. In producing the statement of principles IFSW and IASSW asserted that the intention was not to produce a code of ethics for social work. However there is a danger that once principles are 'agreed' and committed to paper they become powerful. This is particularly the case when the document includes imperatives such as 'social workers should...' and calls upon members of IFSW and IASSW

to 'regularly update their own codes of ethics or ethical guidelines to be consistent...' (IFSW and IASSW, 2004).

The global context of social work emphasizes the wealth of traditions that require to be addressed in all teaching, research and scholarship. The very notion of principles and codification has its origins in western philosophy and practice. Rather than concentrate on 'consistent' principles or guidelines an international association needs facilitate dialogue between individuals, groups and nations. If documents are to be created they should have the status of a 'temporarily negotiated agreement' to recognize that ethics themselves are constructed in, and contingent upon, social, geographical and historical contexts. This can be problematic when students in particular and practitioners in general have a need for guidance akin to codification. This need is clearly articulated in the case described by Lynn Healy (2007). It is precisely because of what is driving that need that caution is required. As social work educators we should be facilitating what Husband calls 'morally active practitioners' (Husband, 1995) encouraging the 'moral impulse' (Bauman, 1993), the personal capacity to act morally, which arises out of responsibility to the other, and not to an employer, or a regulatory body.

However, current trends indicate that practitioners are under pressure to act consistently and predictably, as has been highlighted by recent work on registration of social workers (Orme and Rennie, 2006). In fact, the IASSW/IFSW statement on *Global Standards for Education and Training of the Social Work Profession* (adopted 2004, published 2005) suggested that the formulation of a code of ethics was a necessary adjunct to registration. However in a comparison of two countries it was identified that codes of conduct or codes of practice rather than codes of ethics accompanied the introduction of registration. This was seen as a defensive process; part of a managerialist approach associated with the technicalisation of the social work profession (Orme and Rennie, 2006). This means that practitioners have little encouragement to reflect on the distinction between what Hugman (2003, p. 1030) has called 'acting well and acting correctly'.

To facilitate and enable practitioners to do this, as educators we have to go beyond teaching moral theories (Gray, 1995), or 'introducing' students to an already formulated set of ethical principles. The complexity of this task has been highlighted by feminist critiques of the concept of care. The ethics of care articulated by Tronto, Sevenhuijsen and others and discussed by Vivienne Bozalek above is a case in point. Students and practitioners often interpret their responsibility to others as an assertion that it is their 'duty' to care for others, without recognizing the nuances of caring that can be incorporated into understandings of 'care' discussed within feminist literature (Orme, 2002).

There is therefore a need to ensure that the nuances and complexities of moral theory and philosophy highlighted in the forum and recorded here become an

integral part of the social work curriculum.⁶ Because many subjects compete for space, and learning and education also takes place in practice settings it is imperative that students, and their educators (university teachers and practitioners), recognize that all situations in which social workers intervene are morally contentious and ambiguous and require considered reflection of the theoretical complexities behind the statement rather than a formulaic application of the principles identified.

5) Notes from the discussion

Compiled by Joan Orme

Questions and comments from the floor included the following:

1. The importance of language was noted, with a comment made that the discussion centred around certain dualities, including: care versus service; principles versus codes; morality versus ethical consciousness. It was suggested that we need to beware of setting up false dualities.
2. When discussing human rights we need to acknowledge who gets afforded the status of a human being, in particular, who gets afforded status to make decisions as a human being. Ethical principles should expand beyond human beings to be meaningful in other cultures that have an affinity with the natural world.
3. The discussion tended to frame human rights as an individual issue, but structures also have an impact. Are ethical dilemmas too often individualized, that is, privatized, to individual practices with service users? We need to politicise ethics.
4. A comment was made about the fact that social workers who practised under the apartheid regime had a code of ethics. There were also social workers who were part of the liberationist struggle. The question was raised: what part does history play in how we arrive at ethical principles?
5. It was suggested that 'ethics' as a topic is larger than human rights. There is a need for focus on particular aspects such as the distinction between negative and positive rights and implications for 'the political'.

⁶ In the UK for example the social work qualification became a degree level qualification in 2003. In a recent review (Department of Health, 2008) there is little evidence that moral philosophy is a core part of the curriculum.

6. We also need more discussion about the links between social work ethics for and in practice and ethics in social work research. This should address methodological as well as process issues.
7. We were reminded that in the African context and in other countries people are deprived of human rights through imprisonment and being held hostage. This creates dilemmas for social workers.
8. Social work is increasingly involved in rationing resources. This raises the question of how we deal with this as a profession in terms of ethical principles generally and human rights in particular.

In summing up, the presenters made brief comments as follows:

Lynne Healy acknowledged the breadth of the topic of human rights and drew attention to Jim Ife's (2001) work. She mentioned modelling ethical principles through practice including teaching. She also commented that in the USA codes of ethics have helped protect social workers from being asked to be involved in activities that are ethically unacceptable.

Vivienne Bozalek commented that the discussion of human rights issues took her to the work of Nancy Fraser (1989, 1997) with its attention to identity issues and notions of participatory parity. In terms of history, she acknowledged that we need to take cognisance of the South African experience under apartheid.

Richard Hugman agreed that an historical perspective is vital, acknowledging the work of Bauman (1993) and his use of history, including the experience of the holocaust. In considering the question: 'Why *human* rights?', he replied that the stress on human is because the social work profession is one which attends to people. Social work starts from its concerns for the well being of the human world. No human being is excluded, but ethics is about being human. Non-human animals do not have ethics.

Joan Orme acknowledged the potential for the setting up of false dualities, highlighting that feminist theorists drawing on Foucault had addressed this. Issues of power in communication are important. She also drew attention to the UK code of ethics for social work research, currently incorporated as part of the British Association of Social Workers' code (BASW, 2002).

6) Concluding Comments

Sarah Banks

The process of putting together these varied and illuminating accounts of the presentations and responses given at the symposium has offered time for further

reflection on the problems and possibilities of global ethics for social work and the challenges facing those of us involved in drafting and redrafting international ethical statements.

The debates about the language and validity of the international statement on ethics in social work clearly mirror those about the United Nations international declarations and covenants on human rights upon which the IFSW/IASSW statement is based. In striving to be internationally relevant, such statements are inevitably abstract and general. They are deliberately designed to be self-standing, outside any particular ethical, cultural or religious tradition. In this sense they are often described as 'thin' (Kymlicka, 2007; Walzer, 1994). They need to be interpreted and implemented in specific contexts, within political regimes and in the light of particular ethical, cultural and religious values. Such contexts may be described as 'thick', referring to the local identities, beliefs, values and practices that create, colour and condition people's everyday lives. There is always the problem of transfer and translation from the abstract principles to the particular context. The universal principles need to be 'thin' to be acceptable to all. Yet their very 'thinness' means they are open to wide interpretation. Furthermore, despite the fact that these principles are designed to be framed in a 'thin' universal language, acceptable to all, many critics object that the language and concepts used to frame these international statements are, in fact, based in western liberalism, Christianity or secularism. The emphasis on individual rights and freedoms is expressive of a worldview rooted in western liberal democracies, and thus can be regarded as a continuation of the colonial imposition of the ideas and ways of life of one part of the world on other parts that do not necessarily share these values.

Despite these debates and critiques, the idea of universal declarations and covenants and the language of international human rights have persisted since the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948. Later declarations and covenants (for example, on civil and political rights, on social, economic and cultural rights, and on the rights of the child) have involved greater representation of different countries of the world in their formulation. Whilst they are imperfect documents, and adherence to their principles (however interpreted) is patchy, they clearly play a role in attempts to create a 'world community' and an arena in which debates about minimum standards of right, wrong, good and bad can take place. Interestingly, in recent years, there has been a number of statements on human rights produced that contextualise human rights in particular regions of the world or in particular religions (see, for example, the *Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights* (1980) and the *Asian Human Rights Charter* (1998), reproduced in Sullivan and Kymlicka, 2007). These documents are framed in terms of human rights and in the most part embody very similar principles to those of the various United Nations declarations, but have more emphasis on cultural and religious identities. In the case of the Islamic declaration, many of the rights are grounded in Islamic teaching and law. This suggests that the language of human rights has become broadly accepted and is

regarded as useful, provided we recognise that it is a specially constructed language designed to promote international dialogue on balancing the needs, interests and capabilities of individuals, families, groups and states. The concept of 'international human rights' should not be equated with that of 'individual rights' in western liberal theory.

Kymlicka (2007, p. 4) suggests we should regard global ethics as a two-level phenomenon. On one level it comprises a self-standing international discourse (such as that of human rights) defining a set of minimum standards agreeable to all. At the second level there is a range of ethical traditions each of which has its own account of what is needed over and above human rights. He argues that any coming together at the second level will be the outcome of a slow process of learning and mutual exchange. This suggests the importance of a process of constructive dialogue, and ties with the aims of the 2004 IFSW/IASSW statement, which include promoting ethical reflection and debate and developing ethical awareness. It may seem strange, if the aim is to promote dialogue, that the statement takes the form of a set of principles offering prescriptions for action. However, just as we recognize that there is a special human rights discourse that provides the content of the dialogue, we also need to accept that the form of international ethics documents that has evolved is that of a prescriptive declaration or statement. Neither the content nor the form can be taken literally. Just like the more familiar national codes of professional ethics, the purposes of international ethics statements are not quite what they seem (Banks 2003). In addition to prescribing and guiding action, such documents are also rhetorical, aspirational, educational, dialogue-promoting, provocative, self-contradictory and, above all, constantly evolving.

In the context of this discussion, social work can also be viewed on two levels. On one level, it is a professional practice necessarily rooted in particular nation-states, cultures, legal and policy frameworks. At another level it is also an international social movement, concerned to work for social justice worldwide. The international statement on ethics embodies both these senses of social work and contributes to dialogue about values, practices and ideals across boundaries. Hopefully the next iteration of the international statement on ethics for social work will reflect more clearly the 'culturally aware universalism' referred to earlier by Lynne Healy, or, to use Appiah's (2007) phrase, the 'rooted cosmopolitanism' that is reflective of the current work of IFSW and IASSW.

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