

Rethinking *Professional Practice*:
The contributions of Social
Constructionism and the Feminist
'Ethics of Care'

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Biography

Nigel Parton is Professor in Child Care and Director of the Centre for Applied Childhood Studies at the University of Huddersfield. His most recent book (with Patrick O'Byrne) is entitled Constructive Social Work: Towards a New Practice (2000, Macmillan/St Martin's Press).

Abstract

Drawing upon social constructionist and postmodern perspectives, together with recent feminist debates about ‘the ethics of care’, this paper reflects upon the productive ways in which contemporary social work can be thought about, organised and practised *professionally*. It argues that an emphasis on: process; plurality of both knowledge and voice; possibility; and the relational quality of knowledge are key elements in taking these issues forward. In contrast to the traditions of abstract and instrumental reasoning where the pursuit of knowledge is intertwined with the pursuit of control, the importance of sensory knowledge, symbolised by the unity of hand, head and heart is underlined.

Rethinking *Professional Practice*: The Contributions of Social Constructionism and the Feminist 'Ethics of Care'¹

Contemporary times are posing a major set of challenges for the way social work is thought about and organised. Risk, uncertainty and reflexivity increasingly characterise the present, such that more and more social conflicts can be seen to have no easy and unambiguous solutions (Parton, 1994; Parton, 1996). For as long as traditions and customs were widely sustained, experts were seen as people who could be turned to or who could make key decisions and, in the public eye at least, science was imbued with a major sense of monolithic and generic authority. In effect, science and experts were invested with the authority of a final sovereign court of appeal. But increasingly, shorn of formulaic truth, all claims to knowledge have become subject to doubt. We are now living in a world of multiple authorities and wide-ranging, often inconsistent, knowledge. While social work, compared to other areas of professional practice, has never been completely dominated by scientised and narrowly positivistic approaches to knowledge, rarely has it been able to articulate an approach to its theory and practice which adequately reflects the nature of its operations (Parton, 2000). In this paper I argue that social constructionist and postmodern perspectives, where there is a recognition of the importance of a much more fluid and artistic form of knowledge, may prove productive in rethinking the nature of professional practice, particularly in trying to make explicit the nature of theory *in* and *for* social work. In doing so I also argue that the moral and political nature of the work can be helpfully understood in terms of debates about the feminist 'ethics of care'.

The model of professional practice which has dominated most thinking and writing about the professions treats rigorous professional practice as an exercise of

technical rationality; that is, an application of research-based knowledge to the solution of problems of instrumental choice. Rigorous professional practice is conceived as deriving its rigour from the use of describable, testable, replicable techniques derived from scientific research and which is based on knowledge which is objective, consensual, cumulative and convergent. On this view, social work becomes the *application* of rigorous research-based knowledge to practice, in the same way as engineering becomes the *application* of engineering science.

However, Donald Schön (1983, 1987) argues that such a model fails to capture how professionals operate and how they *know* in practice, for problems are not presented in a way where such rational-technical approaches easily fit. Real world problems do not come well-formed but, on the contrary, present themselves as messy and indeterminate. 'Knowing' in such situations is invariably *tacit* and *implicit*. It develops from dialogue with people about the situation, through which the practitioner can come to understand the uniqueness, uncertainty and potential value conflicts that must be addressed and thereby reaches 'a new theory of the unique case' that informs action. Practice-knowledge is thus derived from 'reflection-in-action' and emphasises interaction. Knowledge of this sort, Schön argues, not only provides a more accurate reflection of the theory/practice relationship but is more flexible and adaptable than technical rationality. Such an approach recognises that social work practitioners are not so much theoretical as they are practical, concrete and intuitive and incorporate elements of art and craft as well as disciplined reasoning. Social work characterised as art rather than science is a theme which has been lost in many recent discussions of social work, yet art has the virtue of being able to accommodate notions of *ambiguity* and *uncertainty* in ways which pose major problems for rational-technical approaches (Goldstein, 1990, 1992).

However, the emphasis in mainstream social work in the UK has gone in the opposite direction. The predominant response to the changes and the challenges since the early 1970s has been to construct ever more sophisticated systems of accountability, and thereby attempt to rationalise and scientise increasing areas of social work activity with the introduction of ever more complex procedures and systems of audit and a narrow emphasis on ‘evidence-based practice’ – whereby it is assumed the world can be subjected to prediction and calculative control. As I will argue, there is a range of skills which have traditionally lain at the core of social work, particularly related to process and where the ability to negotiate and mediate with creativity are of particular relevance, but which are in great danger of being lost. Thus a major part of my agenda is to try and provide a counterweight to these developments.

The Nature of Social Work Practice: The views of service users and practitioners

There are now numerous studies available which have attempted to identify what those on the receiving end of social work and the human services more generally have found most useful and helpful to them (see, for example, Rees and Wallace, 1982; Fisher, 1983; Howe, 1993; Seligman, 1995). The central message that comes across time and time again is that it is not the particular model or techniques used by the social worker which are significant, but the quality and value of the experience. The key themes which users identify for success have been summarised by Howe as ‘accept me, understand me and talk with me’. This is not simply saying that good social work is about establishing a ‘relationship’, important though this is, but that the way we understand and come to terms with difficult and painful experiences is through talk. *Talk* and *language* are key to making sense and taking control. It is the ‘making sense’ which is important, no matter what it looks

like and where it comes from. A client who wishes to re-form the self and make sense of what is going on needs to immerse her or himself in talk, for it is by *language* that the individual self is formed. As Howe has demonstrated, it is less the specific procedures and techniques and more the opportunity to engage in an active *conversation* about oneself that brings about understanding and change. Users say clearly that what they value is the experience of talking which helps them to make sense of their experience and which gives them the opportunity to better control and cope with their life and try and change it accordingly.

What service users say about what they value is interestingly reflected in how experienced practitioners think about and approach their work. The recent work by Jan Fook is particularly instructive (Ryan et al, 1995; Fook et al, 1996, 1997, 2000; Fook, 2000). The focus of the research was to find out how practice was actually experienced in concrete terms by practitioners themselves, and whether it is possible to conceptualise professional expertise based on the experience of practitioners. One study was of thirty 'experienced' practitioners. In order to meet the criteria of being an 'experienced' social worker, practitioners needed to have had more than five years post-graduation practice and to have supervised more than five social work students on placement. Participants were asked to respond to a practice vignette and to describe an incident from their practice which they considered significant. The design required concrete descriptions of practice rather than theoretical justifications, and the transcripts were analysed thematically. The practice of the experienced practitioners was also compared to that of beginning and developing practitioners, derived from another study so that it was possible to draw a picture of how expertise develops and what are some of its key characteristics.

A major theme that came through was the *complexity* of practice situations, and the ability of the experienced workers to handle complexity. They dealt with a range of diverse situations, involving many players with competing and often conflicting interests, yet were able to prioritise important factors quite readily. Closely related to the issue of *complexity* was the issue of *context*, for the practitioners were acutely aware of the influence of differing contexts, particularly of work place, in determining the parameters of their practice - for different work places might have different roles or expectations. They were generally able to be aware of the contextual factors which they could or could not control, and were able to fashion strategies accordingly. Another major theme was the lack of formal theory which was demonstrated by the practitioners. However, it was clear that workers had developed their own frameworks for making sense of what they did, and had recourse to isolated concepts when these appeared meaningful to them. They had clear rationales for their practice, but these rationales did not fit any text book conceptualisations.

In a number of instances workers constructed a process whereby the 'theory' of how to help the service user was *generated mutually*. There was an openness to the service users' experience and engaging in a process which enabled them to communicate it. Despite having clear rationales, a sense of *uncertainty* pervaded many accounts. 'It was as if they were willing to risk uncertainty for the sake of constructing the most relevant process and outcome for service users' (Fook, 2000, p.112). While the practitioners handled the practice vignette in a variety of ways, what was common was a marked ability to readily prioritise factors (often according to their own personal and professional experience) and to engage in a process with the situation. Experienced practitioners identified 'expertise' as being related to the

ability to engage in a process with situations rather than being associated simply with the achievement of a specific type of outcome.

In summary, expertise, as demonstrated by experienced professionals, is characterised by an ability to work in complex situations of competing interests, and prioritise factors in ways which allow clear action. In so doing they are open to change and uncertainty, able to create the theory and knowledge (often in a mutual way with service users) which is needed to practice relevantly in differing contexts, and to locate themselves squarely in these contexts as responsible actors. (Fook, 2000, p.113)

These conclusions have much in common with the findings of Sheppard et al (2000) who argue that a recognition of the importance of ‘process knowledge’ as well as ‘product knowledge’ is key to identifying the way practitioners not only carry out their work but the form of knowledge they draw on in doing so. This is not to say that what practitioners or service users say about practice constitute the only ‘truths’ or ‘stories’ about it. But what it does point to are some important insights into the nature of practice and thus the focus of any theoretical approaches which aim to make a direct contribution to practice itself. It is in this context that Patrick O’Byrne and I have developed the idea of *constructive social work*.

When it was first coined (Parton and O’Byrne, 2000a; 2000b), we argued that the term *constructive social work* had been chosen for two reasons. First, *constructive* was chosen to reflect the wish to try and provide a perspective which was explicitly positive and tried to build on what is distinctive about social work and what can be seen as its major strengths. While the term was used metaphorically, it was important not to lose its literal meaning, for the core idea of *construction*, from the Latin to the present day, is that of *building* or of *putting together*. The notion of

constructive was meant to reflect a positive approach both to social work and towards the users of social work itself. The *Oxford Dictionary* defines *construction* as ‘the action or manner of constructing’, while *constructive* is defined as ‘having a useful purpose; helpful’.

Secondly, the term *constructive social work* was chosen to reflect more theoretical concerns. In trying to develop theoretical and conceptual ideas for practice an explicit attempt was made to draw on perspectives which have been developed over the previous twenty years, associated with social constructionist, narrative and postmodern theoretical developments. In such perspectives an understanding of language, listening, talk and meaning are seen as central. The idea of understanding as a collaborative process is a core one in social constructionism. Here, meaning and understanding are matters of negotiation between the participants in conversation and thus the understanding of and use of language is seen as central to the helping process.

The ‘Postmodern’ Constructionist Turn in Social Theory

While constructionist perspectives have only recently begun explicitly to enter social work literature, it is important to recognise that they have become increasingly widespread in various areas of Western intellectual life over a number of years. They have become central to some of the most important changes and heated debates in literary studies, philosophy, history, socio-legal studies, anthropology, sociology and psychology. It would be incorrect, however, to assume that there is only one single stance or position that can exemplify the work of those it would be appropriate to associate with the term ‘constructionism’.

Perhaps the key event in introducing the notion of ‘social constructionism’ to a wide academic audience was the publication in 1967 of Berger and Luckman’s *The*

Social Construction of Reality. Drawing from the phenomenological philosophy of Edmund Husserl (1975) and Alfred Schutz (1962-6), they characterised everyday life as a *fluid, multiple, precariously negotiated achievement in interaction*. Their principal thesis was that individuals in interaction create social worlds through their linguistic, symbolic activity for the purpose of providing coherence and purpose to an essentially open-ended unformed human existence. Society is neither a system, a mechanism nor an organism; it is a symbolic construct composed of ideas, meanings and language which is all the time changing through human action and imposing constraints and possibilities on human actors themselves. What such an approach clearly does is to emphasise the *processes* through which people define themselves (their identities) and their environments. People do so by participating in their social worlds, interacting with others and assigning meaning to aspects of their experience. *Constructing* social realities is seen as an ongoing aspect of people's everyday lives and relationships.

In more recent years such approaches have recognised the *rhetorical* aspects of construction, in that it is partly a process of *persuading* oneself and others that one rendering of social reality is more legitimate or credible than any other. Michael Billig (1987) and John Shotter (1993) have, for example, analysed thinking as a rhetorical process, where conversation and language are key to understanding identity. Thinking is seen not as a private or personal activity, but as a micro-political and interactional process concerned with categorising everyday life and developing arguments that justify preferred realities and courses of action. Similarly, Potter and Wetherell (1987) argue that language orders our perceptions and makes things happen. They suggest that what they call social texts do not merely reflect or mirror objects, events and categories existing in the social and natural world, they actively

construct a version of those things. They do not just describe things, they *do* things and thus have social and political implications. Constructions have real implications for all concerned both practically and politically. A part of what we must learn in growing up, if we want to be perceived as speaking (and writing) authoritatively about so-called factual matters, is how to respond to the others around us should they challenge our claims. This includes *conversations* with ourselves. We must *speak* with an awareness of the possibility of such challenges and be able to reply to them by justifying our claims. This is a *rhetorical* rather than a referential or representational form of language, because rather than merely claiming to depict or reflect a state of affairs or an external reality, talk and language have the effect of *moving* people to action and changing their views and perceptions. Language is thus seen as not just constituting reality but actively changing it.

This interest in constructionism has been further stimulated by the emergence of a variety of perspectives and analyses which have been termed variously ‘postmodern’, ‘post-structural’, ‘late modern’, and ‘post-traditional’. Such developments have provided a very fertile context in which an interest in social constructionism could flourish (Lyotard, 1984; Turner, 1990; Featherstone, 1988; Smart, 1999). While perhaps ‘postmodern’ perspectives are united by a number of cultural projects which proclaim a commitment to heterogeneity, fragmentation and difference, it is their critiques of modernity which have proved most influential but contentious.

Modernity as a summary term refers to the cluster of social, economic and political systems which emerged in the West with the Enlightenment in the late eighteenth century. Unlike the pre-modern, modernity assumed that human order is neither natural nor God-given, but is vulnerable and contingent. However, by the

development and application of science, nature could be subject to human control. The distinguishing features of modernity are seen to be: the understanding of history as having a definite and progressive direction; the attempt to develop universal categories of experience; the idea that reason can provide a basis for all activities; and that the nation state could coordinate and advance such developments for the whole society. The guiding principle of modernity is the search to establish reliable foundations for knowledge. It aims to identify central truths about the world but also assumes that truth does not reside on the surface of things but is hidden by appearances. The two crucial elements of modernity in the post-Enlightenment period were thus seen as the progressive union of scientific *objectivity* and politico-economic *rationality* (Parton, 1994).

In the modern 'frame' the goal is to produce knowledge about a chosen aspect of the physical or social world by which we can claim *greater certainty*. At that point we can confer a sense of truth about that knowledge, and also confer on the people producing knowledge (for example, scientists or professionals) the status of holder-of-truth and expert about that aspect of the world (Flaskas, 1997).

Increasingly, however, there is a recognition that we now inhabit a world which has become disorientated, disturbed and subject to doubt. The pursuit of order and control, the promotion of calculability, belief in progress, science and rationality and other features which were so intrinsic to modernity are being undermined by a simultaneous range of unsettling conditions and experiences. In part this is related to the major social, economic and cultural transformations that have characterised recent times in terms of: globalisation; the increasing significance of media and the widening networks of information technology, which transform and transmit knowledge; the changes in modes of consumption and production; and the increased

awareness of risk and uncertainty. More fundamentally, it is suggested that it is related to changing notions of ontology (who we are and our sense of being) and epistemology (how we know what we know). It seems that modernism's promise to deliver order, certainty and security has not been fulfilled and increasingly it is felt there are no transcendental and universal criteria of truth (science), judgement (ethics) and taste (aesthetics). The overriding belief in reason and rationality is disappearing as there is a collapse of consensus related to any 'grand narratives' (overarching theories or explanations) and their articulation of progress, emancipation and perfection and what constitutes the centres of authority and truth. The rejection of the idea that any one theory or system of belief can ever reveal the truth, and the emphasis on the plurality of truth, and 'the will to truth', captures some of the essential elements associated with 'postmodernity'.

Truth thus now takes the guise of 'truth' and is centred in neither God's word (as in the pre-modern) nor human reason (as in the modern) but is decentred and localised so that many 'truths' are possible, dependent on different times and different places. In the 'postmodern' there is thus a considerable destabilisation of a core tenet of modernism – that the way something is represented closely reflects its underlying reality. For if nothing is inherently or immutably true, nothing is inherently or immutably real. In a world where everything is increasingly mediated and relayed by complex systems of representation, the symbols that are used have a life of their own and take on their meaning, not on the basis of what reality they are meant to represent, but the *context* in which they are used.

However, there are probably as many forms of 'postmodernism' as there are 'postmodernists'. Within this diversity, Rosenau (1992) delineates two broad orientations which have proved particularly helpful in developing the idea of

constructive social work. She differentiates between the *sceptical* ‘postmodernists’ and the *affirmative* ‘postmodernists’. *Sceptical* ‘postmodernists’ offer a distrustful, pessimistic, negative, gloomy assessment of contemporary times, characterised by fragmentation, disintegration, meaninglessness, and absence of moral parameters and social chaos. She calls this the dark side of postmodernism, the postmodernism of despair that speaks of the demise of the subject, the end of the author, the impossibility of truth and the abrogation of the order of representation. It is concerned about the destructive character of modernity and points to unsurpassable uncertainty where everything is alienating, hopeless and ambiguous and where no social, political or practical project is worthy of commitment. If, as the sceptics claim, there is no truth, then all we are left with is a parody and play – the play of words and meaning.

The orientation offered by the *affirmative* ‘postmodernists’ is far more positive, and while they agree with the sceptics’ critique of modernity, particularly in terms of science and rationality, they have a more hopeful, optimistic view of the possibilities of the ‘postmodern’ age and are positively orientated towards the importance of process. They are much more open to the potential for practical actions and are not just concerned with *deconstruction* but with *reconstruction*. While they seek a tentative approach to practice, it is recognised that normative choices and trying to *build* practical and political coalitions and collaborations lie at the heart of everyday life. In recognising that subject(s) can only be understood in context(s), it recognises the importance of *interdependence* and the way the social and political cultures in which we live are becoming increasingly *relational*. Thus it is not the death of the subject that is of greatest interest so much as the recognition of the diverse nature of subjectivities which is the focus. There is a recognition that in

opening up individuals to the possibilities of choice and responsibility they are truly made up as moral (Bauman, 1993, 1995). Rather than seeing the disappearance of the subject it is argued that there has been a widening in the *constructability* of identities from ascriptive and natural (in the pre-modern), to socially acquired and quasi-natural (in the modern), to chosen and socially negotiated (in the 'postmodern') (Hollis, 1985). It is not so much that persons have to struggle to find meaning within a melange of meaningless but that they are placed at the centre of reality. Instead of making sense out of events, persons invent options and make them real.

There are thus a number of themes informed by social constructionism and postmodernism which have been drawn on for developing the notion of *constructive social work*. *First*, it is important to recognise that the terms by which we understand our world and ourselves are neither required nor demanded by 'what there is'. Constructionism insists that we develop a critical stance towards our taken-for-granted ways of understanding the world, including ourselves. It suggests we should be critical of the idea that our observations of the world unproblematically reveal its nature to us in any straightforward way. It *problematizes* the 'obvious', the 'real' and, crucially, the 'taken-for-granted'; it challenges the view that conventional knowledge is based upon unbiased observation and that we can therefore separate subject and object, the perceived and the real; and it cautions us to be ever-suspicious of our assumptions about how the world appears and the categories that we use to divide and interpret it. *Second*, because the social world, including ourselves as people, is the product of *social processes*, it follows that there cannot be any given, determined nature of the world 'out there'. There are no essences inside things or people which are hidden and which make them what they are. *Third*, social categories and concepts are seen as historically and culturally specific and therefore

vary over time and place. Particular forms of knowledge are not only the products of their history and culture and are therefore artefacts of it, but there are therefore numerous forms of knowledge available. We cannot assume that *our* ways of understanding are necessarily the same as others and are any nearer 'the truth'.

Fourth, it is argued that knowledge of the world is developed between people in their daily *interactions*. These *negotiated* understandings can take a variety of different forms which thereby invite different kinds of action. However, while constructions of the world sustain some patterns of action they also exclude others. Thus rather than being able to separate knowledge and action it is important to recognise they are intimately interrelated. Crucially there needs to be a recognition that our modes of description, explanation and/or representation are derived from *relationship*. Such a view follows largely from the use-view of language. On this account language and all other forms of representation gain their meaning from the ways in which they are used within *relationships*. Meanings are born of coordinations among persons – agreements, negotiations, affirmations. Nothing exists for us – as an intelligible world of objects and persons – until there are *relationships*.

Fifth, as our practices of language are bound within relationships, so are relationships bound within broader patterns of practice – rituals, traditions and so on – for as we describe, explain or otherwise represent ourselves and the world, so do we fashion our future. If we wish to make changes, therefore, we must confront the challenges of generating new meanings, and of becoming what Kenneth Gergen calls 'poetic activists' (1999, p.49). New patterns of social life are not secured by simply refusing or rejecting the meanings as given, but rather by the emergence of new forms of language and thus new ways of interpreting the world, and patterns of

representation. *Generative discourses* provide ways of talking and writing (and any other way of representing) that simultaneously challenge existing traditions of understanding and at the same time offer new possibilities for action and change.

Sixth, constructionism has at its core the notion of *reflexivity* (Taylor and White, 2000); that is, the continual attempt to place one's premises into question and to listen to alternative framings of reality in order to grapple with the potentially different outcomes arising out of different points of view. Reflexivity is not necessarily a prelude to rejecting the present and the past but it is to underline the importance of entering into *dialogue* in order to clarify what might lead to improvement and, in particular, to recognise that there are differing notions of what improvement might mean. In doing so it encourages us to recognise that in expanding on the range of valued considerations taken into account in any outcome, we need to set in motion dialogues in which these competing and potentially conflicting values or outcomes may be articulated and weighed.

Such themes and arguments potentially pose major questions for the way we think about practice and the model of professionalism that we adopt. For while there is no singular set of practices that follow from constructionist 'points of view', it is also clear that they invite a reconsideration of the traditional position in relation to authority. This is not a simple and straightforward change in style. It moves from a hierarchical to a collaborative approach and calls into question the top down structuring of the more traditional – often quasi-medical or bureaucratic – approaches which have often been previously taken for granted. It is not simply a question of moving beyond a hierarchical approach towards something more democratic but of trying to develop a stance of 'not knowing' and not being seen as the expert on a problem. There is a real attempt to move beyond problem saturated discourses that

have been so dominant up until this point and which cast the practitioner in the role of expert searching out causes. This is not to say that the practitioner does not bring uniquely valuable skills to the work but it is to say that such skills are not simply derived from a mastery of understanding. They are primarily skills in *knowing how* as opposed to *knowing that* – and moving fluidly in relationship and of collaborating in a mutual generation of new futures and which explicitly values the views, experiences and voices of service users.

‘An Ethics of Care’

An important way of taking these ideas forward, particularly in the way we can begin to rethink the nature of ‘professionalism’ in social work, is offered by engaging with debates associated with the feminist ‘ethics of care’. This is an important development as clearly the notion of care lies at the heart of social work. More broadly the feminist ‘ethics of care’ recognise that ‘care work’ is usually devalued as a social activity or practice, and is also devalued conceptually through its assumed connection with privacy, with emotion and with the ‘needy’. Because our society treats public accomplishment, rationality, and autonomy as worthy qualities, care is devalued as it embodies their opposites (Tronto, 1993).

This marginalisation and devaluing of care is in part due to the dominance of a universalist conception of ethics which attempts to construct a totality of rules, norms and principles which are to be equally applicable to everyone, and which should be recognisable and acceptable to every rational thinking person. Neutrality, impartiality, rationality, abstraction and objectivity are seen as the most important requirements; morality is seen to entail the finding and respecting of rules. Making morally just decisions thus involves arriving at the correct rules and applying them to specific cases in accordance with accepted procedures. Such an approach can be seen

as not simply modernist but inherently masculinist. The ideal moral subject is a detached and autonomous individual who is centrally concerned with how he can satisfy his universal obligations and exercise his rights.

The feminist 'ethics of care' has a radically different view of human nature and thus a very different view of the objectives of moral deliberation. It has much in common with the versions of postmodernism and social constructionism which I have outlined here. In contrast to an atomistic view of human nature, the ethics of care posits the image of a 'relational self', a moral agent who is embedded in concrete relationships with others and who acquires a moral identity through interactive patterns of behaviour, perceptions and interpretations (Addelson, 1991).

Over the last thirty years feminists have become increasingly concerned with the exploitative nature of women's traditional caregiving work in the 'informal' sector particularly when this is undertaken under market or bureaucratic arrangements. By the 1980s the focus shifted as feminism moved against the notion of women being simply victims and began to celebrate women's difference and identified some of the key elements of a woman-centred culture in terms of the normative structures that influence their caring activities and social obligations (see for example Gilligan, 1982; Graham, 1983; Finch, 1989). Increasingly, however, it is being argued that it is important not to see elements of difference simply in terms of an essentialist binary of opposites. Rather than see established rationality as being in opposition to the emotions, it is now being argued that it is vital to see the emotions as central to an adequate account of human rationality. Care is seen as central to everyone; it is not a parochial concern of women alone. For example, care receiving makes one aware of one's vulnerability and vulnerability is not only an issue for children and elders, but is something which we all – at different times and in

different ways – experience. It thus has clear implications for the way we think about social work and the way it is experienced and organised.

For example, by extending the concept of rationality to include a rationality of caring, Waerness (1996) aims to make intelligible the previously invisible skills and conditions of good care in the public domain. Drawing on research on home care workers, she documents how care workers work outside ‘the rules of the system’ to provide the kind of care they see as valuable to their clients. Flexibility, particularly the capacity to respond to clients as individuals, is crucial. She argues that enabling good care requires delimiting the power of scientific rationality in the forms of professionalism and bureaucratic governance.

The ethics of care implies being open to the ‘other’ and thus attributes an important place to communication, interpretation and dialogue. In contrast to the tradition of abstract and instrumental reasoning where the pursuit of knowledge is intertwined with the pursuit of control – it underlines the importance of sensory knowledge, symbolised by the unity of hand, head and heart. Knowing is conceived of as a social and dialogic process where the recipient of care is not an ‘object to be known’ but someone who we listen to and who we try to understand and communicate with (Sevenhuijsen, 1998, p.6). The ethics of care assumes relationships which are bound by mutual interdependence, and its practice involves the values of attentiveness, responsiveness, competence, and responsibility, negotiation and mutual recognition (Williams, 1999, p.678). Because the self is seen as continually in process so that moral identity is continually being developed and revised, the construing of moral identities is thus inherently a social practice, something which we do and make within human relations and within specific social

and political contexts. Care is seen as a *social practice* where *situated thinking* and *situated ethics* are key.

Celia Davies (1995a; 1995b; 2000) has helpfully developed these ideas in terms of their implications for analysing and refashioning our ideas about professionalism in the areas of health and welfare. While her focus is primarily nursing, there are clear messages for social work and social care. As she suggests, the idea of ‘caring’ has been firmly expunged from the masculine gendered ideals of both bureaucracy and profession. It is not that the ideal professional has been seen as ‘uncaring’, but that they should be detached, treating each service user or client with a correct professional concern and not getting bound up in their crises or their pain. There is a clear parallel here with the impersonality of the bureaucrat though they take a somewhat different form. The bureaucrat always adheres to the rules of the organisation, processes the work in a calm and distant manner, is entirely reliable, shows no favouritism, is interchangeable with any other in the role. It is thoroughly consistent with the current dominant model of practice which is embedded in the ‘evidence-based’ approach and which lies at the heart of the New Labour reforms of local authority social services in the UK. She has summarised what she sees as the six key characteristics of this gendered professional ideal: mastery of knowledge; unilateral decision process (service user as dependent); autonomy and self-management; individual accountability; detachment; and interchangeability of practitioners (Davies, 2000, p.348).

As Davies argues, this old, gendered ideal of the professional could be countered point by point, and as a result one could think about a way of being that was not masculine gendered. The trick, however, is not to fall into some sort of binary opposite but to try and transcend such notions. In this respect she feels that

one can identify a number of other characteristics which can be developed once one places the notion of care at the centre. These are: reflectively using expertise and experience; creating an active community in which a solution can be negotiated; recognising interdependence with others; collectively being accountable for practice; engaged and committed stance towards client or service user; and accept use of self as part of the therapeutic or professional encounter (Davies, 2000, p.350). In many respects the notion of the reflective practitioner, as developed by Schön (1983) can be seen as supporting such a perspective in the sense that it extends the notion of professional expertise beyond the rational and it attends to the uniqueness and uncertainty of the particular problem being addressed. However, Davies argues that such an account of professionalism retains far too much of a masculine notion of the self and the distant, emotionally controlled and controlling instrumental actor which fails to give sufficient recognition to the moral and interpersonal aspects of professional *caregiving* (Davies, 1995a).

Davies is keen to conceptualise ways of being and forms of relationships that resist such dichotomised alternatives. She feels that Purtilo's (1993) notion of a 'meaningful distance' in a healing relationship is one example of both/and rather than an either/or approach that gendered thinking sometimes offers, as is Kathleen Jones's concept of 'compassionate authority' (Jones, 1993). More particularly she feels that the work of Jodi Dean (1995, 1996, 1997), who is attempting to develop a concept of 'solidarity' that can accommodate difference, is of considerable significance. Such an idea recognises differentiation and a form of dependency on others for recognition and connection which, she argues, brings the possibility of working together. 'Reflective solidarity' cannot come from a view of the world as composed of hostile strangers, or a notion of the knowledge project as mastery and

possession. Again, Davies has helpfully tried to summarise and perhaps formalise some of Dean's ideas, contrasting two models and focusing on a model of strong collaboration.

[Table 1 here]

The 'connected' as opposed to the 'bounded' model offers considerable possibility for helping us clarify the nature of the social work role, I would suggest, in the light of our attempts to develop *constructive social work*. The idea of 'reflective solidarity' is relevant to understanding the nature of the relationships of care and to try to develop a new model of professionalism which Davies has expressed as creating 'an active community in which solution can be negotiated' (Davies, 1995, p.150). The idea of the professional encounter as a situation of 'reflective solidarity' attempts to take account of the idea that all participants, including the professionals, shift their positions, enlarge their perspectives, value the words and offerings of the others and come to see the world in a slightly different way in order to negotiate and identify solutions.

Conclusion

These debates about the feminist 'ethics of care' demonstrate that ideas about *professional caring* stand in a complex relation to scientific knowledge. It certainly suggests that flexibility is necessary if such caring is to be of value, for a key element seems to be that there is room for caregivers to exercise judgement and be able to demonstrate emotional commitment. This is not to say that technical knowledge does not have a place, but that it needs to be put alongside these other knowledges, leaving a considerable place for adjustment and negotiation in the light of gaining understanding of persons and situations. There is much in common here, in terms of the organisational implications for practice, with *constructive social work* which

emphasises: process; plurality of both knowledge and voice; possibility; and the relational quality of knowledge. In doing so *constructive social work* is concerned with the collaborative narratives of solutions to problems. Instead of providing the practitioner with information about the causes of problems, so that s/he can make an expert assessment and prescribe a ‘scientific’ solution, the service user is encouraged to tell their *story* of the problem in a way that *externalises* it, giving more control and agency and creating a new perspective on how to manage or overcome it. While *constructive social work* might be seen as giving more prominence to notions of change than may often be assumed with ideas about care, its primary focus is to provide a theoretical perspective and set of concepts *in* and *for* practice.

The political implications of such perspectives are rarely made central, and this is a major contribution of the feminist ‘ethics of care’. Tronto (1993), for example, considers care not just as a moral concept but as a political concept through which we can make judgements and prescribe the ways we can make them. In recognising that humans are relational, interdependent beings, it serves as a political concept to prescribe an ideal for a more democratic, more pluralistic politics and form of professional practice.

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Note 1

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Table 1

Two models of collaboration*

Concept of the individual	bounded	connected
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Group process/style	formal adversarial 'explaining'	relaxed cooperative 'exploring'
Outcomes	resolution is imposed assumption of finality vindication and elation or defeat and despair	agreement is tried expectation of change enhanced commitment stronger bonds personal renewal

* adapted from C Davies (2000) p.353