

## Narrative and the Reconfiguration of Social Work Ethics

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Volume 2, numéro 2, 2012

URI : [https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw2\\_2art01](https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/nw2_2art01)

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Éditeur(s)

The University of New Brunswick

ISSN

1925-0622 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer cet article

Baldwin, C. & Estey-Burt, B. (2012). Narrative and the Reconfiguration of Social Work Ethics. *Narrative Works*, 2(2), 1–19.

Résumé de l'article

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## **Narrative and the Reconfiguration of Social Work Ethics**

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Commencing with a critique of codes of ethics based on the Statement of Principles of the International Federation of Social Work, we explore how a narrative approach to ethics might better serve the practice of social work. We argue that narrative both addresses some of the problems within current codes—such as their Western assumptions, lack of attention to the political role of the social worker, and the privileging of professional expertise—and aligns well with the values social work, being committed to social justice and diversity. Furthermore, we suggest that narrative, because it can operate at the individual, family, community, social, and discursive levels can help us think ethically about how we construct narratives about, with, and for individual service users while remaining attentive to wider concerns of social justice. In so doing we are not seeking to construct a new code of ethics but to generate debate as to how social work ethics might be reconfigured.

Social work, as with other professions, is guided by a code of ethics that claims to be in alignment with the purpose and values of the profession. The primary articulation of this is found in the *Statement of Principles* of the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2004) to which national associations, affiliated with the IFSW, are required to align their own codes of ethics. As a result, despite their differences, there is remarkable similarity between national codes of ethics.

However, it is our contention that there are two fundamental misalignments—one philosophical and one practical—between social work's espoused values and codes of ethics that are based on that of the International Federation of Social Workers. The philosophical misalignment lies between a commitment to respect "people's right to make their own choices and decisions, irrespective of their values and life choices," enabling them "to be empowered in all aspects of decisions and actions affecting their lives," respecting "the ethnic and cultural diversity

of the societies in which they practise, taking account of the individual, family, group and community differences” (see IFSW, 2004) and the promotion of what is essentially a normative ethical framework rooted in Western philosophy. The practical misalignment lies in the attempt to corral ethical comportment by insisting on adherence to a set of pronouncements, a practice that removes ethical creativity and personal responsibility for the uniqueness of the ethical encounter. In this article we will first briefly summarise criticisms of social work codes of ethics and then move toward developing an alternative framework rooted in post-modernist philosophies founded on difference and realised through narrative understanding, processes, and practices. In so doing we are not attempting to substitute one code for another but hope to stimulate debate over how social work ethics might be reconfigured through the lens of narrative.

### **Critique**

Criticism of social work codes of ethics is not new. Although many criticisms were raised prior to the revision of the International Federation of Social Workers’ International Declaration of Ethical Principles of Social Work in 2004, the revised code failed to address the concerns expressed. Consequently it continued to embody those failings and, over time, attracted further criticisms as the role of social work changed. We rehearse some of the criticisms here.

First, there is a tendency towards viewing concepts as universal or unproblematic, noted by authors such as Gilbert (2009), Briskman (2001), and Briskman and Noble (1999). Examples of such universalization are found in Rhodes (1992) in her discussion of the concept of justice, and O’Leary, Tsui, and Ruch’s (2012) discussion on the boundaries of the social work relationship. Second is the fading relevance of a code of ethics when the nature of social work and its relationship to the State and service users has changed so drastically as to render the definition of social work found in such codes redundant (Petrie, 2009). Third, the deontological and utilitarian approaches to ethics embedded within the IFSW Statement of Principles are not international but Western and thus impose or privilege one cultural perspective over others, contrary to social work’s value commitments to diversity (see Azmi, 1997). Fourth, the codes of ethics are not consistently utilized in practice (see, for example, Millstein, 2000; Johns & Crockwell, 2009). Fifth, the reliance on Kantian philosophy, in discussing “respect for persons” is criticised by

Webb and McBeath (1989) as ignoring the political nature of the social worker's relationship with service users. Finally is the inability to address the problems that arise when there is a difference between personal beliefs and professional values and principles (see Buila, 2010).

We would further extend these criticisms in two ways: the reliance on principlism and the lack of a concept of personhood. With regard to the first of these, to the extent that the Code encompasses the principlist approach to ethics (as found in standard social work texts such as Banks, 2006, and Parrott, 2006) they embody a peculiarly Western way of thinking about fundamental concepts such as the individual, autonomy, liberty, and equality (see Tan Alora & Lumitao, 2001, for a discussion of this in relation to bioethics and Wong, 2004, on the Confucian focus on harmony of the family and the community rather than individual interests). Similarly, there is some evidence to suggest that some groups of service users such as family carers of people living with dementia may find narrative ethics more pertinent than principle-based approaches (see Elliott, et al., 2009). Further, such an approach curtails ethical creativity and leads to the sterility and uniformity of approach complained of by Harris in his discussion of the principlist approach to bioethics (Harris, 2003). In framing ethics as the application of pre-determined principles, such codes undermine the professional autonomy necessary to approach new and unique situations and individuals and the use of one's authentic self in social work practice, as the only self that is allowed to be used is that bounded by the professional commitment to principlist, deontological, or utilitarian ethics. In other words, there is a conflict between the promotion of professional autonomy and a commitment to ethical heteronomy (see Baldwin, in press).

Our second criticism arises from the fact that, while social work codes of ethics frequently refer to individuals and persons, there is no underlying conceptualisation of what it means to be a person or of moral personhood. This may seem rather too philosophical a criticism to be relevant to most, but our practice may depend on such—for example, Brock (1993) argues that people with severe dementia are no longer persons and this may justify more limited ethical obligations towards them and consequently, lessened treatment. A notion of personhood, we would argue, is thus essential to ethical action.

Given that the revised code of ethics failed to address such issues, the criticisms are still highly pertinent and thus we suggest that the need to develop a more appropriate ethical framework for social work remains. The challenge for social work (and perhaps for other professions) is to

develop a framework for ethical reflection and action in such a way that it can deal with multiplicity and diversity (see, for example, Briskman, 2001). If social work is to realise its values and principles it is essential, in our view, that it has an ethical framework that aligns philosophically and practically with those values and principles. In other words, it needs an ethical framework that focuses on a dynamic rather than essentialist Self, on difference and uniqueness rather than abstract homogeneity, on persons in relationship, on emergence and becoming rather than stasis, on ethical autonomy rather than heteronomy. We shall suggest in what follows that a strong narrative ethics can provide such a framework, exploring first existing uses of narrative in social work before turning to a narrative ethics.

### **Narrative in Social Work**

In their review of narrative social work literature, Riessman and Quinney (2005) noted only a modest taking up of narrative ideas in the field of social work and while there was some literature on narrative as specific therapeutic intervention, creative writing responses by individual social workers, and narrative accounts of discrete cases, there was little in the way of narrative approaches to qualitative analysis. Only one mention of narrative and ethics is made in the review and this is an unreferenced statement that Quinney had noted: “narrative frameworks can honor social work values and ethics, by valuing time with and diversity among people” (p. 395). Since that time, there has been some movement in terms of narrative analysis (see Baldwin, 2011; Urek, 2005; Wells, 2011) and social work has, to some extent, embraced narrative as an approach to working with service users (see, for example, Abels and Abels, 2001 on narrative therapy; Schweitzer and Bruce, 2008, on reminiscence; and Shah and Argent, 2006, on life story work) but, with the exception of Wilks (2005), little with regard to the development of a narrative ethics for social work, a surprising absence given the fundamentally narrative nature of social work (see Parton & O’Byrne, 2000; Baldwin, in press). As Wilks (2005) states: “The stories that service users tell us [social workers] and our reinterpretations and retellings of them form the warp and weft of our working lives” (p. 1249). Add to this the plethora of institutional narratives which emerge in various documents across social work departments (see, for example, Pithouse and Atkinson, 1988; Hall, 1997) and one is struck with the inescapability of narrative in social work.

Bearing in mind that social work is a narrative practice, there are nevertheless two distinct positions one can take on how narrative impacts daily activity: roughly categorized into “weak” and “strong” positions, each placing a different emphasis on the importance of narrative to human beings both individually and in relationship. The weaker view sees narrative as a valuable but essentially supplemental tool to other conceptual approaches to human understanding. In contrast, the strong position argues that our very lives are narratively constituted (see, for example, Bruner, 1987, 2006; Ricoeur, 1991; Schechtman, 1996). In this view, we do not merely retroactively assign a story to our experiences; instead, we engage in a “narratively constructed framework of identity” (Wilks, 2005, p. 1258). In terms of professional practice, the weak position uses narrative as a specific therapeutic intervention, a means to collect research data or material on which to develop theory, whereas the strong stance sees social work theory and practice as framed, shaped and guided by narrative in its understanding of the individual and interpersonal relationships, research methodology (see Hall, 1997; Baldwin, in press), and as we shall argue here, ethics.

### **Envisioning a Narrative Ethics for Social Work**

As narrative approaches have increasingly become a serious part of other fields such as medicine, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and law, so too have various formulations of narrative ethics. In medicine particularly, these versions of narrative ethics have frequently arisen in challenge to the principlist model of bioethics, as greater and greater dissatisfaction with the limits of this model has been made known (see, for example, Charon and Montello, 2002; Nelson, 1997). Charon (2004), prominent in the field of narrative medicine, argues that “over the past decade, conventional bioethics has struggled to find its way among its chosen principles and has found itself too thin to really address actual values conflicts that arise in illness” (p. 27). Grounded in the idea that narrative shapes not only human communication, (e.g. Fisher, 1984) but also understanding of oneself (e.g. Eakin, 1999) and one’s world (e.g. Plummer, 1994), narrative has been seen to offer a more reflective, relational means of interacting with patients (Engel, et al., 2008).

The diverse approaches to narrative ethics are primarily rooted in the notion of “listening to one’s story” as an ethical activity, but few of them display any amount of agreement on what shape this should take or in what direction it should go, especially as other, more deterministic

ethical frameworks such as principlism can still be used to identify moral action after the story has been told (Wilks, 2005). Indeed, there have been attempts to merge principlism with narrative (see McCarthy, 2003, for example) but these fail to appreciate the incommensurability of the underlying philosophies of each and while, with Wilks (2005), we accept the need to pay attention to the stories of service users (and others) we wish to establish deeper roots for a narrative ethics. It is our contention that a narrative ethics involves attention to two primary facets of all narratives: both the story as it is told and the way in which it is told, the *said* and the *saying* (see Newton, 1995; Baldwin, 2005). Furthermore, we assert that the service user and the social worker compose their narratives in relationship and dialogue with the other, both ultimately emerging with a co-constructed narrative that displays a marked responsibility to the Other (Parton & O'Byrne, 2000). This narrative, ethical relationship then guides all future action.

### **Point of Departure: Narrative Analysis**

Perhaps one starting point is the recognition that any telling of a story is necessarily an ethical activity in and of itself as it always selective in its presentation of events, characterises people in a certain manner, and includes implicit value judgements as part of the very texture of the story (Chambers, 1999). In light of this, writers in both medicine and social work (Chambers, 1999; Hall, 1997; Urek, 2005) argue for the necessity of including a sort of literary analysis into any ethical endeavour starting with narratives. Such analysis might include attention to uses of language, plot, characterization, and other such hallmarks of literary form, all of which combine to affect the reader and promote specific views and beliefs of the author, or even portray the author in a certain light (see, for example, Baldwin 2011, on the rhetoric of expert reports in cases of child protection). It also points to an ethics of *how* we include other people in our stories, especially as our interpretations of their actions, beliefs, or stories may not accord with theirs—a persistent tension in social work practice committed both to the empowerment of the individual and the development of professional expertise. Narratives are always representations and constructions, and literary and narratological investigation points this out in no uncertain terms, including the fact that a particular narrative could have been composed in any number of ways (see Chambers & Montgomery, 1999, on the contingency of narrative).

Such literary analysis can also extend to institutional narratives—those stories told by social workers about service users in assessments, team conferences, court reports, and other official documentation—which are not, and cannot be, innocent of ethical implication or of being caught up in stereotypical dramas. Hyden (1997) writes:

The institutional narrative constitutes the social workers, psychiatrists, clients and patients as characters and their missions or destinies in an ongoing moral drama. Clients and patients are persons who succumb to their destiny because they have violated the moral order; the professionals are the representatives of the good, tragic, albeit still saviours, trying to prevent further violations. (p. 262)

Hall (1997) reiterates the need to examine the texts and stories of social workers themselves when he says “Social worker as text, then, means approaching the conversations and reports of social workers as rhetorical, interactional and literary entities to be understood through an analysis of the reading practices of different readers” (p. 13). The stories of social workers turn into institutional narratives with great force and power to shape service user’s lives, but they are neither objective nor ethically non-aligned. For example, all stories, those told by service users and social workers alike, contain accounts of other people and the tellers choose how they will describe those people as well as how they depict themselves (see Baldwin, 2004, on character work in cases of alleged Munchausen syndrome by proxy). Often, this takes on explicitly moral overtones in social worker stories: an “uncaring parent,” a “dedicated foster family,” or “unsuitable mother” (Urek, 2005).

Along similar lines, one could also engage in an analysis not only of professional documents emerging from certain institutions, but also the ways in which structures, institutions, and discourses are portrayed as influential in a particular individual’s life. What may be called meta-narratives—narratives with wide social and cultural influence—are pervasive and can be exceptionally damaging to those they marginalize or oppress (Nelson, 2001). Social work seeks to redress the ill effects of both oppressive structures and meta-narratives so it is crucial to see how such effects manifest themselves in service user narratives.



### A Philosophy for Narrative Ethics

The approach to narrative ethics from a literary perspective focusing on the narrative itself provides one entry point, what Levinas might refer to as the “Said” (see Kearney, 1984); nevertheless, it ultimately needs further development to be a strong ethics for social work. We may have two stories—that of the social worker and the service user—and know what to look for in the construction and understanding of each, but narrative as a basis for future ethical interaction still requires more profound consideration, rooted in a philosophical understanding of the Self and the Other—an understanding missing from Wilks’ (2005) discussion—and of how the very “Saying” or telling of a narrative indicates a fundamental relationship of responsibility between teller and hearer, a telling which precludes the following of predetermined guidelines.

Firstly, we must note that as narrative social work is primarily an ethical endeavour which embodies certain ways of relating to the Other (the service user), it requires not only the hearing, respecting, and understanding of service users’ stories but also an acknowledgement of, and respect for, the service user as a moral Other completely different from oneself, what Levinas (1961) calls *alterity*. In addressing this ethical relationship we turn both to Levinas (1961), who describes an ethics of relating to the Other, and MacIntyre (1984), who examines the narrative nature of the Self.

Narrative as a crucial constituent of the Self has been noted by many authors (see, for example, Macintyre, 1984; Bruner 1987, 2006; Taylor, 1989; Schechtman, 1996). Indeed, such is the human propensity for telling stories that some authors refer to persons as *homo narrans* (see Fisher, 1984). The meeting of the Self and Other is thus saturated with ethical implication in two ways: first, in the Saying, the telling of one’s story, involving as it does self-disclosure and, consequently, the possibility for authenticity—it is “what makes the self-exposure of sincerity possible” (Kearney, 1984, p. 64); and second, in the ethical responsibility that emerges in both interpreting and acting upon the Said of the Other, vital corollaries of the dialogue that constitutes relationship. In other words, the Saying and the Said that occur through language and its consequent ethical dimensions are inextricably tied to narrative and thus, “Any ethic, whether social, political, legal or otherwise, involves narrative” (Fisher, 1984, p. 3).

As Levinas puts it, “Language as *saying* is an ethical openness to the other” (Kearney, 1984, p. 65) and thus, we would suggest, the basis for the social work relationship that seeks to empower service users through respect for “the distinct systems of beliefs and lifestyles of individuals, families, groups, communities without prejudice” (CASW, 2005, p. 3)

To put this relationship between Self and Other in a different way, the vulnerable Other is in need of an ethical response from the Self, a response that requires careful attention to the position of both the Self and Other in the ethical relationship (in social work, and in other professional relationships, often a relationship of power). Such attention, and all future action, in turn, depends upon narrative as making possible and shaping this encounter in the first place. It also necessitates the realization that the Other is irreducibly different from the Self and that violence arises when one attempts to subsume the Other into oneself, one’s worldview, or one’s way of understanding. This, of course, demands that the Self jettison its self-interest and (professional) presumptions of power and temporarily relinquish its attendant beliefs, opinions, and worldviews, including one’s a priori moral principles, in order to be able to respond ethically. As Robbins (2000) puts it, “to reduce the Other who calls me as a unique self in the face-to-face to a set of a priori moral principles is a violence to her alterity.” Writing from a social work perspective, Rossiter (2011) states that this irreducible difference means that

I must refrain from treating the other person as an extension of my categories, my theories, my habitual or learned ways of perceiving others. Indeed, I must refrain from seeing the person through any system of human thought because when I use my categories to “know” the other person, I treat him or her as an extension of my knowing. This, for Levinas, is violence—even symbolic murder. (p. 985)

As MacIntyre (1984) rightly notes, narrative identity, and consequently narrative ethics, always implicate those around us: “For the story of my life is always embedded in the story of those communities from which I derive my identity. I am born with a past; and to try to cut myself off from that past, in the individualist mode, is to deform my present relationships. The possession of an historical identity and the possession of a social identity coincide” (p. 221). This means that just as our identity is narratively constituted, so too does a narrative ethics implicate a social community. It is not isolable to Self and Other, but can—should—extend

to take into account the social, cultural, and historical contexts in which we reside—a central tenet of social work. To view the Other without consideration of context is to do violence to any attempt to understand the Other. It also means taking into consideration family relationships and stories, as well, something which proponents of narrative ethics in medicine point out: “it is wrong to consider only the well-being of one member of a family when the lives of the others will also be dramatically affected” (Hardwig, 1997, p. 59). This narrative, intersubjective identity aligns with and extends social work’s understanding that people exist in families and communities and that actions carried out in terms of individuals will necessarily affect the Other and vice versa.

The realization that narrative establishes grounds for meeting the Other and therefore constitutes an ethical interaction with and reaction to that Other has certain implications for social work. If the Other is the service user and the Self the social worker, narrative ethics becomes a matter of responsibility to the Other/service user and of not doing violence to him or her; such an ethics circumvents the contextual aridity of principlism through its analytic attention to the personal, local, and structural aspects which emerge in any narrative. It also implies the practice of qualities which seek to support the goals and desires of the service user without forcing prescribed actions on him or her, imposing external categories and interpretations drawn from social work theory or elsewhere (see for example, the discussion of the client as a “talking problem” in Urek, 2004; the examination of the construction of the “unsuitable” mother in Urek, 2005; and the concept of unsettled social work in Rossiter, 2011), or privileging expert knowledge and/or the accounts of social work or other professions over those of the service user (see, for example, the asymmetry of approach toward evidence in the case of P,C,&S, described by Baldwin, 2004). All of these features strengthen a conception of social work based on caring for and empowering service users, and we now look at the possibilities of such practice for social work generally and the social worker/service user relationship particularly.

### **Caring, Power, and Service User Agency**

In the Self/Other, social worker/service user relationship described above, components of each person’s narrative identity and ethical practice merge to create a new story shared by both social worker and service user. The ethical narrative that emerges is one that is based on mutuality

between, solidarity with, concern for uniqueness or alterity of, care for, and trust in the Other and is thus one much more suited to the values of social work than its current reliance on a principlist code of ethics based on Western assumptions and privileging expert theory over lay experience that turns the ethical encounter into a sub-set of decision-making. Furthermore, in this give-and-take relationship of the social worker responding ethically to the story of the service user, the social worker is not erased or subsumed into the Other, as some might object. Rather, there is the recognition that both have an essential role to play in changing a situation and moving forward. Such a narrative ethics demonstrates, as well as strengthens, the caring foundation upon which social work is built and it provides a means of recovering the idea of caring for the Other through respecting and founding relationships upon respect for the narrative nature of the Self (see above).

As McKnight (1995) argues in regard to a number of so-called “caring professions,” social work as one such profession is often criticized as having abdicated its main focus in favour of increasing professionalization and bureaucratization. One way to combat such professional apathy is to realize that in telling their stories to each other and then co-constructing a new story together, the service user and the social worker participate in a profoundly ethical activity far outstripping “just a story.” This co-construction, as a process framed by mutuality and equality, is illustrated by the work of Keady and Williams (2005; see also Williams and Keady, 2005) in co-constructed inquiry with people living with dementia. In contrast to much of current social work, in this process both offer up self-disclosure and self-exposure in their Saying, implicitly assuming responsibility for what the Other has Said. Relationality and dialogue with service users is thus a means to avoid doing grave violence to them.

Caring, opened up by a narrative ethics which embraces the story of the service user and shows awareness of the elements that go into constructing it, becomes an orientation to the Other that recognizes the continuous, narrative nature of being by refusing to “fix” the service user into certain categories, does not silence him or her, and frees him or her to choose the paths he or she wishes to follow.

Unlike MacIntyre’s argument that such paths should take the form of a single, coherent life narrative, the service user may articulate a number of potential stories for him- or herself, none of which may be particularly coherent in any traditionally conceived sense, but which nonetheless honours the user’s aspirations. In this, narrative can act to

resist the tendency toward templating (the tendency to check “the individual against a “social template; to see whether he or she fits a particular pattern” see Howitt, 1992, p. 123) and can generate “lines of flight” or complex, multiplicitous narratives that allow for the creative self-constitution on the part of service users (see Baldwin and Hill, 2012).

This caring relationship therefore involves the crucial distinction of working *with* service users rather than *on* them—a distinction that most social workers would easily recognise. The power imbalance that characterizes conventional social worker/service user interactions is, if not neutralized, at least admitted by this Levinasian Other-focused narrative and the moral and agentic capacity can thus be engaged through attention to Plummer’s sociology of stories (Plummer, 1994). Plummer identifies five elements of such a sociology: the nature of stories, the production and consumption of stories, the strategies of story-telling, and the role and work of stories in the wider world. In paying attention to the nature of stories, we become aware of what kinds of narratives empower and which degrade, control, and dominate; which pathologize and which promote agency and transformation; and which marginalise, are given priority or attributed more credibility. In becoming aware of such narratives we can make ethical choices as to the form, content, and process that we want to engage in our work with service users.

If we concern ourselves with the making or production of stories we are able to see how some voices are silenced, fragmented, disrupted through circumstances or relationships of power and how spaces can be created for stories through Levinasian Other-focused relationships and dialogue. Similarly, if we explore who has access to stories, who consumes stories, how the reader is located in social, cultural, and political spectra, we can identify what will be needed to expand the space in which stories can be told. For example, the movement towards increasing inclusion of service users in social work education and training can be seen as expanding the audience for such stories.

Plummer’s fourth element concerns the strategies of storytelling, how some people might find it more difficult than others to tell their story and how interactions may help or hinder the telling of those stories. For example, Baldwin (2006) has explored issues of narrative dispossession amongst people with dementia and Booth and Booth (1996) have explored how to facilitate narrative with people with learning difficulties. Attention to the subtle and not-so-subtle ways by which we open up or shut down stories can help us work ethically with service users. Finally, Plummer discusses stories in the wider world, how stories sit within the

wider frameworks of power. These might include the meta-narratives that frame individual and group experience (see, for example, Nelson, 2001); issues of rhetoric by which some voices, such as those of professionals and experts, are heard more readily than others (see Plummer, 1994); the role of stories in promoting human rights and social justice (see Davis, 2002); and the stories of those traditionally marginalized and oppressed. As bell hooks states: “Oppressed people resist by identifying themselves as subjects, by defining their reality, shaping their new identity, naming their history, *telling their story*” (quoted in Plummer, 1994, p. 30).

These elements can be illustrated through an exploration of the presence and legitimacy of service user experiences, viewpoints, and knowledge in social work. While over the years there have been some improvements in some jurisdictions in this area, in the main, the inclusion of service users’ voices is relatively limited. Beresford strongly points out the effects of such a shortcoming on social work practice: “Including service users is part of the broader issue of addressing rather than reinforcing their restricted rights and citizenship.... Their exclusion is incompatible with values associated with both social work and social inclusion” (2000, p. 499). Wilks sees narrative ethics as correcting this situation, noting that, “Within social work ethics, the perspectives of service users are largely absent. Narrative approaches to ethics offer the possibility of a place for service users’ stories in ethics—a field of ethical discussion the parameters of which are not fixed by professionals” (Wilks, p. 1259). This participatory model of service user involvement can be extended to uncover and address serious policy and service deficiencies, with the goal of more inclusive, efficient service delivery: “The service user movement seems to be exposing the limitations of traditional, fragmented service categories for organising participation designed to promote strategic change” (Carr, 2004, p. v). Service users can thus be actively involved in claiming power and decision-making capacity through their story construction. Psychiatric service users’ movements, for example, have had tremendous success in countering the biomedical model of mental illness and carving a space for their survivor stories, thus challenging the power imbalance in conventional psychiatry (Kemp, 2009).

Where narrative ethics takes up issues of power, it also supports respectful interaction with cultural difference. Cultural sensitivity—a growing concern for social workers in their daily practice (see, for example, the *Journal of Ethnic and Cultural Diversity in Social Work*, dedicated to such issues)—is also provided for by narrative ethics in that

its focus on assisting the Other and meeting his or her needs does not depend on the imposition of a Western ethical framework like principlism. Instead, narrative ethics can celebrate that everyone has a different story and a different way of telling it. Contrary to the idea that for principles, one size fits all, narrative provides the means by which service users from different backgrounds may speak for themselves and their cultural communities without having forced on them the assumption that those principles necessarily fit with their cultural traditions, thus addressing Azmi's (1997) criticism raised earlier.

Narrative can therefore accommodate great diversity and multiplicity in terms of identities, goals, needs, desires, and contexts, and encourage mutuality, understanding, and personal accountability. It is an ethics predicated on a *response* (in the Levinasian understanding of the term) to the Other that does not attempt to subsume the Other into pre-existing categories, and does not automatically privilege social work's knowledge, interpretations and understandings, or narratives over those of the Other (see Adams, 2008 on the dangers of narrative privilege). This is the ethics that exists before practice and leads us towards what Rossiter calls "unsettled social work," a social work that "gives up the fantasy of complete comprehension in favour of an orientation towards the revelation of the Other" (Rossiter, 2011 p, 994). Further, it is a response that extends personal responsibility to the Other and, as Treacher (2006) says, "involves the act of alterity which is giving up on oneself, giving one's self over to the other, and this is characterised by conscientiousness, humility and sensibility" (p. 36). This is thus a responsibility far beyond the boundaries constructed by principlism or social work codes of practice. Stories are not usually told without some expectations of both an audience and an effect on that audience, and it is the response prompted by a particular narrative that is crucial to future ethical action. Realizing that both the Saying and the Said of narrative involve ethicality is a start, and we can further ground the idea of ethical response in a strong obligation to the Other to be caring and supportive when they call on us.

### **Concluding Thoughts**

As with any ethical theory, narrative ethics is by no means immune to criticism. While we argue that narrative ethics provides a more caring alternative to principlism for social work, it does not prescribe any particular ethical route for practical action. This, Wilks notes, opens up narrative ethics to the criticism of being relativistic, as it depends largely

on individual application, situational vagaries, and an open-ended responsibility to the Other instead of clearly-defined moral principles (to contrast, see also Banks, 1998, for an argument in favour of ethics codes). However, we assert that the simplistic juggling of principles to be applied in a particular case relinquishes personal accountability, turns away from the true needs of the Other/service user, and does violence to individual and cultural uniqueness. In an explicitly moral sense, narrative ethics in social work practice opens up the possibility, as Nelson (2002) says, of

see[ing] morality as a continual interpersonal task of becoming and remaining mutually intelligible. In this view, morality is something we all do together, in actual moral communities whose members express themselves and influence others by appealing to mutually recognized values and use those same values to refine understanding, extend consensus, and eliminate conflict. ( p. 46)

Narrative ethics poses a means of not only examining service user stories for certain content—although that is one possibility—it offers a fundamental way of opening up and listening to the Other that necessitates a reaction grounded in the other person’s best interests, not what we think those best interests should be (see for example, the discussion of blood transfusion in Paulsen, 2011, as an example of such narrative analysis and reasoning). As such, we suggest that codes of ethics might be restructured around the development of narrative literacy, addressing the narrative process and environment of social work practice. This means, in Nelson’s words, “it is time to tell the story forward” (2002, p. 45) and co-construct a new narrative that does justice to the many complex factors involved in a service user/social worker relationship, while at the same time respecting the personal and professional needs of both. This will require creative ethical thinking and a great deal of personal responsibility, but we see this as part and parcel of ethical relationships in the first place.

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