

# Promoting Ethical Research

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## Abstract

Social work students must gain the knowledge necessary to become critical consumers and producers of research. Research ethics is a core component of students' learning. This study entailed interviewing 16 graduate social work research instructors to identify ethical content covered within the classroom and strategies used to engage students in thinking about ethics. The study findings provide curricular suggestions on how to promote ethical research.

Key words: Ethics, Research, Council on Social Work Education, NASW Code of Ethics

## Introduction

Research and evaluation are integral to ethical social work practice. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) identifies *research* as a required foundation curriculum content area in its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (2004). Section 4.6 in part states that: "Research knowledge is used by students to provide high-quality services; to initiate change; to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery; and to evaluate their own practice" (p. 10). This statement indicates that research is not an isolated activity, but rather is essential across the micro-macro continuum of social work practice. The view of research as integral across the curriculum is reinforced through CSWE's references to research in other sections of the Standards. For example, "evaluating program outcomes and practice effectiveness" is referenced in section 4.5 *Social Work Practice*. According to CSWE, upon graduation social work students must be able to evaluate their own practice and critically consume and apply research findings. As section 4.6 further specifies, research content must also result in students' "understanding of a scientific, analytic, and ethical approach to building knowledge for practice" (p. 10). This article focuses on curriculum recommendations for promoting ethical research.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (1999) contains an *Evaluation and Research* section, which indicates the profession's position on the value and need

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for research, as well as guidelines for ethical conduct. Similar to CSWE, the NASW *Code* indicates the connection between research and practice. The NASW *Code* provides additional information related to research integrity, as it directs social workers to develop study designs in accordance with appropriate ethical policies, as well as outlines key ethical considerations relevant to engaging study participants. These considerations include developing appropriate informed consent processes and protocols to minimize risks associated with confidentiality, dual relationships, and conflicts of interest.

The broader social work literature expands upon the ethical considerations outlined by the NASW *Code*. Research and evaluation texts may dedicate a chapter to ethical considerations or weave the content across multiple chapters. Reamer (2005), for example, provides students with a historical overview related to the emergence of professional codes of ethics and the development of the federal human subjects' regulations. Additionally, Reamer points out how ethical issues occur in all phases of research. At the initial phase, students are prompted to ask themselves "How compelling is the research question in the first place? In light of social work's mission and ethical norms, are the project's results likely to generate important information that will enhance social work's ethical duty to assist people in need?" (p. 36). Antle and Regehr (2003) pose additional questions, which include: "Is the research consistent with social work principles of working toward improving the situation of vulnerable individuals or groups in society?" and "What are the broader risks associated with this research? Could a vulnerable group be disadvantaged by potential research findings?" (p. 142). These questions encourage social workers to consider the study's potential impact, including whether it will contribute to further stigmatizing of already vulnerable populations. Overall, Antle and Regehr urge social workers to expand their ethical focus beyond just individual rights "to embrace a more complex analysis that incorporates the long-standing ethos of social work to support the right to self-determination and the dignity of the individual and the need to promote social justice and equity in the community at large" (p. 136). Others similarly advocate for greater inclusion of social justice in ethical analysis (e.g., DePoy & Gilson, 2003; Massat & Lundy, 1997).

Antle and Regehr (2003) further reflect upon the challenges and benefits related to dual relationships. Given the push toward evidence-based practice and other forces that encourage integration of research and practice, they anticipate increased clinician involvement with research. They acknowledge the benefits of clinician involvement, which includes the design of studies

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directly relevant to practice. At the same time, they write, “The dual role of clinician and researcher, although advantageous, poses risks to the self-determination of clients who are potential study participants” (p. 140). They advocate for heightened sensitivity to potential risks associated with dual relationships and implementation of appropriate measures to minimize harm. The NASW *Code of Ethics*’ stance on dual relationships advises social work researchers to be “alert to and avoid conflicts of interest and dual relationships with participants” (p. 26).

The literature describes other types of ethical dilemmas that social workers might encounter. Royse et al. (2001) define a dilemma as a situation in which “there is a choice between two or more equally balanced alternatives” (p. 45). These authors describe how social workers grapple with ethical issues related to working with people with diminished autonomy, use of control groups, and confidentiality. Some authors advocate that students learn how to apply ethical decision-making models to dilemmas, although oftentimes these models are presented in the context of broader social work practice, rather than specific to research (e.g., Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2005). Of note, in section 4.0 *Values and Ethics*, CSWE (2004) refers to ethical decision-making, stating that students will learn how to “analyze ethical dilemmas and the ways in which these affect practice, services, and clients” (p. 8).

Other areas covered within the literature pertain to ethics specific to program evaluation. Unrau, Gabor, and Grinnell (2001), for example, offer a set of principles that include: “evaluation and service delivery activities should be integrated,” “involve from the beginning as many stakeholder groups as possible,” and “involve all levels of staff in the evaluation process” (p. 276). They further address appropriate use of evaluation including demonstration of accountability or intent to apply findings to improve service delivery. Cited examples of inappropriate use included “justifying decisions already made” or “mere window dressing” (p. 259).

Descriptions of ethical review committees are also found in the literature. Brun (2005), for example, describes the Institutional Review Board (IRB) and provides a case example of an IRB approved application. Critiques of ethical review committees exist to a lesser degree within the social work literature. Sanders (2003) writes about the challenges social workers can encounter when medical ethics committees review their projects, which include length of time to receive approval and relevancy of reviews. Questionable perceptions of the review process coincide with findings from Shore and West (2005). In this study, the interviewed social workers identified IRB benefits (e.g., encourages researchers to conceptualize their project), yet several interviewees

simultaneously described the potential for the IRB process to be adversarial and/or to provide inappropriate feedback. Melville (2005), however, urges social workers to view the ethical review process as “an intrinsic aspect of good research practice” rather than “simply as a hurdle to be overcome” (p. 381). Consequently, Melville advocates for social workers to increase their understanding of both research ethics and the ethical review process. Increased presence of social workers on IRB committees may help increase the perceived relevancy of the review process and further promote ethical research (Blaskett, 1998; Shore & West, 2005).

The social work literature clearly speaks to the value of integrating research across social work practice. The literature also identifies ethical considerations that surface throughout the research process, from designing the study to disseminating the findings. Given the importance of research, this study’s aim is to provide recommendations on how to promote research ethics within the MSW curriculum. Based upon this aim, the study examines the following areas: 1) what are the core ethical issues presented to social work students in their research courses, 2) what are the activities instructors use to engage students in critically thinking about ethics, and 3) what types of ethical dilemmas do students encounter in the research process.

## **Methods**

This exploratory study’s sample included 16 social work graduate research instructors from different CSWE-accredited schools. Sample size of this exploratory study was determined by saturation guided by the intent to gain an in-depth understanding of these instructors’ experiences. Participants were identified primarily through Web-based searches and via the National Association of Deans and Directors listserv. The average length of time teaching as either an adjunct or full-time faculty member was 12.4 years, with a range of 5 to 30 years. Fifty percent of the sample identified themselves as Assistant Professors. Other interviewees included Associate or Full Professors, Deans, and Lecturers. Nine of the interviewees served on their university IRB. The average length of tenure on the IRB was 4.9 years, with a range of 2 to 8 years.

Interviews were conducted over the telephone and lasted approximately 45 minutes. The primary interview questions reported upon in this article include: 1) what are the core ethical issues covered in your research class, 2) what activities help engage students in thinking critically about ethical conduct, 3) what are the challenges, if any, in promoting quality student research projects, and 4) what types of ethical dilemmas have your students encountered in the context of doing research? All participants consented to have the interviews audiotaped. The audiotapes were

transcribed verbatim and imported into QSR N6, a qualitative data software package. Constant Comparative Method (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) guided data analysis. As an overview of the analysis, the verbatim transcripts were coded line-by-line, moving toward the development of provisional categories. These categories corresponded to the questions asked within the interview guide. The authors of the study independently coded the transcripts and dialogued about the coding decisions to strengthen the analysis. Transcripts were then imported into QSR N6, a qualitative data software package. Each category was then examined to identify what subcategories emerged from the data. The categories and subcategories were compared both within a given transcript and across transcripts, which resulted in further reconsideration of the category structure.

## **Results**

### **Core ethical content covered within the classroom**

Perhaps as a means to heighten students' appreciation and understanding of the importance of research ethics, many of the interviewees introduce ethics content through an overview of historical violations, including attention to the Nazi experiments and the public health sponsored syphilis study in Tuskegee. A historical overview illustrates the extent to which participants can be harmed and demonstrates how the current human subjects' regulations developed largely in response to these violations. Other ethics content covered included information on the IRB and the *NASW Code of Ethics*, working with vulnerable populations, and conducting agency-based evaluations.

### **Institutional Review Board and the NASW Code of Ethics**

Research ethics instruction entails learning about the IRB and how it functions. Some interviewees structure their discussions through an explicit overview of the guiding Belmont Report (1979) principles (respect for persons, beneficence, and justice). An understanding of these principles allows students to appreciate the complexity of ethical dilemmas and the need for ethical decision-making approaches. As one interviewee shares with her students, ethical dilemmas are “not a matter of right or wrong answers, but [are] a matter of sorting out competing principles.” Other interviewees described focusing on the actualization of these principles by raising questions traditionally considered by an IRB, including: 1) does the informed consent adequately describe participation as voluntary, 2) what are the risks and can they be minimized, and 3) do the benefits outweigh the risks?

Whereas many interviewees elaborated upon traditional IRB considerations, one interviewee cautioned that there is a problematic tendency for “ethics [to] become equated with the IRB.” The interviewees moved beyond IRB considerations and pointed to the NASW *Code of Ethics*. Discussion of the NASW *Code of Ethics* entailed reviewing the profession’s core underlying values and how these inform ethical research. For example, one interviewee shared that she takes the value of social justice and asks the students to reflect upon how this applies to the conduct of research. Questions to ponder include: “How is information used? What is the participants’ role in determining, or making decisions about the research project?” Attention is also given to what is missing in the NASW *Code of Ethics*, for example instructors may highlight the fact that the *Code* is silent in the *Evaluation and Research* section in regard to appropriate attribution to collaborators, which may entail giving credit to students working on faculty projects or to community groups involved in the research process. Additionally, instructors might point out how the NASW *Code of Ethics* coincides with the guiding federal human subjects’ regulations. For example, both documents place significant attention on informed consent and individual study participants’ rights. Some students also learn about other relevant policies, such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

### **Working with vulnerable populations**

Students learn ways in which ethical decision-making can be complicated, particularly when a study involves vulnerable populations. One interviewee, for example, discussed the complexity of weighing ethical considerations and how this may affect research design issues. Students are taught the importance of working through this complexity, rather than simply avoiding research with vulnerable populations. The challenge is to create an appropriate research design that minimizes potential harm—for example, not putting participants “at risk of coming to the attention of authorities for some kind of behavior [such as] drug use or abuse.” This interviewee explains to students that at times there is “a real need to conduct research in an effort to help people,” but that one needs to proceed ethically, which can “inhibit the strength of the design or the strength of the questions or the depth of the research.” More specifically, researchers may remove certain questions from non-anonymous studies if the responses pose inappropriate risks.

Discussions regarding vulnerability extend to looking at the impact a project may have on the study participant/population. Students are encouraged to critically weigh the potential benefits and risks of the study, as well as to determine whether the research design is strong enough to

produce valid and reliable results. As one interviewee shared, students interested in examining aspects related to trauma must ask themselves: “Is the design and is the question important enough socially that it offsets the burden?” and “Is the research important enough and going to contribute enough in the field to make it worthwhile putting subjects through this?”

In terms of negative impact, students must think about whether findings may be used to reinforce existing stereotypes. One interviewee encourages her students to consider participatory research as an ethical means of engaging people and producing relevant and respectful research. Culturally sound research is also presented as an ethical issue, which entails paying attention beyond just whether instruments or consent forms have been translated. Students must consider whether there are unique cultural barriers to research participation, which may include thinking about how certain cultural groups have been exploited historically by research and how some projects require attention to community and individual level consent.

### **Conducting agency-based evaluations**

Many of the interviewees described guiding students in discussions regarding potential ethical dilemmas inherent in doing agency-based evaluation. As one interviewee shared, students must understand how evaluation occurs in a “political environment,” where different stakeholders often have their own “vested interests in the outcomes of the evaluation.” Other topics related to agency evaluation included: 1) what to do when the agency director only wants positive findings reported, 2) what to do when the agency wants to disseminate findings and the researcher does not have IRB approval, 3) how to narrow the scope of the agency’s evaluation vision to reflect the available resources to support the work, 4) what are the motivating factors behind the evaluation, and 5) what are the potential risks related to dual relationships when social workers engage clients as study participants. In the context of discussing dual relationships, an interviewee emphasized how “social work clients are typically incredibly vulnerable whether it’s because of substance abuse, mental illness, disability status, poverty, or the fact that they are racially discriminated against.” Consequently, discussions regarding the ethics of agency-based evaluation often include attention to working with vulnerable individuals or groups.

Specifically, in terms of working with potential or actual clients, students are asked to consider whether potential participants will feel coerced into participating, given they are receiving agency services. As one interviewee reflected, students need to be aware that some study participants may feel that “access to services [is] possibly contingent on participating in that

research.” Students must think about how to minimize potential risks around study recruitment and data gathering choices. In some instances, for example, students may be guided toward creating anonymous surveys or identifying a non-provider to recruit study participants.

Time is also spent discussing the motivating factors behind evaluation. At times, this might be to inform practice, but in other instances, funding requirements drive research designs and requirements. One interviewee shared the dilemma related to the push toward evidence-based practice that seemed to encourage the use of randomized trials to assess family-based service organizations. According to this interviewee, “It is really an ethical breach to withhold treatment to injured or suffering or vulnerable populations in order to use them as a control group.” While a project could still offer the control group “services as usual,” this interviewee believes that “to conduct the research in social work environments and in practice settings in particular [is] a real challenge.” The struggle she presents therefore is to produce scientifically sound research, balanced by the need to be ethical and sensitive to the practice context.

### **Activities to engage students**

Activities to engage students in learning about ethics included group exercises, written assignments, Internet-based activities, and conducting evaluation or research projects. Group activities are often structured around vignettes containing ethical dilemmas. These vignettes are hypothetical situations, examples from the instructor’s own experiences, or other research projects riddled with ethical violations. The vignettes might be presented in the form of a research article, a brief case description, newspaper or magazine article, or a video clip. One interviewee described the impact of using vignettes depicting “horrific social justice violations” as causing students to become “pretty incensed” and very engaged in the discussion around the importance of assuring ethical research. Several interviewees specifically mentioned showing a documentary on the public health sponsored syphilis study.

Presented with the vignettes, students are then expected to identify the ethical dilemmas, and at times are guided in the application of ethical decision-making models. One interviewee described how she encourages students to grapple with a dilemma by applying the *NASW Code of Ethics*. This interviewee describes her process as first introducing ethical principles and guidelines, and then presenting her students with a dilemma to “puzzle” through: “Students very often are trying to look for the right answer. And I’m really trying to put exercises together that

really help them weigh the benefits and costs and understand that there isn't a particular right answer—that they have to make very difficult decisions.”

Another small group activity used is “mock IRBs,” in which students review each other's projects. This process allows students to experience a simulated IRB process and to critically assess the ethical issues relevant to their projects. In other instances, “mock IRBs” assess a fictional or actual research proposal. As an example, one interviewee constructed a “mock IRB” using the Milgram Study. To set the context, the interviewee described the “issues around obedience to authority” referencing the Nazi experiments. Students were then expected to apply ethical principles and determine whether as an IRB they would approve the study.

Other student-to-student consultation activities included constructing and critiquing informed consent forms for their own projects. Strategies to encourage students to think about ethical implications included drawing upon historical violations or the instructor's own research experiences, as well as having students envision themselves or family members as potential participants. The intent is for students to realize they need to “appreciate what [potential study participants] are going through” rather than just focus on “hey my sample size is growing, and you know we're getting all this great data.” An interviewee explains to students his own experiences of being approached to participate in a study during a difficult time in a hospital. This experience, as he shares with his class, allowed him greater insight into “the consumer's perspective” and the need for researchers to be sensitive to the context. Another strategy was to have students reflect upon the question: “Would I want my mother or son doing this kind of a thing, and how much information would I want them to have before they made such a decision on [study participation]?” These strategies help students understand that consent is not just paperwork, but rather entails carefully thinking about the consent process and being sensitive to contextual factors, such as whether participants are distressed or feeling vulnerable.

### **Written assignments**

Having students critique research articles represents another strategy to encourage critical thinking about “risk” as it relates to the process and impact of the research effort. One interviewee, for example, assigns articles in which study participants have a mental illness. The students then reflect upon the question: “What is sort of the emotional risk associated with being asked questions about suicide or sexual abuse?” This approach forces students to “critically think about the nature of the questions they are going to be asking in the context of the populations they are involving in

the study.” Similarly, another interviewee has students consider the potential risks related to recruiting individuals experiencing domestic violence. Other examples included asking students to reflect upon the “connection between cultural competence and ethics” as well as comparing ethical considerations relevant to the different research paradigms. These exercises lend themselves to either written assignments or material for group discussions.

Other written activities described included quizzes in which students read consent forms and then completed a multiple-choice test to assess their ability to understand and retain the content. This approach illustrates the challenges in creating consent forms that are comprehensive and comprehensible. The instructor might then prompt students to think about how these challenges are magnified when potential participants are distressed, have limited reading skills, or are unable to comprehend for other reasons.

### **Internet activities**

The Internet provides additional resources to engage students in research ethics, including information related to historical violations, as well as current regulatory requirements. Some students complete Web-based training modules and provide evidence of their certification (e.g., CITI’s Protection of Human Subjects course). Completion of these modules may increase students’ understanding of the seriousness of research ethics and may benefit them as they engage in future research endeavors. Other Internet-based activities included reading Web sites that describe past ethical violations, as well as identifying and debunking marketing research claims. As an example, one interviewee has students research the validity of a product’s claim of effectiveness. This interviewee finds a “stupid product on the market” and goes to its Web site:

We investigate [the claim that] doctor so-and-so, who was a urologist at it doesn’t mention where, says you know my clinical trials which have been published in the journal of yada yada yada, state that this works. And so the students and I go find this doctor and he doesn’t exist, and we also go try to find the journal and it doesn’t exist either.

Conversations related to fabrication and falsification flow from these types of activities. Students also learn the value of being critical research consumers.

### **Student evaluation or research projects**

All but one interviewee stated that their programs required students to conduct a research project, either as part of a small group or individually. The decision not to assign an actual project was based upon such factors as limited time and IRB requirements. Students at the program that did not require a research project instead completed a proposal and mapped out the different

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sections of a research report. For students who complete a project, these frequently are structured as agency-based evaluations. Some interviewees reported that evaluations occur only when an agency requests a particular project or when students have demonstrated the necessary skills. These projects represent a culmination of the skills and knowledge gained throughout the research sequence. At times, these are considered capstone projects, in which students demonstrate their abilities to integrate course material from across the curriculum. Given that research projects are frequently required and represent a means to assure that students are capable of conducting sound and ethical research, the next section summarizes challenges identified in promoting quality student projects.

### **Challenges in promoting quality student projects**

Challenges in promoting quality student projects included low faculty expectations and students' negative perceptions of research, limited time, and difficulty accessing data or resources. As mentioned in Section 3.2.3 of this article, the challenges presented are substantial enough that one interviewee opts out of assigning student projects.

### **Low faculty expectations and students' negative perceptions of research**

A concern was voiced that MSW programs have insufficient expectations regarding students' ability to design and conduct research. Unlike non-social work graduate and even undergraduate programs, MSW programs typically do not require students to complete a thesis. An interviewee reflected on the tendency for social work faculty to be overly concerned about the amount of work expected from students. As a result, "we often claim that they're very busy, they're working, they're in their internships, they don't have the time." By not "demanding enough," the concern is that students lose the opportunity to apply the skills and gain the confidence to integrate research into their social work practice.

Perhaps related to faculty's low expectations are students' negative perceptions of research. Several interviewees described having to address students' phobias about research, which often were attributed to the students' lack of confidence in their abilities to master research content. Additionally, instructors might need to shift students' views of research as a "hoop to jump through," to research as an integral part of social work practice. One interviewee shared that many of his students have a strong clinical focus, and do not "necessarily see themselves as researchers." Consequently, he reflected: "The first challenge is to engage them and to help them understand the

role that they have to play, both as consumers of research and also as individuals who themselves can create knowledge and evidence for evidence-based practice.”

For some students, research does not just represent a “hoop,” but instead is perceived as “something that’s bad, sick, dumb, ugly, and stupid, you know, that they’ve been trying to avoid.” One interviewee counters this by actively highlighting the connection between social work practice and research, and as a result, “it’s amazing how you suddenly have their attention...[research becomes] like one of these hidden treasures.”

### **Limited time**

Another challenge is limited time. Some MSW programs offer only a two-course research sequence, which some interviewees considered insufficient to teach research and then expect students to apply this knowledge to an actual project. One of the interviewees explained that by the time he has addressed students’ negative perceptions of research and is able to equip students with the necessary skills, the semester is almost over and there is little time to complete projects. Ideally, students develop their project idea and complete an IRB application, if needed, in a previous semester. It is challenging for students, however, to conceptualize their projects ahead of time, when they are still gaining foundational research skills. For other interviewees, time is less of an issue, because their research sequence consists of three courses, with the first centering on gaining foundational research skills, the second on completing an IRB application and learning basic statistics, and the third on conducting the project.

Problems with limited time are further compounded when IRB approval is delayed. Of note, not all instructors submit student projects to the IRB. Decisions to submit an IRB application were at times guided by university or school policy, and at other times left up to the research instructor’s discretion. Some interviewees intentionally guide their students to construct projects that are perceived to fall outside the scope of the IRB (e.g., program evaluation or projects for classroom learning only). Other interviewees preferred a process in which all student projects were reviewed by either an internal school of social work ethics committee or by the university IRB. An underlying belief was that an independent review board should determine whether or not a project is exempt. Some of the interviewees reported that their social work program and IRB co-developed a policy regarding IRB waivers for student projects. A separate paper addresses the perceived benefits and challenges of having student projects reviewed by the IRB, as well as guidelines to support research instructors regarding the review process (Shore, 2007).

### **Access to data and other resources**

Challenges for students in completing projects also include access to data and availability of resources. Students in field placements may have greater access to existing data or opportunities to gather data. Of note, interviewees varied as to whether they required any form of written or oral agreement with the field placement agency regarding project approval. For some interviewees, a signed letter of support from the field instructor is required that at times lists the responsibilities of both the student and the agency. For others, the requirement entails a verbal agreement between the student and the agency, or between the school's field liaison or research instructor and the agency. Other interviewees do not require any form of agreement but expressed an interest in implementing some means of assuring agency support.

Even with agency-based evaluation projects, students often have limited or no access to financial support. As a result, they are unable to provide study incentives or cover mailing costs for study materials. This may then translate to low response rates and/or small sample sizes, which can affect the quality of the research projects. One interviewee commented, "It's so much easier when there's financial support for the research...so that you don't have to worry about the cost of a particular study, and so that the cost doesn't drive the methodology chosen."

### **Student encountered ethical dilemmas**

Based upon experiences supervising student projects, interviewees identified several areas in which students encountered challenging ethical situations. Of note, the interview question asked for student encountered ethical "dilemmas," but most of the interviewees provided examples of challenging situations, acknowledging that in most instances, it was clear what needed to occur. The primary ethical challenges encountered included difficulties related to agency politics and expectations, confidentiality, and study participant distress. Instructors work with students to minimize these ethical concerns by encouraging students to develop anonymous surveys, particularly when working with vulnerable populations. For some of the interviewees, this structure is directed by IRB requirements. As one interviewee described, the university policy states, "no student should submit or be doing a project that requires full board review."

### **Difficulties associated with agency politics**

Students often conduct agency-based evaluations, in which they potentially encounter ethical challenges specific to agency politics. Challenges encountered by students included finding themselves in the middle of staff conflict and competing agendas. This can complicate the ability

to identify the stakeholders and to understand the possible motivating factors behind different parties' interests regarding the evaluation. As an example, one interviewee described how a student evaluated the effectiveness of a team intervention. This student became ensnared by departmental dynamics "where one person wanted this study done and one didn't." The student, with her field and research instructors, met to discuss the challenge and to strategize on how to best navigate the agency politics.

Students may also struggle when they question whether the evaluation project reflects the needs of the agency clientele or whether the design is motivated by other factors, such as a desire to uncritically prove an intervention's effectiveness. As a general lesson, one interviewee teaches about the value of objectivity and works with his students "to get over thinking they already know an answer and trying to prove it." Tied to this is the need to recognize the value of less than positive findings—for example, how this information could enhance program planning.

### **Concerns related to confidentiality**

Students may also encounter ethical issues related to confidentiality. Of note, often a need exists to highlight the difference between anonymity and confidentiality. One interviewee exclaimed, "It's amazing to me...what a difficult time people have distinguishing between confidentiality and anonymity." As a means of explaining the difference, an instructor might discuss how anonymity is achieved when a researcher cannot link study information to a particular participant. In regard to confidentiality, the researcher can make this link, but agrees not to publicly share information that would allow a study participant's identity to be known. Some interviewees insist that students use only de-identified information, which at times requires the student to "black out any identifying information." This becomes particularly important when the student is collaborating with classmates who do not work at the same agency.

Ethical considerations have also surfaced related to mandated reporting requirements and the need to breach confidentiality. An example in which a breach occurred centered on a student hearing "credible threats against a third party." After consultation, the student contacted a "mobile crisis stabilization unit" and took other appropriate measures. Some of the interviewees mentioned that they guide students toward constructing anonymous surveys, or they tell students to avoid studies in which disclosures of harm to self or others might occur. An interviewee also cautions students, "What seems like a very bland and simple idea on its surface could end up putting [students] in a situation where they...have to violate confidentiality by making a legally-required

report of child abuse or elder abuse.” The example she provided centered on interviewing “mothers in a parenting effectiveness training.” Other interviewees shared that students are taught about the importance of informing participants up front about limits to confidentiality, allowing participants to determine their degree of study involvement.

### **3Study participant distress**

Challenges also exist related to research that results in study participant distress. For example, one interviewee reported that his students analyzed satisfaction surveys from a “mental health peer support social club.” In response to the survey question, “What would you do if this organization didn’t exist?” some respondents stated that they would “kill themselves.” The student was alarmed and consulted with the research instructor and director of the social club. The question that surfaced for the student was whether respondents were suicidal, and if so, what could be done, given that the survey was anonymous. This is another example illustrating the potential for seemingly non-risky questions to trigger emotional responses. Based upon these responses, future satisfaction surveys began with directions that “emphasized how respondents should contact one of the peer staff if they experience any distress.”

In regard to distress, another interviewee shared, “Some students have found themselves torn between a role of the researcher and the role of a social worker, and not sure quite how to help the research subject who needed other kinds of assistance outside the research project.” Given this possibility, some interviewees teach their students how to anticipate and attend to potential study participant distress. This may entail guiding students to design projects in a way that minimizes risks, which may include decisions regarding sampling strategies (e.g., seeking provider versus client perspectives). Additionally, instructors might review the importance of assessing for participant well-being and having an established protocol to respond to distress that includes providing participants with a referral list and having an adequate debriefing plan.

Harm can also result from students overlooking cultural considerations. For example, one interviewee shared that her student encountered a problem as a result of the use of an uncorrected version of a survey. In this instance, the survey’s demographic questions contained an uncorrected assumption regarding religious affiliation, which offended at least one respondent. The student, with the support of the instructor, addressed the problem that consisted in part of an apology and an opportunity to debrief. As the interviewee reflected, students do not always understand the need to critically examine their instruments and data gathering processes. Perhaps this reflects the

tendency for some students to view research as a “hoop to jump through” without having a full appreciation for the need to carefully consider a research project’s potential impact.

The examples cited above illustrate that students need adequate supervision and support, and underscore the potential risks associated with student projects. An interviewee provided an example of the extent of active involvement needed to support students; in this case, the student wanted to examine issues related to cutting behavior among middle school students. The student met with the instructor to identify potential risks and to design an approach that not only minimized the risks, but also assured that all the necessary layers of approval and consent were obtained. As part of this discussion, the interviewee described talking “about the dilemmas of introducing that kind of risky behavior to students who may not have thought or contemplated [cutting].” The student also was guided on how to develop appropriate resources for the students, in case of any study-related distress. With active support and guidance, the student was therefore able to conduct the study. Ideally, her study findings resulted in strategies to address cutting behaviors observed within the school.

Student-encountered ethical concerns are addressed within the research classroom, at the field placement, and/or in some instances within the student’s field seminar. Depending upon the circumstances, research instructors may also consult with the IRB. Of note, some of the interviewees were unable to identify ethically challenging situations encountered by their students, perhaps because of the way in which the student projects were constructed.

## **Discussion**

The aim of this study was to identify and build upon strategies research instructors use to promote research ethics. The study findings indicate that ethical issues covered within the MSW classroom expand upon traditional IRB considerations. Students are sensitized to ethical issues relevant to conducting research in social work practice settings and are reminded of core underlying social work commitments. This includes gaining critical awareness of the risks and benefits of involving vulnerable individuals or populations and encouraging students to question whether a proposed study is aligned with social work values (e.g., social justice). This line of questioning coincides with Antle and Regher’s (2003) call for ethical analysis to move beyond just considerations of individual study participant rights.

The interviewees provided numerous examples of activities used to engage students in understanding ethics. The described activities promote critical thinking regarding risk and other

ethical concerns, and they often were structured to facilitate dialogue. The use of case examples engages students in “puzzling through” dilemmas and applying ethical decision-making models. These diverse activities communicate the seriousness of ethical conduct and promote the value of group analysis. Although not explicitly mentioned by interviewees, fostering a group approach enhances ethical decision-making through inclusion of different perspectives. Ideally, students are socialized into seeing the benefits of peer and IRB consultation as part of ethical analysis.

As an activity, student research projects can be an incredible learning opportunity. However, interviewees identified challenges to promoting quality projects that must be addressed. Given that many of projects occur at students’ field placements, a need exists to develop guidelines on how to best work with agencies to negotiate approvable projects and to create strategies that minimize potential study-related risks. Guideline suggestions include requiring a letter of agreement with the agency that articulates agency support and outlines the roles and responsibilities of the student, agency, and other involved entities. A second related suggestion is for students to work closely with their field instructors to assure that the project selected represents an area of interest to the agency. Presumably, if the agency is interested in the project, study findings will more likely be used to inform practice. Students may have an increased appreciation for research if they observe that their projects have an actual application or impact. As Unrau, Gabor, and Grinnell (2001) also state, evaluations should have a purpose, which includes intent to inform and enhance practice. Active collaboration with the field instructor also helps to assure that ethical issues relevant to the practice setting are carefully considered. Based upon the study findings, students should be required to discuss with their field instructors at a minimum issue related to confidentiality, participant distress, and informed consent. These conversations must be bolstered by active guidance from the research instructor.

Agency-based projects allow students to experience research grounded in an actual social work practice setting. This type of activity clearly demonstrates how research is directly linked to ethical practice, demystifies the process, and perhaps encourages students to consider research as one of those “hidden treasures” that they’ll carry forward with them post-graduation. Ideally a positive experience conducting these projects will motivate students to continue integrating research into their practice and prompt some students to pursue a doctoral degree.

An overarching recommendation is to integrate research content across the curriculum in order to further promote students’ appreciation for ethics and research in general. Some

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interviewees mentioned that ethical issues are already discussed as part of the field seminar, which is a natural fit, given that many student projects occur in their field placements. A natural fit exists in other courses. Students, for example, can apply their needs assessment skills to inform grant writing and/or program development courses. This integration is clearly supported by CSWE (2004). Designing student projects as capstone events represents a means to celebrate the integration of research, particularly when students are expected to join together their other coursework to inform and support the project. Support from faculty across the curriculum will also convey to students the value and need for ethical research.

### **Future study directions**

This article represents the experiences of 16 graduate social work research instructors. Whereas numerous ideas and recommendations were identified through the interview process, additional ethical considerations and activities might be uncovered if the sample size were expanded. Findings from this exploratory study could inform a survey in order to solicit additional insights regarding how to promote ethical research. Future studies might include seeking field placement instructor and student perspectives on how to promote ethical research and create meaningful agency-based projects.

Social work research instructors may also benefit from sharing ideas with each other, perhaps gathering at conferences. At these gatherings, social workers could strategize on ways to further promote ethical conduct and heighten student appreciation for research. Additionally, social workers could critically re-examine the NASW *Code of Ethics* and consider how to strengthen the section dedicated to *evaluation and research*. A suggestion from the literature and this study entails infusing ethical considerations with a greater social justice orientation. Other suggested discussions could occur within social work programs related to integration of content across the curriculum. As instructors from across the curriculum introduce their students to ethical decision-making models, for example, the value of critically and systematically assessing ethical dilemmas will likely be reinforced and solidified.

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