
Teaching About What Ethical Social Work Practice Means: Responsibility Starts With Schools of Social Work

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RÉSUMÉ :

Présentation d'un cadre pour enseigner l'éthique aux étudiants en travail social ainsi que les tensions structurelles entre les milieux académiques et professionnels associés à un tel enseignement

MOTS CLEFS :

Travail social, enseignement, éthique, milieux de pratique et académique

INTRODUCTION

The teaching of ethics in Canada's schools of social work is accomplished either through the delivery of a required course or as a topic incorporated into other courses using case examples of ethical dilemmas in different practice settings. When taught as a course, there are a number of ways to introduce social work students to this vast topic. Such courses can be delivered from a more theoretical perspective, by teaching students about the philosophical foundations of moral dilemmas (e.g., Kant's utilitarianism), or by using a more applied approach that familiarizes students with their respective code of ethics, how to recognize ethical dilemmas in practice, and how to engage in ethical decision-making. Increasingly, knowledge of ethics is recognized as an essential element of social work practice; although not a new field of study, its pedagogical importance has

been punctuated by social work regulators who identify this as a 'competence' that all social workers must have (Ontario Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice Handbook, 2010; Ordre Professionnel des travailleurs sociaux et des thérapeutes conjugaux et familiaux du Québec, CQLR c C-26, r 286, 2010) depending on the province they will practice in.¹

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to present a framework for teaching ethics in social work that integrates both theoretical and applied components; and second, to discuss the structural challenges associated with the adoption of ethics in social work curricula. The framework is represented as a concept map that draws on the various sources of knowledge that contribute to ethical decision-making: codes of ethics, ethical theory, social work theory, research, legal frameworks and self. Codes of ethics help students to articulate social work values and familiarize themselves with standards of conduct to which the profession is held. Ethical theory provides students with concepts and principles that help them articulate the approach to framing the ethical decision-making process they should use and the kind of considerations they must include in their deliberations (e.g., rule-based considerations in a deontological approach vs. relationship-based considerations in an ethics of care approach). Similarly social work theory provides students with a lens for understanding

¹ While each province may have its own code of ethics, they are all similar with respect to helping students understand the values and principles of practicing social work in a competent ethical manner.

the concepts and dynamics that are most prominent and relevant for understanding their case and its ethical dilemmas. Research draws their attention to what others have discovered or learned about various aspects of the case and the ethical dilemma embedded in it; and legislation provides them with a sense of the legal framework within which they are operating. Finally, use of self focuses them on how their socio-political or personal self shapes the way in which they view and understand the ethical dilemma. Each of these sources of knowledge is essential to the ethical decision-making process. Although students may be taught about legislation in a course on public policy, or research in a research methods course, ethical decision-making is an integrative experience that requires students to draw on each of these different sources of knowledge simultaneously in order to process the dilemmas they encounter and to arrive at a way forward.

We (the authors) come from two different universities and have collaborated over the years to develop ethics courses in our respective institutions that incorporate what we regard as five essential components of ethical decision-making: codes of ethics, ethical theory, social work theory, research, legal frameworks and use of self. The relationship between the academies that we are part of, and the professional associations/colleges in our respective provinces can be described as distal, at best. These institutions have evolved relatively independent of one another and although standards outlined by the Council for Accreditation of the Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE) requires meaningful engagement between the two, this is most often not the case. As a result, the relationship between Codes of Ethics that are fundamental documents in these professional associations/colleges, and social work values that are essential features of social work curricula, is not abundantly clear to social work students. The following elaborates on this relationship and its complexities.

History of Teaching Ethics Courses from Two Perspectives

I, Rachel Birnbaum, began teaching ethics and social work practice in 2002 to 4th-year social work students in the second term at King's University College, Western University in London, Ontario. The objectives of the course were to teach students to use ethical theories underlying ethical decision-making, develop and apply skill-building in the clarification and approach to ethical issues in specific cases and practice, as well as to differentiate between ethical and legal dilemmas. Students began questioning why they were learning about important issues such as record keeping, confidentiality, regulation, and how to deal with ethical dilemmas, as they were about to graduate and begin their social work career; they requested that the course be taught earlier in their academic studies. As a result, the course was moved to the first term of their social work education before they began their first practicum. It was treated as a course that would prepare them for the complexities of practice.

At McGill University in Montreal, Quebec, the Critical Thought and Ethics course was designed by Lucyna Lach in 2009 as a capstone course for undergraduate students, to bring together and integrate knowledge they had acquired while obtaining their social work degree. It was introduced into the social work curriculum after the redesign and reconsideration of the program's structure and how courses should be sequenced over a three-year period: foundation knowledge in the first year, modes of practice in the second year, integration and special topics in the third year. This redesign was informed by a number of provincial reports that were beginning to articulate shared and unique mandates for the social work profession. With input from practice leaders in the Montreal area, the need for a course on ethical dilemmas was identified. Based on this input, objectives of the course sought to integrate the various sources of knowledge students had come to know during their studies, as opposed to introducing new sources of knowledge.

Although our mandates were directed at different stages of the academic trajectory, we were compelled to collaborate on a common knowledge base. Even though these would be directed to students at different stages of exposure to ethical dilemmas, we were convinced that, regardless of whether this content was delivered sooner or later, it was essential.

While searching for relevant teaching materials for our respective courses, we struggled to find any Canadian textbook or article that applied the Canadian Code of Ethics (CASW, 2005) or any provincial code of ethics from a regulatory college/association to practice dilemmas. There were numerous American textbooks for students that described practice dilemmas; but they were linked to the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (1999) in the United States. Moreover, there were only two Canadian textbooks written about Canadian law for social workers (Birnbaum & Mosher, 2008; Regehr & Kanani, 2006, 2010) practicing in Canada and both were written in English only. There was very little published by Canadians about practice dilemmas and the application of relevant codes to those dilemmas.

It is then that we hypothesized that the lack of Canadian scholarship on this issue was related to an inherent tension between the academy and the field regarding the role that regulation played in the lives of social workers, and more specifically, in the lives of academics. Academics have not been receptive to having the field dictate teaching mandates (as is the case in engineering and other professions); academics have viewed their entitlement to 'academic freedom' as being one that is 'free' from dictates provided by professional bodies that tend toward specifying the type and dosage of content (i.e. this is what you have to teach and this is how many hours of this topic is required).

Although this was not yet where social work education was at in Canada, we believed that some common ground could be found between the academy and the field on the importance of critical thinking and ethical conduct in social work practice. What was less contentious and more commonly understood was that it was incumbent on schools of social work to teach students to recognize ethical dilemmas they encountered in practice, and to provide students with a framework for understanding the complexity of those ethical dilemmas as well as a framework for resolving them. Neglecting to do so reduced their future social work practice to one where they would blindly follow agency policies, demonstrating limited appreciation for the complexities inherent in the lives of those with whom they came into contact, potentially placing them and their clients at risk of harm.

Development of Professional Suitability in Social Work

Social work is a profession; this title is protected and most provinces have legislation that shapes what it is that social workers do and the standards to which they are held (Regehr & Kanani, 2010). The intent of this legislation is to protect the public from harm and along with this is a standard for ethical conduct (i.e., 1.6: Protection of Vulnerable Members of Society, CASW, 2005). We argue that ethical conduct is informed, among other things, by competent practice. Ensuring the competence of practitioners is a responsibility that is shared by schools of social work and professional regulatory bodies (Bogo, Regehr, Katz, Logie & Mylopoulos, 2011; Brear, Dorrian & Luscri, 2008; Gibbs, 2000; Moore & Jenkins, 2000; Tam & Kwok, 2007a, 2007b), or is it? Over the past several years, some academic leaders in Canada have struggled with their position and role in relation to regulation, accountability and whether social work is even a profession (Birnbaum & Silver, 2012). At the same time, prospective employers and unions protecting social work positions require membership in a regulatory college. There is a decided potential for disconnect between how students may be prepared for practice, and what is actually required of them to be ethical and competent practitioners. Those who oppose, or at best are ambivalent about creating a more proximal relationship between regulatory bodies and the academy, argue that there is a potential for regulatory bodies to encroach on academic freedom, stifling the potential for critical thought, and producing technocrats merely capable of meeting the standards of regulators and agencies who hire these professionals. Those who see the importance of a link between the regulators and academy view this less drastically. They would argue that critical thinking lies within and not outside the boundaries of social work practice and that having a more proximal relationship would result in a curriculum that is relevant, that would produce competent practitioners who would measure up to the standards of practice and at the same time, would challenge oppressive structures. Once they have become practitioners, they would also

challenge taken-for-granted assumptions in practice, and would advocate or take responsibility for implementing strategies that adhere to anti-oppressive principles.

The need for a meaningful link between regulators and the academy is amplified when all that is required for membership in provincial regulatory bodies is a social work degree. This implies that the schools have done their due diligence to ensure that their graduates meet the standards of the regulatory bodies. Terms such as “professional suitability” and “professional competence” have been used interchangeably in the literature (CCSWR, 2012; Curren, 2009; O’Hagan, 1996); since the term “incompetence” imposes negative connotations (Brear et al., 2008), the term “professional suitability” is the preferred construct. It is defined as a person’s overall suitability for the profession, reflecting her or his knowledge, skills, and values combined with the performance of appropriate professional behaviours in given practice situations (CASW, 2005; Epstein & Hundert, 2002; NASW, 2008; Rubin et al.). As harsh as this may seem, evaluation of professional suitability lies within the purview of schools/faculties of social work. Yet, few schools actually have professional suitability policies and practices, deferring instead to university codes of conduct. In 2010, the CSWE revised its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards and identified ten core competencies. The new educational and accreditation standards not only emphasize competency-based education, but also feature more focus on measures of student performance (Bogo, 2010; CASWE, 2010). Yet, not all schools/faculties of social work believe in competency-based practice or standards (Birbaum & Silver, 2012; Bogo et al., 2011; Collin, Coleman & Miller, 2002). As indicated earlier, this tension is problematic; Canadian social work does not require graduates to complete a post-degree examination for entry-level practice² and relies heavily on the educational sector to carry out its obligation to ensure that minimum standards are met. Moreover, professional regulation is a provincial and/or territorial jurisdiction. Every province has its own system of registration, mostly requiring that applicants hold a degree from an accredited school; in Northern Canada, registration is voluntary. Responsibilities pertaining to the assessment of professional suitability therefore fall squarely to schools/faculties. If the ‘tail wagging the dog’ phenomenon is so feared by those opposed to a more proximal relationship, how can meaningful engagement between the academy and the professional associations/colleges occur? This tension is not unique to social work, nor is it unique to Canada. It requires a commitment to a higher level of engagement to deal with and discuss this tension in a manner that is neither dismissive, oppressive, nor competitive. These are real issues that the social work profession currently faces, and the process starts with the curriculum in schools of social work. We appreciate and support the role that schools of social work have to play and their gatekeeping responsibility to the profession. Given this obligation, schools must develop policies that ensure that they are graduating competent practitioners; such policies must go beyond having received a passing grade in their courses.

If we accept the assumption that both schools of social work and regulatory bodies are responsible for ensuring the ethical conduct of social workers, it is incumbent on schools of social work to help students learn what that means. We have constructed a model that brings together a number of essential elements of social work knowledge. The following describes the components of this model and how it informs our teaching about critical thought and ethics.

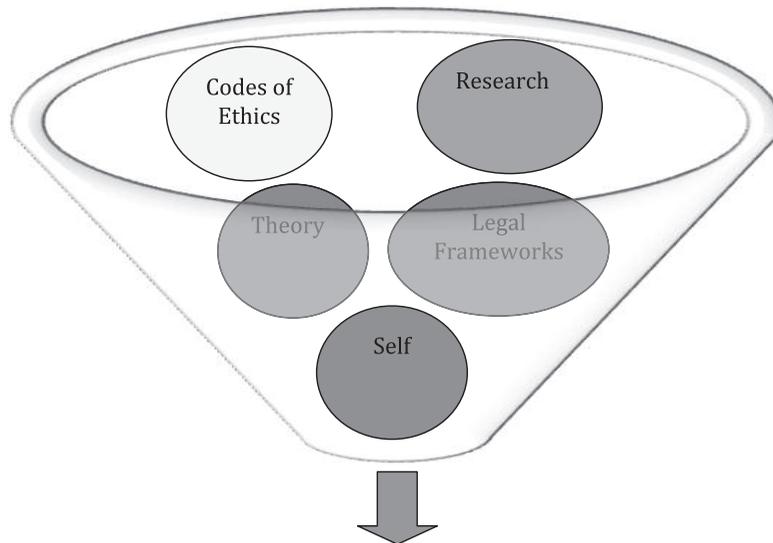
A Model for Teaching Ethical Decision-Making

We have drawn mainly on Mattison’s (2000) framework to teach social work students how to systematically move through the analysis of an ethical dilemma. We have used this model as a foundation and have incorporated additional elements of research, legislation and self. Diagram 1 (see below) is a concept map of the various sources of knowledge that social workers draw on in their

² British Columbia College of Social Workers will be instituting an initial licensure exam for all applicants on September 1, 2015. Similar to the Alberta College of Social Workers, the British Columbia College of Social Workers has a required clinical practice exam for advanced practice and Saskatchewan will be introducing a clinical practice exam for advanced practice as well.

practice, and more specifically, in resolving ethical dilemmas (Birnbaum & Lach, Forthcoming). We believe that in order for students to analyze and understand ethical dilemmas they must also learn to integrate knowledge derived from each of these sources.

Diagram 1 Concept Map



When obtaining feedback from students about the ethics course, they have been surprised to learn that all decisions made in social work practice are value-laden and most involve making a choice (sometimes unwittingly) between 2 competing values. This concept map breaks down the components of the decision-making process. We start the process by defining a value tension. Codes of ethics are helpful in identifying social work values; the values and their corresponding articles in the code are articulated as a value tension. For example, there may be a value tension between ensuring the client's confidentiality and promoting their autonomy. These values are, in turn, linked to specific articles in the code of ethics. Social work theory is used to frame the situation; ethical theories are used as a guide to thinking about resolution – deontology, teleology, ethics of care, and principlism, each of which leads to different kinds of considerations. Students are then taught to think about the legal context of the ethical dilemma. What legislation and legal precedent should they be considering given their practice context and the issues at hand? Knowledge of pertinent research will provide them with a sense of the scope of the problem and what others have learned when gathering data on the issue or the context within which the issue takes place. Finally, social workers bring a personal and social self to the dilemma; they have their own experiences, biases, and social location that inform their decision-making. An awareness of this through reflexivity is essential in order to separate how consonant or dissonant the options for resolution are from one's self.

The following case study illustrates the use of this approach. Selma and Abdel were married in 2000; they separated in 2010 and have two children, ages 8 and 10. Selma alleges that she has been a victim of domestic violence and that the children fear their father; she is requesting supervised visitation between the children and their father. Abdel denies any abuse whatsoever and alleges that Selma has had mental health problems throughout their relationship and that he was the children's primary parent as a result. Both are seeking sole custody of the children. As the social work student assigned to conduct a parenting assessment of this family, you realize that this is a family that your mother knows. What are the ethical tensions for the social worker?

One of the main tensions in this case arises from the social worker's desire to do what is in the best interests of the children; however, in order to do so, the social worker must let one of the parents down. This means that one of the parents' right to self-determination (e.g., to do what they think is in their child's best interests) will be compromised. The ethical tension here is between promoting the best interests of the child (legal principle) and supporting the parents' right to self-determination. These values can be linked to Principles 1.1 and 1.3 of the Canadian Code of Ethics (2005) and to Articles 2.01 and 3.01.04 of the Quebec Code. Further light is shed on this case by drawing on theory and research pertaining to attachment and child custody (Ainsworth, Blehar, Walters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988; Smith, Coffino, Van Horn, & Lieberman, 2012) where we learn that high levels of conflict impact on children's emotional and behavioural adjustment. In addition, research has shown that attachment theory alone does not explain the external stressors in the wake of family transitions such as separation and divorce (Garber, 2009). Finally, the social worker would have to draw on her own experience of dealing with attachment, conflict, prior exposure to allegations of domestic violence, and an understanding of how his/her own social location informs his/her judgment about this situation and how he/she is to proceed.

CONCLUSION

Having now taught this course for several years, both authors have had the pleasure of receiving student feedback, sometimes several years after graduation. Students remember this course, perhaps because it causes them some discomfort, or perhaps because it challenges them to go beyond what is deemed 'agency practice', to think critically about the decisions they make, the values they uphold, and those they have had to compromise. More importantly, students tell us that they need to learn more about the complexities of social work practice so that they may practice ethically and responsibly. We would agree and affirm that the schools of social work are the first place where this type of education must be provided. We would also encourage our academic colleagues to think about creating an ethics course in conjunction with the regulatory colleges and community partners, thereby making the linkages to competent social work practice early and clearly.

SUMMARY

Presentation of a framework for teaching ethics to social work students, as well as the structural tension between the academic and professional environments associated with this type of teaching.

KEY WORDS

Social work, teaching, ethics, practice and academic environments

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