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Editorial: Artificial Intelligence, Continued

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For the past several issues of the *Journal*, much of the discussion has revolved around the ethical issues associated with artificial intelligence. The technology has developed and spread rapidly and is continuing to do so. It's in our watches, our phones, our cash registers, and our automobiles. In fact, it even appears to be in my keyboard, because it's offering me suggestions as I type (only word completion suggestions, not content).

I've never been what I would consider to be an early adopter of technologies. I appreciate most technologies, although like many folks I can be nostalgic for a more low-tech world. Before artificial intelligence, we were slower, more deliberate, methodical. Our invisible helper now allows us to be faster and, ostensibly, more efficient.

Recently, I had a conversation (via text messages) with a friend who has previously been a user of various types of clinical, case management, and hospice social work services. They were talking about their experiences with artificial intelligence. It occurred to me after our brief text discussion that their perspective—the perspective of a social work client—is an important piece of the *Journal's* current discussion thread regarding the ethical use of artificial intelligence. I called my friend and had a conversation about my idea to include their anonymous texts in this editorial. They were fully supportive, and we engaged in an extended discussion about their experiences with artificial intelligence.

As a way to further our ongoing and important discussion about ethical uses of these platforms, I've included our conversation here. In order to protect the anonymity of my friend, I will refer to them as "Social Work Client 1." I've also re-

moved the name of the specific artificial intelligence platform that they use and replaced it with "Platform 1." My friend is an educator, so some of the content reflects artificial intelligence in educational settings, while other content is more about clinical social work.

Here is that conversation:

Social Work Client 1: I am an early adopter of AI. I use Platform 1 every day. I feel that it is a good tool for building effective neutral communication skills. You can't emotionally manipulate the AI. You have to communicate clearly to get a good result. Could be transformative to a person struggling with emotion regulation or social anxiety.

It [is] a second left brain.

Me: This is interesting. Tell me more.

SWC1: My first recommendation would be [for someone who's interested] to download Platform 1 and play around. It's free with an available subscription model. No ads.

Where emotional information is often lost between text messages, the AI operates in a domain where direct communication is mandatory.

I could say, "Write me a five-paragraph essay on Maslow's hierarchy." I can get a response. It will lack voicing and clarity. It won't adhere to MLA or whatever format standard. However, I can instead say "I am writing a five-paragraph essay about Maslow's hierarchy. It is to be formatted in MLA. I am a college sophomore and am in an introductory education course. I want to focus on the self-actualization, self-esteem, and social tiers."

To get good results, you must think through problems because the AI is naive. Through repeated use, you practice these skills repeatedly to improve your prompts. You have the opportunity to structure your thoughts where rigor is rewarded.

So, it all simplifies to: "How do I get what I want without the ability to emotionally manipulate?"

Therapy teaches you to look inward. The AI gives you a structure to mimic to observe and analyze those thoughts and emotions.

> I would role play as a client and see where it takes you. You will find a logically consistent, motivated collaborator. You can add goals and context to a chat. (Context: I am struggling with my ADHD. Please keep me on track with my goals.)

Me: This is fascinating. I'll spend some time with it.

SWC1: I [complain] about current events to it. [It is a good] sounding board without any social risk.

> [My proposal] for using AI as a therapeutic tool in an unspecified use case for behavior modeling through interaction with the model. Better prompts yield better outcomes. Therefore, a layer of rigor is scaffolded into the client's cognitive ability. Left brain training through mimicry.

What follows here is our actual telephone conversation, paraphrased.

Me: I appreciate your having this conversation with me and allowing me to include it and our text thread in my editorial. Of course, we as scholars are concerned about people's ability to misuse platforms as a means to generate work that they then claim to be their own scholarly product.

SWC1: In my experience, that's actually much more challenging, at least in an academic setting. The algorithms currently are not advanced enough to account for all of the variables that go into writing a paper. The data set still has to exist somewhere, for example.

Me: True, but it's probably not impossible; of course, I suppose that it has always been almost impossible to eliminate dishonesty altogether. Bad actors will always try to find a way to cheat.

SWC1: Exactly. As I see it, artificial intelligence is a tool to help people, academics or not, get projects started and to help to determine if projects are even viable. Using Platform 1 is much like using a good librarian. Researchers and students have used librarians for years to assist with literature searches, but no one has ever considered that to be academic dishonesty. Even the best artificial intelligence with the best prompts will require correction by a human author.

Although I'm not sure that I agree with everything that SWC1 says, I do appreciate having the perspective of someone who is neither a social worker nor a tradi-

tional academic. Just the existence of our interchange has served to remind me of our charge as stated in the IFSW Statement of Ethical Principles is that "Social work is a practice-based profession and an academic discipline that facilitates social change and development, social cohesion, and the empowerment and liberation of people." If we can *ethically and responsibly* use artificial intelligence platforms to help (see SWC1's statement above) us deliver our services faster and with a fuller grasp of the literature, then shouldn't we?

We're at the precipice of something—unfortunately, it's difficult to predict exactly what that something is—potentially highly impactful as artificial intelligence grows, becomes more accepted and accessible, and hopefully becomes more trustworthy. Social workers are often described as change agents. Clearly, as we help our clients achieve meaningful change, we should be malleable, too. As someone who identifies strongly as a licensed social worker, I'm glad to see our discipline taking steps toward new technological advances and doing our due diligence to ensure that we are doing so ethically. I look forward to more of this discussion.

Editorial: Embracing AI in Social Work: Why Ethical Concerns Should Drive Integration, not Avoidance

Barbara Hiltz, Special Contributor

As a social work professor, I've noticed a recurring pattern in my conversations with students about artificial intelligence (AI). Many are quick to dismiss AI technologies outright—citing ethical concerns about bias, privacy, environmental impact, and the potential dehumanization of social work practice. While I appreciate and share many of these concerns, I worry that students are "throwing the baby out with the bathwater," missing both the ethical imperatives for thoughtful AI integration and the ways we can mitigate the very concerns they raise.

My perspective enters an ongoing and important dialogue in this journal about artificial intelligence in social work. In Volume 21, Number 1, editor Dr. Stephen Marson (2024) shared his frustrating experiences with AI hallucinations when seeking scholarly references. Victor, Goldkind, and Perron (2024) responded with valuable insights about the limitations of large language models (LLMs) and emerging correctives. While acknowledging these legitimate concerns about AI accuracy, I argue that social work education faces an ethical imperative to engage with, rather than avoid, these technologies.

Addressing Legitimate Concerns

Much like the internet revolution in the 1990s and 2000s, AI is quickly, and fundamentally, changing our professional landscape. It is also here to stay. Rather than

avoiding AI, social workers must engage with it critically and ethically. Here's how social workers can address some common concerns in their daily practice.

Bias and Fairness

Yes, AI systems can perpetuate biases. Social workers are uniquely positioned to identify and challenge this algorithmic bias in the systems they encounter. When a housing assistance algorithm consistently disadvantages certain demographic groups, social workers should advocate for the use of more equitable models. If a social worker encounters automated eligibility screening systems that create barriers for clients with language differences or limited digital literacy—there is work to do. These systems may use terminology or require knowledge that confuses clients, leading to benefit denials for those most in need. Social workers who understand these technological barriers can intervene—helping clients navigate systems, documenting systemic problems, and advocating for more accessible interfaces. By understanding the technology, even at a basic level, social workers become essential ethical guardrails, ensuring equitable access.

Privacy and Confidentiality

Privacy concerns are valid, but avoidance isn't the answer. Privacy concerns in AI-assisted practice extend beyond basic HIPAA compliance. Social workers must become fluent in understanding how information flows through digital systems and explaining these complexities to clients. This includes creating clear and consent processes that explain how AI tools may be involved in their care. Importantly, social workers have a professional obligation to understand the vendors and platforms they use—asking careful and critical questions about how data is owned and stored, who has access, and how it is used. Social workers should be leading conversations about ethical data use, ensuring that client confidentiality remains paramount—even as delivery systems evolve.

Environmental Impact

The environmental cost of AI—from energy-intensive data centers to electronic waste—is a serious concern that aligns with social work's commitment to environmental justice. However, avoiding AI doesn't eliminate these impacts; it merely removes our voice from conversations about sustainable implementation. Practitioners can advocate for their agencies to conduct environmental impact assessments of AI systems, weighing the carbon footprint against potential

benefits. This might mean choosing more efficient algorithms or limiting unnecessary data processing.

It is also true, however, that organizations make all sorts of other decisions that have tremendous environmental impact. If one is going to focus on the environmental impacts of AI, it would also be worth asking other crucial behavioral questions about things like transportation and travel emissions, paper waste, expanding the lifespan of existing hardware, and use of other systems that will optimize resource allocation to reduce waste.

Human Connection

Perhaps the most persistent concern among social workers is that AI will erode the human relationship at the heart of our practice. In reality, thoughtful integration can actually deepen these connections. When deployed thoughtfully, AI can handle routine paperwork, summarize case notes, and manage scheduling—freeing social workers to be fully present during client interactions, rather than splitting attention between relationship and documentation. Social workers should approach AI as an enhancer of their human skills, not as a replacement. This means establishing clear boundaries about which aspects of practice remain exclusively human domains (ethical reasoning, empathic connection, complex clinical judgment) while identifying tasks that technology can support (transcription, information organization, pattern recognition across large datasets). By offloading cognitive burden in appropriate areas, social workers can bring more of their authentic, attentive presence to client relationships. The key lies in maintaining professional discernment about when and how to incorporate these tools—recognizing that technology serves practice, not the reverse.

The Ethical Cost of Avoidance

There is a lot of talk about the ethical costs of AI. But equal attention should be given to the ethical cost to avoidance. In today's rapidly evolving technological landscape, avoiding AI in social work education creates its own ethical dilemmas. As AI becomes integrated into social services, healthcare, and other systems our social workers will encounter, those without AI literacy may inadvertently perpetuate or fail to recognize algorithmic biases affecting their clients. When social workers lack the skills to critically evaluate these systems, they risk reinforcing the very inequities our profession aims to address. Furthermore, as institutions increasingly rely on algorithms for decision-making, our social workers must be

prepared to advocate for their clients within these systems, understanding both their capabilities and limitations.

AI tools can significantly extend services to underserved populations who have historically faced barriers to accessing support. Through chatbots for initial screening or automated translation services for multilingual communities, these technologies can bridge gaps in service provision. By rejecting these tools wholesale, we risk limiting accessibility for the most vulnerable clients, particularly in rural areas or communities with provider shortages.

In a field where burnout is rampant and resources are scarce, the strategic implementation of AI can transform practice efficiency in ways that directly support ethical care. When social workers spend hours on documentation, data entry, and routine administrative tasks, they have less time for the meaningful human connection that defines our profession. AI can handle many of these routine functions, allowing social workers to use their distinct skillset to focus on complex clinical reasoning, relationship building, and advocacy—the aspects of social work that cannot be automated. By resisting these tools, we may inadvertently contribute to workforce strain, burnout, and diminished quality of care, all ethical concerns in their own right.

Conclusion

The question should not be whether to use AI in social work, but rather, how to use it ethically, effectively, and sustainably. When social workers avoid or dismiss these tools, they forfeit their opportunity to shape how technology impacts the clients they serve. This aligns with Victor, Goldkind, and Perron's (2024) imperative that "all social workers are trained in the ethical and effective use of LLMs" through developing digital literacy across education and practice. The core values of our profession—service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity and competence—must guide how we approach these technologies. Rather than seeing AI as a threat to these values, I challenge social workers to see our ethical responsibility to ensure these tools, and our use, embodies them.

Social workers have always adapted to changing social contexts. From settlement houses to organizing during the Civil Rights Movement, to trauma informed approaches in contemporary practice—our field evolves. This AI revolution presents the same challenge and opportunity—to evolve thoughtfully, while

protecting those most vulnerable. The ethical path forward isn't avoidance; it's engagement, education, and advocacy for AI systems that reflect social work values. Marson's (2024) frustrating experiences with AI hallucinations don't contradict this path—they underscore why critical engagement, rather than wholesale avoidance, is essential. It requires a nuanced engagement that acknowledges both peril and promise.

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The Limitations of Common Morality as a Guide for Social Work Practice

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Abstract

In the last two decades, several social work scholars have advocated for a version of Bernard Gert's "common morality" model as a means for moral problem-solving and ethical decision-making in social work practice. Advocates view this model as an improvement over the currently dominant National Association of Social Workers (NASW) code of ethics or appeals to frameworks informed by "grand" moral theories, such as deontology and consequentialism. While novel approaches to social work ethics are much needed, common morality suffers from many of the same limitations it readily identifies with the ethical codes of professional organizations. In this comment, it is argued that common morality

and its underlying two-step adjudication procedure are consequentialist in nature and overly restrictive in practice. Some preliminary thoughts are then made about alternative paths forward for research and scholarship on social work ethics.

> "[E]thics is not an ideal system that is noble in theory but no good in practice. The reverse of this is closer to the truth: an ethical judgment that is no good in practice must suffer from a theoretical defect as well, for the whole point of ethical judgments is to guide practice."
> (Singer, 1993, p. 2)

Ethical dilemmas in social work practice are common and manifest. Practitioners in fields such as behavioral health, child welfare, and criminal justice, among others, are routinely faced with a variety of competing—if not incommensurate—interests, values, and incentives (Gambrill, 2009; Gambrill & Pruger, 1997). While social workers have a responsibility to uphold the best interests of their client, these responsibilities frequently come into conflict with duties to their employers, the local community, and broader societal forces (Reid, 1992). For example, social workers are routinely confronted with decisions about whether and when to involuntarily commit and treat those labeled as mentally ill (e.g., Dunleavy & Murphy, 2019; Molodynski et al., 2010; Taylor, 2005; see Cohen, 1982 and McCubbin et al. 2002 for particularly insightful discussions on psychiatric social work), whether to facilitate the removal of a child from a dysfunctional home (e.g., Houston et al., 2010; Melton & Davidson, 1987; Pelton, 2016), and how to work with clients who may be pressured or forced into substance abuse treatment—for example, when such treatment is mandated by the criminal justice system (e.g., Burman, 2004; Chandler, 2014; Klag et al., 2005; Parhar et al., 2008). Gomory and Dunleavy (2018) provide a general overview of the ethical and empirical justifications for and against the use of coercion in these and other domains. How well the profession is able to successfully navigate these dilemmas is an indication of its ethical maturity.

Necessarily, a variety of tools, perspectives, and approaches have been devel-

oped to teach ethics and ethical decision-making in social work (e.g., Clark, 2016; Congress, 2000; Congress et al., 2009; Gray & Gibbons, 2007; Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010; Reamer, 1999, 2014; Reamer & Abramson, 1982). In the U.S., the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics (2021) has been the most visible resource for education and guidance (for critical discussion see Murphy & Kopel, 1997, Banks, 2008, and Sanders & Hoffman, 2010). The widespread adoption of this and other professional codes helps to ensure professional standards across the field and aids in the orientation and indoctrination of students to disciplinary values and principles.

Limitations of the NASW Code of Ethics

The NASW Code of Ethics (henceforth "Code") describes various ethical principles, values, and responsibilities to which social workers are expected to adhere. Ethics violations, stemming from professional and legal complaints (see generally Strom-Gottfried, 2000), can result in punitive measures. Despite its admirable purpose(s), the Code—along with its counterparts across the helping professions (see Bryan et al., 2016, especially Chapter 1)—suffers from inadequacies at both an applied and meta-ethical level. For example, the Code states

> "Ethical decision making is a process. In situations when conflicting obligations arise, social workers may be faced with complex ethical dilemmas that have no simple answers. Social workers *should take into consideration all the values, principles, and standards* in this Code that are relevant to any situation in which ethical judgment is warranted. Social workers' decisions and actions should be consistent with the spirit as well as the letter of this Code." (NASW, 2021; emphasis added)

Yet, one also finds that,

> "[T]the NASW Code of Ethics *does not specify* which values, principles, and standards are most important and ought to outweigh others in instances when they conflict. Ethical decision making in a given situation must apply the informed judgment of the individual social worker and should also consider how the issues would be judged in a peer review process where the ethical standards of the profession would be applied." (NASW, 2021; emphasis added)

The Code, by itself, offers no formal guidance on how to take into consideration

all relevant values, principles, and standards before making a decision, how these different components should be weighed against one another—despite indicating that in certain situations some components may take precedence over others—nor does it describe how to adjudicate between differing (but perhaps equally valid, or at least justifiable) courses of action. This makes the imperative for social workers to act in a manner that is "…consistent with the spirit as well as the letter of this Code" (NASW, 2021) untenable.

At the meta-ethical level, the Code is found to contain conflicting moral theories. As described above, social workers are often saddled by the Code with explicit obligations to both the individual client and society. This is represented by principles related to autonomy and respect for the individual, and those related to service to the community and toward greater social justice. Section 1.01 ("Commitment to Clients"), states that,

> "Social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients. In general, clients' interests are primary. However, social workers' responsibility to the larger society or specific legal obligations may, on limited occasions, supersede the loyalty owed clients, and clients should be so advised." (NASW, 2021)

Here we see duties to promote both clients' and society's interests. These obligations lead to implicit and explicit tensions, as it tries to accommodate both deontological and utilitarian commitments. Social workers have a responsibility to promote the interests of their client (ethical duties in deontology) and act in a manner which maintains and promotes the good of society (a version of utilitarianism). But how to resolve instances in which these obligations conflict is not made clear, other than to simply say that social workers should "…consider how the issues would be judged in a peer review process where the ethical standards of the profession would be applied" (NASW, 2021).

The above serves to show that, whatever its merits (e.g., socializing new practitioners to common professional values and principles), the Code may not be the most fruitful model to guide social work education and practice. Indeed, many of these points have been aptly anticipated by Freud and Krug (2002), among others. Given its widespread adoption in the U.S., it is not surprising that sometimes social workers behave in ways that lead to harm—even when unintended. Other social workers have pointed toward the "Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles" put forth by the *International Federation of Social Workers* (2018), al-

though this too faces many of the same shortcomings as the NASW Code (see for example Principle 9.7 on p. 8).

The Common Morality Model

The "common morality" model has recently been advocated by social work scholars (Bryan et al., 2016; Kaplan & Bryan, 2009; Reid et al., 2010) as an improvement over contemporary "principlist" approaches—including the NASW Code of Ethics (2021; see broadly McCarthy, 2003). The model was developed, in part, by bioethicist Bernard Gert (2004, 2005; Gert et al., 2006) and advocated for social work practice by Bryan (2006) and colleagues (Bryan et al., 2016). The model consists of ten "common moral rules" to guide ethical behavior. Instead of outlining what an ethical social worker *should do*, the model delineates what one ought not to do (Bryan, 2006, p. 3). This starting point positions social workers to consider the possible harms of their actions; in contrast with "positive" goals (e.g. "help people in need", "address social problems", "challenge social injustice" as found in the NASW Code of Ethics; 2021). These ten moral rules (see below) can be viewed as constraints upon personal conduct; the first five *proscribing* behaviors that will cause harms that "rational people want to avoid" (Bryan et al., 2016, p. 39) and the second five prescribing behaviors that, if not performed, are more likely to lead to the harms rational people wish to avoid.

The ten moral rules (Gert, 2004, p. 21) are:

1. Do not kill
2. Do not cause pain
3. Do not disable
4. Do not deprive of freedom
5. Do not deprive of pleasure
6. Do not deceive
7. Keep your promises
8. Do not cheat
9. Obey the law
10. Do your duty

These rules, according to Gert (2004), are not absolute and can be violated under certain circumstances. Bryan et al. (2016) describe Gert's two-step procedure for

navigating ethical dilemmas and illustrate—using examples from social work practice—when and how one or more of the ten rules may be violated.

The two-step adjudication procedure is (roughly) as follows: The social worker should, Step 1: "Identify the morally relevant features of the case" (p. 41). This involves identifying what rule—or rules—is potentially violated, and considering what the benefits and consequences are for violating the rule, including the desires, beliefs and values of the client. In Step 2, the social worker should: "Estimate the consequences *of everyone knowing* that the violation is impartially and publicly allowed or not allowed" (p. 45, emphasis added). The second step, in which the social worker estimates the consequences of their (prospective) rule-breaking can be restated as follows: A rule violation may be allowed, if it would still be allowed, "…if everyone knew that these rules could be violated in these [particular] circumstances" (Bryan, 2006, p. 14). Posed as a question, the social worker may ask themselves, "Would more harm result from *everyone knowing* (i.e., the public) that a particular action is allowed in this particular circumstance?". Together, these two steps provide a justification for decisions that violate one of the ten rules (i.e., thus making "rule-breaking" ethically permissible).

The current paper extends preliminary arguments set out in Dunleavy (2016; see also Gomory & Dunleavy, 2018). Moreover, it can be seen as a response to Bryan et al.'s (2016) published invitation to provide critical feedback on the common morality model (p. 152). I argue that one of the core features of their model, the two-step adjudication procedure, is inconsistent with its goal of transcending standard deontological and utilitarian tensions (Gert et al., 2006, p. viii). Specifically, I argue that the procedure is a form rule-consequentialism—a feature its proponents deride in their criticisms of other ethical frameworks (see Sinnot-Armstrong, 2003, p. 145). Still further, I argue that the publicity requirement undergirding the two-step adjudication procedure is too restrictive for social work practice. Some acts that might not be publicly allowable in aggregate may still be permissible at the individual level. Further, some acts may be ethically sound, even if they were to be disapproved of publicly. I consider some possible responses to my argument and discuss some alternative paths forward for research and scholarship on social work ethics.

A Case Example

Consider the following ethical dilemma which is inspired by Bryan (2006, pp. 12-15). Kelly is a foster care social worker. She is the primary case manager for an 18-month-old boy, Brendan, who is in the foster care system after the untimely passing of his parents in a car crash. Brendan has a serious underlying health condition—one that if treated promptly will result in minimal harm. If the condition is left untreated, it will develop into a lifelong, debilitating condition.

After repeated failed attempts at finding Brendan a permanent home, Kelly receives a promising application from the Smith family. This coincides with some decline in Brendan's health. Feeling pressured, Kelly grapples with an ethical dilemma: If she withholds information about Brendan's medical condition, she will increase his chances for adoption and therefore increase the likelihood that his condition is promptly and competently treated.

For the sake of the hypothetical, we will assume that (1) the Smiths will not adopt Brendan if they know he has a medical condition, (2) if they do adopt him, their health insurance plan will provide exceptional coverage for his treatment and care—care that he would not have otherwise received as a ward of the state (e.g., due to inadequate community-based medical care), and (3) The family will experience no other tangible harms—other than the slight inconvenience of supporting his medical care.

Kelly's decision, however, risks eroding trust (if discovered) in both the child welfare and adoption systems; alongside potential emotional harm and deceit experienced by the Smiths. Being fully transparent about his medical history risks sabotaging the adoption process, leaving Brendan without a family and his condition untreated and worsening.

The Code, arguably, does not help Kelly resolve the dilemma. On the one hand, a decision to withhold important medical information increases the well-being of the client, Brendan. But this conflicts with her obligations to the community and society more broadly. Such deceit would certainly be disapproved of and punished (e.g., a complaint to the state licensing board). Nevertheless, as a guide for behavior, the Code itself does not resolve the ethical tension inherent in the situation, nor does it tell Kelly what she should do.

In the common morality model, such deceit would, arguably, not be a permissible rule violation because if the behavior were publicly allowed (e.g., being done by social workers throughout the child welfare system), then much more

harm could follow—there is potential for harm to numerous prospective adoptive parents and overall loss of trust in the child welfare and adoptions systems.

Consequentialism in the Two-Step Adjudication Procedure

Consequentialism is a class of ethical theory related to, but distinct from, utilitarianism. Ethicist Brad Hooker (1994) describes one form of consequentialism, "rule-consequentialism", as follows:

> "Rule-consequentialism is the view that an act is morally permissible if and only if it is allowed by a code of rules whose general acceptance would (or could reasonably be expected to) produce the best consequences, judged impartially..." (p. 92)

From the case example above, and earlier description of the two-step adjudication procedure, we can see that common morality features that resemble rule-consequentialism—contra Gert and his followers (e.g., Bryan, 2006; Bryan et al., 2016), who strongly admonish such features; for example when present in the NASW Code of Ethics. When weighing whether or not to withhold Brendan's medical history, several rules are potentially violated (at least Rule #6, "Do not deceive", but also potentially several or all of Rules #7-10). The harms of breaking these rules, according to the common morality model, *outweighs* any supposed benefits delivered to the child in a hypothetical system in which violating those rules in that circumstance is permissible. Bryan (2006) appears to acknowledge this when she states:

> "This analysis requires the practitioner to consider if the long-term consequences do more harm than not violating rules *in particular situations*." (p. 14, emphasis added).

and

> "Not only are the harms immediately experienced by the individuals in this case much greater if they are deceived than if they are not, but also, deceit *in cases like these* promotes great harm to the public, to children needing adoption, and to the legitimacy and reputation of the social work profession." (pp. 14-15, emphasis added)

Here we see a weighing of total harms against any purported benefits, for each potential rule violation, if it were to be done generally. In other words, a judg-

ment about the rightness of a rule in terms of its total consequences (see Hooker, 2012).

That the two-step adjudication procedure has consequentialist elements is not a novel point—having been pointed out two decades ago by Sinnott-Armstrong (2003, esp. pp. 145-147) and Keulartz (2005); prior to its promotion in social work scholarship. In fact, Gert himself (2003, p. 297), though somewhat reluctantly, acknowledges this when responding to Sinnott-Armstrong's (2003) critique.

Limitations of the Common Morality Model

Common Morality is Too Restrictive to Guide Social Work Practice

These issues notwithstanding, the common morality model is (arguably) too restrictive to guide individual social work practice. I offer two reasons for this judgment. First, the publicity requirement (i.e., the public knowability and acceptance of rule violations) forces the social worker to consider and emphasize behaviors, principles, and rules *a society* should promote. But as a guide for practice, social workers are largely confronted with decisions about how they should act in a given situation (for more on this distinction see de Lazari-Radek & Singer, 2013, pp 426-437 and Sidgwick, 1874/1907, especially Chapter 1). This procedure forces a shift in the social worker's attention away the situation at hand and obscures differences that may exist between the singular and the aggregate—the act versus the rule. Second, in some instances, the common morality model and publicity requirement preclude taking individual actions which, on the whole, promote the most benefit, but would otherwise be publicly disallowed. This creates a tension within the model if we are to take seriously its consequentialist features.

Asymmetrical Harms Constrict a Social Worker's Options

Under the common morality model, a social worker's actions can be constricted in instances where there is an asymmetry between the harms produced when an action is performed at the individual versus group level. That is, an act is not necessarily wrong at the individual level, even if it would be harmful (or even disastrous) if performed widely. Borrowing (and modifying) an example from Sinnott-Armstrong (2005), consider the case of an owner of a "gas-guzzling" utility vehicle (p. 296).

The vehicle's owner enjoys taking daily drives across the open highway. They drive safely, and for the sake of the example, they do not risk harm to bystanders, other drivers, or animals. Day after day the owner drives, releasing greenhouse gases (e.g., carbon dioxide, nitrous oxide) into the atmosphere. Taking as uncontroversial that vehicle emissions release dangerous greenhouse gases, that greenhouse gases contribute to climate change, and that climate change leads to harmful and sometimes irreversible damage, it is clear to see how the act is harmful in the aggregate. If everyone, collectively, spent day after day taking leisurely drives across the open highway (otherwise posing no other risk to humans or animals), the constant and exponential increase in vehicle emissions would cause obvious ecological and societal harms. But just because such harms occur when an action is practiced widely does not therefore mean that it should be prohibited at the individual level, if such harms are indirect or otherwise negligible. This can be extended to the common morality model.

Taking for granted that the ten moral rules described by Bryan et al. (2016) should guide social work practice, their violation in the single case need not be prohibited if harms produced are sufficiently small compared to the harms produced if practiced widely. In other words, a social worker could be justified in violating a rule in cases where minor or negligible harm occurs at the individual level, given good reasons for doing so, even if widespread harm occurs in the aggregate. In the case of Kelly and Brendan, keeping all caveats in mind, there is minimal harm to be found at the individual level—and potential widespread erosion in trust in the child welfare and adoptive systems if performed widely. Taking common morality seriously means that the social worker's options for intervening may be seriously restricted by an overemphasis on the consequences for the broader society.

Consequentialism in Common Morality Implies Esoteric Morality

The second reason rests in part on the claim made above that common morality has consequentialist features. If this is indeed the case, then it leads to some paradoxical conclusions for a social work ethics rooted in common morality. Note that, while the following point may be controversial, it need not be fully endorsed by either the author or reader to serve as a valid critique of common morality.

The philosopher and economist Henry Sidgwick notes that there may be some circumstances in which the morally correct thing to do is not that which one

would promote for publicly. In his essential text The Methods of Ethics (1874/1907), he argues that:

"[I]t may be right to do and privately recommend, under certain circumstances, what it would not be right to advocate openly; it may be right to teach openly to one set of persons what it would be wrong to teach to others; it may be conceivably right to do, if it can be done with comparative secrecy, what it would be wrong to do in the face of the world; and even, if perfect secrecy can be reasonably expected, what it would be wrong to recommend by private advice or example." (p. 489)

Put differently, there may be times when the right thing is that which may not be promoted generally. This "esoteric morality" is defended and expounded upon by de Lazari-Radek and Singer (2010, 2013). In the context of social work this raises the possibility that there are instances in which the ethically moral action (from a consequentialist point of view) is not one that a social worker would endorse or otherwise promote publicly, but that should nevertheless be privately (and secretively) performed.

Let's return to the case of Brendan and Kelly to make this more concrete. What should Kelly, as the social worker, do about Brendan's prospective adoption? On consequentialist grounds, it would seem that the action which would promote the most good (i.e., achieves the greatest benefit) is withholding Brendan's medical information from the potential adopters. While offensive to our own moral and professional sensibilities, under the esoteric morality model, it may indeed be the morally permissible—and all around best—thing to do; even if it is something that we would otherwise condemn or shun if made public.

Whether or not this esoteric morality should be a part of any ethical theory social work adopts is up for debate, but any theory of social work which has consequentialist features (e.g., COE, CM) will need to respond to the force of arguments in its defense.

Paths Forward for Social Work Ethics

The criticisms and discussion above bring into question whether the common morality model is a suitable alternative to the Code and whether it serves as a fruitful model for ethical decision-making in social work practice. While I happily acknowledge that the model offers a more mature form of ethical reasoning than the Code, I suggest that it suffers from many of the same limitations it readily identifies with its competitors (i.e., its consequentialist features) and its restrict-

iveness in practice. With that said, I do not claim to have a ready substitute for either the Code or common morality model. But I do have some preliminary thoughts about how social work ethics might be pushed forward.

Seemingly there is no definitive way to fully resolve entrenched disputes between defenders of grand ethical theories (e.g., deontology vs. consequentialism), although continued refinement of these positions and underlying arguments may in fact be worthwhile. Meanwhile, more immediate progress may be achieved by focusing on single cases, which do not necessarily rely on incontrovertible principles or absolute rules. While we should still make efforts to improve the current dominant framework (in the U.S., the NASW Code of Ethics), the profession should consider investigating the prevalence, source(s), and variability of judgments and intuitions of social work practitioners and scholars when considering these cases. This could help the field better examine and understand ethical disagreements and tensions in real-world scenarios. A budding field of experimental philosophy (also known as x-phi; see section 4.1 in Pust, 2017 and section 2.3 in Knobe & Nichols, 2017 for an overview) offers something of a model in this direction—demonstrating how judgments vacillate as context and details are carefully changed.

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Parent-Youth Conflicts about Gender-Affirming Care: Ethical Challenges and Options

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Abstract

When transgender youth come out to their parents, they often encounter conflicts regarding whether, when, and how the youth may socially transition. Family conflicts may be particularly challenging when parents feel confused, troubled, or scared about their child being transgender. This article explores ethical issues that may arise when social workers are helping families to manage these conflicts and determine the best course of action. Through a detailed case study, this article illustrates how social workers can apply the ethical principles of primary commitment, respect, integrity, informed consent, assent, confidentiality, beneficence, nonmaleficence, human relationships, and social justice to guide their interactions and effectively support each individual and the family as a whole.

Introduction

Adolescence represents a crucial period of transition from childhood to adulthood, marked by many physical and psychological changes including identity formation and other developmental tasks (Coleman et al., 2022). Given that transgender youth experience a gender identity differing from their sex assigned

at birth, the process of identity development may be particularly challenging (Pullen Sansfaçonet al., 2020). Just when they are at a time of major transition, transgender youth may encounter negative attitudes and treatment from family members, peers, teachers, health professionals, and others in their social environments. Positive parental support facilitates healthy development of gender identity and expression, whereas transphobia, rejection, and disapproval from parents may lead to mental health concerns such as depression, internalized transphobia, suicide attempts, and high levels of emotional distress (Katiala et al., 2023; Magalhães et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2022). Although not all families with transgender youth require social work assistance, social workers can play a key role in helping parents and families provide transgender youth with support to promote healthy psychosocial development. This article explores ethical issues that may arise when social workers are working with transgender youth and parents who are experiencing conflict over the youth's gender identify and expression, including decisions about social transitions. In particular, this article explores how social workers may navigate the ethical principles of primary commitment, respect, integrity, informed consent, assent, confidentiality, beneficence, nonmaleficence, and human relationships when transgender youth want to pursue particular transitions with resistance from their parents.

This article will first define terms that are essential to the subsequent analysis. The second section examines healthy development for youth identifying as transgender. Subsequently, the author describes ethical principles relevant to social workers helping transgender youth and parents as they navigate conflicts over gender identity, expression, and social transitions. A case study in the fourth section illustrates how specific ethical principles and standards can guide a social worker's decision-making processes. Finally, there is a summary of key strategies for applying the aforementioned ethical principles effectively in the context of supporting transgender youth and their parents through specific challenges.

Terminology

For the purposes of this article, *youth* refers to individuals between 10 and 17 years old. The reason for selecting this age range is to limit the discussion to minors (youth under 18 years old), while also focusing on individuals who are nearing puberty, going through puberty, or have recently gone through puberty. Youth within this age range can clearly express their wishes and concerns, although

they have not reached the age of majority in terms of being able to provide in-formed consent for medical procedures. The age of consent to work with social workers and other mental health professionals varies from state-to-state and country-to-country; it also depends on the agency and type of social work assist-ance under consideration (Barsky, 2023; Noroozi et al., 2018). *Consent* refers to legally-recognized permission to provide services, which may be affected by a person's age and their mental capacity to understand service options and the po-tential benefits and risks of each option. *Assent* refers to permission for services by a person who is not legally authorized to provide consent (Barsky, 2023). For surgery with a minor, for instance, medical providers may ask parents to provide consent and the child to provide assent. Although assent may not be legally re-quired, it shows respect for the dignity and worth of the child (Cavanaugh & Hop-wood, 2016).

In general, parents are legally authorized to provide consent on behalf of their minor children. Sometimes, children are in the care of other people, includ-ing grandparents, foster parents, or other caretakers. To simplify the discussion below, the term *parents* will be used below to refer to any caretaker legally autho-rized to provide consent on behalf of their child. When a child is in the care of a person who is not legally authorized to provide consent, it may be prudent prac-tice to consult with this person for feedback and support, subject to permission of the person(s) who are legally authorized to provide consent. For instance, if a youth is in foster care, the foster parents may have legal decision-making power, but it may be helpful to consult them about the youth's wishes, concerns, and in-terests.

Gender identity is a social construct referring to an individual's internal sense of their gender as male, female, a combination of both, or neither (Bhatt et al., 2022). For the purposes of this article, *transgender* is an umbrella term for any in-dividual whose gender identity is different from the social expectations associ-ated with their sex assigned at birth (Colman et al., 2022). According to this definition, transgender includes individuals who identify as gender diverse, gen-der nonbinary, genderfluid, gender nonconforming, two-spirit, or gender queer (Bhatt et al., 2022). *Gender questioning* refers to an individual in the process of dis-covering their gender identity. The individual may be uncertain about their gen-der identity or have a tentative sense of it (PFLAG, n.d.). *Gender expression* refers to

the manners in which a person conveys their gender in relation to clothes, hairstyle, pronoun use, voice, body language, and other means (PFLAG, n.d.).

Gender-affirming care (GAC) may be defined as any form of medical, social, psychological, behavioral, voice and communication, or financial assistance or care that respects and supports a client's gender identity and expression (Bhatt et al., 2022; Coleman et al., 2022). *Gender-affirming medical care* (GAMC) refers specifically to medical treatments such as puberty blockers, hormone treatments, and surgeries supporting the client's gender identity and expression. Some states have laws prohibiting specific of forms gender-affirming medical care for minors (Human Rights Campaign, 2024). In June 2025, the U.S. Supreme Court upheld Tennessee's ban on gender-affirming care for minors (U.S. v. Skrmetti). This precedent may support similar bans in other states. While the majority held states can restrict procedures they deem risky, the dissent argued such bans violate constitutional equal rights protections.

Transitioning is a process by which a person makes changes to affirm their gender identity (PFLAG, n.d.). *Social transitioning* includes changes in hairstyle, clothing, legal documentation, voice, and other forms of gender expression. Social transitioning provides transgender youth with opportunities to live full-time or part-time in their identified gender (Hughto et al, 2022). *Medical transitioning* includes hormone blockers, hormone treatments, and surgeries (e.g., mastectomies, gonadectomies, facial feminization surgery, chest reconstruction). Although some transgender individuals desire or choose particular types of social and, or medical transitions, these choice are very individualized (Coleman et al., 2022). These choices may be affected by a range of family, cultural, religious, financial, and personal considerations. In terms of social transitions, for instance, some transgender people may choose to be open about their gender identity in some situations but not in others (e.g., at home, school, or work).

This article focuses on the roles of social workers in assisting transgender youth and family members with decisions about social transitions. Social workers often work collaboratively with physicians, nurses, psychologists, educators, attorneys, and other helping professionals. While this article focuses on social work ethics, it is important for social workers to consider the ethical responsibilities of their co-professionals when jointly serving transgender youth and their families (Barsky, 2023; Tyler et al., 2022). As the principles of relational ethics suggest, clinical decision making should consider the interpersonal context of the clients'

situation, including relationships between family members, as well as relationships between various helping professionals and the family (Pollard, 2015).

Healthy Gender Identify Development

Children start developing a sense of their gender in early childhood, with most forming a relatively stable sense of their gender identity between ages 3 and 5 (American Psychological Association [APA], 2016). Gender is not necessarily a fixed trait, as it may be subject to fluctuation. Accordingly, gender exploration and fluctuation may be facets of healthy social development (Bhatt et al., 2022) Although the majority of children identify as male or female, gender is a nonbinary construct. As noted earlier, some people identify as gender fluid, gender expansive, or gender diverse. A range of gender identities is both healthy and normative. Being transgender, gender nonbinary, or gender questioning is not a mental illness (Abreu et al, 2022b).

Family cohesion and parental support are vital for healthy development of transgender children, including their gender identity formation and overall psychosocial wellbeing (Kaltiala et al., 2023; Tyler et al., 2022). According to the minority stress model, transgender youth face elevated stress levels due to institutionalized discrimination, individual prejudice, anti-trans violence, bullying, and rejection. These experiences may lead to mental health concerns such as anxiety, depression, suicidality, substance use disorder, and post-traumatic stress disorder (Bhatt et al., 2022; Magalhães et al., 2020). Positive support for a transgender child's gender identity serves as a protective factor against these stressors. Supportive parents contribute to a positive home environment; they also foster affirming community environments by selecting and nurturing supportive extended family, school, peer groups, healthcare providers, and other community systems (Bhatt et al., 2022). Conversely, adverse parental reactions to their child's gender nonconformity can increase the risk of psychological problems (Kaltilala et al, 2023). When parents reject their child's gender identity, the child may feel compelled to conceal their true gender identity, leading to higher rates of depression, substance use disorders, and depression (Magalhães et al., 2020). Experiences of transphobia and discrimination may also lead to social concerns such as isolation, academic difficulties, and withdrawal from school.

When parents discover that their child might be transgender, they may experience a range of emotions including surprise, denial, fear, hesitation, concern,

anxiety, confusion, and anger (Abreu et al., 2022a).[1] Some parents reject their transgender child due to misunderstandings, misinformation, or fear of social stigma. Other parents may envision the worst-case scenarios about what it means for their child to be transgender (Tyler et al., 2022**).** They may experience a child's coming out about their gender as a threat to their cultural or religious belief systems (Reczek & Smith, 2021). Additionally, they might struggle with a sense of loss because they expected their child to grow up with a particular gender identity. McGuire et al. (2016) refer to this dynamic as "ambiguous loss" given the unclear nature of the loss: the transgender child is not physically leaving, but the parents experience a psychological loss. The parents may need time to adjust to the new reality and future for their child. Emotional support and education may help alleviate parental concerns (Abreu et al., 2022b; Tyler et al., 2022). Each parent may be at different stages of support or opposition regarding their child's gender identity (Abreu et al., 2022a). Examples of positive parental support for a transgender youth include demonstration of love and acceptance, advocacy for their rights in education and health care, and accepting how the entire family system is affected by having a transgender child (Abreu et al., 2022a).

Parental support for a transgender youth may or may not include support for particular forms of social or medical transitions while the youth is a minor. Some youths benefit from support for specific types of transitions which can help them express their authentic selves and reduce their levels of depression and anxiety (Magalhães et al., 2020). Decisions about transitions should consider the unique circumstances of each transgender youth and their family (Coleman et al., 2022). Most major national medical and mental health associations in the United States endorse accessibility to affirmative healthcare for transgender youth (APA, 2024; GLAAD, 2024; National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2023). Research suggests that various gender-affirmation procedures are associated with improvements in psychological and social wellbeing (Hughto et al., 2020). While research on the long-term effects of affirmative medical care is limited (Cass, 2024), hormone blockers and hormone treatments may alleviate symptoms associated with gender dysmorphia or gender incongruence, including depression and suicidality (Bhatt et al., 2022; Tordoff et al., 2022). Hormone blockers may provide transgender youth with time to explore their gender identity without the pressure from experiencing pubertal changes such as breast development, facial

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[1] Parents may also experience relief, understanding, connection, and joy.

hair growth, and development of other secondary sexual characteristics. Delaying puberty may improve mental health in the short-term (Turban et al., 2020). Hormone blockers and hormone therapies may support long-term wellbeing by allowing transgender youth to align their physical appearance more closely with their gender identity (Coleman et al., 2022). Risks of hormone blockers and hormone therapies include cardiovascular issues (including blood clots), liver disorders, weight changes, fertility, menstrual changes, mood swings, and decreases in bone density (Coleman et al., 2022). Specific risks depend on the particular form of hormone therapy, adequacy of monitoring, and individual differences. A detailed discussion of these risks goes beyond the scope of this article. Although some youth may benefit from gender-affirming surgery, such surgery is relatively rare in minors (Bhatt et al., 2022; *Doe v. Ladapo*, 2024; Coleman et al., 2022). Although some forms of gender-affirming surgery are irreversible (e.g., removal of gonads), others may be partially or fully reversible (e.g., facial feminization). Given the long-term implications of surgery, transgender youth will often transition socially while they are minors and wait until adulthood to consider surgery.

Ethical Principles

Social work's core ethical principles emphasize respect for the dignity and worth of all people, support for human relationships, and acting in a trustworthy manner (NASW, 2021). When working with transgender youth and their parents, social workers are guided by these principles to demonstrate respect for both the youth and their parents, acknowledging and valuing their wishes, beliefs, and relationships. While social workers may have particular views about whether certain types of social transitions are best for a particular youth, the principles of client self-determination and integrity suggest that social workers should refrain from imposing their views on either the transgender youth or their parents (NASW, ss.1.02, 1.06). According to the ethics of informed consent, social workers should ensure that clients are well informed about their service options, including the nature, benefits, and risks of each choice (NASW, s.1.03(a)). Social workers should not act as gatekeepers for what types of interventions are available to clients, but rather, help clients make good decisions for themselves (Cavanaugh & Hopwood, 2016). Social workers should also ensure that they do not drift outside the scope of their practice in terms of giving advice on medical procedures. For clients lacking capacity to provide consent, social workers should obtain consent

from an appropriate third party (NASW, s.1.03(c)). In the case of a minor, the appropriate third party is typically a parent or legal guardian. Although the NASW Code of Ethics does not require seeking assent from minor clients, Standard 1.03(c) stresses that "social workers should seek to ensure that the third party acts in a manner consistent with clients' wishes and interests." Ethical challenges may arise when the wishes of a transgender youth conflict from those of their parents.

Challenges and options

To examine the ethical challenges that may arise when parents and transgender youth have differing views about gender identity and social transitions, consider the following scenario:

> Alba, a 12-year-old middle school student assigned female at birth, recently gathers the courage to tell her parents, "I have something important to discuss with you and I'd really like you to listen. I am transgender... I want to start using male pronouns and a different name." Both parents react with shock and silence. After a moment, Alba's mother, Daisy, responds, "I know a lot of kids at school are changing their pronouns, but it's just a trend or a phase. You're our daughter, and you'll always be our daughter." Alba's father, Raoul adds, "This is confusing. We raised you as a girl and now you're asking us to believe that you're not a girl? I don't know what we're supposed to think or do." Distraught, Alba runs to her room, shaking and in tears. Convinced that something is wrong with Alba, Daisy and Raoul arrange to take her to meet Shari, a social worker. During their first meeting, Daisy and Raoul ask Shari to help them convince Alba that she is, and will always be, a girl. Alba firmly states, "I'm male, and I always will be male. I was so afraid to tell me parents up until now, but I can't keep hiding. I need to be true to myself and the people I love."

The following sections delve into ethical challenges arising from this situation, including options for how social workers can use ethics to guide their responses. These examples are intended to illustrate potential ethics-based approaches, not to prescribe the only ethical responses that social workers may consider.

Primary ethical commitment

Social workers owe their primary ethical commitment to the clients they serve (NASW, s.1.01). This duty is based on the principle of fidelity, the notion of being faithful and committed to one's ethical responsibilities within a professional relationship (Barsky, 2023). Although social workers also have obligations to their employers, their communities, their profession, and others, they understand that building and maintaining trust with clients means that they put their clients' interests first.

When working with Alba and her parents, one of the first questions that Shari should consider is, "Who is my client?" If her client is Alba, then her primary ethical commitment is toward Alba. With respect to the conflict over gender identity and expression, one of Shari's roles may be to advocate on Alba's behalf. If Daisy and Raoul want someone to provide counseling, support, and advocacy on their behalf, Shari might refer them to another social worker or mental health professional. If her client is the parenting couple, Daisy and Raoul, then her primary commitment is to them. In the situation described above, it is unlikely that Daisy and Raoul are the only clients given that they brought Alba to see the social worker for help. A more likely situation is that Shari's client is the entire family and her primary ethical commitment is to the family as a whole. Let's continue the analysis based on the premise that the family is the client.

Respect for all family members

When working with families, social workers should avoid taking sides or become triangulated in the family's internal conflict (Sudland, 2019). When family members have different wishes and interests, social workers may experience split loyalties. From an ethical perspective, the duty to respect everyone and their right to self-determination means that social workers should strive toward mutually acceptable treatment goals, not taking sides or pressuring certain family members to act in a particular manner. From a clinical perspective, social workers should avoid taking sides to maintain trust with the whole family (van der Meiden et al., 2016). If Shari simply sided with Alba and told the parents that they should allow Alba to socially transition, then they may terminate services, sensing that Shari is disregarding their views and wishes. Conversely, if Shari sides with the parents, Alba may lose trust in Shari.

So, if Shari is not supposed to take sides and the family has a significant

conflict over whether to support Alba's gender identity and expression, then what is Shari to do? A good place to start is engagement—the process of getting to know each family member and building trust. Shari can demonstrate empathy, respect, and genuineness with each family member without taking sides (Hepworth et al., 2023). The notion of *multidirected partiality* in family therapy suggests that the therapist can demonstrate empathy to one family member after another, demonstrating caring and concern for each person in turn, while maintaining a sense of reliability and confidence with the whole family (van der Meiden et al., 2017).

As Shari engages the whole family, she encourages everyone to elaborate on their concerns by showing that she is open, understanding, and respectful of each of their perspectives. "Thank you all for sharing your concerns. Let me ensure that I'm understanding everyone correctly. Daisy and Raoul, I understand that Alba recently came out to you about her gender identity. She is asking for your compassion and support. I also understand that this news was surprising to you. You see Alba as your daughter. You love Alba as you've always known her. You don't want Alba to change. And Alba, you are expressing your need to be recognized as male and to live authentically, as your true self. Is that a fair summary or have I missed anything?"

Assume that Daisy and Raoul agree with your summary and then go back to their original question. "So, what can you do to convince Alba that she is a girl and always will be a girl?" Shari continues to show empathy and respect, while also being honest with them about her role. "I understand that you hope that I can convince Alba that she is a girl. However, my role as a social worker is to work with all of you, to find out what's going on, to assess your concerns, and to help the whole family determine the best next steps. It may take several individual and family sessions to gain a better understanding of each of you and the family as a whole. I have experience with similar family situations, so I know how troubling and confusing it can be for parents when their child discloses that they are transgender. While I can offer various treatment options, we are early in the helping process. We need to gather more information before determining the best options for everyone." Shari describes what it means to conduct a comprehensive psychosocial assessment, including an assessment of Alba's gender identity, development, and desires, as well as the family's relationships, strengths, and concerns (Taylor et al., 2024). Shari also discusses setting ground rules for respectful

dialogue, helping the family establish guidelines such as listening to one another for the purpose of understanding, not interrupting, acknowledging valid differences of opinion, and using polite language.

Daisy, Raoul, and Alba may each benefit from the social worker's support, so even though they are in the early stages of engagement and assessment, it may be helpful for Shari to meet individually with each of them. Meeting Daisy and Raoul without Alba allows them to discuss personal feelings that they may find too hard to express in front of Alba (Tyler et al., 2022). Likewise, Alba may be able to discuss issues with Shari that she may not be ready to discuss with her parents. Separate meetings allow Shari to give individualized support while minimizing the risk of escalating the family conflict or being perceived as biased when providing empathy and help to each family member. Shari might provide Alba with resources such as self-help groups or other sources of support. If Daisy and Raoul discontinue services, at least Alba will know where she can access other assistance. Shari might provide Daisy and Raoul with information about how parents can support transgender or gender-questioning youths; however, it may be too early to offer such information. In addition, Daisy and Raoul may be in different places regarding reactions to Alba's disclosure (Olson et al., 2020). Daisy seems to reject the notion of transgender altogether, whereas Raoul said he is confused. He might be more open to learning about gender identity and expression. In addition to offering individual forms of support, separate meetings also allow Shari to assess for urgent concerns such as suicidal ideation, high levels of distress, bullying, and child abuse or neglect.

Honesty and integrity

Daisy and Raoul persist in questioning Shari about her views on gender identity and expression, particularly asking if she can convince Alba that she is a girl. They inquire about Shari's opinion on conversion therapy, an intervention for transgender children that they discovered online. Although Shari is not supposed to impose her beliefs on clients, her ethical commitment to integrity instructs her to be honest (Barsky, 2023; NASW, 2021). Shari informs Raoul and Daisy, "The stated purpose of conversion therapy for transgender youths is to change their gender identity from transgender to cisgender—essentially, to convert Alba to identify as a cisgender girl. My professional association and the associations of other mental health professions have found that conversion therapy is not only in-

effective, but also harmful to the youth's mental health. Research indicates conversion therapy increases risks such as depression, anxiety and suicidal thoughts. Research also suggests that transgender youth will benefit more from parental support and acceptance, rather than attempts to change their gender identity. In some states, licensed clinical social workers can be disciplined for recommending or providing conversion therapy." Shari is open and honest about her knowledge and views of conversion therapy, including her sources of information.

Self-determination

Daisy, visibly upset, accuses Shari of siding with Alba. Shari responds, "My role is to help the entire family. I am sharing what I know from the research and from working with families facing similar concerns. Ultimately, you as a family will decide what is best for you. I respect your role as the experts in your own lives" (Cavanaugh & Hopwood, 2016). Shari reminds herself to start where each of her clients are. Applying the Transtheoretical Model of Change (Rollnick et al., 2022), Shari believes that Daisy is in the precontemplation stage while Raoul is in the contemplation stage in terms of the possibility of making changes to support Alba's gender identity and expression. To help Daisy gain insight into Alba's situation, she asks Daisy a scaling question: "On a scale of 1 to 10, how distressed would you say that Alba has been since she first discussed her gender with you?" Daisy responds, "Probably an 8 or a 9." This response opens a dialogue about the urgency of addressing Alba's high levels of distress. Shari does not expect her clients to commit to specific action at this stage. She respects their right to self-determination and honors the family's need for more time to make specific decisions.

Informed consent

Raoul expresses that he might be able to accept that Alba is transgender if he were certain that it is truly her identity. He worries that it might just be a phase. "What if we help Alba make these transitions and she gets bullied at school—or worse! What if, after everything, she decides she's not transgender after all? I don't want her to go through that." Shari reassures Raoul that providing Alba with acceptance and support does not mean that they have committed to any specific social transitions. She explains that they can provide Alba with support even if they are not entirely sure whether she is transgender or her gender identity might evolve over time. "Let's imagine that Alba said she was nervous about an

upcoming test at school and fears she might fail. Would you question whether she was nervous, or would you provide her with support? I'm not asking what kind of support that might be, just whether your uncertainty about her situation might stop you from providing some type of support." Raoul concedes that he would, of course, support Alba. He loves her unconditionally. Still, he is unsure about what "providing support" would actually involve. Shari reassures Raoul about his right to informed consent. "I'm not asking you to agree to any specific course of action to support Alba—It's too early for that. Before making any decisions, you need to know about all the available options, including the potential benefits and risks of each. Only then will you and the family be in a position to provide truly informed consent." Shari provides Raoul and Daisy with a pamphlet with guidance on how to support a transgender or gender-questioning child. Daisy is intrigued by a particular sentence in the pamphlet explaining that parents should neither push their child to social transition nor coerce them not to transition (Olson et al., 2020).

Confidentiality

In a private meeting with Shari, Alba confides that she thinks she's transgender, but isn't 100% certain. Shari assures Alba that it is certainly okay to be unsure and that understanding one's gender identity can take time. Alba admits that she is afraid to discuss her uncertainty with her parents, as they are already questioning the authenticity of her gender identity. Alba asks Shari not to tell her parents about her uncertainty. Shari agrees to keep her uncertainty confidential for now, but mentions that she will consult a trusted professional colleague to ensure that they are taking the best approach with the family. During consultation, Shari's consultant reviews the family's informed consent form, which outlines that information shared during individual meetings will be kept confidential unless the individual consents to share the information or if disclosure is necessary to prevent a serious risk of harm (e.g., child abuse or suicide). They discuss how disclosure may help the family gain a better understanding of Alba's situation and how Raoul and Daisy may become upset if they later discover that Shari knew Alba was uncertain about her gender. After weighing these factors, they decide Shari should prioritize Alba's confidentiality as everyone had agreed to confidentiality for individual meetings. Shari lets Alba know that it may be helpful to be open about her uncertainty with her parents, but that she understands and respects

Alba's decision to keep this information private for now. With Alba's permission, Shari conducts a joint educational session with the whole family, explaining that gender identity development is an ongoing process in which a youth may have questions about their gender identity and that their identity may fluctuate over time. While Alba neither confirms nor denies that this description applies to her, she appreciates Shari for providing this information to her parents in a non-threatening manner.

Beneficence and nonmaleficence

As summer approaches, Alba expresses her desire to begin transitioning during the summer so she can start the next academic year at a new school that would be more supportive of her gender identity. Shari helps Alba present this plan to her parents, encouraging them to listen with an open heart. She suggests discussing the pros and cons of various options before making any decisions. The process of weighing the benefits and risks of different choices fits with the principles of beneficence (do good) and nonmaleficence (do not harm).

As the family starts listing the pros and cons of different options, they disagree on many points. Shari shows respect for all their views, listing their hopes and concerns as they review each option. She offers them educational readings and engages them in discussions about what learned from the support groups they attended. When they discuss the option of "no changes, everything remains the same," it becomes apparent that Alba's distress levels might intensify, potentially affecting her ability to attend school and socialize with peers. When discussing the option of beginning Alba's transition over the summer, Raoul expresses deep concerns about the potential for teasing and harassment. This leads to a discussion of a staged approach, identifying safer spaces where Alba can express her authentic gender identity. They agree to start by coming out to particular friends and family, and postpone decisions about school. Shari describes research findings that indicate how disclosing one's transgender identity and experience in a supportive environment is linked to improved psychological wellbeing (Hughto et al, 2022). Daisy still questions the validity of Alba's transgender identity, so she views the next few weeks as a trial period. Daisy and Raoul say they will try to use he/him/his pronouns for Alba, noting that won't be easy for them. In accordance with this shift, the following discussion also uses he/him/his pronouns for Alba.

Alba voices concerns that his breasts are starting to develop, causing additional distress. Daisy and Raoul react with shock, thinking that Alba may be thinking of surgery. Shari introduces the family to the WPATH Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People, SOC 8 (Coleman et al., 2022), which provides evidence-based guidance on providing health care and support (Taylor et al, 2024). Shari discusses options such as hormone blockers, hormone treatments, and surgery, noting that hormone treatments and surgery are not generally appropriate before a youth has begun the process of social transitioning. Shari notes that Alba may be at an age when hormone blockers could help him by delaying pubertal development. Shari clarifies that as a social worker she is not authorized to prescribe hormone blockers or offer medical advice. She offers a referral to a pediatric endocrinologist if they want further information or an initial assessment. Daisy and Raoul say that they are not ready to even think about hormone blockers at this stage. Shari explains that if they have questions about medical options in the future, she can refer them to a physician with specialized expertise in helping transgender individuals.

Consent and assent

If Alba wants to see an endocrinologist to obtain hormone blockers, his assent alone is insufficient; as a minor, he will need parental consent. Shari introduces the option of meeting with an endocrinologist, understanding that Daisy and Raoul are not yet prepared to entertain the idea. Alba then asks about other options, such as a chest binder to flatten his breasts (Taylor et al, 2024). Initially, Daisy vetoes this idea, citing safety concerns. Shari acknowledges the risks, including health issues such as breathing problems and broken ribs. She also informs them about safety measures that can reduce risks of harm.

Initially Daisy does not want to talk about safety measures because she forbids Alba from binding his breasts. Alba says he can do what he wants with his body because it's his body. Technically, he may not need parental consent to start using a chest binder. He could obtain a binder and use it without his parents' knowledge. Shari explains how it could be more constructive to discuss safe options rather than avoid any family discussion about binders. As part of this discussion, they explore alternatives such as sports bras and layered clothing. Shari encourages them to ask other parents and youth in their respective support groups

about ways that they have navigated these issues, noting that different options may be suitable for different people.

Human relationships

Over time, the conflicts between Alba and his parents fluctuate, sometimes calming down and sometimes escalating. While Alba is pleased that his parents have acknowledged his gender identity, they still refuse to use his preferred name, August. They are also not allowing Alba to socially transition at a new school. Raoul expresses fear that if Alba is allowed to socially transition now, he'll soon be requesting hormones and surgery. Shari notes that while some youth who socially transition will decide to undertake medical transitions later, this is not always the case (Hughto et al, 2022; Taylor et al, 2024). Each decision is separate and should be made at the right time and with complete information (Coleman et al., 2022).

Feeling frustrated, Alba says that maybe it would be best for him to run away and live on the streets, or call child protection services to report Daisy and Raoul for emotional abuse. Daisy says, "Maybe it is time for you to find a new place to stay." Shari intervenes, engaging the family in a discussion of what might happen if this conflict escalates and Alba leaves home. She notes that many transgender youth end up in foster care or living on the streets. She cites research on how conflicts over gender identity and expression may lead to parent-child estrangement, homelessness, and poverty (Reczek & Smith, 2021). She also describes research emphasizing the value of positive family relationships: transgender youth with parental support are less likely to develop depression, substance abuse problems, and school challenges (Kaltiala et al., 2023; Magalhães et al., 2020). Alba presses Shari about whether the family should support his full social transition at school. Shari responds that this is a family decision; however, as a social worker, she does recognize the importance of family relationships and encourages everyone to do what they can to preserve these bonds. Raoul and Daisy say that they do not want Alba to run away and agree to at least discuss the next steps in his social transition. There may be no quick and easy fixes for families like Alba and his parents; however, social workers can help them maintain good relationships even when they are experiencing significant conflict.

Social justice

While this article focuses on conflicts within particular families, it is essential to situate these conflicts within a broader societal context. Laws, social policies, and community attitudes significantly shape the experiences of transgender youth and their families. When transgender youth are raised in environments that are supportive of their gender identities and expressions, it is much easier for them and their families to manage the challenges of social transitions. Conversely, exposure to transphobic and discriminatory laws, social policies, and attitudes correlates with increased rates of depression, anxiety, and risks of suicide among transgender youth (Abreu et al., 2022b; Barsky, 2024).

Since 2023, 25 U.S. states have proposed or enacted laws that ban access to gender-affirming medical care for minors (Human Rights Campaign, 2024). These bans include prohibitions against medically approved hormone blockers, hormone replacement therapies, and gender-affirming surgery. These laws have been enacted despite extensive research supporting the efficacy of GAMC in reducing gender incongruence and promoting positive psychosocial wellbeing (Coleman et al., 2022). False and demeaning political rhetoric and social media discourse have accompanied these bans, further stigmatizing transgender youth and their families (Abreu et al., 2022b). As proponents of social justice (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018), social workers have a critical role in challenging these injustices. This includes countering misinformation, raising public awareness, and advocating for policies that uphold the rights of transgender youth. These fundamental rights include being treated with dignity and respect, living free from harassment and discrimination, and the open access to gender-affirming psychological, social, and medical care. Social workers must champion these rights to ensure that transgender youth and their families receive the dignity, support, and protection they deserve.

Conclusion

When parents and transgender youth face conflicts related to gender identity, expression, and social transitions, there is no "one-size-fits-all" solution for how social workers should help them ethically navigate these issues. By applying the principles of respect and integrity, social workers can initially demonstrate empathy, unconditional positive regard, and genuineness to develop rapport with the whole family, without taking sides or imposing their views on what the family

should do. Employing the principles of informed consent and human relationships, social workers may educate family members about the research on gender identity, expression, and transitions, including the importance of family support and the critical roles that parents can play in helping their children manage these challenging decisions and situations.

When facilitating informed consent for gender-affirming care, social workers should be able to help transgender youth and their parents understand the potential benefits and risks associated with various options, grounded in current, reliable research (Coleman et al., 2022). Social workers also need to understand that family decision making may be affected by religious and cultural beliefs, as well as the parents' stage of acceptance regarding their child's gender identity, gender expression, and thoughts about social transitioning. Social workers may need to provide families with time and supportive environments to process their concerns before they can make appropriate decisions. Numerous sources of information and support are available for both social workers and clients. Decisions about social transitions depend very much on individual and family circumstances. Accordingly, it may be beneficial to reach out to transgender support groups, peer mentors, gender-affirming health and mental health professionals, and clinical supervisors or consultants to gather information, explore options, and obtain support. For transgender youth and their parents dealing with concerns about gender identity and social transitions, social support may be key to their psychosocial wellbeing (Magalhães et al., 2020; Tyler et al., 2022). For social workers, accessing professional consultation and peer support may be essential to delivering effective, evidence-based services.

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Are We Ever Completely Off Duty? Faculty Perspectives on the Private-Life Rights and Behaviors of Social Workers

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Abstract

This article presents findings from a study designed to explore the perceptions of social work faculty about out of work behavior (OWB) and other activities within the private-life realm. A focus is placed on the intersection between OWB and social work education. Major research questions asked respondents to reflect on (1) whether private-life behaviors change as a result of social work education; (2) the extent to which social workers are expected (and students should be taught) to maintain high moral standards in their private lives. Implications of study findings are discussed, highlighting the potential for schools of social work to implement best educational practices that relate to personal life responsibilities. An internet-based survey was used to reach a broad spectrum of respondents. No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Introduction

Social work is commonly acknowledged as a profession grounded in core values and ethical principles (Barsky, 2019; Noble & King, 1981; Osmo & Landau, 2003; Reamer, 2018; Sweifach, 2011). These principles are outlined in the International Federation of Social Workers [IFSW] Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018), emphasizing the unique commitment of the social work profession to social justice, social change, and the promotion of general welfare. Social workers are expected to engage in social and political action, combat exploitation and discrimination, and uphold a host of core values that reflect a deep concern for individuals and society (Reamer, 2018). Scholars contend that social work is one of the most value-based professions, with practitioners adhering to core values due to their concern for humanity (Chechak, 2015; Reamer, 2018). A mindset predisposed toward creating a better world necessitates internal desire, personal commitment, and accountability. For many, this predilection begins long before social work training. It makes sense that many social workers would likely act on these values even if they had not pursued a career in social work.

Through their codes of ethics and other regulations, professions often articulate expectations that extend to the private-life behaviors of their members, expecting that certain values and behaviors are maintained. The concept of 'outside-work behavior' (OWB) describes actions taken by employees outside their professional roles that include both private and public behaviors (Althoff, 2000). This perspective is seen in virtue ethics, which suggests that moral character ought to remain consistent across both professional and personal domains of practice (Cornwell & Higgins, 2019). The practical rationale for this perspective is clear; when professionals act in ways that are anathema to the values of the profession, its integrity becomes suspect.

The topic of OWB is commonplace in the news. The private-life behaviors of musicians, actors, politicians, and other public figures are frequently on display and often judged. In today's cancel-culture world, such public scrutiny can have detrimental fallout, serving as a reminder that private-life behavior is something to consider because the general public is watching. Beyond public figures, the private-life behaviors of professionals are also highlighted by the media: for example, teachers involved in indiscretions with students or viral videos showing police officers engaged in racist behavior. These types of activities attract considerable public attention.

This study explores the perspectives of social work faculty members regarding OWB, examining the extent to which faculty members believe that social workers ought to be guided by professional standards in their personal lives. A specific focus is placed on how these views are considered within the context of social work education.

Clarification of terms

In the literature, several terms are used to describe the behavior of employees outside of working hours, such as 'off-duty behavior,' 'private-time behavior,' and 'non-working hours behavior.' OWB, however, appears to be the scientific term most often used. Moral behavior is defined as a code of conduct that corresponds with society's expectations of good character in professionals and as a representation of core values and norms, such as virtue, honesty, respect, and integrity, which help maintain public trust. A moral exemplar is an individual whose behavior consistently reflects moral excellence, serving as a behavioral role model for others and the broader community (Morgenroth et al., 2015; Yin & Li, 2023).

Background

Some professions more than others, articulate clear expectations regarding OWB, specifying that members are to act in their private lives with integrity, honesty, and trustworthiness (see, for example, General Osteopathic Council [GOsC], 2019; International Association of Chiefs of Police [IACP], 2008; National Association of School Psychologists [NASP], 2020). Personal behavior and conduct are expected to be principled, as poor private-life behavior is seen as potentially eroding public trust and jeopardizing the dignity of the profession (Garner & O'Sullivan, 2020; Halabuza, 2014).

Although some commentators advocate for personal autonomy and argue against imposing standards on private behavior (Clark, 2006; Lippke, 1989; Olivier, 2006), this does not tend to be a majority view. Many professional organizations require that their members uphold high standards of conduct both in and outside of the workplace. These standards include honesty, legality, and respect for others (GOsC, 2019; IACP, 2008; NASP, 2020). The National Association of School Psychologists (NASP, 2020, p. 40), for example, articulates that their members should maintain a high standard of good character and conduct in their private lives because they serve as role models for children. The General Osteopathic Council (GOsC, 2019) in the United Kingdom stipulates that members

are to "uphold the reputation of the profession at all times through [one's] conduct in and out of the workplace" (p. 19). The International Law Enforcement Code of Ethics (IACP, 2008) mandates that all sworn police officers keep their "private life unsullied as an example to all." In both professional and personal life, "be honest in thought and deed" and "be exemplary in obeying the laws of the land" (p. 111).

Expectations of good private-life moral conduct extend to social work as well, with practitioners expected to act according to these standards in both their professional and personal lives (Adusumalli & Jainer, 2020; Banks, 2016; Levy, 1974; Miller, 2022). IFSW's Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018) emphasizes that ethical responsibilities extend beyond the workplace, encouraging social workers to advocate for human rights and social justice, celebrate diversity, work toward equal access to resources, and promote a culture of peace and nonviolence. Although the current United States NASW Code of Ethics (2017/2021) avoids specificity about private-life conduct, the 1979 iteration of the Code of Ethics included the principle of propriety, specifying that "the social worker should maintain high standards of personal conduct in the capacity or identity of social worker" (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], Code of Ethics, 1979). Other social work codes, such as those from the British Association of Social Workers (2002) and the Scottish Social Services Council (2003), specifically state that social workers must uphold standards of conduct both inside and outside work.

Social work education plays a critical role in shaping the professional identity of students (Liu et al., 2022; Wiles, 2013). Commentators suggest that students are engaged in a process of cultivating a sense of 'being' a social worker in order to 'become' one (Wiles, 2013). When one 'becomes' a social worker, this extends into the private-life realm. Students become inculcated into this process early on in both classroom and practicum learning, with expectations to act with integrity and professionalism. MSW and BSW school catalogs emphasize the many sides of personal and professional comportment, such as punctuality, dependability, and commitment to diversity. Many schools also note a responsibility to adhere to high standards of ethical behavior in both personal interactions and online activity, avoid the use of illegal substances, and refrain from becoming romantically involved with clients. These school/professional expectations are very much connected to the personal realm, endeavoring to teach students that professional practice and personal behavior are linked. An implicit message is conveyed about

the importance of upholding certain personal values and behaviors so as not to cast aspersions on the profession or school. This socialization process is all part of 'becoming.' Wiles (2013) suggested that the ways in which students think and behave in their personal lives are significantly influenced by their social work education. 'Becoming' a social worker involves the internalization of a unique 'moral core' of the profession (Bisman, 2004; Butler-Warke & Bolger, 2021; McBeath & Webb, 2002), which calls for consistency between private-life behaviors and professional principles (Knapp & Vandecreek, 2006).

For social workers, whom some view as defenders of social morality (Glasser, 1984), consistency in representing virtuous character traits in both personal and professional life is crucial. Although it is clear that the profession places a substantive emphasis on ethical behavior, which does extend into private life, questions remain about whether social workers themselves agree with these expectations.

Literature

Research on OWB spans several disciplines, frequently addressing the topic of private-life misconduct as it relates to professional reputation and moral integrity. Scholars have produced a wide range of work in disciplines such as law, medicine, and education, emphasizing the moral obligations of professionals beyond their work environment (Althoff, 2000; Gagnon, 2015; Kaptein, 2019; Lister, 2022; Meadows, 1993; Ross et al., 2013; Sawicki, 2009). Substance use, domestic violence, and discriminatory conduct are examples of behaviors that do not go unnoticed, particularly within the context of 'cancel culture,' which has emerged as a societal process for holding individuals accountable for perceived transgressions. In practice, being 'canceled' may involve public shaming or ostracizing, loss of employment, or reputational damage following controversial behavior or perceived moral/ethical transgressions. (Norris, 2021). The behaviors that result in individuals being 'canceled' have been studied theoretically and empirically in the literature. For instance, the private lives of teachers (DiCenso, 2005; Maxwell, 2018), police (Abel, 2022; Lamboo, 2010), clergy (Hargrove, 2023), healthcare professionals (Thompson et al., 2008; Marshal et al., 2021), educators (Griffin & Lake, 2012; Zinskie & Griffin, 2023), and law professionals (Menkel-Meadow, 2001; Rhode & Woolley, 2011), have all been the subject of scholarly work on the moral

realm of OWB, emphasizing the importance of professionals being mindful of their private-life behavior.

In one of the most comprehensive recent works on OWB, Kaptein (2019) offers a thorough discussion and overview of OWB, including its many definitions and iterations, interdisciplinary applications, and how scholars interpret and understand the concept today. Kaptein (2019) also highlights the range of interdisciplinary research around OWB, including its application in professional sports, healthcare, law enforcement, politics, and other sectors.

A growing area of OWB research focuses on online activity, particularly social media, where private posts can quickly become public and impact professional standing (Byrne, 2019; Cook & Kuhn, 2020; Drude & Messer-Engel, 2020; Marshal et al., 2021; Mauldin, 2024; Sarmurzin, et al., 2025). A significant proportion of recent literature in this area pertains to the perceptions of students and the concept of e-professionalism, exploring the issues and risks associated with inadequate personal oversight of social media and other online activities (Hussain et al., 2021; Kamarudin et al., 2022; Nasri et al., 2023). Much of this literature concludes that, while individuals have a right to privacy, they must also be mindful that their behavior is subject to public scrutiny and that poor private-life judgment can lead to significant professional consequences.

It is clear from much of the literature that principles guiding OWB, whether professional or organizational, are very subjective, though broad guidelines around areas such as confidentiality and integrity are generally consistent across disciplines. More specific guidelines, however, are quite varied; for example, regarding private-life social media use, some agencies might require that employees *avoid posting content that could be seen as discriminatory, offensive, or unprofessional*. In general, there is some expectation by both agencies and professional regulatory bodies that professionals will uphold good character in their private lives, which includes behavior that promotes moral norms of virtue and integrity.

A significant debate within the recent literature centers on whether employers/regulatory bodies have the right to regulate employee behavior outside of working hours and, if so, to what extent (Kaptein, 2019; Lister, 2022; Sperdin & Situm, 2024). Some scholars argue that private-life misconduct should have professional repercussions only when directly related to specific work-related situations. Some in the same camp argue that protecting private life is a "considerable and humane public good" (Whittle & Cooper, 2009, p. 98), advocating for allow-

ing professionals some moral slack in their private lives (Menkel-Meadow, 2001). Others advocate "the good of accountability" (Allen, 2003, p. 1387) in order to maintain public trust (Bryan-Brown & Dracup, 2003; Milton, 2014; Staud & Kearney, 2019). What stands out in the literature is the lack of consensus over whether individuals should face termination for off-duty misconduct (Drouin et al., 2015) and the need for policy and guidance surrounding private-life conduct (Maxwell, 2018).

Despite the growing body of literature examining OWB in professions such as law, medicine, and education, the social work literature has primarily focused on ethical misconduct related to direct practice, such as boundary issues, dual relationships, and confidentiality (Boland-Prom et al., 2015; Congress, 2001; Pugh, 2007; Reamer, 2003, 2013; 2018; 2023). While these behaviors sometimes occur outside of working hours, they are directly tied to professional duties. The scholarship in this area, which is relatively extensive, largely focuses on malpractice claims and ethics complaints against social workers (see, for example, Barsky et al., 2021; Boland-Prom et al., 2015; Reamer, 1995; Strom-Gottfried, 2003; 2014). Conversely, aside from a few studies on private-life social media use (see, for example, Duncan-Daston et al., 2013; Fang et al., 2014; Mukherjee & Clark, 2012), and Reamer's (2017; 2019) work on evolving ethical standards, which does speak to the need for caution in personal online activity, off-duty behavior unrelated to direct-practice remains underexamined in the social work literature.

Some research in the social work literature highlights the debate over regulatory oversight of private life, particularly in the United Kingdom, following the development of the General Social Care Council (2002), which developed a code of conduct to regulate and discipline social workers (see for example, Clark, 2006; Furness, 2015; McLaughlin, 2007; Wiles, 2013). Studies have raised concerns about regulatory intrusion into private life, focusing on moral character and suitability for the profession. Wiles (2013), for example, examines social work students' perceptions of private-life behavior, suggesting that while social workers certainly have a right to a private life, there is also a responsibility to ensure that off-duty behavior adheres to professional norms. McLaughlin (2007), questions whether the state has the right to regulate the private-life conduct of social workers, and Furness (2015) examines the ethical implications of such oversight.

The social work literature also explores private life as it relates to the character of students' and suitability for the profession (Currer, 2009; Holmström, 2014;

Tam & Coleman, 2009). Banks (2016) writes about the character trait of integrity, suggesting, like other commentators (Musschenga, 2002; Oakley & Cocking, 2001), that social workers possess "a disposition to act with integrity in the variety of situations encountered in their professional lives, and according to many theorists and most codes of ethics, also in their personal lives" (p. 11).

An expansion of social work research in these and other areas of private-life conduct could provide a clearer understanding of the responsibilities that social workers have regarding private-life behavior, such as providing more explicit professional guidelines for outside-work conduct, clarifying the extent to which private-life conduct ought to be regulated, defining what constitutes moral turpitude, and elucidating the issues and risks associated with poor private-life conduct.

Methodology

Research Design and Objectives

This study employed a descriptive, exploratory design to investigate the following:

1. The views held by social work faculty regarding the private-life behavior of social workers.
2. The extent to which private-life behaviors become modified as a result of social work education.
3. The extent to which social workers and social work students should be expected to maintain high moral standards in their private lives.

Participants and Sampling Procedure

A purposive, non-random sampling approach was used to select 15 universities in the United States, offering MSW and BSW programs. The selection of schools was based on a review of accredited institutions listed by the Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. The schools were chosen from four distinct geographic regions (Northeast, South, Midwest, and West) to represent a mix of large and small schools, as well as public and private universities. This purposive approach was used to maximize variability in institutional and faculty contexts, enhancing the generalizability of findings. Faculty members from the selected universities were contacted via email, with contact information obtained from publicly available faculty directories on university websites. The email invitation provided

information detailing the purpose of the study, the voluntary nature of participation, and the confidentiality of their responses.

A total of 83 survey responses were initially collected. However, 14 responses were excluded from the analysis due to incomplete data or non-responsiveness to key survey items, reducing the final usable sample to 69 faculty members. The exclusion of these responses did not significantly affect the demographic composition of the final sample, but it is important to note that the analyses were conducted with a sample size of 69, which limits generalizability.

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument featured questions on OWB perceptions, practices, behaviors, and sociodemographic factors. The survey included questions about both personal beliefs regarding OWB and whether OWB-oriented content ought to be integrated into classroom/practicum learning. Also asked were questions about whether private-life behavior ought to be externally monitored in some way (Appendix 1 includes a sample of survey questions). Alongside multiple-choice questions (with response options of 'to a great extent,' 'to a moderate extent,' 'to a small extent,' 'not at all,' and 'unsure,') it included open-ended questions that allowed respondents to elaborate on answers to Likert scale items. The 53-item survey was pilot-tested with a small, representative sample of social work faculty to assess face validity and reliability. Based on feedback from the pilot test, minor revisions were made to improve clarity and ensure that all items adequately captured the constructs under study. Reliability analysis indicated that the instrument demonstrated acceptable internal consistency, yielding a Cronbach's alpha of .87.

Collection Procedure & Informed Consent

Data were collected through an online survey administered to social work faculty from July 1st through August 31st, 2024. A reminder email was sent to participants one week and again three weeks after the initial invitation and the survey closed on September 30th, 2024. Before beginning the survey, participants were informed of the study's purpose, confidentiality measures, and their right to withdraw at any time without consequence. Informed consent was obtained from all participants prior to data collection, and all procedures adhered to ethical guidelines. Data were collected and stored in a secure, password-protected

database to maintain confidentiality. Responses were anonymized prior to analysis to ensure that no personal identifiers were included in the dataset.

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS version 29.0 to examine the relationships between various variables and test the study's underlying assumptions. Descriptive statistics were first computed to summarize the characteristics of the sample. Specifically, means, standard deviations, frequencies, and percentages were calculated for categorical variables to provide a general overview of the data. Continuous variables were examined for distributional properties, and where applicable, t-tests and Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) were used to assess differences across groups.

Pearson product-moment correlation coefficients were computed to explore relationships between continuous variables. This provided insight into the strength and directionality of associations between key variables and provided a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness between personal views about OWB, professional commitments, and opinions regarding the teaching of OWB principles to students.

In order to ensure the validity of findings, assumptions of normality and homogeneity of variances were tested prior to conducting parametric tests, and where necessary, non-parametric alternatives were considered. All statistical tests were conducted at a significance level of $p \leq .05$ to determine whether observed patterns were statistically significant.

Demographic Characteristics of the Sample

The final sample comprised 69 full-time social work faculty members. Faculty teaching responsibilities were diverse: (45.3%) of respondents exclusively taught Master of Social Work (MSW) courses, with the remaining respondents instructing in a variety of social work courses, including Bachelor of Social Work (BSW), MSW, Doctor of Philosophy (PhD), and Doctor of Social Work (DSW). Respondents had a wide range of teaching experience, with the number of years of teaching experience spanning from 1 to 54 years (M=14.52 years), which indicates a moderate to highly experienced group of faculty.

Political orientation was diverse, reflecting a range of perspectives. Specifically, 1.6% of respondents identified as very conservative, while 6.2% identified as conservative. A larger portion of the sample, 17.2%, identified as moderate.

The majority identified as liberal (37.5%), and very liberal (31.2%), showing a strong inclination toward liberal ideologies within the group. This ratio is consistent with other data (see, for example, Stoeffler et al., 2021) on the social work labor force, reflecting a strong leaning toward liberal and progressive ideologies. A small proportion (6.2%) of respondents were unsure or preferred not to answer regarding their political orientation.

Geographic Location

Respondents, all from the United States, provided their state of residence, which was coded into the 10 Federal regions used for census purposes. These regions were then recoded into four broader geographic areas: Northeast, South, Midwest, and West. This categorization allowed for an examination of potential regional differences in attitudes toward OWB and social work education. While specific regional distributions are provided in Table 1, the general geographic breakdown reflects the diversity of the sample in terms of location. The inclusion of faculty from various regions helped to promote a more representative sample rather than being biased by the views of faculty from a particular region.

Table 1

Recoded Region	Sample Representation
Region 1 = Northeast	64.52 % (n=40)
Region 2 = Midwest	19.35 % (n=12)
Region 3 = South	8.06 % (n=5)
Region 4 = West	8.06 % (n=5)

Views about the OWB of social workers

A majority, 62.5% (n=40), believe that social workers should be held to higher moral standards compared to other professionals. Additionally, 68.7 % (n=44) believe that social workers should serve as moral exemplars for society. With regard to views about societal perceptions, almost three-quarters (73.4 %, n=47) of respondents believe that the general public expects social workers to maintain elevated private-life conduct. A substantial proportion (68.7 %, n=44) suggests that participating in private-life behaviors, such as making offensive racial jokes or

displaying prejudiced attitudes, can potentially have a negative impact on society's view of the profession. Opinions were more mixed about whether a social worker's moral character is a public matter, with just over half (53.9 %) either disagreeing or only somewhat agreeing that it is.

Oversight of OWB

Regarding external monitoring, just under 40 % (39.1 %, n=25) believe that agencies should have some say in how social workers act outside of working hours. Nearly three-quarters (70.3 %, n=45) argue against state licensing board oversight of OWB. Just over one-third (36 %, n=23) believe that schools of social work ought to conduct some level of social media screening of applicants to assess whether they demonstrate a moral character that aligns with the profession.

Teaching about Private-life Behavior to Students

An index was created to assess perceptions of whether social work education affects changes in students' personal behavior. The index included four items, each with five ordinal response options that were logically consistent. Items were recoded and dichotomized as high or low based on the original rating scale, i.e., high corresponding with 'to a great extent' and low corresponding with 'not at all.' The Cronbach's alpha, measuring the scale's reliability, was .71. A mean score of 3.6 indicated a strong consensus that social work education does impact student private-life behavior.

Findings related to teaching about private-life conduct revealed that 59.3 % (n=40) of respondents believe that students should be educated about private-life conduct; the same proportion also indicated that students ought to ensure that private-life behavior aligns well with the ethical principles of the profession.

Open-ended comments were varied, with many commenting on the perceived impact of social work education on student OWB.

- "Exposure to new ideas and information can have an immediate impact on some students, though not all."
- "Teaching may plant a seed, but whether it leads to changes in thoughts and behavior depends largely on life experiences and environment."
- "Social work education and the university environment may not necessarily make students more sensitive, but might make them hesitant to express their true beliefs."

- ■ "Most students would likely have reservations about these issues before taking social work classes, but if they hadn't considered them, the classes could have an impact."

Limitations

Study limitations include the small sample size and limited geographic variability, as most respondents indicated residence in the Northeast. This region leans more democratic, which could have produced a potential bias in perceptions of ethics and OWB. In addition, the sample only included faculty from the United States, limiting generalizability and an international perspective. As well, the non-probability sampling method could also limit generalizability; that is, faculty whose contact information was unavailable from their institution's website were not included in the study. This limitation is a drawback of convenience sampling. Method of contact could also have led to self-selection bias; in effect, the study may have attracted only those faculty members who have an interest in ethics or private-life behavior. In addition, as social work faculty, respondents are a group who have an interest in promoting a positive perspective of the profession, which could have resulted in some bias.

Discussion

Professional associations direct their membership to uphold certain ethical standards in both personal and professional life. Society expects professionals to exhibit and embody these standards as well. The respondents of this study suggest that this perspective extends to social work, with nearly two-thirds (62.5%, n=40) asserting that social workers should be held to a higher moral standard compared to other professionals. Additionally, a substantial majority of respondents (73.4%, n=47) believe that society expects social workers to maintain high moral character both in their professional and personal lives. Further support comes from 68.7% (n=44) of respondents who feel that social workers should serve as moral exemplars for society.

Opinions diverge, however, when it comes to the oversight of personal behavior. While 39.1% (n=25) of respondents support some level of employer oversight regarding off-duty conduct, a significant proportion oppose such intervention. This resistance also extends to state licensing regulation, with nearly three-quarters (70.3%, n=45) of respondents suggesting against board oversight of OWB.

This study sought to explore how social work faculty view OWB as it relates to both the profession and education of social workers. Some professions, in their ethical standards, provide specific guidelines regarding the expectations and behavior of practitioners in their private lives. We see this in law Braverman & Snyder, 2022; Corker, 2020), psychology (NASP, 2020), and other professions. At one time, the social work NASW Code of Ethics included the principle of propriety (NASW, 1979), articulating an expectation that social workers maintain high standards of personal conduct. Charles Levy, whom some have noted as the grandfather of social work ethics (NASW Massachusetts Chapter, 1999), suggests that:

> "What is generally expected of the practitioner is that he should have high standards of personal or 'moral' conduct. The objective for the practitioner is to avoid any conduct in his [or her/their] private life that might be carried over to his [or her/their] occupational life. The principle of propriety cautions the practitioner to avoid doing anything that would generate public doubt about his [or her/their] honesty or morality as a practitioner or about the trustworthiness or his [or her/their] colleagues as a group" (Levy, 1974, p. 209).

The IFSW Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles (2018), the NASW Code of Ethics (2021) and other social work codes worldwide imply through emphasis on social justice, social change, empowerment of the vulnerable and oppressed, advancing racial justice, and through the principles of service and integrity, that social workers are expected to uphold certain values in both professional and personal lives. These values are indicative of living a moral life in ways that envisage social workers as stewards of ethical integrity. The respondents of this study overwhelmingly support the idea that social workers conduct themselves according to a high standard of moral integrity.

When it comes to teaching students about private-life behaviors, faculty consider it important to speak with students about private-life moral conduct. Research suggest that schools play an important role in influencing the values of students (Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015; Corker, 2020; Seijts et al., 2022). Commentators do suggest that educational institutions ought to emphasize character development (Corker, 2020; Brandenberger & Bowman, 2015), and our findings reinforce the notion that integrating discussions on OWB into curricula is both relevant and necessary.

At the undergraduate level, universities are encouraged to focus on character formation alongside academic learning (Seijts et al., 2022). It seems reasonable to suggest that this becomes even more important in post-graduate terminal degree programs like social work. In agreement, a majority of respondents (59.3%, n=38) advocate for incorporating discussions on private-life behavior into the curriculum.

Implications

These findings suggest several implications, with specific attention to integrating personal conduct standards into the education and practice of social workers. These implications can be instructive regarding how private-life activity relates to the profession and to the education of social work students.

Moral Standards and Integrity

A majority of respondents assert that social workers ought to be held to high moral standards and act as moral exemplars. Both the historical and current culture of the profession, which emphasizes values of social justice, integrity, and empowerment, support this perception. OWB, which includes such things as prejudicial comments, telling offensive jokes, or displaying social media images of drunken behavior, could contribute to a sullied societal perception of the profession. Further standards developed by organizations like IFSW have the potential to reinforce already established guidelines that emphasize the importance of integrity and propriety in private-life behavior.

Oversight of Private-life Behavior

Opinions regarding external monitoring were generally mixed, though support for external oversight of OWB was in the lower range. Those who do support oversight could be particularly focused on the profession's standing in the public eye. For instance, one respondent stated, "I am not really in favor of big brother watching, but I am concerned that a few bad apples could really damage our reputation." The majority of respondents, however, indicated strong opposition to private-life oversight. These diverse opinions suggest a need to support private-life privacy but not at the expense of compromising the profession's standards of conduct. Perhaps this could involve the creation of more explicit guidelines around integrity and propriety, similar to NASW's 1979 Code, but without external monitoring or scrutiny. This would maintain respect for privacy and

autonomy while suggesting self-monitoring that keeps in mind private-life responsibilities.

The Role of Educational Institutions

Given that 59.3 % of faculty advocate for integrating private-life conduct discussions into social work education, schools should consider incorporating content that addresses both professional and private-life behavior into the curriculum. Content on OWB could be instructive in helping students navigate private-life activities, such as digital communication, in which boundaries have become increasingly blurred.

To summarize, findings suggest that any integration of OWB into social work education requires thought and sensitivity that takes into account the diversity of opinion that appears to exist on the matter. Though some OWB content areas may only be moderately embraced as central to social work education, the values underlying ethical and moral considerations of OWB directly support both professional standards and societal expectations.

Conclusion

Faculty perceptions indicate that social workers ought to serve as moral exemplars, adhering to high moral standards in their private lives. This expectation coincides with the general public, as there is certainly evidence that deviations could adversely affect the profession's reputation and weaken public trust. Support for adhering to moral private-life behavior is also found in the IFSW (2018) Global Social Work Statement of Ethical Principles. These expectations, coupled with social work's esteemed reputation as one of the most value-based professions (Chechak, 2015; Osmo & Landau, 2003; Reamer, 2018), engenders considerable responsibility.

Some commentators argue that private-life behavior is just that, private, and should not be subject to scrutiny (Lippke, 1989; Olivier, 2006). This opinion does tend to contrast with the perspectives of professional social work organizations and agencies, the general public, and the respondents of this study, all of which suggest that for professionals, private-life rights are not absolute. In the past, perhaps OWB had less visibility, existing only peripherally with minor seriousness. However, given the proliferation of social media and other virtual environments, where personal lives are displayed with excruciating detail in front of the world, private-life behavior does become a public matter. Students need guidance in

juxtaposing private-life conduct with professional standards. Creating a space for these conversations seems well-advised.

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Appendix 1: Sample of survey questions in each section of the survey

Section 1: Demographics

(1) Approximately how many years have you been teaching social work courses?

	0 10 20 30 40 50 60 70 80 90 100
Number of years	

(2) At what level do you primarily teach (check all that apply).
- ❑ BSW
- ❑ MSW
- ❑ PhD/DSW
- ❑ Other

(3) Which of these options comes closest to your political views in general?
- ❑ Very Conservative
- ❑ Conservative
- ❑ Moderate
- ❑ Liberal
- ❑ Very Liberal
- ❑ Unsure/Prefer not to answer

Section 2: Views about 'Private-Life' Behavior/Conduct

To what extent do you believe that…	To a great extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	Not at all	Unsure
Social workers ought to be held to a higher standard of good character in their private lives, even more than other types of professionals.	○	○	○	○	○
The general public expects social workers to be of good, moral character in their private lives.	○	○	○	○	○
An individual who chooses a career in social work surrenders some of their autonomy to do whatever they please in their private life	○	○	○	○	○

Section 3: Perceptions Regarding the Monitoring of 'Private-Life' Behavior/Conduct

To what extent do you believe that…	To a great extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	Not at all	Unsure
That social work professionals ought to adopt a high tandard of personal conduct and behavior in their private lives.	○	○	○	○	○
That social workers in their private lives be cautious about their behaviors and actions in order to maintain an image that aligns with the profession's values.	○	○	○	○	○
That social workers in their private lives ought to engage in activities such as political action, preventing discrimination, and advocating for social justice	○	○	○	○	○

Section 4: Views Regarding Teaching Students about 'Private-Life' Behavior/Conduct

As a social work educator, to what extent do you feel that the following ideas ought to be integrated into the classroom/practicum learning as an aspect of social work education?	To a great extent	To a moderate extent	To a small extent	Not at all	Unsure
Social workers ought to be held to a higher standard of good character in their private lives, even more than other types of professionals.	○	○	○	○	○
The general public expects social workers to be of good, moral character in their private lives.	○	○	○	○	○
An individual who chooses a career in social work surrenders some of their autonomy to do whatever they please in their private life	○	○	○	○	○

Mitigating Anchoring Bias When Using AI in Social Work Research: Responsible Conduct of AI-Assisted Research

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Abstract

Social workers can use artificial intelligence tools to streamline and enhance many steps in the research process. AI can quickly and efficiently curate research questions, identify relevant studies, synthesize prior research and identify gaps, gather and analyze data, and compose research findings and conclusions. Despite AI's impressive capabilities, its responses are not necessarily accurate, complete, or free from bias. This article explores the ethics of responsible use of AI in social work research through the lenses of accuracy, honesty, and anchoring bias. Anchoring bias refers to a person's tendency to over-rely on initial pieces of information that they receive, potentially discounting or ignoring other information that could confirm or disconfirm the veracity of the initial information. To mitigate this bias, social workers should think critically about AI-generated outputs, rather than over-relying on the first information they receive. This article provides social workers with strategies to mitigate the anchoring effect when they use AI in various stages of social work research: understanding AI's limitations, nurturing awareness of anchoring bias, asking critical thinking questions to evaluate the accuracy of AI outputs, and employing other strategies to verify the accuracy and reliability of AI outputs. While AI can be a valuable research tool,

social workers should remain ethically responsible for the rigor of their research methods and the veracity of the findings they report.

Introduction

Social work researchers (SWRs) may employ artificial intelligence (AI) in various facets of the research process to enhance its effectiveness, reliability, and efficiency (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024; Chubb et al., 2022). AI has the capacity to identify, gather, and analyze large and complex quantities of data in real time. Its advanced algorithms can manage complex multivariate datasets and uncover patterns or relationships that traditional research methods might overlook. However, AI has limitations: it may omit relevant information, fabricate or misconstrue data, or rely on biased, unreliable, or invalid research findings (Chubb et al., 2022). This article explores the risks of "anchoring bias" when SWRs use AI to facilitate research processes. Anchoring bias is a psychological bias that arises when individuals rely disproportionately on the first piece of information introduced to them (Tversky & Kahneman, 1974).

This article begins with a description of the nature of the anchoring bias, including research on factors contributing to this bias. The second section, Research Integrity and AI, explores how anchoring effects specific to AI use may lead to ethical issues when designing and implementing research processes. The third section delves into various stages of the research process, describing how AI may lead to anchoring bias in each stage and providing practical strategies for combating such bias. The final section discusses the implications of AI and anchoring bias for research integrity, offering guidelines for SWRs seeking to responsibly incorporate AI in their work.

The Nature of the Anchoring Effect

The anchoring effect, coined by Tversky and Kahneman (1974), signifies the tendency of initial pieces of information received by individuals to disproportionately influence their beliefs or judgments. This cognitive bias arises when individuals overvalue the initial information, leading them to dismiss or undervalue new information that might conflict with the initial anchor (Furnham & Boo, 2011). By

relying on the initial information without further analysis, anchoring acts as a mental shortcut, allowing people to avoid complex reasoning and make more simplified judgments. Although this mental shortcut entails less time and energy to make decisions, it means that individuals are overlooking additional factors and not questioning the validity of the anchored information (Furnham & Boo, 2011).

Research has identified several factors affecting vulnerability to the anchoring effect, including mood, subject matter expertise, personality traits, cognitive ability, and the perceived credibility of the anchoring information. Specifically, individuals are more prone to anchoring under the following conditions.

- Non-experts are more likely to rely on anchors than those with significant subject-matter knowledge (Englich & Soder, 2009).
- Individuals experiencing sadness are more susceptible to anchoring compared to those in happy or neutral moods, particularly among individuals who are not subject-matter experts (Englich & Soder, 2009).
- Individuals with high conscientiousness, agreeableness, or low extraversion personalities tend to be more prone to anchoring (Furnham & Boo, 2011).
- Individuals with lower cognitive abilities are more likely to be influenced by anchoring effects (Bergman et al., 2010).
- When anchoring information has been widely cited in other sources, they are perceived as more credible, leading to greater anchoring, even if the information is inaccurate (Bornmann et al., 2023).

There is mixed research on particular factors affecting anchoring bias, including the effectiveness of warning individuals about the potential inaccuracy of the initial information they receive (Furnham & Boo, 2011). Moreover, there is little research on anchoring effects specific to AI-generated information (Lee et al., 2022). For instance, how do individuals differentiate between "right-looking answers" and "actually right answers" when deciding whether to rely upon AI's responses? Further research on anchoring effects with AI is certainly needed.

Responsible Conduct of Research and AI Use in Various Stages of the Research Process

Responsible conduct of research (RCR) refers to practicing research in a manner consistent with professional and scholarly ethics, including the principles of honesty, transparency, respect, accuracy, and accountability. RCR fosters a culture of integrity and scientific rigor in research, enhancing public confidence and support for scholarly research (National Institutes of Health, 2024). Various governmental organizations, universities, and research institutes promote RCR through training that not only provides researchers with information about what these principles mean, but also empowers them with critical thinking, attitudes, and moral courage to put RCR into practice (Cicero, 2021; Hoven et al., 2023). For SWRs, RCR aligns with the core values of the profession, including professional integrity, ethical use of technology, the inherent dignity of all people, and confidentiality (International Federation of Social Workers, 2018; National Association of Social Workers, 2021).

When SWRs use AI to assist with research, it is incumbent on them to consider how their ethical duties apply in each stage of the research process. For instance, when formulating research questions SWRs can use AI to brainstorm research ideas, explore gaps in existing literature, or explore potential biases in their research questions. When conducting literature reviews, SWRs can use AI to identify relevant research, assess its quality, and create visual maps to identify connections between various articles. When selecting research methods, SWRs can ask AI to critique proposed methods, suggest methods, or explore ways to improve methods in relation to inclusivity, validity and reliability of measurement tools, sampling bias, or other specific research factors. When conducting qualitative data analysis, SWRs can use AI to transcribe interviews, code data, identify themes, create network graphs or other visualizations to demonstrate correlations between themes, and write drafts of the findings (Anis & French, 2023; Nashwan & Abukhadijah, 2023). When conducting quantitative data analysis, AI may be used to clean data, automate descriptive and inferential calculations, and execute complex statistical models to test particular hypotheses (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024).

While AI can support various research functions, the answers produced by AI are not necessarily accurate or true (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024). The notion of accountability in RCR suggests that researchers, not AI, are accountable for the

accuracy and truth of the research finding. Accordingly, when SWRs are determining whether and how to use answers provided by AI, they need to avoid anchoring bias. In other words, they should not assume the veracity of AI's initial answers. Rather, SWRs should consider what steps may be necessary to confirm or reject AI-generated outputs.

Mitigating Anchoring Bias

To mitigate anchoring bias and ensure the integrity of their research, SWRs should take deliberate steps to evaluate the veracity of results generated by AI. Broadly speaking, these steps may include actively questioning and reassessing the initial information, checking the original sources that AI used to develop its responses, and cross-checking the outputs with other sources.

To guard against anchoring bias, SWRs should be aware of the ways that mood affects anchoring. Research indicates that individuals in sad moods tend to experience higher anchoring effects (relying on first-introduced information despite receiving disconfirming information afterward); individuals in happy moods have lower anchoring effects tending to give higher credence to disconfirming evidence rather than simply relying on first-introduced information (Englich & Soder, 2009). Mood effects are lessened when individuals view themselves as experts in the subject area. In other words, regardless of one's mood, SWRs can mitigate anchoring bias by viewing themselves as professionals or experts who do not simply rely on the first information they receive from AI. When SWRs feel rushed, pressured, lazy, or tired, they may be more prone to unethical behavior (Ahmad et al., 2023; Cicero, 2021; Spoelma, 2022), including the possibility of relying on the first information they receive from AI rather than ensuring its accuracy. Accordingly, it is important for SWRs to be aware of their moods and levels of relevant expertise, and take proactive steps to mitigate anchoring bias.

The following sections provide more detailed strategies for mitigating anchoring bias at particular stages of the research process.

Research Questions

One of the first steps in the research process is formulating a research question, a query that clarifies the focus of the research and guides decisions related to research design, methodology, and analysis (Rubin & Babbie, 2025). SWRs may use AI to brainstorm research questions, identify gaps in existing research, or critique drafts of proposed questions. For instance, SWRs might use AI prompts such as:

- Generate 10 options for research question ideas related to the effectiveness of narrative therapy for individuals with gambling addictions.
- Analyze existing literature on psychosocial assessments for individuals affected by childhood trauma. Identify gaps in the literature and suggest specific, actionable research questions to address these gaps.
- Please improve the research question to ensure clarity, neutrality, and feasibility: How do SWRs help clients with cognitive disabilities address social stigma in employment settings?'

When determining whether and how to use AI-generated responses, SWRs can mitigate anchoring effects by viewing the responses with a healthy degree of skepticism (Lee et al., 2022). For instance, it is essential to consider AI's sources of information, the scope of prior research it considered, and the research it might have overlooked. For the question about gambling addiction, did AI source information about effective interventions from a single country or across multiple locations? Regarding the question about childhood trauma, did AI analyze genuine scholarly research or did it fabricate articles or misinterpret data? For the question about clients with cognitive disabilities, did AI adequately consider culture, religion, socioeconomic status, and other aspects of human diversity?

One strategy for mitigating anchoring effects is brainstorming research questions without using AI, and then asking AI for critique or recommendations. By brainstorming first, SWRs may open their minds to a broader range of research ideas informed by their own knowledge, experience, and creativity. AI's suggestions can then be used to expand the options for research questions, as well as to refine ones that seem particularly relevant or promising. Another mitigation strategy is to engage AI in a series of follow-up inquiries. Assume that AI has critiqued a research question based on culture and ethnocentrism. You could then invite AI to critique the research question in relation to sociocultural status and bias. A third mitigation strategy is to engage AI as if it were a research assistant, particularly one that is eager to answer questions but somewhat prone to errors and in need of guidance and supervision. If AI provides a critique of a research question, for instance, ask AI to provide its rationale. Rather than simply relying on AI's initial response, jointly explore whether the proposed question meets certain criteria that you deem important: To what extent does the research question build on prior research, to what extent is the research question important to the community or population that I am serving, and to what extent does

the research question lend itself to a feasible research project (taking time, costs, and ethical issues such as privacy and informed consent into account). By adopting mitigation strategies, SWRs can use AI to develop effective research questions while maintaining oversight and avoiding undue influence from AI's initial responses.

Literature Reviews

The purposes of literature reviews include laying the foundation of knowledge to inform the research, identifying gaps and limitations in existing studies, providing theoretical support and rationale for the research, and determining what type of lines of research can best build on prior studies (Rubin & Babbie, 2025). SWRs may use AI to search for relevant theories and research articles, summarize and synthesize information from specific articles, and develop visual representations of theories and research findings (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024; Tauchert et al., 2020; Scite.ia, n.d.). SWRs should be aware of the constraints of the specific AI tools they are using, including the source of each tool's data. AI tools such as Scite.AI (n.d.) have been developed specifically for scholarly research purposes, ensuring that articles are sourced from peer-reviewed, reliable databases. ChatGPT (n.d.) and other AI programs may draw from non-scholarly sources, making them more prone to errors, omissions, biases, and fabrications. Many AI tools allow one to request information to be drawn from particular types of sources. Regardless of which AI tools are used to facilitate literature reviews, prudent SWRs can exercise a reasonable standard of care by asking AI to cite its sources and reading the original articles to ensure the veracity of AI's responses.

By asking AI to identify and summarize particular theories and research articles, SWRs can efficiently identify relevant materials (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024). Although AI's responses may appear accurate and complete, SWRs should remind themselves of AI's limitations. To guard against missed articles, SWRs can supplement AI searches with queries in traditional scholarly databases and use AI to summarize identified studies. They can also read original versions of the most relevant articles to check the accuracy of AI's summaries or use AI tools with different databases to cross-check their findings. To guard against bias, SWRs can reflect on the language used by AI, including whether it is inclusive of individuals and groups from diverse backgrounds. For instance, SWRs might ask AI to clarify the methods, sampling, and underlying theories used in particular stud-

ies. To ensure that AI has considered multiple viewpoints, SWRs could ask AI to provide a matrix of research highlighting different perspectives and then pose follow-up questions to identify additional perspectives.

When deciding whether to rely on AI-generated information, individuals often gravitate to information that aligns with their preexisting beliefs. Thus, it is important for SWRs to critically evaluate AI-generated content, regardless of whether it confirms or disconfirms their prior beliefs. Assume that a social worker initially believes that poverty is a primary cause of child neglect, but an AI-generated literature review suggests this correlation is not true. When checking the accuracy of AI's information, the social worker should not allow their original beliefs to interfere with their critical analysis of AI's findings (Lee et al., 2022). By maintaining awareness of their assumptions or biases, SWRs may prioritize evidence-based assessments and rational thinking processes to check the accuracy of AI-generated information. To mitigate anchoring bias, SWRs should regularly ask themselves, "What if my original beliefs are true?" and "What if my original beliefs are untrue?" This mindset encourages open, balanced evaluation of personal beliefs, AI-generated information, and other sources of information.

Research Methods

When selecting research methods, SWRs should ensure that their research design effectively addresses the research questions and objectives (Rubin & Babbie, 2025). Key decisions include sampling size and procedures, methods of gathering information, and valid tools for measuring independent and dependent variables. Experimental design, for instance, incorporates methodologies such as random assignment, control groups, and pre/posttests, enabling researchers to assess whether independent variables are having significant effects on dependent variables. But what if AI has a bias toward suggesting experimental design when other approaches might be more appropriate?

Consider a social worker evaluating the effectiveness of a novel intervention. The researcher asks AI to suggest a research design, including whether the study should employ qualitative or qualitative, what evaluation measures to use, and how to ensure an unbiased sample. While AI can certainly answer these questions, its responses will not necessarily reflect scientifically sound or contextually appropriate methods. AI may misinterpret the social worker's prompt or fail to take factors specific to the social worker's research topic into account (e.g., the

cultural and socioeconomic backgrounds of the research population). Further, AI's suggestions may not be ethical or feasible (e.g., not taking risks to research participants into account or suggesting extremely costly designs).

To mitigate over-reliance on AI, SWRs can develop research proposals without AI and then request AI to provide constructive feedback, suggestions, and refinements for their methods. When reviewing AI's responses, SWRs could critically analyze AI's responses with questions such as:

- Has AI correctly interpreted the research questions?
- Is AI favoring specific methods based on their prevalence in the sources it draws upon, potentially overlooking novel or uncommon methods?
- Has AI accounted for practical constraints into account such as financial costs, risk, informed consent, time limitations, and participant availability?
- Are AI's suggestions consistent with scientifically accepted research methods?
- What additional questions could be posed to AI to improve the research design and address possible limitations?

When assessing the accuracy and appropriateness of AI's suggestions for research methods, SWRs should recognize that they have subject-matter expertise. Rather than passively accepting AI-suggested methods, they should consider potential errors, omissions, or misalignments with their research goals and ethical standards. When uncertain about particular methods suggestions offered by AI, SWRs can ask for clarifications, such as AI's rationale and sources of information used to justify the suggested methods. Suppose that AI suggests multilevel modeling (MLM), a statistical technique unfamiliar to the social worker. The social worker could ask AI to explain MLM, including how it differs from traditional models like linear regression, under what circumstances is it appropriate for human subject research, and what limitations it entails. By treating AI as a supplementary tool rather than an authoritative source, SWRs can verify its responses by consulting established research or statistics texts.

Quantitative Data Analysis

Quantitative data analysis involves examining and interpreting numerical data through statistical techniques and mathematical calculations to uncover patterns and relationships between variables in a dataset (Rubin & Babbie, 2025).

While researchers have long relied on computers to perform statistical analysis, AI affords distinct advantages over traditional computer-based methods. Potential advantages include AI's ability to handle large and complex datasets, and to automate tedious tasks such as error detection, data standardization, and handling missing data (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024). SWRs can also use AI to recommend specific types of data analysis based on factors such as sample size and data type (e.g., ordinal, nominal, interval), enhancing research efficiency and accuracy.

Although the outputs of quantitative research are typically objective, the choice of statistical analyses involves subjective elements (Berger & Berry, 1988). When assessing AI-generated recommendations for statistical analysis, SWRs should ensure that they align with the research question, accurately reflect the story they intend to tell through the data, and adhere to the assumptions underlying the suggested statistical tests.

It is vital for SWRs to ensure that they understand the nature of the statistical methods proposed by AI, including their strengths, limitations, and alternatives. For instance, AI-tools based on algorithms designed for pattern recognition would not be appropriate for determining causality (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024). Ideally, SWRs should personally understand the machine learning algorithms that AI employs in statistical analysis; otherwise, they could consult trusted AI experts to advise on whether AI's algorithms are accurately performing the intended forms of analyses. To mitigate anchoring effects, SWRs and their AI consultants may reflect on the following questions.

- Does the AI-proposed analysis answer my research question?
- Is AI correctly interpreting how I am using my variables?
- What are the strengths and limitations of the proposed analysis?
- What other statistical methods should I ask AI to consider?

Additionally, AI can be used in other steps of the quantitative analysis process, including directly analyzing the data. While AI can reduce the likelihood of human errors in quantitative analysis (e.g., data entry and calculation mistakes), SWRs should not merely accept AI-generated findings at face value. Instead, they may crosscheck AI's findings by manually recalculating a sample of AI's findings or using traditional statistical software (e.g., SPSS and R). They may also remind themselves of the value of human intuition and judgment (Butson & Spronken-

Smith, 2024). Do AI's findings align with my prior experience, knowledge, and intuitions? If not, what could explain the discrepancies?

Qualitative Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis refers to the examination and interpretation of non-numerical data to explore themes, patterns, and meanings. Approaches to qualitative analysis include phenomenology, ethnography, grounded theory, and case study analysis (Renjith et al., 2021). To ensure the dependability of the results, SWRs can reflect on their beliefs and worldviews to raise awareness of how their analyses may be affected by their beliefs and biases. SWRs may use this awareness to foster more accurate and objective analysis (Olmos-Vega et al., 2023).

AI can assist with many forms of qualitative analysis. As with quantitative analysis, the advantages of AI for qualitative analysis include its ability to analyze large and complex datasets efficiently (Anis & French, 2023; Nashwan & Abukhadijah, 2023). SWRs can use specific prompts to guard against biases and to enhance the depth of analysis (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024). Despite the potential advantages of AI, it is vital that humans maintain interpretative control, checking for accuracy and potential biases in AI-generated findings. SWRs should be aware of how their particular AI tool has been trained to evaluate qualitative data. AI's analysis may contain biases due to the way that it has been trained and the data used for such training (Christou, 2023). SWRs may need to manually analyze a sample of the data to ensure AI is accurately interpreting it (Anis & French, 2023). Rather than simply relying on AI's initial outputs, SWRs may compare its results with their own analyses and interpretations. During this process, SWRs may ask themselves:

- Is AI applying different perspectives and biases than I am when analysing themes and interpreting the data?
- Is AI being mindful of relevant cultural contexts and perspectives (including the research participants' values, beliefs, language, and worldviews)?
- What types of algorithms is AI using to interpret the data (e.g., frequency of word use or theme analysis)?

Asking AI to help code qualitative data may allow SWRs to identify key themes they may not have identified on their own. By comparing the SWR's themes with

those of AI, SWRs can reflect on which themes most accurately reflect the data and perspectives of the research participants.

Conclusion

Advances in AI and natural language processing offer social workers new ways to implement technology in many aspects of practice (Goldkind et al., 2023), including social work research. To uphold the accuracy and integrity of research findings, SWRs should be aware not only of the ways that AI may augment research but also of potential pitfalls. AI itself is not a moral agent, but rather, a tool driven by algorithms and the data it has been given to process (Butson & Spronken-Smith, 2024). While AI can excel at analyzing data quickly and effectively, it lacks human qualities such as common sense, the ability to learn from experience, and the capacity to understand social and cultural nuances (Anis & French, 2023). Accordingly, SWRs should exercise ethical judgment and take responsibility for mitigating biases, including anchoring effects.

Historically, SWRs have incorporated many digital tools into their work, including spellcheck (introduced in the 1960s), data analysis software such as SPSS (launched in 1968), and online search engines (popularized in the 1990s) (De Amorim, 2013; Duka et al., 2023; IBM, 2018). Although AI may seem unique or even scary to some, it is essentially another digital tool that SWRs can incorporate across various stages of research. As with other digital tools, SW must remain responsible for ensuring the validity, accuracy, and reliability of the information that AI produces. This includes critically evaluating the sources of AI-generated output, properly crediting the original sources and the AI tools used, and rephrasing outputs to reflect their unique voice. These practices uphold ethical standards, avoid plagiarism, and preserve the human component in researcher-AI collaboration.

As AI evolves and SWRs find new ways to incorporate AI into their research processes, SWRs must remain accountable for their decision making and ensure ethical and scientific rigor. While this article has focused on ways to mitigate anchoring effects of information that AI has generated, SWRs should also adopt strategies to improve the likelihood of obtaining valid and reliable outputs from AI in the first instance. Choosing an appropriate form of AI is crucial. Although some AI tools are not explicitly developed for scientific research, others have

been purposefully designed for research tasks such as literature reviews, data gathering, and quantitative and qualitative analysis.

Responsible conduct of research not only requires knowledge of research ethics, but also the motivation, critical consciousness, moral courage, and practice skills to implement research ethically (Axt & To, 2024; Cicero, 2021; Hoven et al., 2023). Because individuals are particularly vulnerable to anchoring bias when they lack expertise, it is important for SWRs to use their expertise when evaluating the extent to which they should rely on AI-generated information. When addressing topics beyond their expertise, prudent practice suggests collaborating with qualified research partners to vet the accuracy of AI's outputs.

To guard against potential biases, SWRs should use deliberate strategies to raise their awareness and facilitate critical thinking (Axt & To, 2024). One strategy is to reflect on questions that challenge potential biases. For instance, what if the AI-generated information is not true? What if the opposite were true? And what perspectives may be missing in AI's analysis and response?

SWRs should recognize the importance of how they phrase their questions, prompts, or instructions for AI. Even slight differences in wording can lead to vastly different outcomes. Prompt engineering–the practice of designing and refining AI instructions–plays a vital role in enhancing the accuracy, relevance, and depth of AI outputs (Wang et al., 2024). AI prompts should provide clear guidance, including the particular analysis or outputs requested, the context of the inquiry, and relevant data sources or analytical processes to be used. Just as SWRs are trained to communicate in a manner that accommodates their clients' language, culture, and cognitive processes, they should also tailor their AI-instructions to align with AI's "language," logic, and artificial cognition and neural network processes.

Moving forward, it will be important for researchers to study the effectiveness of various AI tools to facilitate specific research functions. Researchers should also study how SWRs and other researchers can use AI in an ethically responsible manner, mitigating anchoring effects and ensuring the integrity of their research. After all, the purpose of scientific research is not simply to generate new knowledge, but to generate valid, accurate, and reliable knowledge.

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Acknowledgements

Book Review: Rights of Nature in Europe

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Introduction

The book Rights of Nature in Europe presents a compelling examination of ecological legal frameworks and environmental justice. Edited by Jenny García Ruales, Katarina Hovden, Helen Kopnina, Colin D. Robertson, and Hendrik Schoukens, the volume explores the multifaceted implications of recognising nature's rights within European legal and policy contexts. The book is structured into four parts, each addressing different dimensions of the Rights of Nature (RoN) discourse and practice.

The first section, "Landing and Grounding," examines how the concept of Rights of Nature travels to Europe. It begins with a chapter on the Ecuadorian experience and the fostering of dialogues as RoN is introduced to European contexts. The rest of this section examines RoN from European philosophical, spiritual, and Sámi perspectives. The section closes with the adoption of the Mar Menor as a landmark RoN case in Europe.

The second section, "Attuning to European Legal Landscapes," explores the challenges of embedding RoN within European legal systems. This part discusses key topics such as linguistic approaches to EU law, property rights concerning wild animals, and the role of human rights frameworks in supporting or limiting the recognition of Nature's rights.

The third section, "Encounters with the Rights of Nature", provides case stud-

ies of interactions between legal, ecological, and cultural systems across Europe. This includes discussions on invasive species, ecological restoration, and the legal recognition of non-human voices in decision-making processes.

Finally, the fourth section, "Visions for the Rights of Nature," looks at future-oriented pathways for strengthening RoN in Europe. This part includes explorations of ecocide law as a legal mechanism, the psychological and cultural dimensions of RoN, and the integration of RoN principles into professional practices such as eco-social work.

This review focuses on Chapter 18, "Eco-social Work and the Healing and Transformative Powers of Nature: Towards an Eco-centric Practice," the only contribution from a social work perspective in the book. Written by Anette Lytzen and Cathy Richardson Kineweskwêw, this chapter is particularly significant in its contribution to the emerging field of eco-social work. It explores how social work can incorporate ecological consciousness and utilise Nature-based interventions to support individual and community healing. This chapter is crucial in demonstrating how social work can transcend human-centred paradigms and integrate eco-centric approaches.

Core Themes and Arguments

The authors argue that eco-social work represents a paradigm shift, urging social workers to view social issues as inherently linked to ecological crises. They advocate for moving beyond the traditional Person-in-Environment model towards a Person-as-Place concept, reinforcing the interconnectedness between humans and their natural surroundings. This conceptual shift aligns with Indigenous knowledge systems, Earth jurisprudence/ecological jurisprudence and promotes the intrinsic value and inherent rights of Nature.

A key aspect of this chapter is its discussion of the Nature programme, a case study from Denmark designed to support women who have experienced partner violence. This initiative illustrates how Nature-based therapy—such as Shinrin-yoku (forest bathing), immersion in Nature, and circle work—can foster healing, resilience, and a sense of belonging increase Nature connectedness. The authors effectively highlight how being outdoor 'connecting' with Nature can serve as a therapeutic intervention, reducing stress, promoting well-being, and reinforcing social cohesion.

Relevance to Social Work

This chapter is particularly relevant to social work because it calls for a transformation of the profession's scope and ethical foundations. By recognising the interdependence of social and ecological systems, eco-social work expands traditional notions of care and advocacy. The authors propose that social work should integrate Nature-based assessments (eco-assessments) and intervention plans (eco-plans) to holistically address clients' needs.

Furthermore, the chapter aligns with the International Federation of Social Workers' (IFSW) policy on eco-social work, which promotes sustainability and environmental justice as core social work principles. This shift is particularly pertinent given the increasing awareness of climate change's social impact, disproportionately affecting marginalised communities.

Strengths and Contributions

One of the chapter's greatest strengths is its interdisciplinary approach, drawing on ecopsychology, Indigenous perspectives, and environmental ethics. The Nature programme case study offers a tangible example of how eco-social work can be implemented in practice, moving beyond theoretical discussions to real-world applications.

Moreover, the chapter effectively articulates the parallels between environmental destruction and social injustices, particularly gender-based violence. By linking violence against women to the exploitation of Nature, the authors underscore the need for holistic, systemic change.

Future Directions

The chapter makes a compelling case for integrating eco-social work into the profession, highlighting its potential for transformative practice. Future work could expand upon this by further exploring institutional barriers to implementing Nature-based interventions within mainstream social services, enhancing the practical applicability of these approaches. Additionally, examining how eco-social work can be adapted to urban environments, where access to outdoor spaces is limited, would provide a more nuanced and inclusive perspective on its implementation across diverse settings.

Conclusion

Chapter 18 in Rights of Nature in Europe is a vital contribution to the discourse on eco-social work. It successfully challenges the anthropocentric focus of traditional social work and provides a roadmap for integrating Nature-based interventions into practice. By advocating for an eco-centric worldview, the chapter not only enhances social work's ethical framework but also fosters a deeper sense of ecological responsibility. As climate change and environmental degradation con-tinue to shape global social issues, this chapter's insights are more relevant than ever.

Overall, Rights of Nature in Europe is a thought-provoking and comprehensive volume that provides an in-depth exploration of the Rights of Nature from multiple disciplinary and practical perspectives. Rather than presenting RoN as a simple solution to ecological crises, the book fosters a nuanced engagement with its challenges, different interpretations, and evolving applications. By bridging academic analysis with activist perspectives, the book effectively captures the complexities and possibilities of RoN as it takes shape in European contexts. Through diverse contributions, this volume underscores the necessity of an interdisciplinary approach to fostering meaningful ecological and social transformation.

Book Review: Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Radical Belonging

McBridge, B. (2023). Troubling the water: The urgent work of radical belonging. Broadleaf Books.

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Troubling the Water: The Urgent Work of Radical Belonging by Ben McBride is a deeply impactful exploration of justice, community, and the complexities of racism and inequality in contemporary society. This work captures McBride's experiences as a pastor and activist, (p.5) providing readers with profound insights that challenge the status quo and provoke a reexamination of what it means to truly belong in an increasingly divided world.

Set against the rich but tumultuous backdrop of Oakland, California, McBride's narrative begins in what he describes as the "Kill Zone," an area marked by gun violence and systemic oppression that serves as both a personal and symbolic setting for his work (pp. 88-89). This locale is not just a geographical reference; it embodies the deeper societal issues that affect marginalized communities across the nation. Through McBride's evocative storytelling, the reader gains an intimate understanding of the challenges faced by these communities, creating a microcosm that reflects the broader struggles against systemic injustice. His recounting of pivotal events, such as the aftermath of the Ferguson uprising, illustrates the larger dialogues around race and justice that have reverberated throughout the United States, demonstrating how local struggles can reflect national narratives. (p. 2)

One of the key themes in McBride's writing is the concept of "radical belong-

ing" (p. 46). In a world where division and biases often define interactions, he insists that achieving genuine community requires confronting uncomfortable truths and actively engaging with those perceived as adversaries. This is where the book transitions from a personal memoir to a profound call to action. McBride draws inspiration from civil rights pioneer John Lewis, who famously advocated for "good trouble"—the idea of acting against injustices rather than remaining passive or complacent (p.11). McBride urges readers to embrace this idea, recognizing that the fight for justice necessitates courage and a willingness to engage with complex, often uncomfortable realities (p.104).

What sets Troubling the Water apart from other activist literature is McBride's focus on the emotional and spiritual dimensions of this work. He emphasizes that societal change cannot occur in a vacuum; it must be preceded by personal transformation (p.107). McBride invites his readers to engage in self-reflection, asking pivotal questions such as, "Who do I need to become?" to build a world where everyone feels a sense of belonging" (p.36). This introspective approach challenges readers to look within themselves and confront their own biases, fears, and assumptions about race, privilege, and community. By doing so, McBride breaks down barriers between individual experiences and collective struggles, fostering a deeper understanding of the interconnectedness of these issues.

The personal stories that McBride weaves throughout his narrative are both poignant and powerful. They serve as a testament to the resilience of individuals who have faced profound tragedy and systemic oppression. He candidly shares the story of his own family, including the pain of losing a loved one to lynching, intertwining these experiences with broader narratives of racial injustice (p.113). By humanizing these experiences, McBride creates a profound emotional connection with his readers, compelling them to confront their own perceptions and roles in perpetuating or dismantling systemic inequality.

An innovative aspect of McBride's work is his "Quadrant Model," which categorizes individuals and groups based on their power and privilege within societal structures. This model delineates four categories:

1. **Powerful and Privileged**: Those who hold significant power and enjoy high levels of privilege, often having access to resources and opportunities that others do not.

2. **Powerful but Not Privileged**: Individuals or groups who possess power—potentially through political or social influence—yet lack certain privileges, such as economic wealth.

3. **Not Powerful but Privileged**: Those who may enjoy privileges like wealth or education but do not wield significant power in societal or political contexts.

4. **Not Powerful and Not Privileged**: Individuals who lack both power and privilege and frequently face systemic barriers that hinder their progress.

The quadrant model serves as a valuable tool for understanding the complexities of social change and community engagement. It helps individuals and organizations navigate the challenges of addressing systemic injustice by recognizing the varied experiences and positions of those involved. By breaking down societal dynamics into these categories, McBride creates a framework that encourages individuals to critically analyze their own positions and the implications they have for social justice work (p.18).

Critics and readers alike have praised Troubling the Water for its vibrant and urgent message, highlighting McBride's ability to intertwine engrossing personal stories with theoretical insights and actionable strategies. His work is recognized not just as a piece of literature, but as an essential resource for anyone seeking to engage meaningfully in today's sociopolitical landscape. The book's resonance with a divine calling for justice, particularly emphasized by figures such as Father James Martin, reiterates that McBride's message is not merely an academic exercise but a lived experience demanding our attention and action (p.62).

In essence, Troubling the Water stands as a profound, thought-provoking read that prompts its audience to dive deep into the complexities of belonging, justice, and the necessity of confronting societal divisions. McBride's blend of humor, provocation, and heartfelt storytelling serves to enrich the discussion on social justice, emphasizing that cultivating true belonging is not merely an aspirational dream but a critical necessity for creating a more equitable and just society.

As readers journey through McBride's insights, they are left with the powerful notion of the transformative potential inherent in radical belonging (p.46). The book challenges individuals to rise to the urgent call to action that accompanies this understanding, pushing them to engage deeply with one another in a world fragmented by inequality and division. Troubling the Water is not just an-

other book on social justice; it is a compelling exploration of community, identity, and the fundamental human need for connection and belonging. McBride's work is a reminder that by confronting uncomfortable truths and embracing the complexities of our shared humanity, we can pave the way for a more just and inclusive society.