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Understanding Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice

Arielle Arambula

UNDERSTANDING ETHICAL DILEMMAS IN SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

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A Project

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

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In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Social Work

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by

Arielle Arambula

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ABSTRACT

This study will address how social workers understand ethical dilemmas in everyday practice. Much of the current literature on ethical dilemmas is centered on the NASW Code of Ethics and decision making models and guides. The purpose of this study is to uncover the actual decision making methods that social workers use. This study will be carried out through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with social workers. Data will be analyzed through thematic analysis and descriptive statistics. The findings from this research can shed light on inadequacies regarding education and training, which in turn can help shape stronger social work curriculum.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Problem Formulation

Every profession has a set of rules or guidelines that practitioners have to abide by. The profession of social work is no different. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has set forth a code of ethics for social workers to follow. According to Kirst-Ashman (2017) the code of ethics help social workers differentiate what is appropriate and what is an inappropriate course of action.

Contained in the NASW Code of Ethics are the values and standards for the profession. Core social work values include service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence (NASW, 2017). Standards outlined include the social worker's responsibilities to clients, responsibilities to colleagues, responsibilities in practice settings, as professionals, to the social work profession, and to society (NASW, 2017). Some of the most important being self-determination, privacy and confidentiality (NASW, 2017).

However, the code of ethics has its limitations. For instance, the purpose section of the Code explicitly states that the code of ethics is merely a "guide" and not "a set of rules" (NASW, 2017, p.1). When the social worker finds themselves in need of making an ethical decision it is up to their discretion. While the section states the Code should be their primary source of decision making it also acknowledges that in certain circumstances the social worker's "ethical

obligations" are at odds with "agency policies or relevant laws or regulations" (NASW, 2017, p.1). The section closes by stating that following the code is not a guarantee of appropriate behavior or course of action. There are no definitive solutions in the NASW Code of Ethics. On one hand the Code states that it should be considered first when making decisions and, on another hand, it states that following ethics can be in violation of policies, laws, or regulations. With no clear answers and blatant contradictions what is a social worker to do when they find themselves in a situation where they have to choose one principle over another?

In instances where one principle will violate another an ethical dilemma is presented (Kirst-Ashman, 2017). A prime example of an ethical dilemma occurs in the case of duty to warn. In the event that a client threatens to harm themselves or others the social worker is legally required to report this. However, this violates the ethical responsibility of privacy and confidentiality. Another ethical dilemma regarding self-determination is highlighted by Freud and Krug (2002). In Freud and Krug's example the social worker must decide whether to notify a minor's parent of their child's pregnancy because the child plans to keep it from their parents so that abortion is not an option. In this situation the social worker has to choose between the self-determination of the client or the client's health and safety. In each of the situations presented above the social worker has to choose between violating one principle and upholding another. The consequences for a misstep in judgement are serious. In each situation the

social worker is liable to make a decision that could cost them their job, their reputation, or both.

In addition to the confusion that social workers might feel, ethical dilemmas also have negative impacts on social workers' well-being. A study conducted by McAufflie (2005) found that being involved in an ethical dilemma can affect the social worker emotionally, physiologically, and behaviorally. Some these responses included depression, social withdrawal, insomnia, high blood pressure, and denial (McAufflie, 2005).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to provide greater insight into the ways in which social workers solve ethical dilemmas in everyday practice. There are no definitive rules regarding solving an ethical dilemma only general guidelines which leaves much open for interpretation for the social worker in terms of how they should proceed. The aim of this study is to uncover the actual methods that social workers use in practice. Ethical dilemmas can occur in any setting and with any client. The range of settings that this problem can occur in demonstrates the need for further study. The probability that this can happen in any setting also indicates how widespread the problem is.

To uncover how social workers understand ethical dilemmas in social work practice, this study will be carried out through one-on-one semi-structured interviews with social workers. Research participants will be recruited from all areas of social work practice including but not limited to clinical social work,

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medical social work, child welfare, and community organizing. Research

participants will also vary in the number of years and experience that they have

in the field. The researcher will take care to solicit social workers with a broad

range of experience from social workers with many years in the field to those that

are newly graduated. Recruiting social workers from different areas of social

work and varying experience levels will be done not only to compare responses,

but to uncover possible themes and similarities between decision making

methods. Interviews will also be semi-structured allowing both the participant and

the researcher to elaborate on elements of the ethical dilemma they see

important.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

Much of the literature regarding ethical dilemmas revolves around

methods of decision making (Congress, 2000; Reamer, 1983, 2006), but not

what social workers base their decisions on. As stated above social workers

have to abide by the Code, agency policy, and laws. Making an ethical decision

involves prioritizing one of these over the other. But the question remains what

do social workers basis these decisions on?

When considering the impact that the following study will have on social

work practice one has to consider the seven stages of the generalist intervention

model. This study is likely to inform all stages of the generalist intervention model

from engagement to termination because ethical dilemmas may occur at any

time during client treatment. The information gathered from this study will

highlight the type of ethical dilemmas that may occur at each stage as well as the real-life steps that social workers used to solve them.

Much is at stake when making a decision in an ethical dilemma. What the social worker decides to do can have serious consequences for their well-being, their career, their reputation, and their clients' welfare. The findings from this study will give greater insight into the ethical decision-making process of social workers. Knowing what social workers base their decisions on can shed light on inadequacies regarding education and training, which in turn can help shape stronger social work curriculum. The research question this study will explore is: How do social workers understand ethical dilemmas in social work practice?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In a review of the literature on ethical dilemmas in social work several themes emerge. These themes can be separated into three categories: NASW Code of ethics revisions, theories guiding conceptualization and basis of decision making. The following review of the literature will discuss these categories.

The NASW Code of Ethics and its Recent Revisions

In its inception social work did not have a code of ethics or official rules guiding the profession. According to Reamer (1998) it was not until 1960 that the National Association of Social Workers created social work's first code of ethics. Throughout the decades the Code has gone through many revisions, most notably in 1993 and 1996. In 1993 the Code was revised to address the topic of multiple relationships in the social worker client relationship, as well as social worker impairment (Reamer, 1998). In 1996 the Code was revised to include social work's six core values and a guide for handling ethical dilemmas (Reamer, 1998). In 2017, the most current version, revisions were made regarding the use of technology (NASW, 2017).

The major reason for revisions has been a lack of specificity (Freud & Krug, 2002a). Although revisions have been made to the Code there are still no steadfast rules leaving much decision up to the social worker. An overview of

recent revisions is necessary in that it indicates the shortcomings of the Code

and reflects social workers' need for greater guidance.

<u>Theories Guiding Conceptualization</u>

Theoretical frameworks are significant in ethical dilemmas in that they

provide a basis upon which social workers make a decision. Also, the teaching of

ethical theories and principles are a cornerstone in social work education

(Reamer, 2006). Reamer (2006) outlines three different branches used to resolve

ethical dilemmas: metaethics, normative ethics, and practical ethics. According to

Reamer (2006) metaethics looks at the formation of language, principles, and

guidelines in regard to ethics. It examines the meaning of right and wrong.

Reamer (2006) states that normative ethics examine moral norms we should

follow and why. Practical ethics focuses on the application of ethical norms and

theories (Reamer, 2006).

Normative ethics are perhaps most important to ethical decision making

because they concern the actual application of theories and principles to ethical

dilemmas (Reamer, 2006). Reamer (2006) outlines two main aspects of

normative ethics are deontological and teleological. Deontological perspectives

view the rightness or wrongness of a circumstance without considering the

consequences (Reamer, 2006). In contrast to a deontological perspective,

teleological perspectives judge actions based on their consequences (Reamer,

2006). According to Reamer (2006) teleological perspectives are further divided

into egoism and utilitarianism. Egoism, although not typically used in social work,

is based on self-interest (Reamer, 2006). In an ethical dilemma an egoist would make a decision that was in their best interest. Utilitarianism, however, is based upon the maximum good (Reamer, 2006). An action is right if it promotes the maximum good.

Reamer (2006) also briefly mentions several other less used ethical theories. With rights-based theory decisions are based upon the fundamental rights of an individual. Communitarianism, on the other hand, is based upon the good of the community (Reamer, 2006). Decisions are made upon what best serves the community and not the individual. Ethics of care are based upon what is morally right (Reamer, 2006). A focus of ethics of care is the social worker client relationship. Another distinction that Reamer (2006) makes is between absolutism and relativism. Those with an absolutist point of view see rules and codes as absolute, meaning rules are to be followed under all circumstances. On the other hand, those with relative point of view see matters contextually based on current political, cultural, and historical contexts (Reamer, 2006).

A sizable portion of the literature reviewed fell under the teleological category with some falling under rights-based ethics. Among the literature that fell under the teleological category (Congress, 2000; Deitz & Thompson, 2004; Freud & Krug, 2002b; Mattison, 2000) were critiques of existing methods (the Code, laws, and policies) of solving ethical dilemmas along with proposed methods of solving ethical dilemmas (models and step-by-step guides). These pieces of literature are categorized under the teleological category because they

advocated for making decisions that would result in the best outcome. The literature that fell under the rights-based category (Furman, 2003; Reamer, 1983) advocated that social workers prioritize the rights of the client above other factors.

In terms of the current study theoretical leanings can only be garnered after the fact. Given that the basis for decision making falls on the social worker it is impossible to tell what theory will be uncovered ahead of time. However, since much of the current literature falls under the teleological approach there is a high possibility that the findings of this study also will.

Basis of Ethical Decision Making

While the aim of this study will be to assess how social workers resolve ethical dilemmas, the research on ethical dilemmas is expansive in nature. The literature regarding ethical dilemmas can separated into three different categories: critiques of the Code of Ethics, proposed methods of resolution, and actual methods of resolution.

Critiques of the Code focus on the lack of specificity in the Code. They argue that the Code is too vague and leaves much up to interpretation (Freud & Krug, 2002a; Freud & Krug, 2002b). This interpretation then leaves the decision making to the social worker. Based on the social workers decision they could find their job at risk or find themselves facing legal ramifications. The authors (Freud & Krug, 2002a; Freud & Krug, 2002b) argue that if the Code were more specific

there would be no room for interpretation thus leaving the social worker less vulnerable to negative consequences.

Additional critiques of current methods include approaches to fiduciary responsibilities, managed mental health care, and boundaries. Kutchins (1991) argues that social workers actions should be rooted in the fiduciary responsibility they have to the profession and clients. Furman (2003) believes that the current managed mental health care system has caused social workers to neglect the rights of clients. Dietz and Thompson (2004) argue that the social worker client boundaries created by the 'distance model' have negatively impacted the quality of care and that social workers should instead apply a 'relational model'.

Proposed methods of resolution are presented as an additive to the Code and existing laws or policies. Authors of proposed methods of resolution aim to eliminate the trouble of having to decide which route follow. The authors propose models or step-by-step guides to follow in an ethical dilemma. Congress (2000), for example, proposes a model entitled "ETHIC," an acronym for examine, think, hypothesize, identify, and consult. In this model social workers are to first examine their values, think about ethical standards and laws, hypothesize the consequences of the possible decisions, identify who will be harmed and who will be benefited, and lastly consult with colleagues and supervisors.

Reamer (1983, 2006) also proposes two step-by-step guides. The first guide presented by Reamer (1983) contains a 5-step guide which focuses on the rights of the client and the obligations that the social worker has to obey laws and

regulations. A more recent guide by Reamer (2006) presents a seven-step model. Reamer's seven step model closely resembles Congress's ETHIC in that includes the identification of those that will be affected by the action, an examination of values, and the consultation of colleagues.

Mattison (2000) proposes a guide that is more extensive that of Congress or Reamer. Mattison (2000) proposes a two-part process that first requires the social worker to be self-aware of their ethics and values. After doing so the social worker can then apply a decision-making guide. This decision making guide closely resembles that of Congress (2000) and Reamer (2006) in that it includes examination of values and the identification of benefits and costs.

While the proposed models and guides may aide in the decision making process, they do not eliminate the subjective nature of the process, nor do they guarantee that the social worker will make a choice that will prevent them from suffering any negative consequences. What one social worker values may differ from another social worker. There is no guarantee that following a proposed model will not have negative consequences for the social worker.

Perhaps the most limited of literature on ethical dilemmas focuses on actual methods of resolving ethical dilemmas. The authors (Millstein, 2000; Rossiter, 1996) report how social workers actually solved their ethical dilemmas in a practice setting. Methods of these studies include social worker subject supplied data. These findings reflect real world decisions that social workers have made in a practice setting.

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A study by Millstein (2000) focused on how social workers solve ethical dilemmas regarding confidentiality. Respondents all had an MSW degree. Respondents filled out questionaries regarding beliefs on confidentiality and their handling of ethical dilemmas and were then interviewed. The majority of respondents reported that they solved their ethical dilemma through supervisor consultation (Millstein, 2000). Social workers also reported the use of colleagues as resources. Millstein (2000) also found that over half (55%) of respondents discussed the ethical dilemma with the client.

A study by Rossiter (1996) had similar findings. Rossiter (1996) reports that social workers in this study also stated that they resolved ethical dilemmas through dialogue. However, respondents in this study reported a negative work culture that made them fearful of discussing ethical dilemmas. While many reported quick consultations with colleagues, case supervision was not a place they felt comfortable discussing matters (Rossiter, 1996). Moreover, the tense work environment made respondent fear that revealing an ethical dilemma would make them vulnerable to punishment or appear incompetent (Rossiter, 1996).

While the two studies illuminate the ethical decision making process of social workers the subject still requires further research. Millstein's (2000) study only involved social workers that held an MSW degree. The decision-making process of other levels of social workers, like those that hold a BASW, must also be considered. Additionally, Rossiter's (1996) study was greatly affected by the

work culture of the agency she studied. Perhaps studying an agency with a healthy work culture would yield different results?

The current study will build on those of Millstein (2000) and Rossiter (1996) in that it will involve subject supplied data, but it will differ in several ways. Unlike Millstein's study, respondents in this study will have varying levels of experience within the field of social work. Respondents of varying years in the field and educational levels will be recruited. Unlike Rossiter's study, participants of different agencies and organizations will be recruited.

Summary

The literature regarding ethical dilemmas is centered around three categories: NASW Code of ethics revisions, theories guiding conceptualization and basis of decision making. The literature surrounding the NASW Code of Ethics highlights the fact that despite the Code's many revisions, decisions regarding ethical dilemmas are still ultimately up to the social worker. Whether they be normative, practical, or other, literature on ethical theoretical frameworks provide a lens to understanding the foundation upon which ethical decisions are made. Yet a smaller amount of literature discusses the basis of ethical decision making in everyday practice. The ultimate aim of this study is to add to current body of literature regarding ethical dilemmas with the hopes of clarify how social workers understand dilemmas in practice.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study explored the ways in which social workers solve ethical

dilemmas in social work practice. The following chapter will outline how this study

was implemented. The methods chapter will include the design of the study,

description of the sample population and sample size, data collection methods,

procedures, human subjects' protection, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to explore the ways in which social workers

resolve ethical dilemmas in social work practice. The majority of the existing

literature discusses how social workers should solve ethical dilemmas, but rarely

discusses how ethical dilemmas are solved in practice. Due to the limited amount

of research on the subject this study was an exploratory study. Because the

researcher was seeking to uncover concepts and themes this study was a

qualitative study. To explore how social workers, resolve ethical dilemmas the

researcher conducted one-on-one interviews with social workers in which they

were asked to share their experiences handling an ethical dilemma. Participants

were be solicited online through social media websites. The researcher will take

care to solicit participants of different ages, genders, ethnic backgrounds,

experience levels and fields of social work.

There are several methodological strengths. A major methodological strength of this study is the study's qualitative design. This study was carried out through individual interviews and through these interviews participants were allowed to state in their own words how they resolved an ethical dilemma. The personal experiences shared by participants will add to the gap in literature that is currently lacking information on social workers' day to day methods of resolution. Another methodological strength of this study is the method of participant solicitation. Soliciting participants via the internet has the potential to reach a large audience. The intention is for many social workers of different backgrounds to respond to request; however, this cannot be guaranteed.

This brings us to the methodological limitations of the study. While the intention was for a large number of social workers to respond to requests for participation this could not be guaranteed. Nor could the researcher guarantee that participants of the desired sample size respond. Another methodological limitation is that the researcher could not guarantee that respondents would answer honestly to interview questions. Participants may have answered questions in ways that they believed would make them be viewed more favorably by the researcher.

Sampling

The type of sampling that the researcher initially attempted to use was non-probability, purposive sampling. This study was only sampling social workers

hence all of the individuals in the sample will be social workers. The researcher

attempted to solicit social workers through social media websites including

Reddit and Facebook. The researcher requested participation from individuals

belonging to groups with "social work" in the title. The field of social work is vast

encompassing many different areas including but not limited to mental health and

clinical social work, mental health and substance abuse social work, healthcare,

child welfare, advocacy and community organization, policy and planning,

politics, public welfare, justice and corrections, school social work. Not only are

there different areas of social work, but social workers may work with clients on

different levels. These levels include a micro or individual level, mezzo or group

level, and macro or large scale.

   Although the researcher intended to solicit participants via social media

websites this method proved to be unsuccessful. The researcher then used

snowball sampling. This was done by reaching out to social workers in the

researcher's social network. Several participants then referred social workers in

their social network to the researcher for participation in the study.

   The sample size for this study was eight participants. The researcher has

only a limited time and resources to complete the study. An excess of eight

participants was not feasible given the amount of time and limited resources of

the researcher. However, in order to complete a thorough examination of the

research topic the researcher must reach a point of saturation, the point at which

no new information can be garnered. The researcher determined that the saturation point of this research was reached at eight participants.

Data Collection and Instruments

Qualitative data was collected through one-on-one semi-structured interviews. Each interview began with an introduction, description of the study, and a discussion of its purpose. At the start of each interview the researcher asked participants questions regarding demographics. Demographic questions included the participants' age, gender, race/ethnicity, years of experience in social work, and education level.

Demographic questions were then followed by questions about the participants experiences with ethical dilemmas. The researcher was asked questions detailed in the interview guide sheet in Appendix A. In order to ensure validity, the interview guide was developed based on the Congress' (2000) ethical decision making model, ETHICS. Questions were then discussed with the research professor and refined to ensure reliability.

Interview guide questions outline seven different domains. The domains include examination of values, ethics, laws or cases at play, possible consequences, cost and benefit analysis, consultation, and methods other than consultation. Participants will be asked questions based on these domains. Responses will be organized thematically. In order to facilitate elaboration, the researcher will employ the use of verbal following skills including furthering, paraphrasing, and open-ended questions.

Procedures

The researcher solicited participants through the researcher's own social network. When soliciting participants the researcher explained the study's purpose, goals, and the need for participants. Once research participants were identified participants were asked to email the researcher with a list of dates and times that they were available for an interview. Once an interview date and time was established the researcher sent out a consent form to the participant. The participant was asked to email the filled-out form prior to the interview.

Interviews were conducted via Zoom. Participants were emailed a Zoom link twenty-four hours prior to their interview. Before conducting the interview, the researcher went over confidentiality with the participant and discussed the purpose of the study once more. Afterward the researcher turned on Zoom's audio recording feature and the interview began. At the end of each interview participants were thanked and debriefed.

Protection of Human Subjects

The identity of participants were kept completely confidential from anyone other than the researcher. To protect participants identities each participant was be given a pseudonym. Pseudonyms were then assigned a number for transcription to ensure that information could not be used to identify any participant. Audio recordings, emails, and documentation were kept on a password protected computer that only the researcher had access to. Data

collection was done virtually over Zoom which prevented the transmission of

COVID-19. Interviews were conducted over a private Zoom call, in which only the

researcher and the participant had the link to. Each participant was asked to read

and sign an informed consent form prior to being interviewed, in addition to

consent to be audio recorded. Three years after completion of the study, audio

recordings, emails, and documentation will be deleted from the researcher's

computer.

The benefits of this study supersede the risks. The risks of participating in

this study are minimal. A possible risk of the study was that the questions asked

may cause the participant discomfort. If a participant felt any discomfort with any

of the interview questions, they were given the choice to decline the question(s)

or end the study all together. The benefit of this study includes adding to the

body of knowledge regarding the handling of ethical dilemmas in social work

practice. This in turn help could help aid in the development of ethics curriculum

and training.

Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. Audio recorded data was

transcribed through a transcription feature on Zoom. Transcriptions were then

corrected for accuracy. Participants were assigned codes in order to differentiate

one participant from another. Statements were organized according to each

domain. Under each domain responses were be categorized in relation to

content topics. The major-themes and sub-themes of each category were assigned a code. These codes were then entered onto a master code list. Data was analyzed several times over to ensure that themes and sub-themes were properly assigned.

Summary

This study uncovered the ways in which social workers solve ethical dilemmas in everyday practice. Semi-structured one-on-one interviews with social workers provided insight into real world methods of solving dilemmas. The qualitative methods of this study helped elucidate themes regarding methods of resolution which in turn add to the knowledge base furthering social work practice.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

Data was gathered through interviewing social workers who are currently working in the field as clinical therapist or who supervise in a clinical setting. The researcher made concerted efforts to elicit participants via social media without results. Therefore, the following data was gathered through snowball sampling. Participation was elicited from social workers that the researcher had direct access to. Subsequent participants were gained via referrals by said social workers. The subject of ethical dilemmas broad and encompasses many topics within it including ethics, values, consequences, as well as the role of supervision. In order to gain a better insight into social workers' understanding of ethical dilemmas in social work practice these topics were explored via the following questions. A demographic description of participants is first presented, followed by information garnered through interview questions.

Analyses

Table 1 displays the demographic information of the participants. The age of participants ranged from 29 years old to 58 years old. The majority of participants were age 40 and beyond with only two participants below the age of 40. Most participants were female with six out of eight participants being female and two being male. The racial/ethnic makeup of participants was comprised of

half identifying as Hispanic or Latino, two identifying as more than one race, one identifying as Caucasian, and one identifying as Asian. All participants had at least 6 years of experience in the field with the majority, or six participants, having more than 13 years of experience in the field. Nearly all participants had at least a master's degree in social work with one participant having a master's degree in social welfare.

Tables 2-7 display the content and themes that emerged from interviews with participants. The content and themes were organized according to interview guide questions six through thirteen as well as an additional question asked by the researcher at the end of each interview. The content and themes were directly taken from interview transcripts. The quotes represent the actual words of participants that have been transcribed to the best of the researcher's ability.

<div align="center">Data Thematic Results</div>

The question being addressed in this study was: How do social workers understand ethical dilemmas in social work practice? The objective of this question was to create a qualitative and exploratory study that would uncover the ways in which social works both conceptualize and handle ethical dilemmas in social work practice. Listed below are the content and themes of the information that was garner which were categorized by the interview guide questions six through thirteen as well as additional question. This additional question was added by the researcher through the course of conducting interviews.

Table 1. Demographics of Research Participants

DEMOGRAPHIC	Participant Response
Age:	51, 45, 33, 29, 40, 58, 41, 42
Gender:	female, female, female, female, female, male, female, male
Race/Ethnicity:	Asian, More than one race, Hispanic, Hispanic/Latino, Hispanic, Caucasian, More than one race, Latino
Years of Experience in the Social Work Field:	18, 19, 8, 6, 17, 38, 13, 16
Degree:	MSW, MSW, MSW, Master of Social Welfare, MSW, MSW, MSW, MSW

Table 2. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 6: What is your understanding of ethical dilemmas as it comes up in social work practice?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "When real life conflicts with the social work Code of Ethics."

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

- "So yeah, it's that grey area where you have to make your best clinical judgment based on the information that you have about said client or clients and also their environment and everything else that's going on with them safety wise."

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "My understanding…um well…I mean when you're going through school you learn about all these possible ethical dilemmas you might encounter. But I think when you actually go into a practice setting you don't realize the magnitude of the situations, you're kind of encountering because a lot of times their masked as policies, as procedures, as all these things they are not. Things that other people don't necessarily see as ethical issues. They see it more as this is the way we do things and so it's just a completely different experience whenever you do go into practice as far as how you view it compared to others, but also in terms of feeling so isolated."

Table 2. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2022

- "Well, those are dilemmas when you as a practitioner or manager of a program, in any kind of role, that you're making decisions based on the best possible benefit to your clients that you run across some kind of obstacle, or some push back in one way or another, either by people or by a system, or by a policy that makes you have to sort of advocate for that on the basis of your client."

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "So, I would say, the way I would define an ethical dilemma would be multiple social work values coming into conflict. So requiring some deeper thought and decision making to navigate how to act in a way that's ethical while still giving due diligence to the different values that are in conflict."

Table 3. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 7: How do you understand the role of NASW regarding ethical dilemmas? How do you understand ethical standards regarding ethical dilemmas?

Content
Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "So, the Code of Ethics is a guideline for our practice. You know guidelines there to ensure that [for] all social workers like there's a standard, an ethical standard. So, my interpretation of something has to be checked against the Code of Ethics."

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

- "So NASW I mean, the Code of Ethics is our guideline to be able to have more of a foundation for working through ethical dilemmas and making decisions as such. I also see NASW as a means of keeping all the clinicians and in check. I guess making sure everybody is on the same page when it comes to Code of Ethics, but also not necessarily repercussions, although I guess that is part of it as well. But reaching out to clinicians who are not making choices well ethically considered. Does that make sense? Or well informed in that regard in terms of ethics."

Table 3. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "So as far as the NASW I mean, I think you know they embody a support
  system for social workers, kind of like a network of just being able to
  connect with other social workers. But as far as the Code of Ethics, the
  social work values, they're supposed to give you a blueprint as far as kind
  of like an overview of various situations you might encounter, but in a very
  broad manner. Where if you're dealing with a situation more than likely
  when you go back to that Code of Ethics it's going to give you some sort of
  blueprint as far as what, you know, what you should do and kind of like
  what your line of thinking should be as a social work professional, and
  how to kind of maneuver through that situation."

Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2022

- "So, you know we have a standard, based on our Code of Ethics, and it's
  very well written and very specific. And it really points out all the main
  issues with regard to, you know, ethical issues, so ethical concerns. So,
  without getting into a lot of detail, I mean, it just sort of guides us to what
  the standard is and to bear that in mind when we're working in the field the
  ethical code."

Table 3. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "So, even though I know it's not necessarily enshrined in law, it is what I would kind of consider the guiding light as far as navigating actual ethical dilemmas in the field."

Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2022

- "It's about consensus. It's about collective minds, collective professional minds in the field of social work that create these standards… So that's the way that I understand their role. You know it's really a consensus across all fields and all settings for that matter. Well, the field of social work across all settings I should say. So, it's really about consensus. It's about all of these collective minds getting together and again just creating a standard for what is right for all individuals across all different settings within social work."

Table 4. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 8: What is your understanding of how personal values might play a part in ethical dilemmas? What is your understanding of how agency values might influence ethical dilemmas? What is your understanding of how client values might affect ethical dilemmas?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 1, March 2022

- "I think we need to, like you kind of mentioned, that we have to be aware of our own values and their own values, but that we need to know that we cannot just push our values and biases towards other people. And then also that you mentioned the agency. There is gonna be a limitation, right? Even though we hope that they will get some kind of assistance there is going to be a limitation. And then I think we need to process that as we go. We have so many stuff going on at work and then I always like you know ethical drama. This is what the agency says because we are employed. We cannot just be independent social workers. This is what I want to do, right? I have to follow the chain of command. But also, I think we can advocate. We want to advocate for the patient, right? But at the same time there is a limitation, so that we really need to use a strategy to how we can advocate, right."

Table 4. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

- "So, for my values this is one of those things where it is interesting
  because one yes, we are supposed to, you know keep our I wouldn't say
  values that's not the right word here. It really isn't but are own biases
  especially you know political or religious, and all that kind of stuff at the
  door… And then to answer the second question or second part with the
  agency values same kind of thing. It's kind of a marriage between all
  three, right? I'm not consciously realizing this, but subconsciously trying to
  kind of remove any cognitive dissonance related to kind of these values
  and find where the joint understanding really is, and then operating from
  there in terms of the therapy. The way that I conduct therapy. Yeah, so
  hopefully that kind of makes."

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "Yeah, so there's always that possibility that your values might be very
  different from the social work values. And sometimes that your values and
  the social work values will not align whether you're working for an agency,
  a company, or whatever it might be. But well, as far as I guess, speaking
  more about myself, I feel that most of work brought me into the field, most
  of the values that I have, the things that are important to me, what brought
  me in the door is

Table 4. Continued

Content
a lot of it matches very closely with the so what the values are with the you know to profession, and NASW and all of that. But I find that a lot of times that doesn't match the practice setting, you know, because a lot of times it's just about policies and procedures which in essence will always be geared towards benefiting the system, or the company, or whatever it is. And so, a lot of times, you hear this is what the mission is and somehow the mission of the company will reflect of some social work value. But when you when you kind of get deeper into that there's so many things that are going against that."
Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2022
"So if they are to conflict with the Code of Ethics that we have as social workers, then that may require even a social worker to step away and sort of pass on a situation or a client if they felt like they were not congruent…And then you would have to consider the possibility of stepping away from a situation without having a specific situation in mind it's a little hard to think about that, because sometimes it's not ethical to step away either. You know it's always the client's best interest that we have to, you know, bear in mind, and sometimes pulling away is not in the client's best interest."

Table 4. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "I think, as a social worker, I see it as one of our competencies to be aware, always have self-awareness of what our own personal values are. And then also understanding when we're acting in a professional capacity that we're obviously needing to be aware of the values of the profession… So, I think that the way that I think about that is obviously understanding if you're employed by an agency, you have certain ethical responsibility to the agency…So, I think social work Code of Ethics both addresses the need to be aware of the profession values, but also the ethical commitments that one might make to an employer. So, kind of being aware of those two things can potentially be in conflict."

Table 5. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 9: What is your understanding of the potential consequences/potential outcomes of an ethical dilemma?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, April 2022

- "If there's an ethical dilemma, and if it's a violation of any of the Code of Ethics or any state statutes or anything someone could write a complaint to the board and there's a whole process. So, this disciplinary action can take place, and sometimes people are fined. They are suspended. When you go into to check on somebody's license it might say disciplinary action because all of that is public. People can see that if they look up your license number, so there could be some disciplinary action. You know ultimately someone could like lose their license if it's that egregious."

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

"But most of the time if there's an ethical dilemma then there is some type of hardship where it's more of a zero sum. There's gonna be some sacrifices I guess or just not everybody will be satisfied not in all regards. So, you have to try and make the best decision in the way that's going to, for me at least, one, help the most people involved with the utmost importance being on my specific client. And then two, what is what would, in my opinion, and based with the information that I have at the time have the biggest positive impact on whatever the situation is."

Table 5. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "I think that there's always the potential consequences that you're gonna

  do some sort of harm to the client. You know I think that's always kind of

  the outcome that they're gonna walk away at a disadvantage. So, they're

  basically coming for you to be able to help themselves in some way. And

  so, there's always that potential that if you, know you do something that's

  not you know in line with the values of the profession that they're gonna

  walk away you know the same or in worse condition."

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "You know, you always want an ethical dilemma to force you into standing

  up and advocating for what is right on the basis of the needs of a client.

  And how you should intervene and provide services to a client or a client

  population having to do with an ethical dilemma which would again kind of

  force you to do the right thing. So sometimes you know really an ethical

  dilemma it's almost like when they say you know challenge or yeah,

  challenges create opportunities. In a similar way ethical dilemmas create a

  strong stand and sort of standing up for an advocating for something that's

  really good on behalf of the client or a group of clients in a community. So,

  I really see it that way because I think that you know anytime you're forced

  to look at an ethical dilemma you're forced to make the best decision."

Table 5. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2022

- " Well, I mean the consequences are that you know that their clients are not getting…that we're not doing right by our clients. That's the ultimate consequence of an ethical dilemma as it relates to the people that we serve. You know are they getting what they need? And you know that's the bottom line. You know or are they getting what they need and are we doing everything in our in our power to make sure that they get their needs met? To me that's always the major you know consequence is that the person is left without a resource or left without something that can benefit them because of this dilemma that we have to deal with. On the positive side I think it just like with anything else you know any dilemma will bring opportunity to learn. For me it's also about growth… Because to me dilemma brings up an opportunity to learn if at the very least to learn other people's perspectives. So, for me even though dilemmas can be challenging it's an opportunity to grow. It's an opportunity to learn as a professional. It's an opportunity for me to learn other people's perspectives and just take it all in and develop my perspective within the guidelines of the ethical standards that are set forth."

Table 6. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 10: In ethical dilemmas, from your point of view might potentially be harmed and who might potentially be protected?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "…depending on what the dilemma is honestly like the patient can be harmed. For the most part I think a lot of the clients that we work with are from marginalized groups in general, and they might not feel comfortable reporting things, so it does put them at risk. They're vulnerable. There's a power differential. So, there's more of a possibility for the client to be victimized or taken advantage of."

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "The client would be harmed and the company, the system is protected. The same system that just, you know, perpetuates all the things we're trying to work against."

Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2022

- "But largely I think that the client, is the beneficiary of any ethical dilemma, even if it, you know, causes us to kind of interact with the client in a way that that makes them feel uncomfortable at first, because you know how they talk about like a crisis is sometimes the beginning of something really positive for his life."

Table 6. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "Well, I guess, I would say the one of the main purposes of having ethics

  is protection of client and whether that's individual, family, family system,

  the client, maybe a larger group. So, I would say the potential for harm is

  typically greater for the client just because the power differential is such

  that the practitioner has more power even if it doesn't feel like more power,

  we do have more power. So, I guess by that extension, I would say

  hopefully the potential for protection also is greater for the client. That just

  because again, that power differential as a professional we're always in a

  position of greater power, even if it only feels slightly greater."

Table 7. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 11: What is your understanding of the role of supervision or consultation regarding the potentially best ethical choice in an ethical dilemma?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "I think that supervision would probably be the first like…Whenever there is an ethical dilemma you should seek supervision and consultation, because you need to make sure you are weighing all the factors out, right?"

Personal Communication, Participant 3, March 2022

- "So, I really enjoy clinical supervision. It gives me an opportunity to discuss some of those questions, you know, some of those cases. It's like what do I do with this? And it's nice being able to consult with someone that's been in the field for a lot longer than I have to see how they've navigated some of some of those concerns. So, I think my clinical supervisor, she's been amazing in helping me navigate that, and she's been with the agency for a fairly long time, too. So, she knows the agency part as well as the client service part. I have a really good experience with that and discussing some of not just with client cases, but some of the concerns that I've seen within the agency within other social workers practicing. So, it's given me an opportunity to discuss different realms of the ethical dilemmas that we encounter."

Table 7. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

- "I feel like the role of supervision and consultation is to gain more insight

    into alternative perspectives, alternate factors, that weren't being already

    considered to have that be brought to light by another person. Because

    the clinician just based on their own experience and training and such

    would have been blinded to really weighing those other factors which

    could be quite important, based on whatever the dilemma is that's at hand.

    So, I would say revealing factors that the clinician wouldn't have otherwise

    been attuned to unless they spoke to, said other clinician that they're

    either getting supervision from or consultation."

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "And so, a lot of the supervision is this talking a lot about a lot of the

    feelings that somebody goes through when they figure out how hard it is to

    operate in that system. And it's giving a lot of guidance, a lot of

    encouragement, a lot of trying to empower that person, that when they are

    rocking the boat whenever they are doing things for the client those aren't

    things to be ashamed of. They are seeing how what big of a difference

    they are making in people's lives and also just teaching them how to

    advocate for themselves in those settings.

Table 7. Continued

Content
So, when somebody is…and it's not the right thing to do, how to be able to advocate for themselves and the client."
Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2022
• "And I feel like my knowledge base has grown because I've been able to pick other people's brains that come from different walks of life. There's always something to gain. To me it's everything. When there is an ethical dilemma that I'm not clear about there is always something to gain by seeking supervision or consulting."

Table 8. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 12: What is your understanding of the helpfulness of consultation or supervision in ethical dilemmas?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "I would say, it is quite helpful, because you know a lot of times when we're faced with one, we're kind of like a deer in the headlights. It helps to get some guidance from maybe someone who has more experience or someone who could be a sounding board to what's occurring."

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

- "You know it either will, one, help me gain more insight into all alternate perspectives of factors, that perhaps I didn't already consider and or two, it gives me more confirmation on if where I was leaning already in terms of making a decision or set of decisions for the ethical dilemma if I was already on the right track."

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "I think it's very helpful, because you know when you're in that situation, and you're going against all these forces all these pressures it really is a lot of pressure just to kind of go with, you know, not to not rock the boat. Just go with it. Go with whatever they're telling you to do. That's the easiest thing to do because again whenever you question the system.

Table 8. Continued

Content
Again, you're dealing with so much potential isolation and possibilities of people discrediting your role, your confidence all these things. I mean it's so hard."

Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2022

- "It's always helpful to reach out to trusted professionals in times when you're trying to make the right decision. I just think our profession is pretty complicated sometimes and can be subjective. We can have various reasons why it's a particularly difficult decision for us personally or us professionally, because of the dynamics of a particular decision. And so confidentially reaching out and getting consultation, like I can't even say too much about it, as it is so important."

Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2022

- "Like I said it's all about personal growth. To me that should be a standard itself if it's not already. You know I think it has to be a practice it has to be a part of what we do as a social worker even if it's just to validate what you know. At the end of the day okay check off that box. Okay, I was going down the right road on this issue. But at least now you have the confidence that you're going down the right path.

Table 9. Research Category: Interview Guide, Question 13: What is your understanding of making ethical decisions without face-to-face consultation for example, your own experience?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "Yes, there have been times where I didn't like have a supervisor or anybody. So that's when you have to dig into state laws, like you have to research, and sometimes even like doing a Google search."

Personal Communication, Participant 4, March 2022

- "The answer is, yes, I would. But now the level of quote unquote apprehension I might have after that will definitely be higher than if I was able to consult with another clinician or clinicians before making the said decision. But you know it really it depends because there's sometimes especially, you know, we're already in the session with them, or if I were already in session with the client it's not necessarily a snap judgment. But I do have to give some sort of answer, at least in the meantime, before the end of the session."

Personal Communication, Participant 5, March 2022

- "Well, I guess it would depend on how much experience the social worker has, I think. Because I think, as you continue being in the profession and you're working in different settings, you kind of get to see certain patterns. But also, I think, with experience sometimes you start to care less about

Table 9. Continued

Content

what other people are telling you, because, as you get to know more and more what you're rolling your focus should be sometimes those things start to matter less and you become more confident in your skills and your abilities and your perspective."

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "Yeah, I think, certainly in situations where there might be just critical time period like there's not time. For example, a decision has to be made that I would kind of draw from my experience. Definitely looking at what needs to be done to keep a client safe is sort of a guiding principles so thinking about safety, and you know if I need to make an immediate phone call to 911 or something doing that. Like I said there may just not be time in some of those situations to actually consult with a colleague so I'd say probably combination of experience familiarity with the Code of Ethics would be the top two things I'd use."

Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2022

- Because you are going to be dealt with these situations where you can't always consult, you can't always collaborate, you can't always pick somebody's brain, and so for me it's at a bare minimum right we need to be on the up and up on the current ethical standards and laws and ethics, so that we can make the right choices and decisions for our clients.

Table 9. Continued

Content
So again, that's why for me it's like those that ongoing continuing education part of our license is so important. And I really respect it and I wouldn't have it any other way. Because you're going to have to depend on yourself throughout your career as a social worker as much as it's ideal to always consult it's not always practical."

Table 10. Research Category: Additional Question: What have you found to be most helpful in preparing you to solve an ethical dilemma, newly post-graduate (i.e. education, the Code of Ethics, on-the-job learning)?

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 2, March 2022

- "I think it doesn't fully prepare you because it's a skill that you have to…like it's an experiential learning. You get kind of the framework for it in school. I think the most important thing is that you know where to find answers."

Personal Communication, Participant 3, March 2022

- "I think just understanding that you're going to encounter it. It is just a matter of when. So, you know, anticipating that it's going to happen, and being able to know who to go to having that support system, whether it's within your agency or getting affiliated with a social work group whatever the case is, or formal consultation. I think that'll help navigate some of those stressful situations, especially as a newer social worker because if you're in this field you're going to encounter it, so making sure you know what your resources are and getting familiar with that Code of Ethics."

Personal Communication, Participant 3, March 2022

- "Well, I guess you know, speaking for myself, I feel as though, like my like, my personal moral compass very closely aligns to you know the social

Table 10. Continued

Content
work values and ethics like they're really closely aligned, right. So, the thing is that whenever I encounter a situation and something immediately doesn't feel right, you know again I think the automatic thing that goes up is wait a minute this isn't right. You know like again, the moral compass… And then the second thing would be my experience. Just kind of looking back at all the situations I've been in before and the possible things that could have happened as well. So, I think just going on the experience. I think also as you continue to work in the profession you do become more confident in what you're doing and what you're saying."

Personal Communication, Participant 6, April 2022

- "Confidence is so important. You know, being able to have the courage to be a leader yourself and to stand up for what's right, and to be able to articulate it in a way that makes sense to others and that helps them to respect and appreciate your professional knowledge and your background. So that's something that sort of happens over time, you know, that you become more and more confident, and I guess I'm addressing when situations require you to have to deal with others, you know, in making those decisions, and especially others, that it may disagree with you."

Table 10. Continued

Content

Personal Communication, Participant 7, April 2022

- "I think the piece of the agency that you work for or the setting you work

  for I've really appreciated that over the years. Because it is certainly much

  easier to practice ethically in a setting where people understand or where

  there are already policies and practices in place. And I've so appreciated

  that because I've been in settings where it's much more up in the air. It's

  up to your discretion. I think that can be make for a lot more ethical

  dilemmas when you're not working in an agency with some clear guidance

  around what does it look like to interact with a client, who takes what role,

  what kind of rules or limits do we set around what hours you're working, or

  should you be calling a client outside of a session."

Personal Communication, Participant 8, April 2022

- "But it had a lot to do with just being in the field and experiencing things for

  yourself. And there's certain concepts that you may read and understand

  but to truly comprehend them at a deeper level you kind of have to

  experience it for yourself. And for that reason, you have to also give

  yourself the grace right to learn. And sometimes you're going to make

  mistakes. And sometimes you may not make the perfect decision. But the

  rule of thumb is always try to do the least amount of damages possible

  and I keep that I keep that in the back of my mind…As you go in this field

Table 10. Continued

Content
you will live and learn and that will ultimately build competence. That will build confidence, but it takes time."

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This following section will discuss the content presented in each of the ten

tables in chapter four and their significance to social work practice. This in-depth

discussion will first begin by presenting a representative piece of content from

each tables and then discuss the content's meaning as a guide on how to view

each of the contents in order to apply them to one's practice. The contents from

the table being discussed include: Ethical dilemmas as a grey area, the Code as

a blueprint, client over personal and agency, doing right by the client,

professional power versus client vulnerability, supervision and consultation as a

source of insight and support, supervision and consultation as confirmation,

confidence yields self-reliance, and experiential learning builds confidence.

Lastly, recommendations on the application of these findings to current and

future social work policy and potential research will be addressed.

Discussion

Ethical Dilemmas as a Grey Area

"Ethical dilemmas as a grey area" emerges from the content in table two.

The content in table two reflects the responses of participants to the question,

"What is your understanding of ethical dilemmas as it comes up in social work

practice?" When asked the above question participant four responded that their understanding of ethical dilemmas as it comes up in social work practice is that it occurs when the social worker is operating in a "grey area" in which they are tasked with relying on their own "clinical judgement" when making a choice in a dilemma. Operating within a "grey area" might suggest that in dealing with ethical dilemmas methods to resolution are up to the social worker. This might indicate that in solving ethical dilemmas the social worker may lack a clear path to resolution. This highlights the open-ended nature of ethical dilemmas and sheds light on the need for better education regarding how ethical dilemmas are to be solved in practice.

The Code as a Blueprint

"The Code as a blueprint" emerges from the content in table three. The content in table three reflects the responses of participants to the two-part question, "How do you understand the role of NASW regarding ethical dilemmas? How do you understand ethical standards regarding ethical dilemmas?" When asked the above questions participant five responded that NASW Code of Ethics acts as a blueprint for social workers to follow or in other words acts as a guide in how social workers should respond to "various situations [they] might encounter," but "in a broad manner." This suggests that the NASW Code of Ethics does provide some assistance in dealing with ethical dilemmas, but that the extent to which it provides this assistance is limited. The broadness of the Code may act as a guide in dealing with ethical dilemmas but

does not give hard-and-fast direction on how to proceed in every situation. This broadness of the Code of Ethics may highlight the need for clearer rules and direction regarding decision making in ethical dilemmas.

Client Over Personal and Agency

"Client over personal and agency" emerges from the content in table four. The content in table four reflects the responses of participants to the three-part question, "What is your understanding of how personal values might play a part in ethical dilemmas? What is your understanding of how agency values might influence ethical dilemmas? What is your understanding of how client values might affect ethical dilemmas?" When asked the above questions participant five explained that their personal values have the possibility to be in conflict with social work values but that part of what drew them to the field was their commitment to their personal values. They went on to explain that their personal values align with that of the profession of social work and the NASW. This might suggest that for some social workers there is a connection between their commitment to personal values and their commitment to social work values. This connection may imply that some social workers have similar personal values to that of the social work profession which may act as a driving force to work in the profession. This connection could aid in the solving of ethical dilemmas due to the possible adherence to the values and standards set forth in the NASW Code of Ethics.

Participant five went on to explain the realities of agency values.

Participant five expressed that there is sometimes a dissonance between the

values that an agency espouses and the ones that they practice. The participant

expressed that in their experience an agency is often guided by a mission

statement which is connected to a social work value, but that in delving deeper

into the "system" there are "so many things that are going against that." This is

important because it may imply that agencies do not always practice the values

they claim to hold. It also may imply that while an agency may claim to be guided

by a certain value their real aim is to act in ways that "benefit" the system

whether or not these practices benefit the client. This might highlight the need to

strengthen social work policies and enforcement of these policies.

When asked the three-part question participant six explained that if a

social worker's values were not congruent with client values, then that would

require the social worker to decide whether or not "stepping away" from the client

or case is appropriate. Participant six explained that sometimes stepping away

from a client is an appropriate decision, but sometimes it is not. A decision

participant six stated is dependent on "the client's best interest." Participant six

went on to say that the social worker must always act on the client's best interest

in deciding a course of action in an ethical dilemma. This might suggest that

social workers prioritize the needs of their clients when deciding how to proceed

in an ethical dilemma. This could imply that social workers prioritize the ethical

responsibilities they have to their clients over their own and those they have to

the agency at which they are employed. This might be important because it highlights social workers devotion to clients which in turn help guide social work selection of social workers into the profession.

<u>Doing Right by the Client</u>

"Doing right by the client" emerges from the content in table five. The content in table five reflects the responses from participants to the question, "What is your understanding of the potential consequences/potential outcomes of an ethical dilemma?" When asked the above question participant eight explained that the "ultimate consequence" of an ethical dilemma is that the social worker is not "doing right" by the client and that the client is not "getting what they need." This might be important because it might indicate that the potential for a client to be at a disadvantage due to an ethical dilemma is great. This may highlight the need for better protections against client harm as well as improved education on service delivery.

<u>Professional Power Versus Client Vulnerability</u>

"Professional power versus client vulnerability" emerges from the content in table six. The content in table six reflects the responses from participants to the question, "In ethical dilemmas, from your point of view might potentially be harmed and who might potentially be protected?" When asked the above question participant two explained that the majority of the clients served in social work practice settings are from "marginalized groups" which results in them being "vulnerable." This vulnerability is then offset by the power that the social worker

has, creating a "power differential," which results in the "possibility of the client to be victimized or taken advantage of." The existing power differential between the social worker and the client suggests that the client may be more likely to be harmed in an ethical dilemma echoing what participant eight stated in table five. Understanding and acknowledging this power differential could be vital in the protection of a client in an ethical dilemma. This highlights the importance of policy creation in protecting clients from harm.

<u>Supervision and Consultation as a Source of Insight and Support</u>

"Supervision and consultation as a source of insight and support" emerges from the content in table seven. The content in table seven reflects the responses from participants to the question, "What is your understanding of the role of supervision or consultation regarding the potentially best ethical choice in an ethical dilemma?" When asked the above question participant four stated that the role of supervision or consultation was to provide "insight" into "alternative perspectives" or "alternate factors" that the social worker had not considered in an ethical dilemma. This is significant because it may suggest that supervision or consultation provides greater understanding for the social worker regarding the various factors in an ethical dilemma. Additionally, different viewpoints may present the social worker with different methods to solving an ethical dilemma.

Another element that was presented in table seven's contents was that of support. Participant five stated that they felt that the role of supervision was to provide "guidance" and "encouragement." These statements from participant five

come from a supervisor's point of view of supervision and consultation.

Participant five expressed that they felt that a supervisor's role in supervision or

consultation is to guide and support the supervisee. This underlines the

significance of the supervisor and supervisee relationship in supervision and

consultation. Understanding the supervisor and supervisee relationship could

provide greater insight into the role that emotional support and a trusting

relationship with one's supervisor may play in handling an ethical dilemma.

Greater research into the training and requirements to become a social work

supervisor help ensure that all supervisors are equipped with the tools to provide

supportive supervision. This could then mitigate the difficulty and indecision that

supervisees feel in handling an ethical dilemma.

Supervision and Consultation as Confirmation

"Supervision and consultation as confirmation" emerges from the content

in table eight. The content in table eight reflects the responses from participants

to the question, "What is your understanding of the helpfulness of consultation or

supervision in ethical dilemmas?" When asked the above question participant

four expressed that supervision or consultation regarding an ethical dilemma

provided "confirmation" on their decision making process and affirmed whether or

not they were on the "right track." This might indicate that supervision or

consultation acts as a confirmation tool for social workers. This suggests a third

role that supervision or consultation may play in solving ethical dilemmas in

addition to the above insight and support.

Confidence Yields Self-Reliance

"Confidence yields self-reliance" emerges from the content in table nine. The content in table nine reflects the responses from participants to the question, "What is your understanding of making ethical decisions without face-to-face consultation for example, your own experience?" When asked the above question participant five explained that as a social worker becomes more "confident" in their "skills," "abilities," and "perspectives" they begin to rely more on their own knowledge and begin to "care less" about what others say they ought to do. Reliance on one's own abilities may suggest that there is a relationship between confidence and self-reliance. This might indicate that the more confident a social worker is the more reliant they are on their own abilities to solve an ethical dilemma. This could indicate the need to employ confidence building exercises in social work education and training.

Experiential Learning Builds Confidence

"Experiential learning builds confidence" emerges from the content in table ten. The content in table ten reflects the responses from participants to the question, "What have you found to be most helpful in preparing you to solve an ethical dilemma, newly post-graduate (i.e. education, the Code of Ethics, on-the-job learning)?" Participant eight explained that preparation in handling an ethical dilemma has limitations, stating that "there's certain concepts that you may read and understand but to truly comprehend them at a deeper level you kind of have to experience it for yourself." Participant eight went on to say that with time a

social worker will "build confidence" but that "it takes time." This might indicate that experience plays a factor in a social worker's confidence and comfort level in handling an ethical dilemma. This highlights the importance of gaining hands on experience during the education process. While internship is a requirement for all social work programs, emphasis should be placed on securing social work students with internship opportunities that provide a range of experiences and multitudes of exposure to different practice. Furthermore, the role of confidence in solving an ethical dilemma cannot be neglected as a key component and requires additional research into the role it plays in ethical dilemmas.

Recommendations for Social Work Research, Policy, and Practice

The information garnered from this study demonstrates greater insight into social workers' understanding of ethical dilemmas in social work practice. This information can be utilized to guide research into ethical dilemmas, guide the creation of social work policy, and inform social work practice regarding ethical dilemmas. The following are the researcher's recommendations for social work research, policy, and practice.

Research

Ethical dilemmas by their very nature provide a lack of clear direction for the social worker in terms resolution. The grey area that ethical dilemmas create leave proper steps to resolution up to the social worker. This leaves much up to interpretation. Research into the creation of better methods into solving ethical

dilemmas is needed. Additionally, this research has demonstrated that a link

between confidence and the solving of ethical dilemmas may exist. Further

research into how to build confidence in new social workers and how to create

richer learning experiences for social workers is needed.

<u>Policy</u>

This research uncovered the discrepancies that sometimes exist between

the values that an agency espouses and the ones they actually practice. This

incongruence can set the stage for harm in an ethical dilemma. If agencies are

not adhering to best practice, can they be trusted to act in the client's best

interest in an ethical dilemma? The NASW needs to create better safeguards

against agency wrongdoing.

This research also underscored the need for great client protections

against mistreatment. As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, a large part of the

population served by social work are that of marginalized groups. This coupled

with the already existing power differential between the social worker and the

client lends to possible mistreatment and exploitation of the client by the social

worker. Stricter client protections need to be created in order to prevent

mistreatment and exploitation.

<u>Practice</u>

The supervisor and supervisee relationship has shown to play a role in

social workers handling of an ethical dilemma. Supervisees rely on their

supervisor for not only greater understanding into how to handle an ethical

dilemma, but also for emotional support. This suggests that support may play a key role in social worker's ability to solve an ethical dilemma.

Social worker's confidence has also emerged as an element in social worker's ability to solve an ethical dilemma. A social worker's confidence plays a role in their ability to rely on their own skill set and knowledge in resolving an ethical dilemma. This research also discovered that confidence can be built through experience in the field. This emphasizes the importance of internship and the need for richer learning opportunities for social workers students.

Conclusion

In conclusion, ethical dilemmas remain a murky situation for social workers to navigate through. While aids such as the NASW Code of Ethics provide a blueprint in navigating these scenarios, a greater support has shown to be the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee and the confidence that social workers can build over time. Ethical dilemmas open up the possibility for client harm. Further research into best practices in solving ethical dilemmas needs to be done in order to better guide social workers' course of action and thus alleviate client harm.

APPENDIX A

INTERVIEW GUIDE

INTERVIEW GUIDE

1. What is your age?

2. What gender do you identify as? (male, female, transgender, gender queer, another gender identity, not sure)

3. What is your race/ethnicity?

4. How many years have you been working in the social work field?

5. Do you have a degree in social work? (bachelors, masters, doctorate)

6. What is your understanding of ethical dilemmas as it comes up in social work practice?

7. How do you understand the role of NASW regarding ethical dilemmas? How do you understand ethical standards regarding ethical dilemmas?

8. What is your understanding of how personal values might play a part in ethical dilemmas? What is your understanding of how agency values might influence ethical dilemmas? What is your understanding of how client values might affect ethical dilemmas?

9. What is your understanding of the potential consequences/potential outcomes of an ethical dilemma?

10. In ethical dilemmas, from your point of view who might potentially be harmed and who might potentially be protected?

11. What is your understanding of the role of supervision or consultation regarding the potentially best ethical choice in an ethical dilemma?

12. What is your understanding of the helpfulness of consultation or supervision in ethical dilemmas?

13. What is your understanding of making ethical decisions without face-to-face consultation for example, your own experience?

APPENDIX B

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to explore the ways in which social workers solve ethical dilemmas in social work practice. The study is being conducted by Arielle Arambula, a graduate student, under the supervision of Dr. Thomas Davis, Associate Professor of the School of Social Work at California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board at CSUSB.

PURPOSE: The purpose of this study is to explore the ways in which social workers solve ethical dilemmas in social work practice.

DESCRIPTION: Participants will be interview and asked questions regarding their understanding of ethical dilemmas. Questions will include their understanding of the NASW, the NASW ethical standards, personal values, agency values, client values, potential outcomes, the role of supervision, as well as demographic questions.

PARTICIPATION: This study defines social worker as any individual with the job title of social worker, regardless of education level. Participants must have a job title of social worker, but do not need to have a degree in social work. Your participation in the study is completely voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses will remain confidential and will be reported in group form only.

DURATION: It will take 15 to 20 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: Although not anticipated, there may be some discomfort in answering some of the questions. You are not required to answer and can skip the question or end your participation.

BENEFITS: There will not be any direct benefits to the participants. However, findings from the study will contribute to our knowledge in this area of research.

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Dr. Thomas Davis at (909) 537-3839.

RESULTS: Results of this study Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/) at California State University, San Bernardino after July 2023.

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I agree to have this interview be audio recorded: _____ YES _____ NO

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study, have read and understand the consent document and agree to participate in your study.

_____   _____

Place an X mark here   Date

APPENDIX C

IRB APPROVAL LETTER

CSUSB INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Administrative/Exempt Review Determination Status: Determined Exempt
IRB-FY2022-67

Thomas Davis Arielle Arambula
CSBS - Social Work
California State University, San Bernardino 5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino, California 92407

Dear Thomas Davis Arielle Arambula:

Thu, Jan 13, 2022 at 12:00 PM

Your application to use human subjects, titled "Ethical Dilemmas: What Guides Decision Making in Social Work Practice?" has been reviewed and determined exempt by the Chair of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) of CSU, San Bernardino. An exempt determination means your study had met the federal requirements for exempt status under 45 CFR 46.104. The CSUSB IRB has weighed the risks and benefits of the study to ensure the protection of human participants.

This approval notice does not replace any departmental or additional campus approvals which may be required including access to CSUSB campus facilities and affiliate campuses. Investigators should consider the changing COVID-19 circumstances based on current CDC, California Department of Public Health, and campus guidance and submit appropriate protocol modifications to the IRB as needed. CSUSB campus and affiliate health screenings should be completed for all campus human

research related activities. Human research activities conducted at off-campus sites should follow CDC, California Department of Public Health, and local guidance. See CSUSB's ✅COVID-19 Prevention Plan for more information regarding campus requirements.

You are required to notify the IRB of the following as mandated by the Office of Human Research Protections (OHRP) federal regulations 45 CFR 46 and CSUSB IRB policy. The forms (modification, renewal, unanticipated/adverse event, study closure) are located in the Cayuse IRB System with instructions provided on the IRB Applications, Forms, and Submission webpage. Failure to notify the IRB of the following requirements may result in disciplinary action. The Cayuse IRB system will notify you when your protocol is due for renewal. Ensure you file your protocol renewal and continuing review form through the Cayuse IRB system to keep your protocol current and active unless you have completed your study.

Ensure your CITI Human Subjects Training is kept up-to-date and current throughout the study.
Submit a protocol modification (change) if any changes (no matter how minor) are proposed in your study for review and approval by the IRB before being implemented in your study. Notify the IRB within 5 days of any unanticipated or adverse events are experienced by subjects during your research.
Submit a study closure through the Cayuse IRB submission system once your study has ended.

If you have any questions regarding the IRB decision, please contact Michael Gillespie, the Research Compliance Officer. Mr. Michael Gillespie can be reached by phone at (909) 537-7588, by fax at (909) 537-7028, or by email
at mgillesp@csusb.edu. Please include your application approval number IRB-FY2022-67 in all correspondence. Any complaints you receive from participants and/or others related to your research may be directed to Mr. Gillespie.

Best of luck with your research.

Sincerely,

Nicole Dabbs

Nicole Dabbs, Ph.D., IRB Chair CSUSB Institutional Review Board

ND/MG

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