
Ethical Decision Making: The Person in the Process

Marian Mattison

Ethical decisions made by social workers are shaped by the decision maker and the process used to resolve ethical dilemmas. Although systematic guidelines for resolving ethical dilemmas offer social workers a logical approach to the decision-making sequence, it is inevitable that discretionary judgments will condition the ultimate choice of action. Social workers are influenced by professional roles, practice experiences, individualized perspectives, personal preferences, motivations, and attitudes. Through reflective self-awareness social workers can recognize their value preferences and be alert to the ways in which these values unknowingly influence the resolution of ethical dilemmas. Understanding which values or ethical principles were given priority from among competing alternatives can inform social workers about their value patterning. This article challenges social workers to view current ethical decisions as linked to other ethical decisions they have made in the past or will make in the future. An approach to developing keener insight into value patterning is presented.

Key words: *ethical decision making; ethical dilemmas; moral dilemmas; values*

It is virtually impossible to pick up a newspaper, magazine, or professional journal today and not find attention being drawn to present controversies about moral or ethical issues. Concern about the morality of professionals focuses on questions of what is to be considered the “right,” “correct,” or “ethical” position to promote or action to take in a professional capacity. Moral responsibility (the obligation to “act correctly”) in actions by professionals is being scrutinized carefully. Increasingly, individual practitioners are being

held responsible for their choices of action (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996). The practice of social work is no exception. As social workers struggle with resolving moral dilemmas, pragmatic approaches to ethical decision making must be better linked to daily practice, and the decision makers themselves should be developing insight into how they typically respond to value conflicts. Although moral decision making in any given case involves a concentrated focus on the particular case details at hand, it should also include points of reflection both

throughout the process and in retrospect, to activate self-knowledge and insight for the social worker. Social workers can benefit from scrutinizing their value decisions to learn, for example, whether they tend to favor following rules or policies over exercising discretionary judgment. In what way is the social worker's decision typically shaped by the worker's role in the agency (direct services practitioner versus administrative role)? Is client self-determination an overriding value, or will the social worker's judgments of right versus wrong direct the ultimate choice of action?

This article attempts to apply the person-in-situation construct to ethical decision making. In addition, it calls for social workers to develop a greater awareness of self throughout the ethical reasoning process. As social workers are engaged in moral decision making, they are urged to be aware of and sensitive to the ways in which their value preferences continuously influence and pervade the process. As ethical dilemmas are resolved, social workers are encouraged to review the decision-making process. This review can provide feedback about individualized patterns of responding to ethical dilemmas. Social workers can then use this feedback to recognize the ways in which they typically respond to value choices in the course of working with clients. A pragmatic approach for gaining greater awareness of one's value preferences is presented. The social work practitioner is encouraged to use reflective self-awareness to make corrections or adjustments to influence future decisions that involve ethical tensions.

Competing Values and Competing Loyalties

Perhaps more than other professions, social work is concerned with values that give direction to its efforts (Noble & King, 1981). "Ethics refers to those rules of conduct that direct us to act in a manner consistent with the values we profess" (Lewis, 1982, p.12), and these rules are embodied in the *Code of Ethics* which "is intended to serve as a guide to the everyday professional conduct of social workers" (NASW, 1996, *Overview*). Although social workers will agree that core values such as client self-determination and the primacy of client interests are

ones to be actualized in practice, translating social workers' values into behavioral acts becomes less certain (Perlman, 1976). When two or more values are activated, it is unlikely that a person can behave in a manner that is equally compatible with each of them (Rokeach, 1973). For example, social workers have long struggled with decisions involving client self-determination (Freedberg, 1989). It is acknowledged that there is no universal application of the concept of self-determination; context and situational preferences lead to exceptions (Rothman, 1989). At what point should client self-determination take precedence over other competing values or obligations that apply? There may be points at which other social work values would be considered more primary than self-determination, in a given situation. Should a social worker honor a pregnant 14-year-old adolescent's right to self-determination, or is there an obligation to disclose the pregnancy to parents or guardians to protect the unborn child? Should an elderly client be returned to an environment that threatens his or her health and safety if he or she so chooses? Clearly there are times when client self-determination should be sacrificed when the social worker believes that the client's chosen course of action is not in the client's "best interests" or threatens the client's safety (Callahan, 1994). The social worker, acting under the obligation of beneficence (the obligation to promote "good" on behalf of clients), may select a course of action that the client opposes. This decision can result in paternalism, "a form of beneficence in which the helping person's concept of harms and benefits differ from those of the client and the helper's interpretation prevails" (Abramson, 1989, p. 102).

The Reality of Discretionary Judgment

Social workers in daily practice make a continuous series of treatment decisions, weighing the relative advantages and disadvantages of various alternatives or strategies. Favorable decisions ultimately are selected on the basis of acceptable practice theory in conjunction with the values of the profession, which, collectively, should guide social workers in their professional capacity. These values, or preferences for what is

good, desirable, or ethical, are systematically presented in a code of ethics that "prescribes and explains the obligations for good, right conduct on the part of professional members" (Siporin, 1982, p. 523). Although the new *Code of Ethics* "offers a set of values, principles, and standards to guide the decision making conduct when ethical issues arise, . . . it does not provide a set of rules that prescribe how social workers should act in all situations" (NASW, 1996, p. 2).

How social workers respond to ethical dilemmas depends, in part, on whether the ethical issues are distinguished from the practice issues and how the worker has learned to think about the ethical issues. The expectation that social

workers become familiar with "specific ethical standards to guide social workers' conduct and to provide a basis for adjudication" (NASW, 1996, *Overview*) is a foundation for ethical practice. Knowledge of the values, ethical standards, and ethical principles espoused in the *Code* equip the social worker with an appreciation of the complexities of the obligations. Yet the code does not specify which values

or principles the social worker should consider primary in cases of competing interests. For this, social workers must be accoutered with a framework or strategy to guide them in determining which principle, value, or obligation to honor foremost when ethical obligations conflict. For example, when a social worker is asked by a 14-year-old adolescent not to disclose her pregnancy to her parents, whose interests should the social worker consider foremost? Is the social worker's primary obligation to the adolescent and her right to self-determination? On what grounds can the disclosure of this confidential information be justified? To what extent might the disclosure of the information be in the adolescent's best interests, in the long run? Is this a circumstance in which the social worker "may limit clients' right to self-determination when, in the social workers' professional judgment, clients' actions or potential actions pose a serious, foreseeable, and imminent risk

to themselves or others?" (NASW, 1996, p. 7). When the needs of the adolescent, the interests of the unborn child, and those of the family system conflict, how does the social worker determine whose interests should ultimately be served? Although systematic guides for resolving ethical dilemmas offer social workers a logical approach to the decision-making process, to some extent, the use of discretionary judgments is inevitable.

Competing Value Tensions

Decisions regarding ethical questions are not made by social workers in an arbitrary manner; they are grounded in the conditions and factors

related to the decision maker, the situational circumstances, and the process itself. Ethical decisions involve not only distinguishing right from wrong, but also addressing the more troubling good/good or bad/bad variety of deliberations. Typically, the more troubling ethical decisions involve choosing from among possible choices of action, each of which offers poten-

tial benefits (good/good) or those in which each of the options at hand appears unattractive or undesirable (bad/bad) (Keith-Lucas, 1977). In either case, any option is never entirely satisfying.

Deontological and Teleological Approaches

Delineating the criteria on which moral decisions are made has been argued by philosophers and described in ethical theories throughout time. Two major groups of ethical theories have relevance to social workers in helping recognize and understand the principles on which ethical decisions are based. Although social workers do not normally talk in philosophical terms as they engage in ethical decision making, elements of deontological and teleological thinking operate and influence the decision-making process, whether knowingly or unknowingly. A brief discussion of the deontological and teleological perspectives and consideration of the ways in which each influences ethical choices deepens

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the discussion of judgments about the rightness and wrongness of professional behaviors.

In the professional training of social workers, a systems perspective highlights the broad understanding of multiple influences and calls for a consideration of the possible consequences that might result from any given intervention. Attention to weighing the potential consequences of proposed actions is central to the teleological school of thought. Decisions for action are made in relation to the consequences that may result; actions that result in greater degrees of good are valued or desired. Subsequently, actions can be justified on the basis of the consequences they create (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996) and the belief that the desired ends will be met, thereby justifying the means.

This focus on consequences, central to the teleological approach, contrasts sharply with the deontological approach, which maintains that fixed moral rules should dictate and define the rightness or wrongness of actions. Deontological thinking is grounded in the belief that actions, in and of themselves, can be determined to be right or wrong, good or bad, regardless of the consequences they produce (Reamer, 1995). From this philosophical perspective, adherence to rules is central. Once formulated, ethical rules should hold under all circumstances (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996). Thus, a social worker would not choose to abide by the rules under some circumstances and disregard them under others. The rules remain in place across all situations, and circumstantial factors do not serve to justify disregard for the rules. A social worker following a deontological approach will differ in the approach to ethical decision-making judgments compared with the social worker who values the weighing of potential consequences. An example will serve to illustrate these points.

Case Example

A 14-year-old adolescent who discloses in confidence that she is pregnant will serve as the reference point. Further investigation reveals that the adolescent intends to keep secret the pregnancy until she is past the legal limit for an abortion. At that point, she believes, her mother and stepfather will throw her out of the house;

this action will enable her to live with her maternal aunt. She asks the social worker to not disclose the pregnancy.

Absolutism versus Relativism

Clearly, every social worker will consider the "standards of care" that direct and guide the choices of action in this case or any other case. The social worker's actions should be consistent with "the way an ordinary, reasonable, and prudent professional would act under the same circumstances" (Reamer, 1994, p. 3). In addition, clinical judgments must be balanced against, and made in light of, legal considerations. With the rise of ethics complaints filed against social workers, the law is becoming an ever-increasing influence on social work practice. Social workers become legally and ethically vulnerable when they are unaware of the legislated responsibilities to which they will be held responsible (Bullis, 1995). For example, in this case the social worker must know the extent to which and under what conditions he or she is obligated to maintain client confidence and under what circumstances disclosure may be warranted. State law may require the practitioner to protect the information shared by the 14 year old. Yet, the social worker may determine that the duty to protect the unborn child outweighs the obligation to protect client confidence. It is not uncommon for social workers who have knowledge of the legal obligation to willfully violate this obligation to serve a perceived "greater good" (Mattison, 1994).

No doubt social workers unilaterally agree that the principles of confidentiality and a respect for a client's right to self-determination are core values to uphold. In this case the rule-oriented (deontological) social worker may feel duty bound to respect the client's right to self-determination. Overriding the obligation to maintain client confidentiality would not be a consideration. If the social worker accepts that the obligations to maintain and protect client confidence and to foster self-determination are central, it would be inherently wrong to violate these under any circumstances. The fact that the client is 14 does not change the imperative to uphold the rules, even if doing so results in harm to the client or client system.

For the social worker who views the situation from a relativistic perspective, the focus is on the consequences that may follow. The social worker attempts to balance the risks involved and is concerned with what might result from each of the proposed actions. This worker, with a teleological perspective, weighs and measures the consequences for the adolescent, the unborn child, the family system, the social worker, societal interests, and others potentially affected. Judgments about the correct course of action are made only after a thorough assessment of what might result from each option. Social workers attempt to weight the various obligations to which they are responsible and to evaluate the possible consequences of these actions, ultimately selecting the action that produces the preferred outcomes or benefits.

In the event that a liability case is brought against the social worker, alleging that the social worker failed to carry out duties properly, the social worker must be prepared to justify not only the action selected, but also the process and procedures followed in selecting the action. The client may claim that the disclosure of confidential information was an act of misfeasance, that the social worker performed "a proper act in a way that [was] harmful or injurious" (Barker, 1995, p. 237). Although the court may not go so far as to rule on what action a social worker should have taken, the social worker is responsible for documenting the systematic steps used in arriving at the decision. These steps must reflect the proper professional conduct expected of a professional social worker. For example, where indicated, the social worker must be able to produce documentation that consultation and supervision were sought, in keeping with expected practice guidelines (Reamer, 1994).

Guides for Ethical Decision Making

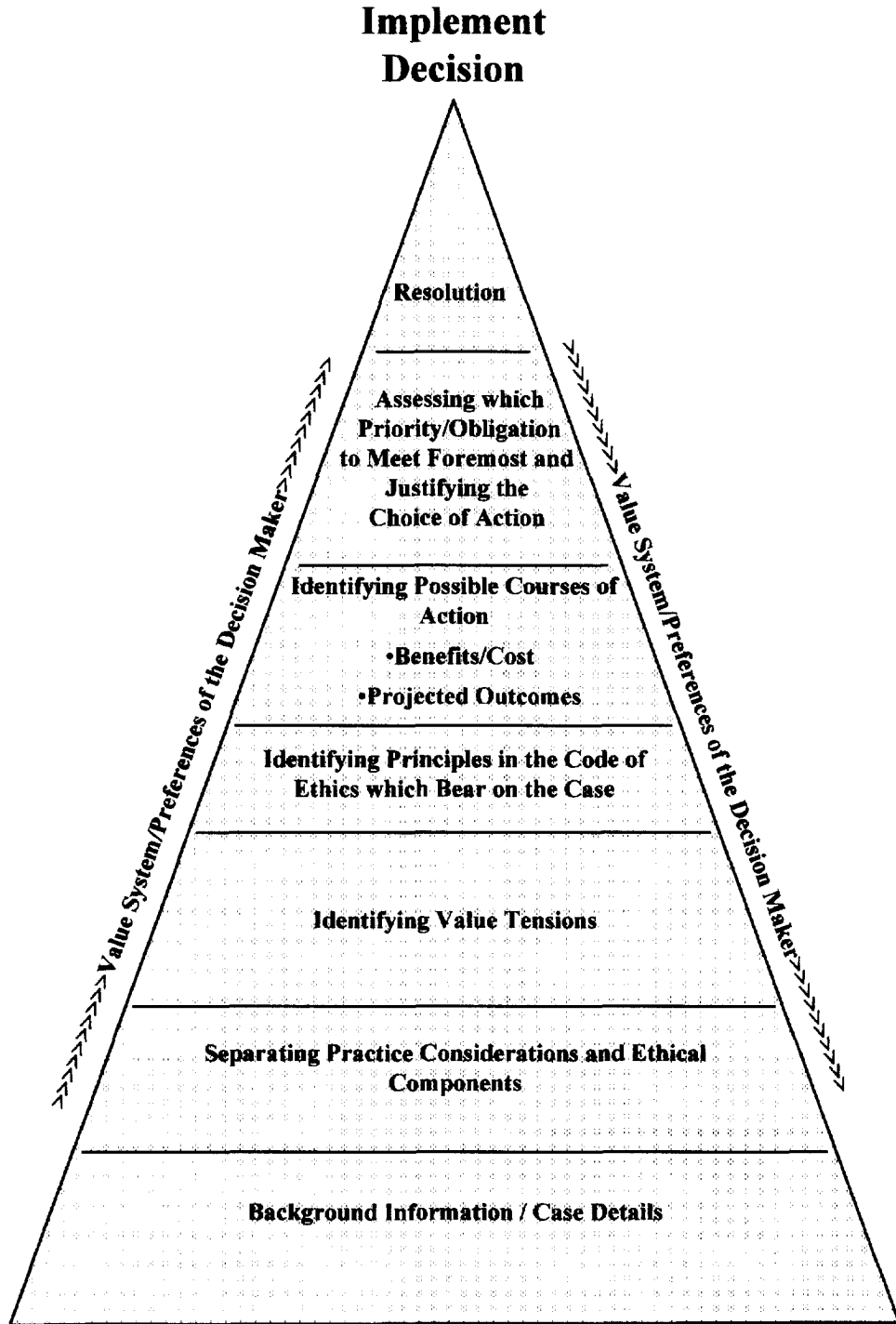
Ethical decision making in day-to-day practice must never be considered a discrete act or a task that is unremittingly logical or scientific by nature. Although theoretical and technical expertise both steer and direct professional practice, it is clear that there are aspects of social work that require thinking beyond scientific proficiency (Goldstein, 1987). In part, the process of

ethical decision making involves the systematic analysis of the dilemma by the individual decision maker. For this facet of the process, numerous guides offer social workers techniques to systematically analyze ethical dilemmas (Abramson, 1985; Lewis, 1984; Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1996; Pine, 1987; Reamer, 1990). These analytic tools attempt to move ethical decision making away from the intuitive and toward the cognitive by offering step-by-step approaches to ethical decision making. They are attempts to shift moral decisions made by social workers from the personal and subjective, to treat these decisions with the intellectual rigor afforded other social work decisions (Emmet, 1962). The goal is to build "intellectual moral resources," by ensuring that moral judgments are tied to reason and are supported by an intellectual base (Emmet). Documenting the process and procedures used in making a decision may be critical to justifying a person's action in a court of law (Reamer, 1994). All too often social workers are unfamiliar with the obligations set forth in the code and have little or no training in the systematic analysis of ethical dilemmas (Mattison, 1994).

I have devised a model for analyzing ethical dilemmas (shown in Figure 1). The process begins as the social worker fully explores case details and gathers needed information to understand holistically the client's current circumstance. Social workers must pay attention to ethnic-based traditions and the ways "in which members of various ethnic groups are likely to define and cope with problems" (Schlesinger & Devore, 1995, p. 906). Might the pregnancy be a tradition that is ethnically based? The analysis progresses as the social worker carefully distinguishes the practice aspects of the case from the ethical considerations. In the case of the 14-year-old pregnant adolescent, the practice considerations may involve questions such as "Which treatment modalities should be used?" "Were the limits of confidentiality explicitly reviewed?" "Is the practitioner familiar with empirically based knowledge about the physical, emotional, and financial consequences of adolescent pregnancies?" The ethical components involve questions such as "To what extent should client self-determination be actualized

Figure 1

Framework to Analyze Ethical Dilemmas



in practice?" "Is a 14-year-old psychologically capable of carrying? Should a 14-year-old carry a child without the supervision of guardians?" "Whose interests should be served foremost, those of the adolescent, those of the unborn child, or those of the family system?"

The analysis continues as the value tensions are identified explicitly. In the adolescent pregnancy case, the value tensions may include the social worker's duty to maintain client confidence versus serving the perceived best interests of the family system; the adolescent's right of self-determination versus the parents' right to know that their daughter is pregnant; the adolescent's right to autonomy versus the

health and safety needs of the unborn child; and the legal obligations regarding the protection or disclosure of the confidential information versus the moral obligation to serve "the best interests of the adolescent" (additional value tensions might be identified). In analyzing ethical dilemmas, the social worker must reference the *Code of Ethics* to identify and evaluate which obligations the code addresses and the specific obligations to

which the worker is obliged. Next, as part of the ethical assessment, the decision maker projects, weighs, and measures the possible courses of action that seem reasonable and the potential consequences of these. For example, if the social worker were to disclose the information against the expressed wishes of the adolescent, what consequences might result for the adolescent, family members, the maternal aunt, or the social worker? In what ways will the interests of the social worker be affected by a failure to abide by any legal obligations that might bear on the case? The costs and benefits to various choices of actions will differ for each individual involved. After a scrupulous assessment of these obligations, the social worker must select an action. Resolving the ethical dilemma ultimately involves determining which of the competing obligations or values to honor foremost. It is the nature of an ethical dilemma that meet-

ing one or more of the obligations comes at the expense of satisfying others. The resolution stage follows; the social worker selects a choice of action based on the outcomes of the assessment and must be prepared to justify the decision. (For a more detailed case example using this model, see McGowan & Mattison, 1998.)

Self-Awareness

Beyond the "scientific" phase, a comprehensive approach to ethical decision making must embrace consideration of the decision maker. The process of decision making is forged by the prejudices and prejudgments brought to the decision-making process by the decision maker (Abramson, 1996). The value system and preferences of the decision maker shape the entire assessment process and influence each step and ultimately the choice of action selected (Figure 1). In the case of the 14-year-old who shares, in confidence, that she is pregnant, the social worker's views on adolescent pregnancy inevitably will factor into the decision making. Weighing the parents' right to know versus

As part of the ethical assessment, the decision maker projects, weighs, and measures the possible courses of action and the potential consequences of these.

the adolescent's right to have her confidentiality protected will be influenced by the social worker's personal and professional experiences. The technical aspects of the ethical decision-making process take shape only as they are applied in practice through the individual lens of the decision maker. Initially, the reasoning process helps the decision maker establish, understand, and organize the complex facts related to the particular situation. Yet there is general agreement in the literature that the ultimate decision for resolving an ethical dilemma lies in the circumstances and the value system or preferences of the decision maker (Keith-Lucas, 1977).

The Person-in-Situation Construct and Ethical Decision Making

We know well, from our understanding of human behavior, the extent to which the context

of the environment shapes and defines behavior. It follows, with regard to ethical issues, that social workers themselves are likely to be influenced by their "prior socialization, and developmental stages as well as situational factors, including the immediate organizational or professional context, characteristics of their work roles, and overall organizational culture" (Holland & Kilpatrick, 1991, p. 143). The practitioners' decision making is sensitized by their cultural background and beliefs, which often inadvertently cast judgments on the rightness or wrongness of attitudes and behaviors. Stereotypes and biases, which are not made explicit by the practitioner, undoubtedly will influence professional conduct (Frankena, 1980). A contemporary approach to social work ethics must center "holistically" on the decision maker in the context of the decision-making process, including recognizing and accounting for the cultural perspectives of the client, which may vary widely from those of the social worker. Acknowledging that the client's value orientation may conflict with the professional and personal beliefs held by the social worker can remind the practitioner to consciously consider whose interests are being served. Abramson (1996) called for social workers to be "ethically aware." The challenge is to use ethical self-reflection to learn about oneself as an ethical decision maker. Because it is the character, conscience, personal philosophy, attitudes, and biases of the decision maker that ultimately give rise to the choice of action (Abramson, 1996), we must learn more about our individualized ethical stances.

Individualized Decision-Making Styles

The research demonstrates that social workers indeed develop individualized styles or patterns of responding to moral dilemmas (Holland & Kilpatrick, 1991). Holland and Kilpatrick documented a number of variables associated with individualized decision-making styles. The authors suggested that some social workers adhere more consistently to policies and laws that are relevant to a situation, whereas others emphasize means or outcomes as more essential to selecting a choice of action. Some social workers honor client self-determination over benefi-

cence as a routine value orientation. Clearly, a social worker's organizational role in the agency (direct service versus administrative) strongly influences the priorities that the social worker emphasizes in ethical decision making. Such value patterning must be brought to the conscious awareness of the decision maker. It is the responsibility of the social worker to know how contextual influences such as agency role, judgments about right versus wrong, and principles and philosophies filter unknowingly into the ethical decisions the social worker makes. Because "a person always enters the ethical decision making process in midstream, influenced by his or her past experience . . . the ideal goal is to come to an ethical decision through a personal equilibrium in which emotion and reason are both activated and in accord" (Callahan, 1988, p. 91).

For social workers struggling to resolve ethical dilemmas, there is a lack of information about what constitutes sound professional practice. Reasonable practitioners disagree on what a social worker should do in a given case situation and whether the social worker's actions constitute a violation of the standards of care to which the social worker is held responsible (Reamer, 1994). No where does the profession provide case references or formal opinions about what constitutes appropriate professional conduct. The absence of such practice standards leaves social workers without reference points as they address complex questions regarding professional ethics (Jayaratne, Croxton, & Mattison, 1997), resulting in social workers being left to interpret individually the boundaries of ethical behavior. Practicing social workers voice concerns and ambivalence about what constitutes sound ethical practice and express a desire for such reference points against which to measure the appropriateness of their practice decisions and behaviors (Mattison, 1994).

Developing insight into one's value patterning can be the result of social workers making ethical decisions in daily practice and continuously reflecting on the decision-making sequence as well as the outcomes of the process. Social workers can benefit from viewing ethical decisions as related to other ethical decisions

that they have made in the past and will make in the future.

Figure 2 illustrates a decision-making sequence that integrates continuous reflection. Purposeful attention to reflection and self-awareness are essential throughout the ethical decision-making process. As the social worker engages in the process, consideration of his or her value preferences must be in the practitioner's conscious awareness. Thoughtful engagement in ethical decision making involves an assessment of the case details with attention to identifying the ethical tensions. Responding to the ethical dilemma requires that social workers recognize the ethical components and distinguish these from the more familiar practice aspects of their work (Joseph, 1985). How social workers respond to ethical dilemmas is conditioned by their ability to see the value components as separate from the practice aspect of the case details. In this process the social worker isolates ethical precepts to which he or she is obligated. As the process proceeds, detecting the ways in which factors such as the social worker's organizational role, personal values, exceptional client circumstances, and professional obligations influence the choices of action must be considered.

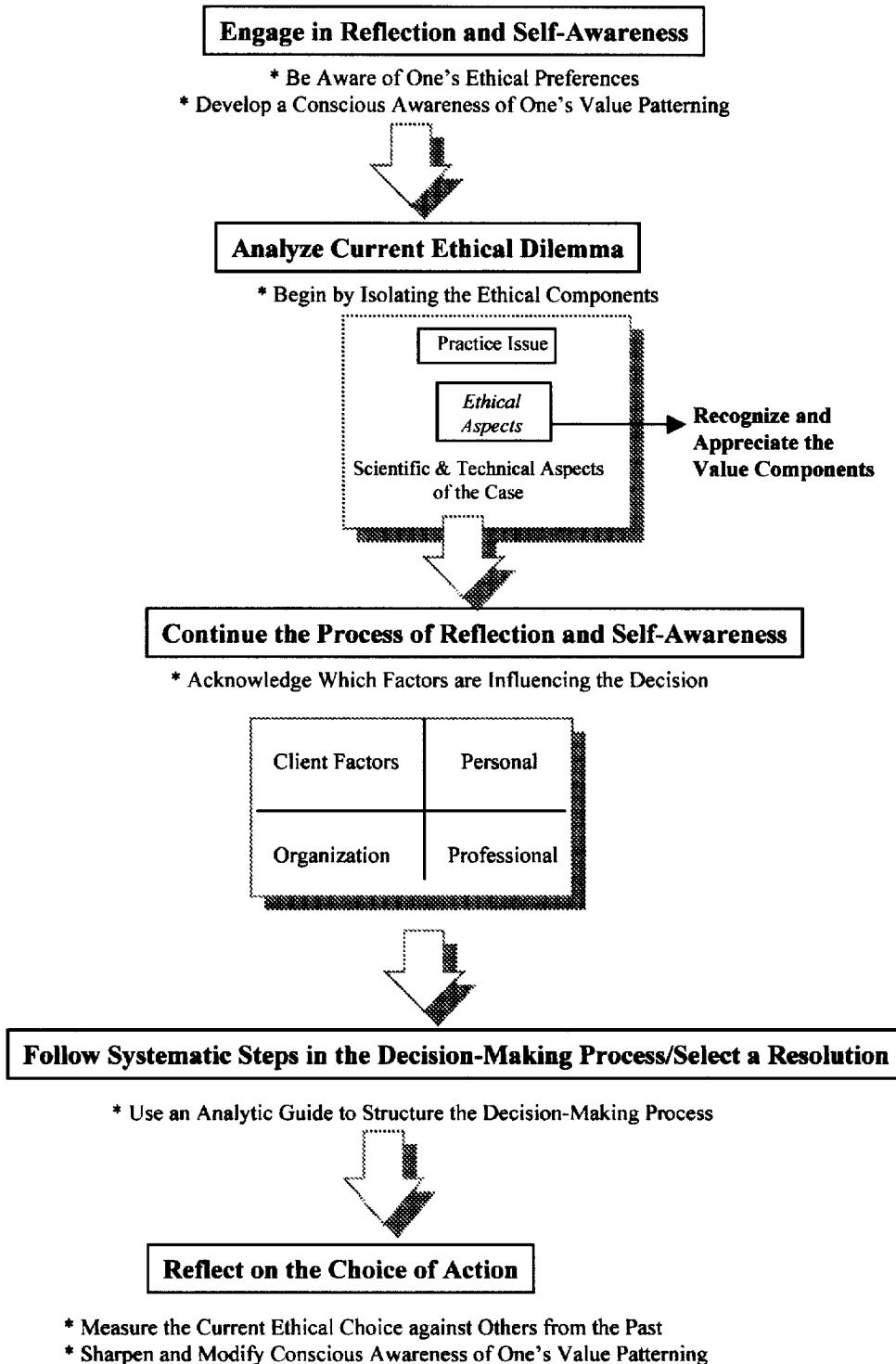
To structure the ethical decision-making process, social workers use an analytic guide (as described in Figure 1) to judge which obligation is more important to honor in a particular case and which value should outweigh the others in importance. Throughout the process, as the choice of action is being selected, justified, and implemented, there is a benefit to social workers reviewing their value preferences in relation to the case. Understanding which values or ethical principles were given priority from among the competing alternatives can inform the social worker about value patterning. This knowledge can be measured against other value choices that the practitioner has made in the past.

After an ethical decision has been made, social workers can benefit by reflecting on their value preferences in the particular case. A practical way for social workers to learn more about their value orientation begins by responding to a series of questions such as those suggested below. As social workers compare their responses

from case to case, they should see patterns of responding. This feedback can inform social workers about their individualized approaches to ethical dilemmas.

1. To what extent did my personal values or philosophies influence the preferred choice of action?
 - I was aware of my personal biases or preferences and attempted to keep these from unduly influencing the outcome.
 - I had not considered the extent to which my personal values may have influenced the ultimate decision.
2. To what extent did the legal obligation influence my decision in this case?
 - Not at all
 - Somewhat
 - Was a deciding factor in my decision
3. Was I willing to act outside of legal obligations if doing so meant serving the client's best interests?
 - My legal obligation took precedence over all other obligations.
 - If the legal obligation does not serve my client's interests, I am not bound to apply the legal rule above other interests.
4. To what extent did adhering to agency policy influence my decision in this case?
 - Not at all
 - Somewhat
 - Was a deciding factor in my decision.
5. If agency policy conflicted with other obligations to the client, was I willing to act outside of agency policy?
 - My first obligation is to the agency.
 - Agency policy may not take precedence in all case circumstances.
6. To what extent did my role in the agency influence my choice of action? (Do you believe that your choice of action might be different if you were an administrator or direct practice social worker?)
 - My choice of action was strongly influenced by my agency role.
 - My choice of action was somewhat influenced by my agency role.
 - I would have made the same decision regardless of my role in the agency.

Figure 2
Cycle of Reflection



7. If the case involved a conflict between client self-determination and paternalism, which value did I judge to be more essential to honor foremost?
 - Client self-determination was the overriding value to uphold.
 - Client self-determination was secondary to my professional judgment regarding what I believed to be the preferred choice of action for the client.
8. In selecting a choice of action in this case, I viewed as more important
 - evaluating possible costs and benefits to the client and client system for each of the various choices of action.
 - strict adherence to procedural practices (adherence to laws and policies).

Conclusion

Each ethical decision made in practice can be linked to others by conceptualizing the decisions as related to one another over time. Decision maker bring to the process a proclivity toward selecting choices of action that are in line with their personal preferences, professional roles, commitment to laws and policies, practice experience, motivations, attitudes, and other individualized perspectives. Social workers are challenged to contemplate their value perspectives, which subtly and often unknowingly influence their resolutions of ethical dilemmas. Developing an awareness of value preferences is then used by the social worker to understand better the effect of these values on the resolution of ethical dilemmas. Social workers can be alert to their preferences and can take steps to compensate for and balance the influence of value preferences in future ethical decision making. ■

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