

# Beneficence vs. Fidelity: Serving Social Work Clients in the Aftermath of Catastrophic Events

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## Abstract

In this article, we highlight the results of an international qualitative study which used focus groups of social workers to explore post-disaster decision-making. The study focused on the impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> and other disasters, both natural and man-made, on the professional practice of social work practitioners. The main research question centered on the dissonance experienced by social workers when agency resource reductions (e.g., time, space, budgetary, technological, etc.), or agency policies/procedures/practices impacted their ability to deliver services deemed necessary.

**Keywords:** Disaster response, fidelity, ethical dissonance, beneficence, personal/professional values

## 1. Introduction

Man-made and natural disasters affect over 300 million people each year (United Nations, 2008). Significant challenges face those who are deployed to the disaster, including social workers,

who are among the experts and professionals who provide vital care during and after the emergency. In many ways, the helping process following a disaster response is complex, often infused with subjectivity and conflict. These conditions may tend to undermine the ability of professionals to render effective services, especially when decisions need to be made between two or more actions, both reasonable, but that cannot be concomitantly executed. Confusion is heightened when these decisions carry ethical overtones.

In this article, we highlight the results of an international qualitative study which used focus groups of social workers to explore post-disaster decision-making. The major research question concerned the impact of September 11<sup>th</sup> and other disasters, both natural and man-made, on the professional practice of social work practitioners. The focus of this study centered on the dissonance experienced by social workers when agency policies/procedures/practices impacted their ability to deliver services deemed necessary. For some respondents, this dissonance was ethical in nature, revolving around conflicts between competing

principles. This article focuses on the ways in which social workers contend with the obligation of acting for the benefit of others (benevolence), while concomitantly feeling an obligation to comply with commitments to uphold agency policies/protocols (fidelity). These are two primary ethical principles which may tend to pose conflicts for professionals during the aftermath of a disaster. The study was conducted with focus groups of social workers in health care and social service settings in the United States, Canada, and Israel.

For this study, the term social worker is defined as a graduate of a social work program at the bachelors or masters level who uses knowledge and skill to provide social services for clients (Barker, 2003). Ethical dissonance is defined as intellectual or emotional disharmony resulting from decisional paralysis over the need to choose between two or more value-based, incompatible actions; feelings of discomfort, frustration or helplessness are possible manifestations (Turkoski, 2000).

Disasters are defined as natural or man-made events of an extreme magnitude that pose a substantial threat to life, property, society, and/or the environment. Commentators suggest that two components interact to create a disaster: a triggering agent, and vulnerability (McEntire, 2006; Ural, 2007). A triggering agent can be naturally occurring, like an earthquake, hurricane or volcanic eruption, or may be in the form of a man-made event like a terrorist attack. Disaster-based vulnerability can be viewed as a self-assessed level of susceptibility prior to, during, and after a disaster event. In effect, an individual's response to a disaster, in part, parallels his/her assessed level of vulnerability (Myers & Wee, 2005). The literature also suggests that there are psychological, sociological and biological factors which drive perceptions and behavior during and after a disaster (Chopko & Schwartz, 2009; Walter, 2009).

## **2. Ethical Dilemmas**

An ethical dilemma refers to a situation in which a practitioner is faced with a choice between two actions based on conflicting values. It implies two competing good actions enveloped in conflicts

and tensions of 'right or wrong' and 'goodness of consequence,' where choosing one action upholds one moral principle, while concomitantly violating another. Social workers frequently rely on two theories of normative ethics – deontological and utilitarian, to resolve ethical dilemmas (Congress, 1999; Lowenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Mattaini, Lowery, & Meyer, 2002). Several social work-based models (Lewis, 1986; Reamer, 2006) of ethical decision-making incorporate these theories.

Deontological thought, much of which has been shaped by Immanuel Kant, argues that moral theory is grounded in pure reason, based upon the extent to which an action is considered right (Beauchamp & Childress, 2012). Deontology calls attention to the way people relate to each other and the moral significance of these relationships. The obligations that each has to the other are independent of consequences. Deontologists characterize moral life as more than merely the means and ends. The moral action focus is on individual rights and liberties rather than the *greater good*.

Utilitarianism, associated with philosophers such as John Stuart Mills and Jeremy Bentham, supports actions according to the consequences they produce. This line of thought is rooted in the belief that there is only one basic principle in ethics, the principle of utility. In effect, certain actions should be taken not because they are 'intrinsically good', but because they are 'good' with respect to their consequences. Utilitarians seek the greatest good for the greatest number (Beauchamp & Childress, 2012); the focus is on prioritizing the collective over the individual. Some commentators suggest that although social work is deontological in nature, social workers typically make utilitarian-based choices (Congress, 1999; Mattaini, Lowery, & Meyer, 2002).

## **3. Benevolence and Fidelity**

Benevolence and fidelity are two highly valued ethical principles in social work (Pinto, 2002; Walker & Staton, 2000). Benevolence occupies

a significant place among the four major ethical principles; others are respect for autonomy, non-maleficence, and justice. The principle of beneficence refers to the moral obligation to act in ways that advance the interests of others (Beauchamp & Childress, 2012), and to further their interests. The principle supports an array of specific rules of obligation. Examples include: the obligation to protect and defend the rights of others, to prevent harm from occurring to others, to remove conditions that could cause harm to others, to help people with disabilities, and to rescue people in danger (Beauchamp & Childress, 2012).

Social workers are guided by the principle of beneficence. Their calling is to serve the needs of people, particularly those vulnerable to exploitation, poverty, and discrimination. To be beneficent is to put oneself out for one's clients, to be available to them, and to help clients obtain the services and benefits to which they are entitled. Under ideal conditions, when beneficence guides both agencies and social workers, clients benefit. However, the ideal is not always achievable, as agencies inevitably are confronted with competing priorities.

Equally important is the principle of fidelity, which directs us to act in ways that are loyal, faithful, truthful and precise. Within the workplace, central to the principle of fidelity is the obligation to honor, in good faith, promises made to an employer. This includes standard workplace practices and procedures such as respecting decision-making protocols, honoring lines of authority, upholding agency policies and rules, and acting to support the agency's mission (Pfeiffer & Forsberg, 2014). For some, fidelity is justified at any cost, and for others, it is set aside if the action could be detrimental to the client/patient. The Code of Ethics (NASW, 1996) expects social workers to place the needs of clients first. There is a concomitant expectation that loyalty to the agency will be maintained. The Code of Ethics states that "social workers generally should adhere to commitments made to employers and employing organizations" (Standard 3.09a). Similar commitments are expressed in the Israeli and Canadian Codes of Ethics. The Israeli code specifies that social workers

are to act with integrity and loyalty to their employing agency (IASW, 1994) and the Canadian Code (CASW, 1994) states that "social workers acknowledge and strive to carry out the stated aims of their employing organization" (CASW, 1994, Standard 4.1.1)

This research focuses on the dissonance experienced by social workers in trying to provide for the needs and welfare of clients, while contending with policy/legal restrictions, all within the chaotic environment of post-disaster conditions. The conflict between beneficence and fidelity can raise ethical dilemmas for social workers, because two principles can not be acted on simultaneously; if one chooses A, one must override B. Overriding B can leave negative emotional consequences or "moral traces" for the practitioner (Nozick, 1968). Ideally, if one could avoid choosing one action over the other, and instead seek a compromise, as many dilemmas involve shades of gray between black and white options, one could discover alternatives and avoid experiencing moral traces.

#### **4. Methodology: Research Design**

A qualitative inquiry was conducted to explore the impact of unanticipated catastrophic events, including man-made and natural disasters, on social work practice. A total of 14 focus group interviews were conducted with respondents from Israel, Canada and the United States, to stimulate discussion about the impact of catastrophic events experienced by the respondents, both personally and professionally. Respondents shared their own experiences and impressions while reacting to the experiences and impressions of others. This interaction was helpful in eliciting memories and personal stories. The dynamic interplay inherent in focus group methodology allowed respondents to offer rich and meaningful feedback (Krueger & Casey, 2008). The respondents' voices became the lens through which the data were analyzed. Rather than beginning with preconceived hypotheses, themes and categories emerged from the text (Krueger & Casey, 2008; Morgan, 1996).

The researchers developed a semi-structured

focus group protocol. The questions were intended to elicit personal stories from participants regarding the impact of the disaster on their practice. They were enabled to respond to one another as well as to share their own personal accounts.

Following Internal Review Board (IRB) approval for the study, recruitment letters were sent to executive directors of a convenience sample of 14 agencies of varying sizes, located in urban, suburban and rural areas. The settings varied and included four hospitals, four Jewish family service agencies, four community-based mental health agencies, one counseling center for women and one agency focusing on child welfare. Agencies provided comprehensive community-based health and mental health, preventive and supportive services.

Letters sent to executive directors included an explanation of the purpose of the study and requested that they identify six to eight social workers who might be interested in participating in the focus groups. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to conducting the interviews. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes. Twelve were conducted in person and two over the telephone to allow those respondents from geographically dispersed areas to participate without incurring transportation costs (Krueger & Casey, 2008). Focus group tapes were transcribed verbatim; names of focus group participants did not appear in the transcripts. Interviews with the executive directors were not included in the analysis. In most cases at least two and usually all three interviewers were present.

Grounded theory guided the analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The transcripts were reviewed by each researcher separately and coded for themes (Glaser, 1992). The research team then met to discuss themes for the purpose of consolidating categories and achieving consensus. The transcripts were organized based on general themes. Members of the research team then recoded the transcripts, this time focusing on theoretical constructs and logical groupings of categories within preliminary themes. Codes were further delineated and consensus and consolidation was

achieved. Finally, after a third set of transcripts, coded categories were linked to larger theoretical constructs, thereby creating families of codes and inter-relationships among categories. The team then met to achieve final consensus on the theoretical underpinnings of themes to make links to broader theoretical constructs. Several passages were coded in several categories as they had multiple layers of meanings. The data were then entered into the computer software package Atlas TI.

Verbatim quotes were used to pull together theoretical constructs and to identify important issues discussed by participants. Demographic information was used to provide context about the sample. While the generalizability of the findings may be limited due to the sites not being broadly representative, the insights generated by qualitative studies such as this have meaning in their own right (Myers, 2000).

## **5. Findings**

### **5.1 Demographic description of sample**

The final sample included 102 of 109 social workers approached to participate in the study. Eighty-two percent of the participants were female; this ratio is consistent with other data on the human services labor force reflecting a growing trend of feminization (Bureau of Labor Statistics [BLS], 2011; Gibelman & Schervish, 1997). The age of respondents ranged from 26 to 67. With regard to professional characteristics, 8% of respondents received their MSW degree less than two years before the study, 18% had the degree for three to five years, 15% for 6 to 10 years, 11% had their MSW for 11 to 15 years and 16 to 20 years respectively, and just over a third had had an MSW for more than 20 years. Just over two-thirds of the respondents had prior experience in the field, either volunteer or paid. Fifty-seven percent were working in direct practice, while 43% were in administrative or supervisory positions. In the great majority of cases, there were no differences in respondent perceptions and beliefs based on country of origin (Canada, Israel, United States).

## 5.2 Beneficence and fidelity

In the great majority of cases, when respondents of this study were confronted with a choice between beneficence and fidelity, beneficence tended to be chosen as the favored principle. In most cases, respondents indicated that prioritizing beneficence over fidelity appeared to be the best option, although the decision was seen as complicated. Acting on the decision carried even greater moral and pragmatic weight, as the available implementation options identified tended to be fraught with trepidation and uncertainty. Three major themes emerged from the transcripts related to actions respondents chose to take to resolve the conflict between the two principles: 1) misleading agency administrators (deception); 2) resisting perceived obstructive policies, or resisting limitations on resource/service delivery (defiance); and 3) drawing on loopholes to bypass protocols (creativity). These themes represent different typologies of social workers, who on most occasions do not vary (from situation to situation) in the ways that conflicts between beneficence and fidelity are resolved. Descriptions of each theme as well as verbatim quotations from respondents that relate to these themes are provided below. For each quotation, an identifying focus group (FG 1–12) and social worker (SW 1–10) code is offered in order that the balance and range of respondents is clear.

## 5.3 Deception

Respondents in this category identified that deception was used or considered in order to evade agency administrators, circumvent policies, or limit access to agency resources. Respondents were willing to consider misleading agency administrators, thereby deprioritizing principles of fidelity in order to provide needed services for clients (beneficence). One respondent stated:

We went into a home where this child needed to be rescued because he was critically hurt. I told my supervisor and called it in to the police department but they didn't want to do a removal. So I had to go back and sneakily set up the

whole family to take out services and make this child stable and take him out and place him so he can be safe. My supervisor said no. I sneaked behind everyone's back. It turned out to be in the best interests of the child. (FG3, SW4)

Another respondent explained:

Ethically we go against agency policy and against what the administration is saying; if they find out, they take us out of our position because we are not adhering to new protocols. We have to sneak around to do our work if we think a particular action is best. It's a shame that we have to work under these conditions. (FG2, SW1)

One respondent stated that he told his supervisor that as a long-term agency employee and a social worker:

I had to do what was in the best interest of my clients on a case by case basis. I knew they needed more services. ... I did what I had to do. (FG6, SW3)

Another respondent explained:

We sneak behind everyone in administration here to get what we need to get. I have gone and lied and pretended that I didn't lie to get it done. (FG10, SW2)

In the four case examples above, respondents deceived agency administrators in order to provide services/resources to clients. They knew the risk of losing their jobs but were willing to take that risk to provide for their clients. In these examples, which all occurred after agencies developed new post-disaster policies and protocols, beneficence as an ethical principle triumphed over fiscal or policy constraints, which were deemed to be less important. The moral imperative of commitment to client welfare supersedes conforming to agency protocols to achieve a *greater good*. Respondents explained that when it was assessed that a *greater good* would not be achieved by following administrative policies, protocols were dispensed with.

## **5.4 Defiance**

When it was determined that a client was in need of a service/resource and the ability of the client to receive that service/resource was being blocked, some respondents indicated a willingness to defiantly resist administrators/policies that obstructed service/resource delivery; especially when it was perceived that needs were unnecessarily being neglected. For example, one respondent stated:

I get involved with kids on an individual level. It is frightening to keep fighting the administration especially when my direct supervisor tells me to stop; however, I am not afraid at all. If I am fired, that is fine. I get personal satisfaction from what I do, and I have some pride in myself. (FG1, SW4)

Another respondent explained:

I will go over peoples head and do whatever I need to do to help a family. I know that I can't help everyone but the few that I can help makes all the difference; ethically you have to do what you have to do. You can't allow the budget cuts and restraints being placed in front of you stop you from helping vulnerable families and children. (FG9, SW3)

Another respondent expressed:

This agency is just as chaotic as my family. Maybe I feel it is empowering to say I am right and they are wrong and I am not going to back down and I am not going to be quiet. (FG3, SW2)

One respondent who spoke about providing services to clients in need when her agency insisted that efforts be used elsewhere stated:

If I had to get a family in for treatment, I became overdramatic, emphasizing how serious it was for the family to come in. I overdramatized, in a way that I normally would not have acted,

in order to assure that services would be appropriately provided. (FG5, SW1)

A number of respondents highlighted their defiance against new post-disaster protocols. One stated:

My manager tells me she is tired of hearing me; that I don't know when to let go. She knows that I am on her case, a family needs this or that, and I am constantly hammering her down. I encourage my colleagues to go out of their way as well. It is all of our responsibility. (FG1, SW4)

Another stated:

I work harder than most anyone in this agency and I know the system very well and I am very skilled at what I do and I am essential; so I can do battle with the system, because they need me—although they don't like how I go about getting the things I need. (FG2, SW2)

These respondents are defiant. They will not be deterred from implementing a strategy deemed necessary to procure what is “right” for a client. These respondents believe that agency rules are meant to be broken when they imperil the lives of clients. These respondents harbor no regrets about their actions; on the contrary, they voice a sense of pride in themselves and their tactics.

## **5.5 Creativity**

In some situations, respondents suggested that creative strategies were used to circumvent post-disaster policies that were in conflict with the provision of ‘beneficent’ services. Respondents also explained that a certain level of ingenuity was needed at times in order to “creatively” work around post-disaster policy impediments. One respondent stated:

It is particularly difficult for some of our clients who have work restrictions; my dilemma comes with regard to how far I bend the rules; in other words I have to assess how to manipulate

regulations in the best interest of a client. (FG2, SW5)

Another respondent expressed:

I am one who generally feels that you should pretty much follow rules and regulations; but I also know that my clients have needs and are restricted for whatever reason. Am I putting myself at risk? I basically hedge as far as I think I can get away with trying to get them resources. You do what you have to do and sort of worry about the other part later. Perhaps not very smart, but I feel this is part of my social work mandate. (FG6, SW4)

Another stated:

I am usually someone who tries to follow rules, however if the rule conflicts with my social work values I have no difficulty finding creative ways around the rules to help people in need. (FG6, SW1)

A number of respondents who were on the staff of hospitals during the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) epidemic noted that the principle of benevolence was often deemphasized as a result of strict quarantine protocols. Respondents suggested that despite rigorous rules, creative avenues could still be found to preserve beneficent practices:

I guess I broke the rules when I made certain home visits. I don't recall anyone saying specifically that I shouldn't; however, I made sure not to ask, figuring that I would be told no. I knew that some families needed to see me face-to-face; they weren't able to come in for whatever reason, and I didn't feel that they or I was at risk. (FG8, SW4)

Another stated:

During SARS, my worst fears came true. We had a case where the administrators were not going to allow both

parents in, but we needed to consult with them to make the decision. I did handstands and used other creative tactics in order to get permission. We were allowed for one hour to have both parents in for a meeting. (FG8, SW1)

Respondents choosing 'creative' techniques drew on personal relationships, reason, persuasion, and other resourceful tactics in order to bend policies and restrictions. These respondents found ways of working around protocols, but not in a state of defiance or outright deception. According to these respondents, it is possible to accommodate client needs and concomitantly abide by agency policy, but one may have to employ creative tactics to do so. These social workers are willing to take some risks, and knowingly tread on thin ice at times.

## **5.6 Prioritizing fidelity**

Although most respondents were much less likely to prioritize the principle of fidelity over benevolence, some did. In these cases, respondents expressed that they felt remiss at not being able to prioritize the principle of benevolence, but they were not willing to break with agency protocols or resource limitations. For example, one respondent stated:

I don't feel comfortable confronting management directly; perhaps I don't feel secure enough in my position or job. I feel secure in my ability and the knowledge that I have, but I don't feel secure enough in my position to challenge authority. (FG2, SW4)

## **6. Limitations**

It is important to be aware that the results of this study are generated from a convenience sample of 14 focus groups with 102 social workers from three countries. The findings are based on a qualitative inquiry. The goal was to understand some of the ways social work practice is impacted by catastrophic events and to gain a better understanding of the ways social workers engage clients when there is a shared traumatic event. The study findings may have been different had

the study included other countries, and we caution against generalization from these results.

## 7. Discussion

When disaster strikes, social workers and other helping professionals face complex decisions. At times, choices between two equally reasonable actions are required, both morally correct as well as ethically grounded. The literature explains that the process of determining which action is correct can be fraught with feelings of discomfort, uncertainty, and other forms of ethical dissonance; knowing that a decision may be preferred on the one hand, but is possibly devastating on another. The process of resolving ethical dilemmas under normal circumstances is difficult. When considered within the context of disaster response, confusion is compounded.

From the respondents' statements, we deduced that while social service agencies are usually guided by the principle of beneficence, after man-made or natural disasters the principle of fidelity takes on a special importance, as policies and practices become more systematized and new protocols become employed. Our respondents, whether from the United States, Canada, or Israel, suggested that in the aftermath of disasters, agencies default to a culture of service denial, where saying 'no' and curtailing services characterize an agency's post-disaster culture. In response, social workers may tend to view administrators as insensitive, callous, stingy, and arbitrary in their application of agency policy and practices. By contrast, the social workers view themselves as beneficent, sensitive, and caring in their attempt to provide for clients despite agency restrictions. In their view, beneficence should ideally override 'unreasonable' constraints, where the use of tactics such as deception and defiance are reasonable courses of action.

The literature reflects considerable debate about the efficacy of resolution strategy options. For example, a large majority of respondents of this study confirmed that they would advocate the use of deception and defiance to procure something needed by a client. Some

commentators, depending on their ethical orientation, might support these strategies, while other commentators would not.

In the book, *Ethics in Social Work Practice*, Abels (2001) presents a case concerning a social work intern who was placed in a correctional facility for women. The social worker determined that the women were at risk of contracting HIV and other STDs; the corrections department refused to supply safe sex paraphernalia and sex education because *officially* the women were not having sex, though they were. The intern had suggested a formal distribution of safe sex products, but the administrators considered these items contraband, and would not permit a formal or informal distribution. The intern was aware that these items continued to flow into the prison, and made a conscious decision to look the other way, thus condoning and passively participating in the contraband trafficking. To the intern, the end justified the means and she judged her actions as nothing more than humane. She was in conflict between her commitment to clients' welfare and her responsibility to her employer. Abels invited a selection of commentators to respond to this case, each offering their perceptions about the social work intern's choice of action. One commentator asserted that the intern's covert disobedience incurred risks that moral agents must take into account; social workers are to advocate for those not served well by the law. Another commentator suggested that when human life is at stake, social workers are justified in breaking rules. "Is this not the heart of our profession, whose commitment to social justice, human dignity and client empowerment has distinguished it from all other professions since its inception?" (p. 47).

One commentator took a diametrically opposite stance, suggesting that social workers are not "lone rangers or vigilantes on a crusade to right the perceived wrongs inflicted by impersonal bureaucracies. ... We place ourselves, our clients, and our profession at risk when we violate rules and regulations, and undermine authority" (p. 44).

Given that various codes of ethics (CASW, 1994; IASW, 1994; NASW, 1996) establish the

primacy of serving clients, should agency rules and regulations be violated in the process? Commentators do suggest that there are times when workers must choose between their duty to obey a law, rule, or agency regulation and the duty to provide for the welfare of clients (Reamer, 1982).

For the most part, the respondents of this study identified that their ethical decision-making process usually resulted in a nod toward beneficence. The moral imperative of commitment to client welfare supersedes conforming to agency rules which are designed to achieve a *greater good*. Respondents explained that when it was assessed that a *greater good* would not be achieved by following administrative policies, guidelines were circumvented. Once their minds were made up, and the decision was deemed ethical, respondents suggested that they felt empowered to implement their decisions. A number of strategies were identified for implementation including deceiving and defying administrators, and finding creative solutions.

## 8. Conclusion

This study highlighted two ethical principles that could easily be in conflict during the aftermath of a disaster. On one side is the principle of beneficence in which social workers are compelled to meet the needs of clients and provide for their welfare – the *raison d'être* of the social work profession. On the other side is the principle of fidelity and the promise to maintain agency rules, practices and policies, and to uphold the agency's mission.

In a post 9/11 era, organizations have had to rethink policies and practices related to areas such as security, resource allocation, risk management, and other strategic matters. In the view of our respondents, agencies have had to adopt policies that prioritize risk aversion over ethics. This appears to mirror the ways in which governments currently operate. For example, government surveillance (like wiretapping), as a “national security” measure appears to take precedence over civil liberties; enhanced interrogation methods (like waterboarding), condoned by some as necessary to protect national interest, appear to take precedence

over the ethical obligation to avoid cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment. Agencies too have adopted policies designed to decrease exposure to various threats, however, as in the examples above, ethical principles are at risk of being compromised.

Groups like ISIS, currently sowing terror around the world, and contagions such as Ebola, causing international concern, do not appear to be going away. Responses to these conditions will likely continue to shape the ways in which agencies are operated and managed. The fallout, which inevitably trickles down to the practice level, appears to invite continued challenge for social workers in their quest to balance the needs and benefits of clients while maintaining allegiance to agency practices and principles.

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