Ethics and Social Work Practice

Fundamental Assumption: Helping Is Good

- Helping: Is it Really “Good”?
- What Counts as “Real Help”
  - Who Is the Client?
  - What Is in the Client’s Best Interest?
  - What Sort of Social Structure Is Consistent With Our Goals?
- Who Should Decide?

Other Assumptions

- Social/Legal
- Personal
- Skill-Based and Professional

Key Ethical Questions

- GOALS
  - What are the goals?
  - What are the worker's responsibilities?
    - To the client
    - To society
    - To the agency
    - To the profession
    - To oneself
- DECISION-MAKING
  - Who should decide the goals and responsibility?

Reasons for Doing as One Ought

- Teleological (Consequentialist): to achieve certain aims, purposes, and desires. Rules derived from this viewpoint are sometimes called “values” (what is regarded good and desirable).
- Deontological: to discharge a duty, an obligation. Rules derived from this viewpoint are sometimes called “ethics” (what is regarded as right and correct).

What Is/Are Ethics?

- Values - What is good and desirable (Teleological)
- Ethics - What is right & correct (Deontological)
Morals, Standards, and Laws

- Morals - Cultural &/or religious standards of behavior (Conventions)
  - Mores - Community Standards
  - Laws - Clearly-defined consequences

Ways of Deciding What Is Appropriate

- Legalistic
- Antinomian
- Contextual

Legalistic Decision-Making

- Decisions are based upon rules for appropriate behavior.

Antinomian Decision-Making

- Abstract principles are too confining to deal with concrete situations.
- Morals, values, ethics all derive from the individual in the particular situation.

Contextual Decision-Making

- Moral principles are socially-derived examples of how the community has dealt with particular problems of conduct.

Six Core Values

- VALUE I: Service
- VALUE II: Social Justice
- VALUE III: Dignity and Worth of the Person
- VALUE IV: Importance of Human Relationships
- VALUE V: Integrity
- VALUE VI: Competence
Six Ethical Standards

- Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to Clients
- Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to Colleagues
- Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities in Practice Settings
- Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities as Professionals
- Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to the Social Work Profession
- Social Workers’ Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society

Ethical “Dilemmas” - Guidelines (Reamer)

- Right to life, health, well-being, and necessities of life are prior to rights to confidentiality and opportunities for “enhancements”, e.g., wealth, education, recreation.
- An individual’s right to well being is prior to another’s right to privacy, freedom, or self-determination.
- An individual’s right to self-determination is prior to his/her right to basic well-being.

Discussion Background

The Sanger Agency provides family services to the community. It also serves as the intake for an abortion clinic that offers first trimester abortions.

The official policy of the agency is that any decision is valid as long as it is the client’s - not the social worker’s or that of any third party such as a parent or boyfriend.

Discussion Points

- 1.01 Commitment to Clients
  Social workers’ primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients. In general, clients’ interests are primary.

- 1.02 Self-Determination
  Social workers respect and promote the right of clients to self-determination and assist clients in their efforts to identify and clarify their goals. Social workers may limit clients’ right to self-determination when, in the social workers’ professional judgment, clients’ actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk to themselves or others.

- 1.07 Privacy and Confidentiality
  Social workers should protect the confidentiality of all information obtained in the course of professional service, except for compelling professional reasons.

Discussion Points

- 6.01 General Welfare
  Social workers should promote the general welfare of society, from local to global levels, and the development of people, their communities, and their environments. Social workers should advocate for living conditions conducive to the fulfillment of basic human needs and should promote social, economic, political, and cultural values and institutions that are compatible with the realization of social justice.

- 6.04 Social and Political Action
  Social workers should promote conditions that encourage respect for cultural and social diversity within the United States and globally. Social workers should promote policies and practices that demonstrate respect for difference, support the expansion of cultural knowledge and resources, advocate for programs and institutions that demonstrate cultural competence, and promote policies that safeguard the rights of and confirm equity and social justice for all people.
  (c) Social workers should act to prevent and eliminate domination of, exploitation of, and discrimination against any person, group, or class on the basis of race, ethnicity, national origin, color, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, political belief, religion, or mental or physical disability.

Questions

- Who are the individuals who would be affected by the decision?
- Who are the individuals whose well-being and right to self-determination must be considered when making this decision?
- What is the basis for deciding which individuals are given higher priority?
**Situation #1**

Laura, a fourteen year old girl, has come to the agency because she is eight weeks pregnant. She wants an abortion. Her parents are active in the local right-to-life movement. They have told Laura that they would never allow a child of theirs to have an abortion. It is not clear if state law allows minors to obtain abortions without parental consent. However, clinic administrators have decided to carry out “non-consent” abortions on a case by case basis.

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**Situation #2**

Lisa, a fourteen year old girl, has been brought to the agency by her parents. Lisa is in the eighth week of pregnancy. Her parents want her to have an abortion. They are concerned about the social and medical risks of an early pregnancy. Lisa will not consider abortion or adoption. She insists upon keeping her baby “so that I can have something of my own to love.”