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Introduction

Ethics are the heart of social work. Since social work is all about the welfare of others, without certain ethical and moral guidelines, the profession is vulnerable and distrustful. This is why, the social work profession comes with ethical guidelines protected under the Code of Ethics developed by National Association of Social Workers (NASW). This Code of Ethics allows social workers to make decisions that are morally and ethically sound, that benefit others, and that also protect the social worker. The significance of the Code of Ethics is to ensure that social workers benefit society through its six core values: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (Doel & Nelson, 2016). Every licensed social worker is obliged to follow and consult the Code of Ethics as the first resource when it comes to facing complex ethical dilemmas, such as personal or emotional bias, confidentiality safety, or conflict of moral or religious beliefs.

Ethical dilemmas in social work are more common than we think. It occurs when there is a conflict between two or more ethical principles or values. While social workers are bound to learn ethical decision making, follow professional principles and ethical values when taking decisions to benefit people, there are often times they find themselves stuck in difficult situations where they have to make a choice between two equally valid courses of actions (Sandu & Frunza, 2017). The following are some common examples of such ethical dilemmas.

Personal or emotional bias is a common ethical dilemma that social workers go through. Social workers are healers and helpers, they form human relationships with their clients to provide support and empathy and gain their trust whilst maintaining professional boundaries. In

doing so, they may often find themselves too close to the issue. For example, a child protection social worker's professional responsibility is to report any sort of maltreatment or neglect with a child. A social workers may discover that a single mother is unable to protect her child because she has to go for work to earn and cannot afford help, so the child stays alone at home for 7 hours a day. While the social worker may see a loving and hardworking mother and the child wants to stay with the mother, they may find themselves in an ethical dilemma to report the mother.

A second common ethical dilemma is confidentiality safety. A social worker may find himself in a position where they have to breach the trust of their client and reveal their confidential or private information for their safety. An example is when a client opens up about their mental health struggles such as anxiety or stress and are dealing with a workplace-related situation. The social worker may find themselves in an ethical dilemma to keep the privileged information to themselves or protect their client by telling their struggles to the employer.

Another common ethical dilemma is a conflict with the social workers' moral or religious values. A social worker is professionally obliged to cater the wellness of their client. For example, in cases where client wants abortion, the social worker needs to keep their religious or moral beliefs on the matter aside to cater to the needs with empathy and support. Social workers are required to manage, process, and deal with such ethical dilemmas keeping their religious beliefs aside.

In the following section, the ethical dilemmas will be analyzed using ethical principles, professional values and standards outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics.

In the first ethical dilemma of reporting a single mother who works hard to earn for her child, there are many ethical principles and professional values that apply. The NASW Code of Ethics primarily talks about the core values which include service, social justice and human relationships. All three professional values apply in this case as it is essential service for the mother to let her keep her child and strengthen her family. It is also valuable service for the child to stay connected to his mother instead of being sent away. However, section 1.01 of the NASW defines the ethical principle of 'commitment to client' (Reamer, 2013). In this scenario, the client is the child and the social worker has the responsibility towards the client's wellbeing and towards the larger society. And thus, the social worker is required by law to report the neglect.

In the second scenario where confidentiality is in question, the NASW Code of Ethics clearly states in section 1.07 that social workers must respect the privacy of the client and apply standards of confidentiality (Reamer, 2013). Social workers are not allowed to share or reveal their client's private information without their consent to anyone including family members, their colleagues or media. It also comes under the professional values of building trust, putting client interests and wellbeing at first priority, and respecting the dignity and worth of a client. Under the following ethical standards and values, a social worker needs to do his best to protect the confidentiality of the client unless there is chance of harm or violence (Johns, 2015).

The third scenario of moral or religious conflict refers to the NASW values of service and competence where the social workers needs to be professional and put the best knowledge and skills to help the client keeping self-interest aside. The NASW section 1.01(c) also states that social workers should obtain education about the nature of social diversity and oppression with

respect to race, ethnicity, religion or others. They must help clients to the best of their ability without bias or being judgmental (Reamer, 2013).

The following are the potential resolutions according to the ethical principles and values:

First dilemma: Despite the personal or emotional bias towards the mother, the social worker needs to report the neglect or maltreatment with the child. Protection of the child is one of the core principles of social work. However, in order to avoid the ethical dilemma, the social worker can inform the mother and ensure that she is not kept in the dark. By doing this, the social worker will maintain their integrity while ensuring the wellbeing of the family to the most of their abilities.

Second dilemma: Under the Code of Ethics, the social workers is obliged to protect privacy and confidentiality of the client under all circumstances unless it is legally required or there is risk of violence or harm. In this scenario, even if the client is undergoing a setback at work, the social worker cannot, under professional and ethical values, break confidentiality. The best course of action for the social worker is to ask for consent or convince the client to allow them to disclose the information for their own wellbeing. If the client agrees, only then the social worker is allowed to disclose confidential information to the employer or in a report. The social worker can also ensure that the employer will keep the information confidential as long as the client promises to seek professional help. This way the client's job will be safe, their wellbeing will not be compromised and the information will not be out publicly.

Third dilemma: While it is clear that a social worker needs to put their personal opinions and religious beliefs aside while working for a client, it is also important to note that

social work can be a challenging profession and thus, the updated NASW Code of Ethics in 2021 include provisions for self-care. If a moral or religious conflict occurs and is causing a mental or emotional toll on the worker, they can drop or transfer the client to another worker.

Social workers are not just advocates or practitioners, they have a bigger role and responsibility towards the society. Social workers who take up the role of supervision and consultation hold special responsibilities to upskill the workers and provide them with additional knowledge and skills they need to become better social workers. Social workers can engage in supervision and consultation if they possess the required knowledge and skill, can set culturally sensitive boundaries, do not engage in dual relationships with supervisees and are not unfair or disrespectful to supervisees. A supervisor or consultant has the professional responsibility to ensure that the supervisees benefit from them and learn ethical practice and decision-making (Nickson, Carter, Francis, 2019).

Social workers continue to grow and learn in their profession as new situations arise every day. It is hardly possible that social workers go through the exact same situation or case and hence education and training is essential for continued growth and to get better at ethical decision-making. Continuing education is also essential for staff development and knowledge of updated ethical practices and standards. It is important for social workers to stay updated with legal guidelines and ethical standards to be able to serve the community better (Nickson, Carter, Francis, 2019).

Ever since the beginning of the profession, social workers have faced challenges when it comes to maintaining ethical practices. Ethical dilemmas are a common challenge for social

workers along with complex legal issues that come with the profession. Social workers have to take ethical decisions every day with the constant pressure of doing what's right for the client and society. Ethical decision-making is the core of all social work. It is not only the profession's requirement but also essential for protecting the client and their wellbeing. Thus, social workers continue to face challenges but with the right supervision, consultation and training, they can master ethical decision-making.

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