

Values and Ethics in Social Work Practice



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Juan's Dilemma

Juan's wife Mary was dying from cancer. Juan and Mary are 70 years old and have not been able to find anyone to help them with Mary's medical bills. They have a small retirement income and cannot afford expensive medication. A local pharmacist had developed a new drug that had proven to work in relieving the tremendous pain caused by the cancer. Juan did not have the money to purchase the drug and has pleaded with the pharmacist to fill the prescription from Mary's doctor. The pharmacist refused. Mary, who was expected to live less than two weeks, screamed out in tremendous pain one night at 3 AM. Mary could find no relief for the pain. Juan in his moment of unbelievable stress broke into the pharmacy and stole 20 pills. You are to address this situation and not suggest ways that Juan might have gotten help through a social service agency or through a social worker.

What are the ethical implications of Juan's behavior?

What would you do if in the same situation?

Social Work Values

Value	Ethical Principle
Service	Social workers primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems
Social Justice	Social workers challenge social injustice
Dignity and Worth of the Person	Social works respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person
Importance of Human Relationships	Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships
Integrity	Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner
Competence	Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise

From: NASW Code of Ethics (pp. 5-6)

NASW Code of Ethics ~ Ethical Standards

1. Social workers' ethical responsibilities to clients	3.02 Education and training
1.01 Commitment to clients	3.03 Performance evaluation
1.02 Self-determination	3.04 Client records
1.03 Informed consent	3.05 Billing
1.04 Competence	3.06 Client transfer
1.05 Cultural competence and social diversity	3.07 Administration
1.06 Conflicts of interest	3.08 Continuing education and staff development
1.07 Privacy and confidentiality	3.09 Commitments to employers
1.08 Access to records	3.10 Labor-management disputes
1.09 Sexual relationships	4. Social workers' ethical responsibilities as professionals
1.10 Physical contact	4.01 Competence
1.11 Sexual harassment	4.02 Discrimination
1.12 Derogatory language	4.03 Private conduct
1.13 Payment for services	4.04 Dishonesty, fraud, and deception
1.14 Clients who lack decision-making capacity	4.05 Impairment
1.15 Interruption of services	4.06 Misrepresentation
1.16 Termination of services	4.07 Solicitations
2. Social workers' ethical responsibilities to colleagues	4.08 Acknowledging credits
2.01 Respect	5. Social workers' ethical responsibilities to social work profession
2.02 Confidentiality	5.01 Integrity of the profession
2.03 Interdisciplinary collaboration	5.02 Evaluation and research
2.04 Disputes involving colleagues	6. Social workers' ethical responsibilities to the broader society
2.05 Consultation	6.01 Social welfare
2.06 Referral for services	6.02 Public participating
2.07 Sexual relationships	6.03 Public emergencies
2.08 Sexual harassment	6.04 Social and political action
2.09 Impairment of colleagues	
2.10 Incompetence of colleagues	
2.11 Unethical conduct of colleagues	
3. Social workers' ethical responsibilities in practice settings	Source: National Association of Social Workers, Inc. Copyright © 1996
3.01 Supervision and consultation	National Association of Social Workers, Inc.

DILEMMAS¹

Step 1 Recognize the problem. (What is troubling you? Briefly describe the problem. Is the situation or problem ethical in nature, i.e. has a core value or ethical principle clearly been violated? An ethical issue is present when there is potential risk for violating an ethical standard. A problem exists when there is evidence that a standard has been violated)

Step 2 Investigate the variables (Whose problem is this? Who is involved in the situation? How are you involved? How might this situation affect your agency? What other variables are present that seem significant, i.e. were laws or policies violated?)

Step 3 Get feedback (Seek the advice of your supervisor or another trusted colleague. What insight does this person have to the situation? Note persons consulted).

Step 4 Determine if you have an ethical problem or an ethical dilemma. (Use the NASW Code of Ethics to identify the specific ethical principles and standards that apply to your situation. Do you have an ethical issue or dilemma? An ethical issue involves one ethical principle that has been violated. In this case, referring to the NASW Code of Ethics may produce a straightforward answer. An ethical dilemma involves two or more competing ethical principles. **If you determine that you are dealing with an ethical problem, follow guidelines in the Code for handling the problem, then skip to step 6 Identify Possible Alternative Actions. If you have an ethical dilemma, proceed to Step 5.*

Step 5 Evaluate the ethical dilemma using a model for prioritizing or ranking ethical principles (e.g. Dolgoff, Loewenberg, and Harrington's (2005) Ethical Principles Screen which provides a hierarchy of ethical rights; Reamer's (1995) Guide to Ethical Decision Making examines ethical dilemmas on the basis of six ethical guidelines that rank one ethical principle against another). First, when using the Dolgoff et al model, list all the ethical rights that apply to the situation. **Note: the rights of the major parties affected and included in the evaluation (i.e. client, colleague, etc. Next identify the ethical right with the highest priority. That right receives top priority.*

Step 6 Alternative courses of action (Brainstorm courses of action. Try not to evaluate them at this point. List the possible courses of action below.)

¹ Modified form of Dolgoff, Loewenberg and Harrison's "Ethical Principles Screen" in Kirst-Ashman, K. & Hull, G. (2006). *Generalist practice with organizations and communities* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thompson.

Step 7 Evaluate alternatives (List pros and cons of each course of action. Consider the interests of all concerned.)

Step 8 Choose one or more alternatives (Write the choice or choices for implementation.)

Step 9 Record your rationale for the course of action you chose (Why did you select one or more alternatives over the others? Include ethical considerations.)

Hierarchy of Ethical Rights

Principle	Ethical Right	Basic Concept
	People Have the Right To	Right To
1. E	<u>Exist</u> with their basic needs met	(Life)
2. T	<u>Treatment</u> that is fair and equal	(Equality)
3. H	<u>Have</u> free choice and autonomy	(Autonomy)
4. I	<u>Injury</u> that is minimal or nonexistent	(Least Harm)
5. C	<u>Cultivate</u> a good quality of life	(Quality of Life)
6. S	<u>Secure</u> their privacy and confidentiality	(Privacy)
for	<u>Understand</u> the truth and receive available	(Truthfulness)
7. U	information	

Taken from: Dolgoff, Loewenberg, and Harrington's Ethical Principles Screen on page 395 of Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Hull, G. H. (2006). *Generalist practice with organizations and communities* (3rd ed.). Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.

Choices when Dealing with Colleagues Unethical Behavior

Dolgoff and colleagues (2005) offer six choices for responding to unethical behavior by colleagues.

1. **Ignore it.** You can simply ignore the behavior. (Refer to Reamer's Negative Responsibility Guidelines when considering this option).
2. **Approach the colleague yourself.** Share your concerns informally. Maybe the colleague is inexperienced or ignorant about the scope and ramifications of his/her behavior or maybe the problem is a minor one.
3. **Inform your supervisor about the situation.** There may be established agency procedure for dealing with such violations of agency policy.
4. **If the colleague is an NASW member.** Contact the local chapter for censure. You must have definite proof that the behavior has occurred and be willing to testify about it.
5. **State licensing board.** You can report the situation to the state licensing board. Again, you must have clear evidence to support your accusation.
6. **Whistle-blowing.** In The Social Work Dictionary (Barker, 1999), whistle-blowing is defined as, "Informing those people in positions of influence or authority outside an organization about the existence of an organization's practices that are illegal, wasteful, dangerous, or otherwise contrary to its stated policies" (p. 517).

Steve Wilson's Dilemma

Steve Wilson, LCSW works at a large hospital. He is called to the ER to assess a situation taking place with the Stone family. Social worker Wilson was called to conduct a mental status exam with Mary Stone. She appears to have a bruise over her left eye and a compound fracture of her right arm. While she was being medically examined she reported she wanted to kill herself. Steve Wilson discovers that Mary Stone has been the victim of domestic violence on four other occasions. This time she is feeling guilt about the serious injuries incurred by her son, Larry Stone, who was also admitted to the ER with her today. She is tired of being battered and realizes that her husband may actually kill her the next time. She asks you to check on her son's condition.

Steve calls the attending nurse and she tells him that Larry Stone, a 6 year old, has been admitted with several serious injuries that include a head injury, broken clavicle, third degree burns on his forearm, and a compound fracture of his left leg. At the present he is in the treatment area of the ER and she says that Larry is in a coma and appears to have a fractured skull. He will need to be institutionalized for a long period of time due to his brain injury.

Mary Stone goes on to tell Steve that she, her son, and husband have been seeing John Swanson, LCSW for therapy over the past two years. John is employed by the ACME Counseling Center and his supervisor is Mary Wynne, LCSW. She says that John has been conducting family therapy and couples' therapy with the members of the family. In addition, Mr. Swanson has been working with issues of alcoholism with Cyrus Stone who has been arrested for domestic violence and is not present with Mary or Larry today.

Mary Stone asks Steve Wilson to talk with John Swanson, LCSW. She says he seems to side with Cyrus sometimes due to biblical directives about wives needing to submit to their husbands. She is upset that she did not move to leave before her son was seriously injured. Mary wants to sign a release to allow Steve to talk with John Swanson. Mary further states that there have been two incidents of injury during the time the family has been seeing John Swanson for therapy. Mr. Swanson always wanted to help Mary and Cyrus reconcile. Cyrus always would seem repentant in front Mr. Swanson, and then they would have to go home and Cyrus would ridicule her. Mary reported that family confrontation of Cyrus resulted in the latest episode of rage and harm to her and Larry.

John Swanson tells Steve Wilson that he has been seeing the Stones for couples counseling relating to domestic violence issues and family counseling involving their son Larry. He also included work on alcohol dependence with Cyrus in the family therapy sessions. John says he believes that working with the family system has kept the family together. He says he has not reported Cyrus Stone to the abuse registry out of concern for Larry. After all Larry had not been hospitalized before. He also stated that reporting would harm the therapeutic relationship.

NOTES

Guide to Ethical Decision-Making

(Reamer, 1995)

- 1. Rules about Basic Survival Supersede Rules Governing Lesser Actions**
- 2. One Person's Right to Well-Being Supersedes Another Person's Right to Self-Determination**
- 3. One Person's Right to Self-Determination Supersedes That Same Person's Right to Well-Being**
- 4. Obeying Rules You Have Agreed to Support Supersedes the Right to Freely Break The Rules**
- 5. People's Right to Well-Being Supersedes Adherence to Rules You Have Agreed to Support**
- 6. Preventing Harm and Fulfilling Basic Needs Supersedes Withholding Your Own Property**

NASW ETHICS CASE

In 2004 Arizona voters passed Proposition 200 titled "Protect Arizona Now." The initiative listed four changes to the law: (a) requiring proof of citizenship when registering to vote; (b) requiring proof of identity in order to vote at the polls; (c) **mandating verification of identity and eligibility in order to receive certain public benefits;** and (d) **imposing mandatory reporting requirements on certain state and local government employees.** This law made social workers guilty of a misdemeanor crime if they did not report undocumented individuals who presented themselves for social services.

An ethics complaint against Samantha Social Worker, a member of NASW, was reported to the NASW Chapter office for violating this law. She was fined \$500 and sentenced to 12 days in jail and 2 years probation for failing to report a family of undocumented people. The family presented themselves to Samantha because the mother was suffering from terminal cancer and needed medications and medical treatment. Samantha believes the law to be unjust and inhumane.

You are on the NASW Ethics Board and will determine if Samantha violated the Code of Ethics when she chose not to report the family members to law enforcement. Today you will not be concerned with determining sanctions against Samantha. Your task is to determine whether or not she violated the NASW Code of Ethics.

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