

# Ethical Decision-Making Models in Resolving Ethical Dilemmas in Rural Practice: Implications for Social Work Practice and Education

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## Abstract

This article discusses a course that focuses on rural social work practice and ways to resolve ethical dilemmas in social work practice. In rural clinical social work practice, ethical issues and dilemmas are oftentimes unavoidable; therefore, it is important for social work students to learn how to practice ethically.

**Keywords:** Ethical practice, rural clinical social work practice, ethics, social work, ethical decision-making

## 1. Introduction

Social work practice in rural communities is packed with possible ethical dilemmas (Daley & Doughty, 2006). Due to the nature of rural communities, social work practitioners are likely to become involved in dual relationships (Galbreath, 2005, p. 106). In communities where everyone knows everyone else, social work practitioners may also face confidentiality and privacy issues. Depending upon the number of social workers in rural communities, dual relationships, conflicts of interest, and issues of confidentiality may be virtually unavoidable.

The purpose of this article is to describe an undergraduate social work course that is designed to assist students in becoming aware of and responsive to ethical issues and dilemmas at all levels of rural clinical social work practice. In this course, students were given an assignment which required them to apply an ethical decision-making model to a rural practice scenario. Research suggests that rural communities and the residents of those communities, including social workers who are working on the behalf of clients, may be confronted with significant barriers when attempting to access services (Avant, 2004). Because of the challenges embedded in social work practice in rural environments, it is particularly important that social work students learn how to apply ethical principles when meeting the needs of their rural clients and/or communities. The students' resolutions to the dilemmas are provided as examples of ways that they applied ethical decision-making frameworks to the scenarios to help them develop the skills that are necessary to address dilemmas in their field placements and their social work careers.

## **2. Course Overview**

This web-based course is offered as an elective for students in the BSW program. In this course, students complete three quizzes, 12 discussion board postings, a major paper that focuses on an issue affecting rural communities, and an assignment in which they apply an ethical decision-making model to an ethical dilemma. Students were provided with journal articles and cases that demonstrated the use of ethical decision-making models to address ethical dilemmas in social work practice. The quizzes, exams, paper, and assignment were designed to encourage students to read the required course textbooks and to help them integrate the authors' material into their practice skills, knowledge, and values. Each quiz covered required reading material that had been discussed in the class prior to the date of the quiz.

To complete the ethical decision-making assignment, students selected one of six sample scenarios and applied an ethical decision-making model in order to find a solution. Using the course textbook, bibliography, and journal articles that were provided, students wrote a 3- to 6-page paper to demonstrate the application of the model and the relevant principles of ethical practice to resolve the dilemma that was presented in the case. All social work practice was guided by the code of ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. The ethical dilemmas presented in each case required students to identify and articulate relevant ethical principles and how they would apply the ethical decision-making model to resolve the ethical dilemma. Further, because the scenarios and the students were in rural settings, students applied their models in a rural context (Ginsberg, 2005; Scales & Streeter, 2004).

## **3. Blackboard Examples**

The 12 assignments were given in Blackboard to help students integrate the tenets of rural social work practice and ethically sound practice as they developed their knowledge of rural clinical social work practice. With each assignment, students posted responses to the discussion item after completing the assigned

reading. Students were required to integrate concepts from that week's readings into their responses. The responses had to be written in Standard English using the 5<sup>th</sup> edition of the Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (APA); citations had to be included and formatted according to APA rules as well.

Students were provided with two ethical dilemma scenarios from which to choose for their assignment. In each scenario, the ethical dilemma involved dual or multiple relationships in rural communities. Students' responses suggested that they understood both the purpose of the assignment and the purpose of the ethical decision-making model. In one scenario, Betty, a social worker, was asked by a close friend to treat her son for what she believed was an attachment disorder. One student responded that, "Betty, the social worker, had the option of treating Verna's son or not." The student added that one of the risks of this dual relationship was that the parents "may or may not be able to handle what's being said about their child." Another student responded, "If the relationship is unavoidable, potential benefits and risks must be weighed. Considering that Betty is the only social worker in town, and it is a small town, I do not think it would be possible for all of her clients to be strangers to her. The precautions suggest that the social worker set healthy boundaries from the outset. Secure informed consent from the client. Discuss both potential risks and benefits. Consult with other professionals to resolve any dilemmas. Seek supervision when needed. Document in clinical case notes and self-monitor."

Another scenario involved Sam, a social worker who was the only social worker in a small town. Sam was working with a juvenile male who was suspected of sexually abusing an 8-year-old girl who had just been referred to Sam from the local hospital. The child was the daughter of the Sam's dearest friend. One student responded, "It is important to understand the blurred lines of professional and personal lines that are often encountered in rural social work practice. Because the worker in the case example is a dear friend of

the victim's father, extra care and precaution [are] needed to ensure that a professional relationship is maintained. They should also discuss how all confidentiality issues will be handled. Furthermore, the effectiveness of the professional relationship should undergo periodic evaluations which evaluate the dual relationship's impact on client confidentiality." Another student responded, "The first step used in this decision-making process was to examine the NASW code of ethics. Because of the multiple conflicts of interest and multiple relationships involved, Sam should make every attempt to find another social worker to take the case of the female child. The rural setting in this case could present a problem if another social worker cannot be found. If another social worker is not available precautions must be examined. These precautions include: setting healthy boundaries, securing informed consent from both clients, consultation with other professionals, seeking supervision when needed, keeping detailed case notes, self monitoring, and examining his personal motivations. Sam could seek advice from his supervisor, NASW colleagues, the NASW code of ethics, and textbooks." A third student appeared to understand the impact of the dual relationship on the outcome of the situation. The student responded, "The first step is to recognize the problems to address and prioritize them. The problems, in order of priority are: Sam is already working with the male child suspect, the hospital has referred the female child victim for services, the female child is the daughter of a close friend, and Sam is the only social worker in the area. After looking at the problems it is determined that the problems are significant (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2009). These are problems which create dual relationships and conflict of interest, which could compromise ethical principles. If another social worker cannot be secured, then much care should be taken to [ensure] that both the male child suspect and the female child victim have their needs met because this is the primary concern (NASW, 1999). Additionally, Sam could begin to look for solutions in the macro level to prevent future dilemmas."

This course demonstrated an approach to teaching ethical decision-making, problem solving, and social work values and ethics by the application and integration of scenarios to the course content. Through the use of multiple teaching methods, students were given opportunities to apply the NASW code of ethics to multiple situations. The ethics, values, and skills that are taught in the course may assist students in their rural clinical social work practice after graduation. The success of this course is also a result of its construction. The course content was delivered via textbook and journal articles; evaluation was conducted via three quizzes, an ethical decision-making assignment, a major paper, and 12 discussion board posts in which students demonstrated their comprehension of the course content. As part of the requirement for submission of the discussion board assignments, students had to cite the readings. This requirement was intended to encourage students to read their textbooks. Students who read their textbooks were able to apply the readings in their postings. Furthermore, as the selected students' responses suggest, these students understood the importance of applying ethical standards and principles and the ethical decision-making model to their practice scenarios.

Although course students did demonstrate the ability to apply the content of the course to the ethical scenarios, there is still room for improvement. In the future, students will be required to cite the NASW code of ethics standards and values that apply to the case scenarios. Additionally, a posting will be added that requires students to identify an ethical dilemma from their field placements. This may enable students to see the real life effects that decision-making can have on client systems and work environments. Students may also see what happens when ethical dilemmas are not addressed at all.

#### **4. Conclusion**

Students had weekly opportunities to integrate social work ethical standards and principles as well as ethical decision-making models for solving ethical dilemmas. They also

had opportunities to consider their personal values and ethical positions when responding to the ethical scenario assignment. By applying an ethical decision-making model to an ethical dilemma, students learned that their decisions might yield unexpected and unintended consequences. Students' application of ethical decision-making was based on input from three different resources: 1) required readings from the textbook, journal articles, and ethical scenarios for the course; 2) students' decision-making practices that were reflected in how they responded to the dilemma cases; and 3) the instructor's observations of students' development as demonstrated in discussion postings, dilemma case assignment, quizzes, and practice paper (Ametrano, 2014). Walker's study also suggested that taking an ethics class does encourage students to be more open in accepting other's perspectives by taking into consideration other viewpoints and does strengthen already existing values and beliefs systems (2011, pp. 84-85). This form of ethics training has implications for social work practice and ethics education.

## **5. Implications for Social Work Practice**

Rural social workers may not be able to avoid the boundary and confidentiality challenges presented by the unique rural contexts in which they practice; however, they can protect themselves and their clients by acting responsibly and by setting clear, appropriate boundaries at all levels. Advocating against organizational climates that present barriers to ethical practice will improve service delivery in rural communities. The NASW code of ethics (1999) provides standards that guide professional conduct, but it does not clearly prescribe the day-to-day actions for resolving ethical dilemmas faced by rural social workers. Identifying ethical issues, developing self-awareness, and learning the process of applying ethical decision-making models will lead to more effective practice. Supervising students in field experiences will provide opportunities for feedback that can increase those students' levels of confidence in providing ethical practice.

## **6. Implications for Social Work Education**

Social work education programs must continue to develop and implement ethics training curricula that not only focus on theory, but also prepare students to apply ethical decision-making models to solve ethical dilemmas in practice settings. Research suggests that ethics education has a significant positive influence on health professionals by helping them make difficult ethical decisions in their practice (Grady et al., 2008). Teaching social work students to incorporate the code of ethics and ethical decision-making models increases the competency levels of social workers. Social work programs can increase students' awareness by preparing them to understand that the NASW code of ethics sets the professional standards for practice, but the ethical decisions made by practitioners in their daily activities are impacted by their personal values and ethics, as well as the unique environments in which they practice.

Field education as the signature pedagogy is critical for developing ethical practice skills for practice in rural settings. Social work programs can collaborate with field placement agencies to ensure that students are being prepared for to practice ethically. During pre-field orientation sessions, social work programs can reinforce adherence to the NASW code of ethics and focus on specific issues such as confidentiality and dual relationships that present ethical dilemmas in rural practice. Ethical practice issues can also be reinforced during the initial agency orientation and during regular supervision. Additionally, in a focus group, social workers' suggestions for effective rural practice included the use of generalist practice skills such as working at micro, mezzo, and macro systems, professional use of self, and self-awareness (Riebschlerger, 2007). In another study, social work supervisors cited the NASW code of ethics as one of the guidelines most often used in managing ethical challenges such as protection of client confidentiality, dual relationships, and boundary issues (Blue, E. T., Kutzler, A. M., & Marcon-Fuller, S., 2014). Social work education programs can work

with the field agencies to provide the continuing education and life-long learning required for ethical rural practice and field supervision of rural social work students.

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