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# Ethics in Field Education:
# Promise, Pretension, or Practice?

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*Ethics are the foundation of every profession. Field education is central to the education of professional social workers. There is a consensus among educators that field education should include ethics education. The field education literature pays lip service to the importance of ethics. Ethical practice is being taught in field education in a cursory manner. Reasons for the discrepancy between promise and practice are discussed. Suggestions are made for including ethics education in the field.*

## Introduction

Nowhere is ethical guidance more essential, and nowhere is ethical content less prominent than in field education. Ethics are the foundation of the profession. Professions were initiated on faith. Faith became ideology. Ideology is accompanied by a set of ethics which are binding on the practitioner. These ethics direct the professional to achieve certain values through the practice of the profession (Argyris & Schon, 1974). Yet, as the founding work experience for many students, and as the founding instructional work experience for all students, field education does not include systematic instruction in ethical professional practice.

Attention to ethics is important in field education because ethics are a major building block of the professional paradigm (Schon, 1983). Social work, in particular, touts ethics as a crucial aspect of practice (Greenwood, 1957; Lowenberg & Dolgoff, 1988;

Reamer, 1994). Since field education is the arena in which the values of the profession are learned through supervised practice with an education purpose, it is logical to think that field education is the place to locate an important portion of a student's education in ethics.

There is ample evidence to the contrary. There is scant literature on ethics in field education. For example, between 1983 and 1993 there were forty-nine articles published on field education in the *Journal of Social Work Education* and the *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*. Of these, none had ethics in field education as a topic (Raskin, 1994). Raskin's Delphi study of field instruction found strong consensus that "Students should be prepared to engage in conscience, knowledge, and value guided practice," but no consensus that "Ethical issues are adequately covered in field instruction" (pp. 82–83). In a situation which produces more raw data for ethical argumentation than perhaps any other in the career of a social work student, the opportunity for ethical debate is missed, the conclusions undrawn, and the literature unwritten.

An article "Training Graduate Students to Deal With Ethical Issues" (Swazey, Seashore Louis, & Anderson, 1994) reports that in a survey of 4,000 respondents:

> "88 percent of the faculty respondents and 82 percent of the students surveyed believe that such 'ethical preparedness' should be an important function of their academic departments and universities, (but) only a minuscule proportion (4 percent of faculty members and 3 percent of students) think that their departments take a very active role in this area" (p. B2).

There are several reasons for this discrepancy between the need for ethics education in field placements and the absence of same. One factor is the "soft ground" of social work values, in which the profession has yet to clearly enunciate the ethical precepts of social work (Reid and Bilups, 1986). We teach problem solving in our practice courses, and dilemmas which cannot be solved in our ethics classes. Dilemmas must be tolerated. Problems can be solved.

Another important reason is the supposition held by many that the ethical questions of social work are answered in one document. Most social work professionals have a stock answer

when it comes to questions of ethics: Consult the NASW Code of Ethics. This is an inadequate answer based on an inaccurate judgement.

Another reason is the ethical confusion with which field education is itself practiced. Our stated mission is to address the problems of the poor and the oppressed, yet many placements do not address this mission. It is important that social work students be supervised by social work professionals, yet many are supervised by others. It is said that the field instructor knows the student's performance best, yet in many schools the faculty liaison awards the grade. As faculty liaisons, are we bridge builders or gatekeepers? Are the students in the role of apprentice or in the role of customer? The professions system of field education must do more to address the competing values faced by students in a changing practice environment. ·

## The Place of Ethics in Field Education

Ethics is the art of valuing. It is the process of deciding what is good and what is bad for people in relationship to others. Ethics consists of placing priority on one action over another. According to Frederic Reamer (1993), social work has a long way to go in developing a moral philosophy. This may help to explain why social work students are not being taught to make ethical judgements in field placements. Field instructors may not themselves be clear about what constitutes an ethical decision. "Although social workers now have a reasonably good grasp of the diverse ethical dilemmas that arise in practice, much work remains to be done to appreciate ethical nuance, dissect ethical issues that are embedded in practice, and apply ethical theories" (Reamer, 1993).

Jenkins and Sheafor (1982) identify six components of field education, including knowledge, competence, *ethics* (emphasis supplied), commitment, a personal style of practice, and the agency context. Even though ethics is identified as one of the major components of field education in their introductory essay, the contributors of this edited volume devote almost no space to a discussion of the role of ethics, referring the reader to the NASW Code of Ethics. This is a consistent pattern among field education writers up to and including the most recent publications. Royce, Dhooper,

and Rompf (1993), for example, mention ethics as important in field education, then refer students to the Code of Ethics for guidance.

The teaching of ethics in field education has been reduced to instructing students in the profession's Code of Ethics. Since the message and the unassailable authority of the Code appears self-evident, the mention of the Code moves the agenda on to the next item. It closes the discussion. It masks the presence of conflict. Rather than stimulating debate and encouraging the development and exercise of professional judgement, the reference to the Code may have the reverse effect. Rather than teaching the process of ethical discussion and reasoning, compliance with a Code of Ethics may stifle competence in this area.

## The Place of the NASW Code of Ethics in Field Education

There are serious limitations to the NASW Code of Ethics as a primary reference to resolve ethical problems as they occur in student field placements. The Code reflects two cardinal values; empowerment and social change. In order to achieve the goals of empowerment and social change, certain assumptions must be made. First it must be assumed that the profession of social work produces empowerment when practiced ethically and effectively. Second, that meaningful social change is possible within our existing institutional and political systems.

These values, when combined with these assumptions, give rise to two contradictions which tend to stifle debate among scholars, practitioners and students. Firstly, it claims empowerment as a primary goal. Yet by assuming the current social and political structure, there is no room in the Code to consider the disempowering aspects of our system. By empowering the student through the trapping of professionalism, is the client empowered as well? Our system of government; some would argue, promulgates the disempowering of a substantial portion of the citizenry, yet the Code of Ethics is silent on this issue. The Code fails to provide an ethical and political framework for social work field education. It is of limited practical value in resolving ethical issues. It is misleading because it tried to define a set of unified values in a profession with many competing points of view (Rhodes, 1991).

## Alternative Approaches to the
## NASW Code of Ethics

The alternative choice for addressing ethical social work issues is the competing values model. Social workers have diverse beliefs which reflect different and sometimes conflicting ethical and political positions and systems of thought. The competing values model is based on dialogue, debate, and the public examination of the process of learning to live with moral ambiguity and ethical decision making in a complex and challenging social environment. Ann Fleck-Henderson (1991) calls these the pervasive and discrete alternatives, one focusing on the development and presence of universal rules or guidelines, the other focusing on the resolution of particular practice dilemmas through the resolution of discrete conflicts.

Ethical dialogue developed by Margaret Rhodes (1991) is a proponent of the competing values/discrete alternative model. This alternative admits to the presence of conflicts in social work practice which are impossible to resolve cleanly and clearly in a manner which pleases everyone. Ann Fleck-Henderson (1991) describes this method in five steps. First, construct a moral dilemma. Next, address the question of responsibility. Third, resolution of the dilemmas is achieved, not necessarily by reaching a clear decision, but by identifying the focus of control as being intrapsychic, interpersonal, or environmental, or some combination of all three. As Fleck-Henderson makes clear, this process is based on the theoretical work of three researchers on moral decision making: The social psychological traditions of Lawrence Kohlberg, Albert Bandura, and Stanley Milgram, respectively. The fourth step is to act upon the dilemma. The final step is to justify the action.

## The Application of Ethical Decision
## Making to Field Education

As an illustration of ethical dialogue in field education, a case will be offered which presents several difficult problems. While the reader may identify multiple dilemmas in the following scenario, the authors have chosen to highlight two dilemmas in particular. They are the dilemmas of contracting and of grading in field education.

Contracting is familiar to everyone. It is taught in social work practice classes. It is practiced in field education. It holds the promise of rationalizing the process of field education. It can become a battleground for the right to establish guilt or innocence. Contracting holds the promise of accountability.

Grading in field education is the process which determines success or failure. A passing grade means progress to the next level. A failing grade in field education means serious delays in progress toward graduation, and often results in the termination of the student's relationship to the school. A failing grade in field education questions the student's suitability to the profession.

The case for consideration is as follows: *A popular and extroverted first year social work student is placed in a family counseling agency. The field instructor is a seasoned MSW with previous field instruction experience. The faculty liaison is a competent faculty member with extensive clinical experience.*

*There is mild concern about the student's performance expressed by the field instructor at the end of the first semester. At the beginning of the second semester, the field instructor presses the student to begin seeing clients. The student begged off during the first semester, saying that he wanted to be fully oriented to the agency and the nature of the work prior to being assigned clients. He had instead observed several of the field instructor's sessions.*

*The student continues to balk at actually seeing clients, suggesting more observation, this time with other workers in the agency. He also wants to do an analysis of the length of the waiting period and drop out rate of prospective clients in conjunction with the clinical director, and at the urging of his research professor. The field instructor stands firm. One client must be engaged by the student from intake to closure before the end of the semester. This is an item in the student's learning contract.*

*The student continues to decline referrals, and has begun his study of the waiting list with the clinical director and two of the other students at the agency without telling the field instructor. The field instructor discovers the student's involvement in the study. Two months before the end of the semester, the field instructor terminates the placement and recommends a no credit to the faculty liaison.*

*The faculty liaison decides to award an incomplete, with the provision that the student repeat the entire second semester of his field*

*placement. The student appeals. The Graduate Professional Review Committee is convened. Testimony is heard from the student, the field instructor, the faculty liaison, and several faculty who wish to testify to the general good character and fine potential of the student. The review committee recommends that the student receive credit for the course, based on a technical point of due process. The student was not warned in writing and given a chance to respond in writing prior to the expulsion from the placement, as outlined in the field education notebook. The Director of the School takes this advisory recommendation and awards the student full course credit.*

*If the faculty liaison does not support the field instructor in awarding a no credit she runs the risk of alienating the field instructor. The field instructor may refuse to be a field instructor in the future, thus depriving the School and future students the opportunity of working with her. By assigning this student an incomplete and having the case go to a Graduate Professional Review Committee, the faculty member, the field instructor and the School comes under public scrutiny.*

*Because the student has the right to a faculty advocate, there is at least one faculty member who, by nature of their role, will have a conflicting relationship to that of the liaison and the field instructor. Finally, the process takes the right to assign a grade out of the hands of the faculty member. The grade assigned was not that which was determined to be the proper grade by the faculty member. The faculty member is now in conflict with the Director.*

For those who advocate a "student as consumer" stance, it could be argued that the customer is always right, and that the real responsibility should reside with the student to determine what he wants and needs to learn in field placement.

The faculty member is aiming to do the right thing, and must do so based on her own concept of right and wrong. What is right for this faculty liaison is something with which she must live. But what is right for her, in terms of her own values and experiences and her own interpretation of her actions, is only part of the story. She must also do what she interprets is right as interpreted by the actors in the scenario. To do otherwise is to jeopardize her standing in this particular community of scholars. "Professional programs, such as social work . . . have made sufficient progress to develop criteria for behavior and, indeed . . . , there is considerable debate and frustration over the ethics and limits of evaluating

students' values and behavior" (Cobb & Jordan, 1989, p. 91). Also, she must do the right thing according to the policies and procedures of the school.

## Contracting

Contracting is a policy in most field education programs. Every field education program in the country has some form of goal setting and evaluation of student performance as components of the overall program. Contracting is an appealing method for goal setting because it involves the student directly, requires negotiation and compromise between the student, the field instructor, and the faculty liaison, and provides a written basis for later evaluation of student performance. This is in keeping with the role systems model of supervision, which contrasts with previously popular models of apprenticeship and the growth model, as described in Wijnberg and Schwartz (1977).

The apprenticeship model as applied to our example would interpret the problem as a failure to honor the prerogative of the field instructor to exercise professional judgement regarding the student's performance. The growth model sees a therapeutic function in field supervision. Identifying and encouraging the need for change in the personality of the student was, and in some circles still is, seen as a legitimate function of field education. This perspective would view the student as resistant and defensive, and would probably lead to a recommendation that the student enter therapy to resolve her problem. The role systems model recognizes the multiple roles, relationships, and tasks shared by the student, the liaison, and the field instructor. In this model the attempt is made to objectify performance criteria, and place shared responsibility for communication, task completion, and evaluation upon all parties, including the student. While this latest model of supervision has the advantage of acknowledging the dynamic nature of the supervision process, with shifting needs, shifting demands, and shifting skills depending on the stage of the task relationships, it has the disadvantage of obfuscating the locus of authority, the responsibility for assigning student intern tasks and the basis of evaluation.

Is the student equally responsible for developing the learning contract? Can't the student modify the contract later if it proves

unsuitable to her learning needs? Also, if the learning contract is the basis of evaluation, does this nullify all of the other documents and criteria spelled out in other locations? For example, the graduate student handbook, the school bulletin, the syllabus, the field education manual, and the field instructor's written evaluation are just some of the sources that criteria for the evaluation of the field education can be found. Must the student meet all of the criteria in all of these documents? And what happens if they conflict? They often do.

Is it the faculty liaison's responsibility to identify all of the various places that evaluation criteria for performance in field education reside? If the student meets the criteria set in the learning contract, yet fails to meet some other test of performance or ethical standard, should the student fail the placement? Contracting is an effort to identify and establish mutual agreement as to the evaluation criteria that all parties to the field placement experience must meet for the placement to be successful. But unless this process is properly placed in a context of all potential sources of evaluation, and carries the weight of authority, it is nothing but an empty exercise in false pretense.

Learning contracts play a limited, variable role in the evaluation of students and therefore should not be misrepresented to the students as a reliable, binding, mutually agreeable sole source of performance criteria.

In this case, the contract was a factor in the original decision to justify the termination of the placement, but was not a factor in the ultimate decision by those in power. There are multiple and potentially shifting sources of student evaluation in field education. One of the problems with having the responsibility for judging student performance taken out of the hands of the faculty immediately involved in the process is that politics and external pressures are more easily brought to bear. It becomes easy to lose sight of the original issues in the case. As students have gained more power over the grading process through such avenues as learning contracts and appeal procedures with the protection of due process, it becomes more possible for students to overturn the evaluation process by appealing to the administration, external review boards, popular opinion, and ultimately by threatening legal action.

## Grading

Grading is difficult enough to accomplish with accuracy and fairness within the confines of a classroom. In field education, the ability to limit uncontrolled variables is much more challenging. Perhaps the most confounding situation is the field instructor/faculty liaison/student triad. The problem occurs when either the field instructor or the faculty liaison believes it necessary to assign a failing grade. The possibility for alliances between the student and one or the other of the supervisors is high.

What is the goal of grading in field education? Is it to promote learning by contributing to the competency of the student? Is it to protect future clients by being gatekeepers of the profession? Or is it to provide a rating system to future employers?

Assignment of passing, incomplete or failing grades is made difficult by criteria that is soft and variable. In fact, programs often employ a pass/fail rating because there is not enough objective data for differential grading. Even a two dimensional grading system can be inequitable and lax. Subjectivity in grading can be heightened in regard to field placement evaluation because the educational institution often does not clearly specify the specific minimal performance goals that all student must achieve regardless of their placements. Wide variability in the experiences offered student's in their placements combined with the different capacities, teaching styles, and commitments among field instructors suggest an unequal foundation in the determination of field grades.

The moral dilemma here is that grading is a biased, imperfect, inaccurate judgement without reliability and validity.* It is being applied to an internship environment over which the academic institution has very little control. On the other hand, clients need to be protected from incompetent or unethical social workers.

The faculty are ultimately responsible for the academic integrity of the educational enterprise. Either faculty support each other and the School's field instructors as colleagues, or they

*Grades are without reliability because every teacher uses different criteria. They are invalid because a grade is a unidimensional representation of multidimensional events.

may be divided by political, ideological and ethical differences. Divisions which result in faculty opposing other faculty on behalf of students, however noble the case, must necessarily have a deleterious effect on the educational quality of the program. Resolution of the dilemma lies in open and public debate of the crucial field education issues and acknowledgement of the limitations inherent in the system.

Other examples of field education dilemmas can be found in Zakutansky and Sirles ( 1993) who make the point that, "It is doubtful the majority of individuals involved (in field education) are truly cognizant of the ethical and legal responsibilities they assume when entering these (student—field instructor—liaison) relationships" (p. 338).

## Conclusion

It is universally agreed that social work students should be taught the subject of ethics. Ethics are one of the hallmarks of professional practice. It is equally unanimous that field education is and should be an essential component of every social work student's academic career. Why then, is to so far fetched to go just one step further and marry the teaching of ethics to the experience of field education?

The answer is that it is a complicated and daunting task to teach ethics in the contemporary cauldron of health and human services. It takes courage and confidence to reveal problems to students, which upon close examination are seen to be beyond solution, beyond control. One way out of this uncomfortable situation is to fall back on the NASW Code of Ethics as holding the answer to every ethical problem. Another way is to adopt the competing values approach.

The next step is to encourage ethical dialogue between field instructors, students and faculty liaisons. Ethical dialogue requires the suspension of the problem solving process, because honest examination of ethical dilemmas requires the admission that no clear solution superior to all other solutions exists for many ethical issues. Ethical dialogue also requires embracing ethics as an important part of social work field education.

An illustration of the competing values approach has been offered. Once the door is open to focusing on the ethical context of field education practice, the ethical conflicts to which each of us has been exposed come leaping to mind. Schools of social work would do well to consider a process for empowering everyone associated with field education to develop a process for thinking about these conflicts, debating them, and reflecting on them as ethical dilemmas with important consequences.

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