Reflecting on the Use of the Code of Ethics in SW Practice: A Newfoundland and Labrador Perspective

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Abstract
This exploratory study was designed to develop an understanding of how social workers use the code of ethics. Through focus groups and written surveys, social workers provided information about the factors that influenced their knowledge about and ability to interpret the 1994 version of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics. The literature demonstrates that code of ethics documents is not consistently utilized as a tool to resolve ethical dilemmas in social work practice, and a number of barriers have been identified. The findings from this study demonstrate that incorporating the code of ethics in social work education and integrating the document into the workplace is associated with increased knowledge and use of the code of ethics in practice. A narrative approach will be used to discuss the findings, and a reflective tool for practitioners, educators, and students to enhance their own use of the code of ethics will be presented.
Key Words: ethics, code of ethics, social work, and ethical decision-making

Introduction

Social work practice is connected to an ethical framework that is unique and is what brings us together (Antle, 2005). Social workers make complex ethical decisions in their practice every day using a variety of tools and resources. A code of ethics is one component of ethical practice and is essential from a professional and regulatory perspective. However, there has been limited research, particularly in Canada, into how codes of ethics are applied in practice. The overall purpose of this study was to develop an understanding of how social workers use codes of ethics and the factors that influence the use of a code of ethics in the resolution of ethical dilemmas.

For the purpose of this study, participants were asked to discuss their use of the Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW) Code of Ethics (1994), which was the document currently

in use at the time of data collection. Whereas the CASW adopted a revised code of ethics in 2005, the results of this study speak to the use of a code of ethics in general.

Literature Review

Brill (2001) refers to codes of ethics as "windows into a profession" (p. 223). The CASW adopted the first Canadian Social Work Code of Ethics in 1983. Previously, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, developed in the United States, was utilized in social work practice in Canada. Subsequent revisions to the Canadian Code of Ethics in 1994 and 2005 have reflected the evolution and growth of the profession. Yet, whereas codes of ethics set forth the values, principles, obligations, and responsibilities that guide professional conduct, several challenges to the use of a code of ethics in practice have been identified in the literature.

Clark (1999) raises several criticisms of professional codes of ethics, including a) professionals often are unclear about the meaning and interpretation of some of the principles and how these translate into practice, b) codes do not offer guidance when goals and principles conflict, c) codes are irrelevant with practice being guided more by law and organizational procedures, and d) codes are not being used in practice. According to Peluso (2003), "one of the most difficult aspects of being a counsellor is understanding and acting in accordance with the ethical codes" (p. 286).

The literature also demonstrates that social work codes of ethics are not systematically utilized in practice (Holland & Kilpatrick, 1991; Kugelman, 1992; Millstein, 2000; Antle, 2002). Holland & Kilpatrick (1991) found that whereas references to different aspects of the code were implicit in their discussions with social workers, the code of ethics was not mentioned specifically as a resource. Millstein (2000) found that only 15.9% of social workers in her study referred to the code of ethics when faced with an ethical dilemma. Jayaratne, Croxton, & Mattison (1997) found that there was often "confusion and dissension among social workers as to what constitutes appropriate professional conduct" (p. 195), and that social work practice standards were seen as being out of touch with the practice realities of social workers.

Kugelman (1992) raised the issue that social workers often feel more comfortable making decisions based on the technical aspects of work rather than relying on values and principles of the code of ethics. She found that in the absence of professional ethics, social workers tended to rely more on personal experiences and organizational guidance. Similarly, Manning (1997),

referencing Kass (1990) noted that there is "an increasing reliance on policy, procedures, guidelines and regulations" (p. 225). This over-reliance on policies and procedures can make ethical decision-making more complex. Reamer (2005) notes that in some instances, following legal rules may lead social workers to act in contradiction to the Code of Ethics, thus creating ethical dilemmas. Freud and Krug (2002) in their discussion of the fiduciary nature of social work and the interplay between legal and ethical issues, note that oftentimes social workers will not act, or will delay acting, as a result of perceived or actual legal implications.

Whereas these challenges to utilizing a code of ethics have been identified in the literature, models of ethical decision making consistently integrate professional codes of ethics (Reamer, 1999; Congress, 2000; Mattison, 2000; Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2005), thus demonstrating the importance of these documents in practice. Therefore, this research project was seen as being very timely and relevant to the profession of social work in Newfoundland and Labrador, as well as social work on the national and international scene.

Research Study

Methodology

An exploratory research design was used, and respondents were selected using convenience sampling. Data were collected using quantitative and qualitative measures. A written questionnaire was mailed to 1,094 social workers registered with the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers (NLASW) in January 2006. The response rate was 23.9% (n = 262). Eight focus groups were conducted with 52 social workers. Legislation in Newfoundland and Labrador (NL) requires registration for individuals to use the title social worker or to practice social work. The minimum educational requirement for registration is a Bachelor of Social Work degree from a university accredited by the Canadian Association of Schools of Social Work or international equivalent.

Quantitative data from the questionnaires were coded and analyzed using SPSS. Tests of statistical significance were analyzed using Pearson's Chi Square. Qualitative data were collected through focus groups, using semi-structured questions and through written survey responses. During the focus group sessions, social workers were asked to share their perspectives on their use of the 1994 Code of Ethics and factors that impeded and/or facilitated the use of the document. Data were analyzed using content analysis to identify issues, themes, and trends.

Respondents

The majority of survey respondents were between the ages of 31 and 50 (72.9%), were female (84%), and held a Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) degree (84%). A smaller percentage (29.8%) indicated they had a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree, and 1.5% had a doctorate (PhD) degree. Of the respondents that had a MSW, 59% also held a BSW degree. There was not a wide discrepancy in the number of years of practice among survey respondents, as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1: Years in Practice
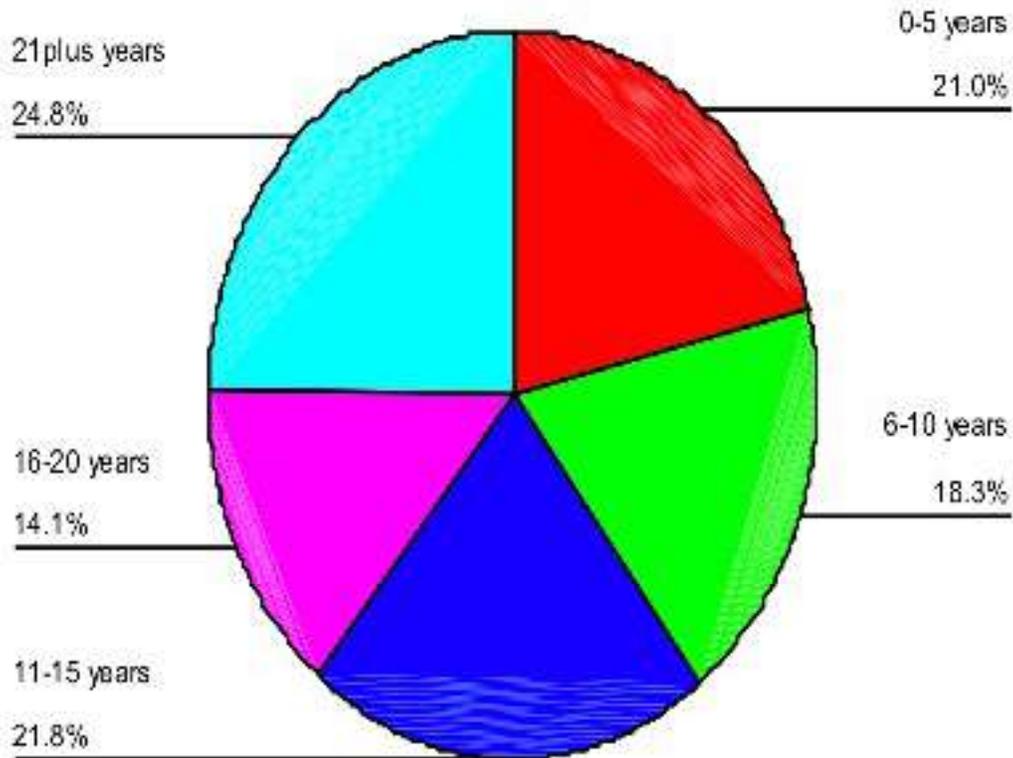
Seventy-seven and a half percent (77.5%) of respondents indicated that they worked in front-line service delivery. For those who indicated front-line service delivery, many survey respondents also indicated that they worked in positions of instructor, manager, supervisor, and community developer.

The majority (53.1%) of survey respondents worked in communities of 10,000 or more people, 22.5% in communities with a population of more than 5,000, but fewer than 10,000, and 20.2% in communities that had 5,000 or fewer people. Of the survey respondents, 30.2% worked with Aboriginal populations, and 17.9% worked with immigrants to Canada.

The majority of focus group respondents were female (96.2%). Each focus group ranged from three to 13 respondents and represented diverse areas of practice. Demographic information was not collected from focus group participants.

Key Quantitative Findings

### *Access and Information about the CASW Code of Ethics (1994)*

The majority of respondents (80.5%) indicated that they currently had a copy of the CASW Code of Ethics (1994). Many respondents indicated that they received information about the social work Code of Ethics at university (66.4%), whereas 48.5% received information in the workplace, and 17.2% attended a Code of Ethics workshop offered by the NLASW.

Knowledge and Application of the Code of Ethics

When asked about knowledge of the contents of the 1994 Code of Ethics, 67.6% of respondents indicated that they were "somewhat familiar" and 27.9% were "very familiar." In terms of interpreting the Code, 61.8% rated their ability to interpret this document as "good," 16% as "very good," and 1.9 % as "poor." Three respondents indicated that their ability to interpret the code was "very poor."

Respondents who indicated they received information about the Code of Ethics during their university education and reported that they were very familiar with the Code of Ethics was higher (34.5%) than those who did not receive it at that time (21.7%) ($x2$ (9) =125.68; p. =.00). Similarly, 41.8% of those who indicated they received information through field education

Figure 2
Knowledge of the Code of Ethics

were "very familiar" compared to 26.7% who did not receive information through field education ($x2$ (6) =14.67; p. <.05).
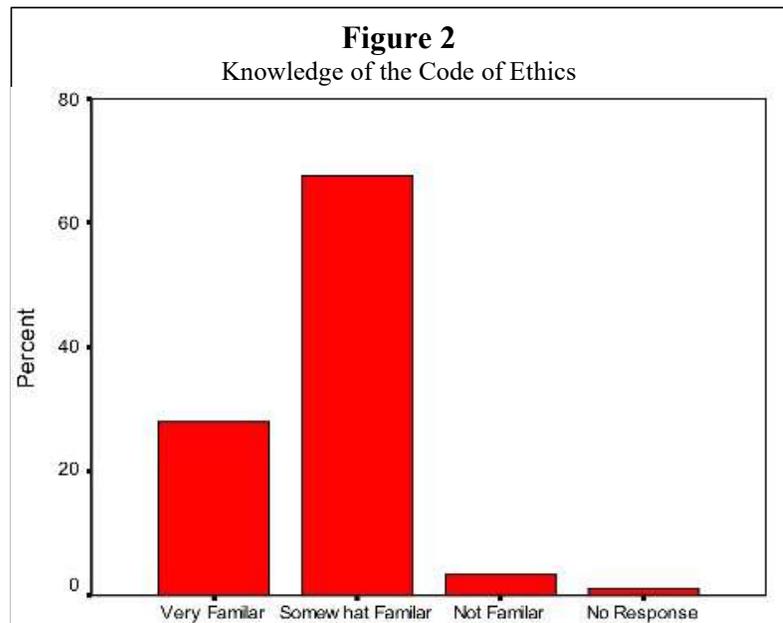
Of those who indicated they received information at university, 20.7% rated their ability to interpret the Code of Ethics as "very good," compared to 8.7% of those who did not receive this information ($x2$ (15) =107.54; p.=.00). Additionally, 22.8% of those who received information

through field education rated their ability to interpret the Code of Ethics as very good, compared to 16% who did not receive this information in field education ($x2$ (8) =25.18; p. <.01).

A little more than half of the respondents (52.7%) indicated they had referred to the Code of Ethics within the past twelve months, and 95.7% of this group indicated that the Code of Ethics was a useful document. The majority reported they used the Code of Ethics for support in resolving an ethical dilemma (50.7%), followed by to determine the position of the profession on a practice issue (35.5%), to support daily practice (31.9%), and to analyze ethical issues in relation to legal obligations (29.0%).

Of those who indicated that they received information about the Code of Ethics at their workplace, 63.8% referred to the Code within the past twelve months, compared to 43.7% of those who did not ($x2$ (3) =15.09; p. <.01).

The percentage of respondents who received information in their workplace and agreed or strongly agreed that work allowed them to fulfill their ethical obligations and responsibilities, was higher than those who did not receive this information in the workplace (86.6% compared to 73.8%) ($x2$ (15) =36.87; p. <.01).

The majority (80.3%) of those in front line service delivery agreed or strongly agreed that work allows them to fulfill the duties and obligations set forth in the Code, 14.3% were undecided, and 1% strongly disagreed.

Respondents were asked to rate their level of agreement with a series of practice statements. A comparison between those who strongly agreed with these practice statements and who had referred to the Code of Ethics within the last twelve months was higher than those who had not referred to the Code. See Table 1.

Table 1. Response to Practice Statements and Referred to the Code of Ethics (n = 262)

Practice Statement	Strongly agreed & code	Strongly agreed & no code
Code of ethics an integral part of social work practice	66.7%	33.3%
Work fulfill the duties and obligations set in the code	63.8%	36.2%
The code supports my personal values	61.2%	38.8%
All should receive on-going training in code of ethics	61.4%	38.6%
The code of ethics is culturally responsive	60.7%	39.3%
Code of ethics is a useful tool in ethical decision-making	69.6%	30.4%

Factors that Impede & Facilitate Use of the Code of Ethics in Practice

When asked about the factors that would impede the use of the Code of Ethics in practice, 30.9% of the respondents indicated that sections of the Code are vague and do not provide clear direction, 29% reported that organizational policies and procedures are paramount, 27.1% reported

that conflict between the code and legal requirements was a factor that would impede the use of the Code of Ethics in practice, 19.8% highlighted time restraints, 15.6% indicated that the language of the Code is difficult to interpret, and 14.9% reported that the Code does not reflect their practice reality.

When asked if the Code was culturally responsive, 46.6% agreed or strongly agreed, 45.8% were undecided, and 4.2% disagreed. Of those who answered this question, 30.2% indicated that they worked with Aboriginal populations. Eight respondents (10.1%) who worked with Aboriginal populations disagreed with the statement that the Code of Ethics was culturally responsive, compared to three respondents (1.7%) who did not work with Aboriginal populations. This analysis was statistically significant ($x2$ (8) = 23.95; p. <. 01).

When asked what would be most helpful in resolving an ethical dilemma, the majority of respondents (31.3%) indicated peer consultation as their first choice, followed by discussion with a supervisor (20.6%), and personal values and experiences (15.3%). The Code of Ethics was listed as a first choice by 6.1% of the respondents.

Qualitative Data: Reflections on the Use of the Code of Ethics in Practice

Qualitative data were collected through a series of focus groups and written responses to the questionnaire. Responses were clustered to reflect themes that were identified by participants and are outlined in this section.

Challenges to the Use of the Code of Ethics

What Gets in the Way of Using the Code of Ethics in Practice?
- It is too subjective and open to interpretation.
  "*Code is general enough – but not specific enough.*"
  "*Which element do I honor?*"
- There is less emphasis placed on the Code of Ethics because of overriding organizational policies and procedures, and a perception exists that the Code does not have the same weight and respect as these factors. Restructuring and lack of clinical supervision led to a feeling of being more "managed" than "clinically supervised."
  "*Depending on where you work, usage of the code may or may not be promoted.*"
- There are barriers to upholding the principle of confidentiality, such as workplace policies, the changing nature of practice, greater access to client records, and work in small communities. One focus group participant noted that sometimes we use the Code to put limits on ourselves as social workers, particularly as it relates to confidentiality, versus using the Code as a component of reflective practice.
- There is a perceived conflict between the Code of Ethics and legal requirements. One respondent referred to aspects of child protection work as placing social workers "*in violation of the code.*" Others noted that whereas the Code was in line with child welfare, they questioned the ease of implementation in practice.
- Insufficient time to critically reflect on the Code and heavy workloads led some focus group respondents to question whether "*we do a good enough job of responding to ethical dilemmas.*" One focus group participant expressed that the Code is mainly used "*when something is wrong – not to increase our own knowledge or learning.*"

Capacity in which Code of Ethics is used

<u>In what types of situations are you most likely to consult the Code of Ethics"?</u>

Focus group and survey respondents identified the following factors that facilitated use of the Code of Ethics document:

- To provide a "*check point*" or "*sounding board*" when trying to determine if an issue is an ethical dilemma. The Code can help provide clarity when issues are gray even if it does not always provide a direct answer.

"*Sometimes we will use the code and be better informed, and other times we will still find ourselves in a dilemma, yet it is the code that identifies and affirms our fundamental values.*"

- When organizational polices clash with the Code of Ethics. One focus group participant noted that the Code was helpful as a guide to balance organizational policies and ethical responsibilities. Other respondents expressed that they used the Code of Ethics as a benchmark for developing, informing, or challenging organizational policies or directions.
- To clarify questions about confidentiality and when struggling with a challenging case with a risk of liability.

"*The more familiar we are with the Code – the less worried we would be about complaints.*"

- To educate non-social work colleagues about the role of social work and to build relationships with clients by helping them to understand the values and principles of the profession.
- To teach social work students and to supervise social work staff.
- To engage in advocacy and to guide social justice activities.

"*the code is a model/framework for the big picture.*"

Ethical Decision-Making

<u>Where does the Code of Ethics fit within your ethical decision-making process?</u>

Many focus group and survey respondents identified the following:

- The Code guides "*everyday practice,*" and the values and principles are inherent in the work.

"*the Code is ever present,*" "*don't pull it out anymore,*" "*it is just good common sense.*"

- Consulting the Code of Ethics was often an initial response, or when seeking ethical consultation with a supervisor or peer.
- Whereas the Code does provide a model or framework for ethical decision-making, it is important to see it as a living versus a static document.

"*The Code grounds our work as a profession" and "helps us to feel part of the collective.*"

The following key issues emerged in the analysis of the data:

Curriculum Programming

The need for greater emphasis on the Code of Ethics in social work education, particularly in the Bachelor of Social Work program. was identified. This would include heightened awareness of the Code of Ethics, a specific ethics course, and integration of the values and principles throughout the entire program. The importance of helping students bridge the gap between learning about the code and applying it in practice and the need for a greater emphasis on the Code of Ethics during field education was identified.

Continuing Education

Continuing education on the application of the Code of Ethics and ethical decision- making through professional associations, universities, and agencies/organizations in the form of workshops, ethics debates, and ethics consultation days was suggested.

Organizational Supports

Organizations employing social workers need to offer and to be educated about the code of ethics, and to highlight the importance of the Code of Ethics in the workplace. This would require decreased caseload sizes that would allow for more in-depth practice, exploration of how the implementation of agency policies considers the Code of Ethics, and additional time set aside for social workers to be able to reflect on the Code of Ethics and to discuss ethical issues with co-workers. Respondents also recommended that supervisors and managers receive additional training on the Code of Ethics.

Other Key Factors

Additional recommendations to facilitate the use of the Code of Ethics in practice included: 1) highlighting case examples of how other social workers have applied the Code in practice, 2) ensuring language used in the Code is relevant and clear, 3) having a Code that is more user friendly with practical applications to limit the vagueness, 4) including regular ethics articles in professional association newsletters, 5) having an exam on the Code of Ethics, and 6) developing position statements on provincial issues and take ethical stands in the public domain.

Discussion

> Our prevailing narratives provide the vocabulary that sets our realities. Our destinies are opened or closed in terms of the stories that we construct to understand our experiences (Goolishian, in Freedman & Combs, 1996).

This quote speaks to the importance of narratives and how narratives construct social realities. Narrative therapy is not a new approach in social work practice. Based on the belief that people have stories and that these stories are shaped by experiences, context, and culture, narrative therapy provides a forum for people to explore the dominant stories in their life that have become problematic and to re-author an alternative or preferred story based on a strengths perspective. The re-authoring of stories is achieved through a process of reflective questioning (Morgan, 2000; Freedman & Combs, 1996).

Using the language of the narrative approach, it would appear, from the results of this study and the literature reviewed, that a dominant story for the profession is that social work codes of ethics are not regularly or systematically used in practice, and there are barriers to using the code of ethics in practice. Many of these barriers included a) time restraints, b) heavy workloads, c) vagueness of code, and d) conflict between code and legal/organizational policies and procedures. This is reflected in a quote from one of the survey respondents

> *...because social work is so gray... social workers are craving concrete answers to ethical issues. Many social workers want examples of practice situations to refer to in their personal practice. This likely stems from heavy caseloads/workloads, and one's need to reduce liability.*

In exploring this proposed dominant story, it is important to recognize, as Morgan (2000) points out, that "no single story can be free of ambiguity or contradiction and no single story can encapsulate or handle all the contingencies of life" (p. 8). Given the complexity of social work practice and ethical decision-making, it is important that social workers continue to give meaning to their personal and professional experiences, as we are constantly being changed through our interactions with others. Our use of the code of ethics in practice can also change over time, particularly as we build our preferred narratives, and a new discourse is generated. This new story can then be extended throughout time as we move forward.

Beginning A New Story

As a profession, we need to ask if how we think about and discuss the Code influences how we use it. Several of the study focus group respondents stated that the Code of Ethics is inherent in our work. Is this sufficient? One of the critiques of the Code of Ethics is that the code is too vague and open to interpretation. However, we would pose the question, "Is a code of ethics meant to be a prescription for ethical practice, or is it meant to foster critical reflection and self-awareness?" Congress (2000) asserts that it is not sufficient just to know about the code of ethics.

Social workers need to understand the application in practice. Rice, as cited in Banks (2003), states that "a Code of Ethics creates the spirit and standard of ethical reflection in that community [of social workers]" (p. 140). This is in keeping with a model of ethical, reflective practice.

Whereas respondents in our study discussed many of the challenges to using the Code of Ethics in practice, the majority indicated that they had a copy of the Code, were familiar with the Code, and were confident in their ability to interpret the Code of Ethics.

This research clearly demonstrated that access to the Code of Ethics in the workplace, and throughout social work education, does make a difference. Providing education at the undergraduate and graduate level, enhancing access to ongoing professional development, and ensuring that organizations that employ social workers support the use of the Code of Ethics will provide the solid foundation upon which to build strong ethical practice. Kugelman (1992), referencing Joseph & Conrad, 1989, noted that social workers who are "academically prepared for ethical decision-making took a more active role in ethical matters in their agencies than those unprepared for the task" (p. 75). However, educational and organizational support must be combined with critical reflection on the part of individual social workers in order to strengthen the use of the Code of Ethics in practice.

A Model for Reflecting on the Use of the Code of Ethics in Practice

Table 2. Questions for Students, Educators, and Practitioners

STUDENTS	EDUCATORS	PRACTITIONERS
1) How satisfied am I with my current knowledge and understanding of the Code of Ethics? Where would I like it to be? What steps can I take for achieving this? 2) How does the Code of Ethics fit with my own values and ways of working with people? Where did these values come from? Who recognizes this about me? 3) To what extent have I been able to integrate the Code of Ethics in my social work education? 4) Where does the Code of Ethics fit within my current ethical decision-making process? What led me to view my work in this way? 5) How will I integrate the Code of Ethics into my practice once I graduate?	1) How do I utilize the Code of Ethics in my work? 2) How does the Code of Ethics fit with my teaching philosophy? Do I see the Code of Ethics as a useful teaching tool? Who would notice this? 3) Is my current knowledge and understanding of the Code of Ethics where I would like for it to be? What is the ideal for me? How can I achieve this? 4) If the Code of Ethics was being used in social work education as I would like to see it being used, what would this look like? Where did these ideas come from? 5) What do I see as my role in enhancing the use of the Code of Ethics at the School of Social Work and/or through field education?	1) How do I make ethical decisions in my practice? Who recognizes this? 2) How does my role within the agency in which I work influence my ethical decision-making? Is there anything I would like to change? What steps can I take to make this change? 3) If the Code of Ethics was being used in practice, as I would like to see it being used, what would this look like? 4) What have I been doing to enhance the use of the Code of Ethics in practice? How might I put other social workers and the profession in touch with these developments? 5) Is it enough that as a profession we say that the values and principles of the Code of Ethics are inherent in our work? How can we make this visible to others?

"Every time we ask a question, we're generating a possible version of a life" (Freedman & Combs, 1996). To contribute to the direction of reflective questioning, a participatory framework that fosters critical reflection, discussion, and debate on the Code of Ethics is presented. Table 2 can be used by students, educators, and practitioners to reflect on their own use of the Code of Ethics in practice and develop their preferred story.

Summary

Ethical awareness is a necessary part of professional social work practice. The use of the Code of Ethics is one component of ethical decision-making. As a profession, it is important that social workers have a solid understanding of the Code of Ethics and the application in practice. This needs to begin at the undergraduate level and continue throughout one's professional career and in the workplace. It also is important to understand the use of the Code of Ethics within an ethical decision-making framework. The Code of Ethics will continue to be updated and refined, and critiques and commentaries will be written. However, as a profession, we need to continue to engage in reflective practice and continue our dialogue on the use of the Code of Ethics in practice. This research has contributed to understanding the use of the code of ethics in NL and is applicable to all social workers. Reflecting on the use of the Code of Ethics in NL contributes to strengthening the story of the profession.

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