

Ethical Decision-Making in Social Work Practice



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NLASW Ethics Committee

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Ethical Decision-Making Framework

Introduction - Ethical Decision-Making and Social Work Practice

The CASW (2005) Code of Ethics sets forth the values and principles that guide social work practice in Newfoundland and Labrador. Social workers uphold the following core values:

Value 1: Respect for the inherent dignity and worth of persons

Value 2: Pursuit of social justice

Value 3: Service to humanity

Value 4: Integrity in professional practice

Value 5: Confidentiality in professional practice

Value 6: Competence in professional practice

“Ethical behaviour comes from a social worker’s individual commitment to engage in ethical practice. Both the spirit and the letter of this Code of Ethics will guide social workers as they act in good faith and with a genuine desire to make sound judgements”.

CASW (2005) Code of Ethics

Ethical decision-making is an integral part of social work practice. Social workers are often faced with ethical dilemmas that require thoughtful reflection and critical thinking. An ethical dilemma is a choice between two actions based on conflicting professional values; both may be morally correct and professionally grounded. Both may be right or good. It is this ambiguity that creates the dilemma for the social worker (Linzer, 1999).

As social workers grapple with ethical issues in practice, a review and reflection on the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics, CASW (2005) Guidelines for Ethical Practice, and the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL is crucial. In addition, social workers may find other strategies and resources helpful, including peer consultation, discussion with a supervisor/manager, review of best practices, use of ethical decision-making models and theories, and ethics consultations.

This guide, which is grounded in the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and professional literature, is intended as a resource for social workers to use as they navigate ethical complexities in practice and make sound ethical decisions. The document addresses areas where critical thought and reflection is encouraged and outlines an ethical decision-making model. The material can be incorporated into discussions with peers, managers and supervisors, and can be used by social workers providing field instruction to social work students.

Components of Ethical Decision-Making

The resolution of ethical dilemmas in practice is rarely straight forward. As a profession we have come to appreciate uncertainty and ambiguity. We embrace the opportunity to step back and reflect on ethical dilemmas from different professional and theoretical vantage points. Antle (2005) developed a model outlining the components of ethical decision-making that social workers may find helpful as a reflective framework.



Ethical Theory and Professional Ethical Orientation

Social work ethics is influenced by many ethical theories (i.e. deontology, utilitarianism, consequentialism), and the guiding principles of non-maleficence (do no harm), autonomy (right to choose), beneficence (bring about good) and justice (for a fair and equitable society) continue to be important considerations in the analysis of ethical issues.

Social workers are encouraged to reflect on their professional ethical orientation and consider which theories and guiding principles impact their decision-making. For example, one might need to consider whether their professional orientation is guided by universal rules

(deontology), analysis of consequences to bring about the greatest good (utilitarianism), or a combination of both. Stepping back and reflecting on this can provide a lens through which social workers consider complex, intersectional ethical issues within an ethical decision-making model to articulate and justify their ethical decisions.

Risk Tolerance

When resolving ethical dilemmas in practice, risk tolerance is a concept that should be incorporated. Risk tolerance can be defined as one's comfort level with risk. This includes risk for oneself and on behalf of another (e.g. clients) to achieve a goal or purpose. As professionals we can make arguments for and against risk; from no risk to high risk. Our tolerance for risk, which is part of the broader ethical framework, can fall along this continuum.

It might be helpful to reflect on the following questions as they pertain to specific ethical dilemmas in practice:

- What factors primarily inform my tolerance for risk?
- Is my personal and professional tolerance for risk similar or different?
- How comfortable am I with uncertainty and ambiguity?
- Are there times when my risk tolerance may have been too high? Too low? What were the contributing factors?

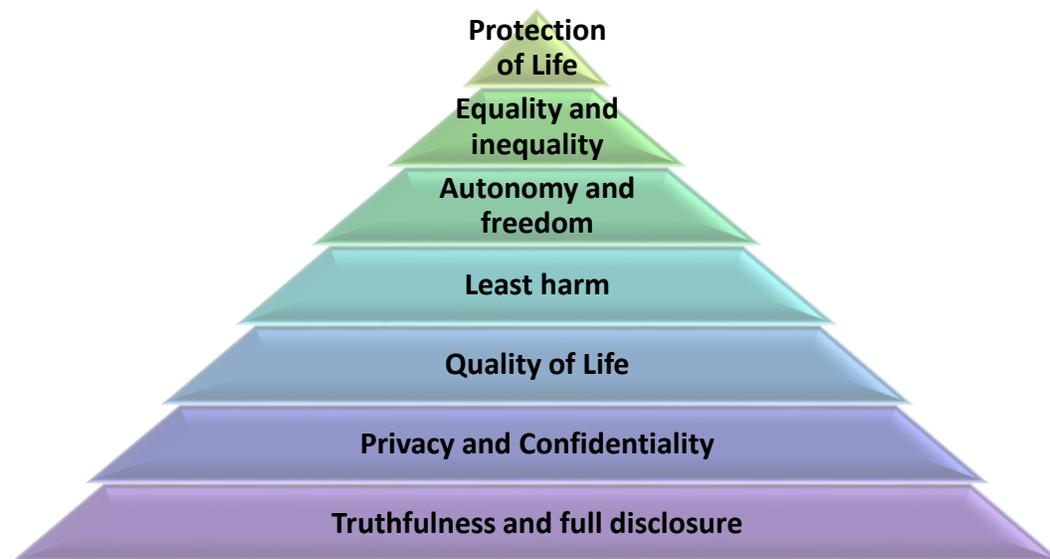
Ethical Decision-Making Model

Social workers are encouraged to use ethical decision-making models that promote critical thinking and reflection. A multitude of ethical decision-making models exist. The following model, or ethical decision-making steps, is an accumulation of aspects from the models included in the literature and is based on a best practice approach. Social workers may find this helpful in working through ethical dilemmas in practice.

- 1) What is the ethical dilemma? Clearly articulate the professional values that are in conflict. What personal values if any may be influencing my decision making? Is there a conflict between my personal and professional values?
- 2) What is my immediate reaction or instinct for the best way to address the ethical dilemma?
- 3) From which theoretical lens am I considering the dilemma?
- 4) Consult the CASW (2005) Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice. Does the Code provide direction and guidance? Identify the sections from the Code of Ethics and Guidelines for Ethical Practice that are applicable to the dilemma.
- 5) Consult the NLASW (2018) Standards of Practice for Social Workers in NL and relevant explanatory documents. What standards are applicable to the dilemma?
- 6) Consult applicable agency policies? What direction is the employer giving?
- 7) Are there legal considerations? Consult relevant legislation where necessary.
- 8) What are some of the cultural considerations?
- 9) Was this issue addressed through informed consent?
- 10) What are some of the available options or choices for resolving the dilemma? Analyze the risk and benefits of each option. What steps do I need to take to minimize risk and not compromise my ethical responsibilities?
- 11) Consultation with a peer, manager or supervisor can be extremely helpful.
- 12) Does the context of practice make a difference?
- 13) Discuss the dilemma with the client where appropriate.
- 14) Consider the impact on the therapeutic relationship.
- 15) What other resources might be helpful in my decision-making?
- 16) Document the ethical decision-making process. For additional information refer to the NLASW standards pertaining to documentation and recording.
- 17) Monitor and evaluate the impact of the decision and modify if necessary.

Ethical Principles Screen

When consulting the Code of Ethics, there may be times when the Code will not specifically address the dilemma, or when the Code provides conflicting guidance. In these instances, social workers may find it helpful to use the Ethical Principles Screen developed by Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington (2005).



The ethical principles screen involves the ranking of ethical principles. For example, in this model, the protection of life supersedes privacy and confidentiality.

As with any ethical decision-making tool, social workers must use professional judgment when using these tools and consult with a colleague or supervisor as needed. For a detailed description of the Ethical Principles Screen, please see Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington (2005). *Ethical decisions for social work practice*. Thomson Brooks/Cole.

Critical Reflection and Professional Judgment

“Social work is a multifaceted profession. As professionals, social workers are educated to exercise judgement in the face of complex and competing interests and claims. Ethical decision-making in a given situation will involve the informed judgement of the individual social worker”(CASW 2005, p. 3).

In critically reflecting on ethical dilemmas in practice, some questions that you might want to consider include:

- Am I placing the client first? Am I motivated by my own needs?
- Are professional boundaries being challenged? Have I set clear boundaries with my client?
- Is this situation/dilemma creating a blend between my personal and professional life?
- Would I consider it to be reasonable for another social worker to make a similar decision given the facts and circumstances?
- Can I explain the rationale for my decision based on the elements outlined in the ethical decision-making model?
- Are there other influences (that have little to do with my professional role) that may be influencing my decision-making?

Ethical Considerations

Ethical decision-making is a key component of professional social work practice. Daily, social workers in all areas of practice throughout NL will be working through the resolution of ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas may pertain to the following:

- **Self-disclosure**
Should social workers disclose personal information about themselves to clients? How much personal information is appropriate to share with clients? Are there times when self-disclosure is unavoidable and if so, how should these be handled? What is the impact of self-disclosure on the social worker-client relationship?
- **Personal/professional boundaries**
How should social workers respond when a client offers them a gift or complimentary services/products? Should social workers ever hug a client? How should social workers respond when meeting a client in the community who asks for advice? Should social workers develop friendships with clients or former clients? Should social workers accept clients as friends or contacts on social media sites such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter or LinkedIn?
- **Privacy and confidentiality**
How should social workers respond when a client sends them an e-mail with personal information? Who should have access to client information? Is it ethically appropriate for social workers to post non-identifying client information on social media platforms?

- Conflicts of Interest

How should social workers respond when they find out that a new client is a relative of a current client and both have requested therapy for the same family issue, yet neither client is aware of the social-worker client relationship with each other? How should social workers employed with an organization respond when a client of that organization requests to see them in their private practice? How should social workers respond when a client wants to donate to a charity with which the social worker is affiliated?

Conclusion

Social work is a profession committed to improving the health and social well-being of individuals, couples, families and communities. Accountable, Competent, Professional and Ethical: social workers are employed in diverse areas of practice throughout Newfoundland and Labrador and use their skills, knowledge and professional judgment to ensure that clients receive the highest quality services. Social work practice is grounded in a code of ethics that sets forth values and principles that provides a common ethical framework. Ethical decision-making is a core component of social work practice. It is anticipated that this document will be a useful resource to social workers as they navigate ambiguity and make sound ethical decisions.

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