

SOCIAL WORK ETHICS AND PRACTICE: THE ACCOUNTABILITY IN DECISION MAKING

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ABSTRACT

The ethics of social work, as a branch of applied ethics and practice, establishes the primary objective of a social worker: to assist persons in addressing current moral dilemmas related to ethical decision-making. This article specifically addresses the unique challenges that arise in social work practice, with a focus on responsibility in decision-making about social concerns such as social inclusion, poverty, and prosperity in society. The proposition states that social workers have a moral obligation to strive for just, equitable, and responsible access to valuable decision-making resources. Nevertheless, social workers often encounter obstacles such as institutional, organisational, or personal limitations, as well as systematic discrimination, racism, and several other issues that hinder them from working by their ethical beliefs. This essay emphasises the significance of ethical information for social workers in developing ethical decision-making abilities that are tailored to particular practical contexts. We contend that social work is a distinct field of study that requires a corresponding methodology that can effectively support activities such as interviewing, observation, experimentation, analysis of moral and ethical dilemmas, content analysis, and other related approaches. Our stance is that analysing ethical issues arising from social work practice is a very effective method for developing and strengthening the practical skills required to make challenging but justifiable ethical choices and decisions as a social worker. In this context, the research suggests that a social worker should gather extensive information in order to make an ethical and well-informed judgement and action plan for accountability in decision-making.

Key words: Social worker, ethics, practice, accountability, decision making

INTRODUCTION

This introduction emphasises the significance of ethical reasoning in society, shown by a selection of historical instances that exemplify ethical principles and responsibility. Thus, it is important to first elucidate the disparities that exist between ethics and risk in social work management. Moral philosophy, rooted in ancient principles, is a subdivision of ethics. However, risk management is a current focus that pertains specifically to modern professional lifestyles. It provides guidance on how to navigate laws and regulations in order to minimise professional liability in practice. Social work is a profession and academic subject that focuses on promoting social change and development, fostering social cohesiveness, and empowering and liberating individuals (IFSW, 2014). In several countries, including Bulgaria, social work has been formally acknowledged as a profession since the 1990s. However, it is worth noting that in Bulgarian society, many activities resembling the modern concept of "social work" were already being carried out prior to this time. (Minev, 2012). The Social Assistance Act (1998) and the Regulation for the Implementation of the Social Assistance Act (1998) mark the start of social reform in Bulgaria. Nevertheless, up to now, there is a dearth of significant and anticipated outcomes. This is because the majority of other countries, particularly developing nations, have not yet embraced these modern advancements and innovations. In Nigeria, there is a lack of a comprehensive and coordinated strategy between governmental institutions and the civil sector to actively include different disadvantaged populations. It is an undeniable reality that low salaries and deteriorating financial circumstances exist (Popova & Angelova, 2004). A significant portion of the population lives in abject poverty, with frequent lack of access to essential services and poor provision of such services. The discourse among institutions on the significance and principles of key ideas like deinstitutionalization and decentralisation within

a shared framework of values has not yet occurred. The social worker encounters fresh obstacles in their role as a mediator between vulnerable groups of individuals on one side and the obligatory regulations, tactics, and procedures outlined in normative acts on the other side. Simultaneously, he is compelled to carry out his duties within a social setting where social interactions are regulated by distinct legal and moral principles (Benkova et al., 2017). This results in various limitations and obstacles, accompanied with pertinent ethical and socialising endeavours. The scientific and applied research on social work in Africa, including Nigeria, is mostly not driven by the particular practical circumstances. Practice addresses topics such as poverty, social inclusion, social transformation, equitable income distribution, and caring for those with little resources. The complexity and sensitivity of confidentiality concerns, informed consent, and self-determination are heightened in situations when individuals need help and their rights and decision-making skills are restricted due to factors such as their age, ability, competence, legal constraints, and parental authority. In order to address these issues, the field of social work emphasises the need of both professional competence and moral preparedness among social workers (Kusev, 1998). Social workers have a dual obligation to safeguard and uphold the values and principles of their profession, which include making accountable decisions and addressing all the issues that come with doing social work. Without the necessary professional experience and understanding of the unique empirical environment of the specialised social practice or social institutions, it is not feasible to accurately analyse and understand these challenges. This should be included as part of the need to be knowledgeable and comprehend the culture and values of the customers. Therefore, the social worker's hands-on tasks are carried out in a setting characterised by intricate predicaments that they analyse and encounter. The responsibility to resolve these predicaments often results in mental, bodily, and emotional fatigue. Based on our personal experience and study conducted by Benkova et al. (2017), we have seen that social workers often exhibit a significant degree of anxiety, emotional instability, anger, and dissatisfaction in their responsibility profile. Consequently, this leads to the inability to achieve professional expertise, hindered contact with colleagues and customers, and challenges in making ethical judgements. Social workers often collaborate with multidisciplinary teams consisting of professionals such as physicians, nurses, psychologists, and pedagogues to provide social and healthcare services. The team members have the ability to operate from varied paradigms of aid and support, as well as demonstrate a commitment to diverse moral principles. Consequently, this broadens the range of ethical challenges and increases the intricacy of the ethical decision-making process within particular practical scenarios. When making decisions, social workers face a complex position. They must balance opposing professional ideals, control the impact of their own value system, and consider the values of the individuals they serve.

Theoretical Background

The essay aims to assess the significance of social work ethics in terms of responsibility in decision-making for social workers in the field of ethical practicum, with the goal of developing ethical decision-making abilities. We use and implement the ethical practicum to establish a culture of ethical decision-making, taking into account the particularities of practical circumstances (Kusev, 1998). The primary points of this study are associated with the following factors. Ethical decision-making is a methodical process that involves carefully analysing and resolving ethical challenges. Each of these processes is grounded on basic values that stem from different philosophical approaches to ethics. Therefore, it is important to carefully evaluate and choose any such technique. Conversely, social workers must possess knowledge of the merits and constraints of the ethical frameworks that underpin these procedures. The ethical decision-making process entails a conscientious endeavour to harmonise the ideals of social work with the objectives and obligations of the individuals involved. According to Benkova and Georgiev (2019). This requires a deep grasp and awareness of the ethical principles that govern the conduct of social workers. It also involves the capacity to analyse complex ethical situations and use techniques based on philosophical approaches to ethics. Put simply, social workers must possess the capacity to engage in critical

thinking. The development of these abilities, with the aim of enhancing the practice of social work, is closely linked to the training process. Social professionals must undergo comprehensive training and continuous education that encompasses both conventional knowledge and radical analysis of social control, individual user concerns, and conventional societal interpretations.

Approach and Details in Social Work Practice

The ethics of social work practice encompasses a distinct topic area that requires a rigorous approach. This methodology includes several techniques such as interviewing, observation, experimentation, study of moral and ethical issues, content analysis, and others. Hence, it is important to have adaptability, both in the selection and in the integration of various assessment techniques. Social work practice places significant emphasis and focus on cultivating a culture of ethical decision-making, fostering critical thinking skills, and developing the capacity to make informed choices in various situations. The main benefit of this approach, as opposed to other methods, is the opportunity for trainees to not only acquire a specific algorithm for moral decision-making, but also to actively contribute to its development when addressing particular ethical dilemmas or moral-ethical situations. Social work is considered to be a prominent and comprehensive type of ethical activity (Zhukova, 2007). Viktoruk (2013) highlights the significance of the traditional practice approach in teaching ethics. During the practice, individuals not only develop professional and ethical skills related to morality, but they also have the opportunity to enhance their personal moral development by cultivating self-esteem, tolerance, understanding of others, and recognising the significance of universal moral values (Benkova & Georgiev, 2019). Engaging in ethical practices allows for the exploration of personal and professional creative endeavours. During the practice, individuals assimilate ethical information. Additionally, it fosters the growth and does not hinder the expression of personality. The professional ethical practice of social work encompasses a range of tools, such as ethical tasks and exercises, the analysis of specific moral situations, accountability, and ethical business games and standards. One important aspect of this practice is the examination of ethical dilemmas, which receives particular attention in this analysis.

Applied Ethics from the Social Work Perspective Principles of morality and right conduct Decisions made by social workers in the course of their job are impacted by a wide range of variables, including but not limited to: professional responsibilities, ethical standards, experiences in the field, personal preferences, organisational and governmental policies, laws, beliefs, and attitudes. Their answers to ethical dilemmas are influenced by all of these things. If you want to make an ethical judgement in a situation where there aren't any clear solutions, you need to apply your knowledge and logic. From time to time, a social worker's ethical obligations may run counter to agency policy or even to specific legal requirements. To resolve disagreements, social workers look to accountability measures that are consistent with their decision-making and ethical standards. But when it looks like there's no way to fix a problem, social workers will seek out the right people to talk to before making a decision. A supervisor, an ethical committee, a colleague with knowledge in the subject, the relevant regulatory authority, or legal counsel might all be involved in this discussion. One important and pervasive part of social work is holding clients and colleagues accountable when making ethical decisions. Ethical challenges that need deep thought and analysis are common for practitioners. But these moral dilemmas aren't always easy to solve, and doing so may test their ideals. By training themselves to be more self-aware, social workers are better able to recognise when their own values and those of their clients are at odds and to intervene when necessary. Linzer (1999, p.1) stated thus:

“Ethical behaviour comes from a social worker’s individual commitment to engage in ethical practice. Both the spirit and the letter of this Code of Ethics will guide social workers as they act in good faith and with a genuine desire to make sound judgements”.

In order to help social workers make ethical decisions, the Manitoba College of Social Workers (MCSW) has put out a code of ethics and standards of practice. However, social workers still lack thorough guidance on how to handle every possible ethical challenge from these regulations and standards.

Social workers will find this ethical decision-making framework useful in navigating complex ethical situations. Using it as a roadmap for your thoughts is not the intention. Instead, it serves as a framework for groups and individuals to use in order to have fruitful conversations that lead to ethical solutions. Additionally, this perspective has the potential to encourage social workers to engage in positive ethical discussions with their clients, families, communities, coworkers, and employers. The following are some of the goals of using an accountability perspective when making ethical decisions: first, to critically analyse the relevant laws, policies, and professional values that apply to the situation; second, to systematically identify the ethical dilemma and make challenging decisions; third, to facilitate discussions on ethically significant factors with all relevant stakeholders, including clients, families, and communities; fourth, to determine appropriate actions and consequences; fifth, to effectively manage conflicts; and finally, to develop an ethical practices in social work are supported by the specified procedures, which are in line with specific principles. Principles that an individual, family, group, organisation, or community works for are what fall under this category of values. They reflect the ideals and principles that people hold in high regard. Some principles are more important than others, and those priorities can change in the future. Additional values are ingrained in a person's personality and remain constant over the years, developing into deeply held tastes or principles that individuals fight to maintain. It is critical to identify and consider the perspectives and goals of every person who can be affected by the decision. There will be those whose opinions and goals are more weighty than others. Think about how everyone's priorities could mesh with those of other parties involved.

Factors must be taken into account and the outcomes that may result. While social workers acknowledge the need of implementing fundamental principles such as client autonomy and confidentiality in their work, the application of these principles may become more ambiguous when they clash with other values. Hence, in situations when there is a conflict between two or more values, it is improbable for a social worker to react in a way that is equally consistent with each of the values. At what juncture should the autonomy of the client be prioritised above conflicting principles related to maintaining a healthy way of life? There are some circumstances when sacrificing confidentiality is necessary, such as when a social worker determines that the actions taken by the client pose a danger to the safety of others. Social workers must also reconcile their judgements with the paramount concern for the client's welfare.

An ethical quandary may arise when a person is faced with many competing commitments, perhaps leading to severe repercussions for the client or their loved ones. Social workers should prioritise their commitments by assessing the net benefit of their interventions in terms of the positive outcomes against the possible negative consequences. As a social worker, it is crucial to acknowledge that while evaluating any choice, one should take into account the possible hazards linked to each alternative. Prior to reaching a final choice, it is essential to conduct a comprehensive assessment of the potential risks and rewards in order to inform the decision-making process. When considering accountability, it is important to take into account several elements like public laws, professional standards, agency regulations, professional code of ethics, culture-based systems of morality, and the religious values of the client. Categorically, think about the possible outcomes of the situation by taking into consideration the following:

- What are the possible harms?
- What are the likelihood levels of risk?
- How important is the option for consideration to you, to the client and their family and to the wider community?
- Does this issue need to be dealt with now or can it wait?

A social worker has the authority to evaluate and develop safety measures, prioritise possible benefits and good outcomes, while considering potential risks, damages, and negative consequences. It is important to consistently evaluate the prioritisation of competing ideals, even if they may vary in different contexts. The Dilemmas of Ethical Decision Making in Social Work Practice The significance of dilemmas in ethical social work training is in their role in moral judgement, as they allow participants to consider and choose from several alternative options when discussing a particularly challenging scenario. Callahan (1980) and other writers argue that social work ethics should address the potential influence on decision-making and conduct, raising important considerations for practitioners to consider. The issue at hand is whether it is appropriate to expect social workers to change individuals' behaviour if it assumes that they behave in an ethically wrong way. Nevertheless, the nature of this job is centred upon conduct, and for the ethics of social work to be beneficial to social workers, it must prove its usefulness in the challenging and practical task of ethical decision-making. Therefore, ethical decision-making and proper individual action should rely on thorough study, substantial arguments, intellectual accountability, and moral judgement capability. The act of observing social work allows social workers to identify the factors that lead to ethical difficulties and to contemplate the intricate connection between the behaviour of social workers and the process of making ethical decisions (Reamer, 1998). In our opinion, we found that observing practice-based and well-structured dilemmas that emotionally connect social workers, and include a time perspective and an opportunity for discussion, is one of the most effective ways to develop and strengthen the practice of making difficult but justified ethical choices. Through internships in diverse social services and state institutions, as well as regular meetings with practicing social workers, we have gained valuable experience that has enabled us to identify several groups of ethical dilemmas for discussion within the context of ethical practicum. The proposed categorization of ethical challenges into five types is presented as a common method for presenting ethical difficulties. While there are alternative frameworks for categorising and examining ethical dilemmas, such as those proposed by Kidder (1995), this study does not delve into them. However, these frameworks generally share the purpose of offering tools and terminology for analysing and debating ethical concerns. They also present dilemmas as conflicts between principles, norms, values, and roles. Therefore, the following dilemmas, while encompassing universal aspects of social work practice, do not fully address the specific challenges faced by social workers in Nigeria. However, it is crucial for social workers to be aware of and comprehend their organization's stated values, as well as the social work values demonstrated in their professional code of ethics and standards of practice, in order to navigate these dilemmas effectively:

- a.) When the applicability or context of the ethical norm is ambiguous. In this instance, a quandary emerges about the implementation of a criterion. For instance, in situations when the user displays hazardous activity that poses a threat to himself and others, confidentiality boundaries may be imposed. Applying standards becomes more complex when dealing with individuals who are vulnerable, since the intention of the standard, while clearly defined, may conflict with other laws or regulations about ethical duty. The social worker is obligated to adhere to the standard and concept of honouring the client's autonomy and assisting them in defining their objectives. There are situations when it is necessary for a social worker to override a customer's self-determination if the social worker determines that the customer's chosen actions are not in their best interests or pose a danger to their safety.
- b.) When there is a clash between standards and institutional needs. The difficulty may occur when an organization's policies or practices clash with established standards. Personal values and access to social and economic activities in Nigeria are governed by national law, which explicitly outlines the authority of different institutions. Nevertheless, the social worker may have unease over this strategy due to concerns about adhering to consumer protection information rules and safeguarding the confidentiality of user documents. Another, more

grave than the preceding instance, is to the execution of governmental policies and safeguarding the distinct personality of a kid, such as in the deinstitutionalization of persons with various disabilities. c.) When a social worker has challenges in conforming to or abiding by the ethical guidelines as a professional. These difficulties emerge as an inherent clash inside the social worker's character. A significant portion of professional training focuses on personal growth, taking into account the characteristics of practitioners such as their drive, susceptibility, and principles. It also explores how these factors may either support or impede good performance. The crucial aspect is that work does not exclude challenges when the principles of a social worker are met with an ethical criterion. A typical scenario occurs when the law or professional regulations mandate secrecy, yet the beliefs and perspectives of social workers advocate for transparency. Although it may seem evident that adhering to the law or prioritising the client's well-being above the social worker's own desires is the correct course of action, it is not necessarily morally or ethically justifiable.

d.) When the attainability of sound judgements made by a social worker seems to be unattainable. The three aforementioned conditions are interconnected with the selection of a competitive "good" or "right" option aimed at achieving long-lasting solutions. However, dilemmas might occur when there are no satisfactory solutions in a particular scenario, and the only option is to choose between competing "undesirable" or "incorrect" alternatives. Indeed, the word "dilemma" refers to the need to choose between two undesirable options. After discussing these four essential yet preventable challenges in social work practice, it is crucial to recognise and emphasise that the initial and crucial step in addressing these dilemmas is for the social worker to understand and distinguish their nature. As a social worker, identifying the nature of an issue enables the transition from a state of bewilderment to taking action, ultimately promoting responsibility in decision-making. Differentiation enables the social worker to discern the components of ethics in each challenge, so facilitating the development of potential resolution choices. The study of ethical problems in the context of ethical practice follows a sequential process, which is outlined in a model called the "Framework to Analyse Ethical Dilemmas." This model was established by Mattison in 2000.

CONCLUSION

Social work is a vocation dedicated to enhancing the physical and mental health, as well as the social welfare, of individuals, couples, families, and communities. Social workers apply accountability, competence, professional ethics, and values in many areas of practice throughout their careers. They utilise their skills, knowledge, and professional judgements to guarantee that clients get services of the utmost quality. Social work practice is based on a code of ethics that establishes norms and principles, creating a shared ethical framework. Integrating ethical decision-making is an essential element of social work practice. This study is expected to serve as a valuable resource for social workers as they navigate uncertain situations and make ethical judgements based on good judgement. The practical job of a social worker occurs within the realm of intricate challenges that they analyse and encounter, along with the responsibility to resolve them. The significant knowledge of social work plays a crucial role in shaping the future of the industry by educating competent workers.

RECOMMENDATION

Effective social work entails making, communicating, and implementing decisions within the framework of social work practice. After this process, it is crucial for the social worker to evaluate their own comfort with the choice and analyse its effect and responsibility. Therefore we consider the following recommendation:

- 1.) A social worker should gather as much information as possible in order to develop an ethical and well-informed choice and action plan for accountability in decision-making.
- 2.) In actual practice, every social worker should include all individuals who have the right to provide input and/or be engaged in making essential decisions and action plans.
- 3.) A social worker should have foreseen and made efforts to address the repercussions and ethical dilemmas arising from their decision and action plan, particularly for those who are significantly impacted by it; and
- 4.) If a social worker is assigned to replace any of the stakeholders in a given situation, they should consider the decision and action plan to be fundamentally equitable, taking into account all relevant circumstances.

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