

## Straight Talk about Professional Ethics

Kim Strom-Gottfried, Ph.D.

Smith P. Theimann, Jr. Distinguished  
Professor of Ethics and Professional  
Practice

School of Social Work,  
UNC-Chapel Hill

[stromgot@email.unc.edu](mailto:stromgot@email.unc.edu)

(919) 962-6495

[www.formoralcourage.com](http://www.formoralcourage.com)



---

---

---

---

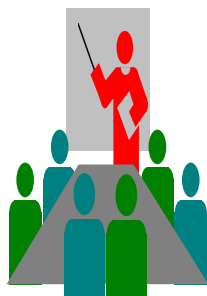
---

---

---

---

## Plan for the Session



- Introductions and Overview
- Ethical dilemmas
- The NASW Code
- Core ethical standards
- Ethical decision making
- Acting on ethics: Moral courage
- Applying the concepts
- Wrap-up and evaluation

---

---

---

---

---

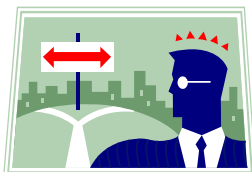
---

---

---

## Ethics

Ethics involve our sense of what is right and wrong, what should and should not be done in certain situations in our personal lives and in our professional work.



- Ethical dilemmas are not right vs. wrong

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Five Sources of Ethical Dilemmas

- When standards conflict with each other
- When standards conflict with institutional demands
- When there are conflicting loyalties
- When good solutions seem unattainable
- When a professional finds it difficult to adhere to an ethical standard



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### The NASW Code of Ethics



- 1<sup>st</sup> Unified Code 1965
- Revisions 1979, mid-80s, early 90s, 1996, 1999
- Aspirational and enforceable tenets
- Application beyond membership
- Opportunities for errors of omission as well as commission

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Six Purposes of the NASW Code



- Identify core values
- Summarize ethical principles and specific standards to guide practice
- Identify relevant factors when obligations conflict or uncertainties arise
- Inform the general public for professional accountability
- Socialize new practitioners
- Articulate standards that the profession can use to assess unethical conduct.

---

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

### Features of the NASW Code

- Six Core Values & Ethical Principles
  - Service
  - Social Justice
  - Dignity & Worth of the Person
  - Importance of Human Relationships
  - Integrity
  - Competence
- 155 Standards
  - Organized by responsibilities to clients, colleagues, practice settings, as professionals, to the profession, to society
- Not hierarchical



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Core Ethical Standards

- Self-Determination /Autonomy
- Informed Consent
- Professional Competence
- Conflicts of Interest
- Dual and Sexual Relationships
- Privacy and Confidentiality
- Supervision
- Nondiscrimination
- Professionalism



---

---

---

---


---

---

---

---

### Ethical Action or Reaction?



---

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

### Sample Dilemmas

- A SW suggests, for efficiency, having supervisory meetings over lunch at a local café.
- A client complains to her new SW that her previous worker (the SW's supervisor) was "horrible" and "just didn't get it" about cultural differences.
- A SW, enjoying a large cold beer at a local blues festival, runs into two of her teen clients.
- A SW on a home visit about truancy is greeted with a meal and the entire extended family present.



---

---

---

---


---

---

---

---

### Ethical Decision Making Model ( It's more than codes and laws)



- **Who**
  - can be of help?
- **What**
  - are my choices?
- **When**
  - have I made a similar decision?
- **Where**
  - do principles, standards, laws and policies lead me?
- **Why**
  - am I choosing this option?
- **How**
  - will I carry it out?

---

---

---

---

---


---

---

---

### Who?

- Consultation
  - Supervisor
  - Colleagues
  - Specialists
  - Resources
  - Generate options, evaluate options, plan process, practice, debrief
- Before or after
- Inappropriate resources and required discretion



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### What?



- Generate alternatives, including non-action
- Pros and cons? For whom?
- Timing
- Fit with principles:
  - Beneficence, nonmaleficence
  - Justice
  - Fidelity
  - Veracity

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### When?



- Examine past dilemmas
  - Effective?
  - If not why not?
- How is this similar to past choices?
- How is it different?
- Have personal “policies” been developed for this issue?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Where?



- Codes: NASW, Licensure Boards, Accrediting bodies
- Laws and rules: Case, administrative, agency policies
- Principles:
- Standards: practice standards, ethical standards, NASW
- The dilemma of multiple destinations

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Why?

- Examine motives
- Self-understanding
- The right thing for the wrong reason
  - Misapplication of valid concepts
  - Self-interest
  - Counter-transference
  - Relativism
- Principle of publicity



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### How?

- Process matters!
- Consider ultimate objectives
- Use social work knowledge and skills
  - Human behavior
  - Strategy
  - Empathy
  - Communication
  - Culture



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### Moral Courage



- Action in the face of fears
  - Different forms of courage
  - Different forms of costs
- “It takes a great deal of bravery to stand up to our enemies, but just as much to stand up to our friends” (Dumbledore, in Rowling)
- Without it, what are any other virtues worth?

---

---

---

---

---

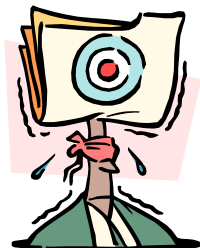
---

---

---

### Challenges to Ethical Action

- Lack of awareness
- Discomfort
- Fear of exposure
- Sense of futility
- “Groomed for submission”
- Confusion/complexity
- Complacency/Apathy
- Personal cost
- Bystander effect



---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

### The Costs of Inaction



- Personal
- Professional
- Organizational
- Societal
- Moral cowardice

---

---

---

---

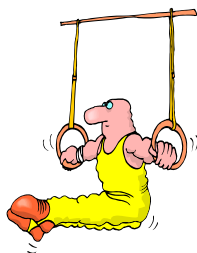
---

---

---

---

### Practice through Dialogue



- Who?
- What?
- When?
- Where?
- Why ?
- How?

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

## Seven Favorite Resources

- [www.globlethics.org](http://www.globlethics.org) (*Ethics Newsline*)
- Cohen, R. (2002). *The good, the bad and the difference: How to tell right from wrong in everyday situations*. NY: Doubleday.
- Doherty, W. J. (1995). *Soul-searching: When psychotherapy must promote moral responsibility*. New York: Basic Books.
- Houston-Vega, M. K., Nuehring, E. M., & Daguio, E. R. (1997). *Prudent practice: A guide for managing malpractice risk*. Washington, D.C.: NASW Press.
- Kidder, R. M. (1995). *How good people make tough choices: Resolving the dilemmas of ethical living*. NY: Simon and Schuster.
- Strom-Gottfried, K. J. (2007). *Straight talk about professional ethics*. Chicago: Lyceum
- Yalom, I. (1996). *Lying on the couch*. New York: Harper Perennial.

---

---

---

---

---

---

---

---