Section 2:
What do we mean by "ethics"?

Theories, frameworks and professionalism

Is Ethics relevant to CLD practice?

In thinking about what is meant by "ethics", let's start with two questions about CLD:

- Can CLD workers do their job by just doing what they're told?

- Is CLD practice just a set of techniques?

Most if not all CLD practitioners would answer "no" to both these questions. But what underpins these views?

Ethics is about why we should do one thing rather than another; it's concerned with the development of frameworks for thinking about what we should do and how we should do it.

What does the dictionary say about "ethics"?

Ethics (noun)

1. (Functioning as singular) the philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and of the rules and principles that ought to govern it; moral philosophy.

2. (Functioning as plural) a social, religious or civil code of behaviour considered correct, especially that of a particular group, profession or individual.

3. (Functioning as plural) the moral fitness of a decision, course of action, etc.

All three definitions are relevant to working out why ethics may be relevant to CLD. The second one – "a…code of behaviour considered correct" – of course relates directly to the Code of Ethics for CLD. This at first sight suggests something like a set of rules or a definitive guide to conduct.

However, a look at the other two definitions starts to suggest why an attempt to arrive at a definitive guide may not get us very far. If ethics are about "the moral fitness of a decision" then experience tells us that finding "right" answers isn't straightforward; no doubt this is why "the philosophical study of the moral value of human conduct and the rules and principles that ought to govern it" has continued for more than 2,000 years – at least – without reaching final conclusions.

Ethical theories and frameworks

This philosophical study has of course generated a range of theories that seek to provide a basis for understanding how to behave in a way that is guided by ethical principles.

- One type of theory says that the basis of ethical behaviour is to do whatever produces the greatest amount of "good" consequences; one well-known way of describing this is that we should aim for "the greatest good for the greatest number".

  In other words, this type of theory bases morality on the consequences of human actions, rather than on anything intrinsic to particular actions in themselves. Most non-religious people see themselves as using this theory.

  Theories of this type are known as "consequentialism".

- On the other hand, another set of theories focuses on human actions in themselves, and teaches that acts are intrinsically "right" or "wrong", irrespective of the consequences that may result from them.

  This kind of theory can be described as being concerned with "the principle of the thing", or more technically as "non-consequentialism" or "deontological ethics".

- Or instead of seeing ethics in terms either of the consequences of particular actions, or the nature of particular actions in themselves, a third type of theory concerns itself with the way individuals live their lives.

  In this way of looking at ethics, "good actions" are the result of virtuous people expressing their "inner goodness" in the things that they do. We can judge that an action is right if it is what a virtuous person would do in the same circumstances (which might allow us for example to consider both the consequences of an act and the act in itself).

  This type of theory is known as "virtue ethics." There is further information on these and other ethical theories and frameworks at
  http://www.bbc.co.uk/ethics/guide

Points for reflection and discussion

- What ethical theory or theories do you think underlies – perhaps not in a conscious way – how you make decisions in day-to-day life?

- In what ways do you think the ethical frameworks you use, maybe without thinking about them, are helpful in reaching good decisions? Can you identify ways that they might work against this?

Applying the theories: "professional ethics"

"Professional ethics" has been described as:

> *The norms and standards of behaviour of members of specific occupational groups and the ethical issues and dilemmas that arise in their practice.*
> *(Ethics, accountability and the social professions, Banks, 2004, p3)*

Professional ethics is seen as a branch of "applied ethics", that is, the study of how the types of theoretical framework sketched out above can be applied to practical issues including those involving policy decisions.

The study of professional ethics involves analysis of the meaning and legitimacy of relevant concepts, such as confidentiality, empowerment or autonomy (or of the concept of "professional ethics" itself).

In developing the Code of Ethics, the Standards Council considered three stages in a continuing debate about professional ethics: the "established view"; challenges or threats to this; and a re-interpretation responding to these challenges. The key points taken into account are set out below.

Professionalism: the established view

In this view, the "established" professions (health, law, education) are seen as characterised by:

- Provision of a service essential to human flourishing through a special relationship.

- A requirement for sustained education and training.

- Adherence to an ethical code.

- The exercise of autonomy of professional action and judgement.

- Self-regulation through a legitimating body.

- Taking on a role in commenting on public policy.

The key advantages of understanding professionalism in this way are that:

- It gives professions a role in providing a counter to a centralising government.

- It provides the basis for a sensible compromise between expertise and public accountability.

Challenges and threats to the established view

The established view of professionalism has been criticised and attacked in a number of ways; the developments and arguments include:

- The established criteria are exclusive in their effects.

- Professionalism based on this model encourages a "silo" mentality.

- The personalisation agenda in the delivery of public services challenges the claims of "professional expertise."

- The movement supporting competence-based training and emphasising competence-based practice challenges the value of professional education.

- Managerial approaches to service delivery and emphasis on the over-riding importance of financial accountability challenge claims to autonomy and self-regulation.

- Well-publicised cases of professional misconduct and incompetence challenge several of the claims of professionalism already mentioned.

- Professions can be seen as self-serving monopolies.

Re-interpreting professional values

Issues such as those listed, and the debates arising from them, have led to a continuing re-interpretation of professional values with an emphasis on:

- Stronger intra- and inter-professional collaboration.

- Evidence-based practice.

- Commitment to enhanced performance.

- Stronger involvement by practitioners in setting professional standards.

- Shared inter-professional ethical values such as non-discriminatory practice.

- Personal morality and professional action.

Points for discussion

Thinking about "professionalism" in society today in a broad sense:

- Are there aspects of the "established view" that you think are still of value, bearing in mind the critique of this outlined under "challenges and threats to the established view"?

- How powerful do you think the "challenges and threats to the established view" are? How far do you agree with the arguments put forward?

- How strong a basis do you think the re-interpretation of professional values briefly outlined provides for professionalism that has a valid place in the 21st century?

Sarah Banks's book, Ethics, Accountability and the Social Professions (2003) and with Peter Westoby, Ethics, Equity and Community Development - Rethinking Community Development (2019) as well as Youth Work Ethics (Sercombe, 2010) explore these issues in much greater depth