# Leadership in the Field: Fostering Moral Courage

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## Abstract

Moral courage requires commitment to moral principles and action on those principles in the face of a threat to personal well-being. Self-awareness is a critical first step in being able to commit to ethical principles (Mattison, 2000). Ethical decision-making is a process and requires that participants be aware of how values, assumptions, moral development, and emotional skills influence decision-making. This article focuses on strategies to ensure instructors, supervisors, and colleagues are responsive to the needs of clients when presented with challenges in practice. Clearly identifying moral structures consistent with social work standards is an effective way to foster moral courage. Facilitating moral decisions and ensuring least harm to all parties involved is at the core of social work ethical decision-making. Social workers need to not only act in an ethical manner; they must also be ethical beings.

*Keywords*: moral courage, ethical decision-making, leadership, social work practice, ethical principles

Does one support the policies of the employer knowing that these are contrary to the needs of the clients the agency serves? Or does one confront the policies to better serve those clients? While teaching a module within an ethics course, the author used an example scenario that highlighted these conflicting priorities. Several students responded that their primary responsibility was to the agency over their responsibility to clients. The students explained that they needed their jobs and to question the policies would endanger their employment. The students did not see the needs of clients as worth the risk. Regardless of their awareness of the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics* (2008) standard 1.01 commitment to clients as primary, students reported their intention to act contrary to the best interest of the client in situations where their jobs might be jeopardized. When considering choices such as this, what must be present in order to ensure that the values, principles, and standards of the profession are upheld in practice?

This paper will highlight the concept of moral courage. The paper will examine strategies to ensure that instructors, supervisors, and colleagues are responsive to the needs of clients when presented with challenges in practice that place social workers in precarious positions. Kidder (2005) defined moral courage as involving a commitment to moral principles and a willingness to endure the challenges involved in supporting those principles. Using that definition, one can surmise that moral courage has an impact on decision-making and its adherence to the standards of the profession.

## Conceptualizing Moral Courage

The positive psychology movement has identified six core moral virtues of which courage is one. Peterson and Seligman articulate that "strength of courage entails the exercise of will to accomplish goals in the face of opposition, either external or internal" (2004, p. 199). Viewing courage as a virtue highlights courage as counteracting some inherent difficulty, motivation, or temptation to act otherwise. When applied to challenges within the workplace, one can examine those factors that

assist in defining virtuous workplace behavior. Specific practices can be developed that lead workers to react with courage in the face of opposition. Acting with integrity, authenticity, honesty, persistence in the face of temptation and with empathy and humanity are all reflective of key character strengths. Those character strengths are desired traits within social work identity.

## Model of Moral Courage

Kidder (2005) developed a model of morally courageous actions as having three strands. Commitment to moral principles, awareness of danger in supporting those principles, and a willingness to endure the consequences are required components of moral courage. Motives for action must be related to a duty to the moral principle and private convictions. Moral courage may involve denouncing injustice. Moral courage may also be displayed in order for one to be at ease with one's decisions.

Moral courage as outlined by Kidder (2005) is in line with the virtue ethics theory of Aristotle: "For the virtue ethicist, a 'good' person will act in a 'good' way not because of their principles or duty but because they are 'good'" (Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010, p. 403). Peterson and Seligman (2004) note that virtue ethics provides the ability to explain moral motivation: the matter of degree to which one is virtuous determines motivation.

A key trait when acting with moral courage is integrity. Kidder describes this as the "ability to discern right from wrong, acting at personal cost to oneself and being able to openly admit to the choice for right over wrong publicly" (2005, p. 150). As a core value and principle of the profession (NASW, 2008), integrity becomes a crucial consideration when confronted with ethical dilemmas in practice. The student example proposed actions based not on integrity but rather on self-interest. Ethical decision-making would require a commitment to the profession's ethics, including the belief that client interest is primary.

## Complexity of Working in Systems

The social context within the workplace has created challenges for ethical thinking. Caffo (2011) noted technological advances and rapid increase in information as factors that impact how employees carry out their tasks. Unclear guidelines due to the rapid pace of change, requirements to do more with less, and diversity within work settings—racial, cultural, multigenerational, and language differences—all serve to create further workplace complexity.

Warren et al. (2014) found professional silence to be in the top five challenges in rural mental health practice settings. The authors noted that silence around ethical practice could be resulting from fear which leads to a lack of discussion of the issue and adds to the continuation of ethical problems. While investigating rural practice issues, the authors concluded that efforts to "encourage providers to share ethical issues need to be ongoing… [and supervisors] need to create training and offer support" (p. 72) for practitioners.

Social work training emphasizes the interactions between client and social worker, often neglecting attention to differing ethical perspectives of colleagues. The benefit of interprofessional practice includes focusing on the contextual nature of practice relationships with diverse groups. However, the shift toward more interprofessional practice can create challenges for workers. Weinberg (2010) noted the need to broaden perspectives of training to include the structures within which social workers practice in order to deal with systemic issues. The roles social workers fulfill are not always well-understood by others. Expectations can conflict with ethical and professional considerations (Graham & Shier, 2014) resulting in discrepancies between policy and the social work value stance.

As employees, individuals are obligated to adhere to agency policies and adhere to the NASW *Code of Ethics* (2008) while working collaboratively with others. Ethical practice can be considered to include developing the moral courage to confront and challenge issues in the workplace contrary to the *Code*. Valuing ethical behavior and carrying through requires more than familiarity with ethics: it also requires the strength of character to uphold

the spirit of the code (Stevens, 2000). This can be difficult when the social worker does not feel empowered within the interprofessional team.

Manning (1997) highlighted the concept of moral citizenship as congruent with social work ethics and noted the need to develop independent thinkers. She noted social workers as moral citizens demonstrate independent judgment and refuse to go along with morally harmful actions. Manning's contention can be related to the concept of organizational citizenship behavior (OCB). OCB can be explained as behaviors that foster good working relationships and helping others perform. In an early discussion of the concept in the business sector, Hoffman (1986) highlighted the need for morally excellent workplaces to allow space and time to engage in critical reflection. When applied to challenges in social work settings as noted earlier (Caffo, 2011), one can question whether time and space is being allocated for ethical discussions much less self-reflection.

## Developmental Capabilities

The definition of what makes an ethical dilemma is not the same for all social workers (Weinberg & Campbell, 2014). How an individual makes meaning of a situation is in part defined by the level of development of that person. Individuals must be capable of recognizing when controlling or insensitive social contexts are leading to inauthentic behaviors (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Caffo (2011) identified the need for self-awareness about how we influence and are influenced by others as a starting point of thoughtful approaches to ethical decision-making in the workplace.

In order to act with moral courage, people must possess a sense of responsibility, have the ability to know right from wrong, and have a spiritual base (Kidder, 2005), but individual developmental needs can interfere with the expression of moral courage. The desire to be liked, timidity, caving in to pressure from others, and acting regardless of principles are all linked to the developmental skill to discern and commit to principles. Social workers who do not commit to the values of the profession may have trouble defending the principles of social work when challenged.

## Leadership Implications

Sekerka, Bagozzi, and Charnigo (2009) highlighted the need for managers to expect employees to go beyond the moral minimum. Although discussing business and not social work, the authors noted that to foster this commitment to moral decisions and moral courage, managers must first possess the capacity themselves. The authors described professional moral courage as value-driven achievement, doing good for the benefit of others, and aspiring to a moral ideal. Supervisors should encourage others to exercise their character strengths.

The role of supervisors and managers in promoting ethical workplace climates has been reinforced in the social work literature. Ulrich et al. (2007, p. 9) noted that "an important overlap exists between overall work climate and ethical climate, and overall work related stress and ethics stress." Leadership plays a significant role in the creation of work and ethical climates. Erwin (2000) highlighted the need for supervisors to possess ethical sensitivity in order effectively to assist supervisees to navigate challenging ethical situations. The need is for leadership that is "ethically driven, [with] committed leaders, guided by deepest values rather than circumstances" (Kacmar, Bachrach, Harris, & Zivnuska, 2011, p. 260).

Manning (2003) notes that leadership in social work has not received enough attention, but social workers can play a role in building ethical organizations and supporting social responses. Organizational leadership lends itself toward ethical challenges that must be navigated, responsibilities to clients and employees, and the moral obligations inherent in social service agencies. Developmental levels of moral maturity in leaders affect how in tune they are with the moral challenges of the workplace. Moral maturity includes (but is not limited to) ethical sensitivity, moral action, and the ability to have those important ethical conversations (Carroll & Shaw, 2012).

## Ethical Decision-Making and Moral Courage

The student example described previously is one which highlights the need for ongoing attention to development of social work ethics as students are socialized to expectations of the profession. The decision to comply with policies inconsistent with social work ethics and ignore client interests is one that can create dissonance and moral stress in the social worker. What would it take for these social work students to do what needs doing despite the fear of job loss?

## Impact of Moral Courage

Much of the literature surrounding the concept of moral stress has been investigated within the nursing profession. A review of the literature highlighted that moral stress can be conceived as different from that of ethics stress. Ethics stress is seen to be associated with ethical issues or dilemmas, or is related more specifically to the ethical standards themselves. Moral stress can be delineated as that psychological disequilibrium or negative feeling state that results from placement in a situation whereby one's moral standard conflicts with institutional constraints (DeTienne, Agle, Phillips, & Ingerson, 2012). Moral stress can go beyond that which is dictated by the profession to the underlying sense of what is right or wrong by the individual. DeTienne et al. further noted that when moral stress is ignored, or not acted upon, distress can result in physiological as well as psychological consequences.

Ethics failure operates within the realm of relationships and is a complex individual and organizational experience (Bruhn, Zajac, Al-Kazemi, & Prescott, 2002). Although Bruhn et al. were speaking primarily of academic settings, the concepts can apply to the workplace. Social workers can be supported through promoting ethical work climates, institutionalizing values supportive of that climate, and promoting good citizenship through service.

Additionally, social work has been increasingly influenced by the risk paradigm and its impact on practice was discussed in a case study by Robson (2014). Decisions made using only the rules as a foundation do not necessarily balance the issues of power, relationship, and control. Without challenging decisions, we may not identify the deeply embedded assumptions and ways of practicing which may be reinforced when policy or situational contexts may be rooted in oppression.

Giacolone & Promislo (2010) noted that ethical infractions challenge an individual's values and assumptions and break trust in organizations and colleagues. They concluded that both individual and organizational well-being are diminished with ethical infractions. Although applied to business, their conclusions can easily be seen in social work practice settings. Workers experiencing burnout, secondary trauma, and compassion fatigue are unable fully to connect with the clients they serve, extending the scope of the issue beyond that of the workplace itself.

Bolino, Hsuing, Harvey, and LePine (2015) coined the term *citizenship fatigue* as occurring when employees feel lack of support from the organization. They describe this construct as different from burnout noting the primary feeling is frustration and under appreciation; unlike burnout, work production is not decreased but the employee is no longer connected to the workplace and contributing to the development of the organization.

Promoting connections to the workplace and reducing the risk of burnout can be influenced by leader behavior. Leaders within organizations can reward and encourage behaviors that are associated with traits of a moral identity (Reynolds & Ceranic, 2007). Organizations can improve individual moral judgments in their employees through modeling and providing opportunities for others to lead. When individuals have a strong sense of moral identity, they are more likely to have the moral courage to decide to act ethically.

Strategies to Foster Developing self-awareness surrounding the issues of personal and professional values is a critical first step in being able to commit to ethical principles (Mattison, 2000). All ethical decision-making is a process and requires that participants be aware of how

their values and assumptions, moral development, and emotional skills influence decision-making. Additionally, ethical conduct with colleagues involves understanding personal values and behaviors, responsibilities to practice settings, and effective management of conflicts that develop in practice.

Dialogue and idea exchange can facilitate ethical understanding through consideration of context, the unique nature of clients, our workplaces, and the impact of these factors on decision-making (Weinberg & Campbell, 2014). Such a process relies on a degree of comfort with ambiguity and a willingness to take responsibility as a moral change agent. Kidder (2005) expands on the need for discourse and discussion to include role modeling, mentoring, practice, and persistence as leading toward morally courageous actions.

The Australian Association of Social Work (AASW) has identified strategies for supporting ethical practice within the workplace (2012). Professional integrity as a fundamental value is outlined and operationalized as a need for employers to ensure that they are not requiring social workers to practice beyond their current level of competence, knowledge, and skills. AASW further contends that attention to the physical resources available to social workers can lessen the risk of ethical issues developing. Once ethical issues have developed, debriefing, support, and ongoing professional development can all serve to lessen moral stress and improve ethical decision-making.

Moral stress has been identified as a cause of burnout, job dissatisfaction, and turnover (DeTienne et al., 2012; Ulrich et al., 2007). DeTienne et al. noted that if organizations wish to lower employee fatigue and turnover or increase job satisfaction, decreasing moral stress is a "good place to start" (p. 387). Encouraging discussions of ethical issues in the workplace is one way to reduce role-related moral stress and encourage ethical work climates. Conversations that provide support for workers' ethical thinking serve to enhance ethical decision-making by moving from compliance-based thinking to that of principle-based decision-making

(Caffo, 2011). Gallina (2010) highlighted the need for advocacy by the profession itself to change work environments that foster ethical dissonance. Social workers can collaborate together to better equip organizations to support ethical practice.

## Role of Education, Supervision, Leadership

As social work educators, it is important that we provide students with strategies to address the moral and ethical challenges that develop within organizational contexts. McAuliffe (2005) completed a qualitative study of social workers who had negative stress reactions due to extreme ethical situations. She advocated teaching models and frameworks to assist workers to seek consultation and support when exposed to difficult situations. The use of Socratic dialogue allows for deeper examination of ethical and moral issues (Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010) allowing for the development of virtues such courage and integrity.

A study by Cannon (2008) found that a structured internship that utilized new role taking, followed by guided reflection over a nine-month period, was more effective in providing psychological growth as measured by the DIT-2. (The DIT-2 is a validated scale measuring moral development levels.) The study measured scores using an intervention group and two comparison groups. The author concluded that during internship experiences individuals must incorporate new ideas into their cognitive schema. Use of guided reflection is an effective means for instructors to assist students in their development. Leadership in the form of mentoring and practice examples helps students to incorporate reflective strategies for practice, enhancing the likelihood of moral choices. A similar study using teachers emphasized social role taking (Reiman & Peace, 2002). For experienced teachers, guided inquiry promoted moral growth, as did collaborative interactions. The authors also highlighted roles of mentors. Further research utilizing this model could provide support for this strategy within social work students. Assisting student growth through guided reflection can foster the ability to express moral

outrage. The ability to take others' perspectives increases as moral development levels rise. Handesman, Knapp, and Gottleib (as cited in Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 209) noted that "more effective [ethics] courses would be those that pay more attention to what one should do to be an ethical professional as opposed to what one should not do to avoid being an unethical one."

According to Gray and Gibbons (2007), the need to deal with the complexity and ambiguity of ethical situations requires dialogue and a process of moral reasoning, and as such, instruction needs to combine knowledge, theory, skills, values, and guidelines. When combined with self-reflection, tolerance for ambiguity or uncertainty and the ability to assess risk across situations are associated with developing a prosocial orientation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004). Curricula including consideration for self-care and the impact of practice on the quality of life of practitioners was described as a moral and ethical imperative (Newell & Nelson-Gardell, 2014). Both these approaches highlight the need to reduce the risk of unethical decisions through proactive training.

The need for a working environment that recognizes the impact of practice situations on the social worker and provides support for employee well-being has been outlined as a strategy to combat the stress of practice (Graham & Shier, 2014). Social workers can band together within our organizations, professional associations, and coalitions to work toward policy change to promote work structures that support ethical practice.

## Conclusion

While instruction in ethics is important, situations arise in which individuals know what is considered ethical professional behavior and yet choose unethical solutions (Strom-Gottfried, 2000; Smith, McGuire, Abbott, & Blau, 1991). The need to protect and advocate for the most vulnerable within complex systems highlights the need for careful consideration of ethical issues and a foundation for decisions. If we can understand situations that trigger moral decision-making and attend to the character of the worker, it is more likely that

moral responses will occur when ethics are challenged (Miller, 2003). Social workers need to be aware of the impact of values, both personal and professional, within the decision-making process to ensure least harm to all parties involved. "Explicit attention to character and moral development within professional education plays a significant role in supporting the development of effective and virtuous practitioners who are able to exercise sound judgment and wisdom within social work" (Holmstrom, 2014, p. 464). An effective way to foster moral courage is to ensure that social workers strongly identify with the moral structure that facilitates ethical decision-making. Social workers need to not only act in an ethical manner; they must also be ethical beings.

Moral courage is an inherently personal matter woven into our cultural identities (Kidder, 2005). The codification of one's identity is necessary in order to develop morally (Valutis, Rubin, & Bell, 2012). As educators, our emphasis on reflection for personal growth can serve to socialize individuals effectively to the profession while also promoting moral development. A clear moral identity consistent with the social justice perspectives of the social work profession sets the stage for the demonstration of moral courage. As noted by Robson, "Social workers need to find the courage and resilience to stand out and often against the tide or risk being swept away with it" (2014, p. 91).

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