

'I know what I ought to do, but I am unable to do it': exploring moral distress in social work

Ethics is an increasingly important theme in social work practice. Worldwide, social workers experience common ethical challenges - how to be fair, whether to break a rule - in very different contexts, from disaster relief in China to child protection work in Palestine.

This presentation will draw on a recent project that has involved collecting cases relating to ethical issues in social work from practitioners around the world. The cases will be published with accompanying commentaries in Summer 2011 in an edited book, *Practising social work ethics around the world: cases and commentaries* (Routledge). This paper outlines some of the key ethical challenges that emerge from the cases in the book, considering particularly some of the tough cases where social workers express powerlessness and inability to challenge unethical or poor practice, as well as those where they have worked out ways of handling quite complex and politically charged situations. We will look at how social workers express their ethical concerns, and consider whether the concept of 'moral distress' is useful in examining the accounts given by the social workers in the cases. Moral distress is a concept that is more commonly utilised in nursing than social work. It has been described as arising 'when one knows the right thing to do, but institutional constraints make it nearly impossible to pursue the right course of action' (Jameton, 1984)

Jameton, A. (1984) *Nursing practice: The ethical issues*, Prentice-Hall, Englewood Cliffs, NJ.