**From Values to Virtues: Applying Virtue Ethics in Social Work**

International Social Work Conference

Bridging Social Work Practice Around the World

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**Introduction and Overview**

Learning Objectives:

1. Understand the basic principles of virtue ethics and its application to ethical decision making in social work;
2. Begin to integrate the perspective of virtue ethics into our lives and practice;
3. Identify resources for further study and reflection.

**Concepts and Definitions**

Global Discourse

Ethical Dilemmas and Decision Making Process

Ethics Triangle:

Principles/Rules = Duty (Deontology)

Utilitarian (Teleology/Consequentialism)

Virtue Ethics

**Application to Ethical Dilemma**

Ethics Triangle Exercise

**Self-reflection**

Questions Generated by Virtue Ethics

Social Work Virtues

Plans for Nurturing Virtues in Practice

**Summary Discussion and Wrap-Up**

Implications

Quiz

“Principles and standards **must be applied by individuals of good character** who discern moral questions and, in good faith, seek to make reliable ethical judgments”

(NASW *Code of Ethics*, 2008, p. 4, emphasis added).

**Exercise Applying the Ethics Triangle to Ethical Dilemmas**

**Worksheet for Groups or Pairs**

**Directions:**

Consider the ethical dilemma faced by your supervisee (or colleague) in the scenario below. Then, *applying only the perspective assigned to you,* prepare to report what you would advise your supervisee (or colleague) to do and why – *again, using just the one point of the Ethics Triangle assigned to you.* For brief summaries of each perspective, see the following pages.

**Decide on facilitator, recorder, reporter:**

Scenario

**A foster mother has reported that a teenage boy in her care has just shown up in her kitchen after having been out all night without permission. The foster mother suspects that the youth has been drinking or using drugs, and without informing him, she has arranged for an inpatient assessment in a locked facility to which she asks your supervisee to transport the youth. However, she has directed the supervisee not to inform the youth about where they are heading because she fears that if the youth is told that the supervisee will take him to the assessment, the youth will run away again. The supervisee is not sure whether to refrain from informing the youth about where they are going or whether even to take the youth to the inpatient assessment.**

• From the **Principles/Rules = Duty** point, what do you recommend that your supervisee or colleague do and why?

• From the **Utilitarian** point, what do you recommend that your supervisee or colleague do and why?

• From the **Virtue Ethics** point, what do you recommend that your supervisee or colleague do and why?

**Recommendation:**

**Rationale:**

**Principle (deontological or rule based thinking):**

Rick Reamer writes: “Deontological theories (from the Greek *deontos*, ‘of the obligatory’) are those that claim that certain actions are inherently right or wrong, or good and bad, without regard to their consequences” (p. 65). That is, if we are justifying an action because it is abiding by a rule (*deon*), we are thinking deontologically. For example, the NASW *Code of Ethics* contains a standard that is a rule prohibiting social workers from using deception:   
*“Social workers should not participate in, condone, or be associated with dishonesty.” (4.04)*  
Likewise, the social work licensing statute in Minnesota also prohibits deception:

*“A social worker must not:*

*(4) engage in conduct that has the potential to deceive or defraud a social work client, intern, student, supervisee, or the public.”* (MS 148E.195, Subd.2, d, 4)

Deontologists argue that there are no exceptions to fundamental, impartial moral rules which apply universally, such as to tell the truth, keep promises, and be fair. However, it is possible to make a deontological, principle- and rule-based argument that in certain cases, higher principles override the rule prohibiting deception. For example, there could be a rule that in those situations when deception is required to save a life, then it is ethical to lie as a way to comply with the principles of human rights, dignity, beneficence, well-being and social justice; this would be a universal rule to apply in all such situations.

Many social work scholars have included *autonomy* (protect liberty and privacy) along with three additional principles as fundamental to social work ethics: *beneficence* (do good), *non-maleficence* (first do no harm!), and *justice* (be fair). Banks (2012) identifies these four principles as elements of our “common morality” (p. 57) and then adds *human dignity*, *well-being*, and *social justice* as core principles for social work ethics. Kim Strom-Gottfried includes *fidelity* (be trustworthy and honest) among social work’s basic ethical principles (2007, p. 39). One limitation of deontological thinking is that many “real world” dilemmas do not seem readily resolvable if we are to strictly abide by one rational ideal principle above all others.

**Utilitarian (teleological, consequentialist thinking)**

“The second major group of theories, teleological theories (from the Greek *teleios*, ‘brought to its end or purpose’), takes a different approach to ethical choices. From this point of view, the rightness of any action is determined by the goodness of its consequences” (Reamer, p. 66). The end (*tele*) justifies the means. Among these approaches are the influential versions of utilitarianism: one makes a decision to take a particular course of action when facing an ethical dilemma based on the potential consequences of that action. Would my action result in the greatest amount of good or in good outcomes for the largest number of people? A typical example is that instead of rigidly following a rule that social workers should never deceive, utilitarian thinking examines what the results of being honest or deceptive would be, and if lying could save a life, it would be OK then to lie.

What is good for the majority can also be harmful for minority, however (Reamer, 2008). And, as with principle-based thinking, utilitarian thinking doesn’t always result in an easy or clear answer; it is impossible, after all, to predict future outcomes with certainty; and within utilitarianism, some ethicists focus on the short-term consequences of a particular action (“act utilitarianism”) while others take into account long-term consequences if our decision becomes a precedent (“rule utilitarianism”). This can result in contradictory directions. Under act utilitarian thinking, a lie might be acceptable if it led to a good outcome or prevented a bad outcome in a particular situation; under rule utilitarian thinking, though, lying in general would not bring about the best consequences in the long run because doing so could erode trust (Boss, 2014: 301).

**Virtue Ethics**

Honesty is of course a virtue, and it is likely to be one of the core virtues that we as social workers wish to cultivate, and certainly we honor the honesty of those social workers we admire. Moral virtues like honesty are reliable, enduring personal dispositions embodying our commitment to ethical values. They are habits of mind and heart and action -- in other words: *strengths of character that are consciously and continuously reflected upon as contributing to the meaning of our lives.* “The term ‘virtue ethics’ refers to a variety of ethical theories or theoretical approaches that have a central focus on the moral qualities (‘virtues’) of individual people or institutions” (Banks & Gallagher, 2009, p. 7). Being virtuous encompasses an “overall constellation of particular virtues and the wisdom to enact them well” (Fowers, 2005, p. 9). No single virtue is seen as key, nor can they function well in a piecemeal fashion; instead, cultivating virtues constitutes leading a good life over time, and various combinations of virtues can be employed to reflect upon particular ethical issues or to address a given ethical quandary or dilemma in all its unique complexity and cultural context. Virtue ethics is thus concerned with the character and integrity of “an individual’s life as a whole and with how that life comes together through decisions and actions the person takes” (Fowers, 2005, p. 48; Banks, 2010; Webb, 2010).

One of the strengths of virtue ethics is how clearly it explains moral motivation (Peterson & Seligman, 2004, p. 87-88; McDermott, 2011, p. 57). Acting rightly does not result directly from following principles or rules so much as “growing” from character strengths (Fowers & Davidov, 2005, p. 582; Fowers, 2005, p. 12). As a branch of normative ethics that was dominant in Western philosophy until the Enlightenment and now is in resurgence as an approach to ethical decision-making congruent with multiculturalism (Fowers & Davidov, 2005), virtue ethics is a good fit with social work. From a virtue ethics perspective, a holistic view includes both ourselves as moral actors and our decisions and actions in their social, cultural, and political contexts. If we cultivate virtues aligned with our core professional values of service, justice, respect for human dignity and relationships, competence, and integrity, we may be able to consistently and reliably bring those values to life. Virtue ethics gives conscious and keen attention to relationships, includes emotional intelligence in conceptualizing rational processes for decision-making, and shares common threads with a diversity of approaches from cultural or religious traditions worldwide.

One of the leading philosophers who have influenced the revival of virtue ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre, adds that principles and rules also play an important though not exhaustive or exclusive role for evaluating whether or not we are being virtuous (1999, p. 111). Part of being trustworthy or having integrity is usually acting in accordance with rules, but there will be particular situations as well when no rule or set of rules suffices and virtues such as practical wisdom or courage are needed to guide moral actions.

In order to determine which virtues then we should develop to be a good person (and good social worker), according to virtue ethics we should observe and learn from exemplars, paragons, or role models whose lives show the way to virtuous excellence (Banks, 2012, pp. 90-91; Peterson, 2013: 39; VanSlyke et al., 2013 pp. 2 & 5). These exemplars may include historic figures, current mentors, parents, teachers, supervisors, fictional characters, heroes or saints (for more on the latter three, see Flescher, 2003).

In summary, while not ignoring principles or consequences, virtue ethics focuses primarily instead on how a course of action compares with what a virtuous social worker would do and what we as our best virtuous selves would do. From a virtue ethics perspective, then, how we make decisions when facing ethical dilemmas depends on our character: “….ethics is as much about *being* a certain sort of person as it is about *doing* certain things” (Flescher, 2003, p. 298, emphasis in original). A key question under virtue ethics is “What kind of person (or social worker) do I want to be?” How do my decisions and actions compare to what exemplary social workers do?

As with the other perspectives and points on the ethics triangle, there are limitations to virtue ethics. It can turn into a self-righteous personal crusade. It might not give specific guidance in a given dilemma. It needs to be supplemented by reference to norms, rules, laws or principles. Defining a virtuous act can appear circular: i.e., one is acting virtuously if one acts as a virtuous person would act. And a virtuous act, like being honest, can result in a bad outcome (e.g., the youth runs away).

Thankfully, we can use all of the points on the triangle, whose perspectives tend to complement each other, and we can rely as well on our central social work value of service to others to keep us grounded.

*For more on deontology and teleology, check out Reamer’s lucid explanation on pp. 65-69 (in Social work values and ethics, 2nd ed., 1999). These are theories from normative ethics (applying abstract thinking about right and wrong to actual dilemmas, that is those difficult situations when we have to choose between courses of action that may at first appear equally good or bad, between ethical standards that conflict, or between competing interests).*

*For more on virtue ethics, see the attached reading list.*

**Questions from Virtue Ethics for Deliberating upon Ethical Dilemmas**

“How should I live?”

(Banks & Gallagher, 2009, p. 34)

“What are my ultimate goals for my life?”

(Fowers & Davidov, 2005, p. 584)

“What kind of person (or social worker) do I want to be?”

(Banks & NØhr, 2012, p. 5; Rhodes, 1986, p. 42; Fowers, 2005, p. 64)

“What are my values?”

(Banks, 2010, pp. 2179-2180)

“What are my motivations?”

(Banks, 2010, pp. 2179-2180; Fowers & Davidov, p. 584)

“What virtues will it take to achieve my goals and ideals in this situation?”

(Fowers & Davidov, p. 584)

“What consistent actions do I take now or can I take in the future to express these virtues?”

(Fowers & Davidov, p. 584)

“What does a caring response require of me?”

(Imre, 1989, p. 22)

“Will I make this decision with integrity?”

(Rhodes, p. 42)

“How does this decision fit with my ideals as a social worker?”

(Rhodes, p. 54; Fowers & Davidov, p. 584)

“What would a virtuous social worker do?”

“Not ‘What is good social work?’, but ‘what is a good social worker?’”

(McBeath & Webb, 2002, p. 1020).

“How can I best meet my caring responsibilities?”

(Tronto, 1993, p. 137)

“What more is there left for me to do? What have I missed?”

(Flescher, 2003, p. 310)

“What if I am wrong? Is there something I am overlooking?” (Barsky, 2010, p. 262)

“How can I act most wisely?” (Fowers & Davidov, p. 584)

**Selected Virtues Relevant for Social Workers**

Professional Practical Wisdom (Prudence)

Openness to Others

Care

Compassion

Kindness

Benevolence

Tenderness

Respectfulness

Empathy

Trustworthiness

Patience

Justice

Reciprocity

Fairmindedness

Courage

Righteous Indignation

Integrity

Sincerity

Honesty

Judgment

Reflection

Diligence

Loyalty

Self-Discipline

Hopefulness

Perseverance

Gratitude

Humility

Temperance

Liberality

Just Generosity

“Caring social workers embrace six virtues” (Barsky, 2010, p. 378):

Attentiveness

Responsibility

Competence

Responsiveness

Integrity of care

Discernment

*Universal Classification of Character Strengths: 6 Core Moral Virtues\**

(which are expressed in character strengths or positive traits):

*Wisdom & Knowledge*

(Creativity, Curiosity, Open-Mindedness, Love of Learning, Perspective)

*Courage*

(Bravery, Persistence, Integrity, Vitality)

*Humanity*

(Love, Kindness, Social Intelligence)

*Justice*

(Citizenship, Fairness, Leadership)

*Temperance*

(Forgiveness & Mercy, Humility/Modesty, Prudence, Self-regulation)

*Transcendence*

(Awe/Wonder, Gratitude, Hope, Humor, Spirituality)

*From:* Adams, 2009; Banks & Gallagher, 2009; Banks & NØhr, 2012; Barsky, 2010, table 1.1: 29-30;

Clifford and Burke, 2009; Fowers & Davidov, 2005; McBeath & Webb, 2002;

Peterson & Seligman, 2004\*; Rhodes, 1983; Webster, 2011

**Constellation of Virtues That I Plan to Cultivate and Nurture**

Plan for next 3 months:

To gain more understanding of ­\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

To take action to practice expressing \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

To evaluate next steps (motivation, resources, barriers)

Date for Check-in with Partner (Contact Information):

Ultimate Goal in Life as Social Worker:

\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Virtue Ethics Reading List**

(Compiled by Anthony A. Bibus III, PhD, LISW: [bibus@augsburg.edu](mailto:bibus@augsburg.edu) January 2014)

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**Ethics Triangle**

**Principles/Rules =**

**Duty**

**SERVICE**

**Virtue Ethics**

**Utilitarian**

“Ethics Triangle” adapted from Svara, 2007, p. 68

**From Values to Virtues: Applying Virtue Ethics to Social Work**

Post-Workshop Quiz

*Circle the letter for the response that best answers or completes the item:*

1. The term “virtue ethics” refers most closely to which of the following descriptions:
2. A perspective in ethical decision-making that focuses on whether a particular decision would result in the best possible outcome or consequence for all affected.
3. A perspective in ethical decision-making that focuses on universal principles and then on ideal, impartial rules to determine one’s moral duty.
4. A perspective in ethical decision-making that focuses on the moral qualities, characteristics, or strengths of the person facing the decision.
5. None of the above.
6. Virtue ethics is a good fit with social work because:
   1. It focuses on holistic strengths of the social worker facing an ethical dilemma.
   2. It is flexible and responsive to the social, cultural and political contexts of an ethical dilemma.
   3. It emphasizes the overall integrity of the professional.
   4. All of the above.
7. Which of the following is **not** a limitation of virtue ethics?:
   1. It might not give specific guidance in a given dilemma.
   2. It focuses on the character and motivations of the person facing the ethical issue or dilemma.
   3. It needs to be supplemented by reference to norms, rules, laws or principles.
   4. Defining a virtuous act can appear circular: i.e., one is acting virtuously if one acts as a virtuous person would act.
   5. A virtuous act can result in a bad or harmful outcome.
8. Facing an ethical dilemma, virtue ethics would have us ask:
   1. “What kind of person (or social worker) do I want to be?”
   2. “What are my values?”
   3. “What are my motivations?”
   4. “What does a caring response require of me?”
   5. “What have I missed?”
   6. All of the above
9. Each of the following is an example of a virtue relevant to social work and related to each other as conceptualized by virtue ethics except:
   1. Skill in Paradoxical Interventions
   2. Courage
   3. Practical Wisdom
   4. Integrity
   5. Care

**Correct Answers for Quiz Items:**

#1 = **c**

#2 = **d**

#3 = **b**

#4 = **f**

#5 = **a**