

Care-based Ethical Reasoning among First-Year Nursing and Social Services Students

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Background

- Recent research has established a developmental sequence for care reasoning (Skoe 1998; Pratt et al. 2004 Juujärvi 2006)
- Care reasoning is especially used in solving moral conflicts concerning needs of others (Jaffee & Hyde 2000)
- Nurses use both care and justice reasoning in ethical decision-making (Sherblom et al. 1993; Gremmen 1999)
- Even though the ethic of care has widely been argued to be crucial for nursing, the related empirical research remains sparse (Numminen & Leino-Kilpi 2007)

Levels of care reasoning

3. Caring for self and others

2.5. Transition to truth and honesty
about relationships: selfishness reappears

2. Caring for others

1.5 Transition towards responsibility:
Selflessness appears

1. Caring for self

:

Aim & Research Questions

The aim was to describe novice students' care-based moral reasoning with the questions as follows

- What is students' ethical reasoning like at each ECI level in the beginning of their education?
- What ethical principles are expressed at each ECI level?
- How do nursing and social services students differ from each other in terms of ethical reasoning?

Participants

- 112 first-year students from a university of applied sciences in southern Finland.
- 99 (88 %) were women and 13 (12 %) men.
- Mean age was 27.8 years (SD= 9.7)
- The students' forthcoming professions were nurses (n= 46, 41%) and social counsellors = bachelor-degree social workers (n= 66, 59%)
- A convenience sample of students representing care-oriented fields was recruited from the initial sample of the research project on moral development during education
- Students were recruited through classes and all volunteers were interviewed

The Ethic of Care Interview (ECI)

- A self-generated real life moral conflict
- Three standard dilemmas concerning
 - unplanned pregnancy
 - marital fidelity
 - care for a parent
- Each dilemma is scored according to care levels, yielding total score ranging from 4-12 and overall level score (used in this study)
- Inter-rater agreement between three scorers varied from 79 % to 94 %, Cohen kappas were 0.88, 0.86 and 0.73

Laura

Laura is twenty-year-old woman who suffers from bouts of depression. She is unemployed, lives by herself and is dependent on social security. Her family and friends have recently found her increasingly difficult to cope with, and now they have little contact with her.

Some months ago Laura had a brief relationship with a married man, and now she finds herself pregnant. Now her pregnancy has lasted nine weeks and she wonders what she should do with the pregnancy (Note: the abortion is legal in Finland up to 12 weeks). Laura has talked to her mother who thinks that the pregnancy should be terminated. Laura dreams about a little baby of her own, but is still unsure what she should decide.

Now Laura seeks advice from you about what she should do with her pregnancy.

Adapted from and Nolan & Smith (1994) and Ajanko & Leino-Kilpi (2005)

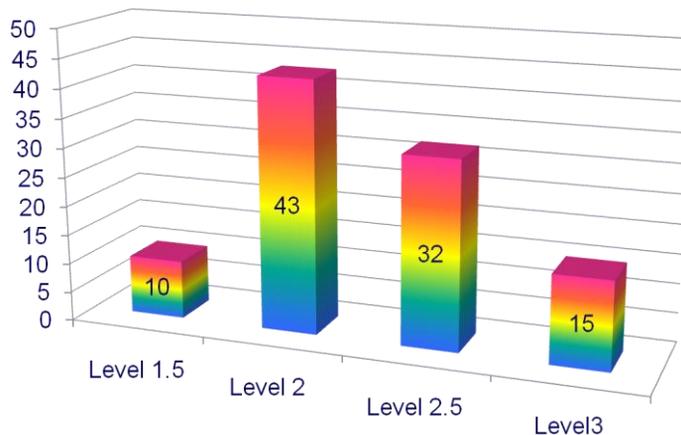
Interview questions

- 1) How would you advise Laura as a nurse or social counselor. Why?
- 2) Do you know any ethical codes or principles that one or you could use when thinking about what one should do in the situation?

Content analysis of ethical reasoning

- Data was arranged according to the participants' ECI level and study program
- Responses to Laura were analyzed using inductive qualitative content analysis
- Analysis yielded 36 meaningful themes that formed a basis for descriptions of ethical reasoning according to the ECI levels

Participants across ECI levels in percentages



Ethical reasoning at Level 1.5 (10%)

Main concern: Laura's survival in the situation

Goal: Laura's happiness and wellbeing

Focus in helping :

- 1) Sorting out the best alternative for Laura
- 2) Giving alternatives and information on services available

Social networks: Other persons are rarely mentioned

Ethical principles: only two respondents (18 %) spelled out a principle

Level 2 (43%)

Main concern: Laura's responsibility as a mother

“Is it a only a dream?”

“ Having a child is not having a family”

“ It not right to spoil the married man's life”

Goal: Wellbeing of the child

– critical factors are recognized and assessed

Focus in helping:

- 1) Giving useful information
- 2) Providing various forms of support in a long run

Level 2 (continued)

Social networks:

Support from individuals involved is evaluated

Ethical principles:

One principle on average was mentioned

- respecting the client's decision (29 %)
- impartiality (13 %)
- respecting human dignity (10 %)

Level 2.5 (32%)

Main concern: Laura's responsibility for her child's and own life

Goal: The quality of the relationships

Focus in helping:

- 1) Exploring situation in a realistic way
 - Laura's coping with daily and caring practices
 - Laura's mental capacities
 - Laura's motivation: it is not right to use the child as means
- 2) Promoting Laura's personal growth and conscious decision-making

Level 2.5 (continued)

Social networks: Social network is seen as a resourceful system that first must be constructed or repaired

Ethical principles:

1.5 principles on average were mentioned

- respecting the client's decision (40%),
- impartiality (22%)
- respecting human dignity (17 %)

Level 3 (15%)

Main concern: Laura's autonomous decision-making in the presence of the truth about relationships

Goal: Balancing Laura's and the child's needs in a long-term perspective

Focus in helping:

- 1) Exploring persons' actual needs and intentions.
- 2) Empowering Laura as a morally responsible person, mother and citizen

Level 3 (continued)

Social networks: The perspective of the child's father is taken into account and professional collaboration is utilized

Ethical principles:

2 principles on average were mentioned

- Respecting the client's self-determination (41%)
- impartiality (29%),
- respecting the client's decision (24%),
- respecting the child's rights (24%)
- and respecting human dignity (18%)

Self-determination

Usage of self-determination was positively related to levels of care reasoning

Understanding self-determination constitutes a developmental continuum

- Level 1.5 "Do not interfere with clients' businesses"
- Level 2 "Do not interfere with the client's decision-making"
- Level 2.5 "Respect the client's decision-making"
- Level 2 "Respect the client's self-determination"

Findings & Conclusions

- Students' current level of care reasoning was clearly reflected in students responses on the ethical dilemma forming a distinct entity at each level
 - There were no remarkable differences between nursing and social services students
- > Care reasoning constitutes conceptual bedrock for ethical reasoning and practice at the commencement of students' training

- Ethical principles were generally few
 - The usage of the principle of self-determination was however positively related to levels of care development
- > Even though care reasoning represents a particularistic mode of moral reasoning, employing the principle of self-determination is characteristic for mature care reasoning

- Educators should be sensitive to the variance of the students' developmental levels in care reasoning and adjust teaching to them
- Further research is needed to find out
 - the effects of education on care development
 - the role of care reasoning in professionals' and experts' ethical decision-making and practice

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