

**‘WHAT SHOULD I DO?’:**

**A STUDY OF SOCIAL WORK ETHICS, SUPERVISION AND THE  
ETHICAL DEVELOPMENT OF SOCIAL WORKERS**

**Submitted by**

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## **STATEMENT OF SOURCES**

This thesis contains no material published elsewhere or extracted in whole or in part from a thesis by which I have qualified for or been awarded another degree or diploma.

No other person's work has been used without due acknowledgement in the main text of the thesis.

This thesis has not been submitted for the award of any degree or diploma in any other tertiary institution.

All research procedures reported in this thesis received the approval of the University's Human Research Ethics Committee.

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## **ABSTRACT**

This thesis explores the ethical development of social workers and the role of supervision in that development. It begins with an examination of the social work context for the study, including the early history of social work and the ways in which it was influenced by the major social and cultural movements of the late 20<sup>th</sup> century, concluding with a discussion of both the threats posed and the possibilities emerging for social work in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

It then considers the ethical context for the study. It investigates the ethical theories and traditions that have contributed to the development of social work ethics and the role of professional ethics (including codes of ethics). It then proposes that a pluralist approach to social work ethics is the most appropriate way forward. This is followed by an examination of ethical development and the importance of reflection. Various models of ethical decision-making are compared and an inclusive, reflective model is found to be the most appropriate for social work in terms of both particular dilemmas faced and the overall development of workers as ethical decision-makers.

The focus of the thesis then moves to supervision, exploring its history, its central place in social work and some of the problems that can arise for both supervisors and the social workers they supervise. It is argued that the reflection required to develop as ethical decision-makers is most logically located within the relationship and processes of supervision and that supervisors have an important role in guiding that reflection and development.

The next part of the thesis describes the qualitative and action research strategies employed and examines the results emerging from the data. Participants in the focus groups were

social workers who supervise other social workers, and they each met for two sessions, six months apart. Between the two sessions, they were asked to trial in supervision a framework for reflection on practice. The data emerging from the groups reflected the theoretical development begun in the early chapters, including the importance of reflection and the role of supervision in assisting the ethical development of workers, particularly in terms of deconstructing dilemmas and being able to articulate the reasons for decisions made.

The thesis concludes that no one ethical theory is sufficient to support the ethical decision-making required for the practice of social work. Rather, a pluralist approach that allows a dilemma to be considered from a number of theoretical perspectives is more appropriate. Alongside this, an inclusive, reflective model of ethical decision-making reflects that pluralist approach and supports the ethical development of the individual worker. Supervision is vital in guiding the reflection required to make justifiable ethical decisions and to develop as ethical decision-makers.