RESPONSE

What do we expect from ethics in health promotion and where does Foucault fit in?

S. Whitelaw and A. Whitelaw

Abstract
This paper comments upon Duncan and Cribb's ethical consideration of the Helping People Change project (this issue). We welcome this undertaking, suggesting that such an exercise is profitable in respect of both its general orientation towards ethics in health promotion and its introduction of the work of Foucault. In relation to the former, we seek to locate this work in a broader context, suggesting that the issues they raise have wider significance in relation to what we may expect of ethics. In relation to Foucault, we question the trend of using individual philosophers in general, and Duncan and Cribb's narrow characterization of Foucault's work in particular. By focusing on only one aspect of one man's work, they set up what we feel is a false polarization of views which leaves them (and their readers) in a position where they are ultimately forced to choose between different ethical styles. We feel that this is unnecessary and conclude by suggesting that a social constructionist approach can provide a pragmatic way for health promoters to deal with this diversity in ethical style.

Introduction
Post-structuralism and ethics both involve a range of potentially complex and confusing debates. However, for those involved in health promotion who are interested in social change and want to review their practice, Duncan and Cribb's paper (1996; this edition) will be welcomed as refreshing and challenging. They build upon previous ethical work in health promotion, including, e.g. Williams (1984), Doxiadis (1990), Seedhouse (1991), Nordenfelt (1993) and Cribb (1993). Their use of Foucauldian analysis is also interesting and innovative. As they suggest, Foucault, along with a broader range of commentators with a structural/poststructural or postmodern orientation, has developed ideas that have considerable implications for health promotion. It is therefore encouraging to see that they are being increasingly expressed within health promotion literature (see, e.g. Bunton et al., 1995; McKie, 1995; Williams, 1995). Most importantly, in exploring the territory between a generalized concept of 'ethical analysis' and the problems posed upon ethical certainty by critics like Foucault, Duncan and Cribb are beginning to address a series of more fundamental issues. As we see them, these are: how should we define the 'ethical process'?; what should we expect from the ethical process?; how can Foucault contribute to this? and how appropriate is it to focus on the contribution of particular individuals when discussing ethics in general?

In this context, our aims here are two-fold. Firstly, we want to develop more generally some of the specific points raised by Duncan and Cribb, around ethical 'form'—particularly the tension between the possibility of universal ethics based on a priori values and that which is oriented around a more modest, contingent and local set of principles. Secondly, we would like to question Duncan and Cribb's use of Foucault. We suggest
that relying on individual philosophers to develop ideas both constrains the discussion within the parameters set by the philosopher, and (in this case) does not do justice to the variety and complexity of the individual’s work. Specifically we question Duncan and Cribb’s use of Foucault’s writing on *genealogy* rather than his writing on *ethics* and their portrayal of Foucault’s work as nihilist.

### Defining the ethical process

The technical basis of ethical issues is well rehearsed. The classic differentiation between ‘contractual’ (Williams, 1985), ‘duty based’ (Warburton, 1994) or ‘deontological’ (Seedhouse, 1991) positions, on the one hand, and utilitarianism or consequentialism, on the other, is commonly recognized.

In utilizing a range of ‘*prima facie*’ ethical principles such as ‘autonomy’, ‘voluntariness’ and ‘beneficence’, Duncan and Cribb accommodate both contractual and consequential principles, thus side-stepping the age old debate about the respective utility of these positions. At the same time, however, they still imply that a systematic analysis of ethics is possible and in their use of *a priori* and therefore apparently linguistically unambiguous concepts such as (differentiating between) ‘helping’ and ‘changing’, Duncan and Cribb firmly locate the first half of their text within an objectivist paradigm and ‘analytical’ philosophical tradition. Kantian notions of ‘transcendence’ and ‘categorical imperative’ are reflected in such a position. Finally, by drawing on notions of ‘empowerment’ and ‘helping people’ (change) they also locate themselves within a humanist context that accepts and supports the notion of a rational, autonomous and reflective ‘self’. This is particularly intriguing, given their subsequent discussion of Foucault. By pursuing this line, Duncan and Cribb have begun to suggest that ethics is not just about technicalities, but rather is rooted in a broader philosophical context. Tensions that arise in the paper are part of a much wider ‘crisis’ in the human sciences, e.g. in sociology (Smart, 1992), psychology (Parker, 1989) and cultural studies (Redhead, 1995). In philosophy, Deleuze and Guattari (1994) question the notion of the development of ideas being the product of a neat and consistent historical process, Ree (1995) critiques the foundationalist image contained within such an image, and Rogers (1995) wonders whether philosophy can ever have ‘real world’ significance.

These general concerns point to critiques that arise from the nature of a ‘formalist’ philosophy. Firstly, the objectivists’ assumption that philosophical and ethical concepts are linguistically self-evident is undermined by those who emphasize the socially constructed and narrative basis of all philosophical concepts (Miller, 1987; Lyotard, 1988). Hence they would argue that ‘autonomy’, ‘helping’ and ‘changing’ are rhetorical constructions, discursively produced to serve particular functions rather than true and consistent concepts.

A second area of critique concerns the wholesale use of the famous ‘four *prima facie* principles’. This seems to be an example of what Williams (1985, p. 197) has identified as a major problem with moral philosophy, in that it is: ‘caught up in unreflectively appealing to administrative ideas of rationality’. It is within this mode that much of the implicit ethical base for health promotion is located, reflected, for example, in formulations like, ‘respect for others’ (Campbell, 1990, p. 17), ‘liberty and autonomy’ (Nordenfelt, 1993, p. 128) and ‘serving needs before wants’ (Seedhouse, 1991, p. 129).

Duncan and Cribb deploy Foucault as a counterpoint against such orthodoxy. For some, these kinds of criticism are clearly irritating. Seedhouse (1991, p. 134), for example, is ‘exasperated’ at this ‘devil’s advocacy’, suggesting that foundational moral bases can ‘provide a firm theoretical footing for a true health service’ ([italics added](https://academic.oup.com/her/article-abstract/11/3/349/578686)). The deconstructionist would immediately ask Seedhouse what he means by ‘true’. As Duncan and Cribb recognize, aspects of Foucault’s writing undermine the use of such ossified concepts,
regarding them as what Norris (1993, p. 30) calls 'a form of transcendental illusion'.

**Expectations of the ethical process**

This notion of ethics being constructed rather than given points to our next question—what do we expect of ethical analysis? The application of pre-determined principles to a problem certainly skews the emphasis of the process towards 'answers' and Duncan and Cribb find it possible to come to the relatively firm conclusion that Helping People Change 'fares rather badly'. Not withstanding the problems of invoking pre-given principles as is suggested above, there also arises the problem of how 'stable' or 'long-standing' any ethical 'solution' can be. Being cautious of such closure has resulted in the tendency for many to favour a more 'situated' ethical process. Such an approach is mindful of the historical-contextual forces and culture specific values and motives that create what we deem to be ethical and it allows us to continually reflect on and examine our 'answers'. This kind of ethical process draws upon three (related) ideas: Rorty's (1991) notion of 'pragmatic' and 'communitarian' ethics based on the solving of situated ethical problems, Derrida's 'deconstruction', and Foucault's 'transgression' that maintains a degree of scepticism of finite truths. Clearly, these themes, with their modest emphasis on the ethical process as an indeterminate localized undertaking, are largely hostile to the notion of conclusive and universal ethical endpoints.

In constructing a paper around these positions, Duncan and Cribb have conformed to three aspects of accepted wisdom. Firstly, in separating out 'idioms', they suggest that such end-points actually exist as idealized positions. Secondly, and in spite of their acknowledgement that the positions could be 'complementary', they feel ultimately obliged to favour one position, thereby implying that these idioms are essentially exclusive of each other. Finally, they position Foucault as 'the representative' of the sceptical project. The rest of this paper raises doubts about these three assumptions.

**Foucault’s ethics: relativist, universalist activist or anarchist?**

For Duncan and Cribb to counterpose the weight of the majority of established ethical thinking with the views of one man, Michel Foucault, is an interesting strategy. As Miller (1993) recognizes, Foucault's work, along with the stories that define his life and death, has the ability to both challenge the most established of orthodoxies and to excite scholars to a point that goes beyond normal academic sensibility. Whilst we ourselves are equally interested in the man and his ideas, we would caution against using 'single' voices generally, and Foucault in particular, in the way Duncan and Cribb have.

Attempting to represent a genre within the confines of a single author is, we feel, problematic. In presenting one reading of one aspect of Foucault's work, Duncan and Cribb both 'under-represent' Foucault and tie their argument into simple, one-dimensional and discrete propositions. In the light of Foucault's dismissal of the (unified and unitary) self in his notion of 'death of the author' Foucault (1984b), this is particularly ironic. Foucault famously attempted to stay free of any label placed upon his work, including 'structuralist' or 'postmodernist', insisting that his ideas were

...merely lines laid down for you to pursue or divert elsewhere, for me to extend upon or redesign as the case may be. (Foucault, 1988, pp. 78–79)

Duncan and Cribb have condensed Foucault's thought into his genealogical project that examined the relationship between power and knowledge. Of course, this is a prominent and popular aspect of his work. In brief, and as Duncan and Cribb suggest, this reading sees Foucault at his most pessimistic, subverting all notions of truth, reason
or objectivity and viewing the individual as 'nothing more than a transient side-effect of discourse' (Norris, 1993, p. 30). Such a perspective is well established in literature: Connolly (1993, p. 366) suggesting that many feel that Foucault is waging 'total war against society'; Merquior (1985) seeing Foucault as an 'anarchist'; and Habermas (1987) regarding him as a 'neo-conservative'. As they point out, Foucault's contribution to alternative modes of critical thinking is undeniably useful and we do not deny either the existence of such work or its importance. What we question is the tendency to lead discussion in the fashion of a 'cultish' attitude to individual philosophers rather than with ideas.

There is considerable evidence to challenge the stereotypical account of Foucault's ideas given by Duncan and Cribb, which presents a rather different image. His public political activism on behalf of oppressed groups such as prisoners, gays and lesbians, and political dissidents (Eribon, 1991; Miller, 1993) is an established aspect of his biography and one that goes some way towards discrediting the view of him as a nihilist. Even accepting the view that this political conviction may not have been expressed to any degree in his academic writing, many have identified a 'late period' Foucault in which he appeared to be willing to accommodate the idea of universal principle and question the utility of his deconstructive tendencies (see Hacking, 1987; Boyne, 1990; McNay, 1992; Norris, 1993).

In particular, one of his last works, What is Enlightenment?, is cited as a key example of this change of direction. Here, he suggested that:

...we must not conclude that everything that has ever been linked to humanism is to be rejected.
(Foucault, 1984a, p. 44)

and

...we must free ourselves from the intellectual blackmail of 'being for or against the Enlightenment'. (Foucault, 1984a, p. 45)

Ironically, the subject of this piece was Kant. Here, Foucault develops two themes that act to reconcile what is traditionally seen as the gulf that separates their work. On the one hand, as is suggested above, Foucault acts towards accepting the possibility of some universal. At the same time, he suggested that seeing Kant as a simple rationalist is inaccurate and that Kant's ability to theoretically uncouple a priori concepts from constructed experience (see Miller, 1993, pp. 137-142) as an indication of what would become a central feature of his own notion of thought being post hoc and thus historically contingent. Similarly, postmodernists such as Lyotard were to appropriate Kant's notion of the 'sublime' as a fore-runner of postmodern idea 'difference' and the problem of objective representation (Sarup, 1993, pp. 150-152). The ability to juxtapose Foucault and Kant illustrates the dangers of relying on individual philosophers to defend particular positions.

Our aim is not to try to offer a 'better' reading of Foucault than Duncan and Cribb's, but to consider the implications of their narrow focus for a discussion of ethics in general and in health promotion. We suggest that their one-dimensional reading of Foucault leads to an excessive polarization of the ethical debate and unnecessarily forces us to make rigid choices over ethical style. We want to suggest, as we believe have both Kant and Foucault in different ways, that there is no need to be forced into a decision of adopting either universal or local ethics as Duncan and Cribb imply. Rather, we argue that the deconstructive process was never intended to lead to a nihilistic spiral and that 'affirmative' ground can be a product of deconstruction. For example, Derrida (1995) has recently written of his regret that his deconstructive project has run beyond limits originally intended. Of the decline in the position and influence of Marxism, he notes with sadness, of

...those of us who opposed de facto 'Marxism' or 'communism', but never intended...to do so out of conservative or reactionary motivations or even moderate right-wing or republican traditions. (Derrida, 1995, p. 33)

Such views have been reflected in broader attempts to reconcile deconstructive process with a main-
tained political grounding. For example, Rosenua (1992) uses the term 'affirmative' postmodernism and Larrain (1994) identifies 'politically motivated' postmodernists. What this suggests is deconstruction and affirmative action need not be mutually exclusive.

Writing from a social constructionist position, we would argue that 'relativism' has been unfairly characterized. One reason for this lies in the assumption that relativism equates with an 'anything goes' attitude to morals, ethics and politics. Some social constructionists (e.g. Wetherell and Potter, 1992; Edwards et al., 1995) have argued that relativism need not entail adopting an amoral or apolitical position, that if reality and knowledge are discursively produced through human interaction, it becomes even more important to think things through, discuss and argue for one's point of view.

There is no contradiction between being a relativist and being somebody, a member of a particular culture, having commitments, beliefs, and a common-sense notion of reality. These are the very things to be argued for, questioned, defended, decided, without the comfort of just being, already and before thought, real and true. (Edwards et al., 1995, p. 35)

As Laird (1995, p. 152) sums it up 'Values are screened in not out'. Thus, from a social constructionist perspective it can be argued that particular ethics or morals in themselves are not lost, but an authority external to that of human interaction is.

Adopting a social constructionist approach also permits a release from the restraints of the 'universal-local ethics debate' in two main ways. Firstly, it enables us to side-step ontological issues (questions of what universal ethics are), as the starting point for social constructionists is that ethics do not exist independently of human interaction. Secondly, it is possible to be a relativist and allow for a pragmatic belief in universal ethics. William James gave voice to the pragmatic approach—that meaning is established by action and not intellectual musing—when he asserted that 'My first act of free will will be to believe in free will' (cited in Bjork, 1988, p. 89). Thus the main concern from a social constructionist perspective, is not whether, say, empowerment is or is not of universal importance, but the consequences of believing that it is, or is not. This allows us to acknowledge the historical and cultural contingency of 'empowerment' yet recognize that for it to 'work' we may have to take a claim for its universality.

**Conclusion**

Duncan and Cribb have made an important contribution to our ethical thinking in health promotion. In recognizing the difference between ethical styles, they warn us against what must be the great temptation of seeing ethics as a homogeneous and technical activity. However, in relying on one aspect of one man's work, rather than a broader discussion of Foucault and/ or ideas, they have created an unnecessary and unhelpful dichotomy between relativist and universal ethics. Adopting a social constructionist approach enables health promoters to avoid having to 'take sides' and feel comfortable with a both/and ethical style.

**References**


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8, 25-49.


