Chapter 7

Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice: Case of Botswana

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ABSTRACT

Ethical dilemmas are conflicts that arise when two or more ethical principles clash. As social work practitioners often grapple with ethical dilemmas in their practice, it is important and informative to explore how they address them, especially in different cultural contexts. Drawing on data from a qualitative exploratory study of social work practitioners in different settings in Botswana, this chapter identifies and discusses several ethical dilemmas that social work practitioners in Botswana come across in their practice in both government and non-governmental organizations and how they address them. The chapter also examines the struggles practitioners deal with such as ethical stress, as they try to address and deal the ethical dilemmas. The chapter brings forth recommendations that social work ethics should be part of the educational curriculum and the importance of practitioners’ self-awareness.

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the world, social work practitioners are expected to conform to social work ethics and principles and to uphold the ethical standards of social work practice. Ethical standards are critical in research, education and practice (Congress & McAuliffe, 2006). These standards include responsibility to society at large; clients; colleagues; ethical responsibility in practice settings; and responsibility as professionals as well as to the profession (Congress, 2000; NASW 1996). Ethics are critical in fields such as social work to ensure that practitioners maintain some professional conduct. It is critical to abide by the set professional conduct of ethics and values to ensure legitimacy and credibility of the profession (Banks, 2008). However, the extent to which social workers uphold the code of ethics in practice depends on the nature of their work environments, and the uniqueness of the country’s legal requirements. Furthermore, it depends on clients’ culture, as well as social workers’ own individual values and backgrounds. Because of all these interactions, social work practitioners are confronted with ethical issues that often lead to ethical dilemmas.

Ethical issues are challenging situations that are connected to rights, responsibilities, and obligations that are founded within moral and value-based foundations (McAuliffe, 2005). Ethical dilemmas are complex and difficult circumstances where social work practitioners should make decisions pertaining to issues that conflict with ethical principles, agency procedures, laws of the country or directives that may create disagreements and/or are likely to be unaccepted by the receiving party (Kadushin & Egan, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005). An ethical dilemma arises where values or ethical principles are placed in conflict with one another and resolution at either pole of the dilemma is unsatisfactory, leading to outcomes that one would not seek in an ideal world (Banks, 2001; McAuliffe, 2005). Ethical dilemmas are due to the clash of multiple ethical principles such as challenging injustice; helping people in need; respect for the dignity and worth of a person, and recognizing the importance of human relations (NASW, 1996). They can also be propelled by the clash between workplace or organization’s expectations and professional values (McAuliffe, 2005). In some instances, ethical dilemmas relate to boundary issues where social work practitioners experience struggles or possible conflicts between their professional duties and their various personal relationships (Congress & McAuliffe, 2006; Reamer, 2003). Other challenges creating ethical dilemmas relate to issues of confidentiality, cultural competence, and competence in the field of practice (Congress, 2000). Streets (2008) argues that clients’ culture, religion, and spirituality are critical in social work profession, and that once these clashes with the values of the profession, then ethical dilemmas are created, hampering social work practice in service delivery.
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