

RESEARCH ON ETHICAL AGENCY

Symposium: empirical ethics in social work

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- Introduction of the research project
- Empirical turns during the research
- Sketch of the research framework
- Evaluation of the learning outcomes
- Conclusion: possibilities and challenges

Objective: ethical aspects of social work (esp. at home)

→ **main reasons** (cf. Van Doorn, 2008)

- **increase of moral dilemmas (growing complexity)**
- **decrease of shared frames of reference (growing diversity)**

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Structure: cooperation of the research group of UAS Utrecht
Netherlands with six regional welfare organizations

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Method: practice based ethics research

- **Focus on professional practice: learning from moral experiences in frontline practice** (cf. Van Doorn, 2008)
- **Hybrid approach: combining theoretical resources and professional practice** (cf. Banks & Gallagher, 2009)
- **Mixed methods: desk research, interviews, best practice units (BPU), development of ethical tools**

Shift in language: from moral dilemma to moral (fields of) tension

- No theoretical discussions
- But practice based research

Shift in language: from moral dilemma to moral (fields of) tension

Shift in focus: from moral expertise to ethical agency

- Not looking for objective and normative criteria
- But starting an intersubjective and reflective dialogue

Shift in language: from moral dilemma to moral (fields of) tension

Shift in focus: from moral expertise to ethical agency

Shift in cooperation: from relatively passive sources of information to active participants:

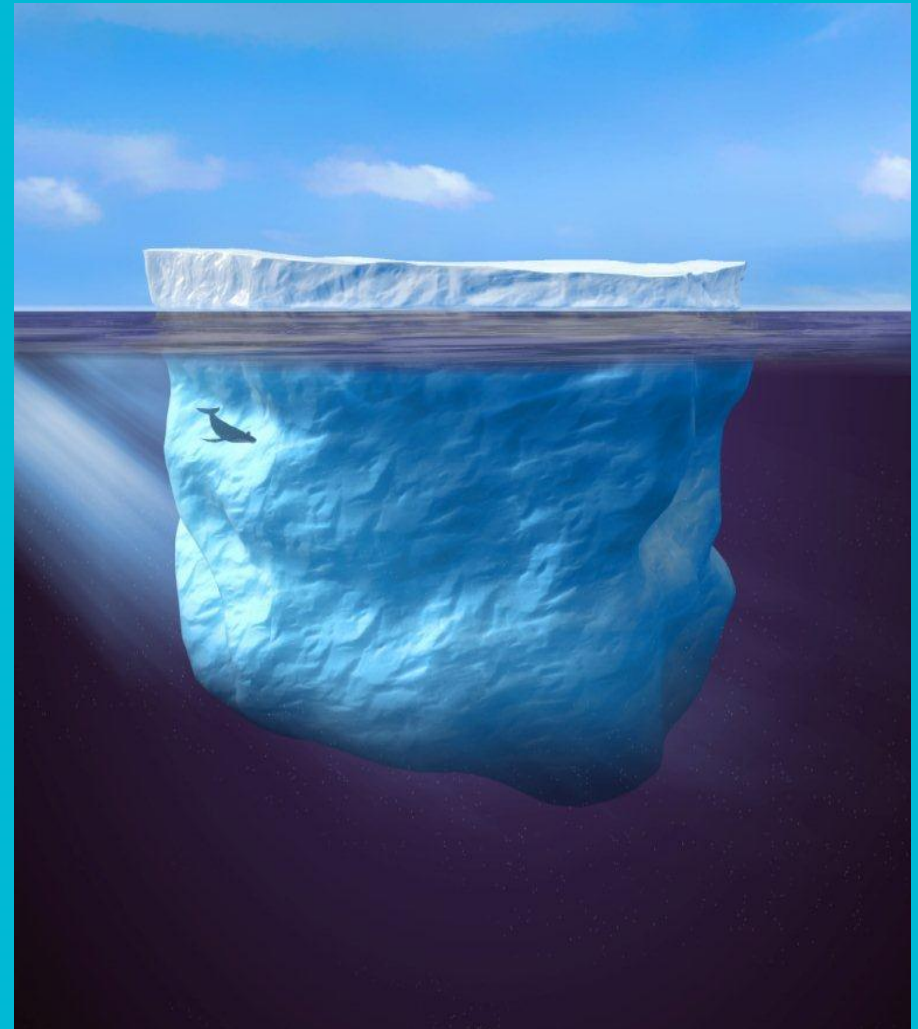
- Welfare organizations as co-owners of the research
- Social workers as reflective and inquisitive practitioners and as change agents

Developing a light model of ethical agency as an open frame for research

The metaphor of an iceberg: not original but effective: empowering social workers

(cf. e.g. McClelland about competencies)

- **Surface: action**
- **Depth: motivation**
- **Width: position**
- **Length: alteration**



Please evaluate on a scale from 1 to 10 the general learning effects of participation in the research project
(10 respondents)

Average: 7.6

- 6: 20%
- 7: 10%
- 8: 60%
- 9: 10%

The quality of my work has improved by becoming more sensitive to moral tensions in daily practice.

(10 respondents)

- **I completely disagree: 0%**
- **I disagree: 0%**
- **I agree: 50%**
- **I completely agree: 50%**

Conclusions: possibilities and challenges



- Practice based ethics research demands for a dialogical and cooperative approach, which provokes an empirical turn.
- Active participation as a reflective and inquisitive professional in a practice based research can have a strong learning (and empowering) effect.
- A best practice unit appears to be an apt model for combining practice based research and professional development. This combination of theoretical and practical goals is a strength of empirical ethics.
- Challenges for our research project are integrating the perspectives of the service users.