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Re-imagining Social Work Ethics: Variations on a Theme

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ABSTRACT

This article comprises a series of discrete reflections by different authors on the theme of ‘re-imagining social work ethics’. It takes its inspiration from a workshop hosted by the Social Work Ethics Research Group (SWERG) in partnership with the *Ethics and Social Welfare* journal. The authors consider the meaning and motivation of calls to ‘re-imagine’ social work ethics in the light of current practical, political and philosophical challenges to the western, universalist and anthropocentric values underpinning the profession. They conclude that the process of re-imagining ethics is a necessary and valuable exercise, while challenging to implement in practice.

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I. Introduction

Sarah Banks

Social work ethics

If we are to re-imagine social work ethics, we need first to consider what it is that we are re-imagining. Social work ethics can be conceived of as a body of knowledge and norms about the core purpose of social work and how social workers should be and act. In this sense, social work ethics influences and underpins what social work is and the felt identity of social workers. It is also influenced by social work practice, as well as policies, laws and cultural norms. While we conceptually abstract the ethical dimensions of social work from its practice to create a body of knowledge and norms, social work ethics is deeply

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contextualized in practice and embodied in its practitioners. We tend to refer to aspects of practice as pertaining to ethics when we regard them as matters of rights, responsibilities, harms, benefits, distribution of goods and relationships of people to each other and the biosphere.

The content of social work ethics is constantly shifting and varies between countries – influenced by moral philosophical theories, changing social and cultural norms, and social and economic conditions. Despite this variation, there is a global statement of ethical principles, designed as a relatively generic document at a fairly high level of abstraction. The influence of western values on the international statement and on social work theories and methods is well-rehearsed and is indicated in the introduction and footnotes to the International Association of Schools of Social Work (2018) version. This document exemplifies the challenge of developing an internationally relevant statement at a time when the deleterious effects of colonization of places, peoples, practices and values are increasingly apparent and the valuing of diversity, indigenous knowledge and values is high on the agenda. This provokes the question: do we need to re-imagine social work ethics for new times?

Re-imagining

What does it mean to re-imagine something? At its simplest, to re-imagine is ‘to have a new idea about the way something should be’ (Cambridge Online Dictionary). Imagination is usually associated with creativity, perhaps putting aside preconceived ideas, previous knowledge and images. The prefix ‘re’ indicates there is an old image/set of ideas to be reconfigured or replaced. While the call to re-imagine social work and the ethics underpinning it is not new, it has taken on a new salience in the light of the growth of neoliberal and populist regimes, digital working and awareness and experiences of the consequences of human-created climate change.

If we examine some of the literature that focuses on re-imagining social work (and by implication, social work ethics), the re-imagination being proposed takes several forms. Some advocate a return to a social work ‘that has personal relationships and emotional connection at its core’ (Cummins 2019, back cover) and/or a re-emphasis on the espoused values of human rights and social justice, alongside an escape from, or rejection of, a neoliberal, proceduralized and privatized practice (e.g. Banks 2014; Ito 2014). The use of the term ‘return’, or in some cases ‘reclaim’, implies a pre-existing vision, model or approach that may need readjusting, but is there to be rediscovered. Other literature sees a more radical break with the past, linked with new paradigms for understanding and being in the world that not only take account of the causes and effects of climate change and post-colonial thinking and practices, but are premised on a worldview that sees humans as entangled with the natural and material world and acknowledges indigenous cultures and practices (Bozalek and Hölscher 2023; Ife, Mehta, and Tusasiirwe 2024; Livholts 2023). This more radical thinking may also connect with the past (a more holistic and nature-focused life), but the thinkers who are developing the more radical post-human and post-colonial frameworks do not advocate a ‘return’.

The rationale and methodology of this article

This article takes its inspiration from a workshop on the theme of ‘re-imagining social work ethics’, held at the European Social Work Research Association conference in Munich in March 2025. The workshop was hosted by the Social Work Ethics Research

Group (SWERG) in partnership with the *Ethics and Social Welfare* journal. The workshop was conceived in the context of earlier work undertaken by SWERG on ethical challenges and responses during the pandemic (Banks et al. 2020), the ethics of the call for ecologically-informed practice (Banks et al. 2024) and the ethical issues raised by the increasing use of digital technology, including artificial intelligence (AI) and algorithms (Banks et al. 2025). The questions that framed the workshop included: Do we need to re-imagine social work ethics in challenging times – in the context of pandemic conditions, the global ecological crisis, the digital revolution and the prospect of a post-anthropocene era? Is it enough to keep adding new clauses to codes of ethics and new modules to the teaching curriculum, or do we need to reconfigure and extend existing values and virtues or create new ones designed for new times?

Several people offered short provocations on: the significance of ‘soul’ in social work; the need to challenge the re-psychologization and neoliberalization of social work; and the importance of cultural humility. These were followed by World Café-style round table discussions, of which notes were taken and collated. About 20 people attended, some of whom were members of SWERG and others were new to the group. The facilitator (Sarah Banks) informed people of the intention to write an article and invited interested people to attend future online meetings of the group. The content of the provocations and notes of the World Café were circulated and discussed in the working group, which identified several themes and topics of interest. Two sub-groups wrote short papers for the next meeting on ‘Overcoming binaries to re-imagine social work ethics’ and ‘Decentring the human: from a dualistic to an organic world view’. Discussion of the ideas in these papers brought out the idea of the *rigidity* of boundaries and binaries in social work (e.g. personal/professional, individual/social, expert/client) and the dangers of *reductionism* (reducing people to cases and complex relationships to risk assessments) and the implications for the distinctiveness of social work.

The questions that framed the workshop are expansive and challenging. In this short article we cannot attempt to answer them, but rather to reflect on some of the issues they raise. The three short pieces that follow were written after the workshop and explore the question of re-imagining social work ethics from several different perspectives. In section II, Groothoff and Reimer consider the lineages of social work and identify essential features of an ideal type derived from recent literature, as a backdrop to the following sections. Section III argues for a radical version of re-imagining, calling for an epistemological and ontological paradigm shift, premised on a holistic worldview, drawing on post-human and post-materialist thinking. Section IV brings us back to everyday practice, advocating the virtue or moral quality of cultural humility in the face of complex dilemmas, while the final section offers some concluding comments about the challenges of re-imagining social work ethics.

II. Background: reflecting on social work’s origins and key characteristics

Richard Groothoff and Elizabeth Reimer

This section outlines briefly a perspective on the development and current characteristics of social work as a backdrop to the following sections, which focus on re-imagining social work ethics.

The development of social work

The pioneers of social work in late nineteenth/early twentieth-century Europe and North America were inspired by key characteristics of the eighteenth-century Enlightenment, such as belief in human dignity and rational progress (Forrester 2024; Kant 1992 [1784]). These values have persisted through time and been transferred globally, as an essentially western model of social work spread around the world.

During the transformation from philanthropic charity to systematic practice, the public role of social work came to be defined as promoting the social functioning of individuals, groups and communities in interaction with their environment. Throughout the history of social work, there has been a continuous shift in the vulnerability of individuals, groups and communities, as well as an increase in the complexity of their environments (Van Ewijk 2010). This has involved increasingly refined systems of policies, institutions, rules and procedures designed to redistribute inequalities and provide necessities, particularly in the global north. Political shortcomings and rising inequality have contributed to polarization and populism, threatening the ideal of a diverse, inclusive, and resilient democratic society (Cohen and Arato 1995; Dahl 2015). The withdrawal of the welfare state (where it existed) has also forced citizens to rely on and strain their personal support and kinship networks, creating new forms of social inequality (Van Ewijk 2010). At the same time, it is difficult for vulnerable citizens and minorities to raise their voices or influence state policy.

More recently, we have been facing unprecedented developments that further challenge social work practice. First, the environment can no longer be seen as a stable backdrop to life and social interaction. We have entered the Anthropocene – an era in which humanity has profoundly and irreversibly altered the Earth's condition. Environmental interest groups and First Nations peoples worldwide have become resolute in asserting 'more-than-human' interests by participating in the 'parliament of things' – a place where humans and non-humans are represented (Latour 2017). Furthermore, Generative Artificial Intelligence (Gen AI) is being rapidly integrated into daily life. High potential for Gen AI exposure suggests a pressing need for social work professionals to engage proactively with it, and leverage and support use by service users. However, hitherto critical digital literacy is limited, despite increasing concerns regarding Gen AI related to ethics and power.

The nature of social work

Despite these social changes, consistencies in ethical principles have persisted since the earliest days of social work practice development. First, social work remains grounded in the core principle of belief in human dignity rooted in social justice. Furthermore, social work practice has continued to distinguish itself from the more individualistic or symptom-focused methodologies of other helping professions. Four distinctive features are identifiable: the centrality of trusting service user–worker relationships; commitment to social consciousness and conscience; a holistic approach that considers individuals within their broader social environment; and seeking social justice.

It is important to note that these characteristics form what might be described as an 'ideal type' and may be espoused more in theory than realized in current practice. However, they provide a useful benchmark against which to re-imagine social work

ethics. First, and centrally, social work emphasizes a close, collaborative relationship between people using social work services and workers, characterized by sensitivity, dialogue and shared power (Adomaityte-Subaciene, Poviliūnas, and Ignotas 2024; Herod and Lymbery 2002; Kaplan 1963; Towle 1952). Second, grounded in sociological perspectives, and guided by a social consciousness and conscience, workers strive to focus on improving social functioning and interactions within the community, addressing issues of vulnerability, powerlessness and injustice (Adomaityte-Subaciene, Poviliūnas, and Ignotas 2024; Bauman 2000; Herod and Lymbery 2002; Towle 1952). Third, workers are urged to adopt a holistic perspective, considering the ‘whole person’ and their social context in decision-making (Adomaityte-Subaciene, Poviliūnas, and Ignotas 2024; Bauman 2000; Herod and Lymbery 2002; Kaplan 1963). Finally, driven by a strong social conscience and understanding of power dynamics, social workers continue to seek social justice by engaging in advocacy and challenging the status quo (Adomaityte-Subaciene, Poviliūnas, and Ignotas 2024; Bauman 2000; Herod and Lymbery 2002; Towle 1952).

These distinguishing characteristics collectively position social work as a profession uniquely equipped to address complex social problems that arise from the intersection of individual circumstances and broader social, economic, environmental and political forces. This perspective is particularly relevant in contexts such as technological disruption, where social workers recognize that people rendered redundant by artificial intelligence, for example, become vulnerable not due to personal inadequacy, but because of systemic failures to provide adequate social protection and support.

III. Overcoming binaries

Eva Grabinski, Daria Forlenza, Teresa Bertotti, Elizabeth Reimer, María Irene Carvalho, Mercedes Cuenca, François Gillet

This section explores what it might mean to re-imagine social work ethics by drawing on critical post-humanist relational ethics, and how this can relate to pluriversal decolonial ethics that acknowledges a plurality of ethical stances beyond colonial western ethics (Hutchings 2019). Critical post-humanist relational ethics provides a post-Enlightenment non-anthropocentric framework that troubles the predominant western concept of the human through a relational accountability that demands justice for all marginalized bodies, species and environments (Braidotti 2019). It is a holistic framework that considers human and non-human relations inseparably entangled together along with broader social-political and natural-environmental forces, and that supports justice for all human and non-human relations by challenging the status quo of centring on the concept of the human in western liberal humanist thought (Braidotti 2019).

Deliberation among working-group members brought out the idea of the rigidity of binary divisions underpinning social work ethics that is rooted in foundational assumptions of western liberal humanism inspired by the Enlightenment. A binary comprises two mutually exclusive entities (e.g. human or non-human; male or female; subject or object). In social work, binary thinking creates boundaries that exclude and marginalize, shaping who is considered worthy of ethical concern. Challenging binaries opens space for more inclusive and responsive ethical practice. This matters for social work ethics because the rigidity of binaries like human/non-human and self/other can reinforce

exclusionary norms of what it means to be human, thus functioning to foreclose and marginalize different, plural and relational ways of understanding and experiencing the world. This rigidity of binaries is arguably upheld by the western liberal humanist assumptions espoused in international guidelines for social work ethics (Bozalek and Pease 2021). For re-imagining social work ethics as overcoming binaries, the group explored the potential of critical post-humanist theorizing to challenge the status quo of centring on the concept of the human in western liberal humanist thought.

Critical post-humanist and pluriversal decolonial scholarship have highlighted that the human of humanism has been characterized as the fully independent, white male subject of western European descent; this figure of the human has been an assumed ideal where those who are not the same as this figure are comparatively positioned as ‘other’ (Braidotti 2019; Zembylas 2018). Ethical frameworks for social justice rooted in liberal humanism have aimed at autonomous self-determination for human individuals based on this universalized figure of the human as the standard for equity. However, liberal humanist ethics that centre this concept of the human can foreclose alternative ways of understanding ethics. This emphasis on sameness, rather than difference, restricts the possibility of embracing plural ways of understanding and experiencing the world. Critical post-humanist relational ethics encourages a shift in thinking about ethics to focus on difference rather than sameness in how the world is understood and experienced individually and collectively together with human and non-human relations (Braidotti 2019). This approach to ethics foregrounds different ways of understanding and experiencing the world to challenge hierarchical norms sedimented through binary thinking in order to think beyond these exclusionary dualisms (Braidotti 2019).

Critical post-humanist relational ethics blurs the human/non-human divide and related sameness/difference binaries assumed in liberal humanist thinking (Bozalek and Hölscher 2023). Examples include self/other, subject/object and culture/nature, where the former is associated with the human. In liberal humanist thinking, ethics is understood as an autonomous rational deliberation of individual human agency. Critical post-humanist relational ethics is understood differently as contextually emergent through encounters involving humans inseparably entangled with natural, material, semiotic and other forces. Human-centred control over nature and technology as objects is disrupted by understanding nature and technology as agential, together with humans, in emergent phenomena like ecological crises and digital disruption. Critical post-humanist ethics assumes a complex interconnected understanding of ontology that emphasizes the entangled mutual immanence of all human and non-human relations, where ethical practices contextually unfold through these dynamic relations (Braidotti 2013). This perspective invites re-imagining social work ethics beyond human exceptionalism, autonomy and control assumed in liberal humanist thinking, which provides strong roots for formations like neo-liberal individualism (Zembylas 2018). By foregrounding human and non-human relations as interconnected and dynamic, critical post-humanist relational ethics troubles binary liberal humanist thinking while inviting situated and responsive ethical engagement. For social work practice, post-humanist ethics entails always being open to different and new ways of experiencing the world through encountering and troubling the boundaries that exclude and marginalize relations categorized as non-human. This includes critically considering how such boundaries are (re)configured through entanglements with state apparatuses, social work codes of ethics, emergent digital technologies and more.

Decolonial scholarship challenges the ‘othering’ of human and non-human relations deemed different, exterior and inferior to the human of humanism (De La Cadena and Blaser 2018; Ortiz et al. 2025). This practice of othering creates boundaries to negatively characterize those deemed ‘other’ to sustain colonial hierarchies of oppression. The effects of othering are profound, including marginalization, exclusion and the denial of rights (Lugones and Crowley 2025). Central to this has been a self/other binary where the former is associated with the human of humanism, and where this split is propped up by related binaries like human/non-human, subject/object, culture/nature and civilized/uncivilized. Decolonization takes on different meanings in different contexts internationally; however, common across decolonization is centring diverse ‘other’ ways of understanding the world instead of indexing on the human ‘self’ of humanism (Zembylas 2018). Pluriversal decolonial ethics starts with affirming difference by embracing diverse perspectives, knowledge systems, and ways of existing that differ from the viewpoint of a universalizing concept of the human in liberal humanist thinking. Both critical post-humanist and pluriversal decolonial ethics support an ethical accountability in social work ethics that moves away from indexing on the human of humanism. Critical post-humanist relational ethics can be put to work together with pluriversal decolonial ethics to foreground epistemologies that have been historically marginalized by the deleterious results of colonization to highlight the pluriversality of different ways of knowing and existing in the world (Barreiro et al. 2020). This entails a re-imagining of social work ethics as responsive to co-flourishing and mutuality across diverse contexts instead of adhering to ideas about what prescriptively constitutes ethics based in liberal humanist ways of thinking (Bozalek and Zembylas 2017).

IV. From cultural competence to cultural humility

Netanel Gemara and Michal Segal

We now move from the theorising of the previous section to re-imagine a very specific aspect of social work practice from a non-binary, relational ethics perspective. In this section we explore cultural humility in the context of social work with the ultra-Orthodox Jewish community. The conventional approach to cultural diversity in social work has focused on ‘cultural competence’ – the acquisition of behaviours, attitudes and policies that enable effective work in cross-cultural situations. However, this framework may perpetuate binaries that constrain ethical practice: expert/client, knower/known, universal/particular (Garrañ and Werkmeister Rozas 2013). Cultural humility offers an alternative paradigm that exemplifies the relational ethics essential for contemporary social work. It entails a lifelong commitment to self-assessment, equalizing power imbalances between professionals and clients, and developing mutually beneficial, non-paternalistic partnerships with communities (Tervalon and Murray-García 1998). Unlike cultural competence, which positions the social worker as an expert and focuses on the ‘way of doing’, cultural humility presents the practitioner as a learner. In this regard, cultural humility can be described as a ‘moral quality’ or ‘virtue’ – a ‘way of relating’ to clients that values culture and cultural differences (Hook and Davis 2019). Cultural humility entails acknowledging that no single ethical framework can claim universal validity. This shift from competence to humility embodies a reconceptualization of how ethical

knowledge is co-constructed and validated in practice, not from textbooks, but through relationships.

Three levels of ethical conflict

Research with ultra-Orthodox Jewish communities (Gemara and Nadan 2022; Gemara, Nadan, and Roer-Strier 2021) reveals the need for cultural humility through three levels of ethical encounters. These encounters highlight the complexity of ethical dilemmas and the limitations of existing ethical codes when faced with profound ideological differences.

1. *Surface level challenges:* Conflicts at this level seem manageable within the existing framework. For instance, the stigma surrounding mental illness in the ultra-Orthodox community may lead parents to avoid discussing their mental health diagnoses with their children (Jacob et al. 2024). A social worker might address this reluctance with cultural sensitivity and adapt therapeutic goals. Here, the professional code remains intact; only its application needs adjustment. However, a fundamental question arises: whose knowledge matters? Is it the clinical literature advocating for disclosure or the community's wisdom prioritizing social and spiritual protection?
2. *Value system conflicts:* This level reveals deeper contradictions. For example, a secular female social worker must consider how much to adapt her dress to the ultra-Orthodox community's strict moral rules based on gender segregation (Zalcborg-Block 2025). This is not merely a matter of cultural sensitivity, but a direct conflict between ethical systems. Adapting her dress could signify professional respect. Yet, from a Western feminist perspective, these norms may represent patriarchal structures that limit women's freedom. Adhering to these norms could imply tacit consent to gender inequality. This example illustrates how binary thinking – respect versus equality, professional versus personal values – leads to impossible choices. A relational ethics informed by cultural humility recognizes that ethical insights arise from engaging with these contradictions honestly.
3. *Epistemological differences:* This level presents the most profound challenge: divergent constructions of ethical knowledge. Social work ethics is rooted in western, rational, individualistic and humanistic principles from Enlightenment thinking (Clarke 2022). In contrast, many religious and indigenous ethical systems derive moral authority from spiritual traditions, communal wisdom, ancestral knowledge and ecological relationships. The western framework values knowledge gained through reasoning and empirical evidence, while the ultra-Orthodox community bases ethical authority on divine revelation, sacred texts, and intergenerational interpretation. Dismissing such religiously-grounded ethical considerations as mere 'cultural beliefs' while privileging empirically supported interventions is an act of epistemological violence. Cultural humility requires acknowledging that our professional ethics, despite claims to universality, represents only a particular and partial understanding of moral knowledge.

Cultural humility as an ethical foundation

Cultural humility, therefore, comprises not only a practical skill, but can be regarded as the very embodiment of a relational, non-dualistic ethics. In contrast to central values in social

work, such as dignity and rights, which serve as substantive ethical commitments, humility is a second-order ethical orientation that shapes how such commitments are interpreted and enacted in diverse contexts characterized by power asymmetry and ethical pluralism. The goal of this conceptualization is not to add ‘humility’ to a list of professional values, but rather to propose humility as a foundation through which all ethical engagement is filtered. This proposal has significant theoretical implications and points to a necessary move towards a framework that supports genuine ethical pluralism. Such a shift implies a profound restructuring of professional power and creates an institutional architecture in which multiple moral authorities are recognized. By embracing humility as foundational, social work theory can begin the important work of decolonizing its ethical core, thereby developing a more authentic and relevant response to the challenges of an interconnected and multicultural world.

On the path to ecological humility

Connecting our discussion of cultural humility with post-human approaches to ethics discussed in section III, the value or virtue of humility can also transcend cultural differences and frame our relationship to the world within a broader ecological and spiritual context. Just as cultural humility decentres the western worldview, ecological humility decentres the human and challenges anthropocentric assumptions in professional ethics. This perspective aligns with many indigenous and spiritual traditions that acknowledge kinship with land, water and other species. It shifts social work from a narrow focus on human well-being to an understanding of humans as part of a complex ecological system. This framework creates space for the ‘soul’ – aspects of the human experience that cannot always be rationally articulated but are deeply felt through connection to community, nature and the sacred. Ecological humility is best understood through ‘environmental openness’ – a virtue that encompasses both intellectual receptivity to ecological knowledge and emotional responsiveness to the non-human world.

V. Concluding comments

Sarah Banks

While the contributions in each section of this article differ markedly in style and focus, they concur on the importance of interrogating the nature and role of social work ethical frameworks in the context of new and challenging times. In section II, Groothoff and Reimer consider the origins and key characteristics of social work. They conclude that while rooted in western humanist values, it is a profession uniquely placed to address complex problems at the intersection of individual circumstances and broader social, economic, environmental and political forces. They prefigure the concerns of Grabinski et al, who, in section III, illustrate at a philosophical level the fundamental paradigm shift needed to move beyond a focus on humans towards an ontology that gives parity to human and non-human entities and acknowledges their inter-connectedness. Moving from abstract theorising to the everyday challenges of social work practice in section IV, Gemara and Segal advocate humility on the part of the social worker, focusing particularly on cultural humility in the context of the relationships of humans with each other,

but also considering what it might mean to be ecologically humble in relation to other elements of the biosphere. The themes of relationality, connectedness and plurality run through these contributions as they seek to imagine a new social work ethics.

These varied reflections on the theme of re-imagining social work ethics suggest that re-imagination is a challenging but necessary process for the profession to undertake. For social work, which is state-sponsored and/or state-regulated in some countries, to take a stance that is radically post-human, pluralist and de-colonial is to go against the norms and values within which it is embedded. It entails re-imagining power, recognising that regulation, governance and everyday relationships are all shaped by relational, circulating forms of power rather than fixed hierarchies. From a post-human and feminist perspective, power can be reconfigured as a capacity to strengthen connections and subvert dominant dualisms, opening new possibilities for ethical decision-making. To explore what this might mean and take small steps to make changes within the existing paradigm (e.g. the move from cultural competence to cultural humility) before questioning the whole concept of human culture *per se*, is a micro-change at practice level that can be linked to broader shifts in macro-level political and philosophical thinking. This article does not provide answers, but contributors offer pointers for directions in which thinking and practice are moving and may shift over time.

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