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Article

‘Does my *Haltung* look big in this?’: The use of social pedagogical theory for the development of ethical and value-led practice

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to set out how the use of social pedagogical *Haltung* can support the exploration of values and how this informs and shapes a practitioner’s direct work. *Haltung* is a German concept that has no direct English translation but means ‘mindset’, ‘ethos’ or ‘attitude’ (Eichsteller, 2010) and relates to an individual’s value base. Mührel (2008, cited in Eichsteller, 2010) set out that a social pedagogical *Haltung* is based on the two concepts of empathic understanding and regard. This article argues that the use of a social pedagogical *Haltung* gives practitioners a philosophical framework to support the reflection of core values and ethics held on a personal level. It also supports an understanding of how these influence practitioners and students when using *self* in relationship-based practice. The understanding of *Haltung* is important, but for social pedagogical practice to be undertaken it also has to be demonstrated by actions. The reflective activity of ‘values alive in practice’, set out in this article, provides a tool for social workers, practitioners and students to critically explore their own values and practice and make more meaningful connections between their *Haltung* and the behaviours they demonstrate in their everyday work. In the United Kingdom, values and standards for social work practice are set out by the British Association of Social Work and Social Work England. Arguably these have, at times, been reduced to a checklist for students and practitioners and can

lack more in-depth and explicit links to practice. The analysis of practice is more likely to focus on the skills and abilities of practitioners rather than the value base that underpins these. While the understanding and key application of core knowledge and skills is essential for competent social work practice ([Forrester et al., 2019](#)), this article argues that it must also be supported and shaped by ethical principles. It seeks to explore how social workers can be supported to adopt value-led approaches to complex work within an outcome-focused culture.

Keywords: Haltung; ethical practice; value-led practice; reflective tool; social pedagogy

Introduction

Before starting the discussion set out in this article around *Haltung* and values alive in practice, we would like to acknowledge the professionalisation of language in social work and how this has led to individuals being viewed as ‘other’, as ‘objects’ or as ‘cases’ that need fixing. As Freire (1970) argued, the use of language and terminology can be directly linked to power, discrimination and oppressive practice. The ability to recognise and reduce power imbalances and work alongside people in a more human way is central to social pedagogical practice (Charfe and Gardner, 2019).

In an effort to avoid further marginalisation of individuals through the use of disempowering language, the use of the terms ‘service user’ or ‘client’ will not be used. Instead, the article refers to ‘people’ and ‘individuals’.

Haltung explained

Haltung is a German word that has no direct English translation but ‘roughly translates as mindset or ethos’ (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 34) and is as such our attitude to the world around us (Eichsteller, 2010). Haltung can be understood as a moral compass that guides every action taken in every area of an individual’s life (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). An individual’s Haltung is an important and fundamental aspect of their personal being and shapes the way they think and feel about the world around them, situations that they face and the relationships they have with other people. Due to the subjective nature of Haltung, Eichsteller (2010) wrote that it can be ‘more or less distinct by how we actually live by our values’. As such, it can be seen to be value-neutral, due to the fact that each individual will form their own Haltung.

Another aspect of Haltung is the link to the active use of *self* in practice and the core feature of social pedagogy that centres around ‘authentic engagements’ with the people practitioners work alongside (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 34). As a result, Haltung and the use of *self* is not something that is utilised in a certain situation or only during working hours but is, as Eichsteller (2010) noted, ‘a skin and not a jacket’ (p. 34). Haltung takes the use of social work values one step further as it recognises that personal and professional values are fundamental in shaping the way social workers and practitioners work alongside people. Social work practitioners are therefore ‘more than just a pair of hands’ in professional practice (Eichsteller, 2010, p. 4).

The word ‘ethos’ takes the definition of Haltung a step further in linking an individual’s attitudes to the established sets of moral codes and values in society (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2014). Corbella and Ucar (2019) insisted that ethics are concerned with the dignity and happiness of everybody in a society and that all actions are guided by values and ethics. Ethics are often individual and personal yet determine a person’s behaviour and standpoint. Eichsteller and Holthoff (2011) stated the importance of acknowledging the constructed and ‘conceptualised’ nature of how different groups are viewed within a society or community, and how this shapes the development of a person’s own Haltung. Due to the socially constructed nature of Haltung, it will differ between individuals and it can be argued, therefore, that there is no ‘correct’ Haltung.

In social work and social care practice there is continued dialogue and debate around the link between ethics, theory and practice. Storø (2013) and Corbella and Ucar (2019), among others, have clearly identified the difficulty in being able to link the use of ethics to direct practice. Cleary (2020, p. 2) has developed this point further and has identified three aspects of ethics. He has named them as ‘professional ethics’, ‘everyday ethics’ and ‘philosophical ethics’. He stated that the professional and everyday relates to ‘decision making and action’ within professional and personal lives, while the philosophical aspect relates to the meta-reflections around ‘goodness, justice, love and happiness’. In relation to Haltung, it can be argued that all three are important to consider when reflecting on the development and shaping of an individual’s Haltung and the direct use of *self* in practice.

In relation to social work and social care, the use of the new approaches in practice, discussed later in this article, will be influenced by each practitioner’s Haltung. For instance, the term ‘child in need’ is very subjective and is greatly influenced by aspects such as a professional’s view of children, how they view a child’s capacity and whether they see the rich child (Malaguzzi, 1993). Is it their belief that they need to provide a child with protection and do they see their role as a rescuer? A practitioner’s view

will also be influenced by the culture of the agency they work in along with the way key principles of legislation or policy are translated into practice. For example, there is a duty to complete a needs and wishes assessment of children under Section 1 of the Children Act 1989 as part of a wider assessment of a family. Any social worker completing such an assessment is aware of the need to ascertain the wishes and feelings of the children as there is a legal duty to do so. How they conduct this assessment and how the information given by the children will be used in the final assessment will be influenced by the social worker's Haltung. If they see children as vulnerable to manipulation by adults and as being too young to truly know their own views, these views are likely to influence how the social worker interprets and assesses the information given by the children.

Likewise, adult social care is heavily influenced by societal and individual values surrounding those identified as vulnerable adults. Social care organisations have a long history of deeply embedded paternalistic values shaping welfare delivery, something that disabled people have continued to challenge and campaign against (Morris, 2004). In adopting social pedagogical approaches, practitioners must continually challenge these societal perceptions and their own assumptions in attempting to see individuals as experts in their own lives rather than passive recipients of care (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Wieninger (2000, cited in Eichsteller, 2010) pointed out that our Haltung influences how we think about others and therefore how we are likely to respond to them.

Because of the subjective nature of Haltung, it is necessary to critically reflect on one's own value base. In using social pedagogy theory and the professional codes of ethics, practitioners can develop awareness in relation to how this can influence their responses to the complex ethical dilemmas within social work practice. Making judgements is a major part of being a human being but it is also an important skill in assessment and decision making in social work practice. Social workers need to remain acutely aware of the factors influencing their professional judgements.

Social pedagogy can support this self-reflection. As an ethical orientation it encourages practitioners to 'strive towards understanding people, being respectful and recognising the unconditional value of human beings' (Kaska and Ladbrooke, 2016, p. 20). One of the key historical thinkers, Pestalozzi (1964, cited in Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011), identified the link between humanity and the need for a positive and harmonious view of people as well as the importance of valuing and respecting individuals. Mührel (2008, cited in Eichsteller, 2010; Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 35) expanded on the important work of Hans-Georg Gadamer (1900–2002) and Levinas (1981) who developed the two important pillars of social pedagogical Haltung, with empathic understanding on one side and regard on the other. Mührel (2008, cited in Eichsteller, 2010) drew on Gadamer's use of hermeneutics in gaining an 'understanding of an individual, their way of life and their perspective' by using relational-based practice. Similarly, the German term '*Verstehen*', which translates as empathic understanding and being able to see the lifeworld orientation of an individual, is useful in understanding Haltung. Empathic understanding requires the practitioner to form a genuine emotional connection to the other person through reflecting their experiences and demonstrating understanding. This links clearly to Freire's (1970) assertion regarding the importance of 'investigating people's thinking about reality and people's action upon reality' (p. 87) in the use of relational-based practice. By regard, Mührel (2008, cited in Eichsteller, 2010) referred to the work of Levinas (1981) and the German term '*Achten*', which 'refers to accepting the otherness in people who are different from ourselves' (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 35). This enables the practitioner to respect difference when there is no personal experience of an individual's situation. In setting out the two pillars of a social pedagogical Haltung, Mührel (2008, cited in Eichsteller, 2010) gave us a navigation method or reflective framework through which to direct practice.

Another key dynamic to Haltung is the importance of the promotion of social justice (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). At the heart of this is the ability to recognise the Haltung represented in legislation, policies and organizational procedures. An understanding of Haltung on a macro level is just as important as understanding its influence on the micro level. 'It is important to recognize the explicit and implicit principles and ethos (Haltung) of legislation can play a powerful role in shaping our practice and the relationship between the state and people who access services and support' (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 36). A key example of this is the guiding principle contained in the Children Act 1989, that the 'welfare

of the child is paramount'. Even though this is an important principle it could be seen to place a child's needs, wishes and feelings over those of their parents or carers, instead of taking a holistic view of a child's situation and the emotional and relational connections they have to other members of their family. This guiding principle is the *Haltung* represented in legislation, which has had a direct impact on how practitioners interpret this in their practice.

A short critical discussion of current English social work and care practice

Understanding the political and policy-led landscape is key to understanding the environment that current social work and social care practitioners are working within. Since 2010, when the Conservative and Liberal Democratic Coalition government initiated an austerity programme, a reduction in state responsibility and funding for health and welfare services has been evident (Cunningham and Cunningham, 2014; Bilson, Featherstone and Martin, 2017). As a result, many organisations and local authority departments have had to reduce, redesign, work in partnership or close services, while trying to meet continued growth in demand for support services. Alongside this there has been a focus on the transformation of the workforce and the search for new approaches to working in response to cuts in funding. Some of these responses have been embedded into legislation, a clear example of which can be seen in the Care Act 2014. The introduction of this piece of legislation saw a shift away from the paternalistic approach with the emphasis on the provision of services, to one that focuses on well-being, self-determination, choice and control (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). The Care Act 2014 promotes the use of strengths-based (Saleebey, 2006) and person-centred (Sanderson and Lewis, 2012) approaches in all areas of practice with adults and their families. From a social pedagogical perspective, the centrality of a relationship-based approach in supporting individuals to develop and improve their independence and well-being is essential to practice. There is a clear focus on working *with* individuals and their families rather than *for* them (Charfe and Gardner, 2019) and this reinforces the commitment to a person-led rather than needs-led approach to practice.

With regard to working with children, young people and their families, there have been similar developments set against the austerity agenda. Many local authorities have looked for ways to provide improved outcomes for children and families while managing cuts to services, understaffed teams and high caseloads. As identified by Ruch, Turney and Ward (2010), austerity has led to an increased focus on risk management, safeguarding and investigative approach to practice. As a direct result, local authorities and third-sector organisations have looked for new approaches to practice that will support workforce development while also equipping their staff to manage the complexities of working with children and their families. This has included the use of Risk Sensible models (Featherstone, Morris and White, 2014) and Signs of Safety (Spratt, Devaney and Frederick, 2019), which privilege the use of relational approaches and focus on key social pedagogical principles including independence and interdependence, building confidence and motivation, setting goals and contributing to society.

Although many social workers would clearly identify with social pedagogical principles as described above, the ability to translate this into practice has become increasingly challenging in current contexts. Social workers and social care staff already under increasing pressure through the rational-technical approach (Munro, 2012, cited in Trevithick, 2014, p. 1) find it difficult to see the 'space' for adopting relational approaches to their work. A common theme in discussions in training social care staff is that current systems and contexts prevent them from working in this way, even though the espoused narrative of strength-based and relational practice is commonplace within the workplace.

Social work values and standards

There has been a long tradition of advocacy, rights-based approaches, participation and relational practice in social work in the United Kingdom (BASW, 2014; Ruch et al., 2010). The importance of these are enshrined in the professional standards set out to guide social work practice, such as the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Children and Family Practitioners (DfE, 2018), the Knowledge and Skills Statement for Social Workers in Adult Services (DoH, 2015) and the Professional Capability Framework (BASW, 2018).

When it comes to setting out the values and ethics for social work practitioners, the British Association of Social Work (BASW, 2018) articulate a comprehensive list of the desired values. These are set out in the Code of Ethics and come under three headings: human rights, social justice and professional integrity, all of which link to the same ethical base of social pedagogy practice (Corbella and Ucar, 2019). There are also a number of ethical practice principles aimed at supporting practitioners to apply these standards and values directly in their practice. As BASW (2018) rightly pointed out, social work strives to ‘meet human needs and develop human potential’ and that social workers should act with integrity and ‘treat people with dignity and care’.

BASW’s Code of Ethics and the ethical practice principles set out a detailed explanation of each; for example, the need for developing professional relationships and the need to be able to assess and manage risk. The *what needs to happen* in practice is very clearly set out and gives excellent guidance as to its importance, yet it can be argued that *how this is done* is the key aspect, which is less clear. Our personal experiences of teaching in higher educational settings on social work and related degree courses and providing continual professional development training to practitioners is that there is little time or attention paid to supporting people to assess their own values. In their research, Corbella and Ucar (2019) found that training was not effective in supporting professionals’ and students’ own understandings of how the ethical dimension to their work affected their practice. They also cited the worrying statistic from Vilar (2014, cited in Corbella and Ucar, 2019) that 80 per cent of practitioners do not have adequate support systems to help them deal with ethical and complex decisions that may challenge their own values. As a result, social work values, at times, have been reduced to a tick-box exercise as students strive to demonstrate their skills in competence-based frameworks of assessment. This lack of contemplation risks the student failing to recognise the importance of continual reflection once qualified. It is at this point that we propose the key benefits of social pedagogical approaches and attention to one’s Haltung, in challenging one’s own value base and the impact of the action one takes in practice.

Adopting social pedagogical approaches in practice

It is very common in policy and practice to understand *what needs to be done*, but often it is less clear about *how things get done*. This is where social pedagogy can be helpful. Instead of creating systems and processes to practice, social pedagogy is more concerned with *how and why* a particular action is taken and relies on relational approaches to support interventions and ethical and value-led practice (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Social pedagogy focuses on the ‘conscious use of relationships’ (Bengtsson, Chamberlain, Crimmens and Stanley, 2008, p. 9) by practitioners, which are based on social pedagogical actions. Stephens (2013) insisted that these relationships have to be underpinned by the notion of *caritas*. He argued that *caritas* is the ‘benevolent concern for others that signals a sense of solidarity’ (Stephens, 2013, p. 23) and went further than kindness. It also clearly links into the diamond model (Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011), in that practitioners have to be able to see the potential in the person they are working with. Once this has been achieved, they have to use every opportunity to support them to build up their confidence and self-efficacy, ultimately leading to them taking charge of their own lives (Stephens, 2013; Charfe and Gardner, 2019).

Importantly, practitioners need to be supported to be confident in their own values, judgements and actions in order to utilise their most critical resource – themselves. Corbella and Ucar (2019) highlighted the complex nature of ethical practice and values and suggested that these are wrongly ignored as the focus is solely on theory, practice and the use of ‘common sense’ (p. 2). Through adopting a social pedagogical perspective, organisations and individual practitioners can be supported to develop positive relational approaches to practice that serve to meet the underpinning aims of the organisation, policies and legislation. An example of this would be the use of social pedagogical Haltung in supporting practitioners to develop ethical practice. However, the focus of this article is not to critically analyse this in further detail, but rather to look at the issue of professional values in practice when these approaches are undertaken and lead to more effective practice and outcomes for the people social work practitioners are working alongside.

Social pedagogy is essentially concerned with well-being, learning and growth (ThemPra, 2017). It is underpinned by the idea that ‘every person has inherent potential, is valuable, resourceful and can make a

meaningful contribution to the wider community if we find ways of including them' (ThemPra, 2017, n.p.). Social pedagogy provides a philosophical, theoretical and practical approach to practice. As such it requires an organisational and individual commitment to these aims in order for the ethos to be translated into practice. Social pedagogy should not be seen as 'an *add on* to social work or a set of methods that can be picked up and used' (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 8). As Hämäläinen (2003) stated, social pedagogy does not happen because of the methods utilised but rather as a result of social pedagogical thoughts. Stephens (2013) explained that social pedagogy is a lens through which the world can be viewed, that in turn will influence the way practitioners respond.

Values alive in practice

The importance of practitioners being aware of their own *Haltung* is a key starting point when using relational practice. But reflection alone is not enough. Freire (2001) stated that there needs to be 'right thinking, right doing' (p. 39) and Stephens (2013) wrote that 'a compassionate disposition and kind actions are particularly important' (p. 23). Cleary (2020) also argued that reflection and ethical reflection are part of 'guided action' (p. 2) and help practitioners 'qualify action' (p. 2). It is also key to note that reflection that does not help practitioners develop their practice should be seen as ineffective. Kierkegaard (cited in Hatton, 2013, p. 28) asserts that for a person to become self-aware there needs to be critical reflection on their thoughts, feelings and actions. 'Knowing when to push, when to let go, what to listen to, and what to ignore – all these skills are based on the profound respect for human dignity and working to restore a sense of who they are and what they want to be' (Kim Berg, cited in Eichsteller and Holthoff, 2011, p. 38).

If critical reflection is key, it has to be rooted in an individual's practice as well as a philosophical understanding of their own *Haltung*. To support this development and from experiences of facilitating training and teaching sessions, we have developed a reflective activity called 'values alive in practice'.

This activity supports individuals, teams and organisations to consider the behaviours that demonstrate their *Haltung*. The starting point is to invite people to explain their understanding of named core values, such as respect, compassion, love, being non-judgemental and so on. This is achieved by setting the participants into small groups and giving each group one value different from the other groups, which is written out on a brightly coloured piece of paper. They are encouraged to think about their own understanding of the value before sharing with others. After being given a set time, the group must then discuss what this value means to them personally and how they would define it. They are encouraged to try to find an agreed term that can explain this value to the wider group. The wider discussion encourages the group to compare their definitions and to focus on the challenges in achieving agreement on a particular value. The aim of the exercise is to tease out the subjective nature of our understanding of values on a personal and professional level.

The 'values alive in practice' activity then requires the groups to explain how they demonstrate this value in their practice. For example, when working with individuals or families, how would the person they are working alongside know that they are demonstrating the highlighted value? What behaviour in their direct practice would demonstrate compassion? How would somebody they were working with know they were being compassionate towards them? Individuals are given a short amount of time to reflect and then share this with their group members. They are encouraged to share practice or life examples of how they have demonstrated this value and how it had been received. This critical analysis and reflection support the practitioner or student to link the importance of understanding and explaining core values while demonstrating and use these in their direct work. Once again examples are fed back to the wider group and reflective questions by the facilitators are asked, including:

- How easy was the activity?
- What made it particularly challenging?
- Did you hear any examples that you felt were helpful to your own practice?

In the evaluation of this activity, students and practitioners often comment on their increased understanding of the difference between values and behaviours as result of the exercise. Similarly, they

suggest the exercise helps them to understand Haltung and the notion of congruence between one's values and one's actions.

Values alive in practice supports reflection on another key social pedagogy idea around the genuineness and purposefulness of actions. Social pedagogical practice has to be 'purposeful, with the ultimate aim of supporting growth, development and well-being' (Charfe and Gardner, 2019, p. 13). Links to the work of Freire (1970) can be made here, particularly in terms of his analysis of dialogue and the importance of this being genuine. Freire (1970) stated that 'dialogue cannot exist, however, in the absence of a profound love of the world and for people . . . Because love is an act of courage, not of fear, love is a commitment to other' (p. 70).

Conclusion

Kornbeck (2009), Hämäläinen (2003), and Cousseé, Bradt, Roose and Bouverne-De Bie (2010) have all written about how difficult it is to define social pedagogy and social pedagogical practice. It is often said 'it depends' when discussing whether practices are social pedagogical and the contested nature of this discipline makes it difficult to identify. Social pedagogy is not a set of methods to be used but a lens through which to see the world and react accordingly; it is therefore much more of a philosophical and moral code by which to live life (Charfe and Gardner, 2019). Fundamentally important are the genuine and authentic actions that practitioners take based on a 'profound respect for their human dignity' (Eichsteller, 2010, p. 3). This can be seen in their thoughts and interactions with people.

To help develop social pedagogical practice, the use of Haltung as a starting point supports the understanding of personal values and critical reflection on how genuine and authentic practitioners are being in their actions. The use of the two pillars of social pedagogy Haltung in Mührel (2008, cited in Eichsteller, 2010) gives practitioners a framework in which to constantly reflect on their ability to work in a strengths-based, respectful and humanist way. It also means that practitioners must have an understanding of the Haltung contained in legislation and policy and how these are interpreted into their direct practice. While using the two social pedagogical pillars of Haltung as a framework that supports self-reflection, values alive in practice compels practitioners to check that their Haltung is being supported by their actions.

Declarations and conflict of interests

The authors declare no conflicts of interest with this work.

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