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Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

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Decision making in relation to admitting people to train as social workers is, either explicitly or implicitly an ethical activity. This paper considers ethical and practical issues related to the processing of applicants to social work training in England who have criminal convictions. These issues are explored by focusing on policies that strengthen regulations that exclude ex-offenders from working with children and vulnerable adults. The admissions processes for social work education are analysed in terms of how they contribute to, or counteract, processes of social exclusion. The advice and guidance from the General Social Care Council of England (GSCC) is summarised and analysed. A case study of a social work education partnership grounds the ethical discussion by illustrating the complexities of engaging with combating social exclusion whilst seeking to ensure that the public is protected.
Key words: social work training, criminal convictions, ethics, social justice

Introduction
In this paper we consider ethical and practical issues related to the processing of applicants to social work training in England who have criminal convictions. We outline ethical standpoints and their relationship to decision making, and describe how they may be applied in recruiting people with criminal convictions to social work

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

degree courses. We locate these issues in an English social policy context, and focus on policies that strengthen regulations that exclude ex-offenders from working with children and vulnerable adults. Excluding certain categories of people from social work training may also exclude them from other social resources, ostensibly because of the risk that they may pose to other (vulnerable) people. We consider how the admissions processes for social work education contribute to, or counteract, processes of social exclusion. The advice and guidance from the General Social Care Council of England (GSCC) is reviewed and analysed in terms of the styles of ethical decision-making that it encourages. We present a case study of a social work education partnership that has engaged with issues of protecting the public whilst combating social exclusion.

Recent developments affecting the recruitment of ex-offenders to social work training In England candidates for social work training have to undergo a selection process that involves a written application form including a personal statement, two personal references, an interview and a criminal records check. These procedures have emerged as part of the new social work qualifications that are now at a minimum of graduate level and based in institutions of higher education.

There are three recent developments in England that are of particular importance when considering the issues related to social workers and applicants to social work training who have criminal convictions. They are (a) a greater public concern with criminality associated with professionals who have contact with children or vulnerable adults; (b) the development of a centralised means of checking criminal records; and (c) the establishment of a national body with responsibility for registering social workers, social care workers and social work students.

(a) A greater public concern with criminality associated with professionals who have contact with children or vulnerable adults
Concern with who should enter professions that have direct contact with, and responsibility for, children has only recently had a high public profile. In 1999 Smith reported research undertaken with senior managers in sixty-four Local Authority Social Service Departments. She used 'decision board analysis' (Smith 1999; pp 55-56) to discover whether Social Service managers would employ people, with a criminal record, as social workers who would have substantial unsupervised access to children. The research indicated that six Social Service managers would employ a candidate with a conviction for indecent assault against a child (Smith 1999; p.57).

However, this situation has radically altered in the last three years. The conviction in England, of Ian Huntley (on 17th December 2003) for the murders of two children at the school where he was the caretaker, raised many issues related to employing people where there was evidence of previous concerns about their alleged criminal

behaviour. During the trial of Ian Huntley it was discovered that between 1995 and 1999 there had been four crime reports in relation to him and alleged sexual offences against girls aged between 13 and 15 years of age. In addition there was a crime report for an offence of burglary. None of these reports resulted in a conviction. Following the Government Inquiry (known as the Bichard Inquiry) into the circumstances of this case (Bichard 2005), there have been many changes in relation to the exclusion of ex-offenders from employment (Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development 2004), particularly in jobs where they have contact with children (Department for Education and Skills 2005;) or vulnerable adults (Department of Health 2006; Department of Health 2004).

However, these initiatives have not reduced public concern. Concern has focussed particularly on the discovery that there are/were a number of convicted sexual offenders employed in schools in the UK (Naughton 2006; Kelly 2006; and Pascoe-Watson 2006), and that the employment of these people had been authorised (in some cases) by central government. The UK Government is now planning to tighten further the vetting and barring processes in relation to employment involving work with children or vulnerable adults (Department for Education and Skills and Department of Health 2006).

(b) The development of a centralised means of checking criminal records
In England prior to 2002 pre-employment/training police checks were undertaken by local police forces (Smith 1999). The Bichard Inquiry revealed a number of shortcomings in how this type of data was interpreted and communicated across police forces (Bichard 2005). As Bichard was gathering information, in March 2002 the Criminal Records Bureau (CRB) was launched in England and Wales (Criminal Records Bureau 2005(a)). This organisation provides a national means of checking criminal records in relation to employment, voluntary work and professional training. It offers three different levels of information – from a basic level to an 'enhanced' disclosure. The enhanced disclosure contains details of all crime reports, police cautions, reprimands or warnings and criminal convictions. Also for posts involving contact with children and vulnerable adults lists held by the Department of Health, the Department for Education and Skills (Department of Health 2004; Bichard 2005; Department for Education and Skills 2005; Department of Health 2006) and the National Assembly for Wales Prohibited List (National Assembly for Wales Order 34/02) are scrutinised. There are similar processes in Scotland (Scottish Criminal Records Office 2005) and Northern Ireland (Department of Health, Social Services and Public Safety 2004). For the purposes of social work employment and training In England all students are required to undergo the highest level of investigation ('enhanced disclosure') (Home Office 2003; Criminal Records Bureau 2005(b)). The issue of obtaining accurate and detailed information about employees and applicants to training for work with people is now a matter of critical importance.

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

(c) The establishment of a national body with responsibility for registering social workers, social care workers and social work students

The GSCC was established in October 2001 and on its website it announces itself to be 'the guardian of standards for the social care workforce in England' (General Social Care Council 2005(a)). In this role it has instituted the Social Care Register (General Social Care Council 2005(c)) - everyone who works in social care in England is required to register as a social care worker and their professional conduct is governed by the Code of Practice for Social Care Workers (General Social Care Council 2002). Andrew Skidmore (2005) the Head of Standards and Registrar of the General Social Care Council has usefully outlined the context and process of registration:

> The Care Standards Act 2000 sets out at s58 the criteria for registration. Amongst other things the GSCC must be satisfied that the applicant "is of good character".
>
> We do not obtain criminal disclosures directly ourselves, but rely on employer endorsement of application forms (or endorsement by relevant senior figures in social care or equivalent).
>
> The application form requires applicants to disclose any criminal convictions or disciplinary findings, including any cases in progress.
>
> Each case is investigated by the GSCC on its own merits. There is no set list of convictions that are likely to lead to automatic refusal of registration, though clearly there are certain convictions where it would be difficult to register in any circumstances.
>
> Staff make an initial assessment of the case, making a judgement about the level of risk, paying particular attention to the likely impact on service users and carers. In many cases there are strong mitigating factors that we are able to take into account.
>
> Where there is doubt, staff make a recommendation either for registration with condition(s), or refusal of registration. These recommendations go to the GSCC's Registration Committee for final decision. There is an appeal stage to the Care Standards Tribunal (Care Standards Act 2000 s68).

Although Mr Skidmore says that there is 'no set list of convictions that are likely to lead to automatic refusal of registration' the British Government elsewhere (as we have outlined above) is more prescriptive in relation to people who have been convicted of offences. However, although these initiatives are clearly significant,

they do not totally remove discretion and decision making in relation to admitting people convicted of other offences who apply for social work related employment or training.

The way in which the GSCC processes applications from social workers that have criminal convictions provides a baseline for University admissions tutors in England. If the GSCC is unlikely to register someone because of their previous offending history then it is doubtful whether an applicant with similar offences should be admitted to social work training.

Applicants with criminal convictions: social exclusion and managing risk
In his review of 'Employment Screening and the Criminal Records' Thomas (2002; pp 68-69) comments:

> The implications of a vast increase in screening [(Better Regulation Task Force 1999)] have led to criticisms of creating a 'checking culture' that has the 'potential for negative effects such as social exclusion and the creation of barriers to employment' [(Independent 1999)].

 Screening, in itself, does not initiate social exclusionary processes. It is what is done with the information when criminal offences are disclosed that may contribute to social exclusion. Disclosure of certain offences may initiate actions that exclude people who have been convicted of these offences from professional social work training. Thus, potentially, the (necessary) screening of applicants to social work training for criminal offences initiates a process that will contribute to various groups of people being socially excluded.

Phillips (2006; p. 116-117) notes that social exclusion is primarily focussed on groups and communities and deprives them of social status, economic resources and social rights. Additionally, he (Phillips 2006; p. 117-118) notes that there are 'moral narratives' associated with social excluded groups – these narratives become part of the rationale for socially excluding certain (undeserving) groups. Clearly, ex-offenders have a (group) legal status of low moral worth and because of such are socially excluded (Jones Finer and Nellis 1998; Fletcher 2002; Gray 2005). We suggest that the 'moral narrative' that has developed around ex-offenders and their suitability (or not) to train as social workers is focused on the risk that they (may) pose to the general public, the social work profession (embodied in University courses, social work employers, and professional associations), and particularly social work service users. The 'moral narrative' of risk varies according to many factors, for example class, gender, race, age, sexuality and disability. Additionally the number and nature of their offence(s) and the recency of their offending are of significance. In order to understand these factors and to articulate a justifiable 'moral tale' in relation to their suitability (or not) for social work training, the nature of the risk

that they pose needs to be described. This is done through 'risk assessment' (General Social Care Council 2005(b).

Although some proponents of risk assessment assert the process to be scientific and universally applicable, a number of commentators have highlighted how risk assessments socially construct the world and in particular the object of assessment. Ericson and Doyle (2003; pp 2-3) note:

> Assessment of the chance of adverse consequences also depends on morality. Identification of a threat or danger, and of adverse consequences, is based on judgements about 'goodness' and 'badness' and distinctions between right and wrong.

Critics of the scientific paradigm of risk assessment (Silver and Miller 2002) argue that actuarial tools are designed primarily to facilitate the efficient management of institutional resources rather than to target individuals or social conditions in need of reform. Additionally, they state that the group-based nature of actuarial prediction methods may contribute to the continued marginalization of populations already at the fringes of the economic and political mainstream. This accords with Phillips' (2006) notion that 'moral narratives' form a key part of social exclusionary processes. Feminist commentators (Chan and Rigakos 2002) have noted that the way in which risk is construed is deeply embedded in gender, race and class politics.

Potentially, processes that consider the suitability of ex-offenders for social work training contribute to socially exclusionary constructions of people from social groups that are already marginalised by their offending.

Social Work Admissions: ethical perspectives
In England there is no prescriptive statement that people with criminal convictions cannot become social workers. Consequently Admissions Tutors and others are drawn into a discussion of who ought to be allowed to train as social workers; this discussion focuses on the individual as well as the offences they have committed. This discussion is fundamentally an ethical discussion.

Most of those involved in selecting social work students are influenced by social work values. The GSCC Code of Conduct (General Social Care Council, 2002) alongside the British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics for Social Work (British Association of Social Workers, 2002) could be taken as a general portfolio of values to which social work practitioners and academics subscribe. These encapsulate the core values of human dignity and worth, social justice, service to humanity, integrity and competence. Such traditional social work values can be seen as being firmly based on the ideas of the philosopher Kant and his concept of the categorical imperative:

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

> So act as to treat humanity, whether in your own person or that of any other, never solely as a means but always also as an end"(Kant 1964:32).

Consequently an individual is worthy of respect irrespective of previous offending behaviour, and whether s/he ought to be allowed to undertake social work training is as much about individual change as the nature of her/his offences. These values sit closely with both an acceptance and active promotion of the rehabilitation of offenders. For example Perry (2004; p. 997) examines the impact of criminal conviction disclosure on the self-reported offending profile of social work students and demonstrates the influence of Kantian values in suggesting that social work "needs to create a more positive climate for the recruitment of those offenders who represent no more of a threat to users than non-offenders."

However, an equally strong influence on ethical decision-making is utilitarianism. Drawing on the philosophers Bentham and Mill the utility principle is variously described as indicating the right action as being one, which brings about the "greatest good over evil" or "the greatest happiness of the greatest number" (Banks 2006: 36). As such the utility principle supports the view that persons with criminal convictions ought not as a general rule be allowed to train as social workers; protecting the public is a greater good than promoting the rehabilitation of an individual. If this approach were to be adopted, it would be possible to devise a proscriptive list of offences considered to be inimical to the common good. Scott and Zeiger (2000) for example adopt a utilitarian approach in arguing that Social Work Admissions Tutors have a responsibility to protect the public by refusing anyone who has committed any criminal offence admission to professional training. This position, however, is incompatible with Kantian derived social work values. The problem lies in that this type of exclusion seems morally unjust in terms of treating all offenders in the same way irrespective of the act or circumstances. The stance is inequitable.

Within this potentially fraught setting the concept of equity is important (Hollows and Nelson 2006). Aristotle in "Ethics V 10" describes equity as "a correction of law where it is defective owing to its universality" (Ross, 1972:133). The problem for Aristotle lies with universal statements and what he describes as laws. There are some things about which it is not possible to make a universal statement that is correct. In this case equity is "a correction of the law where it is defective owing to its universality." Consequently equity is the spirit of justice, which enables us to interpret laws rightly. Equity goes beyond the notion of fairness and the idea that not treating everyone the same is unfair. Rather equity is concerned with justice and what it means to act in a just way.

If this interpretation of Aristotle is applied to decision making about social work entrants with criminal convictions it would appear that this is a situation where it is

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

not possible to make a universal statement, which is correct. Consequently decision making requires a consideration of equity to correct "the law" that no people with criminal convictions should be allowed to train as social workers, which is defective because of its universality. The consideration of equity, of moral justice for all candidates with criminal convictions, becomes central to the decision making process and firmly locates the process in a context that is ethical and value laden.

Banks (2006) identifies two broad approaches to ethical thinking: principle-based and character-relationship based. 'Principle- based' approaches are derived from abstract sets of principles designed to guide/shape ethical behaviours. The two principle-based approaches to ethical reasoning with most influence in social work are utilitarian and Kantian. 'Character and relationship – based' approaches to ethics (Banks 2006; p. 54) are more concerned with the detail of ethical conduct. Banks (2006; p. 54) notes that:

> Principle-based approaches ignore important features of moral life and moral judgements including the character, motives and emotions of the moral agent, the particular contexts in which judgements are made and the particular relationships and commitments people have to each other.

In clarifying matters of an ethical nature, Banks and Williams (2005:1011) make the distinction between ethical issues, problems and dilemmas in moral decision-making:

> Ethical Issues – a situation that has an ethical dimension, but which is not articulated as a decision-making situation for the person concerned
> Ethical Problem – a situation where a decision has to be made, but where there was no dilemma for the person making the decision – i.e. it was clear what course of action to take
> Ethical dilemma – a decision making situation involving a difficult choice between two unwelcome alternatives and it is not clear which choice will be the right one.

For all decision makers the decision about whether to admit an ex-offender to social work training inevitably involves ethical issues, but for some decision makers and with some candidates the decision will pose a greater or lesser ethical problem. For some decision makers, however, decisions about certain candidates can pose an ethical dilemma where a decision entails making a choice between two or more conflicting principles.

When faced with a dilemma about whether to admit an ex-offender to social work training, selectors may review the facts of a risk assessment - for example the nature of the offence and, the time elapsed since the offence. Where disagreements occur decision makers may agree on the facts but disagree on the ethical interpretation. The horns of the dilemma are ethical and as such are not susceptible to a technical

resolution. This is not to say that an overtly ethical discussion will make the decision easier but it will "remove some confusions and clarify some obscurities, so that the options stand out more plainly" (Raphael 1994:10). We illustrate this process below in our discussion of two case studies.

General Social Care Council: ethical approaches to registering social workers with criminal convictions
The GSCC requires both principle-based and also character and relationship-based ethical thinking. In their 'risk assessment document' (General Social Care Council 2005(a); p. 3) they categorise offences as being 'low', 'medium' or 'high' risk. In relation to 'high risk' offences they state that these offences:

> … suggest the offender is likely to pose a risk to the safety and well-being of service users, and is therefore unsuitable to work in social care.

Here, taking a Utilitarian principle-based approach, they are clearly describing a requirement to exclude certain types of offender from social work training for the general good of the wider community. High-risk offences include:
• offences against children and young persons under 18
• offences involving the abuse of trust
• offences involving violence or cruelty

They provide a list of thirteen 'examples' of this type of offence (General Social Care Council 2005(b); p. 3). Here the issue is clear and the ethical thinking that is needed is a principle-based approach. However, for 'medium risk' offences the situation is far less clear.

'Medium risk' offences are defined as:

> Offences which suggest the offender may pose a risk to the safety and well-being of service users, and may therefore be unsuitable to work in social care. (General Social Care Council 2005(b); p. 3).

The examples of medium risk offences that are cited are:
• Drink driving
• Failure to provide a breath test
• Theft
• Possession of Class A drugs
• Dealing in controlled substances
• Serious driving offences
• Repeated low risk offences

The situation here is not prescribed by the GSCC; the offender may pose a risk and s/he may be unsuitable to work in social care. In reaching a decision on suitability

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

for training, research evidence on recidivism in respect of the specific offence or offending behaviour may be valuable. The value of recidivism data, however, lies in the ability to give a generalised reconviction pattern in relation to types of offences; it cannot give information about the individual offender. To this evidence is added consideration of the relevance of the offence to social work and the seriousness of the offence. Such consideration is of necessity value laden given the cultural and social value attached to an offence at any one historical moment, and will draw on the personal and professional values of the decision-makers and dominant societal mores.

Here a different type of ethical thinking is required. McBeath and Webb (2002) have demonstrated the limitations of Utilitarian and Kantian ethics for addressing professional issues involving people in dynamic social contexts. Banks (2006) suggests that such critiques of principle-based ethics question the focus on actions rather than the person doing the acts and the need for ethical decision making to be rational and impartial. Feminist philosophers, for example, have highlighted the gendered nature of such concepts as objectivity, impartiality and reason (Harding 1991). Character-relationship based approaches focus on contextual issues; in this case the offence(s) (the applicant's current situation and where they may be on placement) and relationships (how did the applicant relate to others during the time they were offending, how do they relate to people now).

The GSCC indicate how they assess people with offences in their two lower offence categories (medium and low). In some cases a declared criminal offence will have no bearing on an individual's suitability to work in social care and the assessment of suitability will be straightforward. However, suitability is something that can only be determined after due consideration of:
- the relevance of the offence to social care work;
- the seriousness of the offence;
- the length of time since the offence;
- whether the applicant has a pattern of offending;
- whether the applicant's situation has changed since the offence was committed;
- the circumstances surrounding the offence;
- the applicant's explanation for the offence;
- evidence submitted by the applicant of their good character. (GSCC(2005b)

Assessing the relevance of these points requires the assessor(s) to be mindful of principle-based approaches to ethics but also to adopt a more contextually sensitive approach.

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

No single approach to ethical decision-making is in itself sufficient. It is clear that those involved in either admitting people to social work training or deciding whether or not to place them on the professional register have to use both principle-based and character-relationship based approaches in coming to their decisions. Making decisions in this setting involves balancing the claims of the public to be protected against the claims for excluded groups for social justice.

Clearly, character-relationship based approaches imply different methodologies to principle-based approaches to ethical decision-making. The latter approach could be undertaken on the basis of written evidence only (for example the enhanced disclosure); if an offence is proscribed then the applicant is refused admission. However, medium and low risk offences are not amenable to this methodological approach. More information (as indicated by the GSCC) is needed. This requires applicants to be interviewed before a decision can be made. The issue of 'who' should conduct the interview and 'how' it should be organised are not stipulated by the GSCC. It is likely that practice will vary across England. What follows is one example of how a local social work education partnership has attempted to resolve this issue.

Towards an integrated approach to ethical decision-making: a local case study
Our two universities operate as part of a learning partnership which includes local statutory, voluntary and independent social work agencies with one agreed set of procedures for dealing with applicants to social work training who have a criminal record (SYNEMPLP 2004). Central to the operation of the procedures is the Criminal Records Consultative Panel (CRCP) made up of representatives from all agency partners and the two universities. This is particularly important because the agency partners provide work-based placements. The representatives include human resource managers as well as social work managers and academics. The panel considers all applicants with a criminal record and for those identified as medium risk and above according to GSCC guidelines two members of the panel will interview the applicant and present their findings to the full panel. All members of the panel have agreed to be bound by the decision and consequently if an applicant is offered a place on a course they will be offered placements without the need for any other interview.

The following anonymised case studies illustrate some of the issues involved in decision-making:

> AB is a Black British working class woman in her mid thirties. She has several cautions for drug related offences in respect of cannabis, the last of which (growing a cannabis plant for personal use) was over five years prior to her application. Serious concern about her suitability for social work training was expressed by a small number of human resource managers. The views

of the other CRCP members highlighted issues of oppression of very lightly convicted Black women. The discussion was extensive, and eventually the panel agreed to admit this woman.

For the majority of CRCP members this application posed ethical issues but was not an ethical problem. They identified the offences as low risk in terms of the likelihood of AB posing a risk to the safety and well being of service users. The offences had occurred more than five years previously when AB's social circumstances had been very different. Details that she provided about her offending contextualised her criminal behaviour and illustrated how her life had subsequently changed. She had demonstrated her ability by successfully working in a voluntary social care setting for two years as evidenced by references. For the majority of panel members consideration of the offence, and the individual applicant (character-relationship based approaches) led them to believe she should be admitted to social work training.

However, for the human resource managers this case posed an ethical problem. The issue that they prioritised was not the risk posed by AB to an individual client but the risk to the agency of being seen to condone drug taking. The discussion within the panel was essentially an ethical debate between a Kantian approach which recognised individual change and a Utilitarian approach where the greater good of the greatest number would be damaged if society, as a whole, lost trust in the agency through their being seen to condone drug taking.

A prominent aspect of the discussion was the centrality given to the concept of trust as opposed to risk. Human resource panel members were acutely aware of the connection between public trust in the agency and professionalism. Koehn (1994 in Banks 2004:58) argues that professional ethics "is the foundation of public trust in the profession" and if this trust breaks down then so does professionalism. Trust has been much explored as a concept but a useful definition is "the mutual confidence that no party to an exchange will exploit another's vulnerabilities" (Svendsen and Svendsen 2004; p. 25 in Phillips 2006; p. 142). As such trust is particularly pertinent to social work in three areas: (i) public trust in the profession as a whole; (ii) in a specific Agency and; (iii) as a foundation of worker-client relationship. Consequently the assessment of an applicant for social work training, who has a criminal conviction, becomes an assessment of how much they can be trusted alongside what risk they pose. That assessment, however, is not just in respect of whether they can be trusted in individual worker-client relationships. It is also about whether admitting them (and others in a similar position) will engender distrust in the profession or Agency. The assessment of AB became an assessment of the effect of a lack of trust in the Agency (providing a placement to someone who had misused substances) rather than the risk posed by AB to future clients.

Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

Offenders in the widest sense have arguably at some stage contravened the value of trust. As a result they are potentially denied access to social capital. As a group they face social exclusion in terms of outcome and process and in this case AB as a black working class woman is doubly disadvantaged. The acquisition of personal capital in the shape of a professional qualification is linked to the acquisition of social capital and achieving social inclusion. The assessment of trust is central for both applicant and agency.

> ST is a White man in his mid thirties. His offences were committed from the age of 15 to 28. He described a troubled childhood including fights, use of alcohol and glue and expulsion from school, but did not, however, blame this for his offending behaviour. His early offences were theft, drunkenness and threatening behaviour. He later moved into drug related offences and at the age of 23 he served a 20-month prison sentence for assault with intent to rob. In interview he stated that his offending behaviour was directly related to his substance abuse. In the past seven years ST has undertaken an extensive programme of drug rehabilitation, and has not taken drugs or alcohol for five years. He described his rehabilitation in some detail, showing both humility and insight. He has apologised to the victims of his offences. He lives in his own flat and has a strong group of friends from his rehabilitation programme and his local Church. He has undertaken Access to Higher Education programmes, and states that he is committed to becoming a social worker.

This case posed ethical problems for all panel members but for some the case raised a real ethical dilemma - choosing between two moral principles (Kantian and Utilitarian) and two unwelcome alternatives. In attempting to resolve the dilemma this case highlights very clearly a clash of principle-based ethical approaches. Whilst a Kantian perspective emphasises the significant change the individual had undergone and the stability of his current situation, a utilitarian perspective would emphasise that the offence involved violence, and thus there was potential risk to agency and service users. One human resources panel member, for example, stated, her agency would never employ or provide a placement for any individual with such a criminal record.

Character-relationship based approaches give greater emphasis to the process of the interview (ST's clarity, humility and his ability to describe in detail his process of personal change) and support the Kantian perspective. In reviewing this case, the notion of equity is useful. Some panel members considered it unjust to treat all individuals who had committed similar offences in the same way. It was inequitable to ignore evidence of rehabilitation by focussing discussion and decision-making only on the nature of the offence. However, on this occasion principle-based ethics

dominated the discussion. A Utilitarian perspective outweighed the Kantian duty to the individual applicant and the insights from character and relationship-based approaches. ST was not, therefore, offered a place.

Conclusion

Selecting and admitting people to social work training courses involves ethical decision-making. Admissions tutors have to ensure that social work agencies and service-users are not put in danger through negligent selection procedures that admit people who have criminal convictions and who also (may) pose a risk to others. At the same time, admissions tutors are in a position to collude with or challenge social exclusionary processes that marginalise people in oppressed groupings (including ex-offenders). Ensuring safe recruitment and social justice is not always possible, however being clear about the ethical thinking that (may) inform decisions to admit (or not) ex-offenders to social work training is an essential pre-requisite to accountable admissions practice.

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Safe recruitment, social justice, and ethical practice: should people who have criminal convictions be allowed to train as social workers?

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