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# Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice: The Fine Line Between Intervening and Not Intervening

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### ABSTRACT

Social work is a profession that aims to improve the social welfare of individuals and is shaped on the basis of human rights, justice and equality. Social workers may face various ethical issues and dilemmas while working to improve the quality of life of individuals. These issues are related to individuals' rights, confidentiality, independence, justice and other fundamental values. Ethical decision-making in social work practice helps to overcome such challenges in an appropriate and professional manner. Ethical decision-making is vital to the success of social work, and the proper management of this process by professionals has beneficial consequences for both clients and society. This article aims to draw attention to the professional ethical issues and dilemmas that social workers face in their practice. In addition, the stages of the ethical decision-making process will be discussed. In this context, the aim of the article is to analyze the ethical dilemmas faced by social workers and to reveal the ethical decision-making processes that should be followed in these situations. As a result, making decisions in accordance with ethical principles in social work practice increases the credibility and effectiveness of the profession by providing more effective and fair services at both individual and social levels.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Social work is an ethics-based profession that aims to improve people's well-being by standing against inequalities and discrimination and advocating for social justice and social change in society [1]. Due to the demanding nature of the profession, social workers around the world face many difficult situations that they must appropriately address in order to fulfill their duties. In some of these situations, social workers individually need to make an ethical decision, which may involve tensions between conflicting interests and moral values or ethical principles [2]. Especially for social workers working in the field, these situations are even more complex and often raise a variety of ethical issues that are no longer simple and straightforward cases to deal with. Such situations are a cause for concern as they make it difficult for social workers to choose between

unfavorable alternatives to make good decisions [3].

Problems in social work are directly related to the complex situations social workers face and require balancing the rights, needs and well-being of individuals with professional responsibilities and societal values [4]. These challenges often involve dilemmas related to confidentiality, informed consent, professional boundaries and cultural competence. Social workers also have to address conflicts of interest, resource constraints, and value conflicts between personal beliefs and ethical standards.

Their ability and commitment to act ethically is an important aspect of the quality of service provided to clients who engage with social workers. Respect for human rights and a commitment to promoting social justice are central to social work practice around the world [5]. All practical activities carried out by social workers are guided by core

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values, which include four basic categories. These are the values of the organization in which the social worker works, the professional values of social workers, the personal values of the social worker and finally the client values [6]. Our study highlights the importance of ethical decision-making frameworks and reflective practice to identify common ethical challenges faced by social workers and to manage these dilemmas. It also illustrates through case studies how social workers can navigate these ethical complexities and maintain their commitment to integrity, professionalism and client wellbeing.

## 2. ETHICAL PROBLEM

Ethical problem - refers to a difficult situation where a decision needs to be made but there is no dilemma for the person making the decision, i.e. it is clear which course of action to adopt. An example of an ethical problem is a situation where a social worker decides to respect the choice of a client with serious alcohol problems to stay at home, despite 'significant' risks to his or her safety and requests from friends that it is not safe [7].

While acting with the responsibility of defending and protecting the rights of individuals, social workers often encounter ethical problems arising from social, cultural and economic factors. These challenges include breaches of confidentiality, inability to provide services fairly due to limited resources, and the struggle to balance the rights of service recipients with professional responsibilities. In addition, social workers may experience conflicts between their personal values and the values of service recipients, especially when working with individuals in difficult situations [8].

Ethical problems often arise from the tension between social workers' social responsibilities and individual rights, whereas ethical dilemmas arise more from the necessity to choose between conflicting values and options [1].

## 3. ETHICAL DILEMMA

In the social work literature, ethical dilemmas are defined as situations involving a forced choice between two or more equally undesirable or unsatisfactory alternatives, each dictated by a different ethical principle [1]. In another definition, an ethical dilemma occurs when the social worker must choose between two or more conflicting ethical guidelines or when each alternative has an undesirable outcome for one or more people and is considered as a conflict of at least two opposing values that can affect each other [9].

For social workers, this distinction is particularly important in order to identify a situation as an ethical dilemma so that it can be addressed constructively. Ethical dilemmas are generally accepted as a routine part of the social work profession, regardless of the field of practice.

Studies show that ethical dilemmas that arise in both direct and indirect practice settings are most commonly related to the right to self-determination, informed consent, confidentiality and privacy, professional boundaries, moral and religious beliefs, administrative issues, and dual relationships [10]. A recent international study conducted by IFSW with the Social Work Ethics Research Partnership showed that the ethical dilemmas faced by social workers during the COVID-19 pandemic were related to the need to balance the rights, needs and risks of clients against personal risks to themselves and others, and the need to protect public health and safety [1].

Ethical dilemmas are a globally neglected topic in social work research, despite their importance for professional practice. In social work, ethical dilemmas play a vital role in the decision-making process as they affect professionals' ability to make decisions that are vital in dealing with ethically difficult situations during their work [11].

The principles and values prepared by NASW (National Association of Social Workers), a comprehensive guide to ethical standards in social work practice, provide a basic framework for ethical or professional behavior. The commitments to the client's right to self-determination, informed consent, professional competence, cultural competence/social diversity, conflict of interest, privacy and confidentiality, which are determined in the light of ethical principles, are very important in terms of guiding the social worker during practices [12].

## 4. ETHICAL DECISION MAKING

Social work is a multifaceted profession and the decisions made by social workers are influenced by many factors - their professional roles, ethical codes, practice experiences, personal preferences, institutional/governmental policies, laws, values and attitudes - all of which combine to shape their responses to ethical issues. Ethical decision-making involves informed judgment and critical thinking in situations where ethical solutions are not obvious. Under certain circumstances, a social worker's ethical obligations may conflict with organizational policies or even relevant laws or regulations. In the face of such conflict, social workers seek to resolve the problem in a way that is consistent with the values and principles expressed in their own code

of ethics and standards of practice. When a reasonable solution to a problem does not seem possible, social workers seek appropriate consultation before making a decision. This discussion may involve their regulatory agency, a knowledgeable colleague, a supervisor or legal counsel. Ethical decision-making is a common and integral part of social work practice, as practitioners are often faced with ethical dilemmas that require reflection and critical thinking; however, the resolution of such moral issues is rarely black and white and may run counter to their own values. Social workers recognize their unique value preferences and are alert to the ways in which competing values and ethical principles take precedence [13].

## 5. ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN DECISION MAKING

Social work professionals may face a number of ethical dilemmas in the ethical decision-making process. These dilemmas include the following:

### 5.1. *Autonomy and Intervention*

Social workers have to build a strong relationship of trust with their clients. However, at the same time, legal obligations and professional responsibilities may require them to violate their clients' privacy. This poses an ethical dilemma, especially in cases of child protection and domestic violence. For example, a child may want to keep the violence he or she experiences from his or her family secret, but the professional may be obliged to report it. In this situation, the professional has to choose between protecting the privacy of the individual and the responsibility to protect society [14].

In many social work situations, a balance needs to be struck between the right of individuals to make their own decisions (autonomy) and the need for professional intervention. For example, a social worker is working with an individual to whom she provides psychological support. This individual consistently exhibits harmful habits and addictive behaviors. The social worker offers the individual treatment recommendations for his/her addiction, but the individual is reluctant to receive treatment and does not want to make any changes in his/her addiction [15]. The ethical dilemma here creates a conflict between the individual's right to make his/her own decisions (autonomy) and the intervention and assistance that should be provided by the specialist (social good). Should the expert force the individual to intervene or respect the client's personal freedom?

In another example, a social worker receives information from a client that a crime is being

planned. The client requests to keep this information confidential and the expert is obliged by professional ethics to keep this information confidential. However, the expert realizes that the planned crime threatens the community and may cause victimization. The ethical dilemma in this situation creates a conflict between the obligation to protect the client's confidentiality and the responsibility to ensure the safety of society. The ethical dilemma is whether the expert should violate confidentiality and report the situation to the authorities, or maintain confidentiality and not cross personal boundaries [16].

### 5.2. *Family Unity and Child Protection*

Social workers play a critical role in protecting children and supporting families. However, sometimes children need to be separated from their families. Situations such as domestic violence or neglect can jeopardize a child's safety. For example, a social worker goes to investigate a child who has been subjected to forced labor and physical abuse by his or her family. The child wants to be reunited with his family because he says he loves them. However, in her interviews with the child, the expert realizes that the child has suffered great physical and psychological harm. The ethical dilemma then becomes a conflict between separating the child from the family to ensure the child's safety (child protection) and taking into account the child's desire to be reunited with the family (family unity) [17].

### 5.3. *Bilateral Relations and Borders*

Another common ethical dilemma is seen in a social worker's dyadic relationships with a client, where there is more than one type of relationship. One relationship may be professional, while another may be more casual, such as the social worker is also a close neighbor. When this occurs, there is always the potential for conflicts of interest and compromising the quality of care. Therefore, it is very important to avoid dual relationships at work whenever possible [10].

### 5.4. *Value Conflicts*

Social work professionals may sometimes experience conflicts between their personal values and professional values. In this case, it can be difficult to strike a balance between professional ethical principles and personal values. Value conflicts can complicate the decision-making process [18].

### 5.5. *Resource Limitations And Fairness*

Social service professionals often work with limited resources. The limited budgets and capacity

of aid programs may make it possible for only certain individuals to receive support. In this situation, while social workers strive to provide services to all applicants in a fair manner, they may sometimes have to refuse some people's requests for assistance. This leaves them with the responsibility to provide assistance to individuals with the greatest need without violating the principle of justice and equality [19].

Limited resources can affect the decisions of social workers. Factors such as budget constraints and the number of individuals served may make it difficult to implement decisions. In such cases, a balance should be struck between ethical responsibilities and practical limitations [3]. For example, a social worker realizes that the socio-economic support program has to work with limited resources due to the economic crisis. Many people have applied for support, but only a limited number of applications can be accepted. The expert will have to reject some of the applications. In this situation, the ethical dilemma arises from the conflict between the principles of justice and equity and the fact that resources are limited and therefore only certain people receive assistance. An example of an ethical dilemma is whether the expert should help the most urgent and needy people or try to ensure that everyone receives help equally [20].

#### **5.6. Beliefs and Professional Responsibilities**

Sometimes social workers may experience a conflict between their personal beliefs and values and their professional responsibilities. For example, a person may refuse certain medical treatments because of their religious beliefs. The social worker may have to respect this person's religious beliefs while at the same time making treatment recommendations to improve their health. Such situations pose challenges for professionals to balance professional responsibilities with personal values [17].

#### **5.7. Receiving a Gift**

For example, a client wants to give an expensive ring to a social worker for her birthday. Not accepting the gift may damage the relationship that the social worker has built with the client over many years; it may make the client feel personally rejected. Accepting the ring, however, may cross the line into an inappropriate relationship because the ring is expensive, it may imply a bribe, and the nature of the ring may have intimate, romantic connotations. A social worker weighing these two options would probably decide to reject the gift. However, in another case, the social worker may decide that accepting a small gift from another client, such as a handmade knitting project or a

homemade fruit cake, may be a more attractive option than refusing and risking damage to the professional relationship [21].

### **6. STRATEGIES FOR OVERCOMING ETHICAL DILEMMAS**

Strategies for social workers to cope with ethical dilemmas are presented below:

#### **6.1. Continuous Training and Commitment To Code of Ethics**

Social workers should frequently review ethical codes and professional guidelines to deal with ethical issues. Adhering to the principles of professional ethics helps professionals to make healthier and more ethical decisions. Continuing education and ethical guidance improve the ability to deal with such dilemmas [22].

#### **6.2. Supervision, Intervention and Counseling**

Social work professionals can get support from experienced colleagues or supervisors when they face ethical problems. Supervision and counseling can help professionals find the right path when faced with difficult decisions [23]. In an ethical dilemma, colleagues can be the best resource. They can provide insight and Inter-team collaboration is also extremely useful. Social workers can learn a lot from colleagues in other disciplines [24].

#### **6.3. Open communication with the client**

Open and transparent communication with clients can alleviate ethical dilemmas. Understanding the client's needs and concerns can help the professional to generate solutions that are in line with their ethical responsibilities [25].

#### **6.4. Legal framework and practical guidance**

Complying with legal regulations provides a guiding framework for making ethical decisions. This ensures that the professional does not ignore legal obligations while fulfilling professional responsibilities [26].

### **7. STEPS OF ETHICAL DECISION MAKING PROCESS IN SOCIAL WORK**

Ethical decision-making is the process by which a professional makes the most accurate, fair and professional decision regarding an ethical dilemma or problem. Social workers try to find solutions that are ethically correct and compatible with societal values, taking into account the best interests of their clients. Ethical decision-making requires finding the balance between individual values and professional principles, while at the same time respecting the rights of individuals and



social justice [27]. By following the ethical decision-making process systematically, social work professionals can make consistent and rational decisions when faced with difficult situations. The basic steps of this process are as follows:

### **7.1. Defining the Ethical Problem**

The ethical decision-making process starts with the correct definition of the ethical problem or dilemma. The social worker should understand which ethical principles are being violated. In this step, the needs of the client, the responsibilities of the professional and the dynamics of the situation are examined in detail [28].

The first step involves acknowledging the ethical problem and identifying the specific ethical problem. In some cases the problem may seem obvious, while in other cases ethical issues are hidden in a web of interrelated problems. Careful consideration is needed to determine whether it is a legal issue, a personal/cultural issue, a regulatory issue, or an issue that concerns institutions, systems and/or society beyond the organization [13]. The ethical issue may be a combination of all these factors. Therefore, the following questions should be asked when defining the problem:

If this is a legal issue, what does the law require? Who should report it?

Are the problems specific to the personalities of the individual? If so, what are the values that motivate them?

What other values are at stake? Whose values are these?

Do these values coincide with the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW) Ethical values?

### **7.2. Identification of Relevant Ethical Principles**

Every social work practice should be carried out in line with certain ethical principles. These principles include values such as confidentiality, independence, social justice, individual rights and respect. The professional should determine which ethical principles should be more prominent in the situation they face. This is necessary to resolve the situation more clearly [29].

### **7.3. Review of Alternatives**

When making an ethical decision, the social work professional should consider different alternative solutions. Possible options are examined, taking into account the consequences of each alternative and the long-term benefits for the client. At this stage, the ethical and legal dimensions of all options are carefully considered [30].

### **7.4. Evaluation of Results**

The possible consequences of each alternative are evaluated. The most important criterion here is to consider the client's interests. In addition, the social and cultural effects of the decision should also be taken into consideration. The social worker should consider how this decision will affect the client and how it will affect the social structure [31].

### **7.5. Decision Making**

After evaluating the results, the social worker should take the most appropriate decision. This decision should be a solution that is compatible with ethical principles and in the best interests of the client. At this stage, the professional should demonstrate a fair and respectful approach that will not violate the client's rights [32].

### **7.6. Implementation and Monitoring**

The decision should be implemented and monitored. The social service professional should observe the effects of the decision and make changes when necessary. This stage is important to evaluate the effectiveness and accuracy of the decision [33].

### **7.7. Evaluation and Reflection**

Once the decision has been made, the social work professional should evaluate the process and analyze what they have learned. This provides an important learning opportunity to deal with similar situations in the future. Ethical decision-making should be a process of continuous development and improvement [34]. Ethical decisions made by social workers are shaped by the decision maker and the process used to resolve ethical dilemmas. Although systematic guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas provide social workers with a logical approach to decision-making, discretionary judgments inevitably determine the final choice of action. Social workers are influenced by their professional roles, practice experiences, individualized perspectives, personal preferences, motivations and attitudes. Through reflective self-awareness, social workers can become aware of their value preferences and be alert to the ways in which these values unwittingly influence the resolution of ethical dilemmas. Understanding which values or ethical principles are prioritized among competing alternatives can inform social workers about their own value patterns [35].

## **8. Conclusion**

Ethical issues and dilemmas are common in social work practice and make some cases difficult

to resolve. Social workers need a strong understanding of ethics, professional knowledge and support networks to deal with the ethical challenges they face. Ethical dilemmas are complex situations that can exist in all areas of social work and require careful consideration, open communication and professional guidance to overcome these challenges. Social workers need to develop skills in dealing with ethical issues in order to provide more just, effective and ethical services to society. In conclusion, ethical dilemmas remain a largely understudied area of social work research in our country and around the world and offer great potential for scientific discovery.

### Conflict of Interest

No conflict of interest is declared by the authors. In addition, no financial support was received.

### Author Contributions

Conception and design of the study: GA, DSS; Data collection: GA, DSS; Data analysis: GA, DSS; Data Interpretation: GA, DSS; Drafting the article and/or its critical revision: GA, DSS; All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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