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Ethics in Social Work Practice and Research

Outline

- A brief history of ethics in social work

- The Canadian Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics*

- Addressing ethical dilemmas: The process of reflexive decision-making

- Social work ethics in research

Learning Obejectives

- To **review** the historical development of ethical guidelines in practice and research
- To **introduce** the CASW Code of Ethics and its contemporary applications
- To **address** current ethical issues in the context of historical ethical misconduct
- To **contextualize** ethical social work practice and research through a reflexive lens

Why Are Ethics Important in Social Work?

Ethics and Social Work

- Social work is a profession with a distinct value base grounded in the pursuit of social justice and the elimination of oppression are central tenets social work values.

- Ethical dilemmas emerge when social workers find themselves positioned between competing demands (e.g., the protection of clients' interests and addressing demands for efficiency).

- Ethics to which social workers adhere span across the spheres of practice and research.

A Brief History of Ethics in Social Work

The Morality Period

- Early twentieth century
- Social problems and challenges believed to be the result of individual moral failures
- Role of social workers: to lead clients to "better" life by "strengthening their morality"

Values Period

- Early 1950s

- Practice focus shifted to the need for social workers to examine their own personal values

- Profession debated the need for a core mission and core professional value

Emergence of Ethical Theories and Decision-Making

- 1970s saw a surge on the topic of ethics across professional disciplines

- High-tech developments, social movements, evidence of professional misconduct awoke interest in professional ethics

- Two types of ethical theories:

  - **Utilitarian theories** suggest actions are right and wrong according to their outcomes rather than their intrinsic features

  - **Deontological theories** maintain that certain acts are intrinsically good or bad in and of themselves, irrespective of their consequences

The Ethical Standards and Risk Management Period

- Early 1990s

- Creation and formalization of a comprehensive code of ethics for the profession

- Ethical code development designed to protect public, prevent ethics complaints and litigation

The Canadian Association of Social Workers' *Code of Ethics*

Code of Ethics Core Values

- Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons
  - Social workers must uphold clients' human rights and their right to self-determination, respect diversity among clients and ensure client choices are voluntary.
- The pursuit of social justice
  - Social workers must provide services, resources, and opportunities that work to benefit humanity and protect individuals from harm.
- Service to humanity
  - Social workers must aim to promote the personal development of individuals and groups as outlined in the *Code*.

Code of Ethics Core Values, cont'd

- Integrity of professional practice
  - Social workers must respect and promote the values, purpose and ethical principles of their profession and their field of practice

- Confidentiality in professional practice
  - Social workers respect their clients' right to privacy and the importance of the trust their clients have placed in them.

- Competence in professional practice
  - Social workers respect their clients' right to be offered the highest quality of service possible

Strengths and Limitations of the CASW *Code of Ethics*

STRENGTHS

- Provides direction and guidelines when ethical dilemmas arise
- Assists in creating and maintaining professional identity
- Establishes norms related to professional mission and methods
- Ensures public accountability and protects clients from malpractice or abuse
- Ensures that professionals maintain relevant, up-to-date skills

LIMITATIONS

- May lead social workers to adopt an overly cautious relationship style with clients
- Formal codes may distract from alternate ethical systems
- Codes of ethics are informed by a liberal democratic philosophy and may favour certain ways of thinking and/or people in certain positions over others
- The Code appears deliberately ambiguous and can challenge decision-making process
- Formal codes are not timeless and are subject to revision

Addressing Ethical Dilemmas: The Process of Reflexive Decision-Making

The Process of Reflexive Decision-Making

- Describe the case and context
  - Describe factors that are key to understanding the case
- Define the ethical problem
  - Separate out competing values (e.g., confidentiality vs. duty to warn)
- Explore values and biases
  - Examine personal, agency, professional, and societal values and biases

The Process of Reflexive Decision-Making, cont'd

- Gather information: Research, theory, and the *Code of Ethics*
    - Refer to relevant research, laws, theories, and the *Code of Ethics* to help decision-making
- Explore options
    - Consider all possible courses of action and possible benefits and risks

Research in the Social Work Education Curriculum

- Quantitative approach
  - Focuses on the production of numerical findings that can be statistically interpreted in order to generalize them to populations beyond the study sample.
  - Ways of collecting data typically include questionnaires, experiments, and using data collected previously.
- Qualitative approach
  - A way to "study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings that people bring to them."
  - Ways of collecting data typically include in-depth interviews, field observations, and reviews of written documents
  - Data are expressed as words, images, objects, or sounds

Research in the Social Work Education Curriculum, cont'd

- Why include research courses in social work curricula?
  - To increase social workers' familiarity with research methods used to evaluate research in order to apply findings to practice
  - To increase social workers' understanding of an analytic approach to knowledge production
  - To apply social work ethics and values to research process
  - To cultivate an ability to critically review published research

Evidence-Based Practice

- **Evidence-based practice** is an approach that brings practice and research together so as to strengthen the scientific knowledge base supporting social work intervention

- **Practice-based evidence** calls upon practitioners to think about the outcome they and their clients hope to achieve and represent the outcome in a measurable way

Overview of Social Work Research

- Exploratory research
  - Focuses on a "new" topic about which the researcher wants to learn more
- Descriptive studies
  - The use of systematic, intentional data collection in order to describe a population, organization, and so forth to provide an accurate portrait of various characteristics of populations
- Explanatory studies
  - Focus on seeking to answer the "why" question by testing hypotheses, expanding a theoretical explanation, or assessing which explanation is most effective for particular populations
- Evaluation studies
  - Include the use of any of the approaches above to assess a program, an intervention or a service

Origins of Contemporary Ethical Guidelines in Research

- Universal principles of research emerged following World War I and the trials in Nuremberg, Germany, of Nazi doctors
- Ten principles, referred to as the Nuremberg Code, were developed for medical research, but have also served as the foundation for research ethics guidelines across disciplines
- Key elements included:
    - ✓ Voluntary consent to participate in research
    - ✓ Research should be conducted to benefit participants and society at large
    - ✓ Unnecessary physical and psychological harm must be avoided
    - ✓ Participants have the right to withdraw from a research study

Origins of Contemporary Ethical Guidelines in Research

- The Declaration of Helsinki was adopted by the World Medical Assembly in 1964.

- Key areas of the Declaration:
  - The importance of participant well-being over scientific and societal interests
  - The need to respect participants and protect their health and rights
  - The recognition of specific populations that require additional protections (such as children and individuals with disabilities)
  - The requirement of research ethics board reviews of research proposals in order to assure the protection of participant rights and welfare

Ethical Considerations for Social Workers in Research

- Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP)

- Do no harm—Physical, psychological, or otherwise

- Research participation should be voluntary and informed

- Disclosure and deception

- Protect participants' privacy by keeping their information anonymous or confidential

- Dissemination of findings

Ownership, Control, Access and Possession (OCAP)

- OCAP principles are a set of particular guidelines that supersede what is provided in policies guiding Canada's main research-funding institutions.

- The OCAP principles grew out of the negative history of research with Indigenous Peoples in Canada.

  - **Ownership** refers to collective ownership of information.

  - **Control** refers to the rights of First Nations to control all aspects of lives.

  - **Access** refers to First Nations Peoples' right to access data about themselves.

  - **Possession** refers to stewardship of the data, ensuring respectful relationship between ownership and possession.

Do No Harm—Physical, Psychological, or Otherwise

- Social work research should not cause injury to study participants.

- Precautions must be in place to eliminate or greatly reduce potential physical or psychological harm or emotional distress for participants.

- Cost to participants must not outweigh the benefit for the social work knowledge base.

- Researchers should be sensitive to the issue of focus and highly aware of possible implications of findings (especially to the community from which data was gathered).

Research Participation Should be Voluntary and Informed

- Social work research must follow a major principle of medical research ethics: participation in research must be voluntary.

- Researchers must be sensitive to potential of coercion.

- Power dynamics between researcher and study participants must be considered.

- Consent forms must be provided to all research participants.

  - Consent forms explicitly describe the study, its purpose, expectations of the participants (duration, what participation will entail), clear description of the procedures, explanation of possible risks, description of benefits, etc.

Disclosure and Deception

- The need to conceal the nature of the study from those being observed is an ethical dilemma.
- The range of concealment spans from:
  - Disclosure where the researcher is transparent about the nature of the study and the researcher's role in it;
  - Neglect where the researcher does not inform people that they are being observed;
  - Full deceit where the research hides both the study and his/her role in it.
- Research ethics boards will review issues of disclosure and deception to ensure the benefit of the study (and deception) vastly outweigh the risk to participants.
- Researchers should build debriefing sessions into their studies to inform participants of findings.

Protect Participants' Privacy

- **Anonymous data** refers to information that no one, including the researcher, can trace back to the participant who provided it.

- **Confidential data** refers to information that can be linked with a particular participant but those connections are not made public.

Dissemination of Findings

- Dissemination of research is a key piece to ethical research.

- Researchers must ensure that the research is available and accessible to the community from whom it was gathered.

- Researchers should ask how they can give back to the community in a way that is accessible and available.

- Newsletters stripped of research jargon are one method of disseminating research findings back to participants.