

Ethical Dilemmas In Social Work Practice

Lauren Sapko

Longwood University

SOWK 412

Professor Betts

October 4, 2021

Ethical Dilemmas In Social Work Practice

In most agencies or organizations there are a set of policies and procedures the workers must follow, this is true for Social workers as well. Social workers work in a variety of settings that are typically people-oriented, because of this social workers are held to a high standard when working and are governed by the National Association Of Social workers or NASW. The NASW includes a code of ethics which they describe as being a set of standards that may help guide social workers while working with clients. (NASW, 2017) For example, the NASW code of ethics outlines within their ethical standards what conflict of interest means which therefore helps to discourage inappropriate relationships between the social worker and their clients. (NASW, 2017) Although the NASW does cover many topics within their ethical standards from conflict of interest to discrimination it is nearly impossible to have a comprehensive list of what breaks ethical codes as ethical dilemmas present themselves frequently, and oftentimes unexpectedly while working in the field. Because of this, it is crucial for Social workers to practice their decision-making process and become familiar with what ethics mean and situations where ethical dilemmas occur so they can still uphold the ethical standards of social work during moments of uncertainty. (NASW, 2017)

Knowing how to respond to ethical dilemmas in leadership is essential for not only the professional success of the worker but as well as the well-being of the client. An ethical dilemma is defined by having a conflict arise where there are two competing values at play. In this case, it is up to the social worker to define what values are involved and what consequences may occur for each action that may be taken. For this reason, the NASW does not establish values or standards that are more important to abide by but rather leaves that up to the discretion of the

social worker as well taking into account what the laws are for the state the social worker is residing in. (NASW, 2017)

For a leader to be trusted and preserve the integrity of their organization they must have upstanding morals and act ethically. When studying positions of authority research showed that “people are as much concerned about fair procedures as they are about fair outcomes.” (Emler, 2019, p. 37) For this reason when a social worker is facing an ethical dilemma while in a leadership position it is critical that the decisions they make are for the best interest of the client and that they are not making the decision based solely on biases they may have or are abusing the authority they hold within the agency. (Emler, 2019) An example that outlines power disparities and ethics could be a social worker deciding whether or not to decline services to a youth offender who refuses to attend services if her friend is not allowed to attend her sessions as well, even though the social worker and the agency find that having other adolescents involved may be problematic to her treatment. (McComb, 2020)

Here is another example of an ethical dilemma, Katie lives in a rural area and is in need of mental health services to cope with her anxiety. Because rural communities often do not carry many options for services including different social workers to seek services from dual relationships within rural communities are fairly common. (Edwards, 2015) In Katie’s case there is only one licensed social worker in her town that can provide her with the support she needs. The Social worker, Kevin, happens to be Katie’s brother’s best friend. Kevin who has known Katie’s family for years has already had a pre-established relationship with her prior to services. Providing services to Katie would be a conflict of interest as he would be engaging in a dual relationship; however in this case it may be unavoidable given their environment and the needs of Katie.

In order for Kevin to make sure he is making the most ethical decision, he should utilize the ethical decision-making model. This starts by having Kevin first decide if there is an ethical dilemma, in this case, the ethical dilemma is whether Kevin should decline services to Katie due to a dual relationship or provide her with services. In the next step, Kevin needs to determine which values and ethics are involved. The code of ethics states in 1.06 (B) "Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients." (NASW, 2017) The same section also states that when dual relationships are unavoidable they should take necessary steps to maintain professionalism and set clear boundaries between themselves and the client. (NASW, 2017)

The next step would be to define key values. The key values in this scenario are professionalism, dignity and worth of a person, and trust. In this case, the values may be ranked by dignity and worth of a person, professionalism, and trust. Dignity and worth of a person come first because Katie has a right to receive services in order to better her mental health and to address her needs. (NASW, 2017) Without services, there is no certainty in how that may impact her day-to-day functioning which may include her relationships, job, and her overall physical and mental health. Professionalism comes next because dual relationships may impact the client negatively and put them at a higher risk for harm, as well as could potentially affect Kevin's job, and his relationship with her brother. Trust, would be ranked last as it is similar to professionalism in the sense that Katie should be able to trust that Kevin is treating her in a fair and competent manner with respect to confidentiality, as well as the mutual understanding that both parties will respect pre-established boundaries.

Kevin in this case should accept Katie as a client, but before services begin he should establish his professional and personal boundaries with Katie such as not disclosing Katie as a

patient to her brother and only providing services to Katie when an appointment is scheduled. After implementing this plan Kevin should reflect on the decisions he made using the ethical decision model.

Social workers should also utilize supervision when faced with an ethical dilemma in conjunction with the Code Of Ethics. While the social worker could not identify the client in any form during supervision they may disclose the overall case with a supervisor for guidance on how to proceed. Supervision can help provide the social worker facing the ethical dilemma with unique and professional insight that they had not previously considered. They may also provide peer support to the social worker if the ethical dilemma is inducing stress. It is important when facing an ethical dilemma to use all available resources to help produce the best possible outcome.

References

Edwards, B., & Addae, R. (2015). Ethical Decision-Making Models in Resolving Ethical Dilemmas in Rural Practice: Implications for Social Work Practice and Education.

Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics, 12(1), 88–92.

Emler, N. (2019). Seven moral challenges of leadership.

Consulting Psychology Journal: Practice and Research, 71(1), 32–46.

<https://doi-org.proxy.longwood.edu/10.1037/cpb0000136>

McComb, L. (2020). Ethical dilemmas in power and authority: A social work student confronts her own power. *Ethics and Social Welfare*, 14(4), 425–431.

<https://doi-org.proxy.longwood.edu/10.1080/17496535.2020.1839183>

NASW. (2017). *Code of ethics*. Socialworkers.org; National Association of Social Workers.

<https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>