



RESEARCH PAPER

Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice: A Qualitative Exploration of Reflective Decision Making

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses the issues of ethical dilemma in social work practice and discusses how reflective decision making can help in solving ethical dilemmas. Social workers often find themselves in complicated scenarios in which professional values and organizational requirements and demands as well as the needs of the client are at odds. The qualitative study was carried out in Sargodha Division, Punjab, Pakistan. Through in-depth interviews, purposive sampling was used to collect data on 12 professional social workers until saturation was reached. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the data. The results show the four key themes; various aspects of ethical dilemmas, reflective decision making as a fundamental strategy, organizational limitation and work pressure, and the importance of professional experience and judgement. This research concludes that reflective practice can boost ethical decision making, but the application of reflective practice is constrained by organizational constraints. The research recommends formal education and enabling institutional settings to enhance ethical competence among social workers.

Keywords: Social Work, Ethical Dilemmas, Reflective Practice, Decision Making, Professional Ethics, Qualitative Exploration

Introduction

Ethical dilemma is a basic and unavoidable part of the social work practice, as it occurs when the professionals have to make a decision when certain moral values clash with each other and when they have to make a decision between the equally problematic options. It arise when social workers face professional values like confidentiality, client autonomy, and the duty of care, and where they need to balance the values in complex situations (McAuliffe, Boddy, Chenoweth, 2023). Moreover, ethical decision making is rooted in the social, cultural and organizational contexts, and the practitioners have to negotiate between the conflicting norms and obligations underlines that (Banks, 2020).

Ethical dilemmas are not a singular phenomenon but a dynamic interaction occurring across several dimensions, such as values of individuals, professionalism, organizational forces, and general social expectations (McAuliffe, 2021). Her Model of 'Inclusion in Ethical Decision Making' emphasizes the significance of critical reflection as the fundamental element of overcoming such dilemmas. Some others stress that ethical issues of social workers in practice are largely determined by structural issues like workload, resource scarcity, and institutional policies (Gray & Webb, 2012).

The idea of reflective practice, which was proposed by Donald Schoen in 1983; also helps to comprehend the way in which professionals react to ethical dilemmas via reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action. According to this view, ethical decision making is a process that is dynamic and continuous and that develops through experience and critical thinking. An important aspect of ethical practice that is given a lot of emphasis in the

model is critical reflection. It encourages social workers in making decisions that are actively reflective on assumptions and biases, as well as on professional responsibilities.

In Pakistan, social workers face critical ethical dilemmas due to the conflict between professional ethics and cultural norms. Here the confronting challenges include patriarchal norms, professional values versus confidentiality, absence of a national regulatory council, and security threats from various groups (Shafi, Butt & Qursam, 2025). Here, treating patients from variety of sub-cultures include the clash of distinct cultural norms versus professional advice. Eventually, the process of generalist social work practice remains in complete or failed here due to this clashing situation.

The Pakistani context is further complicated by ethical decision making that is hindered by limited resources, cultural diversity and institutional pressures. This paper also discusses social work practice ethical dilemma and how reflective decision making can help in solving these dilemmas. Social workers are usually caught in a complex situation where ethical principles and institutional demands and client demands conflict. This qualitative study was done in Sargodha Division in Punjab, Pakistan. The research will address the issues of ethical dilemma in social work practice and will discuss how reflective decision making can help in solving ethical dilemmas.

Literature Review

Overall, the literature indicates that ethical dilemmas in social work practice are due to a combination of various factors such as professional values, organizational restrictions, and cultural factors, and reflective decision making is extremely significant in overcoming the complexities. Although there is a very vast body of literature globally, the research on the experience and how social workers in Pakistan especially in Sargodha Division handle ethical dilemmas in their day to day practice is very limited. This research will thus fill this gap by focusing on the lived experiences of social workers and how they apply reflective decision making in solving ethical dilemmas.

Ethical dilemmas are regarded as one of the main issues of social work practice. Reamer (2006) explains that ethical dilemmas occur when social workers have to make decisions between conflicting professional values, including confidentiality, client autonomy, and the duty of care.

According to Banks (2020), social, cultural, and organizational contexts determine ethical decision making. In third world such as Pakistan, institutional restrictions and resource scarcity add more ethical issues. One of the strategies that have been found to deal with ethical dilemmas is reflective practice. Schön (1983) presented the idea of reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action, which is essential in thinking critically in the course and after the professional practice.

Current trends in social work ethics are focusing on the use of inclusive and reflective methods in making ethical decisions. Inclusive Model of Ethical Decision Making by Donna McAuliffe (2021) underlines that ethical choices are not unilateral and are predisposed by different dimensions interacting. These dimensions include individual values, work ethics, organizational environment, culture and power.

This perspective is particularly relevant within the healthcare and the community setting where social workers are placed in rapidly shifting and emotionally charged situations. Factors in the organization also make a huge difference. Gray and Webb (2012) have the assumption that social workers cannot practice reflectively because of the overload of work and institutional support. Likewise, Hick and Stokes (2023) point out that ethical judgement and decision-making skills are enhanced with professional experience. In spite of these contributions, the qualitative research that is based on the lived experiences of

social workers in Pakistan, especially in Sargodha Division is still limited. This gap can be addressed by this paper which will review the experiences of social workers.

Theoretical Framework

The research is based on the Inclusive Model of Ethical Decision Making by Donna McAuliffe (2021). This model is an in-depth approach to ethical decision making in social work practice.

The model has a number of main dimensions:

- **Accountability:** Concentrates on transparency, justification, and openness of decision making, managing conflicts of interest and adhering to ethical standards.
- **Consultation:** It is the sharing of the dilemma and is done with other people including colleagues or supervisors to help in clarifying and getting various points of view.
- **Cultural Sensitivity:** Understands the importance of cultural awareness in ethical dilemmas, such as thinking about the effects on indigenous clients or clients with different backgrounds.
- **Interdependence:** Recognizes that nothing exists in a vacuum and it is necessary to consider relations, power and how choices affect other parties.
- **Reflection (Critical Reflection):** It is a reflection based on self-awareness to draw on past experience, new knowledge, and critically analyze the situation.

The model focuses on the reflective dimension because it has allowed practitioners to assess their decisions and to enhance their practice. This framework is especially applicable to the setting of Sargodha Division, where social workers have to work in a culturally complex resource-constrained setting.

Material and Methods

This paper utilized a phenomenological research design that involved qualitative research methodology to investigate the experiences of social workers about ethical dilemmas in practice. The phenomenological approach was deemed suitable since it is based on the subjective experience and meanings that people attach to given phenomena. The phenomenon of interest in this study was ethical decision making in the social work practice.

The qualitative design facilitated the comprehensive investigation of the view of participants and the researcher was able to elicit rich and detailed descriptions of ethical issues and thinking of the social worker.

The research was carried out in the Sargodha Division within Punjab in Pakistan with various districts comprising of various healthcare and social welfare institutions. The participants were chosen in hospitals, Medical Social Services Units (MSSUs), and social welfare departments of the public sector where social workers are actively involved in the provision of psycho-social support to patients and their families.

The settings have been selected since they are complicated settings where ethical dilemmas are common occurrences as a result of interactions among patients, families, and institutional arrangements.

There were 12 professional social workers in the study. The sample was selected through purposive sampling that is normally employed in qualitative studies to find people with pertinent experience and knowledge on the research topic.

Participants were included based on:

- Being a social worker or other professional with the background in the field.
- Employed in a health or social welfare environment.
- Experience in dealing with an ethical dilemma in practice.

The 12 participants were deemed to be an adequate number because data saturation was reached, i.e. no new themes or insights were being generated with the addition of more participants.

The data was gathered using the in-depth semi-structured interviews that were flexible to enable the participants to share their experiences, though important issues were addressed. A set of open-ended questions was created based on the interview guide that addressed:

Types of ethical dilemmas faced

- Decision-making processes
- Practice role of reflection.
- Organizational challenges

All interviews were about 30-45 minutes and were held in a comfortable and confidential setting. With the participants' consent, interviews were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy and reliability of the data. Field notes were also recorded to record non-verbal communication and contextual details.

The data obtained was subjected to thematic analysis and the identification of the patterns and themes in the data was done in a systematic manner. The analysis was performed in a number of steps:

- To begin with, the transcription of all interviews was done verbatim to guarantee proper representation of the answers given by the participants. The researcher would then read the transcripts a number of times in order to become acquainted with the data.
- The second process was the initial coding whereby relevant textual segments of information regarding ethical dilemma and decision making process could be identified. These codes were further divided into bigger groups.
- Themes were then formed by clustering like codes into patterns that were meaningful. The themes were vetted and reduced to bring about consistency and relevance to the research objectives.
- Finally, the themes were discussed and related to the available literature and theoretical frameworks so to be more informed on the findings.

Trustworthiness of the Study

In order to achieve the quality and rigor of the research a number of strategies were employed:

- **Credibility:** The participants had been engaged with over a prolonged period and their experiences had been appropriately represented due to careful interpretation of data.
- **Reliability:** There was an open and orderly method of conducting the research, whereby, data collection and analysis could be transparent.
- **Confirmability:** The researcher was objective and not biased when conducting the research.

- **Transferability:** The context and participants of the research were described in detail to enable readers to determine the applicability of results in other contexts.

In the course of conducting research, ethical principles were adhered to strictly. The participants were briefed on the study objective and the voluntary nature of the study. Data collection was carried out with informed consent. The anonymity and confidentiality was guaranteed because the participants were not identified. The participants had the right to pull out of the study any time without any repercussions. All data were utilized purely in academic purposes and kept in a secure place to ensure privacy.

Results and Discussion

THEME 1. Multiple levels of Ethical Dilemmas

Through the process of data collection, it was clear that social workers face vast array of ethical issues in their practice. The conflicts between confidentiality and safety, client autonomy and family involvement and professional values and organizational expectations were noted by many of the respondents. Such dilemmas usually involve keen decision-making and cause emotional tension in practitioners.

The results show that social workers often face ethical dilemmas of confidentiality and client autonomy, especially when it comes to risk and family intervention in a medical context. The participants expressed the strain of having to reconcile professional ethical values with outcomes of life, particularly when the safety of other persons is concerned or when family members affect the decision making process contrary to wishes of the patient. Such complexity was reflected in one respondent who said,

I always have a dilemma in that I cannot maintain secrecy, especially when other individuals are at stake, in this case I will be confused about whether to uphold professional ethics or the real-life outcome, family members can also sway me to make a decision on behalf of the patient and this creates a conflict in ethics.

This integrative report brings to the fore the problem of how professional responsibilities and cultural expectations like risk, cultural expectations and family dynamics influence ethical dilemmas in social work practice. It shows the multifaceted nature of the decision making process as social workers have to negotiate between the ethical standards and the realities all the time and judgement and reflective practice are needed.

The results further emphasize that organizational limitations are major causes of ethical dilemmas in social work practice, especially in scenarios that entail scarcity of resources and institutional policies. According to one respondent,

At some stage, organizational regulations go against social work values such as when limited resources force us to serve some patients at the expense of others which causes ethical stress as all the patients have the right to equal care and this presents emotional and professional strain. This reaction is symptomatic of the conflict between the needs of the organization and professional ethics, as social workers have to make hard choices that can go against their values.

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A similar concern was expressed by another respondent who explained that,

Because of the lack of resources, and the large number of patients, we are unable to give all cases a fair hearing and attention, which can be very stressing as we are aware that, all patients should be given attention and care. These descriptions show how institutional constraints and resource shortages are the key factors contributing to the shaping of ethical dilemmas where social workers are regularly put in emotionally straining and occupationally complicated circumstances where balancing reasonableness and fairness becomes an incessant challenge.

THEME 2: Reflective Decision Making as a Strategy

Many respondents also stressed that one of the strategies of dealing with ethical dilemmas in social work practice is reflective decision making. Reflection enables practitioners to critically examine cases, weigh the outcomes, and enhance decision making in the future. It also offers the ability to consider various views prior to action, which enhances professional judgement and minimizes the chances of making a mistake. As the experience of the participants shows,

I will not make decisions in problematic situations immediately; I will take time to analyze the situation and potential outcomes of my actions so that I would not be stressed and make more rational decisions. It means that in difficult cases, reflection helps to regulate emotions and make thoughtful decisions.

Other respondents also emphasized the value of sharing of reflection,

As they said that being able to discuss ethical concerns with their colleagues and supervisors assists them in gaining insight into other perspectives and relieves stress. A participant mentioned that these discussions make one feel supported, and enhance professional competence. Moreover, case post-handling reflective learning was found to be a significant component of professional development, as practitioners assess their practice and find ways to improve it.

Another participant stated that,

They usually talk about ethical matters with their colleagues, and consider their own actions after handling a case, which allows them to learn through their experiences and enhance their future decisions in addition to becoming more mindful of ethical responsibilities.

These reactions indicate that reflective decision making is not only a personal affair but also a team and ongoing practice that can improve ethical awareness, growth, and quality problem solving within the social work profession.

THEME 3: Work Pressure and Constraints in the Organization

Many respondents emphasized that organizational constraints play a significant role in influencing them to make ethical decisions in practice. A high workload, time constraints, and a lack of resources were cited as key obstacles that impede a reflection approach and decrease the quality of service provision. According to some participants,

The biggest challenge in my job is the workload. There are numerous cases to attend to within a limited amount of time and it is hard to devote the necessary focus to each case and consider the ethical issues. This is an example of time constraints that prevent critical thinking and ethical consideration in practice.

Other respondents added that the pressure by the management to deliver results fast usually results in a rush in making decisions and that ethical considerations can be compromised. One of the interviewees stated that,

Under this pressure, it is hard to be a professional because sometimes the decision is made without consideration. Moreover, the scarcity of resources was also noted as one of the significant challenges, as social workers have to make a choice in favor of some patients, and other patients are not given the necessary attention, which results in ethical stress and emotional load.

Another participant added,

That the management frequently puts us under pressure to deliver results fast, and that we sometimes have to make decisions hastily without giving it a second thought, which in turn subjects us to ethical stress and emotional strain.

This evidence shows that organizational issues like workload, time and scarcity of resources are pivotal in determining ethical dilemmas, which tend to constrain the capacity of social workers to practice reflective and moral decision making.

THEME 4: Role of Professional Experience and Judgement

Respondents stressed that work experience is essential in handling ethical dilemmas in the social work practice. As one gains experience, their judgement, confidence and problem solving skills increase, thus making social workers be able to deal with complex situations more efficiently. Based on what the people mentioned,

I would say that with greater experience, I would be more confident in my ability to resolve ethical dilemma since I will be able to grasp the situation and make a well-informed decision based on my previous experience. This is where experience helps in giving confidence and faster and more efficient decision making.

Other respondents also elaborated that experiences of the past enable them to compare the present situation to those cases that they had dealt with in the past and therefore apply the right solutions. Secondly, professional knowledge and exposure to practice were also found to be relevant contributors to reinforcing ethical knowledge. Respondents observed that they can become better equipped to address more complex ethical situations through training and lifelong learning, as well as through experience.

Another participant said,

Experience and professional knowledge are also important in ethical decision making since working on cases and getting training enables me to be more aware of difficult situations and with time I have become more confident, responsible, and competent in dealing with ethical situation.

Such results suggest that professional experience, in combination with the ongoing learning process, can considerably improve ethical judgement and provide social workers with the necessary skills to be able to negotiate complicated and difficult situations in practice.

The results of this research are consistent with the Inclusive Model created by Donna McAuliffe (2021), stating that ethical decision making is determined by various dimensions. The interaction between professional, organizational and cultural factors can be seen in the dilemmas that were reported by the participants. One of the strategies was reflective practice that reinforced the notion that ethical decision making is a dynamic process that is ongoing. Nevertheless, there are organizational restrictions that restrict the capacity of social workers to be able to reflect. The results of the present research do resonate with the Inclusive Model of Ethical Decision Making developed by Donna McAuliffe (2021) greatly. The ethical dilemmas that were shared by the participants represent the interplay of several dimensions that were found in the model.

As an example, the conflict of confidentiality and safety is a sign of the conflict between professional and organizational responsibilities, but the involvement of family raises the question of the cultural and social influence. Along the same line, issues that arise around workload and resource problems are a good example of how the organizational aspect of ethical decision making can impact.

The findings also highlight the importance of the reflective dimension as the participants observed that they applied reflection in their analysis of situations, learning by experience and improved decision making. This aids in justifying the thesis, as presented by McAuliffe (2021) that reflection is all that ethical practice and professional development is. The research, also finds that organizational constraints are restrictive to the capacity of social workers to engage in reflective practice wholly. This implies that there is a need to have institutional support to reinforce the use of the Inclusive Model to practical applications.

Conclusion

This paper concludes that ethical dilemmas are an inherent aspect of social work practice, especially in complicated healthcare and community environments. Social workers of the Sargodha Division are experiencing various challenges based on the clash of values, organizational influences and resource constraints. Reflective decision making is an important element in enhancing ethical judgement and professional practice. The obstacles of workload and institutional support are, however, limiting its effectiveness. An enhancement of reflective practice can be a strong factor in improving ethical competence in social work.

It is further concluded that ethical dilemmas has become a vital part of the social work practice and they occur as a result of a complex interplay between the professional values, organizational requirements and the needs of the clients. The social workers often face scenarios in which decision making is difficult and should be done cautiously. Reflective decision making is also important as it assists the practitioners to analyze, examine different perspectives and make sound ethical decisions. Nonetheless, workload and limited resources present to the organization are usually limiting factors that limit the opportunity of reflection. On the whole, ethical competence in social work can be improved by increasing the use of reflective practice to improve professional outcomes.

Recommendations

It is advisable that social work institutions should come up with structured training programs related to ethical decision making and reflective practice. Organizations ought to establish favorable conditions where supervision and discussion are fostered. Also, workload management plans must be put in place to enable them to contemplate. The possibilities of continuous professional development should also be offered to improve skills and ethical competence.

Social work organizations and institutions have been advised to come up with well-organized training programs on ethical decision making and reflective practice in order to improve the professional competencies of social workers. Organization supportive environments that promote an open discussion, supervision, and guidance on handling ethical dilemmas have to be made. Moreover, workload management techniques ought to be adopted enabling the social workers to have adequate time to engage in critical reflection and sound judgment. Continuous professional should also be encouraged in institutions.

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