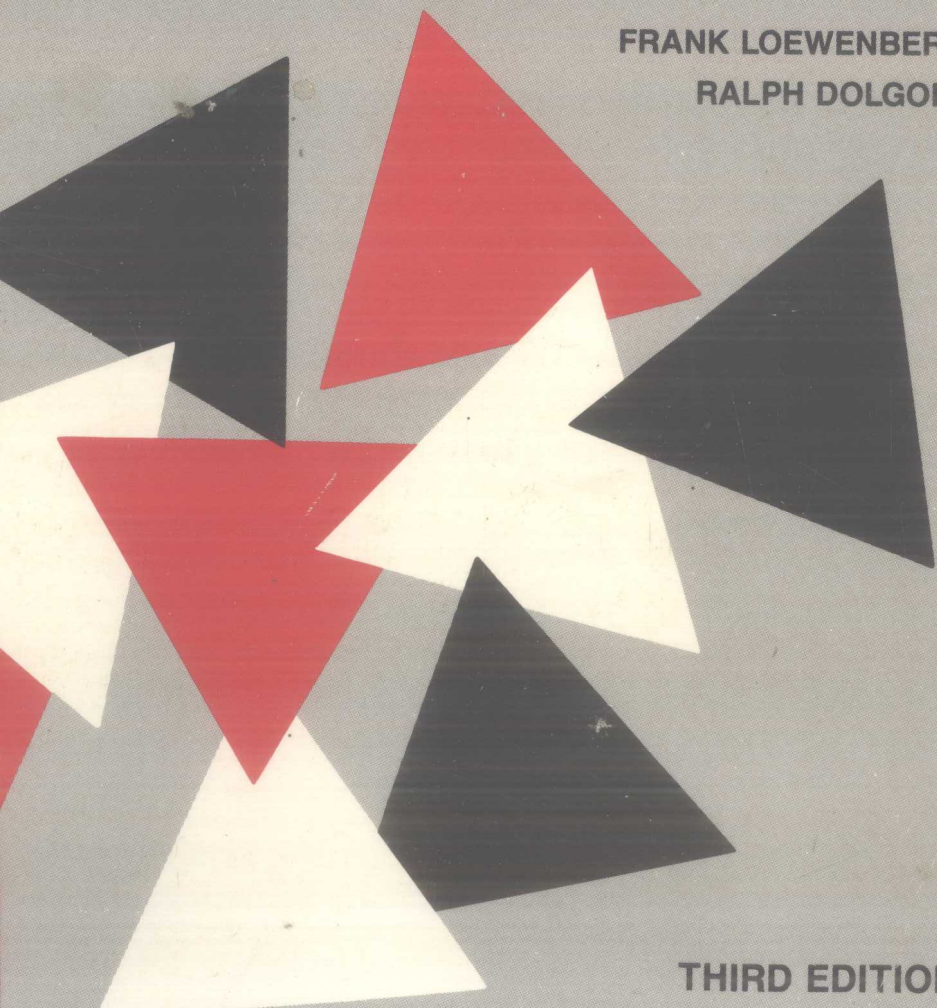


ETHICAL DECISIONS for SOCIAL WORK PRACTICE

FRANK LOEWENBERG
RALPH DOLGOFF



THIRD EDITION

DECISIONS for PRACTICE

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ETHICAL SOCIAL WORK

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**WE DEDICATE THIS BOOK
TO OUR WIVES—CHAYA AND SYLVIA**

PREFACE

When we first wrote *Ethical Decisions for Social Work Practice*, we were aware that social workers showed a renewed and widespread interest in the ethical aspects of their professional practice. This high degree of interest in the ethical aspects of practice has been maintained, perhaps given new impetus by societal and governmental developments that have continued to raise serious public ethical dilemmas and questions. In addition, new technological developments, new arenas for practice, and new or newly accentuated social problems, all have created new ethical dilemmas for professional social workers.

These ethical problems arise whenever and wherever people deal with human lives, human survival, and human welfare—as social workers do every day. This is the reason why we believe that concern for ethical conduct must be included in every professional education curriculum. But all who teach in this area must keep in mind Thomas Aquinas's caution that when it comes to ethics "we cannot discuss what we ought to do unless we know what we can do" (Commentary on *De Anima* 1.1.2). In other words, the *theory* of ethical action is not worth much unless it is accompanied by the *skills* of ethical action. In this book, we follow this dual focus on theory and skills.

It has been said that virtue cannot be taught in a college class-

room and that ethical dilemmas cannot be resolved by textbooks. But we believe that the principles and techniques of ethical assessment and ethical decision making do have a place in a professional curriculum. Our approach to ethical decision making is designed to achieve a more ethical stance in practice. The exercises at the end of each chapter have been prepared to heighten students' sensitivity to the ethical aspects of social work practice, to aid them in developing a personal approach to such issues, and to help them consider the essential elements in ethical decision making in professional practice.

The use of our book by practice instructors, staff development personnel, and others interested in social work practice, as well as the comments we have received from the classroom and the field confirmed that our observations were correct. The flow of comments has continued and has been gratifying, and once again convinced us that another edition is needed to keep pace with the latest developments in the field.

We have sought to make this latest edition even clearer to the reader. As a result, we have rewritten much; added new content; rearranged some parts of the book; added a number of graphic displays of important features of the book; added new case examples in the body of the book as well as in the exemplars included in the appendix. These new exemplars are from newer areas of practice and reflect shifts in the field as social workers have entered new practice arenas, confronted new social problems, and grappled with emerging ethical dilemmas. Practitioners and students will find new case examples for study, analysis, and application of the concepts and principles set forth in the text.

Illustrations from the more traditional practice areas—including work with the aged, minority groups, abused children, troubled teenagers, and single parents—continue to be used throughout the book. All of these exemplars are taken from the real practice world, but none occurred exactly in the way they are presented here, nor have we used the names of real people. Neither the names nor any identifying information has come from social agency records. Needless to say, these exemplars do not always typify good or desirable practice. They were chosen simply to illustrate the ethical aspects of practice problems.

The inclusion of criteria, including a rank-ordering of ethical

priorities, has proven helpful to readers of earlier editions in the ethical decision-making process. This guide for rank-ordering ethical priorities and ethical obligations can help social workers identify priorities among competing ethical obligations. Our effort has been to suggest some principles and guidelines that can help social workers in making ethical practice decisions. While moral perfection remains an unattainable goal, social workers, like all others, must continue to strive toward that goal.

Our focus in this book, as in the earlier editions, remains primarily on individuals—on individual clients and on individual workers. This approach is congruent with the primary emphasis that American society has accorded to the individual. Yet we recognize that the individual, although important, is not the only focus. Professional ethics are not only the concern of the individual worker, but also of the agency, the profession, and the community.

This focus on individual clients and on small groups is not meant to indicate a preference for social casework or for psychotherapy, nor does it do violence to one of the basic assumptions of modern social work practice—that the problems that social workers deal with are those that arise where the person and the environment meet. Our focus merely recognizes the reality that most social work practice today is with individuals, families, and small groups, and not with macrosystems and large-scale social systems.

We want to thank our colleagues and students at Adelphi University and Bar Ilan University for helping us think through many of the issues involved in social work ethics. A special word of thanks is extended to the teachers of Foundation Social Work Practice at Adelphi for their help. Dr. Benjamin Chetkow-Yanoov, who reviewed an early draft of this book, deserves our special thanks for his thoughtful comments. Thanks are also due to Jean Gonsalves, Elizabeth Canavan, Maureen Bisch, Helen O'Connor, and Ann Carney for their assistance. Of course, we alone are responsible for any errors of fact, judgment, or interpretation. Finally, our wives Chaya and Sylvia were again active partners in the preparation of this book. They made this a more readable book.

August 1987

FML Ramat Gan, Israel

RLD Garden City, New York

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Ethical Choices in the Helping Professions

Everyday, most social workers are confronted in their work with the necessity to make ethical decisions. Sometimes they have an opportunity to think about the choices, perhaps to talk it over with colleagues or to consult with experts; in general, however, social workers—even during their student years—must make their own choices when faced with difficult ethical decisions because of the immediacy of the problems. At most, they can mull such problems for a few days to consider what should be done.

There are many ways to prepare for this practice reality. First, it is important to recognize that every decision in social work practice includes ethical aspects. Next, social workers need knowledge and skill to clarify these aspects of practice and to engage in effective ethical decision making. Knowledge and skill in this area—as in all other aspects of social work practice—need to be developed and refined.

This book is meant to help social workers, students as well as practitioners, to prepare for informed and skillful reasoning in ethical decision making. Part of this preparation is considering

questions such as these: Who is my client? What do I owe clients? Can I have more than one client in a situation? What do I owe myself? My family? My employing agency? My profession? What are my "private" values and responsibilities and what are my "public," "social," and professional responsibilities? What is the ethical priority if I owe responsibilities to several people at the same time? How can I choose among responsibilities? What are the ethical actions and priorities?

In this chapter we will introduce this complex and important topic and define what we mean by ethical decision making. But first, consider the following situations, typical of those faced daily by many social workers:

- A client reveals to you, his social worker, his intention to commit a serious crime.
- A 26-year-old married woman wants a tubal ligation since she does not ever want to have any children. She asks you, as her social worker, to help her find a physician who will perform the ligation.
- A social worker believes that a client in a residential detoxification center is potentially violent and may become a danger to other residents.
- A social worker learns informally that another social worker knows about a child abuse situation but has failed to report the case to the Child Abuse Center.
- A Board member of your agency helped to obtain a grant which makes it possible for you to serve adult alcoholics and their families. The Board member now wants you to report that more people are served than actually receive service so that next year the agency can receive a larger grant for services to this group.

Can you identify the ethical aspects in each of these situations? Various social workers may emphasize different ethical aspects. Some may even claim that this or that situation is so obvious it involves no ethical dilemma. Some may say they know how to cope with the situation without needing to consider the ethical aspects or they might suggest the ethical aspects are straightforward and simple. But most social workers will admit that every practice de-

cision involves ethical aspects and that dealing with ethical dilemmas is difficult, even painful.

Some critics think that most social workers have not yet developed a strong enough sense of morality and that therefore they do not find it easy to cope with the ethical implications of their practice. Others think that social workers are aware of ethical issues that occur in practice, but that they make decisions on the basis of incomplete knowledge, value judgments, and insufficient conscious use of self. Students and practitioners have asked for guides to help them grapple with ethical practice issues. Until recently these requests were answered only by codes of ethics, which were helpful in some ways but were lacking in many other ways. Nevertheless, ethics are supremely important because, according to Gewirth, they set "requirements that take precedence over all other modes of guiding action" (1978:1).

The very subject of professional ethics was once almost completely ignored in the social work curriculum. In the past two generations we have cracked the genetic code, split the atom, put a man on the moon, and succeeded in transferring an embryo from the test tube to the womb. Nowadays it is possible to do almost anything technologically. The key question now is how to decide what ought to be done. In line with this, more and more social workers have come to recognize that the ethical aspects of social work practice must be faced to achieve successful outcomes. As a consequence, the subject of professional ethics has become more visible in the professional curriculum. This book has been written to help social workers develop the skills necessary to deal more effectively with these ethical issues.

What does the word ethics mean? Ethics (from the Greek root *ethos*, meaning custom, usage, or habit) deals with the question of what action is morally right and with how things ought to be. General ethics clarify the obligations that are owed by any one person to another person. But some obligations are based on specific relations between the parties involved (such as between a mother and her son) or on a particular role voluntarily accepted by one of the parties. The latter are special obligations that apply only to those who have consented to accept a special role position (Fishkin 1982:25-27). Professional ethics are a codification of the special obligations that arise out of voluntarily becoming a professional, such