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## **Ethical Practice in the Contemporary Human Services**

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## **Ethical Practice in the Contemporary Human Services**

### **Abstract**

*Summary:* This paper examines the findings of an exploratory study of emerging ethical issues and practices reported by a sample of human service managers and practitioners in public and non-profit agencies in Queensland, Australia.

*Findings:* The contemporary context in which human services are delivered in Western societies is characterised by increased marketisation, contractualism and managerialist practices, all of which entail different ethical values to those traditionally embraced by the social work profession. Utilising qualitative and quantitative methodologies, this research identifies current and emerging challenges to ethical practice and existing organisational responses to it. Widespread concern about the negative aspects of changed structural arrangements on ethical practice in the contemporary human services is highlighted. Differences in the ways in which organisations and practitioners are responding to these changes are examined. The limitations of existing approaches and ethics codes are noted.

*Applications:* Implications for organisations, practitioners and educators are explored, and more pro-active management and training strategies are advocated. Further research is required to identify the often-understated negative effects on ethical practice of the market-based reforms of human service structures and processes.

### **Key Words**

Ethical practice, social work, human services, managerialism, marketisation.

## **Introduction**

The contemporary “marketised” environment in Australian human services has been suggested as posing new dilemmas and highlighting old dilemmas in human service delivery, particularly in relation to ethical practice. Conducting an exploratory study of contemporary ethical practice in the human services, the authors attempted to ascertain the extent to which restructured and reconfigured service delivery mechanisms were affecting perceptions and understandings of ethical practice. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were employed for the study to examine the current environment, and emerging issues and dilemmas, in ethical practice in the human services. This paper reports on the results of the statistical analysis of data collected from a survey completed by a sample of 233 human service workers employed in a range of service delivery agencies in southeast Queensland, Australia. In addition, the details gained from voluntary interview respondents expand and enhance the knowledge gained from these quantitative data. The findings have implications for managers and funders of social programs, as well as educators of social workers and human service professionals.

## **The Contemporary Human Services Environment**

The 1980s and 1990s witnessed a decline in the general support for broad-based welfare responses; and considerable questioning and criticism of the role of governments in social care arrangements (Butler and Drakeford, 2001; Howe, 1994; Parton, 1994, 2000). Consequently, governments of the “Left” and “Right” political persuasions have adopted “reform” agendas that mask what is essentially a return to socially and politically conservative values. These values include: self-reliance, blaming the

disadvantaged for their lot, an emphasis on 'family' rather than government responsibility, and an individualist rather than collectivist social agenda.

Generally speaking, during this period public expenditures on social programs within the OECD did not decrease as a proportion of GDP. Nevertheless, the significant fiscal constraint did not permit the growth in the sector necessary to meet rising community expectations and needs (Kalisch, 2000). As a result of these ideologically- and fiscally-driven pressures, fundamental changes took place in many countries with respect to the ways in which service delivery in the human services was funded, structured and delivered (Harris and MacDonald, 2000; Kalisch, 2000).

A basic dynamic within this overall process of reconstruction is the marketisation of welfare, in which putative boundaries separating human service delivery from market processes and market forces have been eroded (Healy, 1998; Rees and Rodley, 1995). For example marketisation, privatisation, contracting in service delivery, managed care and case management, the increased role of for-profit businesses in service delivery and the growth of private practice have all been identified as potentially problematic developments (Brown and Barker, 1995; Lewis et al. 1997; Reeser, 1996; Strom, 1996; Sunley, 1997).

Furthermore, the advent of 'managerialism' alarmed many direct practitioners, notwithstanding the associated benefits of improved management processes and approaches in the human services (Considine, 1988; Jones and May, 1992).

'Managerialism' has been a term used to describe the adoption of business-like methodologies by management teams that employ strategies including tight fiscal controls, strategic planning, targeted responses to emerging opportunities, and sophisticated information systems that closely monitor organisational processes and

outcomes. Increased power for managers has resulted through accountability measures and restrictive policy and procedures, often at the expense of professional power bases and autonomy (Fook et al. 2000; Rees and Rodley, 1995).

Concerns have also emerged that the purchaser-provider split and the managerialist prescriptions of influential central agencies of the state have resulted in a significant reorientation away from the traditional service focus on providing services to the most marginalised and disadvantaged citizens (Auditor-General Western Australia, 2000; Horin, 2001; Industry Commission, 1995). The ethical values adopted by market-based businesses are not the same as those traditionally adopted by social workers and human service professionals. For example, free market business advocates highly value maximising shareholder' profits, whereas key human service values include client self-determination, the dignity and worth of all people, privacy and confidentiality, and maximising social justice outcomes (Reamer, 1998).

Whilst many stakeholders share the task of promoting ethical practice, management has a primary responsibility for the variety of strategies that may be employed. The employment of professional staff for example, has been used as one key means by which ethical practice can be operationalised in human service organisations. However, in the reconfigured human services, professionals are increasingly exposed to circumstances hitherto rarely experienced (Aldridge, 1996). Banks (1998: 214-215) argued that developments such as the increased use of management driven rules and procedures have the potential to circumscribe professional autonomy and discretion, and with it, erode the capacity of individual professionals to maintain an ethical orientation to their practice.

Currently, Australian human service professions and organisations have largely adopted the ‘values’ approach to promoting ethical practice, which involves the identification, development and promotion of professional standards and guidelines articulated as formal codes of ethics (Reamer, 1998). However, reliance on codes of ethics to promote ethical behaviour is regularly criticised (Gaha, 1996; Thorpe, 1997). De Maria (1997) and Briskman and Noble (1999) for example, note the limited capacity for codes of ethics to guide individual responses of social workers in the contemporary turbulent context. Codes of practice overly define individual practitioners as autonomous agents, able to act independently of the organisational context in which they are located. An alternative perspective views professional or organisational codes of practice as only one of many influences on individual workers and that organisational conditions also influence and mediate the service delivery process (Jones and May, 1992).

In addition, old certainties about the legitimacy and moral probity of service delivery organisations have also been increasingly challenged (Healy, 1998; Leat, 1994). Here, it is assumed that because a human service organisation (particularly a non-profit provider) overtly promotes an explicit moral mission, and delivers services outside of the framework of profit and the market, then a culture of ethical responsiveness must be in place. It is assumed that the non-distribution constraint, limiting the capacity of non-profit organisations to redistribute surplus as profit, predisposes service providers to rely on ‘cultural assumptions of goodness, good works, altruism, [and] high standards of moral probity’ (Leat, 1994: 22). However, there are increasing questions about these assumptions and whether the close contractual

relationships of a number of major human service organisations with the federal government means the end of charity (Horin, 2001).

Taken together, reliance on professions, codes of ethics and the assumed morality of human service organisations form the basis of the existing strategies adopted by human service organisations to promote ethical practice and ethical behaviour in the delivery of services. The extent to which these strategies are appropriate for the contemporary environment formed the backdrop to this research and paper. The key question we posed is simple: Are these sufficient in the contemporary environment?

## **Research Design and Methodology**

This research was exploratory because the marketisation of human services and emerging ethical practice issues in Australia is a relatively new area of study and hypotheses were unable to be tested (Babbie, 1998). The overall aims of the research were to provide a better understanding of the nature of contemporary ethical practice in the human services, and to facilitate a preliminary investigation of how these were related to the marketisation that was occurring. There were four core objectives:

- Identify contemporary ethical dilemmas posed by the changing human service context from the perspective of organisational employees;
- Discover and describe existing organisational responses to these issues, or what is characterised here as organisational ethical practice;
- Determine whether or not there were different issues and dilemmas emerging within the diverse range of human service sectors and practice fields; and to
- Inform the revision and refinement of ethical principles and guidelines and assist in the training of practitioners and managers with respect to ethical practice.



The research design used a mixed methods approach, employing qualitative focus groups preceding a quantitative stage, and subsequent qualitative follow-up interviews with volunteer respondents (Bryman, 1992).

### Survey Instrument Construction

Semi-structured focus groups were chosen to explore the broad area, clarify the dilemmas and issues, and to ascertain the language used by human service managers and practitioners to enable the construction of a survey instrument (Fontana and Frey, 1994; Jones, 1996; Kreuger 1993). Eight practitioners from different types of government and non-profit agencies participated in each of two focus groups; one being organisational managers and the other direct practitioners. Semi-structured processes were used to engage with two themes; the contemporary context of service delivery in their organisations, and organisational strategies to promote ethical practice.

The proceedings were audiotaped and thematically analysed, with considerable consensus about the themes evident. Items in the survey questionnaire were those frequently identified in the focus groups, and included questions about the contemporary environment, organisational approaches to ethically informed practice, and respondent demographic and organisational variables. The items were presented as statements and respondents indicated their level of agreement on a five-point Likert scale.

There are approximately 750 state and non-profit human service organisations in the southeast corner of Queensland, Australia. However, given that a formal and reliable register of human service organisations does not exist, the researchers undertook to construct the sample frame from other sources. Those organisations that provided field

placements for students undertaking the Bachelor of Social Science (Human Services) at Queensland University of Technology, and another large sample frame constructed by researchers engaged in identifying a compendium of competencies required by human service professionals (Gow et al. 1998) were used in the study. A random sample of 360 agencies, sufficient for statistical analysis purposes, was drawn from this, and two surveys were sent to each, with a request that a manager and a direct-service worker complete them. Responses were received from 233 recipients, representing a response rate of 32.4%.

### Volunteer Interview Data

Practitioners and human services managers participating in the questionnaire survey were invited to self-nominate for follow-up face-to-face interviews. Twenty-one (n=21) volunteers participated in the interview process. Table 1 provides details on the interviewed subjects. The general categories are associated with the 'type of work' respondents are engaged in. "NF" represents non-profit organizations and "Govt." represents government departments.

**Table 1: Interviewees in the Study**

Women n=	Men n=	justice n=	Health n=	Cultural n=	Child & family n=	young people n=	NF n=	Govt. n=
14 (66%)	7 (33%)	4 (19%)	4 (19%)	1 (4%)	9 (42%)	3 (14%)	12 (57%)	9 (42%)

### Interviewing Technique and Data Analysis

Interviews were conducted during convenient working hours at the respondent's work, with data being tape recorded. Each respondent was advised that general information

regarding their gender, location and type of work would be noted, but that their identity would not be disclosed. The transcribed interviews were perused, with those themes and issues concerning the respondent's preparedness for addressing ethical dilemmas in practice being highlighted.

### Survey Data and Statistical Analysis

Questionnaire data were inputted on to a SPSS V7.0 data file and were initially cleaned, with outliers altered to the mean score. This allowed truly significant relationships to be more evident because the impact of deviant scores was reduced (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 67-69). The data were analysed to produce descriptive statistics and to determine any relationships between the variables (for example Chi square ( $\chi^2$ ), Eta ( $\eta$ ) and Pearson's  $r$  (R). Specific levels of statistical significance were at the .05 level or higher, which has been noted to provide sufficient statistical power and a sound balance between type I and type II errors with sample sizes of around 200 respondents (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 36-37).

Each section of the survey was then factor analysed to identify underlying or core themes among the multiple items. Factor analysis is a robust multivariate statistical analysis, which identifies variables that are correlated with one another but mostly independent of other subsets of variables, and combines these into factors (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 635-637). In essence, factor analysis groups questionnaire items that are interrelated into factors, which can then be used for further statistical analysis to determine what other variables are influential or associated with them.

Following this, analyses of variance were performed on new composite variables constructed from the items identified in the factor analysis. This was done to determine

the effect, if any, of professional or vocational background, level of education, auspice of employing organisation, main client group served, type of service delivered, gender, organisation and position (that is, manager or direct service worker). Thus, any differences between distinct groups of respondents or types of agencies were explored.

### Limitations to the Study.

This was an exploratory study that sought to map out the contemporary ethical environment in the human services in southeast Queensland. Consequently, hypotheses were not tested. With an exploratory study it is prudent to look at the results overall and to use them as an indicator of the likely situation and circumstances rather than as a definitive conclusion of the state of affairs. The study limitations included:

- The survey questions were not pretested for their statistical reliability.
- This study examined practice in southeast Queensland agencies and no generalized claims are made with respect to practice in other locations.
- The modest response rate to the survey questionnaires also limits the generalisability of these results.
- The survey items measured respondent's perceptions of the contemporary practice context (e.g. how ethical issues were dealt with by management) and these may be different to the realities.

Despite these limitations, the quantitative results were supported by the findings of this study's qualitative methodologies (See for example, Fox et al. 2001). Further research is needed to examine the extent to which these findings are applicable to other human services practice contexts and across the industry as a whole, including internationally.

## **Results**

### Focus Groups

Participants in the two focus groups articulated similar key concerns with respect to the current environment and ethical practice, namely:

- Heightened funder and management expectations to ration scarce resources;
- The increasingly negative impact of resource constraints on quality service delivery;
- More frequent use of notions of “deserving” and “undeserving” poor;
- The altered focus on organisational accountability to funding bodies to the detriment of accountability to service users;
- The increased focus on employee accountability to employers to the detriment of employee accountability to service users;
- Pressure from funding bodies to erode client confidentiality;
- The negative impacts of increased organisational focus on duty of care issues and fear of litigation and its effects on quality service delivery;
- The consequences on quality service delivery of increased employment of casual staff as opposed to permanent staff; and
- The increased fears of the personal and organisational consequences of whistle blowing or complaining about the new environment.

### Survey Data

These issues were incorporated into the questionnaire design and respondents reported their perceptions about the issues and organisational responses to them. Of the 233

respondents to the questionnaires, most were 'managers' (57.5%) rather than 'direct practitioners' (42.5%). State government agencies made up 34.1% of the sample, non-profit organisations were 57.9%, Commonwealth and local government agencies constituted 3.0%, and 'other' respondents 5.0%. The types of services offered by the employer organisations were varied, the major ones being community and social support (51.1%) and accommodation services (25.8%). Women consisted of 73.5% of the sample, with the overall mean age being 42 years. The main professional and occupational groups represented were tertiary educated social welfare workers (32.4%), social workers (21.3%), business and arts qualified graduates (15.1%), nurses (11.1%), teachers (8.9%) and psychologists (6.2%). The mean length of time in the human services was 14 years, and the average time in their current position was 3.5 years. Taken overall, this sample consisted of a diverse group of human service professionals who tended to be mature and experienced practitioners with job stability.

#### Emerging issues in the contemporary environment

Questionnaire data about emerging issues in the contemporary environment were factor analysed using a principal factors extraction with varimax rotation, a statistical technique which maximizes the variance of the factors, thereby highlighting statistical associations (Tabachnick and Fidell, 1996: 647-648). Two factors in this section of the questionnaire were extracted. The first pertained to *issues affecting service quality*, and included those items relating to the perceived impact of changing conditions in the organisational context of service delivery such as a decreased focus on accountability to service users. The second factor, *increased resource scarcity*, indicated that respondents considered it to be a major issue in the contemporary environment. The questionnaire

items that were associated with these factors are shown in Tables 1 and 2 along with the statistical factor loading for each (a higher figure indicating a larger relative influence in the overall factor) and the percentages of the total sample who agreed that the item represented an issue of concern.

INSERT TABLE 1 APPROXIMATELY HERE

A number of newly emerging issues were generally perceived to adversely affect service delivery quality, mostly centering around changing accountabilities, and increased staff casualisation and litigation. Most agreement was observed with the item relating to increased accountability to funding bodies, and least (although still considerable) about the item concerning employee accountability to employing organisations. Most respondents agreed with the items relating to complaining about the new environment and the impact of fear of litigation, while just under half of the sample agreed with the item relating to the impact of the increased employment of casual staff. New dependent variables were created by summing the factorized items and averaging the loading on each factor. Analyses of variance (ANOVA) were then performed treating these new composite variables as dependent variables. The influence of the demographic and organisational independent variables on these dependent variables was determined. Managers ( $F_{1, 222} = 7.185, p < .05$ ) and women ( $F_{1, 222} = 9.298, p < .05$ ) were more likely than others to indicate that service quality was negatively affected.

INSERT TABLE 2 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Table 2 shows a substantial majority agreed with both items included in the ‘resource scarcity’ factor, indicating that there is widespread and increasing concern about the negative effects of fiscal constraints on service quality and rationing. The ANOVA for this factor did not reveal any significant differences among respondents, confirming the almost universal perception about the increasingly negative effects of resource constraints on service delivery quality.

#### Organisational approaches to ethically informed service delivery

Factor analysis of the 20 questionnaire items about organisational responses in the contemporary context identified four distinct factors, namely

- *the extent to which the organisation discusses ethics and ethical practice at key times;*
- *Management non-responsiveness to ethical concerns or breaches;*
- *Management responses to ethical concerns or breaches; and*
- *Formal protocols and procedures.*

Each factor represents a different aspect or type of response an organisation might make. For example, factor one relates to the extent to which the organisation discusses ethics and ethical practice at key times, such as training and induction (see Table 3).

INSERT TABLE 3 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Most organisations employed a variety of strategies including discussions of ethical issues at induction, training, supervision and during organisational planning and evaluation. ANOVA on this factor’s composite variable identified a significant difference with respect to organisational auspice, specifically, that non-profit



organisations were more likely to discuss ethics at key times than were other organisations, mostly state government agencies ( $F 3, 198=5.835, p<.05$ ).

The factor 'management non-responsiveness to ethical concerns or breaches' is worrying with respect to management practices (see Table 4), especially in light of overseas and Australian studies that have identified problematic levels of ethical breaches among social work practitioners (Jayaratne et al. 1997; Murray and Swain, 1999; Strom-Gottfried, 1999, 2000).

INSERT TABLE 4 APPROXIMATELY HERE

A small but significant proportion of these respondents perceived tardy management responses on ethical matters. Distinguishing between management down playing, as opposed to not responding to, an ethical concern or breach, it is clear that although the percentage of the sample indicating agreement is low, down playing an issue or breach is perceived as a more common management response than inaction. ANOVA on this factor identified that respondents state organisations were more likely than others to indicate that their employing organisation had down played or not responded to an ethical breach or concern ( $F 3, 198=3.932, p<.05$ ). Direct workers were also found to be more likely than managers to claim that their organisation was not responding to ethical issues, concerns or breaches ( $F 1, 209=8.884, p<.05$ ).

However, it is not all bad news as there was also evidence of considerable management reaction to ethical issues and breaches (see Table 5). The factor 'management responses to ethical concerns or breaches' highlights that it was just as likely that management would make an informal as a formal response to ethical

concerns or breaches. Again, ANOVA did not identify any significant differences among respondents on this factor.

INSERT TABLE 5 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Finally, the items comprising the fourth factor ‘formal protocols and procedures’ again provides reassuring evidence that many organisations are taking their ethical responsibilities seriously (see Table 6). A substantial majority of organisations have a written commitment to ethical practice in their mission statements, and just over half have a formal code of ethics. Similarly, approximately half these organisations had taken formal steps to implement their code of practice and develop formal protocols and procedures, while only a minority of organisations had a nominated committee or employee dedicated to foster ethical practice. The ANOVA revealed that direct workers were more likely than managers to perceive that formal protocols and procedures were in place ( $F_{1,209}=11.098, p<.05$ ).

INSERT TABLE 6 APPROXIMATELY HERE

Whilst these results are generally encouraging about formal organisational measures to encourage ethical practice, the primary data also revealed that relatively large proportions of respondents did not know whether or not their organisation had a written commitment to ethically informed practice (17.1%), a formal code of ethical practice (31.9%) or a set of formal procedures to respond to ethical matters (34.9%).

In summary, as far as this sample was concerned, non-profit human service organisations were more likely to discuss ethical issues at key points and state

organisations were more likely to display management non-responsiveness. In addition, while direct workers were more likely than managers to indicate that their organisation had formal protocols and procedures in place, direct workers were also more likely to claim that their organisation displayed management non-responsiveness to ethical concerns or breaches. Additionally, significant proportions of these respondents were unaware of their organisations' formal mechanisms in relation to ethical practice.

### Interview data and analysis

The focus of respondent interviews was examining the issue of preparedness for addressing ethical practice in human services, with elements pertaining to university studies, on-the-job training, induction, code of ethics (conduct), and policies and procedures specifically identified. The framework for the qualitative data analysis was:

- Goodman's (1998) definition of professional ethics, which is the study of a profession's values, ideals, moral obligations and its use of power, authority and knowledge in relation to the client it services; and
- Reamer's (1998) reference to social work ethics as being concerned with right and wrong and matters of obligation and duty.

All these respondents were interested in the topic of ethical practice in service delivery, which was developing into a major consideration in their activities, especially the emerging issues identified in the survey data. A counselor at a non-profit location suggested that ethics was currently evolving in practice saying:

I think that there are a number of events or issues that are all happening at the same time which probably then has raised the profile of ethics or raised the profile of standards etc. If you look at what was happening ten years ago compared to today then we are far more open and far more accountable and inclusive...

Another respondent working in the mental health field indicated that:

There has been a lot of integration, change and restructuring as a service but getting down to these little policy and procedure things hasn't really happened. As for the question of ethics, that's just totally undeveloped....Inviting people into talk about ethics adds a lot of depth and maybe a bit of excitement to things like standards, and makes people thing, 'yeah, that's why we do...".

While all of the respondents were enthusiastic and supported advancing ethical practice awareness, many lamented the lack of commitment or support from within their organizations to address their concerns about ethical practice, and emerging ethical dilemmas in their workplace. Information about lack of confidentiality, professional abuses, worker stress, and burnout were mentioned. A participant indicated that many employees do not understand the meaning of confidentiality and become defensive when directed in this area. Child protection practitioners discussed worker stress and the difficulties associated with working in an ethically proper manner with aggressive/abusive parents. A respondent said:

Advancing ethical practice is hard when reporting child protection details. The parents are abusing you and you feel threatened.

Professional human service workers appear to regularly confront a myriad of ethical issues/dilemmas. When participants were asked specifically about their preparedness for advancing ethical practice and dealing with ethical dilemmas, various themes and issues emerged, including:

- University studies;
- On-the-job training;
- Induction;
- Codes of Ethics; and
- Policies and procedures.

### University studies

Five (5) respondents, who all worked with young people, discussed tertiary qualifications at university level in respect of understanding professional ethics. Two respondents highlighted the importance of tertiary qualifications and how they attained their degrees through distance education. One respondent said:

I worked for 5 years unqualified, I certainly thought I knew it all...I was very lucky I had a common sense approach and didn't do anything too damaging to any of the young people I worked with. But I personally see how important it is to have training and they have to have a tertiary qualification to work here.

A senior manager in child protection discussing human resource issues and staffing considerations indicated that:

We also select people with life experience and good people skills...So I guess from that very early point we're saying let's have a look at the range of human resources that we have and select on the basis of potential....So we happen to have about 85 percent of people with tertiary qualifications and about 15 percent of people without tertiary qualifications. And, therein lies a bit of a tension! Because sometimes the people without qualifications feel a bit less prepared compared to people with qualifications and feel a bit anxious about that.

Although, the debate regarding qualifications and preparedness in ethical practice remains contentious, a consistent thread from all of the respondents was the notion of 'common sense' application of professional values in working through ethical practice dilemmas. In an effort to accommodate this theme, many respondents supported robust university training in professional ethics and ethical practice.

### On-the-Job Training

The issue of on-the-job training was a common theme raised by over 75% of the interviewed respondents, with responses indicating that training opportunities within

organizations need to specifically address professional ethics training for all staff.

Raised issues dealt with what is ethics, when to intervene, decision-making, volunteerism and training linkages. A counselor/supervisor indicated there needs to be an examination of decision making, stating that:

We don't do a lot of looking at the mega process of decision-making. I think we need to be aware that economic issues can be thought of as ethical issues and you need to remove the extraneous matter and just actually see what you're making a decision about and then decide...

Complementing this position, a respondent working in community development noted that:

The dilemma is often the question relating to intervene or not to intervene; from day one you're thought to be an expert and often that is not the case. It doesn't matter whether you do social work or psychology...that's a personal dilemma for me but sometimes people don't want to hear that...it's too scary sometimes when you're viewed as 'the expert'.

Ethical issues should be in training and academe, I notice it because I supervise social work and human service students. I do sneak some ethical issues toward them but they are young and learning. I want them to not be 100% sure about their specialist status, and I think that is good.

Some respondents indicated what seemed to be an effective training strategy regarding professional ethics. Two respondents in the mental health field raised mentoring and peer coaching aligned to their on-the-job training. A respondent said:

I don't think training is the ultimate panacea...I can go along to training ad infinitum but it doesn't have the value of mentoring and having the deeper discussions and reflecting etcetera on what we're doing. And you can't teach somebody ethical practice...

Another participant said:

I think peer coaching should be encouraged. You do have procedures to make sure someone is taking ultimate responsibilities and that the jobs are being done professionally. [Peer coaching] is striking the balance between having that and allowing people flexibility in their workplace...

Finally, a respondent working in the justice field raised the importance of a code of conduct. The respondent indicated that:

We have a code of conduct book and we have had training in that... You know its good reading in the sense that if you are a new person it would highlight some of the ethical issues that are involved with security and relationships with clients and offenders...

### Induction

Information in this area was scant and haphazard. Some respondents indicated that they knew their organizations now offered an induction program, but they had no idea of its intent or content. One respondent indicated that their induction focused on confidentiality, based on a tick and check process. A respondent working with children indicated that:

Part of the induction orientation is that they go through some client files, not only so they see how to write their notes and how we want things noted, but also to see how we have handled situations in the past... a lot of the orientation is me actually getting to know a worker and what they would respond to, how they would respond, and whether that's appropriate or not within the program.

Other respondents reported that induction was new to their organization and focused more on employee entitlements, policies on harassment and workplace health and safety legislation, rather than emerging issues and sound ethical practice.

### Code of Ethics

Undoubtedly, the utility of a code of ethics was the most common theme raised by the interview respondents. Whilst the researchers did appreciate differences between codes of ethics, conduct and practice, when respondents were asked directly about a code of ethics their language would usually revert to concern either behavior or practice. Based on the respondents' reference to these descriptors when replying to the researcher's questions on code of ethics, it was decided to include their responses in this category.

Most of the government respondents, and particularly those working in juvenile justice or child protection, discussed code of conduct and practice standards in relation to their duties and responsibilities. A respondent best summed up this position by saying:

...being in the public service, there is the formal code of conduct which lays down the principles that all of us are expected to comply with. In terms of professional ethics or decision-making around ethics as they relate to your ongoing casework, as well as administration...there is a lot of standards, practice standards that attach to the way we do our work...

Discussing the value of the code of conduct a community corrections respondent noted:

...we have a code of conduct book and we have training in that, and every new officer is supposed to go through that and there is a test on it. It's good reading in the sense that if you are a new person, it would highlight some of the ethical issues that are involved with security and relationships with clients or offenders and what not.

While the reliance on, and prevalence of, codes of conduct prevailed in the public sector, they did not rate any mention within the non-profit sector respondents who instead spoke of codes of ethics. For example, respondents from the health field, in particular those working in mental health, noted that the code of ethics was used as a means for training and focused on issues about respect for the client, practice behavior and research.

### Policies & Procedures

The researchers noted a correlation between comments on code of ethics (conduct) and reference to policies and procedures from government employees, in particular, from those respondents who were in human service positions associated with justice.



Two child protection workers also raised specific elements of their policy and procedures and how they had gained awareness of the legal and ethical implications associated with their roles. A respondent said:

Duty of care was something we didn't know about, but new procedures were introduced. It was a term that was used in some documentation but it wasn't well known within the organization so we had training in it and it is now a major influence on our procedures and practice. The policies and procedures are quite detailed and rigid especially in relation to confidentiality.

Respondents working in child protection noted the ethical dilemmas of working with abusive and aggressive parents, the respondent noted that, "We have written policies around harassment and child protection, they are very clear." Again, it was interesting to note that, in contrast to government employees, those working in the non-profit sector did not comment or elaborate on policies and procedures. Rather, they discussed the role and directions that are given by a board of governors or advisory committee as the main source for driving their organization.

## **Discussion**

Whilst keeping in mind the study limitations, the findings from this exploratory investigation do shed some light on contemporary service delivery in the human services, albeit the perceptions of the respondents. From the perspective of managers and direct workers in a range of human service settings, serious issues affecting ethical practice have been highlighted. These include changed accountabilities away from service users toward employing organisations and funders, the negative effects on service-delivery outcomes of increasing fiscal and resource restraints, perceived tardiness or avoidance by some organisations in addressing ethical issues and breaches, and the increased use, yet limited utility, of existing strategies such as codes of conduct

and formal procedures. Also, many respondents were unaware of their organisation's existing strategies to address ethical practice.

According to this sample, several important implications about the contemporary human services environment can be drawn from this exploratory research:

- Changed accountabilities and staffing arrangements have occurred.
- It is problematic due to increasing resource scarcity and fiscal pressures.
- Although mechanisms and procedures have been established to promote ethical practice, there is evidence that these are not always known and embraced, and at times are ignored, or the issues downplayed.
- Different approaches and strategies tend to be taken by government and non-profit agencies for the promotion of ethical practice.
- Traditional social work and human service ethical values are not necessarily universally embraced in an industry environment where business values are increasingly used by market-driven agencies that compete to secure and maintain funding.
- These difficulties are compounded by expressed fears of the consequences of complaining, whistle blowing and litigation. The chickens may be coming home to roost with respect to the so-called "reforms" of a marketised and managerialist human services.

What can be done to address this situation? As noted earlier, the promotion and maintenance of appropriate ethical practice is clearly a management responsibility, although other stakeholders also have roles. Human service managers clearly need to reassess their existing organisational strategies for the promotion of ethical service delivery. The reliance on traditional measures such as codes of ethics,

professionalisation of the labour force, and generalised trust appear to be inadequate to address the contemporary and emerging issues identified in this study. Pro-active and innovative management strategies to promote appropriate ethical practice need to be adopted, such as systematic processes to identify and debate emerging issues and dilemmas, training practitioners to develop and articulate appropriate ethical values and practices, and utilising a range of monitoring and review processes to ensure the detection of unethical practices. These recommendations are reinforced by the results indicating differences in organisational responses to ethical concerns or ethical breaches. Specifically, there is evidence that respondents considered the state sector, which mostly relied on codes and procedures, to be more problematic in terms of its organisational responses than was the non-profit sector, which tended to embrace discussions and explorations of ethical practice. This may signpost a better approach.

A series of useful developments has also arisen within the applied ethics movement in public administration. Essentially, these involve a commitment by management to promote ethical service delivery in their organisational context or service delivery system, arguing that reliance on professional codes of ethics is inadequate, and that organisational contexts exert an enormous influence on ethical behaviour of participants/employees. This study's findings support such an approach, particularly as those factors that created significant effects refer essentially to organisational phenomena, either in the form of organisational role (manager/direct worker) or organisational auspice (non-profit or state).

Furthermore, within the applied ethics literature a variation of risk management is proposed, which positions ethical breaches as a 'risk' that can be managed. This approach to maintaining quality and best practice in ethical service delivery involves

purposeful and targeted management strategies (for example, see Moore, 1992; Nicolo, 1996). These include regular ethical risk audits, ethics audits, ethics reviews, establishment of standing ethics committees in organisations, establishing an ongoing and permanent program of ethical education and staff development within organisations, and appointments of an 'ethical champion'. In noting these developments, we are proposing that they not be uncritically adopted within human service organisations. Rather, we are suggesting that human service managers should position the promotion, debate and management of ethical service delivery as a key management task in the contemporary environment.

In addition, educators and professional associations across the range of social work and human service professionals need to appreciate that ethical issues and practice have altered within the marketised and managerialist contexts of organisational and professional practice in the human services. Teaching traditional ethical values and responses to what are essentially new developments is likely to leave practitioners under prepared to deal with ethical issues and dilemmas that involve changed accountabilities, commercial and organisational self-interest, competitive inter-agency relations and pressure to operationalise funding body policies that may be antithetical to notions of client empowerment and self-determination. Further research and theoretical development is required to clarify the ethical values that are applicable and appropriate to this new environment where welfare has adopted business approaches, and at times, values.

Acknowledging that the research reported here is exploratory and confined to one state (Queensland) in Australia, it does, however, seem necessary and timely that more in depth research be conducted, focussing particularly on determining the optimal

conditions within organisations and viable strategies adopted by managers and practitioners for the promotion of ethical human service delivery across its diversity of practice contexts and fields. Comparative and cross-national study designs are also needed to determine the extent to which the identified problems, issues and practices are present in different locations and contexts. A “one size fits all” approach may be counterproductive in light of the different roles, responsibilities and approaches of government and non-profit agencies. In light of the widespread concern identified in this study about changed ethical dilemmas and issues, it is imperative that appropriate values, practices and processes be articulated and promoted to address problematic areas. The required objective should be to have human services that utilise business-like efficiencies and effectiveness to optimise the capacity to meet the needs of the marginalised and improve the well-being of the whole community, whilst not sacrificing ethical practice in this quest.

The changing nature of the Australian welfare state as a result of privatization, marketisation and increased commercialism has witnessed significant changes in people’s perceptions, attitudes and utilization of various human services across the country. The time-honored awareness of human service practices being viewed as compassionate, ethical and professional have been overshadowed and replaced by notions of profit making and fiscal restraint driven by money markets and multi-national conglomerates. While a sense of inevitability about the reconstruction of the Australian welfare state prevails, researchers and practitioners are concerned about emerging ethical dilemmas in human service practice.

Practitioner preparedness for addressing ethical issues has emerged as a major consideration in monitoring the outcomes of Australia’s reconstruction of its welfare

systems. The information in this study is beneficial in that it is located at the 'grass roots' level of service provision. All of the respondents work directly with human service consumers on a daily basis. Rather than focusing on global policies, political posturing and generalizations; this research gives some insights and understanding at the service delivery level of human service practice.

In advancing recommendations from this study, the researchers are aware of the limitations to the Australian human service context. Nevertheless, international trends in advancing privatization, commercialism and marketisation in many welfare practices justifies some appreciation about issues, problems and strategies Australia is undertaking in addressing the resultant ethical dilemmas.

University qualifications, reflective practice and exposure to professional ethical awareness have been identified as major considerations in preparedness for addressing ethical dilemmas (Fox et al. 2001). Given the changing nature and structure of Australia's welfare state, it seems logical and rational to adjust human service academic programs to address the makeup and implications from the changes. Curriculum adjustments should cover theoretical subjects such as professional ethics, human rights, legal issues, and applied subjects covering internships, fieldwork and on-the-job experiences.

In the past decade Australia has been committed to advancing training, accreditation and induction programs in the workplace. The results from this study indicate that training and induction programs are somewhat haphazard and unstructured. Human service organizations should be advancing accredited, specific training programs that cover general professional ethics in tandem with specialized understanding and approaches, rather than just relying on ethical codes. Based on the

respondent comments, coupled with the on-going status of the reconstruction of Australia's welfare state, this research is timely in that it justifies a pro-active approach to training and induction in professional ethics. Organizations should be encouraged to exploit these training options by establishing links with relevant professionals in university or college environments.

The debate about the value of documented code of ethics (conduct) in some organizations as evidence that the organization is committed to ethical practice was not the intent of this study. However, the researchers warn that it is not sufficient for any organization to rely on code of ethics documentation as opposed to practice. Some government employees advanced that they were given training in relation to the documentation, but this was not evident in the non-government respondents. Efforts should be made by government departments to ensure that their service providers are included in such training. Moreover, it is recommended that contractual arrangements should require that professional ethics training, accreditation or credentials be mandatory.

A noteworthy element from this research is that all of the respondents indicated the importance and value of ethical awareness in their professional location and in relation to their duties and responsibilities. This substantiated the researchers' contention that ethical dilemmas are emerging as a major factor emanating from the reconstruction of the Australian welfare state. Given the timing and input in this study, it is time for human service practitioners to be proactive in seeking out and advancing their own knowledge and organizational approaches to professional ethical practice in the workplace. They should be investigating supporting networks like universities,

colleges and accredited training locations for assisting them in their preparedness for addressing ethical issues and dilemmas in contemporary human services practice.



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**Table 1: Issues Affecting Service Quality**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>Percentage of total sample agreeing With statement</b>
The increased focus upon personal accountability to employing organisations is deflecting attention away from personal accountability to our clients.	.762	39%
Increasingly, practitioners are frightened to publicly complain about what's really happening in the new environment.	.689	55%
Increasingly, the trend towards employing casual staff is negatively affecting the quality of service offered.	.678	47%
Increasingly, service delivery is negatively affected by duty of care issues and fear of litigation.	.644	56%
The increased focus on organisational accountability to funding bodies is deflecting attention away from organisational accountability to clients.	.607	66%

**Table 2: Increasing Resource Scarcity**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Factor Loading</b>	<b>Percentage of total sample agreeing</b>
Increasingly, resource constraints are making it hard to provide quality services to clients	.908	86%
Increasingly, we are expected to ration resources	.904	86%

**Table 3: Ethical discussions in planning, training and induction**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Sample Agreeing</b>
My organisation discusses ethically informed practice and/or includes ethical matters in staff and volunteer development and training.	.899	71%
My organisation discusses ethically informed practice and/or includes ethical matters in organisational planning, evaluation and review processes.	.851	70%
My organisation encourages the discussion of ethically informed practice in staff supervision.	.797	72%
My organisation discusses ethically informed practice and/or includes ethical matters in staff and volunteer induction.	.777	69%
My organisation discusses ethically informed practice and/or includes ethical matters in staff and volunteer appraisals.	.748	51%

**Table 4: Management non-responsiveness to ethical concerns**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Sample Agreeing</b>
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been an attempt by management to down play an ethical breach by a staff member or volunteer.	.879	14%
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been an attempt by management to down play an ethical concern or issue raised by a staff member or volunteer.	.864	13%
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been no response by management to an ethical issue or concern raised by a staff member or volunteer.	.846	7%
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been no response by management to an ethical breach by a staff member or volunteer.	.843	6%

**Table 5: Management responsiveness to ethical concerns**

Item	Loading	Percentage of Total Sample Agreeing
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been a <u>formal response</u> by management to an ethical concern or issue raised by a staff member or volunteer.	-.860	42%
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been an <u>informal response</u> by management to an ethical concern or issue raised by a staff member or volunteer.	-.810	48%
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been a <u>formal response</u> by management to an ethical breach by a staff member or volunteer.	-.799	42%
Since I have been in my current position, I am aware that there has been an <u>informal response</u> by management to an ethical breach by a staff member or volunteer.	-.754	42%



**Table 6: Formal protocols and procedures**

<b>Item</b>	<b>Loading</b>	<b>Percentage of Total Sample Agreeing</b>
My organisation has a formal ethical code of practice.	-.822	58%
My organisation has taken steps to implement this formal code of practice.	-.738	57%
My organisation has a set of formal procedures to respond to ethical issues or dilemmas.	-.697	52%
My organisation has a committee, sub-committee or person specifically and formally nominated to develop, implement and monitor ethically informed practice.	-.612	32%
My organisation has a written commitment to ethically informed practice in its mission statement.	-.551	71%