SOCIAL WORK VALUES

and ETHICS

> fourth edition

FREDERIC G. REAMER

Frederic G. Reamer

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SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS

FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIAL WORK KNOWLEDGE

FREDERIC G. REAMER, SERIES EDITOR

Social work has a unique history, purpose, perspective, and method. The primary purpose of this series is to articulate these distinct qualities and to define and explore the ideas, concepts, and skills that together constitute social work's intellectual foundations and boundaries and its emerging issues and concerns.

To accomplish this goal, the series will publish a cohesive collection of books that address both the core knowledge of the profession and its newly emerging topics. The core is defined by the evolving consensus, as primarily reflected in the Council of Social Work Education's Curriculum Policy Statement, concerning what courses accredited social work education programs must include in their curricula. The series will be characterized by an emphasis on the widely embraced ecological perspective; attention to issues concerning direct and indirect practice; and emphasis on cultural diversity and multiculturalism, social justice, oppression, populations at risk, and social work values and ethics. The series with have a dual focus on practice traditions and emerging issues and concepts.

The complete series list follows the index.



PREFACE

SOCIAL WORKERS' understanding of professional values and ethics has matured considerably in recent years. During the earliest years of the profession's history, social workers' attention was focused primarily on cultivating a set of values upon which the mission of social work could be based. Over time the profession has nurtured and refined a set of values that has given tremendous meaning and purpose to the careers of generations of social workers. Social work's enduring commitment to vulnerable and oppressed populations, and its simultaneous preoccupation with individual well-being and social justice, are rooted in the profession's rich value base.

But the lens through which social workers view values and ethics has changed dramatically over time. Perhaps it is more accurate to say that social workers now look at these issues through several lenses, not just one, and that the angles of these lenses periodically shift in response to cultural developments and trends. Today's social workers face issues involving values and ethics that their predecessors in the profession could not possibly have imagined. What social worker, in the early twentieth century, could have anticipated the magnitude of the debates about the ethical issues for social workers that have emerged from the AIDS crisis or the complex privacy and confidentiality issues facing social workers who use e-mail, Facebook, and other Internet tools to serve clients? What social worker in the 1930s could have forecast the ethics debate about social workers' role in the use of animal or artificial organs to save a dying client's life or ethical problems created by cutting-edge psychopharmacology and electronic monitoring of certain clients?

Especially since the late 1970s, a growing number of social work scholars and practitioners have been studying, exploring, and debating issues involving values and ethics in the profession. Literature on social work values and ethics.

presentations at professional conferences, and instruction on the subject in undergraduate and graduate social work programs have increased dramatically. Today's students and practitioners have access to vastly more knowledge and education related to social work values and ethics than did their predecessors. In fact, it is not an exaggeration to say that social work's exploration of these issues has increased exponentially.

The same is true in other professions. In professions as diverse as journalism, medicine, engineering, accounting, business, law, psychology, and nursing, practitioners and scholars have devoted increasing amounts of attention to the subjects of values and ethics. For a variety of reasons, which I shall explore shortly, members of these professions have come to recognize the critical importance of these issues and their immediate relevance to practitioners' work.

The wide variety of complicated issues involving values and ethics in social work and other professions has emerged along with the invention of an entire field of study whose purpose is to help identify, explore, and address the kinds of problems professionals encounter in these areas. Applied and professional ethics (also known as practical ethics) began to take shape in the early 1970s, primarily as a result of the explosion of ethical issues in medicine and health care. Since that time scores of scholars and practitioners have studied the relevance of values and ethics to the professions, debated ethical problems in the professions, explored the relevance of ethical concepts and theories to the kinds of ethical dilemmas that arise in professional practice, and improved education and training in these areas.

Such has been the case in social work as well. The vast majority of literature on social work values and ethics has been written since the mid-1970s. Although many significant publications appeared earlier, most of the in-depth scholarly exploration of these subjects has occurred since then. In addition, most presentations at professional conferences, training sessions in social service agencies, and undergraduate and graduate education on the subject have occurred since that time, too.

Thus today's social workers have access to a far wider range of information and knowledge related to values and ethics than did earlier generations of practitioners. Times have changed dramatically in this respect, and the profession's literature must keep pace. Contemporary social workers must be acquainted with advancing knowledge related to the profession's values and the kinds of ethical issues and challenges that practitioners encounter.

Social Work Values and Ethics has been written with this purpose in mind. This book is designed to provide social workers with a succinct and comprehensive overview of the most critical and vital issues related to professional

values and ethics: the nature of social work values, ethical dilemmas and decision making, and ethics risk management. Social Work Values and Ethics puts between two covers a summary of compelling knowledge, topics, and debates that have emerged throughout the profession's history, emphasizing the issues that are most pressing in contemporary practice. The book acquaints readers with the core concepts they need to identify and investigate the wide range of complex issues involving values and ethics faced by today's social workers.

Chapter 1 provides a broad overview of the values and ethical issues in social work and a brief history of the profession's attempts to address them. This is followed by an in-depth examination in chapter 2 of the nature of social work's core values and the relevance of the profession's value base to clinical practice (the delivery of services to individuals, couples, families, and small groups) and macro practice (agency administration and management, social advocacy, community organizing, and policy practice).

A significant portion of this book is devoted to complex ethical dilemmas in social work. These are situations in which social workers are challenged by conflicting ethical duties and obligations, circumstances that generate considerable disagreement and debate. Chapter 3 provides a conceptual framework for thinking about and exploring ethical dilemmas and ultimately making difficult ethical decisions. This chapter includes a practical outline and concepts to help social workers approach ethical decisions. It also includes a detailed summary and overview of the current version (2008) of the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics.

Chapters 4 and 5 provide an overview of a wide range of specific ethical dilemmas in social work. Chapter 4 focuses on ethical dilemmas in clinical practice with individuals, couples, families, and small groups of clients. In contrast, chapter 5 focuses on ethical dilemmas in macro practice, that is, ethical dilemmas encountered in social work administration, social advocacy, community work, and in social welfare policy.

Among the issues involving social work's values and ethics are the problems of malpractice, unethical behavior, and professional misconduct. Social workers sometimes are named in ethics complaints or lawsuits that allege some kind of ethics-related negligence or misconduct (for example, unethical management of professional boundaries or inappropriate disclosure of confidential information). In a few instances social workers have been charged with and convicted of criminal conduct (for example, sexual involvement with a client, billing for services that were not provided). The good news is that many such problems are preventable. Thus chapter 6 provides readers with an overview of the nature of professional misconduct and of the ways in which social workers can become entangled in ethics

complaints and lawsuits, a summary of the most common problems in the profession, and various prevention strategies.¹

Social work values and ethics have come of age. It is a privilege to be able to provide readers with an introduction to what constitutes the heart of social work's noble mission.

Case examples are provided throughout this book. With the exception of instances in which case
material is a matter of public record, circumstances have been altered and pseudonyms have been
used to ensure anonymity.

SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS

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SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS

An Overview

IMAGINE THAT you are a social worker at a local community mental health center. You spend most of your time providing supportive and casework services to individuals and families experiencing some sort of difficulty. You have worked at the agency for about three years.

During the past two months you have provided counseling to Sarah Koufax and her two children, Brooks, seven, and Frank, four. Sarah Koufax originally sought help at the agency because of difficulty she was having managing Brooks's behavior. According to Sarah Koufax, Brooks "frequently throws temper tantrums when he's upset—he can really kick and scream." Sarah Koufax also reported that Brooks's teacher said she was having a great deal of difficulty controlling the boy and wanted to discuss whether he should be transferred to a different classroom, one for difficult students.

You have spent considerable time teaching Sarah Koufax various ways to handle Brooks's behavior, particularly the use of positive reinforcers. During the past few weeks Sarah Koufax has reported that his tantrums have been less frequent and that he has responded well to the positive reinforcers. Brooks's teacher has also reported that the child's behavior has "improved somewhat."

Throughout your relationship with Sarah Koufax she has talked at length about some of her own difficulties—single parenthood, financial problems, and her struggle with alcoholism. In recent weeks she has been especially eager to discuss these problems. In your judgment you and she have developed a constructive, trust-filled relationship.

Yesterday morning you received a telephone call from Sarah Koufax. She was clearly distraught and said she needed to see you as soon as possible, that she could not wait for her regularly scheduled appointment later in the week.

She reported over the telephone that "something awful has happened and it's really bothering me. I need to talk to you fast. I know you'll understand."

You were able to see Sarah Koufax today because another client had canceled his appointment. Sarah Koufax came in alone and immediately started to cry. She said that two days earlier Brooks was throwing a terrible tantrum, one of his worst: "I had just had it. I was feeling sick, and Frank was screaming for me to feed him. Brooks just wouldn't let up. I got so frustrated I grabbed him and pushed him. He tripped and fell into the radiator in the kitchen, breaking a tooth. I got him to a dentist right away. I told the dentist that Brooks was horsing around with his brother and bumped into the radiator. I just couldn't tell her the truth. I'm so ashamed. Things were getting so much better. I don't know what happened. I just lost it."

During this session you spent most of the time encouraging Sarah Koufax to express her feelings. You also talked with her about how most children who are receiving help for behavior-management problems will regress sometimes, even though they are making considerable progress overall. The two of you talked about how Sarah Koufax might respond to any future tantrums.

Toward the end of the session you told Sarah Koufax that you were "in a real pickle. I know that what happened with Brooks was an accident, that you didn't mean to hurt him. But here's the problem. The law requires me to report what happened. I know you don't think you deliberately abused Brooks, but, according to state law, I have to report to the child welfare agency the fact that Brooks was injured. I'd like you to help me report this, so we can show the state social worker how hard you've been working on your problems. Frankly, I don't think they'll do much. This is just something I'm supposed to do." Sarah Koufax immediately started to cry and became agitated. "I can't believe you would do this to me," she said. "I thought I could trust you. If you call the state, I'm never coming back here. I can't believe this."

In fact, you do not really want to report the case to state child welfare authorities. You firmly believe that Sarah Koufax did not mean to harm Brooks and that this was an isolated instance in which she lost control. You have been impressed with Sarah Koufax's earnest attempt to address her problems and with her progress in recent months. You sense that reporting the incident to the child welfare authorities will do more harm than good; reporting is likely to alienate Sarah Koufax and undermine your therapeutic relationship with her. Moreover, Sarah Koufax is already receiving competent help from you; in your judgment services from a state worker are not needed and would be counterproductive.

The bottom line, however, is that you feel compelled to obey the state law. You did your best to explain to Sarah Koufax why you felt the need to report the case. You told her you understood why she was so angry. But despite your

best effort, Sarah Koufax walked out quite distressed and agitated, saying: "Do what you have to do. Just let me know what you end up doing so I can figure out what I need to do."

Seasoned social workers can certainly identify with this predicament. Helping the client deal with her anger and to sustain the therapeutic relationship demands sophisticated clinical skills. Sometimes the clinical intervention is effective, and sometimes it is not.

CORE ISSUES IN SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS

At the center of the example that opens this chapter is a complex set of issues involving values and ethics. In fact, the values and ethical issues in this case represent the four core issues in social work—and those on which I shall focus throughout this book:

- The value base of the social work profession
- Ethical dilemmas in social work
- Ethical decision making in social work
- Ethics risk management

At the heart of this case is a difficult decision about core social work values. Social work is among the most value based of all professions. As I shall explore more fully, social work is deeply rooted in a fundamental set of values that ultimately shapes the profession's mission and its practitioners' priorities. As the social worker in this example, you would be concerned about several key values, including Sarah Koufax's right to self-determination, confidentiality, and privacy (her wish for you to continue working with her without notifying state child welfare officials about the incident involving Brooks); the obligation to protect your clients from harm (Brooks from harm in the form of parental abuse, his mother from being deprived of meaningful help from you, and both from harm that might result from investigation by state child welfare officials); the obligation to obey the law (the law that requires social workers to report all instances of suspected child abuse and neglect); and the right to selfprotection (that is, social workers' right to avoid sanctions and penalties that might result from their failure to comply with the law).

Ideally, of course, the social worker would act in accord with all these values simultaneously. What social worker would not want to respect clients' right to self-determination, confidentiality, and privacy; protect clients from harm; obey the law; and protect herself or himself? The problem is that situations sometimes arise in social work in which core values in the profession

conflict, and this leads to ethical dilemmas. An ethical dilemma is a situation in which professional duties and obligations, rooted in core values, clash. This is when social workers must decide which values—as expressed in various duties and obligations—take precedence.

To make these difficult choices social workers need to be familiar with contemporary thinking about ethical decision making. In the Sarah Koufax case the social worker must decide whether to comply with the state's mandatory reporting law—and risk jeopardizing the therapeutic alliance that has been formed with Sarah Koufax—or deliberately violate state law in an effort to sustain the meaningful, and apparently helpful, therapeutic relationship.

As I shall explore shortly, the phenomenon of ethical decision making in the professions has matured considerably in recent years. Professionals trained today have far more access to helpful literature and concepts related to ethical decision making than did their predecessors. This is particularly true in social work, which has experienced a noticeable burgeoning of interest in ethical decision making.

Finally, social workers must be concerned about the risk-management ramifications of their ethical decisions and actions, particularly the possibility of professional malpractice and misconduct. Is it acceptable for a social worker to knowingly and willingly violate a law, even if she has only noble motives involving service to clients? What consequences should there be for a social worker who does not act in a client's best interests? What legal risks—in the form of criminal penalties, ethics complaints, formal adjudication by ethics disciplinary committees or state licensing boards, and lawsuits—do social workers face as a result of their actions?

THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL WORK VALUES AND ETHICS

To explore fully the nature of contemporary values and ethics in social work, it is important to understand the historical evolution of thinking in the field with respect to its value base, ethical dilemmas in practice, ethical decision making in social work, and practitioner malpractice and misconduct. The social work profession's grasp of key values and ethical issues has matured considerably in recent years.

The general topics of values and ethics have been central to social work since its formal inception. Historical accounts of the profession's development routinely focus on the compelling importance of social work's value base and ethical principles. Over the years beliefs about social work's values and ethics have served as the foundation for the profession's mission. Social work is, after all, a normative profession, perhaps the most normative of the so-called help-