# Navigating a Murky Landscape: The Application of Bowen Family Systems to Field Office Ethics

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## Abstract

Ethical decision-making frameworks are good guides for monitoring students in the social work field setting but often fail to address the anxiety felt in ethical conflicts or murky situations. The authors posit a framework that uses three main concepts from Bowen family systems theory: triangles, differentiation of self, and both the nuclear family and multigenerational process.

*Keywords*: ethics, field work, social work, Bowen systems, field supervision

## Introduction

Social work emphasizes sound ethical practice built on a professional code that distinguishes it from other professions. The Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers (2008) is meant to provide guidance during difficult ethical conflicts. In addition, social work researchers have developed frameworks and offered guidance on how to teach social work ethics to students. However, the field office operations can be a murky place where little guidance is available. Many field directors, liaisons, and instructors can appreciate that there are often difficult situations that arise as part of placing and maintaining students in the field.

Although many of these situations may not actually cross the line into an ethical dilemma, they remain difficult to sort out and resolve. Educating students in the field can be an area full of a myriad of decisions, as one manages relationships between various stakeholders. It can also be challenging to guide social work students through sound decision making as they are first introduced to the varied needs and demands of an agency setting. Many field directors and liaisons struggle with how to maintain strong relationships with the field sites while also supporting students as the students question practices and decisions. This job can be challenging, as there is little guidance on best practices for supporting students in the field. This situation is ironic, considering how critical the field practicum is to social work education.

Little has been written on the intersection of social work ethics and the management of field placements (Congress, 1997; Reamer, 1998, 2012), or on the relational issues that can arise during field operations. This article discusses the various situations and issues that occur during the course of field office operations with a primary focus on concerns that may arise due to the numerous and varied relationships, connections, values, and areas of practice that the field office manages.

The framework we posit is guided by Bowen family systems theory (Chambers, 2009).

The relationships in field education can appear similar at times to those of family systems, which is especially apparent when one considers the possible multiple relationships and tensions that can exist among the field supervisor, the faculty liaison, and the student intern (Congress, 1997). Consequently, this framework lends much support to educators who are struggling to sort through the complexities in situations that often arise in the field. Congress's (1997) discussion of value conflicts for field educators touches on the usefulness of incorporating Bowen theory in decision-making, and we propose the addition of several components from the Bowen family system's lens (Chambers, 2009; Sagar & Wiseman, 1982) to the framework. With this addition, field educators can better maintain focus on who the "client" is, what anxiety exists surrounding the ethical issues, and how best to proceed in the given situation.

The NASW Code of Ethics, the Ethical Principles Screen (Dolgoff, Harrington, & Loewenberg, 2012), and the Essential Ethics Framework (Reamer, 2012) are also used, as it is important that educators be able to discern when an issue moves from being confusing and unclear to possibly unethical. In this article, we highlight the steps of the proposed framework: (a) pinpointing who the actual "client" is (Congress, 1997), with awareness of differing individual and organizational interests at stake; (b) being aware of anxiety, in oneself and others; (c) reviewing the situation and the NASW Code of Ethics to determine if an ethical violation occurred (using an ethical decision-making framework if needed); (d) knowing the specific role one has in the setting/situation—especially if one has several roles in the university (Chambers, 2009; Peluso, 2003; Weinberg, 2005); and (e) consulting and dialoguing with other colleagues and making a decision or reviewing other steps as needed (Hill, Ferguson, & Erickson, 2010; Reamer, 2012; Weinberg & Campbell, 2014). When these steps are followed, field educators and social work faculty liaisons can be better equipped to manage the many stakeholder relationships and the challenging situations that can arise in the field office.

## Bowen Family System's Lens

Bowen family systems adds to the framework by giving social work educators in the field office a lens through which to process their own anxiety and the role it plays in assessing the dynamics that may be occurring in field operations (Chambers, 2009). This added layer of critical self-awareness is an essential aspect of sound practice and ethical decision making (Abramson, 1996; Mattison, 2000). Three aspects of Bowen family systems theory can be helpful when navigating situations that arise in the field; triangles, differentiation of self, and both the nuclear family and multigenerational process (Kerr & Bowen, 1988).

The first aspect of Bowen family systems theory to be addressed is that of triangles as three-person relationships forming the building block of larger emotional systems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). Bowen's focus was on the family instead of the individual. Bowen saw the dyad as less stable than the triad relationships for managing tension. When anxiety and tension build up between two people it is common for one or both to attempt to engage a third person in the conflict. This may spread the tension or anxiety, but doesn't solve the problem. There are many possible triangles (and interlocking triangles) that can be activated in the work of the field office. One example is the conflict between the field instructor (agency person who is supervising the student) and agency staff. The field instructor may try to get the students and faculty liaisons (faculty from the student's school) to align with the field instructor against the other staff. Another example is the relationships between the faculty liaison, the field instructor, and the student. We have had several experiences of field instructors giving negative feedback about students to the faculty liaison, but not directly to the students. The field instructor may be uncomfortable with direct conflict and look to the faculty liaison to communicate difficult things to the student.

Multiple relationships can often highlight potential ethical questions. In the example of triangles, there is potential for faculty and administrative staff of social work programs to have

professional relationships with agency staff and administrators, leaving the student feeling uncertain whom to trust with complaints about supervision. Ethical considerations can also arise if the field coordinator feels pressured to place students in organizations that have a connection to faculty.

The commonly used model of assigning students both task and MSW field supervisors can also present challenges for student interns. Students may hear different expectations including conflicting instructions from the two supervisors and turn to the faculty liaison for assistance. This could also be an example of interlocking triangles. The two supervisors and the student could be one triangle, while the student, the field staff, and one or both of the supervisors could be another triangle.

All of these examples highlight a few of the many possible triangles in social work field instruction. It is apparent how these triangles often highlight the current tension and anxiety experienced by members of the field experience. We believe an awareness of this dynamic on the part of the field office will assist in both identifying the issues as well a course of action.

The second aspect of Bowen systems theory that can be useful for social work educators is differentiation of self. It speaks to how much a person is able to make calm, thoughtful decisions when in contact with emotionally reactive individuals and systems (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). In field education, students, field instructors, and faculty liaisons may all be emotionally reactive to various issues that arise. These reactions may be to direct-service client issues, agency issues (i.e., staff morale, budget issues, and space for the student), and student-field instructor relationship issues. All of these situations can be challenging. Those people in field education know that it is not uncommon to encounter many of these circumstances all in one setting. What commonly occurs is that one person involved has an emotional reaction to what transpires, and the situation is then relayed to the faculty liaison in an urgent or emotional manner. Once that happens, it can be easy for the person receiving the information to also react emotionally. When approaching the situation through the lens of Bowen family systems, it is important not to react but to first take a deep breath and work to collect information in a calm and thoughtful way before making a decision.

Finally, Bowen's focus on the nuclear family and multigenerational processes can be a helpful tool for the field office when dealing with difficult field education situations. Bowen provides a framework for understanding people's patterns of coping with stress as well as their role and process in decision making (Kerr & Bowen, 1988). An understanding of one's own decision-making process based on familial roles and coping patterns can provide an emotional distance to the situation. For example, people can better understand what is being triggered in themselves as well as what may be triggered in others who are engaged in the situation under review.

One possible tool for the exploration of possible triggers and decision-making styles based on the family of origin is the ethical genogram, which was introduced by Peluso (2003). He draws on Bowen's work in utilizing genograms to understand the intergenerational family emotional process (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) and encourages using a genogram to look at decision making in families of origin. Although Peluso posits the ethical genogram as a tool for clinical supervisors (2003), the same concepts can apply to the field office (Figure 1).

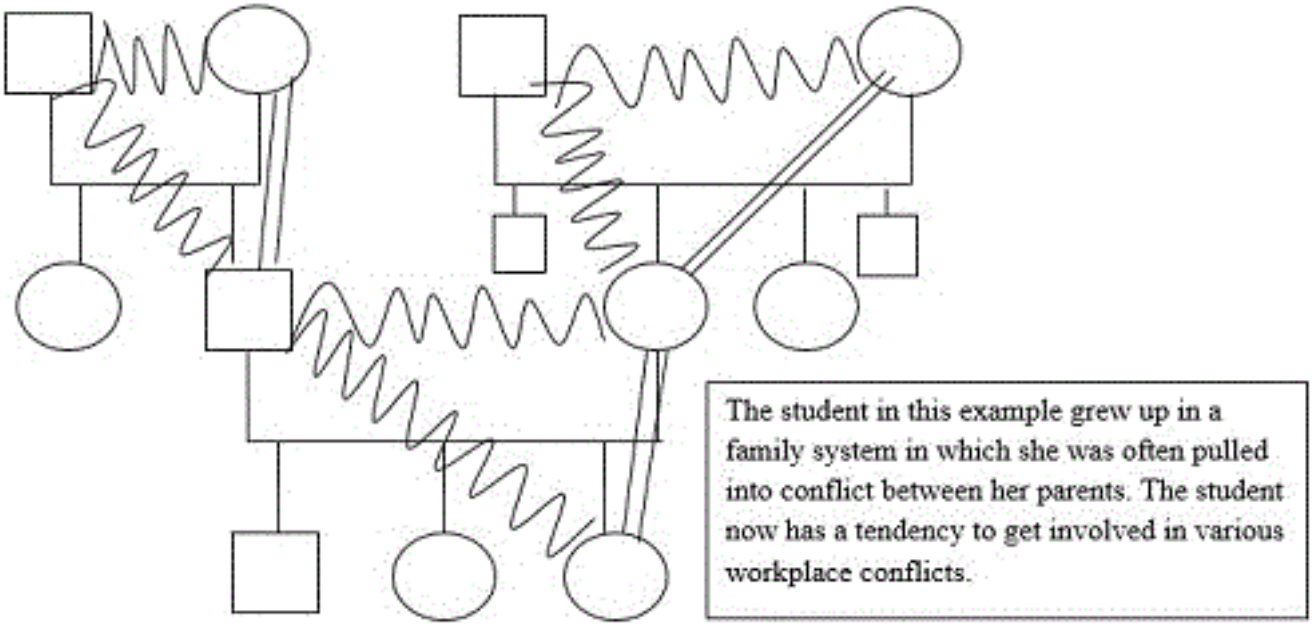


*Figure 1.* Ethical Genogram Example

Some of the factors to be considered in looking at the intergenerational process include the decision-makers' gender, religion, culture, and emotional cut-offs (Peluso, 2003). Both field staff and students can reflect on the decision-making processes in their families of origin. Family roles and family-of-origin relationship issues are often brought into the work environment (Chambers, 2009). Individuals who have been in a caretaker role in their family of origin may bring a pattern of over-functioning into the workplace. They may get involved in triangles by inserting themselves into a situation instead of encouraging the two parties to work out a conflict. Another possibility is that someone who learned to use distance as a way of coping with conflicts in their family of origin may also be passive in the workplace and not be active when appropriate in the decision-making process. Another way that ethical genograms could be applied is looking at decision-making processes in schools of social work, universities, and the organizations that host students.

## Proposed Approach to Ethical Decision-Making in the Field Office

The combination of the Bowen family systems lens, the NASW Code of Ethics, and an ethical decision-making framework when necessary, work together to shape the proposed approach to difficult decisions faced by the field office. The approach is highlighted below and followed by an actual example from the field.

As you can see from the diagram in Figure 2, the proposed model is cyclical. Decision-making models can often lead people to believe that the process of making difficult decisions is clear and linear in fashion. In practice, this is rarely the case. It is more common for decision makers to move in and out of different stages of the process. For example, anxiety may not go away just because a person is aware of it. The proposed approach is explained in further detail below.

First, it is important to identify who your client is in the given situation, which will help to determine what the starting point should be. As Congress (1997) highlighted, in issues related to field work, the student is always considered the

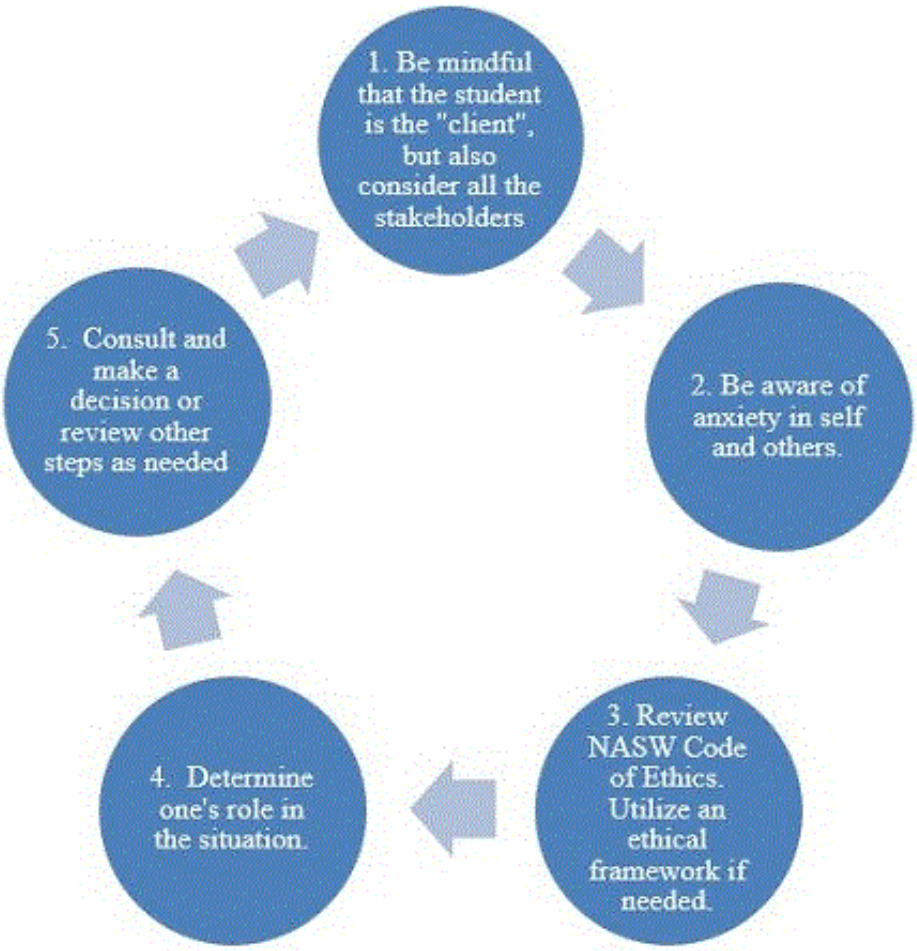


*Figure 2.* Proposed Approach to Ethics in the Field Office.

client. This means that a beginning point to the process is figuring out what makes most sense for the student. An important aspect of this question is to keep the students' confidentiality and self-determination a priority unless otherwise indicated. Supporting what is best for the student while also managing relationships to the organizations, community, and to the university as a whole can feel akin to walking a tightrope over a raging river. However, when you focus on the student as the client and take a deep breath and a step back to see the larger picture, it is possible to move on to the next step in the framework.

Once this first step is achieved, the next step—the step we feel is arguably one of the most important to this approach—is being aware of your own anxiety as well as the anxiety in others who are involved in the situation. It is this anxiety that can potentially lead both students and educators to make quick decisions that fail to take into account all pertinent aspects of the situation. Drawing on the Bowen family system's lens, it is important to think about the triangles that exist in the situation. It may be that the faculty liaison is being brought in to manage the tension or anxiety that has built up in the relationship between student and field instructor. The faculty liaison will need to talk with each of them separately to figure out the source of the anxiety and how best to address it. For example, it is normal for a student to have

some level of anxiety while learning new things, and the student may need reassurance to feel more settled in placement. However, a higher level of anxiety may exist in a new field instructor who is contemplating how to give difficult feedback to a student, or possibly to fail them. Talking with the parties involved and analyzing the situation can help defray the instructor's own anxiety and that of others. The ability to remain nonreactive is integral to the approach and to managing stressful field situations. This is not always easy when all parties involved want an answer or solution immediately. Important skills to use during this step are actually core clinical social work skills. They include staying centered and talking from an "I" position (Kerr & Bowen, 1988) as well as remembering not to attack or defend (Kerr & Bowen, 1988), trying to simply clarify one's own position and the position of others. It is important to observe and ask questions when appropriate, keeping in mind how each party involved is situated in a larger system.

The third step in this model is application of the NASW Code of Ethics to the situation. Many difficult circumstances that arise in the course of field instruction do not actually cross the line to being an ethical violation. However, it is important to consult the NASW Code of Ethics as well as ethical decision-making frameworks. This consultation is helpful both for guidance and to determine whether an ethical violation has occurred. After reviewing the NASW Code to see if it has clear guidelines for the situation under review, it is also helpful and important to become familiar with an ethical decision-making framework and to use it as a guide. Two ethical frameworks that we have used for decision-making in field operations are the Ethical Principals Screen (EPS; Dolgoff et al., 2012) and Reamer's Essential Ethics Framework (2012).

Dolgoff and colleagues (2012) offer the Ethical Principle's Screen (EPS) as a unique way to approach the application of ethical principles to one's work. They first stress that an individual should always check to see if the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) addresses the situation and gives direction to what should be done. If the NASW Code is not sufficient to address the situation, then they offer the EPS as a way to determine which ethical principles are at stake and which take priority (2012). We add that while there is currently no consensus on the ranking of professional ethical principles, the EPS was developed with consideration of what may be the agreed-upon order by social workers. The order they give to the ethical principles is (a) protect life, (b) preserve social justice—treat all people the same given the same circumstances, (c) foster clients' self-determination, autonomy, and freedom, (d) ensure that the decision causes the least amount of harm, (e) promote a better quality of life, (f) strengthen people's right to privacy and confidentiality, and (g) fully disclose relevant information to clients and others (Dolgoff et al., 2012, p. 80).

Reamer (2012) posits that to best meet the needs of students, the field office, practice settings, clients, and other stakeholders, it is important that field instruction focus on four key areas. These include (a) the value base of the social work profession and its relationship to students' values; (b) ethical dilemmas in social work; (c) ethical decision making; and (d) ethics risk management (Reamer, 2012, p. 3). Most students are given a list of decision-making steps in their field manuals as well as in practice classes (Gray & Gibbons, 2007; Reamer, 2012). They are also encouraged to explore the intersection of their own personal values, the values of the profession, and how they may cause or intensify ethical questions. Risk management is also stressed today as a result of the increased attention on professional misconduct and the possibility of legal recourse (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011; Reamer, 2013; Strom-Gottfried, 2007). These areas of concern are all essential for students in field internship settings.

The fourth step is knowing the role you have in the setting/situation (Chambers, 2009; Peluso, 2003; Weinberg, 2005). This step may seem straightforward on the surface. For example, if the student is the identified client and your role is that of the field director, you could imagine that you clearly need to act on behalf of the student and what is best

for the student's learning. However, it is not always that straightforward. Some universities have field directors who may also act as liaisons. In this case, it is important for the field directors to think about how their function may be different in each of these given roles. In addition, students may lobby for a certain decision to be made but the field director or faculty liaison may think differently. It can be difficult to know when to allow for student self-determination if no ethical violation has occurred, and when to step in and make a decision that may be best for the student and his or her learning but may be unpopular.

Finally, consultation with others is important before making a decision. Always consult with those involved in the situation, but it can also be beneficial to consult with colleagues at other schools of social work who share similar roles. When dealing with difficult situations that potentially include ethical violations, it can be helpful to see what others have done in similar situations. And finally, remember that the process is cyclical. There are many points in the process where it is advantageous to go back and examine the various motives, anxieties, and issues being raised.

## Case Example from the Field

A first-year MSW student attending a university in a large Midwestern city was placed at a small, grassroots community agency that was under severe financial stress. The agency had received MSW student interns from the university in the past and also currently had a relationship with two faculty members in the department for an ongoing research project. The agency was heavily dependent on state funding, and the state was behind in payments. However, this situation was not unique to this particular organization as many social service organizations in the state were in a similar situation. The field instructor of several years abruptly left the organization during the summer months, after the MSW student was connected with the placement for her first-year field experience. An administrator of the agency said that they were bringing back an experienced, clinically licensed social worker—who had previously worked with the organization as the new field instructor. The new field instructor would work on a contractual basis to supervise the field students (other schools had students placed there as well).

The agency provides culturally sensitive services to an immigrant population that is largely underserved by the community. Most of the agency staff identify with this same ethnic group while the student and current field instructor are part of the dominant white culture. During the time the new field instructor was there she raised concerns with the student and the faculty liaison about not getting paid. She also openly expressed concerns regarding how the agency was run. She had conversations with the faculty liaison, without the student, in which she said that if she left the student should be pulled out of the placement because of organization concerns and lack of supervision options. She said she wanted to honor her academic yearlong commitment to the students but as time went on she said she wasn't sure if she could financially afford to last for the year. Mid-way through the academic year she left and said the student should be taken out of the internship. The student had heard mostly negative things about others in the organization from the field instructor and had some negative interactions herself, which seemed to reinforce the perception that the agency environment was not going to be conducive to student learning.

## Application of Framework to Case Example

The initial step in the framework is to focus on the identified client while being mindful of the other stakeholders involved. The stakeholders in this example include the student, the field instructor, the agency administrators, the student's clients, the faculty liaison, the social work department, the faculty members who partner with the organization for research, and the university. The faculty liaison followed Congress's recommendation (1997) to keep the student's self-determination as a primary focus in the decision-making process. The student's initial impression was that she should be taken out of the placement. She felt allied with the field

instructor and did not think she would have a well-supported learning experience if she stayed on at the site. However, she also expressed concern at the thought of abruptly leaving clients. The concerns raised by the field instructor were considered. However, the viewpoint of the agency administrator was also taken in to account.

The agency administrator was surprised by the abrupt departure of the field instructor and the possible effect on the internship. The administrator was concerned that the field instructor's comments regarding the organization would be discussed in the larger community. Although not verbalized, the agency administrator may have been concerned about how the removal of the student would affect the collaboration with university faculty on an ongoing research project. The faculty members partnering with the agency may have been concerned about how the conflict between the agency and the social work department would affect the collaboration. However, this was not directly discussed. The student's clients would have been affected by abrupt service termination, without someone to transfer the clients to. In the midst of all of this, the faculty liaison was most concerned about the quality of the student's placement going forward. She was also mindful of the potential effect of her decision on the ongoing relationship with the agency.

The second step is to be aware of anxiety, in oneself and others (note triangles, differentiation of self, and patterns of coping with stress). The faculty liaison initially saw the removal of the student as the best option. The field instructor was very clear about her concerns regarding services to clients and the student's learning experience. Prior to the mid-year departure of the field instructor, the faculty liaison had very limited direct contact with the agency administrator. The student and faculty liaison together discussed triangles in the setting. These included student–field instructor–administrator and student–field instructor–paraprofessional staff, student–faculty liaison–field instructor, faculty liaison–student–administrator, and faculty liaison–faculty–administrator. This was indeed a murky situation with many triangles. The student expressed feeling very uncomfortable with the tension and conflict between the field instructor and the agency administrator. As recommended by Vodde and Giddings (2000), the liaison and the student completed an internship eco-map and discussed some of the triangles in the setting. This was the first time the faculty liaison had experience of a field instructor, who was the primary contact for internships, recommending a student be removed from an internship. There was clear conflict between the administrator perspective and the field instructor perspective, and it was hard to know what was accurate. This all served to generate some anxiety for the liaison.

The third step is to review the situation and the NASW Code of Ethics and determine if an ethical violation occurred. One should use an ethical decision-making framework if needed. During this step, the faculty coordinator/liaison made a point to clarify the factual information from the parties involved. Knowing that anxiety can play a role in everyone's initial response, she knew that obtaining the facts was important.

The NASW Code of Ethics connection in this example includes respect for student self-determination, mindfulness of the importance of planned versus abrupt termination of services to clients, ethical responsibility to treat colleagues with respect, and seeking consultation (NASW, 2008). The field instructor raised concerns that there would not be someone competent at the agency to provide supervision. The agency administrator raised concerns about cultural competency of the field instructor who did not share cultural knowledge with students.

The faculty liaison contacted agency administrators to discuss the student's placement and supervision. Prior to this first contact by the faculty liaison, the administrator said they had not been contacted by the field instructor about the field instructor's decision to terminate her employment. The agency administrator was surprised that removing the student was even being considered. It was agreed that a meeting was needed. The meeting was held at the agency site and included

administration, the liaison, and the student. The student learned from the agency administrator of some misperceptions she had regarding agency administration and ways that the field instructor had not been following expectations regarding sharing the organization's cultural knowledge. It was clarified that whatever decision was made about the placement, the other university and agency collaborations would continue. The student's initial anxiety about staying decreased after the meeting. With the student's input, the faculty liaison made the decision to keep the student at the placement. One of the agency directors took on the student's supervision responsibilities. The faculty liaison was glad that an agreement was worked out that allowed the student to stay in the placement and decreased some of the concerns that the student had about the organization.

The fourth step is to be aware of one's role in the situation. The student's self-determination remained a primary factor in the decision-making process. The faculty liaison was also aware of other partnerships the agency had with faculty in the social work program. She was conscious of the varied power differentials as well as the role of dominant culture and racial privilege in this scenario considering the student, faculty liaison, and the field instructor were all from the dominant culture. The faculty liaison knew the agency administrator was very concerned about the reputation of their organization and the effect the field instructor's statements and actions could have on the organization. It is also important to keep in mind that some agency staff and administrators most likely were aware that the social work department faculty and staff have a role in affecting decisions not just about the current student but also future students and university collaborations, much like a multigenerational family. This was a case in which the agency administrator had multiple relationships with faculty and staff at the university. The faculty liaison was aware of the numerous roles but was careful to make certain that those other relationships did not affect her decision on what was best for the student and her placement.

Finally, the fifth step is consultation. Throughout the process the liaison consulted with the social work program director, with faculty familiar with the organization, with colleagues in other social work programs, and with a community service provider who was familiar with the organization. Consultation was helpful in reducing the anxiety surrounding the initial conflict between the differing perspectives among the student, the field instructor, and the agency administrator.

## Conclusion

The literature cautions that the use of decision-making frameworks is merely a starting point (Dolgoff et al., 2012; Hardina, 2004). The truth is that even when followed, the framework is a guide and not an assurance of a positive outcome. However, we believe that the addition of Bowen family systems theory to current ethical decision-making frameworks is a positive one. This addition affords people the ability to address a range of difficult situations. Students, field instructors, and educators will benefit from the reminder to slow down the process, address any anxiety that exists, clarify facts, and think through the situation from all angles. There are many different perspectives to be considered when making decisions about student field placements. Combining Bowen family systems theory with ethical decision-making frameworks can help social work educators navigate their way through the murky situations inherent in field operations. Social work field placements are an integral part of students' learning and thus call for critical attention and further research to ensure that we are best meeting the students' learning needs.

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