

quick to recognize the emotional damage occurring within a family when an abuser lives there and doesn't cooperate with counseling. In one real-life situation a father with explosive anger kicked in his ten-year-old child's bedroom door because the parent wanted to punish his son for coming home a few minutes late for supper. When the worried mother got on the phone and called the "family counselor," he did not encourage her to call the police or the child protection authorities—actions that would have resulted in greater protection of the child and the mother and probably would have provided the motivation for the father to participate in therapy.

Case Example

Retta is an undergraduate student in a practicum at a large, multiservice agency with strict eligibility standards based on income. Retta has a client, Tonya, a single mother with four small children, who is struggling to get by on her welfare check. Tonya also receives a small amount of assistance with her large utility bill from the agency. However, Retta receives a phone call from Tonya's neighbor informing her that Tonya has been working part time and not reporting her income.

Questions

1. Should Retta just forget about this piece of information and allow Tonya to provide more income for her family?
2. Should Retta reduce the amount of assistance by the income the neighbor reported? What would you do?
3. Could the "correct" response for Retta to make be in opposition to the most ethical course of action?

HOW DO I RESOLVE ETHICAL DILEMMAS?

The first step in resolving an ethical dilemma is to recognize the problem and identify the source of the conflict. For instance, is it a clash between professional and personal values? Between professional values and agency policy? It may be useful to write down the problem as you understand it and then to gather relevant information. How has this problem been handled in the past?

You must also keep all parties informed of your legal and ethical obligations. Engage clients or involved parties in dialogue, and brainstorm the "best" course of action. Make sure you are constantly keeping in mind the mission of the profession and observing the client's right to self-determination. If you are still unclear about what to do, discuss the situation with your field instructor or faculty liaison. Protect the identity of the client if necessary, and present the situation as a "hypothetical" case.

Lowenberg and Dolgoff (1996) have suggested an approach for ordering social work values that might help you get off the "horns of a dilemma." For instance, they say that protection of life should always take precedence over lower-ranked values, such as privacy and confidentiality, or even truthfulness (as when you have to break a promise). Their priority ranking of ethical principles is as follows:

1. Protection of life
2. Equality

3. Autonomy and freedom
4. Least harm
5. Quality of life
6. Privacy and confidentiality
7. Truthfulness and full disclosure

How do you know when you are doing the right thing? It is not always possible to know, but there is a greater chance that you can feel good about the decision you have to make if you go through a deliberate process where you examine your values, seek additional information, and consult others.

Joseph (cited in Garrett, 1994) has outlined a decision-making model that requires these steps:

1. definition of the dilemma;
2. looking at all the relevant facts and developing valid arguments for various courses of action;
3. consideration of practice wisdom, personal beliefs and values, and how these might influence the final decision;
4. developing options, exploring compromises, evaluating alternatives in an attempt to find a course of action with the least negative effects; and
5. choosing a position that you can defend.

Other decision-making models have been discussed by Lowenberg and Dolgoff (1996) and Tymchuck (1992). When you have conscientiously gone through such a process to resolve ethical dilemmas, then you have done all that can be done.

Case Example

Freda and Holly are placed in a large agency where their field instructor is so busy that she scarcely has time to see them each week. Mrs. Morgan, the field instructor, had agreed to accept the two students before she learned that she would be given responsibility for managing a new branch office miles from town. Because she is frequently unavailable to them, Freda and Holly have been using their time in the practicum setting to do their homework and catch up on reading for their other courses. After the first month, Freda and Holly have yet to see a client, and they have only been given some basic clerical assignments like answering the phones and finding files.

Freda wants to inform their faculty liaison that they are not being used appropriately and are not learning any social work skills. Holly says, "Why ruin a good thing?" She clearly communicates that she will be most unhappy if Freda speaks to their faculty liaison.

Questions

1. Should Freda take the chance that things will eventually settle down for Mrs. Morgan and that she will find some meaningful assignments for them before the semester is out?
2. Should Freda go against her friend's wishes and speak to Mrs. Morgan or their faculty liaison? What are the arguments for each position?
3. Besides speaking to Mrs. Morgan or their faculty liaison, what else could Freda do to enrich her own experience within the agency?



Professional Identity

Critical Thinking Question: After accidentally breaking a client's confidentiality, how could you reflect upon the experience to avoid making the mistake again?