

Homelessness: Ethics, Professionalism & Boundaries

Jaimie Page

UTA School of Social Work

Some Basics

- Ethics, Professionalism & Boundaries are intertwined
- Homelessness work is different
- Subpopulations exist, requiring different responses
- Survival in this field depends on sound Ethics, Professionalism & Boundaries (EPB)
- It is the administration's responsibility to ensure sound EPB
- Philosophical Bases: Social Justice/Social Work/Oppression
- Ending homelessness depends on socio-political action and change (the big picture)

My Main Points

- 1) Homelessness work is a very gray area; it is a critical human experience (stigma/oppression)
- 2) We will all make mistakes
- 3) We have to continually work toward ethical goals & be vigilant about assessing the application of those ethics
- 4) We must have real support from our organization so we never feel alone

Diagnostic Questions (pre)

- Why are/were you interested in working in the area of homelessness?
- What causes homelessness?
- Is it possible to end homelessness?
- What will it take to end homelessness?
- What are your experiences with people who are homeless?

Diagnostic Questions (mid/post)

- In what ways are workers stressed out in your agency? How is it manifest?
- What are the rumors & secrets?
- What is turnover like?
- How do workers get supervision, training, and support?
- What structure is in place at the organization?
- What are the agency outcomes? How is success measured?
- How do clients gain power?
- Do clients move on/get better?

What are signs of burnout?

- That people share...
- That are unique to an individual...
- When burnout starts occurring, ethics, professionalism, and boundaries can start to fray!!!

NASW Code of Ethics

- The mission of the social work profession is rooted in a set of core values. These core values, embraced by social workers throughout the profession's history, are the foundation of social work's unique purpose and perspective:
 - service
 - social justice
 - dignity and worth of the person
 - importance of human relationships
 - integrity
 - competence

1) Service

Ethical Principle: *Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.*

Social workers elevate service to others above self-interest. Social workers draw on their knowledge, values, and skills to help people in need and to address social problems. Social workers are encouraged to volunteer some portion of their professional skills with no expectation of significant financial return (pro bono service).

2) Social Justice

Ethical Principle: *Social workers challenge social injustice.*

Social workers pursue social change, particularly with and on behalf of vulnerable and oppressed individuals and groups of people. Social workers' social change efforts are focused primarily on issues of poverty, unemployment, discrimination, and other forms of social injustice...

Social Justice (cont'd)

...These activities seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity. Social workers strive to ensure access to needed information, services, and resources; equality of opportunity; and meaningful participation in decision making for all people.

3) Dignity and Worth of the Person

Ethical Principle: *Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.*

Social workers treat each person in a caring and respectful fashion, mindful of individual differences and cultural and ethnic diversity.

Social workers promote clients' socially responsible self-determination. Social workers seek to enhance clients' capacity and opportunity to change and to address their own needs.

Dignity and Worth (cont'd)

Social workers are cognizant of their dual responsibility to clients and to the broader society. They seek to resolve conflicts between clients' interests and the broader society's interests in a socially responsible manner consistent with the values, ethical principles, and ethical standards of the profession.

4) Integrity

Ethical Principle: *Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.*

Social workers are continually aware of the profession's mission, values, ethical principles, and ethical standards and practice in a manner consistent with them. Social workers act honestly and responsibly and promote ethical practices on the part of the organizations with which they are affiliated.

5) Competence

Ethical Principle: *Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise. Social workers continually strive to increase their professional knowledge and skills and to apply them in practice. Social workers should aspire to contribute to the knowledge base of the profession.*

Important!

- Values, Principles, Mission Statement must be part of the hiring, training, continuing education, & performance evaluation process!
- Do you know your agency's Mission Statement?

Integration of Empirical Findings?

- From:
 - organizational evaluations
 - Community assessments
 - Client evaluations
 - From the professional literature
 - From conferences
 - From policy analysts/legislation

Previous Study (Page): Top Five Treatment Approach Practices (HMI)

- Clients are not discharged because of substance use (4.64)
- Clients are not discharged because they 'lack insight into their mental health (4.45)
- We build on client strengths (4.44)
- We still see clients even if they decline or refuse medication (4.37)
- We can change the tx plan if it isn't working (4.33)

Previous Study (Page): Factors Attributed to Differences in Success (ANOVA)

- *Accessible housing* resources, $F(1,234)=15.97$, $p=.000$
- *Non-traditional treatment approach* combined with availability of *accessible housing*, $F(1,234)=4.36$, $p=.038$
- *Affordable housing* resources $F(1,234)=10.49$, $p=.001$

Previous Study (Page): Correlations of *Moves Into Housing* ($p=.01$)

- Accepts medication (.393)
- Intensive housing support services (.318)
- Staff will go look for missing clients (.276)
- Staff can get help in difficult cases
- Sign treatment plan only if ready
- Participation in activities/treatment is not required

Common Ethical Dilemmas?

- Expectations of clients
- Clashing values between worker and client
- Engagement vs. coercion
- Inclusion vs. exploitation
- Strategizing vs. manipulation
- Representation vs. tokenism
- Organizational democracy vs. authority
- “constructive sociopathy”
- Flexible boundaries depending on clinical presentation and circumstances
- Clients vs. co-workers vs. supervisors, etc.

Professionalism

- Agency expectations & culture
- Personal & organizational responsibility
- P & P, accreditation, legal, professional, & licensure expectations
- Vigilance & accountability
- Power indifference
- Critical thinking
- Fairness (no favorites)
- Opportunity for growth
- Clients vs. co-workers vs. supervisors, etc.

Boundaries

- There are some strict rules...such as....?
- There are gray areas, depending on the subpopulation and risk to the client
- Clients vs. co-workers vs. supervisors, etc.
- Work vs. homelife

Ethical Issues/Dilemmas: My examples

- Wet/Dry/Damp (easy)
- Signature for 'consent to treatment'
- Welfare Application
- 24 hours homelessness requirement
- Harm Reduction
- Social Security Application
- Staff substance use/mental health issues
- Safe Haven Sex
- Discharging a client when 2 agencies are involved (case coordination with partnering agencies)
- Hiring a "consumer" (difficult)

Ethical Decision Making

1. [Trust & Safety]
2. What is the risk involved?
3. What are the absolutes?
4. What biases are at play?
5. Team Decision Making Process/Structure
 - Follow-up, debriefing, documenting/communicating
6. Supervision
7. What does it look like on paper? (my personal trick)
8. Do we need a policy/procedure change?
 - Case by case basis, categorical, or universal?
9. Do we need to act strategically?
10. Do we need to act politically (small/large scale)?

Ethical Issues/Dilemmas: Your Examples

Make it Personal

- What are your biases?
- What are your triggers?
- What are your issues?
- Be humble
- Always invite your own learning
- Be willing to own mistakes
- Be a role model (with other agencies, too)
- Learn some new tricks...