# Profound labour: world view communication in social work

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**ABSTRACT**
Social workers can deepen their profession by being able to communicate about and from world view. This article clarifies the concept of profound labour, consisting of communication about meaning and moral communication. The relationship with world views is pointed out and indicators for a competence are formulated.

**KEYWORDS**
Meaning, moral communication, world view

## INTRODUCTION: THE CASE OF THE LONELY EGG (PART 1)

This article explores social work as profound labour. I describe two aspects of profound labour: communication about existential meaning and communication about values. Both are related to world view. I close with a description of the competence needed to be able to perform profound labour. To get started, I introduce a case from our own research. In a Dutch state-funded project called *Meaning in Youth Care*, we were interested in the practice of communication about meaning in residential homes, foster care and family homes. Ten students did research for their bachelor's thesis and collected empirical data. They observed the communication between social workers, foster parents and the children in practice and described the chances and opportunities for meaningful communication. We used the metaphor of 'space for meaning' to discover moments and places in the interaction between social worker and child which can be used for meaningful communication: communication about meaning in everyday life, but also communication about existential questions. After the observations, the students interviewed the caregivers and the children.

In this example, one of our students is going into the woods with Frank, a child living in a family home. A family home is a home in which several children are placed in care based on a court order to remove the children from their previous home. In my example, one of the parents is a fulltime care professional caring for six children with different nationalities. Frank is a nine-year-old boy, suffering from diabetes,

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and close to the diagnosis of ADHD. He is a victim of child abuse, and can meet his biological father only under supervision. The following is part of a logbook with observations from the research written by the student involved.

***The cabin and the egg***

*Frank wants to show me a spot in the woods, so we go for a ride on our bikes. He shows me a cabin on top of a hill. He calls it 'our cabin', referring to himself and his friends from the neighbourhood. "This spot is only a fine place when we are together", Frank says. The student takes some pictures of it. There is a table, a fence and in the tree there are pieces of a carpet, so the children can sit more comfortably.*

*At the left side of the cabin, we find an enormous egg. Frank is impressed and wants to take the egg immediately to the cabin where it is safe and warm. He does not want to leave this 'poor thing' behind. He starts crying and stamping his feet. He says he finds this so sad that it is lying there all alone and that 'his mother has left him there'. We talk about this. "Perhaps the egg has to stay there, given the possibility that the mother could return?" says the student. Frank does not agree. The student slowly realises the importance of this situation for Frank. She suggests that they talk this over with the family home parent. They return to the house and the mother appears to have no objections, but invites Frank to think about a possible nest to which the mother bird might return. Back at the cabin, Frank decides to take the egg home with him. He wraps it in a kitchen towel and puts it on a pillow in his bicycle carrier bag. "Come with me", he whispers to the egg, "we are going home quickly". And to the student he says, "Now I am a father, because I am going to care for it". He descends the hill very slowly, because he is cautious not to break the egg. "This is everything for me", he says; he is jumping for joy. "I have never experienced anything like this", he says. At home, he puts the egg in a basket filled with straw and places it on the central heating system. Frank expects a bird to hatch out of the egg. But the other family members deny the possibility and make jokes about it. "Maybe a dinosaur will come out", one says. But Frank is convinced that there is a living bird inside the egg.*

## 1. SOCIAL WORK AND COMMUNICATION OF MEANING IN A CONTEXT OF RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY

My view is that communication about meaning, contributes to the deepening of social work, to profound labour. Profound labour is working while being conscious of the world view aspects of your work, of your motives and moral views, and applying them professionally. Profound labour demands communication about that what really matters: attribution of meaning, inspiration, motivation, values, experiences and convictions which are at stake.

According to the most recent nationally validated and prescribed document for training of social workers in the Netherlands, *Landelijk Opleidingsdocument Sociaal Werk*, (Vijf Loo's, 2017) social workers must know the meaning system and social and cultural values of clients and groups, bring these in communication, and try to realise them in action.

This means that a conversation about how to work (discussing methods and techniques, discussing effects and efficiency) is relevant but not sufficient. Moreover, profound labour demands discussion of the why, the purpose, the perspective.

Such a conversation always touches upon sources of world view, traditions, philosophy and religion; a social worker should therefore be competent in world view communication.

## 1.1 THE CONTEXT OF COMMUNICATION ABOUT MEANING IN THE NETHERLANDS

The Netherlands is one of the most secularised countries in Western Europe (Bernt & Berghuis, 2016). Nevertheless, Dutch people are still searching for meaning in their lives and work. They are reflecting and pursuing higher values, in an individualised way (Van den Brink, 2012) and give form to a personal world view identity with a patchwork character, combining bits and pieces from all sorts of sources of inspiration (De Hart, 2011). Therefore, communication about world view is complex. Society is pluralised with regard to lifestyles, religion, and cultural adherence. There is no common religious vocabulary to use. Every new client has to be assessed to determine their world view. Clients use various sources of meaning, sometimes connected to institutionalised traditions, and sometimes connected to popular culture like books, theatrical productions, movies, soap operas, and songs. People use these sources to construct their frame of reference, their meaning system, which helps them interpret the world and understand life situations like illness, unemployment, separation and so on.

## 1.2 THE CONTENT OF PROFOUND LABOUR

The content of the communication about meaning consists of personal and professional values, concepts and pictures of world view and religion, experiences, and the role and meaning of sources and traditions. The aim is to develop a mutual understanding of a certain situation or experience from a transcending point of view, a transcending frame of reference. These conversations are about existential questions: about meaning, ideals, desire, values and beauty; about suffering, origin and destination of life, about personhood. The language in world view communication uses visions, metaphors and stories to indicate what is of ultimate value, what is holy, what matters most, what matters in the end. There are different levels of communication about meaning: the level of everyday meaning and the level of existential meaning.

A conversation will often start with an experience during the day. Most of the time, we perceive meaning unconsciously in the stream of actions and thoughts. We can place what we feel and think in a broader frame if we feel acknowledged, purposeful, competent, motivated, worthwhile and so on (Smaling & Alma, 2010). While working, we can experience these values and attribute meaning to what we do. We call this 'everyday meaning'. However, when things are not experienced in a flow, because of loss, of not being seen, of disabilities, loss of income, etc., existential questions are raised. And when we search for answers, we can seek refuge in a world view, a philosophy of life.

This philosophy could be institutionalised or not, and may be of a religious nature or not.

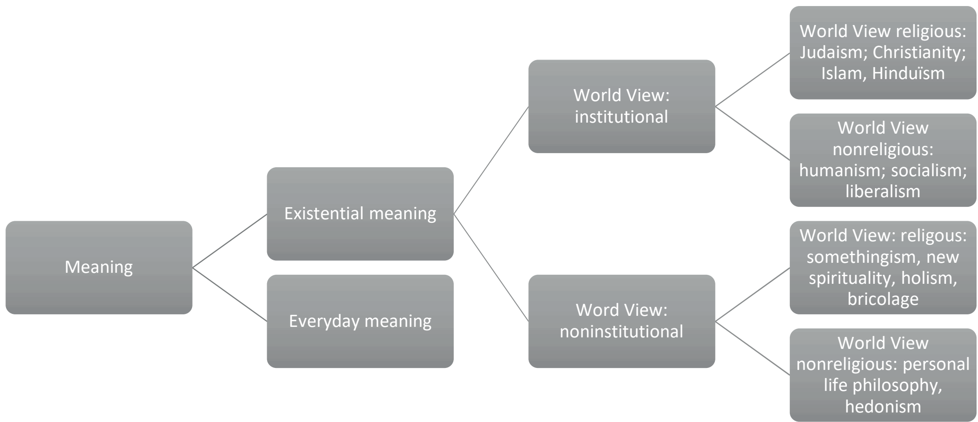


**FIGURE 1** Meaning Systems

This figure makes it easy to detect what kind of attribution of meaning takes place.

Everyday meanings and conversations can contain elements for conversations about existential issues. A professional who is oriented to profound labour will sense these elements and use them as trigger for a deeper understanding for the client or the situation.

## THE CASE OF THE LONELY EGG (PART 2)

Let us return to the example of the lonely egg. In her analysis of this case, the student labels the moment of the discovery of the egg and Frank's responses as possible triggers for a conversation about meaning. This situation can be seen as a space for communication about his existential questions about being a family, about his siblings, rooted in the everyday experience of finding an egg. Frank's reactions invite communication about being at home, about being abandoned and left alone, and about what it means to be a proper father.

But back in the family home, the caregivers did not use this trigger. In an interview, the student confronts the social worker with this observation, but this fulltime parent does not recall in detail what happened around the egg. He admits, however, that these and other examples could symbolise the defining questions that Frank has. The social workers say these questions are: *"Why am I in a family home? Why did my father, mother and brothers leave me? Why is my life so miserable?"*. And the social worker adds: *"Frank has about three hundred stuffed animals, and you should not even consider taking one of them away."*

We have documented several of these observations that show that opportunities for conversation about meaning on a deeper level are often not recognised (Mulder, 2014).

## 2. SOCIAL WORK AS AN INTRINSICALLY VALUES-BASED PRACTICE

Reflection on values is the second aspect of profound labour. The capacity for ethical reasoning is a necessary element in the set of competencies of the social worker. Social work is intrinsically a values-based and values-oriented practice. A short look at a definition of social work as formulated by the IFSW shows this: *"Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that promotes social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people. Principles of social justice, human rights, collective responsibility and respect for diversities are central to social work. Underpinned by theories of social work, social sciences, humanities and indigenous knowledge, social work engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing"* (IFSW 2014).

The definition uses such values as cohesion, empowerment, liberation, justice, responsibility and respect. The overall core value in social work is social justice. But how is this connected to other values which are also important in social work? These values include worth and dignity, respect, capacity for change, self-determination, basic needs, confidentiality, empowerment, equality, non-discrimination, and diversity. Differing values generate dilemmas for a great number of issues, for instance confidentiality versus public safety.

### 2.1 VALUES ORIENTATION AND CONFLICTS IN PROFOUND LABOUR

We have learned from our research in youth work that personal values may contradict professional values and influence the choice of interventions, not always for the good of the client (Mulder, 2014). In one of our cases, a client was interested in looking for a church to visit on Sundays. The social worker involved could not imagine why someone would do that, reacting from his own world view and biography, fed by negative experiences with the church. He did not support this young girl. Another example is that of a Muslim girl taken into foster care by a Pentecostal family. She would have liked to eat halal food, but the foster parents were not willing to adapt their kitchen habits to this religious wish. They wanted to insert their religious identity into the life of this child. De facto, this means a suppression of the child's personal identity and an eradication of the culture passed down to her by her biological family.

The theme of supporting the development of a personal religious identity, sometimes differing from that of the caregivers, family parents or youth workers, is an example of a values conflict that exists on a broader scale in the Netherlands. In 2012, a group of young clients in youth care from two regions in the Netherlands published a Manifesto on Belief in which they referred to the International Treaty on Children's Rights. Article 14 states that the child has the right to freedom of religion and to the expression of religion. The clients asked in this manifesto for the option to visit churches and mosques, and the freedom to follow the rules of their religion concerning meals.

These examples demonstrate a values-based conflict between the circle of personal values and the circle of the client's values.

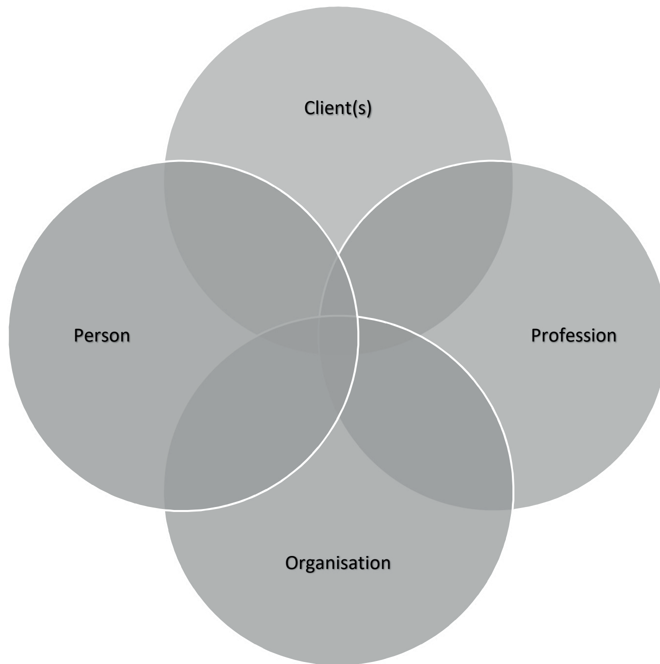


**FIGURE 2** Value Systems

In practice, besides the values systems of the worker and the client, the values of the profession and the organisation also have an influence and create tensions. In a project commissioned by a private institution for youth care, colleagues at our university interviewed 43 social workers in various types of youth care (Blenkers & Groen, 2008). They talked with them about their drives, motivations, ideals and experiences in their daily work. They discovered that the policy of the organisation was to comply with all the state requirements for funding, to avoid risk taking, and to create protocols and fixed procedures of work. Moreover, there was a strong focus on recording results and on administration.

The youth workers told us they slowly became estranged form their core values and their original motivation to be a youth worker. They wanted to contribute to the well-being of the children and give more attention to them, and spend more time with them instead of getting the paperwork done. Personal values collided with organisational values. They also experienced tensions between the treatment protocols and the real needs of young people. Where young people need to be safe, physically and mentally, the protocol was focused on developing learning skills (coping with setbacks or lapses, time management). This illustrates a tension between their personal definition of the goals of social work and the professional methods and procedures. At the end of our project, we could conclude: youth care may be effective according to treatment protocols and accreditation standards, but the existential questions of young people and the personal values of the social workers had not received any attention.

## 2.2 REFLECTION TO NEGOTIATE VALUES-BASED CONFLICTS

There is no universal solution to all the possible collisions between values systems, of course. Not only do the levels of reasoning differ (macro, micro, mesa), but the level of impact also differs per situation. Professionals need to develop a sensitivity for the underlying values when choices about treatment, coaching, methods and interventions are made. What might help in the reflection process about values is the model of moral reflection from Browning (1991).

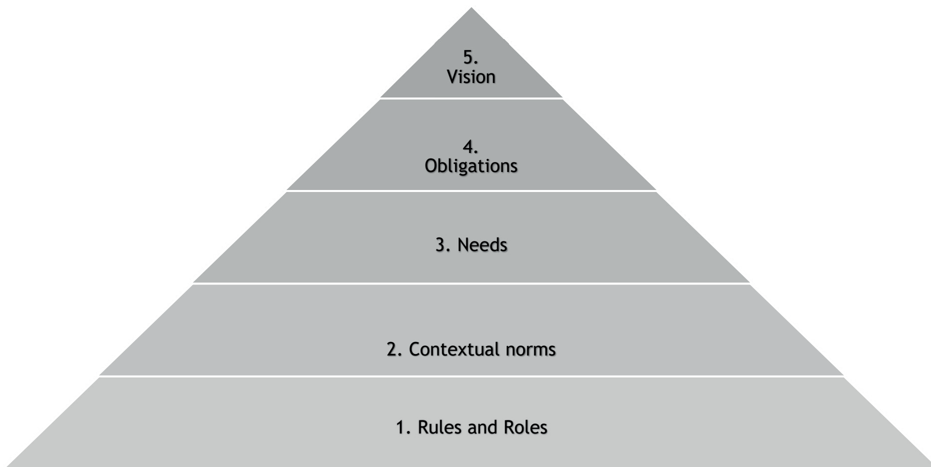


**FIGURE 3** Values Model Browning

He shows that moral reflection is a multi-layered concept. There are different levels of reasoning available and also necessary when valuing the complex practice of social work in the light of 'good practice'. The following brief explanation starts from the more concrete and ends with the most abstract level.

1. First, there is the level of **rules and roles,** which describes specific acts and patterns of action. This is the level of turning moral views into concrete behaviour. How do you do things; how do you define your role (e.g. shopkeeper/customer)? Rules and roles become self-evident and they are engraved deeply into our daily routines. Reflection gives room for criticising the 'normal'.

2. Second, the analysis of the **context** is necessary to reach concrete rules for responsible professional actions. Our social and cultural context exerts a normative influence on us, whether we realise this or not. Society invests common values and norms in the context. We have views about what it is to be a good citizen, for instance. How do I respond to the government or to questions from a neighbour? When we establish rules and roles, we have to tune in to this constantly changing societal context. Constructing behaviour is like navigating between what is good for an individual and what the context asks of us. Deviant behaviour may be possible within a culture or subculture, but only in a limited way.

3. The level of **human strivings and needs** is a context that most of us will know from the work of Maslow and his pyramid of needs. Our natural needs can be divided

into physical needs, psychological needs and volitional needs (will, motivation, striving). These needs can be examined from the perspective of the social sciences and are in themselves pre-moral. Ethical reflection asks: which meaning is attached to attention, what value is attached to food, safety, housing, happiness, self-development, and what are the costs of these commodities? At what expense must these needs be fulfilled, and to what extent? Does satisfaction of needs always contribute to happiness? Is covering needs a condition for a morally good life? There are moral aspects to how Maslow's pyramid is handled.

4. The fourth level is that of **obligations**, which arise from reason. We can think of Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative: 'I ought never to conduct myself except so *that I could also will that my maxim become a universal law*.' (Kant, 2002: 18). The principle guiding your actions should be able to be transformed into a universal moral law. Moral obligations are of course more concrete than universal laws, but less detailed than prescriptions. Obligations are also more subject to change than universal laws. From Christian tradition, Browning borrows such concepts as brotherhood/sisterhood and reciprocity as general criteria to judge practice. Other axioms could be borrowed from other religious sources and world view systems. People are accountable, moral persons. People are responsible and able to respond precisely because the world and life is given to them.

5. The fifth level is **vision.** This is a more or less comprehensive view of existence and of the world as a whole (philosophy/theology). A vision uses the language of metaphors and narratives, just as religious traditions do. Concrete moral behaviour, values, axioms of the middle level are connected to transcending concepts and are clothed in meaning. Some values will be directly taken from sacred scripture, while others will be found by reading and reflecting on stories, for instance the parables of Jesus or the Hadith about Muhammad. Direct retrieval of rules or roles is generally not possible, since a hermeneutical translation has to be made from the original context of stories to the context of today and vice versa. An important Christian metaphor is the Kingdom of God. Values like equality, freedom, solidarity and righteousness are connected to this root metaphor of Christianity. The parables of Jesus show an other-than-normal world in which these values are depicted narratively.

The coherence between these five levels can be summarised as follows: The fifth, world view perspective on nature, good and evil, and the view of humanity, renders general principles (level 4) like justice and non-discrimination. These principles must be applied in loving ways to the scope of human needs with which they sometimes collide (level 3). Expectations from the immediate community or from society at large provide some culture-specific limitations and opportunities (level 2) to give form to concrete rules and roles in the professional practice (level 1).

Reflecting on wat is the best thing to do in professional cases, social workers can discover in a mutual exchange that they are reflecting and reasoning from different levels. Tracing the underlying level from which reasons are derived makes it possible to clarify the conversation about values. The model can also be an instrument to deepen moral reflection by asking questions about more or less abstract levels as needed: moving towards more concrete in one case, or more abstract in another. Communication about the level of vision can be a real challenge, yet it can also be very inspiring.

**Adam's case**

In a Dutch handbook on profound labour entitled *Werken met diepgang* (Mulder & Snoek, 2012, pp. 247–270), a case study recalls a conflict in the group of volunteers who work in a faith-based shelter for homeless people or others seeking some kind of attention. The case is about Adam.

> *A regular visitor, Adam, had an accident in one of the two toilets and left a mess behind. It appears it was the third time in a year this happened.*
>
> *His personal standards of clothing and personal care and hygiene are quite different from those of the volunteers, and he often has a distinct smell. The social worker, a trained theologian, initiates a moment of moral reflection with the group of volunteers to discuss the problem. Some say the social worker should have a clear conversation with Adam about his behaviour and make him promise it won't happen again in future. Others want to ban him from the toilet. And someone suggests keeping one toilet for the staff and volunteers and the other one for visitors. The social worker acknowledges that it must be terrible to be confronted with this situation as a volunteer who is responsible for toilet sanitation. However, she asks to empathise for a moment with Adam. The conversation seems to be dominated by the level of rules (ban from toilet; separate toilets) and level two (how people ought to behave). The social worker redirect the focus to the mission and vision of the shelter: does a banning order correspond with our identity as a shelter, and with the world we want to live in? No: the shelter dreams of a world in which hospitality is the main characteristic, reflecting a loving God (level 5). Level 3 needs are also discussed: Adam finds a safe place and home in the shelter and his physical needs include a toilet visit. Shouldn't we be more concerned about his health when this happens so often? The obligation to help others who are in need is also mentioned (level 4). Scrolling through the levels in the discussion allows the conversation to unfold in a more empathising and peaceful way. The volunteers reflect on their own motives and spirituality. One says that opting for separate toilets is not symbolic of the unity we want between volunteers and visitors. Another volunteer says it is possible to invite Adam to ask for help. A third suggestion is to clean the toilet together with Adam, not in a condemning but in an understanding way. So they can achieve inclusion instead of separation.*

The case study demonstrates that the model can be helpful for stepping back and reflecting on values-based conflicts in social work. The social worker is like a pilot navigating the ship from one level to the other.

## 3. HERMENEUTICAL COMPETENCE FOR PROFOUND LABOUR

Communication about meaning and values, both connected to world view, requires a hermeneutical competence. This competence comprises the ability to understand people and their experiences from the perspective of world view, in the context of sources and traditions of meaning, and of values. With every new client, a social worker has to assess the other's perspective on the world in order to tune into

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that perspective in communication. Awareness of the individualisation and pluralisation and the ability to recognise all kinds of sources of meaning are needed, together with the skill to discover meaningful aspects of everyday life, in order to create spaces for communication of meaning. I distinguish between several indicators (Mulder & Snoek, 2012, p. 32):

The social worker has the ability to:

— reflect on her own motives, experiences and judgments, and those of others;
— signal existential questions and values-based views at different levels;
— retrace certain utterances (judgments, convictions, motivations) to sources and traditions of world view systems;
— deepen the conversation, serving from the perspective of sources and traditions of world view when this is in the client's best interest;
— respectfully initiate communication about meaning in the light of professional goals;
— contribute to the conversation while presenting her own views and experiences;
— unravel the entanglement of values systems (personal, professional, organisational, societal);
— sense and understand the narrative and symbolic character of world view language.

Of course this list of indicators is not exhaustive, and the achievement of these abilities is connected to a body of knowledge, conversational skills and a reflective attitude. In my view, this hermeneutical competence should be part of all educational programmes for social work, at least to a certain level, to foster profound labour.

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