Conceptual Critique

# Ethics in an individualized field of practice – Social pedagogy in the context of the neoliberal organization

Bill Cleary

University College Copenhagen, Denmark; BCL@kp.dk

**Peer review:**

**Copyright:**

**Open access:**

## Abstract

Writing from a Danish social pedagogical perspective, the author raises concerns about the difficulty of developing and integrating ethical reflection within the organization in the context of neoliberalism. While ethical reflection in social pedagogy tends to focus on the relationship between practitioner and client, or the relationship between the profession and the general public, this article wishes to focus on how ethical reflection develops in the workplace on an everyday basis. The reason for this focus is that the culture and language of the workplace can have major consequences for how practitioners interpret their roles and how they interpret the official ethical code. Although this article addresses the problem from a Danish context, the author argues that the struggle to develop ethical reflection within the organization is a general concern in most professions in contemporary society. What makes this problem controversial within the Danish social pedagogical context is that the profession has a long tradition of working qualitatively with relationship-based-practices. In the neoliberal organization, mercantile logic undermines the ethical logic of relationship-based practices. This is due to the former's emphasis on effectivity and the latter's emphasis on responsibility. This article is a critique of what the author sees as the neoliberal organization's inability to tackle this conflict of values. Furthermore, this article problematizes the 'abstract individuality' that neoliberal organizations produce, highlighting the fact that such individuality is inconsistent with responsibility. Finally, the author argues that, by reinterpreting the concept of reflective practice, the organization may develop a more concrete individuality that is more consistent with responsibility.

**Keywords:** ethical reflection; social pedagogy; individualization; reflective practice; neoliberalism; responsibility; generosity

## Ethical reflection within the organization

The following paragraph strives to explicate professional ethics within the social pedagogical organization. It also seeks to look at the values that professional ethics in social pedagogy must draw on to gain legitimacy in praxis. Ethical theory may seem to contemporary social professionals like an idealistic abstraction, due to their promotion of agency and effectiveness. It is arguably the case that neoliberal workplace cultures favour concrete, effective actions as opposed to too much procrastination. The very concept of 'reflection' can provoke professionals into a defensive position, where they claim that they do not have time to reflect and that reflection is a luxury (Boud et al., 2005). However, it is important to argue that 'reflection' or 'ethical reflection' is part of any guided action. Reflection is not contrary to action in a professional context; it qualifies action. Without reflection, action becomes impulsive and haphazard. The fundamental status of ethics for human praxis becomes clear when ethics are absent – i.e. in cases of crime, warfare, oppression or professional negligence.

The following will distinguish between 'professional ethics' and 'everyday ethics'. This distinction is analytic. The two types of ethical reflection overlap in the everyday running of the organization, and are conceptually interdependent in social pedagogical praxis. When separated from each other, both types of reflection lose legitimacy within the organization. There is a third type of ethical reflection, which I refer to as 'philosophical ethics'. Although this type is not the primary focus of this article, it is important to look at philosophical ethics as it informs the two other types of ethical reflection.

Philosophical ethics is an academic discipline of systematic and rigorous reflection. Whereas everyday ethics and professional ethics evolve in specific practices with a view to decision-making and action, philosophical ethics evolves in a meta-reflective context with a view to establishing theoretical arguments. Philosophical ethics dates back more than two thousand years, to the philosophers of antiquity. As a rigorous, reflective discipline, it concerns itself with interpreting fundamental concepts such as 'goodness', 'justice', 'love' and 'happiness' (Aristotle, 2004). Furthermore, it concerns itself with how these concepts are interrelated. Although this discipline is meta-reflective, it is not merely about procrastination. On a societal level, philosophical ethics delivers interpretations of fundamental concepts that play a role in informing and assessing actions, persons, characteristics and institutions (Andersen, 2003). Historically, the various schools of philosophical ethics have strived to interpret 'goodness', each drawing their own conclusion (Husted, 2014). Although there is little consensus between the various schools concerning the interpretation of 'goodness', there is overall consensus that the concept of 'goodness' is fundamental to other ethical concepts, i.e. 'solidarity', 'dignity', 'justice', 'recognition' and 'responsibility'. The legitimacy of philosophical ethics may be questionable in contemporary society with its interest in evidence and evidence-based practices. Although evidence may contribute to establishing or pointing in the direction of what is 'good' or 'beneficial' in a specific context, philosophical ethics can say *why* specific practices are 'good'. It is this interpretive 'why' that informs other types of reflection in society. The 'why?' is radically different from the 'how?'. The first requires interpretive practice while the second requires a technical or methodological response (Christoffersen, 2013; Ricoeur, 1976). Although social pedagogical or social worker practitioners do not necessarily have competency in philosophical ethics, I would argue that the very nature of the work, i.e. working with relationships, communities and social problems, requires systematic interpretive practices concerning fundamental concepts such as 'goodness', 'justice', 'dignity' and 'responsibility' (Banks, 2012; Christoffersen, 2013). The question is, to what extent are such interpretive practices possible in neoliberal cultures where the primary focus is commodification and marketization?

Professionals are also dependent on what I refer to as 'everyday ethics'. Everyday ethics is an ongoing and mostly subconscious process. Whenever the professional evaluates an experience, questions the meaning of a particular action, habit or custom, everyday ethical reflection takes place. This type of reflection is necessary when practitioners strive to make sense of ambiguity in everyday professional practices (Nyhan, 2006; Bjerlöv and Docherty, 2006). This type of reflection goes mostly unseen but has important value for the organization in that it deals with the fundamental conflicts, challenges, ambiguities and dilemmas within the organization. The challenge is to incorporate the individual practitioner's everyday ethical reflection into collective reflection, so that reflection represents the organization as a

whole (Bjerlöv and Docherty, 2006). However, there is also a risk in doing so. However unintentionally, collective reflection can become a means for management surveillance and control (Schenkel, 2006). It can also unintentionally lead to notions of correct/incorrect types of reflection, which can undermine the authenticity of an individual practitioner's reflections. Everyday ethical reflection is informal and does not require systematic argumentation. When a practitioner's actions seem unusual and others raise questions, then some degree of argumentation is required of the practitioner. Such argumentation must legitimize the nature of the actions under surveillance.

This process of legitimization often leads to systematic ethical reflection (Taylor, 1989). Legitimization of action in social pedagogy is necessary due to the profession's responsibility towards the citizens that rely on the services. A reflective culture within the organization that cultivates such argumentation is vital for effective judgements and decision-making (Taylor, 2013; Featherstone et al., 2014). However, a reflective culture within the organization can never be exclusively professional in the formal sense as it also involves practitioners as whole people, i.e. with emotions, values, temperaments, idiosyncrasies, interests, habits and political persuasions. Furthermore, reflective cultures within the organization are dependent on informal relationships that are geared toward dealing with the everyday practicalities of the job. Wenger (1998) refers to these informal relationships as 'communities of practice', arguing that they play an important role in forming worker identity. It must be argued that the development of everyday ethical reflection within 'communities of practice' is fundamental to the culture of the organization in that it identifies certain actions and habits as legitimate and others not. Wenger (1998) refers to this as the 'social negotiation of meaning', arguing that such informal negotiation can sustain or undermine the more formalized structures of the workplace. Although informal negotiation can affect the formal structures of the workplace, there is often, as Nyhan (2006) points out, a gap between them. In other words, there is a gap between the organization's formal code of ethics and the informal ethical reflection generated by the 'social negotiation of meaning' within communities of practice. The problem with this gap is that the organization's external identity (in the outer world) does not match its internal identity (within the workplace). Ideally, in social pedagogy and other social professions that work with relationship-based practices, the formal and informal aspects of ethical reflection should be connected. Failure to do this may leave practitioners making promises to their clients that they cannot fulfill. To keep one's word as a professional, to 'walk the talk', requires continual integration of informal and formal aspects of ethical reflection within the organization. This also ensures that individual reflection contributes to collective reflection. Management can organize and facilitate such collective reflection with a view to ensuring the complete picture (Reynolds and Vince, 2016). Such a venture would require a shared normative life within the organization across all levels of management and including practitioners on the ground. However, marketization, commodification and bureaucratization of services tend to stratify the organization into different normative cultures, i.e. at various levels of management and various types of practitioners. This can undermine any potential for a 'shared venture' based on a 'shared vocabulary' (Wenger, 1998).

To make any kind of sense, professional ethics must draw on everyday ethics and philosophical ethics. It must draw on the common sense and evaluative aspects of everyday life, and it must draw on the concepts of philosophical ethics. The fundamental concept in professional ethics in social pedagogy, I would argue, is 'responsibility', i.e. responsibility to the citizen using the services. As a fundamental concept, 'responsibility' ensures intrinsic coherence with all the other ethical concepts in social pedagogy. I understand 'responsibility' as a matter of concrete responsiveness in face-to-face encounters with the other(s). To take responsibility for a person is to respect that person's 'otherness' without reducing the person to an idea, category or type. This is the opposite to '-isms', such as Communism, Marxism, Capitalism and so on, which tend to reduce concrete persons to types or concepts. My understanding of responsibility as responsiveness to the concrete other is influenced by Levinas's ethics (Levinas, 1969). In a social professional context, 'responsibility' entails that the practitioner is responsive to the needs of the service user as a unique individual; even the word 'service user' challenges such an ethical approach as it reduces the other to a type. The practitioner must see beyond the categorization innate in professional environments by being sensitive to the voice or 'call' of the service user as a unique person

(Banks, 2012). 'Responsibility' as responsiveness requires more from a practitioner than theoretical knowledge; it requires observational, interpretational and reflective skills that enable context-sensitive action. Such context-sensitive action is intersubjective in that it involves relationships between the practitioner and the service user. However, on a legal and administrative level, 'responsibility' is not intersubjective, but must be impartial. Here service users are citizens with equal rights and should not be treated unequally. On a legal and administrative level, the practitioner is 'accountable' for the service user. It is arguable that 'accountability' would not make sense in practice without 'responsibility'. However, in some cases the two poles present a dilemma for the practitioner: should the practitioner act impartially toward the service user or should the practitioner be responsive to the uniqueness of the other? Working with social justice at any level of society arguably requires an ability to deal with this dilemma. Ideally, the professional code of ethics in social pedagogy and other social professions should articulate this dilemma, offering guidelines to practitioners on how to find a balance between impartiality and responsiveness. Such guidelines would be very difficult to formulate. However, the need for such guidelines highlights the importance of reflective practices in the social professions.

The professional code of ethics for Danish social pedagogues (*Socialpædagogerne*) highlights the following five values:

- personal emancipation (of the service user)
- social justice
- compassion
- cultural freedom (of the service user)
- professional integrity. (Etisk Værdigrundlag for Socialpædagogerne, 2017; my translation; my additions in brackets)

It is interesting to note that 'responsibility' is not among the five values. The code does refer to responsibility in its paragraphs on 'Standards for Practice' (*Praksis Standarder*). Here the code stipulates that practitioners should 'take responsibility' in adhering to the five values in practice. In other words, 'responsibility' is first a matter of loyalty toward the professional code and second a matter of acting appropriately toward the service user. The profession comes first, the service user second. Furthermore, the code stipulates that the practitioner must 'take responsibility' (*tag ansvar*) when applying the five ethical principles, and not that the practitioner 'is responsible' or 'has responsibility' (Etisk Værdigrundlag for Socialpædagogerne, 2017). To 'take responsibility' implies a degree of professional autonomy. It also suggests that the practitioner is competent. The level of competency often differs from practitioner to practitioner. This lack of clarity arguably leads to a number of problems. First, in a neoliberal society, with its emphasis on cost-reduction and profit, the act of 'taking responsibility' becomes a highly individualized matter. Such individualization moves 'responsibility' from the collective, organizational level to an individual practitioner level. Second, in such circumstances how should the individual practitioner deal with the dilemmas between impartiality and partiality, accountability and responsiveness? To what extent should the practitioner respond to the needs of the service user as a unique other? To what extent should the practitioner be loyal and adhere to the needs of the organization? What is initially referred to as practitioner autonomy, i.e., the space to make judgements and decisions, quickly becomes a matter of conflictual and contending loyalties.

Lipsky (2010) has contended that such dilemmas are typical of the social professions because their practitioners work face to face with the general public. Lipsky (2010) referred to such practitioners as 'street-level bureaucrats'. Furthermore, Lipsky (2010) argued that the individualization of professional agency is problematic in that practitioners tend to put the needs of the organization before the needs of the service user. Surely the aim of the professional code of ethics for social pedagogy is to generate a coherent and reflective culture, one that is responsible and that supports practitioners in decision-making. This point is important in times where the political system calls for social professional practices to be based in evidence. Cultivating a reflective culture is not a question of being for or against evidence-based practices, but a question of combining evidence and reflective judgements to make the best possible decisions (Taylor, 2013). The challenge is to formulate a professional ethical code that draws on all three strands of ethical reflection, i.e., everyday ethics, professional ethics and philosophical ethics.

Ethical reflection in the workplace is not simply a question of adhering to a list of moral principles but requires continual interpretation on all levels of the organization (Nyhan, 2006). The professional ethical code must not become isolated from everyday actions and reflections. Otherwise, it arguably runs the risk of unintentionally becoming a tool of discipline as opposed to a medium for learning and reflection (Schenkel, 2006; Foucault, 1995; Elmholdt and Brinkmann, 2006). When the professional ethical code fails to connect with everyday ethics and philosophical ethics, the reflective spaces begin to disappear. It may seem odd to suggest that professional ethical reflection should draw on philosophical ethics. However, this simply means that the concepts of philosophical ethics, i.e. 'goodness', 'happiness', 'flourishing', 'solidarity', 'justice', 'social justice' etc., are fundamental to professional ethical reflection and should therefore be actively incorporated, questioned and reflected upon in everyday practices. Reflecting on the link between 'responsibility' and 'the good' may seem like an idealistic pursuit. However, not to do so can lead to confusion concerning values in practice. Social pedagogy and other social professions find themselves increasingly bureaucratized and services commodified producing work cultures that focus exclusively on cost reduction. From a cost-reduction perspective, 'responsibility' risks becoming a romantic ideal, or even a waste of time. In an 'age of Neoliberalism' (Saad Filho and Johnston, 2005) it is arguable that genuine social pedagogical practices require values that resist a profit/loss rationale.

**Individualization of practice and the neoliberal paradigm**

If reflection is to engage in real questions, challenges and dilemmas with a view to learning, then reflection has to be collective and has to evolve in everyday practices. In other words, reflection must be an integrated part of 'praxis'. By 'praxis' I mean the long-term cultivation of skills, values and goods within a specific community and with a view to specific ends (Aristotle, 2004; Macintyre, 2003; Banks, 2012). However, as I will argue in the following, the individualization of work procedures undermines collective reflection. The challenge that individualization poses cannot be resolved within the workplace as it occurs on a macro-societal level. Individualization is a characteristic of the time we live in: Late Modernity (Beck, 2002; Giddens, 1991). Although the workplace cannot resolve individualization, it can introduce measures to create collective reflective spaces. Before returning to this point, it is important to look at the causes of individualization, namely the culture of neoliberalism.

It would be helpful to begin with a clear definition of neoliberalism, outlining its motivations and its limits as a political ideology. However, neoliberalism is not a clearly defined position within political or economic theory but more a term of condemnation used mostly to express disdain at the actions of others (Harwich, 2009). Not many people are self-affirming neoliberals; it is not an identity one cultivates with pride. On the other hand, neoliberalism has roots in liberalism, so understanding liberalism is a good place to start (Fogh Rasmussen, 1993; Harvey, 2005; Saad Filho and Johnston, 2005; Thorsen, 2012). Ryan (1993) argued that liberalism is characterized by three 'prescriptions' and three 'antipathies'. The three prescriptions are that (1) the individual should have freedom to choose in life-defining situations; (2) civic life should be subject to democratic law and governance; and (3) state power should be kept within constitutional limits. The three antipathies aim at avoiding (1) political absolutism; (2) theocracy; and (3) unrestricted capitalism. Thorsen (2012) suggests that the main distinction between the liberal and the neoliberal lies within the third antipathy – 'unrestricted capitalism'. For the liberal 'unrestricted capitalism' is subject to antipathy, while for the neoliberal it is a prescription. In other words, for the neoliberal, mercantile freedom has priority. When mercantile freedom becomes the ambition of an organization, it undermines the very grounds for 'praxis', i.e., the long-term cultivation of skills and values. The organization becomes subject to top-down control by means of commodification, bureaucratization and managerialism (Banks, 2012). From this perspective, control and discipline of the practitioner's mindset can become more important than authentic reflection.

German sociologist Andreas Reckwitz (2017) has written that contemporary western societies discipline their members to be creative. Reckwitz draws on Foucault's theory of governance by conceptualizing creativity as a *dismotif*. "Dismotif" is a concept used by Foucault to refer to the fact that social practices are highly disciplined, i.e. governed, by latent habitual ideals in a society. For a dismotif to be addressed – e.g. that citizens are obligated to be creative – it must first become articulated. Having

articulated a dismotif it is then possible to work toward resisting it. In other words, creativity has become an organizing principle in western societies. Members of society cannot say no to creativity without there being consequences, i.e., a loss of social, cultural and economic capital. Reckwitz has written that creativity in society has become a norm and that it is generally expected of individuals that they are able to think up new and novel ways of living and working. In this context, novelty becomes more highly valued than reliability. The aesthetic formation of individuals becomes more important than their ethical formation (Reckwitz, 2017). While this dismotif applies to most people at all levels of society, it applies particularly to the workforce. The 'creative imperative', as Reckwitz calls it, is difficult to see because most people in contemporary western societies have a subjective wish to be creative and lead creative lives. Reckwitz (2017, p. 2) has written:

> In late modern times, creativity embraces a duality of the wish to be creative and the *imperative* to be creative, subjective desire and social expectations. We *want* to be creative and we *ought* to be creative.

This duality goes to the heart of social pedagogical practices, as creativity has a fundamental place in these practices. Social pedagogy has traditionally seen creativity as one of its most important tools in establishing relationship-based practices and community-based practices. The 'common third' refers to the didactical use of an activity, where both practitioner and service user participate on an equal footing, thereby levelling the playing field and democratizing power relations (Husen, 1996; Hatton, 2013). The service user can be equally or more highly skilled at the activity at hand than the practitioner, e.g. playing a musical instrument. However, the duality presented by the 'creative imperative' can lead to two problems, as I see them. First, creativity can lead to greater individualization as it becomes a performative demand. Second, the expectation that one ought to be creative can lead to an anti-creative impulse as a form of resistance on the part of service users and practitioners alike. What complicates the picture even further, as Reckwitz has written, is that late modern society taps into the ethos of romanticism and its premise that creativity is linked to authenticity. In other words, to be an authentic person, one must be creative. However, the eighteenth-century flourishing of romanticism in western societies was arguably an attempt to resist what was then seen as all too narrow a concept of rationality, and to liberate individuals to lead more independent and authentic lives – 'authentic' here referring to a type of life in which individuals were true to their own inner voices. However, the original premise – that creativity leads to emancipation – has in late modern society now become a demand, or a dismotif, the premise now being: be creative so that you avoid social exclusion!

However, I would argue that creativity is not the only value that has become a dismotif within the neoliberal paradigm. I would argue that neoliberalism has successfully converted the value of 'individual autonomy' into a prerequisite for social inclusion. Individual autonomy is possibly the most central value in the modernity tradition (cooperative during roughly the 1750s to the 1960s). In fact, it is difficult to understand contemporary western culture without grasping this value. It has roots in a number of traditions preceding modernity, such as humanism, enlightenment, philanthropy and cosmopolitanism (Korsgaard, 2004). Individual autonomy is intrinsically linked to other important modern values such as self-expression, human dignity and individual judgement (Taylor, 1989). The problem in contemporary society is arguably that neoliberalism promotes the values of creativity and individual autonomy within a profit/loss rationale. In other words, the value is removed from its humanist tradition and becomes a question of utility (Zamora and Behrent, 2016). Individual autonomy translates into the neoliberal culture as self-management, self-organization and self-observation, all of which are a 'labor of subjectivity', with the view to optimizing utility (Rossi, 2016).

To grasp what is lost when subjectivity becomes a question of utility, it is important to have a historical awareness. The Enlightenment tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has been fundamental for our modern understanding of individuality – particularly the idea that the individual can learn and overcome psychological, social and cultural limits. The Enlightenment tradition construed the individual as a multifaceted being and as such a being that required a holistic pedagogy, i.e., a pedagogy that cultivated the spiritual, emotional, intellectual, social, physical and cultural dimensions of the individual (Kemp, 2013; Korsgaard, 2004). This pedagogical holism strived to develop all aspects of the

individual, i.e., as opposed to focusing narrowly on intellectual skills. The ideal was twofold: to develop individuals who could act and think autonomously (i.e. who were self-governing), and who also could act and think patriotically (i.e. who were governed by culture). The German concept of 'Bildung' was central to this twofold pedagogical challenge. Bildung, which I have discussed elsewhere, translates into a broad and holistic concept of education (Cleary, 2019). Bildung in the Enlightenment period should ideally cultivate autonomy and patriotism in the individual. Enlightenment intellectuals highlighted the importance of the cultural and social formation of the concrete individual, i.e., the formation of the pupil as a practical being who was capable of making ethical judgements based on experience. Intellectuals like Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1712–1778), Johann Bernhard Basedow (1724–1790) and Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) advocated for a holistic pedagogy that cultivated the senses as a basis for cultivating individual judgement (Kant, 2000; Rousseau, 1997). The vision was to prepare the individual for judgement and reflection in everyday life. Kant called this ideal 'practical reasoning' (Kant, 2002). Hegel was later to characterize this vision with the term '*sittlichkeit*', which translates to a practical ethics of everyday life (Taylor, 1979; Hegel, 2005). The Enlightenment delivered the idea of the individual as a practical, reflective being capable of making judgements based on lived experience. This idea is fundamental to social pedagogy and other social professions today. However, I would argue that neoliberalism, while promoting the idea of the individual on a symbolic level – that is, the individual as self-manager within the market context – does not promote this idea on a practical level, i.e., the individual as a normative being who reflects on the basis of lived experience.

Ignoring the idea of the practical individual has serious consequences for social pedagogy. It removes the normative basis for living together in communities. It also removes the normative basis for relationship-based practices. Furthermore, it removes the normative basis for social justice. This is not merely a challenge for the social professions; it is, as Baumann (2007) has written, a global human crisis. Furthermore, Baumann (2007) has written that removing the normative basis for coexistence leads to uncertainty, deprivation and isolation. The idea of the individual becomes diffuse, abstract and ambivalent within the neoliberal paradigm.

The Danish educational researcher Fibæk Laursen (2003) has written that to adapt to the highly individualized working culture of contemporary organizations, employees must position themselves as 'personalities'. This entails that one should be visible and have a certain amount of personal aura. This has implications for what it means to be 'professional'. Professionalism is no longer limited to the mere application of knowledge; it requires charisma. Organizations put greater and greater emphasis on the social skills, emotional intelligence, and flexibility of employees, i.e., the personality (Fibæk Laursen, 2003). However, it is arguable that within a neoliberal context social skills are not enough when it comes to working in the social professions. The 'personality' of a practitioner, however charming and novel, does not ensure ethical reflection and action; charisma cannot deliver social justice. The emphasis on personal aura arguably covers over the void of what is absent; it covers over the absence of individuals as practical reflective beings. Far from being autonomous in their judgements, practitioners must continually perform as personalities with the 'right attitudes' and 'right intentions'. They must demonstrate loyalty to the organization (Fibæk Laursen, 2003; Åkerstrøm-Andersen, 2003). To some extent they must demonstrate devotion to their job and their workplace (Åkerstrøm-Andersen, 2003). To advance within the hierarchies of such an organization the language of passion and devotion is becoming a necessity. This is clearly evident on social media, where professionals speak, apparently of their own free will, of devotion, passion and love for their jobs. Giddens (Giddens, 1991) refers to such practices as self-practices. Self-practices are not necessarily a question of narcissism, but are embedded in the social structures of society. In other words, they are unavoidable. The practitioner is governed by social structures to produce and sustain a form of abstract individuality – an individuality that privatizes or 'sequesters' (Giddens, 1991, p. 201) whatever doesn't fit into the workplace narrative. Arguably, what is needed for ethical reflection within the organization is the opposite; what is needed is the cultivation of a more concrete and practical individuality. It may seem like a paradox, but such practical individuality is arguably an important ingredient for 'collective reflection'. By practical individuality I am referring to a first-person perspective that deliberates on real problems, dilemmas and challenges that are embedded in everyday practices. I see this as a stark

contrast to abstract individuality, i.e., personality, which is a symbolic construction of the self. Such a first-person perspective of the practical individual requires reflective spaces in order to flourish within the organization.

**Developing reflective spaces**

Ideally, reflection in social pedagogy should accommodate all three types of ethical reflection discussed earlier, i.e., philosophical ethics, everyday ethics and professional ethics. Social pedagogical practices are geared to working with social justice and therefore require that practitioners draw on reflections concerning the nature of goodness, meaning and responsibility. The question is what type of reflective practice is conducive to such reflection and how is it possible to develop a reflective space?

Awareness of the importance of reflective practices in connection with professional learning began to grow dramatically from the 1980s onwards. Donald Schön's *The Reflective Practitioner*, published in 1983, marked the beginning of what has since been referred to in organizational research as the 'reflective turn' (Boud et al., 2005). Schön (1991) made a clear distinction between 'reflection in practice' and 'academic reflection', construing the first as context-sensitive reflection and the second as standardized, rigorous reflection. He maintained that the lack of understanding concerning 'reflection in practice' led to a crisis in the professions. The rigor and standardization of academic reflection is not enough when getting to grips with the complexities of concrete practice. For Schön (1991), 'reflection in practice' refers to the individual practitioner's dialogue with specific and unique practical contexts. Such dialogues between practitioner and context entail continual (re)framing of the problems, challenges or dilemmas at hand. As Schön argued, because each practical situation is unique, each situation requires its own set of interpretations. This goes against standardization. Schön (1991) also made a clear distinction between 'reflection in practice' and 'reflection on practice'. 'Reflection in practice' refers to the practitioner's immediate reflections while engaged in the situation. 'Reflection in practice' is the opposite of procrastination and requires experience. Such experience-based knowing is not reducible to theory; it is essentially beyond theory. Meanwhile, the second concept, 'reflection on practice', refers to reflections that take place before and after practice, i.e., planning, evaluating, organizing, conceptual understanding and so on. 'Reflection on practice' can entail drawing on academic theory, i.e., rigor and standardization. However, Schön's (1991) focus was on 'reflection in practice'. He argued that 'reflection in practice' is akin to artistry in that it requires intuition, sensitivity, creativity and a sense of judgement. By referring to reflection as 'artistry', Schön also pointed out that there is no fixed formula or method for reflective practices. Any such formula or method would miss the point that reflection in practice entails the practitioner's dialogue with a unique context. Schön's work had a major impact on social pedagogy and other social professions as it legitimized practice on that practice's own grounds.

Although Schön has had a major impact on the social professions, his work has been criticized for individualizing reflective practices (Boud et al., 2005). Drawing on social learning theory, a number of researchers have argued that professional reflection takes place in 'communities of practice' (Wenger, 1998) and on this basis have argued that reflection in the workplace should be construed as 'collective reflection' (Boud et al., 2005; Nyhan, 2006; Reynolds and Vince, 2016; Wackerhausen, 2008). When 'collective reflection' is advocated, the focus moves from the individual practitioner's ways of processing experience to the ways in which practitioners deliberate and negotiate meaning collectively. In other words, the focus is social as opposed to individual. Researchers who advocate for 'collective reflection' emphasize the point that 'meaning' is socially constructed and above all socially negotiated (Boud et al., 2005; Reynolds and Vince, 2016). Negotiating meaning is seen as a pivotal activity, one that requires a common vocabulary, a sense of a common enterprise and mutual engagement (Wenger, 1998). Researchers who advocate for 'collective reflection' emphasize that 'meaning' in everyday practices is not reducible to a set of rules and regulations or a code of ethics (Boud et al., 2005; Nyhan, 2006). Professionals negotiate 'meaning' on an interpersonal level. It is argued that if the organization is to optimize its potential for reflection, then it must create legitimate reflective spaces on all levels, from the floor to management to directors (Boud et al., 2005; Reynolds and Vince, 2016).

While the shift in focus from the individual to the collective in reflective practice research has generated important insights, it arguably runs the risk of forgetting the importance of the individual, i.e., the first-person perspective of the practical individual. Social professionals who work directly with the general public are individually accountable for their practices. Front-line staff in particular, the so-called 'street level bureaucrats' (Lipsky, 2010), are individually accountable for actions or lack of action. This argument is especially relevant for social pedagogy as the practitioner is not merely accountable but also responsible as discussed earlier. So, arguably, the turn towards 'collective reflection' does not legitimize a complete negation of Schön's individual 'reflective practitioner'. The solution must be a compromise between the two positions. Certainly, in situations that demand reflection on professional responsibility and accountability, the individual practitioner operating from a practical first-person perspective is necessary. To remove this practical first-person perspective from the larger social framework is, as Arendt (2017) has pointed out in her critique of the Nazi regime, a move toward totalitarianism. Further, when arguing for the link between reflection and judgement, Arendt (2005) highlighted the importance of the first-person perspective: namely, that when it comes to processing experience, acting and articulating responsibility, the individual is necessary. To remove this first-person perspective can result in individual practitioners avoiding reflection altogether. This may particularly be the case within the neoliberal organization, where the focus is on cost reduction and effectiveness. To work effectively in this context can mean to work without reflection, as reflection requires time and energy. In his study of Child Protection in the UK, Ferguson (2018) revealed situations in which it makes more sense not to reflect. The reason for avoiding reflection, Ferguson argued, is that certain situations can be so emotionally demanding that practitioners must protect themselves first and foremost. This is clearly a problem as it causes the first-person perspective of the practitioner to become lost, making it difficult to negotiate meaning and process understandings of responsibility. Again, individual reflection is a necessary part of 'collective reflection' in social pedagogy and other social professions.

Within the context of neoliberalism, reflective practices in social pedagogy must seek to integrate the three forms of ethical reflection: philosophical ethics, professional ethics and everyday ethics. This requires that practitioners work with hermeneutic processes – the type of processes that make it possible to question, articulate and re-articulate experience (Gadamer, 2004; Ricoeur, 1976; van Manen, 1997). Genuine reflective spaces can be developed when practitioners let go of the idea that they know in advance. Whereas evidence-based practices in many social professions build on an ideal of certainty, i.e., using delivery methods based on objective and irrefutable knowledge, reflection in social pedagogy must also accept a degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty is inherent in the human aspect of relationship-based practices. Humans are changeable and unpredictable beings. Such uncertainty requires interpretive practices that are driven by the practitioner's desire to understand (Gadamer, 2004). The rationale that drives the desire to understand is not commensurable with the mercantile rationale of cost reduction. Creating a reflective space in the workplace is more akin to an act of generosity. This is not to say that practitioners must give something away. Generosity in this sense is not associated with financial loss; no donations are necessary. Instead, generosity entails the giving or bringing of open curiosity into reflective spaces (Diprose, 2003). Reflective spaces do not exist of their own accord; they are developed by the type of generosity that cultivates open curiosity concerning concepts, responsibilities and meaning in everyday practices. It is precisely this act of generosity – of enquiring and listening, of genuine interest – that makes space for the first-person perspective of the other to have a voice. The sceptic will argue that this is not realistic in the larger organization where the demand for effectiveness is so powerful that such reflective spaces will never be legitimate. However, Pullen and Rhodes (2013) argue for a type of reflective 'resistance' to mercantile standardization. Workers can openly question the stereotypes and taken-for-granted assumptions embodied in the workplace. Drawing on the work of Diprose (2003), Pullen and Rhodes (2013) argue that reflective spaces in the workplace may be developed with an ethos of 'corporeal generosity'. Surely such reflective 'resistance' has relevance for a contemporary social pedagogy?

## Conclusion

This article has highlighted the challenge in social pedagogy of developing reflective spaces in the context of neoliberalism. It has distinguished between three forms of ethical reflection: philosophical ethics, professional ethics and everyday ethics. The author has argued that the three types of ethical reflection must be linked so that they inform each other in everyday practices, and that the neoliberal organization, with its focus on mercantile rationality, undermines the type of rationality that constitutes ethical reflection. Furthermore, the author has problematized the type of abstract individuality that the neoliberal organization generates, arguing that such abstract individuality entails continual 'self-practices' and the cultivation of 'personality' and is therefore incommensurable with the act of responsiveness to the other. It is precisely this act of responsiveness that constitutes social pedagogy as a practice, it is argued. Being responsive requires concrete, practical individuality. To have any chance of flourishing, such practical individuality would require reflective spaces within the workplace that accommodate and give voice to first-person perspectives on practitioner experience. The author has argued that such a first-person perspective is rooted in practical dilemmas, challenges and problems that arise from everyday practice. However, to develop such reflective spaces requires a radical break with the neoliberal rationale, i.e., of profit/loss. Such reflective spaces require 'generosity' and the act of giving. What is given away does not cost in the financial sense, but is the gift of open curiosity which precedes open enquiry. Furthermore, the author has argued that because the human aspect is at the core of social pedagogy, the practitioner must continually deal with uncertainty. It is this uncertainty that demands interpretation. Such interpretive practices are hermeneutical as they seek to (re)articulate lived experience and are driven by the practitioner's desire to understand. To cultivate such interpretive practices, to develop such reflective spaces within a neoliberal culture, does not happen of its own accord; it requires a new way of doing things.

## Declarations and conflict of interests

The author declares no conflicts of interest with this work.

## References

Åkerstrøm-Andersen, N. (2003). Medarbejderen i kærlighedens tegn. In I. Weicher & P. Fibæk-Laursen (Eds.), *Person og profession – En udfordring for socialrådgivere, sygeplejersker, lærere og pædagoger* (pp. 38–44). København: Billesø & Baltzer.

Andersen, S. (2003). *Som dig selv: En indføring i etik*. Århus: Aarhus Universitetsforlag.

Arendt, H. (2005). *Responsibility and judgement*. New York: Schocken Books.

Arendt, H. (2017). *The origins of totalitarianism*. London: Penguin Classics.

Aristotle. (2004). *The Nicomachean ethics*. London: Penguin Classics.

Banks, S. (2012). *Ethics and values in social work* (4th ed.). New York: Palgrave.

Baumann, Z. (2007). *Liquid times: Living in an age of uncertainty*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Beck, U. (2002). *Risikosamfundet: På vej mod en ny modernitet*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Bjerlöv, M., & Docherty, P. (2006). Collective reflection under ambiguity. In D. Boud, P. Cressey & P. Docherty (Eds.), *Productive reflection at work: Learning for changing organizations*. Londing: Routledge.

Boud, D., Cressey, P., & Docherty, P. (2005). *Productive reflection at work*. London: Routledge.

Christoffersen, S. (2013). *Professionsetik: Om etiske perspektiver i arbejdet med mennesker*. Aarhus: Klim.

Cleary, B. (2019). Reinterpreting Bildung in social pedagogy. *International Journal of Social Pedagogy*, *8*(3), 1–12. [CrossRef]

Diprose, R. (2003). *Corporeal generosity*. New York: State University of New York Press.

Elmholdt, C., & Brinkmann, S. (2006). Discursive practices at work constituting the relfective learner. In D. Boud, P. Cressey & P. Docherty (Eds.), *Productive reflection at work: Learning for changing organizations*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Featherstone, B., White, S., & Morris, K. (2014). *Re-imagining child protection: Towards humane sociale work with families*. Bristol: Policy Press.

Ferguson, H. (2018). How social workers reflect in action and when and why they don't: The possiblities and limits to reflective practice in social work. *Social Work Education*, *37*(4), 415–527. [CrossRef]

Fibæk Laursen, P. (2003). Personlighed på dagsordenen. In I. Weicher & P. Fibæk Laursen (Eds.), *Person og profession: En udfordring for socialrådgivere, sygeplejersker, lærere og pædagoger* (pp. 13–37). København: Billesø & Baltzer.

Fogh Rasmussen, A. (1993). *Fra socialstat til minimalstat: En liberal strategi*. København: Samleren.

Foucault, M. (1995). *Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison*. New York: Vintage Books.

Gadamer, H. (2004). *Sandhed og metode: Grundtræk af en filosofisk hermeneutik*. Århus: Systime Academic.

Giddens, A. (1991). *Modernity and self-identity: Self and society in the late modern*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Harvey, D. (2005). *A brief history of neoliberalism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Harwich, O. (2009). *Neoliberalism: The genesis of a political swearword* (CIS Occasional Paper, no. 114). Sydney: The Center for Independent Studies.

Hatton, K. (2013). *Social pedagogy in the UK: Theory and practice*. Lyme Regis: Russell House Publishing.

Hegel, G. (2005). *Åndens fænomenologi*. København: Gyldendal.

Husen, M. (1996). Det fælles tredje. Retrieved February 17, 2020 from http://michaelhusen.dk/det-faelles-tredje/.

Husted, J. (2014). *Etiske teorier*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Kant, I. (2000). *Om pædagogik*. Aarhus: Klim.

Kant, I. (2002). *Critique of practical reason*. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing.

Kemp, P. (2013). *Verdensborgeren: Pædagogisk og politisk ideal for det 21. århudnrede*. København: Hans Reitzels Forlag.

Korsgaard, O. (2004). *Kampen om folket: Et dannelsesperspektiv på dansk historie gennem 500 år*. Copenhagen: Gyldendal.

Levinas, I. (1969). *Totality and infinity: An essay on exteriority*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

Lipsky, M. (2010). *Street-level bureaucracy: Dilemmas of the individual in public services*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation.

Macintyre, A. (2003). *After virtue* (2nd ed.). London: Duckworth.

Nyhan, B. (2006). Collective reflection for excellence in work organizations. An ethical 'community of practice' perspective on reflection. In D. Boud, P. Cressey & P. Docherty (Eds.), *Productive reflection at work: Learning for changing organizations*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Pullen, A., & Rhodes, C. (2013). Corporeal ethics and the politics of resistance in organizations. *Organization*, *21*(6), 782–96. [CrossRef]

Reckwitz, A. (2017). *The invention of creativity: Modern society and the culture of the new*. Cambridge: Polity Press.

Reynolds, M., & Vince, R. (2016). *Organizing reflection*. London and New York: Routledge.

Ricoeur, P. (1976). *Interpretation theory: Discourse and the surplus of meaning*. Fort Worth: Texan Catholic University Press.

Rossi, A. (2016). *The labour of subjectivity: Foucault on biopolitics, economy, critique*. London: Rowman & Littlefield.

Rousseau, J. (1997). *Emile – Eller om Opdragelse*. Ringkjøbing: Borgens Forlag.

Ryan, A. (1993). Liberalism. In R. Goodwin & P. Pettit (Eds.), *A companion to contemporary political philosophy* (pp. 291–311). Oxford: Blackwell.

Saad Filho, A., & Johnston, D. (2005). *Neoliberalism: A critical reader*. London: Pluto Press.

Schenkel, A. (2006). Disciplined reflection or communites of practice. In D. Boud, P. Cressey & P. Docherty (Eds.), *Productive reflection at work: Learning for changing organizations*. London: Routledge.

Schön, D. (1991). *The reflective practitioner: How professionals think in action*. Aldershot: Ashgate.

Socialpædagogerne. (2017). *Etisk værdiggrundlag for socialpædagogerne*. Retrieved February 16, 2020 from https://sl.dk/media/8511/etisk-vaerdigrundlag-2017-11_web.pdf.

Taylor, B. (2013). *Professional decision making and risk in social work* (2nd ed.). London: SAGE.

Taylor, C. (1979). *Hegel and modern society*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Taylor, C. (1989). *Sources of the self: The making of the modern identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Thorsen, D. (2012). *The politics of freedom: A study of the political thought of Isaiah Berlin and Karl popper, and of the challenge of neoliberalism*. Oslo: University of Oslo.

van Manen, M. (1997). *Researching lived experience: Human science for an action sensitive pedagogy* (2nd ed.). London, Canada: The Althouse Press.

Wackerhausen, S. (2008). *Efaringsrum, handlingsbåren kundskab og refleksion, Skriftserie Nr. 1*. Århus: RUML, Afdeling for filosofi, Institut for filosofi og idéhistorie.

Wenger, E. (1998). *Communities of practice: Learning, meaning, and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.

Zamora, D., & Behrent, M. C. (2016). *Foucault and neoliberalism*. Cambridge: Polity Press.