

Berlin Declaration On Professional Ethics and Professional Principles

(Resolved at the 2014 BMV, Berlin)

Preliminary Remark

The DBSH elaborated professional ethical principles 15 years ago. In recent years, the ethical requirements in the practice of social work have transformed and the acceptance of ethical principles and principles of human rights has increased.

Today, the relationship between basic ethics and professional principles must be defined anew, negotiated and the significance of professional ethics must be emphasized.

The benefits of social work are being increasingly assessed from an economic standpoint beyond the question of social justice and human dignity.

The practice of social work sees itself confronted on various levels with the consequences of the development of a neoliberal society. What is necessary today is a transparent and comprehensible ethical professional orientation in dilemma situations that meets the profession's own standards. Only in this manner can our colleagues draw upon a professional ethical orientation when neoliberal philosophy in society has been reduced to efficiency and effectiveness and humanity and solidarity fall by the wayside.

This "Berlin Declaration" describes the tasks and opportunities that are associated with the establishment of professional ethics for the profession. We invite all interested parties to help us shape these.

We thank those who participated intensively in the preparation of this Berlin Declaration and the professional ethics. Without this voluntary dedication, an updating of the professional ethical principles would not have been possible.

We look forward to an exciting discussion that will lead to a professional ethics policy that represents and secures the core of professional social work practice and its ethical framework.

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Berlin Declaration

Social Work as a Profession

The resolution of social problems requires professional action. Education in the field of social work in Germany looks back upon a development of one hundred years. In this time, the education at colleges and universities has been increasingly qualified and differentiated by social state activities and societal developments as well as by academic knowledge and methodical competencies. Today, social work is seen as an independent profession. The profession determines the standard scope for its actions autonomously and independently. In doing so, it orients itself to the historical traditions and theoretical discourses of the discipline. From the point of view of the professional association, social work has assumed an independent position, free from normative frameworks of the supporters and organizations as well as the requirements of the various working fields of social work.

Social work unfolds in an action/reflection relationship between

- The societal task,
- The assignment by the clientele and the associated help and/or support process communicated,
- The necessary partisanship and the effects upon the (social) political environment in order to deal with the structural causes of social problems,
- And the framework conditions provided by the payers and/or employment entities for effective help.

This special relationship defines the unique nature of professional social work. With the existing reserves of academic knowledge, professional ability and the necessary freedom to act, the criteria are met that comply with a profession.

The necessary professional autonomy, the unique nature of the expertise and position of power associated with the task and activity of social work require self-control on the basis of a professional ethics policy. Self-control and the ensuring of professional expertise is also necessary because social work can only complete its task by working together with the respective clientele. At the end of the day, it is the recipients of the social work themselves who work on a solution to problems and expand their options for action.

Professional Ethics Are Indispensable For Social Work

Ethical principles and a professional self-conception are the foundation for professional action. In ethical discourse, critical questions regarding the legality and legitimacy of tasks could arise that must be reflected upon. It seems important that the values and principles represented do not serve merely as a backdrop for citing an ethical position. Instead, these can also have a direct effect upon the professional practice. The task at hand is to specify the professional boundaries of professional action, justify these and emphasize their general value for the common good and their significance for the preservation of social justice.

The Disciplinary View

Social work shows and demonstrates practical competence with a knowledge of values and actions that allows encumbrances in living situations to be identified, evaluated and methods for their relief to be indicated. These competencies are necessary in order, in dialog and/or cooperation with the clientele, to determine the need for action, elaborate individual solution approaches and to specifically implement help strategies. These include a regular evaluation and further development of one's own professional practice.

Moving beyond the professional action perspective, the service spectrum of social work also includes an academically-founded idea regarding how living together in society can be shaped in order to take basic human needs into consideration. These include the improvement of the living situation, co-determination and participation as well as fair social structures in society.

Social work is a vocation and a profession. Its ethical orientation comprises both of these dimensions. The orientation to human dignity, social justice, participation and the universal rights of humanity combined with a well-founded ethical position define a professional aspect of social work.

Human Rights As An Ethical Orientation Framework

All ethical actions and a corresponding professional position are informed by societal traditions and influences. It is undisputed that a professional ethics policy cannot be formulated independently from the philosophical concepts that reach far back into the history of humanity in Europe. Globalization has brought influences from other cultural areas.

Humanistic traditions, the orientation to human dignity and the associated human rights form the foundation of professional ethics that are reflected in the various ideological, religious and philosophical trends in social work.

Additional justifications and elements for the ethics of social work are found in the statements in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany, the EU Charter of Fundamental Human Rights, the Human Rights Convention and Social Charter of the EU as well as the UN's General Declaration of Human Rights and its conventions.

On the one hand, human dignity and human rights provide basic standards for individual, societal and state actions. On the other, they also simultaneously refer to realizable utopias beyond social work constituting an ethical orientation of all human beings and all state institutions.

Approach and Function of Professional Ethics

As the professional association for professional social work, the DBSH invites the members of the social work community to engage with the aspects of ethics in social work and to critically examine them. It is of particular importance to apply and further develop these in all areas of social work (in practice, in teaching and research, in structures and in politics). In our opinion, it is critical for the social work professionals throughout all institutional levels (education, supporters, state, research) to create space which allows and supports ethical reflections and in which the design of the structures of social work can be discussed.

Dealing with ethical questions ensures the quality of social work. In addition, the humanitarian basic needs and basic rights stated in the human rights will be recognized on individual and structural levels for the professional work and used as the basis for the professional work.

In so doing, professional ethics for social work fulfill functions on the various levels:

1. They obligate the members of the profession to use professional ethical principles and decline courses of actions that contradict these professional ethics. They thus form an indispensable element for professional self-control.
2. They serve the members of the profession as an instrument for reflection in conducting their professional everyday lives.
3. They create and maintain the professional identity and provide an essential contribution to the self-organization of the profession.
4. They underscore the orientation of the profession with regards to human dignity, ethical positions and working principles.
5. They clearly demonstrate the fundamental orientation of social work to the clientele and/or the user and name the principles that the clientele can rely on.
6. They make the effectiveness as well as the limits of the profession clear to the public and to the political sphere.
7. They describe the attitude towards other vocations and professions on the levels of distinction and cooperation/collaboration.
8. In this context, they describe the demand made of employees and/or employing entities for professionally justifiable autonomy in the exercising of the profession.
9. Professional ethics exercise a long-term influence upon law practice, e.g. in penal procedures against professional, damage compensation claims brought about by those seeking help or also in labor law proceedings.

Making Professional Ethical Action Possible - Framework Conditions and Next Steps

With the elaboration of professional ethics with regard to the further development of professional ethical principles, an option for reflection is provided in order to be able to constructively deal with the dilemmas experienced. In this context, it would make sense for the social work professionals to be able to rely upon associations and institutions that support them both with regard to their own qualification as well as with regard to conceivable conflicts in the structures of social work. The DBSH continues to offer itself as a partner. Our vision remains the acceptance of ethics by a majority of the members of the social work community (professional organizations, supporters, et cetera).

The reference to professional ethics and the thus associated values and principles form the basis for ensuring that questions regarding a "successful life" and the "right actions" can be encountered from a reflected, ethical standpoint.

The next steps:

1. As a professional association, the DBSH will discuss the project "professional ethics" on a wider level and, if possible, provide a basis for this that extends beyond the DBSH.
2. The social work professionals will receive motivation and support in initiating active debate regarding ethical questions in the professional environment.
3. In the long-term, the DBSH is planning measures for its members that continuously promote ethical discourse within the profession. For this purpose, training sessions can be developed that take place via a quality test within the scope of the DBSH Institute and the professional register.
4. On the institutional level within the professional association, the ethics committee established by the DBSH for the clarification of questions resulting from professional dilemmas will advise committees and representatives and create corresponding handouts and templates for support.

Summary

As a profession, social work requires an effective form of self-assurance and self-control and a transparent basis for the ethical evaluation of the tasks assigned to it. Parallel to the further development of the professional ethical principles, the DBSH is formulating professional ethics for social work for this purpose.

The necessity of professional ethics for social work is justified in the special position of power towards its clientele and for the professional autonomy required for the work. This includes distancing one's self from illegitimate tasks on the part of the contracting entity, employer and clientele.

The orientation towards human rights and human dignity as it is anchored in the Basic Law for the Federal Republic of Germany as well as an idea of social justice forms the umbrella for the professional ethics under which the various ideological, religious and philosophical trends within social work can be combined.

The implementation of the professional ethics in practice as well as the discourse with all relevant groups will be supported by the DBSH in various steps.

In doing so, it has been described how the professional ethics strengthen the profession of social work and support the professionals in their actions. In this context, the current dominance of economic thinking and action in the society, social policy and in social work plays a role. This primarily encumbers people who lives at the edges of society and have very few resources. The dominance of economic constrains also represents an encumbrance as well as a challenge for many social work professionals as they must redefine their daily work, making providing useful help more difficult if not actively preventing it.

If, however, social work seeks to support social change and the resolution of problems and enable people to shape their lives successfully through free decision-making and if it feels obligated to human rights and social justice¹, it must come to terms with the dominance of the neoliberal trends and develop a notion of how these can be worked against and how a more fair society can appear. In doing so, goals that may appear utopian may not be rejected as unrealistic; instead, active professional perspectives for the clientele of social work must be developed under the given conditions.

Professional ethics will thus provide the opportunity to strengthen the professionalism of the social work professionals and truly assume a reflected, advocacy position for the clientele. This refers both to the various fields of activities of social work as well as to the (social) political level. As a professional association, the DBSH thus combines the intention to work against the current conditions in the society and in the professional practice to create a professional realizable utopia for a solidly united and fair society and to actually be able to achieve this.

¹ See: Definition of Social Work, [www. http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/](http://ifsw.org/policies/definition-of-social-work/)

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