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# Values in social work: A philosophical discussion of normative questions

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# Values in social work: A philosophical discussion of normative questions

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*Abstract.* Fundamental disagreement between social workers and their clients often involve value conflicts. This philosophical working paper analyses such conflicts on the basis of central assumptions in Wittgenstein's influential philosophy of language. According to Wittgenstein, the fact that personal values are relations to 'ways of living' in collective practices means that a strict rationalistic and individualistic model of justification does not apply in value-related discourse. Cases are used to show how Wittgenstein's arguments have important implications in social work practice.

Key words: Philosophy, social work practices, values.

*Sammendrag.* Grunnleggende uenighet mellom sosialarbeidere og brukere av sosiale tjenester involverer ofte verdikonflikter. Arbeidsnotatet analyserer disse verdikonfliktene i lys av Wittgensteins språkfilosofi. I følge Wittgenstein er personlige verdier 'måter å leve på' som er nedfelt i kollektive praksiser. Dette innebærer at en snever rasjonalistisk og individualistisk modell om begrunnelse ikke er gyldig i verdiladet kommunikasjon. Eksempler brukes til å vise hvordan Wittgensteins argumenter har slående konsekvenser i forhold til sosialt arbeid.

Nøkkelord: Filosofi, sosialt arbeid, verdier.

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# Values in social work: A philosophical discussion of normative questions

## 1 Introduction

Social workers interacting with clients that voluntarily or involuntarily are in contact with the social services often face ethical dilemmas involving value conflicts. The problem in these situations is not just that one disagrees about what are 'good' and 'bad' measures or solutions. More fundamentally, the challenge is that clients typically believe they have some good reasons for attributing positive values to actions they endorse, and that they easily feel overrun if social workers do not acknowledge these reasons. A paternalistic attitude to clients' value assessments will often lead to greater conflict than to closer contact and collaboration (Reamer 1990; 1999).

A typical example is a person who is on long-term sick leave. A social worker may assume that a person who receives the label 'sick' associates the term with negative connotations, and that the person genuinely wishes to return to work as soon as possible. A recipient of sickness benefits may, however, view the fact of being on sick leave as less negative than the assumption made by the social worker (Hofmann 2002). Poor communication and misunderstandings can easily also arise if a social worker suspects erroneously that a person who is on sick leave actually wishes a more permanent welfare arrangement. A person who has been ill may have a genuine desire to return to work as quickly as possible, but have problems in participating in organised work activities for reasons that a social worker may be unaware of.

Communication challenges in client interaction typically arise when social workers do not know enough about clients' socio-cultural background and how they wish to live their lives (Reamer 1999; Nordby 2008a). However, the reason for poor communication does not need to be a lack of knowledge about a client's social context, beliefs or interests. A social worker who consciously ignores a client's view of reality because he or she believes that his own view is 'more correct' will easily end up in a standoff. It is important to remember that even if one believes that there are good reasons to judge an action in a certain way, these reasons are of limited value if the client has a completely different perspective. As in all other interpersonal work in which the goal is good communication and collaboration, the starting point in value-laden social work should always be the client's perspective (Shulman 1992; Johnsen 1992). One must understand each other in a good way to start with, before addressing the issue of what is 'right' or 'wrong'. In order to achieve good communication in cases of fundamental ethical disagreement, social workers should, in effect, put a provisional parenthesis around the issue of 'who is right' (Reamer 1999; Nordby 2006).

My aim here is twofold. The first aim is to use basic assumptions from modern philosophy of mind and language to argue that clients' beliefs should not be conflated with the values they have. In relation to the analysis I intend to pursue, beliefs involve propositions about the world (Burge 1979; Cummins 1983; Peacocke 1992; Guttenplan

1994; Bechtel & Graham 2000; McDowell 2001). The reason clients think their beliefs are true is that they believe that these propositions are true, either because they seem evidently true or because they are grounded in experiences or other beliefs they have (Dancy 1986; McDowell 2001). The problem is that this perspective on truth and justification cannot be used to explain clients' experiences of being entitled to have the values that they have. According to widespread philosophical assumptions, values are directly related to activities and 'ways of living', and they are therefore not subject to the same type of logical justification as beliefs. But how then should one understand clients' experiences of being entitled to hold the values that they possess?

The second and most important aim of the paper is to use the idea of social capital and Wittgenstein's (1953; 1969) theory of social 'language-games' to propose a solution to this philosophical problem. According to Wittgenstein, a person's experience of using language correctly must be linked to agreement in a social context. I argue that to understand values as a form of social capital in social work can be understood as an application of this point: It follows from Wittgenstein's analysis that clients' experiences of being entitled to have a set of values is grounded in their use of expressions like 'good', 'bad', 'right' and 'wrong' in shared linguistic practices. This means that in order to understand and work with clients' values, one should focus on their social capital in the sense that one should focus on their social relationships and collective actions.

It should be emphasised that the overall goal of this paper is not to present an extensive philosophical analysis, but to explain how Wittgenstein's philosophy and the idea of values as social capital can play a practical role in social work. I will therefore not present the theoretical perspectives in detail, but rather focus on their implications. Several case studies from social work practice will be used to elucidate the descriptive and normative aspects of these implications.

## **2 Beliefs and values**

In order to understand more precisely how values can be understood as social capital, it is necessary to clarify some background assumptions that the discussion will be based on. The first and most fundamental is that it is possible to explain human actions by understanding their intentions (Cummins 1983; Guttenplan 1994). The idea is that one can explain an action psychologically if one has understood a person's motives, and that motives are combinations of beliefs and desires. In the professional literature this perspective is often called 'folk psychological explanation' (Fodor 1998; Bleicher & Graham 2000; Guttenplan 2002). Explanations that refer to beliefs and desires are commonly also called 'common sense psychology', because they correspond to how we usually ascribe beliefs and desires when we try to understand actions (Guttenplan 2002).

An everyday example may help to clarify the idea: A person stretches out his hand towards a glass of water on a table in front of him. A reasonable explanation of the action is to attribute to the person a desire to quench his thirst, since this is a desire that we usually associate with this action. But notice that this desire alone cannot provide a complete psychological explanation of why the person carries out the action. A person who is blind, or who believes the glass in front of him is filled with something undrinkable, will normally not reach out his hand for the glass even if he may be thirsty. By also attributing to the person the belief that there is a glass of water in front of him, the behaviour becomes more meaningful as an intentional act. If the explanation is also correct – if the person actually does act based on the belief and desire we attribute to him – then we have arrived at a psychological understanding of why the person acts as he does. In the real world psychological explanations are normally more complex, but the idea has been the same:

When a person carries out an action on the basis of beliefs and desires, we have understood the intention behind the act if we understand what beliefs and desires the person expresses (Cummins 1983; Fodor 1998; Guttenplan 2002).

A topic that has received less attention in philosophical analyses of actions is that we also act on the basis of our values. To have a value is not the same thing as believing that something is true. Our values are directed toward things in the world around us, and they are formed by particular social and cultural practices (Dancy 2006). As Wallace & Raz (2005, p.1) points out, a fundamental fact is that

...the objects and activities that we esteem would not so much as exist in the absence of various contingent social and historical conditions... More generally, the ways in which we relate to valuable objects and undertakings, and the significance they have for our lives, themselves depend crucially on the social conditions under which we live.

When we attribute a value to ourselves or other persons, then we do not attribute a belief, but an attitude – the attitude of valuing something – to an object or an activity. Notice that the expressions that follow the phrase ‘P values...’ in value ascriptions like ‘P values being with his family’ or ‘P values living in a small town’ are not complete statements. The expression ‘...living in a small town’ is not true or false in the same way that an everyday sentence like ‘It is raining’ is true or false depending on whether it is raining or not. It refers instead to what Wittgenstein (1953; 1969) calls a fundamental ‘way of living’. What we value has something to do with our interests and personal identity, something that goes beyond what we actually hold to be true of ourselves and the world around us (Williams 1975; Dancy 1986; 2005; Raz 2001).<sup>1</sup>

Beliefs, on the other hand, are in modern philosophy of mind and language conceived to be attitudes to thoughts we believe in (Burge 1979, Nordby 2003). When I say ‘P believes that it is raining’ then I relate P to the statement ‘It is raining’. I assume that P has a true belief if this statement is true, and a false belief if it is false. In the philosophical literature beliefs are standardly called ‘propositional attitudes’ (Cummins 1983, Peacocke 1992; Guttenplan 1994, Fodor 1998; Bechtel & Graham 2000). The idea is that beliefs are attitudes to *representations* of the world, and that these representations are sets of concepts that make up propositions (Burge 1979; Guttenplan 2002; Nordby 2003). Thus, the belief that it is raining is an attitude to the proposition that it is raining, made up of the three concepts *it*, *is* and *raining* (Burge 1979; Peacocke 1992). If this proposition is true then the belief is true, if the proposition is false then the belief is false.

The way to understand the distinction between beliefs and values more accurately depends on which theoretical perspective one uses as a starting point. Independent of the different theoretical directions, there is, however, a series of assumptions about values that many have accepted. One of these is that we believe that we have - from our respective subjective standpoints - a special entitlement to hold the values we have. *Entitlement* is here understood as a broader concept than *justification* (Burge 1996; Peacocke 2001). Consistent

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<sup>1</sup> It is important to emphasise that I do not mean to presuppose that this concept of value represents the only adequate understanding of the term ‘value’. Another concept has already been mentioned: The term might be understood as referring to ethical properties that are attributed to actions, as when one judges an action to be ‘good’ or ‘bad’. A third way of understanding the term is to refer to fundamental principles that we think members of a community should defer to, such as principles of freedom and equality. It would fall outside the focus of this article to discuss the relationship between these (recognised) concepts of value (Beauchamp 1982). My concern is that it is, in one fundamental sense, possible to link the concept of value to what each and every one of us value – the activities and things we esteem. The arguments will not presuppose that this represents the only plausible explanation of what values are.

with the philosophical understanding, ‘an entitlement to hold values’ may be understood as the right we think we have to have them.<sup>2</sup>

What is it that makes us believe that we are entitled to have the values we have? Notice that when it comes to beliefs, this is in light of the assumption that they are attitudes to propositions easily answered. We have the beliefs we do because we believe them to be true, either because they seem self-evidently true or because we believe they are supported by other beliefs or experiences that we have (Cummins 1983, Dancy 1986; Guttenplan 1994; Bechtel & Graham 2000). The problem is that as long as values are not attitudes to representations of the world that we think of as true, a corresponding model cannot be used to explain why we believe we have a right to have them. But how can a person’s feeling of entitlement to a specific set of values then be explained? Why do we believe that we have a right to hold the values that we possess?

This is a philosophical problem that is particularly relevant in the context of challenging social work. The reason is obvious: Social workers are often involved in relations with clients who hold value sets that in large measure are characterised by a social and cultural context that social workers have limited or little knowledge about. There may be very little coherence between the way clients wish to live their lives and what social workers believe is a ‘good’ way of living. That is why, if it is not possible to provide a good explanation of why clients believe they are entitled to have the values they have, it is also difficult to understand how one can achieve good communication and understanding in value conflicts in social work.

### 3 Values as social capital

In *Social Capital* (2005, p.39) David Halpern defines social capital as “informal social networks, norms and sanctions that facilitate co-operative action among individuals and communities”. According to Halpern’s definition, any normative social structure that facilitates collaboration without being formalised represents a type of social capital. This does not mean that social capital needs to be positive: “...like other forms of capital, social capital may be used to achieve objectives that some may regard as bad” (Halpern 2005, p.19).

Halpern’s concept is more wide-reaching than other definitions of social capital (Franklin 2003). Furthermore, the idea of an informal social structure that facilitates collaboration can be understood in different ways based on different theoretical perspectives (Putnam 2000; Lin 2001, Halpern 2005). Here I will discuss the idea on the basis of Wittgenstein’s very influential analysis of ‘language-games’. I will argue that the idea of social capital understood in the light of Wittgenstein’s philosophical perspective can provide us with an important understanding of how values are a form of social capital.

One of Wittgenstein’s most fundamental ideas is that assumptions about the human mind must be derived from assumptions about language. According to Wittgenstein, we can only understand what concepts our beliefs, thoughts and other mental states involve by considering how we use language (Wittgenstein 1953; Kripke 1982; McDowell 2001).<sup>3</sup> Wittgenstein’s ‘cube’ example is famous. Usually when I use a word such as ‘cube’ then I

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<sup>2</sup> The concept of justification is usually linked to rational and logical reasons that support a belief. An ‘entitlement’ can be more unarticulated and general. We can be entitled to have a belief without being able to explain in detail why it is rational for us to have the belief, and without the belief being grounded in a logical structure (Burge 2001; Peacocke 2001).

<sup>3</sup> The opposite idea is that we can only understand the meaning of language by understanding what thoughts and beliefs speakers express by their use of language. For a further of what this involves this, see Davies (1995).



assume that I express the concept *cube* – and that it is therefore correct for me to use the word for cubes and not for other things. But what actually tells me that it is correct to use the word in this way? The problem is that there is nothing in my consciousness that can tell me how the word should be used. I can attempt to associate it to mental images, experiences or grammatical rule formulations, but none of these things have a normative force; they cannot in themselves tell me how the word should be used:

...suppose that a picture does come before your mind when you hear the word "cube", say the drawing of a cube. In what sense can this picture fit or fail to fit a use of the word "cube"? – Perhaps you say: "It's quite simple; - if that picture occurs to me and I point to a triangular prism for instance, and say it is a cube, then this use of the word doesn't fit the picture." –But doesn't it fit? I have purposely so chosen the example that it is easy to imagine a method of projection according to which the picture does fit after all (Wittgenstein 1953, p.54).

The point is that mental images, representations or rule-formations must be *interpreted*; they do not contain their own 'method of projection'. How Wittgenstein's argument should be understood more precisely has been a matter of discussion, but according to an influential interpretation there is a critical difference between a person and the person's social environment. The idea is that as long as a person is considered in isolation from a language community, then there is no basis for saying that the person is using a language correctly or incorrectly (Kripke 1982; McDowell 2001). Then everything that seems correct per definition will be correct, and one can in reality not speak of something not being correct (Wittgenstein 1953). But if we bring in other persons and the idea of a linguistic community, then we can identify standards in relation to what others mean. Within a specific language community, a person's language use can always be assessed as correct or incorrect relative to what others mean.

To illustrate how Wittgenstein's argument represents a break with the idea that the use of language is driven by individual rules that we have a conscious access to, Kripke (1982) gives the example of a person who has learned the rule for addition – a person who really means *plus* when he uses the word 'plus'. As long as there are no qualities within the person himself that can serve as a language rule to guide him, the standard for what is correct or incorrect use of the word must consist of what other people believe is the correct use of the word:

A person is entitled, subject to correction by others, provisionally to say, "I mean addition by 'plus'", whenever he has the feeling of confidence – "now I can go on!" – that he can give 'correct' responses in new cases; and he is entitled, again provisionally and subject to correction by others, to judge a new response to be 'correct' simply because it is the response he is inclined to give (Kripke 1982, p. 90).

Wittgenstein's analyses of the social aspects of language are consistent with the recognised idea that language is a kind of social capital (Halpern 2005). However, Wittgenstein's argument is particularly interesting because it specifically deals with how behaviour and practices are social and how collective actions constitute the basis of the entitlement speakers think they have to their beliefs and values: "Giving grounds, however, justifying the evidence, comes to an end; - but the end is not certain 'propositions' striking us immediately as true, i.e. it is not a kind of seeing on our part; it is our acting, which lies at the bottom of the language-game" (Wittgenstein 1969: 210). Wittgenstein's focus on what he calls 'language games' – common linguistic practices where language is used in accordance with implicit rules – represents an alternative way of analysing entitlement and

justification. Our perspectives on ourselves, and the world around us, are in the final analysis not grounded in more or less logical thought patterns and ideas of truth and falsity, but in agreement, collective actions and shared 'ways of living' (Kripke 1982; Johnston 1989; Nordby 2008b).

Thus, Wittgenstein's analysis can be used to explain experiences of being entitled to values. As long as values are not true or false, a strict rationalistic model of justification does not apply; it is simply meaningless to say that we think that our values are true because they are logically supported by beliefs. Wittgenstein's theory represents, however, an alternative explanation: Values are not grounded in rational structures that imply their validity in the sense that we think they are true. When we feel entitled to have the values that we have, then that is because there exists a fundamental acceptance of having them in a social practice we are part of. Wittgenstein's point is that a person's values must be understood based on how one uses value-laden words such as 'right' and 'wrong', and that the use of these words – as for all language for that matter – is guided by agreement and how we act collectively. The way a person thinks he is entitled to a set of values reflects the way it is correct to use language that express these values in a language-game: If it is conceived to be correct to use a term like 'good' in a certain way in the language-game, then the person will think that he is entitled to have the value that this use of the term expresses.

In sum, Wittgenstein's philosophical perspective implies that values can be understood as a form of social capital. First, values are grounded in practices that are informal because they are not governed by rules each and every one of us has a conscious awareness of, and because they do not involve logical structures of justification ('justifying the evidence comes to an end'). Second, the practices are collective because they involve several persons. Third, there is mutual agreement in the practices about the use of value-laden language, and thus which values one is entitled to have.

#### **4 Social capital and anti-individualism**

Social workers and clients receiving social services often have strikingly different horizons (Gadamer 1975) – strikingly different perspectives on themselves and the world around them. In highly value-laden communication, it is important for social workers to acknowledge that clients' horizons not only involve beliefs, but also values (Reamer 1990; 1999). Communication problems and lack of agreement in value-laden social work arises first and foremost when disagreement is not acknowledged as disagreement in values (Nordby 2008a).

A typical pitfall for a social worker can be illustrated in the following way: In a given case a social worker arrives at an overall assessment of what is 'right' or 'wrong' for a client. The client, however, does not agree, and the background for the client's view of the situation is not just beliefs – not just a different understanding of how the world actually is - but also different values. These values are important for the client, but the social worker does not acknowledge them for what they are. And the stronger and more intense the arguments are made, the larger the misunderstanding and distance between the parties grows.

The distinction between beliefs and values therefore implies that it is important for social workers to identify clients' values as values. In this way the distinction has a fundamental practical implication for social work practice. At the same time, it does not say much about how social workers should go about dealing with fundamental disagreement, and it is here that Wittgenstein's perspective has a more substantial consequence: In highly value-laden social work, it is wrong to restrict one's focus to individuals considered in

isolation from their environments. In order to understand and (if one thinks it is correct) challenge a client's value preferences one should focus on the client's social context – the collective bonds and networks that support the client's preferences.

There are two critical aspects relating to this strategy. To begin with it is critical to find out to what degree a client's values constitute the basis for his or her verbal or non-verbal actions. An understanding of *how* values serve as the basis for behaviour will provide a better understanding of *why* clients act as they do. In line with modern hermeneutic presuppositions that a good process of understanding is a gradual uncovering of another person's overall horizon (Gadamer 1975; Bleicher 1980), it is critical to clarify how a client experiences that values are grounded in social practices. The point is that if one merely has an individualistic focus – if one does not understand value preferences as relations between persons and social practices – then one will not be able to understand a client's values.

After having identified value preferences as relational attitudes, the next step to consider is whether it is right to attempt to change or at least challenge the preferences. It is of course reasonable to assume that if a social worker does not actively use knowledge about a client's values, then it will be more difficult to achieve good communication around ethical disagreement (Reamer 1990; 1999). But even if one really does try to work consciously with the values a client has, then this does not mean that one is guaranteed a successful result. In relation to Wittgenstein's theory, one will not be able to secure successful communication unless one conceives of values as social capital. Only if one focuses on the social bonds that make up the basis for a client's value assessments will one be able to challenge a client's value preferences on the client's own terms. If one also believes it is right to change clients' values, then one needs to literally change their social practices.

These methodological implications represent a breach with what often is called 'methodological individualism (or 'methodological solipsism') – that one needs to consider a person in isolation from the person's surroundings in order to be able to understand the 'real' psychological reasoning behind a person's actions (Guttenplan 1994; Fodor 1998). In recent years, this methodological ideal has been on the defensive (Guttenplan 2002), and the analysis of values as social capital can contribute to providing us with a richer understanding of why it is wrong to believe that the basis for a client's value assessment can be identified within a narrow individual focus.

At the same time it is important to emphasise that even if the analysis of values as social capital is based on Wittgenstein's philosophy of language, it does not imply anti-individualism about meaning. Anti-individualism about meaning refers to the idea that the content of our beliefs – the concepts that the beliefs involve – depend on which language community we are in (Burge 1979; Fodor 1998; Nordby 2003). But according to the perspective I have outlined, values are not relations to propositions made up of concepts, so the idea that values are a form of social capital is therefore not the same as anti-individualism as meaning. In fact, the perspective involves a type of anti-individualism that goes beyond the view that one must understand a person's surroundings in order to understand what concepts his beliefs involve. The perspective is not anti-individualistic because it holds that meaning is relational, but because it holds that values and value entitlement are grounded in agreement and social practices.

## **5 Values as social capital in social work**

In order to clarify further how Wittgenstein's perspective has practical anti-individualistic consequences, it may be appropriate to take a starting point in two examples of value-laden

social work. The first is a larger empirical study carried out in a smaller municipality where the main goal was to understand the welfare recipients' life situation, values and interests. The study is described in more detail by Solheim (2009). Here I will focus on finds and assumptions that are relevant for the points made here.

A starting point for the study was that there was relatively high unemployment in the municipality. In local newspapers some people also expressed the view that there existed a type of welfare culture in which it was widely accepted that it was ok' to live on welfare because it covered the minimum expenses needed for a decent life. An important finding in Solheim's study was that there was not a basis for saying that there was such a welfare culture. However, what she found was that the welfare recipients did not wish to return to full-time jobs 'at any price', and that this could explain some of the problems in getting 'everyone' back to work. To a larger extent than one could imagine, the recipients were interested in having time to do other things that were important for them, like spending time with family and having time to do leisure activities.

How the interests of those who were interviewed in the study should be interpreted more precisely will of course depend on a range of factors. The point here is that based on what was found in the study, it is not unreasonable to understand the interests as values grounded in a social community. Even though the study documented that it did not exist an actual welfare culture, there was a mutual acceptance of there being other things than being in a full-time job that were valued goals. Many of the persons interviewed made it very clear that they were not willing to accept just any type of job offer, and they were not willing to sacrifice other fundamental values. This was a fairly common attitude, and it is reasonable to assume that this community feeling strengthened the experience each individual had of being entitled to have values that came into conflict with the idea that everyone should want to be in a full time job 'whatever the cost.'

Now, a good question is whether it would be right to try to challenge the values that were identified in Solheim's study. At any rate, if one believes that change should be attempted in a situation like this, then Wittgenstein's theory implies that it is crucial to focus on their social context. If one focuses on each individual in isolation from their common language-games, then one will not find the basis for their values. One could imagine a social worker going to great lengths to argue with one of the persons in the study about how important it is to prioritise finding employment, without accounting for the fact that the person's alternative values is anchored in the social community. Based on what came out of the study, it is not unreasonable to assume that the social worker would meet relatively large resistance, and that the reason for this resistance would be the client's experience of being entitled to have values that correspond to a shared way of living.

Another important area is value conflicts across cultures in a more traditional sense. The larger the cultural differences are, the more challenging will value related communication typically be (Nordby 2008a). Here is an example from work with children and youth:

A social worker is working on integrating a family from Africa. The aim is to get the family integrated in a satisfactory way into the local community. One of the methods used in the integration work is strongly encouraging the children to start in kindergarten and participating in after-school programmes and other socialising activities. The parents are a bit sceptical of the suggestions. They are not used to thinking about socialising, stimulating and getting the children active in the way proposed by the social worker. In their native country, it is common for the children to be much more together with their family than what is typical in the new country. Influenced by the arguments of the social worker and based on a desire to be cooperative, they agree to go along with the arrangements that are suggested. The

consequence is, however, that the arrangement does not work very well, and considerable effort and resources must be expended to get the family to participate in the way expected.

In this case it is reasonable to assume that an important reason why the arrangement does not work is that the social worker does not have a clear idea of the differences between beliefs and values. It might be easy to think that it is good for the family that the children participate to a large degree in formal leisure activities with other native children, and that the family will agree as long as they understand what type of activities are involved and their purpose. But when the social worker thinks that he or she has adjusted the family's views around kindergarten and after-school arrangements in an informative, factual direction, then we can interpret the example such that he or she in reality has simply overridden their values. The family gives in because they wish to be pragmatic and because they feel pressured – one can even imagine that the social worker has prepared contracts that they do not wish to break; but when it comes down to it the family has not given up their original value attitudes. These attitudes remain a part of their horizons - they influence the parents' behaviour and lifestyles, and they explain why the cooperation with the kindergarten and after-school arrangements does not work like the social worker had intended.

The point is that the family think they are entitled to have the values they have because it is a part of their culture, and because the values are not false or incorrect in any objective sense. The values are a part of a social capital they believe gives them the right to live the way they would like to. In order to understand the family, one must therefore begin by identifying their values as cultural elements. To the degree that one believes that it is appropriate to challenge their value preferences, one must then take as a starting point the experiences they have of their values as a social capital – that the cultural context they are a part of gives them the right to hold such values.

It is easy to imagine many other examples, but the basic ideas should be sufficiently clear. The point has been to show that the analysis of values as social capital has some striking implications for how one should relate to basic value conflicts in social work. The analysis is relevant in all forms of social work in which it is important to understand, challenge or even change a client's values.

## **6 Ecological perspectives on social work**

The analysis of values that this article has presented is grounded in Wittgenstein's philosophy, but it has clear similarities with more traditional theoretical perspectives on social work. The idea that values must be identified as relations to activities in a social context is particularly well suited to an approach to social work that is often described as an "eco-social perspective" (Matthies et al, 2001). The basic idea in this perspective is that difficulties in social work to a large degree must be understood and dealt with in light of an interaction between individuals and the social environments in which they live:

...eco-social social work searches for an ecologically and socially sustainable model of social policy and social work. Sustainability, it is recognised, is not about maintaining the status quo. It is about creating an environment in which all the component parts contribute to the whole while creating a better quality of life (Boeck, McCulloch & Ward 2001)

As Matthies, Närhi & Ward (2001, p.11) observe, this is a perspective that understands practical social work within a social capital perspective. The goal of "social action" is to "increase the level of social capital in combating [phenomenon such as] social

exclusion". This means that one must understand "the impact of the living environment", and that clients are identified as "part of their environment through participation and influence" (Matthies 2001, p.141). In interpersonal work, the eco-social perspective implies "a commitment to a better networking between various actors" in light of their surroundings (Matthies 2001, p.141).

This is more a programme than a theoretical perspective, and the analysis I have presented can provide a more precise understanding of how these goals can be understood and dealt with. A large comparative research project discussed by Matthies (2001) can serve to illustrate the point. The main goal of the project was to understand social phenomenon such as social inclusion and exclusion in relation to vulnerable group's interests and surroundings in three towns in three different countries. An interesting finding was that even though the residents in Jyväskylä (Finland), Magdeburg (Germany) and Leicester (England) valued some of the same activities, they gave different reasons for why the activities were important for them. A typical example was their relationship to outdoor recreational activities:

It is of special importance to the Finns that they retreat to (original) nature (forest, lake side, fishing, summer cottage) – alone, isolated and in silence. The interviews ... also revealed that especially unemployed residents considered their immediate access to nature upon exiting their flats as extremely important. For the German unemployed people, the enjoyment of nature (although cultivated), particularly in the summer, also was seen as an extended space in everyday life, although it was mainly connected to social events, such as barbeques, picnics, community building in small private gardens where residents spend their free time together. In Leicester ... nature as such was hardly mentioned by the residents of the estate. In fact, some Leicester residents even expressed the view that, for example, the tree-lined streets typical to the area were traffic hazards. However, also in the British case, the residents strongly identified themselves with their gardens, considering them to be the most important natural environments in their everyday lives. Parks and playgrounds were also seen as essential in terms of quality of life (Matthies 2001, p. 144).

This clearly shows how value preferences are shaped by social context: All the groups in the study valued engaging in outdoor activities, yet they referred to different social practices in order to explain why this was important. While those who were interviewed in Jyväskylä were concerned about how untouched nature gave them an opportunity to find peace and quiet, the unemployed in Magdeburg to a much larger extent indicated social reasons. In the urban quarter the project focussed on in Leicester, the residents were also not concerned about untouched nature in the same way as the Finns. However, in contrast to those who were interviewed in Germany, they focused more on urban areas and their own, private outdoor areas than on social activities (Matthies, 2001).

As a thought experiment, one can imagine a situation in which a typical person from the group in Finland was in a more urban context such as that in Leicester – a context that made it impossible for him to experience nature in the way he preferred. In this case his new actual beliefs about the environment would lead to a new value preference: he would not in the same way value being outdoors in order to find peace and quiet. In a similar fashion, one could imagine a person from Magdeburg in new surroundings. If the leisure activities could not fill social needs – if he were to a much larger degree surrounded by untouched nature – then he would not value being outdoors in the same way as he did in his home city.

As Matthies (2001) points out, focusing on the social practices of these groups is crucial for understanding how they value to live. However, the theoretical perspective I have presented goes a step further when it comes to understanding what this means: The values they hold are part of who they are; they are a part of their social identity that they always act out of and interpret others' actions through. In this way, their social and cultural interests say something essential about who they are and how they wish to live their lives.

## 7 Summary

In cases of fundamental ethical disagreement it is important for social workers to be able to identify value preferences. Being able to understand how clients' values underlie their assessments about which actions are 'right' and 'wrong' should ideally be a part of social workers' professional competence. The problem is just that it is not obvious what personal values actually are and how one should deal with value-related disagreements.

It has been recognised that values can be linked to the idea of social capital (Halpern 2005). This has, however, not been investigated on the basis of theories in modern philosophy of mind and language. This article has explored this perspective. The theoretical starting point was that unlike beliefs, values should be understood as direct relations to activities. It follows that entitlement to values cannot be explained by using a narrow model of justification where the aim is to identify and support *truth*. I have used the idea of social capital and Wittgenstein's theory of language games to argue for an alternative explanation. According to Wittgenstein, values are a form of experienced social capital because they are grounded in social practices where use of value related language and collective action are governed by agreement.

The analysis of values as social capital has two dimensions. First, it can help to clarify and interpret value conflicts. Second, the analysis says something about how one should attempt to achieve good communication and understanding in practical value-laden social work. The most important implication is that one should adopt a collectivistic, wide focus on a client's social context. The aim has been to show that if social workers are consciously aware of what this involves, then they will often have a better platform on which to understand and deal with value conflicts in their daily work.

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