ETHICS AS A SITE OF RESISTANCE: THE TENSION BETWEEN SOCIAL CONTROL AND CRITICAL REFLECTION

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Introduction
We are writing this article at a point where the topic has particular local and personal salience. In a previous publication, we had expressed our own difficulties of thinking outside a system of thoughts and practices which has shaped, and continues to shape, us. Yet we had stressed the need for, and possibility of, resistance to the current neoliberal economic disorder and its concomitant value systems (Bauman, 1993; Cox, 2002; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004; Sewpaul, 2006 in press).

In spite of this, we continue to be active participants in the very system we have claimed to be willing and potentially able to resist. Our service rendering colleagues in the field battle with diminishing resources in relation to increasing numbers of service users, spreading their professional time and stocks of financial and material aid ever more thinly. In this context, governmental quality assurance procedures, codes of practice/conduct and codes of ethics forced upon non-government organisations and welfare practitioners – always in tandem with the threat of funding reductions should quantifiable standards of practice outputs fail to be met - are bound to be perceived as oppressive rather than facilitative (Department of Welfare 1999; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004; Hölscher, 2005).

Meanwhile, social workers in academic institutions find themselves in positions where they are confronted with all sorts of throughput, output and minimum standard requirements pertaining to the measurable production of knowledge and new graduates. We engage in critical reflection and critical citizenship education at our peril (Sewpaul, 2003). Critical engagement requires time, and the more time is being occupied with producing tangible and quantifiable outputs, the content of which remains marginal to the management of academic institutions, the less time remains to think freely – and against the mainstream of these institutional practices.

Yes, we may perceive ourselves as critical, but we are active participants in a system obsessed with outputs which can be measured and behaviour which can be controlled. Critical we may be, but we will comply with the required numbers of foster care applications processed, abuse allegations investigated, articles produced and students put through – accounting for our activities by means of increasing bureaucratic and administrative procedures. For who doesn’t want to share in the benefits of successfully competing, and who wants to be penalised for failing to meet these layers of tightening standards that control our welfare and academic practices? Thus, the commodification of welfare and education, though acknowledged to be exploitative and oppressive, is showing signs – via our daily practices - of becoming firmly anchored in our individual and collective consciousness, turning most of us into perpetrators and victims of the expanding rule of neoliberalism at once (Leonard, 1997, Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004).
However, seeds of discontent seem to germinate into more openly expressed resistance (Fergusson and Lavalette, 2006; Sewpaul, 2006), both passive and active. At the time of writing this article, the authors received a correspondence from a Durban child and family welfare organisation, one of the biggest in the country, indicating that during the past three years, this organisation has experienced a turnover of well over 100 per cent of its entire social work staff. Staff losses in most of the child and family welfare organisations of the province of KwaZulu-Natal have become so rapid and widespread that several organisations are now literally on the brink of collapse.

Also at the time of writing, academics (including social workers), cleaners, secretaries and gardeners at the University of KwaZulu-Natal, again one of the biggest in South Africa, have been embarking on a prolonged strike, which was simultaneously directed at gross salary discrepancies, oppressive management practices, the increased corporatisation of higher education and increasing stress levels generated by a deteriorating teaching and learning environment (NTESU, 2006). Strikes are the traditional weapon in labour disputes because time is the one asset that those of us who are selling our labour are able to withhold. We would like to broaden this strategy out somewhat by claiming: If there is one form of resistance we would like to engage in at this point in time, it would be to claim back our time in order to think, to contemplate, to reflect, and to sabotage this maddening rush that is chewing away at our strength while transforming us into output generators of intellectual and human products.

This claim sets out the parameters within which we discuss the topic under consideration, i.e. the tension between ethics as social control and ethics as critical reflection. While we are not discussing epistemological questions explicitly, the following deliberations are based on an assumption which is fundamental to our arguments, and which we would therefore like to state upfront. That is, the said tension arises from opposing, and in many respects mutually exclusive, epistemologies within which the field of professional ethics may be framed, and which may be broadly distinguished as positivist/modernist and critical-reflective/postmodernist paradigms (See for example, Williams & Sewpaul, 2004; Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004; Hölscher, 2005, as it is not within the scope of this article to provide details on this debate). The former resonates well with the neoliberal context within which social work is currently forced to function. The latter produces dissonances which may be painful to endure, but which contribute to the continued widening of the gap within which resistance to the current dispensation in welfare becomes possible. We consider this tension both in the light of current international debates and in relation to our local context, that is, social work practice in post-apartheid South Africa.
Mapping the local context: Welfare challenges in post-apartheid South Africa

Much has been written on the effects of the neoliberal version of globalisation on welfare and social work practice across the world (Compare for example: Adelzadeh, 1996; Hoogvelt, 1997; Ife, 2000; Amin, 2001; Desai, 2002; Hart, 2002; Terreblanche, 2002; Hertz, 2004; Midgley, 2004; Bond, 2004, 2005a, 2005b). The purpose of this section is therefore not to repeat these arguments but rather to aid the international reader’s imagination of what this condition has translated to in South Africa. In the following, we use the two terms ‘globalisation’ and ‘neoliberalism’ in conjunction. Neoliberalism, in brief, signifies a global ideological, economic and political phenomenon which has been unfolding during the past 30 years. Constituting both a discourse and set of practices, neoliberalism refers to the dramatic shift in ‘societal power balances … in favour of corporate capital, which has been exerting pressure on governments to implement policies that seemed in favour of their capital accumulation strategies’ (Sewpaul & Hölscher 2004, p.3). In this context, we use the term globalisation specifically to refer to ‘the globalisation of capital [which] has created a world of unbridled consumerism, individualism and greed with the maintenance of a capitalist ideological hegemony that precludes our search for alternatives and, indeed, limits our very ability to think outside the system’ (Sewpaul, 2006; our highlights).

Led at least in part by a belief that in a globalising world there existed no policy alternative, especially to emerging economies, South Africa officially embraced neoliberalism as its core economic ideology two years following the first democratic elections when in June 1996 the Ministry of Finance published its Growth, Employment and Redistribution strategy (GEAR). The net results of the subsequent policies and legislation implemented are that South Africa remains the country with the highest rate of inequality in the world – in spite of a formidable growth rate in GDP which according to Finance Minister Trevor Manuel (2006) had reached the five per cent mark at the end of 2005.

In more concrete terms, this has meant large-scale destruction of local industries which had provided livelihoods for entire generations; a total of over one million jobs destroyed since 1996; unemployment rates consistently well above 40 per cent, with an increase by 9 per cent in unemployed black women and 6 per cent in unemployed black men, thus further marginalising the most disadvantaged of South Africa’s apartheid past; as well as water, telephone and electricity cut-offs affecting well over 10 million people, that is, one quarter of the South African population, the vast majority of whom are rural or peri-urban and black. Unsurprisingly under these conditions, diseases like diarrhoea, tuberculosis and AIDS are ravaging South Africa, with more than an estimated 1,700,000 AIDS-related deaths as of Wednesday, 8 February 2006 (Guardian Newspaper, 2006).

Apart from its broader effects, neoliberalism has had distinctly harmful consequences for welfare service delivery in South Africa. While overall welfare
expenditure has grown at approximately 20 per cent per annum in the financial years 2002/3 to 2004/5, this is in the main due to the greater uptake on social grants by members of the formally excluded population groups (Manuel, 2006). By contrast, since 1994, welfare service expenditure in real terms has only grown marginally considering that this item comprises not more than 5 to 15 per cent of the total social development budget (Raniga, 2006 in press). Yet, just as South Africans have been increasingly able to obtain social grants, so they have been able to access services previously inaccessible. All non-government organisations in receipt of funding from the Department of Social Development have been expanding their services into formally un- or under-serviced rural, peri-urban and urban informal settlements, attempting to add developmental and preventative programmes to their statutory obligations – albeit within existing budgets. In other words, human and material resources have been spread ever more thinly as welfare services rendered by the NGO sector have broadened out, with often devastating effects on the quality of services.

In the context of the South African government’s official commitment to a social development paradigm (Department of Social Welfare, 1997), it is important to note that the original intention had been to make a fundamental change in welfare service financing. This would have meant an overall shift from the predominant financing of statutory services and institutional care to the financing mainly of preventative and community development interventions. This change was originally envisaged to have been progressively implemented and completed between 1999 and 2004 (Department of Welfare, 1999).

Instead – with the contrast between planning and reality sharpened by the unfolding of the ‘orphan crisis’ as the AIDS epidemic worsens - statutory services and institutional care continue to constitute the bulk of social work practice, while the rendering of developmental and preventative services depends largely on the creativity of social workers in utilising gaps that may open from time to time in their statutory routines. While some of the projects thus piloted have indeed been impressive, they remain the exception (Sewpaul and Holscher, 2006 in press). Issues of social injustice and structural oppression continue to occupy an even more marginal place in social work practice, and have been unable to move beyond an empty rhetorical space when lip service is paid from time to time in official government communiqués and policies (compare for example, ibid; Sewpaul, 2005).

As a result of the consistently inadequate funding of the NGO sector, social workers’ salaries have remained well below that of government employees, who in turn earn considerably less than their counterparts employed in the corporate sector or overseas. Consequently, social workers have left the profession – often the country – in droves. For example, at the end of 2004, just over 50 per cent of the Department of Social Development’s social work posts were filled countrywide, and in the Province of KwaZulu-Natal alone, 395 of 720 posts were vacant (Mhlambiso,
Child Welfare South Africa (2004) documents that the majority of social workers employed by its member organisations leave their jobs before five years of service, which has resulted in instability and inexperience within the service context. The vicious cycle of inadequate resources and high staff turnover has led to a steady deterioration of working conditions. For those who have stayed behind, case loads have either remained high or increased (Child Welfare South Africa, 2004), in many organisations exceeding 200 families serviced per every child and family welfare worker, who in turn struggles to access basic necessities such as cars and phones so as to be able to contact service users. The results are often devastating, as highlighted by the reports on ‘Baby H’, which hit national newspapers in August 2005. ‘Baby H’ was the foster child of a pastor and his wife. Police found the boy, after having been tipped off by neighbours, ‘in a tiny outside room with no food and no water. He was sitting in a blanket covered in his faeces, and had never been potty trained or taught to speak’ (Porter, 2005). On investigating the matter, the police learnt that ‘the social worker responsible for monitoring Baby H [said that] she did supervise the case, in spite of her present heavy load of 305 cases’ (Louw, 2005).

The staffing crisis in the South African welfare sector has eventually led to the Minister of Social Development declaring social work a ‘scarce skill’, the Minister of Finance allocating funds to improve social workers’ salaries (Skweyiya, 2005) and the Department of Social Development formulating a recruitment and retention strategy for social workers. While these moves may indeed address some of the concerns of social workers, they leave working conditions unaltered. Thus, they are unlikely to effectively curb the exodus of social workers from the South African welfare sector in general and its NGO sector in particular, leaving the users of social work services – by and large South Africa’s marginalised and poor – humilitatingly short-changed.

In other words, the systemic contradictions afflicting post-apartheid South Africa can be clearly discerned in the welfare sector: Working conditions have worsened as increases in the welfare services budget have not kept pace with the expansion of delivery, and social workers have been leaving the country. Thus, welfare services have effectively perpetuated a ‘blame-and-treat-the-victim approach’ – intermittent government commitments to a developmental welfare paradigm notwithstanding. Yet, critical discourses in the profession remain marginal, and structural social work or other forms of anti-oppressive practice are rare (Sewpaul, 2006 in press). Instead, an air of despondency, disempowerment and victim-hood characterises the social climate of many welfare organisations. All of these factors have profoundly undermined the prospects of reconstructing South African welfare along emancipatory lines (Leonard, 1997).
Social control: The official ethics response to the contextual challenges in welfare

What is the official response, or more pointedly, what is the official ethics response to a welfare context of increasing numbers of increasingly marginalised people, and of a recalcitrant social work profession that apparently prefers to leave the country rather than paper over society’s cracks for what are perceived to be inadequate salaries received for work done under deteriorating conditions? In order to answer this question adequately, it is important to first reconsider some of the writings on the role of social work in modern democracies in general, and under conditions of globalisation and neoliberalism in particular.

For our purposes, it seems useful to begin the discussion with some of the core concepts for which we are indebted to Michel Foucault. In his exploration of human action, and more specifically of the institutional practices that sustain modern societies, he was especially concerned about social practices and discourses; the contexts that both facilitated and constrained them; and the effects in turn of these discourses and practices on their contexts as well as on the subjectivities that emerge within them. Chambon (1999) highlights three such effects that appear to have particular relevance to contemporary social work practice: governmentality, discipline and normalisation.

Government in Foucault’s sense refers to clusters of social discourses and practices that shape the range of possible actions within its sphere of influence, that is, the way the conduct of individuals or of groups is directed. Not only does it ‘cover the legitimately constituted forms of political or economic subjugation, but also modes of action, more or less considered and calculated, which [are] destined to act upon the possibilities of action of other people’ (Foucault, cited in Chambon 1999, p.66). One particular set of such discourses and practices perform the function of discipline. By this, Foucault means the guidance of behaviour at a microlevel. ‘Discipline … is a type of power, a modality for its exercise, comprising a whole set of instruments, techniques, procedures, levels of application, target; it is a ‘physics’ or an ‘anatomy’ of power, a technology’ (Foucault, cited in ibid.). The effect of disciplinary discourses and practice is a ‘process of normalisation [which] not only restricts or erases unwanted behaviour, it also shapes wanted behaviour’ (Chambon 1999, p.65). As far as social work is concerned, it needs to be borne in mind that social work both serves a disciplinary and normalising function in relation to its service users, as much as it is subject to disciplinary and normalising processes itself. Indeed, Chambon (ibid. p.67) suggests that we should ‘view the rapid expansion of … contemporary ethics as current attempts to extend a normalising influence over individuals and populations’.

Social work’s peculiar positioning within societal power structures is as old as the profession itself and has been well documented. From its onset, ‘social work occupied the space between the respectable and the dangerous classes, and between those with access to political and speaking rights and those who were excluded …
social work [fulfilled] an essentially mediating role between those who are actually or potentially excluded and the mainstream of society’ (Parton 1996, p.6). Epstein (1999, p.8; our brackets) describes this function poignantly as follows,

... social work is a major social institution that legitimates the power contained in modern democratic capitalist states ... State power must be grounded on broad public support [which is achieved either by means of overt coercions (as a last resort) or normalisation (ideally so)]. ... The human or social sciences are the backbone of the technologies that have emerged as instruments by which the state can govern with minimal coercion, or, when coercion is employed ... human science offers ways to support, ameliorate, disguise, and justify the state’s carceral machinery. Social work collaborates with other occupations, mainly the ‘helping disciplines’, all of which together manage the population.

Social work’s complicity in this normalisation process is evident on the one hand in its willingness to succumb to a proliferation of regulations and controls embodied in codes of ethics, conduct and practice. Indeed, social work actively participates in the formulation of these, hoping that it might enhance the profession’s status and help protect service users (Orme & Rennie, 2006). On the other hand, there is the profession’s general unwillingness to challenge the impacts of structural disadvantages on the lives of service users (Sewpaul and Hölscher, 2006 in press; Sewpaul, 2006 in press). This system-stabilising role accounts for the fact that social work’s normalising function has remained its defining feature across the globe and through decades of shifting intervention foci, of exploring different methodologies, and of refining skills and techniques. Inevitably though, ethical tensions arise from social work’s positioning as mediator between the powers that be and those who are marginalised in modern states (Sewpaul & Hölscher, 2004).

These tensions are rooted in the contradiction between the profession’s moral legitimacy which is derived from empathetic, dialogical and democratic relationships that may emerge in encounters with service users, and its societal legitimacy, which is derived from fulfilling social work’s ameliorative and normalising functions. While the latter requires social workers to be disinterested in and ignorant of structural forms of injustice and oppression, the former is likely to generate awareness thereof. The latter requires ‘social handywomen [who do] many kinds of repairs ... to the living conditions and personal attitudes of citizens’ (Epstein 1999, p.7). The former calls for critical reflection on the exact nature of these structures that marginalise social work’s service users, on social work’s complicity in this regard; and implies a need to act on the resultant insights. From a system-stabilising point of view therefore, it makes perfect sense to regulate and monitor the profession so as to ensure the handiwork is done; while genuine encounter, democratic communication and dialogue are defined out of the ethically relevant if
not desirable, to discourage critical reflection, and to reduce the notion of ethical practice to following pre-formulated codes and rules.

Epstein (1999, pp.8ff) captures this condition within a brilliantly phrased passage, in which she refers to social work as ‘the Janus-faced profession’:

To accomplish its purposes social work must dominate its clients, although in theory and in its manner of interpersonal relations with clients it puts forward a democratic egalitarian manner. … It must produce an effect without force, without command, indirectly. It must not be authoritative. It must enable its clients to be transformed, to adopt the normative ways and thoughts voluntarily. Doublespeak is characteristic of twentieth-century communication in all walks of life, in all corners of social interaction. In social work, non-influential influencing is its communicative art, its specialty. It has evolved complex rationales and methods for appearing to sew together influencing and not influencing without the seam showing too much. … For example, it is common to state the intentions of social work as helping people to accommodate the status quo and as challenging the status quo by trying to bring about social change. This dissonance is intrinsic to the nature of social work, to its essence.

If social work has both fulfilled and been exposed to the normalising discourses and practices of the modern state since the middle of the 19th century, the contradictions which the profession has had to bridge have softened somewhat during the post World War II reconstruction period between the late 1940s and early 1970s. However, they have sharpened dramatically from the early 1980s onwards as globalisation has accelerated and the neoliberal ideology governing it has increasingly penetrated societies beyond the immediate sphere of corporate capital, including the welfare sector.

Cox (2002) contends that globalisation at its current stage has been successful in dividing the people of this world into three basic strata which cut across national boundaries. There are firstly those of us who are active participants in the global economy, ‘members of a ‘kind of homogenised elite global culture’ with little or no allegiance to any country but, at the same time, lacking ‘any global civic sense of responsibility’” (Falk, cited in Lister 1997, p.57). Many of the global economic elite, but by far not all, live in countries of the so-called ‘First World’. Then there are ‘those who serve the global economy in a subordinate and more precarious way. This is the potentially disposable labour force’ (Cox 2002, p.84; highlights in original), found both in countries of the so-called ‘Third World’ and the ‘First World’ and consisting increasingly of what was once called the petty bourgeoisie. The bottom of the hierarchy comprises those who are ‘excluded from the global economy. Here are the permanently unemployed, superfluous labour or the underemployed’ (ibid. highlights in original), many but by far not all of whom are living in the ‘Third World’.
Nation states, considerably weakened under these conditions both in terms of capacity and legitimacy (Strange, 1996), have in the past decades increasingly focused on their social control functions, using more open forms of coercion against their residents. Garland (cited in Bauman 2004, p.68) characterises this transformation as ‘a marked shift of emphasis from the welfare to the penal modality … The penal mode, as well as becoming more prominent, has become more punitive, more expressive, more security-minded … The welfare mode, as well as becoming more muted, has become more conditional, more offence-centred, more risk conscious…’. And Wacquant (cited in ibid. p. 84) characterises the role of the state as containing and hiding ‘the deleterious social consequences of the deregulation of employment conditions and the deterioration of social protection for the inferior regions of social space’.

As the role of states is changing, so must the role of social work change towards a more coercing and a more subjugated profession. One such process of increasing intimidation of the profession has often been referred to as managerialism (compare for example, Newman & Clarke 1994). In the wake of the progressive dominance of the economic over all other considerations, the belief has been mainstreamed that ‘problem-solving methods developed in an economic, specifically corporate context are transferable to other spheres of public life, including that of social welfare’ (Sewpaul & Hölscher 2004, p.44). Managerialism, as a discourse and practice, can be identified in that all problems are defined economically, ‘and their resolution is understood to be synonymous with increasing the productive outputs of the organisations concerned, in other words, to get more for less and to provide more value for money’ (Pollitt, cited in Sewpaul & Hölscher 2004, p.45). In this context, managers have been presented as having all those characteristics that were said to be lacking, for example, in professionals. These include, inter alia, a search for efficiency, flexibility and orientation towards an end result, being guided by good business practice, and customer orientation (Clarke et al., 1994).

Management thus becomes the organisational component tasked with designing the necessary steps towards more economical solutions to the problem of equitably distributing increasingly scarce resources amongst increasing numbers of, and to the problem of enforcing the law on increasingly unruly, marginalised poor. These steps may thereafter be implemented by a profession more tightly controlled than ever before in its history, that is, social work. The qualitative change in the normalising function of social work under conditions of neoliberalism is aptly captured by Parton (cited in: Banks 2001, p.152) in relation to child and family welfare practice. He contends that

In a time of increasing public concern about child abuse and limited resources for social work, the aim of social work is to predict which families are ‘dangerous’ and
therefore to protect children from abuse in these families by removing them. … The rest of the families who are not regarded as dangerous should be left alone.

Notwithstanding managerialism’s claim to reducing bureaucratic procedures and replacing bureaucratic mindsets, Banks (2001) and Orme & Rennie (2006) observe an increasing dominance in social work theory and practice of the technical/bureaucratic model. This dominance has manifested in a growing ‘specification of tasks and procedures, attempts to reduce indeterminacy in decision-making, the adoption of competency-based approaches to education and training, [as well as] the growth of interest in ’evidence-based practice’” (Banks 2001, p.146). These tendencies manifest, for example, in an increased production and dissemination of quality standards, codes of ethics/conduct, procedural manuals and assessment schedules which have, however, promoted a shift in the balance from any possible constructionist, emancipatory or radical approach in social work to resource management and administration.

The duties required by the agency or employer are being defined in increasing detail in order to meet the ever-changing requirements of … government for quality standards. This leads at best to bureaucratic practice (which focuses primarily on issues of risk assessment and resource allocation as determined by agency rule and procedures) and at worst to defensive practice. (Banks 2001, pp.154-155)

She goes on to define defensive practitioners as those social workers who

Go by the book and fulfil duties/responsibilities defined by the agency and the law. There is no need to take blame if the prescribed rules and procedures have been followed. Social workers are ‘officials’ or ‘technicians’. Doing ‘my duty’ means fulfilling my obligations to the agency, rather than doing the morally right action; personal and agency values tend to be separated, and the latter tend to be adopted whilst in the role of social worker. (ibid. p.157)

It is this reading that we would apply to the South African Draft Code of Ethics for Social Service Professions. In a social world divided into those who manage and those who are managed, it follows that in order for the discourse of an efficiently managed welfare sector to be translated into a practice of an efficiently managed welfare sector, social workers must be told What to Do, Where to Do It, When to Do It, and How. The thought ought not to even enter the equation that such directive might more appropriately be obtained within mutual engagement, democratic communication and dialogue with each other and with the country’s marginalised poor and oppressed.

Consequently, the code leaves no room for speculation and sets out to articulate ‘values, principles and standards [guiding practitioners’] conduct …
regardless of their professional functions, their settings in which they work, or the communities they serve' (SACSSP 2004, p.5). And to remove any residual doubt on the intentions of the code, it is spelt out equally clearly that

Registration with [the SACSSP] commits members to adhere to the code of ethics … Social service professionals who do not abide with the principles, values, standards and guidelines as set out in this document may be subjected to inquiries in terms of the regulations regarding unprofessional conduct … The actions that the SACSSP may take for violations of the code of ethics include actions such as reprimand and/or warning, a fine, remedial action or supervision, and … cancellation of professional practice registrations (SACSSP 2004, p.5).

In other words, the socio-economic context in South Africa generally, and its welfare context in particular, seems to invoke as its logical consequence a prescriptive, control and rule oriented professional code of ethics. This is not to say that over-prescription is only a local problem. For example, the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles sets out to promote ethical debate and reflection, while acknowledging some of the fundamental contradictions discussed in this article. Yet, the principles which follow are couched throughout in terms ranging from ‘social workers should’ / ‘social workers should not’, over ‘social workers have a responsibility to’ to ‘social workers need to’, ‘social workers have an obligation to’ and ‘social workers are expected to’ (IFSW 2004, pp.3ff)

This is a far cry from calls for an alternative practice and ethics voiced by several international authors. Leonard (1997, p.166), for example, calls for a practice which ‘enables subjects to express individual resistance to domination and the possibility of participating in collective resistance in the pursuit of claims for welfare’, while Briskman & Noble (1999, p.66; our brackets) calls for ‘acceptance of otherness, an acknowledgement and celebration of diversity, and recognition that there is no general position of dominance [as] the foundations from which a reformulated code [of ethics] would start’. In a similar vein Hölscher (2005, p.248; our brackets) speaks to the need for a ‘living [code of ethics] that evolves with the changing nature of … society’. And finally, Hugman (2005, p.166; our brackets) proposes ‘the development of discursive ethics, enriched by new ways of thinking about ‘good’ and ‘right’ … [which would provide] a way of openly talking about applying ethics that enables the caring professions to ensure that their practices are congruent with their values and moral principles’.

On the difficulties of resistance
Alternative, critical and dialogical approaches to social work ethics exist (See, for example, Husband 1995; Leonard, 1997; Sevenhuijsen, 1998; Noble & Briskman, 1999; Rossiter et al, 2000; Hugman, 2003, 2005; Banks 2004; Hölscher 2005). Rather
than summarise the respective arguments in detail, we want to highlight here those components that appear to be crucial in any alternative framing of social work ethics within critical, emancipatory, postmodern and/or feminist paradigms. These are the interconnected notions of the embedded individual and relationality, critical reflection, dialogue and resistance. What concerns us is that many of us seem to stop only on rare occasions to ponder on the contradictions we encounter in our daily work, on the roles we play within these contradictions and to consider strategies of resistance, never mind implement them — irrespective of the theoretical insights we may indeed have. In the discussion which follows we will draw from time to time on statements made by colleagues in the field, some of whom have participated in our masters courses. As Fook & Pease (1999) point out, it is critical that we consider the practice implications of our theoretical insights.

Foucault historicised the self and separated selfhood from the individual, rejecting the notion of a unitary and ahistoric individual which he traces back to the Enlightenment period. Instead, he described an ‘embodied self’ that reflects and displays ‘the multiple imprints that institutions make on our bodies’ (Chambon 1999, p.59; highlights in original):

In thinking of the mechanisms of power, I am thinking of its capillary form of existence, the point where power reaches into the very grain of individuals, touches their bodies and inserts itself into their actions and attitudes, learning processes and everyday ‘lives’ (Foucault cited in ibid.)

This concept is taken up by Fairclough (1989, p.24) who, with greater emphasis on the thought processes of the self, asserts that, ‘people internalise what is socially produced and made available to them, and use this ... to engage in social practice, including discourse. ... This gives the forces which shape societies a vitally important foothold in the individual psyche, although ... the effectiveness of this foothold depends on it being not generally apparent’. Thus, an experienced social worker heading a small child and family welfare office contends,

800 cases go through my office every year. [I recently found out that] one of my workers didn’t follow up on a case in over 18 months — in spite of regular supervision. It just slipped through. These things are bound to happen. It is only a matter of time until I get reported to Council for misconduct.

Clearly, the punitive approach taken in the South African draft code of ethics is reflected in our colleague’s consciousness. What is of ethical concern to her is not that her office is confronted with the demands of an unmanageable number of service users. What does not even come close to entering the debate is the possibility of refusing to work under such conditions, possibly even collectively with other
social workers afflicted by similar conditions. There is little space for entertaining thoughts of resistance when the thought processes are governed by perceived threats of disciplinary action, or perhaps on account of a total lack of an alternative consciousness of resistance.

In fact, even as we are writing this article, the thought of proposing to this colleague that she ought to resist seems almost preposterous. We imagine without difficulty the responses she would give in this instance: ‘Who would care to join me? My life is stressful enough as it is, so when am I expected to organise such resistance? How would I get my job back if I were to lose it as a result? What would happen to our service users who have nowhere else to go but us?’ These would be real – if not necessarily realistic – concerns arising not just from societal discourses but from material social practices; they would be real, since we did not ask. For our collective experiences and shared interpretations thereof are such that at times we don’t even feel a sense of curiosity as the answers we are failing to provoke function in our minds as foregone conclusions to questions which we haven’t asked. The entrapping mechanisms of the system are indeed profound.

In any event, there is little chance of engaging in collective resistance if those colleagues who are afflicted by similar conditions take personal blame and respond via the route of disengagement. This is demonstrated by a social worker at an even smaller child and family welfare office of three members who complains about the attrition of staff:

Seasoned social workers are lost to the profession, and new social workers are not adequately equipped. Often, they come without a driver’s license, know little, and need a lot of supervision, which is time consuming in addition to the full case loads which older workers carry already. [In addition] there are lots of vacant posts which cannot be filled. [So] the general feedback on services … is very negative. We are violating the principle of competent practice. [But] what do you do in a case where you don’t have a competent social worker to do intake, yet the service has to be rendered? The intake load has to be allocated.

Again, her ethical concern is framed in terms of trying to abide by rules and standards that are as universal as they are unrealistic. What emerges from the account is not a sense that something might be wrong with the formulation of principles which – given the current practice context – must set practitioners up for failure, and there is definitely no sign of resistance. Instead, singular and isolated as she appears in this comment, there is an act of blame-taking (‘we are violating the principle of competent practice’, rather than ‘we are violated by the principle of competent practice’), and an air of resignation (‘what possibly could I, you, or anyone do’…). It merits noting that the social worker cited here has since left the country and is now practicing in Britain.
Such awareness of rule-breaking, in conjunction with personal blame-taking, feelings of isolation, disengagement and resignation is, according to Rossiter et al (2000, p.85), reinforced by a conceptualisation of ethics as ‘a kind of rarefied space beyond the reach of power, … unaffected by its relations to the messy world of practice’. Our colleagues’ experience of ethics (in fact, rather all to often our own!) is well captured when the authors go on to assert that,

Discourses of professional ethics depend on the construction of practitioners as isolated, autonomous individuals … and consequently construct ethics as properly emerging from an internal, private, cognitive function of that individual. (Rossiter et al 2000, pp.85-86)

Disregard for the conditions which structure the welfare sector in such a way that the rendering of humane services becomes practically impossible, will remain common so long as we as actors in welfare regard ourselves as the locus of responsibility of ethical practice.

We cannot apprehend, and therefore act on, the social relations that produce our experience when those experiences are viewed as beginning and ending in the individual … Deploying the individual practitioner as the unit of analysis and action prevents us from acknowledging and analysing the social relations of ethics. (ibid. p.91)

Thus, it is not just a matter of stringing together a set of ‘ought to’ and ‘how to’ recommendations to help ‘uncritical welfare practitioners’ see the contradictions which make their lives difficult – as well as that of their service user – so as to enable them to resist. This, according to Pease & Fook (1999, p.5; brackets in original), carries the ‘danger that the experience of the ‘unconverted’ will be devalued and discounted, and there is therefore potential for radicalism to be experienced as disempowering (by those who by definition don’t have it)’. We believe that dealing with our own embeddedness and that of our colleagues is far more complex than this. It requires regard for how deeply all of us are implicated in the contradictions of welfare. What we need is to create the space for reflection (alone and collectively), for dialogue and subsequent action; it is about realistically assessing the likelihood of penalties as much as it is about being able to bear collectively the sanctions the system has in place for those who are found violating the relevant rules and regulations.

Thus, when we talk about critical reflection as ethical practice, we concur with Parton (2003, pp.15-16) who talks of ‘the continual attempt to place one’s own premises into question and to listen to alternative framings of reality in order to grapple with the potentially different outcomes arising out of different points of
view. [It is] a question of … trying to develop a stance of ‘not knowing’ and not being seen as the expert on a problem’. While Parton refers here to the relationships between social workers and service users, this practice would as well be applicable in the context of inter-practitioner dialogue. We need to take the subject positions seriously of those of us who currently feel unable to resist, or are unable to see what they might otherwise want to resist.

What would then be an appropriate dialogical response when confronted with practitioners who describe their practice experience as follows?

Most of what we do is ‘granny placements’, because of the AIDS pandemic. So these days, even when we do come across a child abuse case, we don’t do much. We just check the basics. ‘Is the perpetrator living in the home? No? So let’s consider the child safe and move on’.

I do placements like an assembly line worker. I don’t see people any more, I don’t engage with them. It is just the same thing, one after another.

We are not advocating relativism in the sense that any view on the current state of welfare practice is acceptable. Surely, the economic and ideological context, the socio-economic marginalisation of increasing numbers of people in South Africa, as well as the increasing subjugation of social work under the rule of managerialism are an important factor to be considered in the dialogue thus envisaged. So as we engage with each other, we need to remain mindful of pertinent material relations. These can be debated in themselves, there may well be alternative interpretations, but they cannot be ignored. Only then will we deal consciously with the dissonances we often only feel and respond to emotionally by way of frustration and despondency. And only then will we be able to perceive them as contradictions which can be subjected to interrogation and which we wish to understand and relate to the power constellations that may have caused, perpetuated or exacerbated them. But we need to firmly rely on the hope that once consciousness of how current societal contradictions and structural injustices play themselves out ever-more violently in the lives of service users and providers alike, the will to action will germinate more freely. And it will probably find fertile soil in one question, which we need to pose openly and clearly so as to guide our reflections:

What should we do when the need we are confronted with is such that we want to help but the process of helping itself becomes dehumanising for both the helper and the service user?

Part of the answer is provided once again by Foucault, whose arguments are summarised by Chambon (1999, p.70) as follows:
A social form contains its counterform and can create opportunities for deviation and innovation. If normative practices constitute forms of subjectivity, change is to be found in counterforms or alternative forms of knowledge and of practices. An avenue of research and practice consists of looking for the deployment of actions and subjectivities at variance with the norm. Forms of opposition or innovation are intrinsically linked to dominant forms, as derived expressions. They need not be dramatic departures. They can be minor changes. Transformative work shows that the present is not natural and need not be taken as inevitable or absolute. Change can come from the realisation of the precarious nature of established ways and by inviting the development of alternatives.

Fergusson and Lavalatte (2006) discuss in a poignant article such a process and point to possible sites of resistance in social work. The demoralisation and anger among social workers and their dissatisfaction with a narrow ‘what works’ agenda, to the exclusion of social work’s emphases on relationship, process and reflexivity can and should serve as a site of resistance, rather than a capitulation to the systemic oppression of the profession. Other possible sites of resistance stem from service-user’s challenging of professional knowledge and practices and lessons that might be learned from global social movements, such as the anti-war and anti-privatisation campaigns. The authors (ibid.) call for a more radical re-orientation in social work, providing a pragmatic example of social workers in Liverpool, England engaging in social activism to defend the values and the vision of what social work represents, intersecting some of the most salient issues confronting social workers across the globe.

However, our argument is that in order for social workers to reach the level of engagement that Fergusson and Lavalette (2006) describe there has to be, in the first instance, an awareness of such systemic oppression, how the dynamics of such oppression operate and an awareness of the need for structural changes in those factors that so profoundly impact both social workers and the lives of people whom we engage with (Sewpaul, 2003). As discussed in this paper, none of these are encouraged; indeed, they are actively discouraged by governmental control agendas and prescriptive, technically formulated codes of practice and codes of ethics. The need for reflexivity and reflexive practice takes us to the emancipatory theses of Freire (1972, 1973), Gramsci (1971, 1977) and Giroux (1983, 1997) that the development of critical consciousness might lead to critical action.

Freire’s (1972) idea of praxis or conscious action involves a dialectical movement from action to reflection and from reflection upon action to a new action. Giroux (1983) asserted that subjective intentions alone pose little threat to the existing socio-political order. Rather, social action must be preceded by an awareness that makes the need for such action comprehensible. Awareness represents an important step in getting people to act as engaged and responsible citizens who question the structural basis of social life. In this respect the arguments...
developed by Sewpaul (2003) are as equally applicable to students as they are to social work practitioners and social work educators.

Social workers, like all other people, are constructed within particular cultural, social, political and historical relations that inform our common-sense assumptions about our world, and the choices that we make. All too often the dominant ideologies of managerialism, the market, of competence, outputs, outcomes and efficiency are so entrenched that it is difficult to think outside of certain prescriptive ideological frameworks, thus our own buy-in to and perpetuation of the very systems that oppress and work against us. Reflection and dialogue can therefore not be value free and value neutral and not all social work practices can be passed as innocuous. It is vital that the dominant paradigms and ideologies that exist in the profession, both in South Africa and in other parts of the world, be confronted. Such confrontation, we believe, is central to our personal and professional development and to our commitment to social change. Radical pedagogy and radical social work confirms that it is the Self that must be the main site of politicisation that might, despite its apparent paradox, be used in collective change oriented strategies. Giroux (1997, p.225; our brackets) argues that radical pedagogy provides scope for students (and we would like to add social work practitioners and educators!) to

Extend their understandings of themselves and the global contexts in which they live...[and it] affirms the importance of offering students a language that allows them to reconstruct their moral and political energies in the service of creating a more just and equitable order, one that undermines relations of hierarchy and domination.

To this end we conclude with an appeal that we must, individually and collectively, create space for dialogue and reflection. Given the contemporary service conditions of social workers described in this paper, and the influence of the neoliberal economic order on social welfare in general and on social work in particular, our argument is that the creation of such space in itself constitutes an act of resistance.

**Conclusion**

In this article we have set out to explore certain ethical concerns as they arise from a context which can be framed both in local and in global terms: That is, welfare in post-apartheid South Africa under conditions of neoliberalism and the globalisation of capital. As such, this context has framed our consciousness and practices twofold. There is firstly the difficulties we are experiencing in our attempts to place ourselves ideologically in opposition to a system of discourses and practices of which we form a constitutive part. At the same time, these very discourses and practices have created contradictions which play themselves out in our lives by creating
dissonances which are hard to ignore. These contradictions are, in our view, sharpening as the impact of neoliberalism on social welfare expands, in that social workers slide more deeply into the dual roles of victim and perpetrator. Yet by and large, while felt and perceived intuitively, this condition is seldom thought about and deliberated upon. Ethics framed as rules and proliferating in various kinds of codes are instrumental in pushing social work down its contradictory route, progressively narrowing just that space which we need for critical reflection and dialogue. The latter two are, however, crucial activities if we are to become conscious of social work’s dual role which is tearing at so many of us as we conduct our daily work.

In other words, critical reflection is a prerequisite for resistance to the rule of the neoliberal version of globalisation. At the same time, the creation of space for critical reflection and dialogue is an act of resistance. If social work is to take its moral responsibility towards its service users seriously in view of their lived experience of social, economic, political and/or cultural oppression, and if additionally, it is to broaden this view so as to regard its own members as both instrumental in the oppression of its service users and as subject to the same structural forms of injustice, then the creation of such a space becomes itself a site of ethical practice as much as it is an ethical responsibility. To recognise that the tightening regime of managerial control, including ethical control, over social work discourses and practices suffocates critical reflection not just coincidentally but forms an integral part of the neoliberal colonisation of welfare is an experience of ethical liberation.

References


