

The Ethics of Practicing Forensic Social Work

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Social work ethical codes help to define our profession as well as to provide guidelines for resolving challenging social work dilemmas. Forensic social work is a specialty area that is broadly defined as social work activities involving criminal or civil court proceedings, criminal offenders, victims of crime, or other systems of justice. Forensic social workers are most often involved with adversarial court proceedings and emotionally charged civil cases that require special attention to ethics. The National Organization of Forensic Social Workers (NOFSW) has maintained a Code of Ethics for its members since 1987. As the field continues to evolve a discussion of current ethical dilemmas and a revision of the code of ethics are needed. This article reviews the major ethical challenges faced by forensic social workers, discusses key considerations for practice, and presents a revised edition of the NOFSW Code of Ethics.

Forensic social work is broadly defined as the application of social work to questions and issues relating to law and legal systems (www.nofsw.org). Forensic social workers function in diverse practice settings that may include the provision of mental health services to correctional populations, conducting risk assessments, developing mitigation evidence, providing expert witness testimony, conducting custody evaluations, or administering victim or offender services. This range of roles often presents unique challenges to forensic social workers (Barker & Branson, 2000) and necessitates more

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specialized ethical guidelines in addition to those put forth by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) (NASW Delegate Assembly, 1999). This article reviews relevant ethical literature, identifies areas of particular concern, and presents an updated ethical code for forensic social workers.

Forensic social work has been evolving for the last century (Maschi, Bradley, & Ward, 2009) but has only been officially recognized in the last 30 years as a specialty within the social work profession. Foundational to forensic social work is the contextual nature of the individual and the importance of social justice. Social work's core mission is to "enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty" (NASW Delegate Assembly, 1999, p. 1). Additionally, social workers are charged with advancing "human right and social and economic justice" (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, pp. 5). Working with the justice system allows social workers to address issues of justice and injustice directly. Within this practice arena social workers can impact the well being of individuals, families, and communities as well as advocate for social justice, address discrimination, and effect policy change.

Professional ethics "combine broad aspirations with specific rules of conduct" (Congress, 2007, pp. 76) to create a uniform set of standards that become part of the profession's identity. Nearly all professional organizations have ethical standards that are often incorporated into credentialing standards, licensure, and membership requirements. The NASW prescribes the ethical code social work students and practitioners are bound to uphold (NASW, 1999). This code provides general guidelines regarding how social workers should interface with clients, organizations, and other professionals. Most social work ethical dilemmas faced by social workers can be negotiated through the application of these guidelines. In cases where there seem to be conflicting ethical obligations, as is frequently the case in forensic work, there are several frameworks for solving these dilemmas (Corey, Cory, & Callahan, 2007; Reamer, 1989; Strom-Gottfried, 2007). All these guides ask a series of questions designed to guide practitioners in cases of complex ethical conflicts. NASW provides a "Framework for Solving Ethical Dilemmas" as part of their ethics training packet. This framework is provided here and suggested for use by forensic practitioners (NASW, n.d.).

1. Why is this bothering me?
2. What is the primary dilemma?
3. Are there ethical issues involved?
4. Who will either face ethical issues or be affected by them?
5. What are the facts?
6. What value conflicts are present?
7. What ethical issues are in conflict? Are some more important than others?
8. What are the alternative courses of action/conflicts?

9. What demonstrates the greatest mutual respect?
10. Can any of the alternatives be universalized, would I advise anyone else to follow the same course of action?
11. What are the consequences and risks of the courses of action?
12. What are the motives of those involved?
13. Am I being true to myself?
14. In light of these consideration what is my decision?

Most professional ethics are limited in scope to protecting patients and consumers from unscrupulous practitioners. Social work ethics extend beyond other professions with a strong social and economic justice component. Most other professions are not ethically prescribed to advocate for underserved, disenfranchised, and oppressed populations. Social workers are charged with promoting the core values of service, social justice, the dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence (NASW, 1996). The expansive nature of this value system requires special attention to ethical practice and the application of professional knowledge, skills, and values to client systems at micro, mezzo, and macro levels to promote the needs of all people. Forensic social workers may be especially vulnerable to ethical challenges while working with conflicted criminal or civil court proceedings, work in institutional settings, and interfacing with a “blind” justice system. The ethical provision of social work cannot be, nor should it be, “blind.”

Through forensic social work we have numerous opportunities to “flex” our social work skills and assist the justice system in prescribing justice for all parties, not just those with privilege or financial backing. Although work with the justice system can be professionally and emotionally challenging, forensic social workers provide an essential service. A social work perspective that values multiple perspectives; understands the impact of race, culture, and poverty; and applies knowledge from theory and science effectively bridges the divides that frequently stagnate and interfere with resolution of cases. When cases are resolved efficiently, humanely, and after careful consideration of all applicable information, we can reach the best possible resolution for all parties. This is the role of the forensic social worker in legal proceedings.

One of the biggest challenges that forensic social workers face is effectively practicing their social work skills in an adversarial legal system (NASW, 1997). Most social workers are trained to work toward mutually beneficial outcomes for either side of a dispute, whereas the legal system, at least superficially, seems to promote winners and losers. While initially challenging for most, work within the justice system can be extremely rewarding for social workers and replete with opportunities to promote social justice. The utilization of social work knowledge and skills nearly always serves the interest of justice, and countless judges, prosecutors, and defense attorneys depend on social workers as their most trusted of professional allies. By bringing concepts like restorative justice, therapeutic jurisprudence, and an

awareness of the impact of race, culture, and poverty into courtrooms, forensic social workers provide an invaluable service to the community.

Forensic social workers work closely with legal counsel, including defense attorneys, prosecutors, guardian ad litem, state attorneys, or various other legal advisors. While one of the great joys of forensic social work is collaborating with these professionals, it is important to understand how our ethical obligations differ, and at times may even conflict (NASW, 1997). The definition of the client and the boundaries of that client-professional relationship is an area where social workers and lawyers have divergent definitions and ethics.

Attorneys typically have a very narrow definition of who their client is and function strictly within their role as advocates and counsel throughout proceedings. Social workers define the client with additional complexity as we consider issues of self-determination, confidentiality, duty to warn, and protection of children and other vulnerable populations. Therefore clarification of our role and the boundaries of that role are especially important in forensic work. Utilizing supervision with supervisors and peers both within and outside the profession are vital to managing forensic ethics. There are no easy answers when faced with challenging practice situations like an aggressive client who verbalizes general, rather than specific, homicidal intentions, or a sexual offender who discloses a strong desire to continue to offend, without a threat towards a specific person, or a stabilized psychotic patient with a history of violence who reports that he/she will discontinue their medication upon discharge. Although our ethics mandate that we advocate for self-determination, we must also balance the needs of our client with community safety. This potential dual role is best negotiated through clear communication with clients about our role and obligations not only to them, but to the community.

Many times forensic social workers are retained as “hired guns” in criminal or civil proceedings as mitigation specialists, expert witnesses, or fact witnesses. In these roles, social workers may be vulnerable to presenting information that is unbalanced and promotes the agenda of an individual party in the case (Pollack, 2003). This role presents challenges to many social workers who make their living testifying in court. In any case, remaining impartial and fair, while advocating for our client and the safety well being of all is the best way to negotiate our professional ethic (NASW, 1998). A social worker retained by an attorney could also encounter additional ethical conflicts in even the seemingly irrefutable abuse reporting requirements.

Social workers are mandated reporters of child, elder, and vulnerable persons abuse in all 50 states. This reflects the highest ethical and moral commitment to advocate and protect vulnerable populations. When social workers are retained by an attorney, the social worker would typically be bound by the attorney-client privilege and could not report abuse uncovered through the course of their work. In this case, social workers continue to be

bound by their ethical and legal duty to report abuse but are constrained by their role and by another profession's ethics. A typical case would be a social worker who is hired as a mitigation specialist for a defense team. In this case the identified client is the defense council and any information uncovered in the course of the work is the property of the defense team. So while the social worker may uncover abuse information that would normally have to be reported, this information can only be reported back to council. To report the abuse to authorities would breach the attorney-client privilege, but not to report violates the law. In either case the social worker could face professional, licensing, legal, or civil repercussions. This presents an unsavory ethical dilemma that has no easy resolution. The most ethical and professional option is for forensic social workers to anticipate these dilemmas and clarify roles, responsibilities, and legal issues prior to engaging in work that could compromise professional ethics.

Social workers are often put into legal and ethical binds by different reporting requirements mandated by agency policy, local ordinances, state law, and federal law. In many residential or secure facilities, agency policy often requires social workers to report drug use, sexual activity, or possible threats to security, even if disclosed in a therapeutic setting. In addition, many specialized courts like drug courts or mental health courts require therapy but also require the reporting of substance use. The reporting of drug use back to the court often results in incarceration or sanctions by the court. Even with the proper releases signed; this is a slippery ethical situation because of the coercive nature of these court-ordered programs.

Federal drug reporting laws also present a challenge to social workers (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services [HHS], 1987). The Drug Abuse Prevention, Treatment, and Rehabilitation Act (21 U.S.C. 1175) provides special protection for those clients in addictive rehabilitation services in section 42 of the Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), Part 2. These federal laws can conflict with agency, school, or even state reporting requirements and are best resolved through supervision and application of a problem-solving rubric.

Other areas of practice that are troublesome for the forensic social worker are issues of informed consent with court-mandated clients. Often, treating clinicians are called upon to provide progress reports or other information to the court regarding work with offenders of crime. Clearly, when releases are signed voluntarily and informed consent is obtained appropriately, there is no ethical conflict. But, in most cases the offender has been ordered to participate in treatment as a condition of probation or parole, and required to waive some rights to confidentiality. This coerced agreement and release of information, too often signed in duress, are not valid forms of consent and do not meet our social work ethical standard for informed consent. The social worker must be cautious not to simply accept that the client has waived these rights and is required to help the client understand

the consequences of this release. Helping the client understand their rights to confidentiality and clarifying the limits of this agreement is not just best practice but is prescribed by our ethics. By educating clients about this right we empower them and promote self-determination, self worth, and dignity. It is unfortunate that many of these individuals have never really given informed consent. By promoting a strengths perspective with the offender, we also begin to address motivation for treatment. Once a client makes an informed choice and assumes responsibility for their treatment and the accompanying progress reports, we have avoided one of the most challenging issues we face in working with court-mandated clients.

An all-too frequent ethical dilemma encountered by forensic social workers is duality of the forensic and therapeutic roles. These frequently co-occurring but generally incompatible roles (Sarnoff, 2004) are part of everyday social work practice for thousands of social workers. This dilemma has been hotly debated in the psychological literature (Appelbaum, 1997; Greenberg & Sherman, 1997, 2007; Heltzel, 2007) and will likely continue to be a challenging area for professional working with the justice system. Strictly speaking, there should be no dilemma as our code of ethics clearly cautions against these kinds of dual roles (NASW Delegate Assembly, 1999) and promotes early identification and avoidance whenever possible. But the debate persists and forensic social workers are frequently faced with this dual role. For example, as a clinician treating a court-mandated client we are called upon to provide progress reports and eventually a discharge summary to the court. Usually, the court is interested in just three basic pieces of information: (a) is the client attending treatment? (b) did the client complete the program and satisfy the orders of the court? and (c) are they rehabilitated and is their risk to the community reduced? Providing the progress or completion information is reporting on clinical progress and poses no ethical conflict, but the assessment of future risk is clearly a forensic role and potential dual role. Ideally, a separate evaluator could conduct the risk assessment and this could be submitted separately to the court, whereby avoiding any conflict of interest. Unfortunately, engaging two or more independent practitioners often represent an unnecessary burden to both the client and the agency, especially in rural settings. Anticipating and avoiding these conflicts whenever possible is the first line of defense. Taking steps to minimize acting in a dual role, clarifying possible conflicts before they come up, consulting with supervisors and peers, and most importantly, being transparent about these conflicts of interest are part of ethical forensic practice.

Conducting research with vulnerable, incarcerated, and/or victimized populations presents real ethical dilemmas not only in protecting their rights to informed consent but also in the potential use of the research once published. Too many policy makers and politicians are primed to take research findings out of context to promote agendas that may serve to further

marginalize vulnerable populations and perpetuate bias towards persons of color. Individuals involved with the justice system are, unfortunately, accustomed to coercive and confusing rules and regulations and may easily be coerced into participating in research. The ready access to offenders in institutions could be used by unscrupulous researchers without considering the larger social justice issues and individual rights. Additionally, we often fail to adequately consider the potential for harm when conducting clinical trials in intervention research. With such a high incidence of trauma, substance abuse, and child maltreatment in the juvenile and adult correctional populations, we must be especially cautious about the potential harm associated with unproven interventions. The potential for harm with victim populations is also significant and research with these populations must be carefully considered and monitored. Frequently, recidivism studies use sensitive archival data that may include social and criminal histories that must be carefully safeguarded to ensure the confidentiality of the participants. The sensitive nature of this information cannot be overstated.

The use of evidenced-based and evidence-informed practice becomes even more urgent ethical issue in work with criminal offenders. While the application of ineffective or inefficient treatment practices results in poor individual outcomes with any client, sub-standard treatment of criminal offenders has even larger ripple effects. Inadequate treatment for sex offenders, domestic violence perpetrators, and even property crime offenders too often leads to additional victims of crime as well as a tremendous financial cost. The lost opportunity for the offender to be a contributing member of society and the cost of assisting the victims of crime are compounded by the tremendous costs of additional policing, court, and incarceration. When viewed through the lens of psychosocial and financial impact on society, we cannot afford to provide anything but the most rigorously evaluated treatments for these populations. Forensic social workers are ethically bound to use science to inform practice as well as contribute to the knowledge base through program evaluation and original research.

While none of these ethical issues presented here are necessarily unique to forensic social work, they do arise more frequently and with a higher potential for harm in this specialty area. Social workers within the legal system and related social service programs must be particularly sensitive to potential ethical conflicts. Social workers should continually evaluate their activities with special attention to roles, boundaries, and power differentials to protect the interests of both individual clients and the larger community. While it is beyond the scope of any code of ethics to prescribe procedures for every situation, the code of ethics created by the National Organization of Forensics Social Work provides more specific guidelines to resolve these dilemmas. The most recent revision of the NOFSW Code of Ethics is provided here to assist social workers working with criminal justice and forensic populations.

NATIONAL ORGANIZATION OF FORENSIC SOCIAL WORK'S CODE OF ETHICS PREAMBLE

In accepting membership in the National Organization of Forensic Social Work, each Forensic Social Work Practitioner solemnly pledges to adhere to the Code of Ethics. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner agrees, in accordance with this Code of Ethics, to fulfill the following obligations to society, fellow colleagues and their organizations, individual members of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work and the National Organization of Forensic Social Work. Each Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall promote well being, minimize potential harm, and encourage the equal availability of quality Forensic Social Work services to all.

Section I: Ethical Responsibility to the National Organization of Forensic Social Work

Canon 1. Each member of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work shall possess the required qualifications of education, background and experience to perform the duties of a Forensic Social Work Practitioner.

Canon 2. Members of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work shall not misrepresent a member's qualifications, education, background, or experience either orally or in writing for any purpose, including purposes of obtaining membership, licensing, and/or certification.

Canon 3. Each Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall keep abreast of changing laws effecting practice, participate in service training programs, attend professional conferences, expand their practice skills through professional publications, consult on forensic matters with professional colleagues, and present educational material to colleagues and other professionals when so requested.

Canon 4. Each member shall be responsible for informing other professionals and the public about the work and standards of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work.

Canon 5. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall clearly distinguish between his/her statements made on behalf of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work and those made as a private citizen.

Canon 6. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall attempt to clearly identify potential conflicts among laws, rules, policies and treatment goals when serving the client, in consultation with other agencies, or with members of society.

Canon 7. Each Forensic Social Work Practitioner who pursues scholarly inquiry through research and publication shall insure confidentiality and minimize physical and/or psychological harm to all clients.

Canon 8. Members of the National Organization of Forensic Social Work shall only participate in research with subjects who have voluntarily given

his/her informed written consent. Care shall be taken to protect the privacy and dignity of research subjects. There shall be no penalty to the client for refusal to participate in any research project.

Canon 9. Appropriate credit should be given in publications according to standards set by publishers. Major contributors shall be listed. The primary author should be listed first.

Section II: Ethical Responsibilities to Employers and Colleagues

Canon 10. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall adhere to commitments voluntarily entered into between the Forensic Social Work Practitioner and the employing agency.

Canon 11. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall report unethical conduct of employers or colleagues to appropriate agencies and/or professional organizations.

Canon 12. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall refuse to participate in any unethical conduct or procedure against any client, colleague, or agency.

Canon 13. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall treat clients, colleagues, supervisees, students, and trainees with respect and dignity.

Canon 14. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall conduct evaluations of supervisees, students, or trainees in a fair and equitable manner according to agency norms or personnel practices. Such evaluations shall be shared with the subject of said evaluation.

Canon 15. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall consult with colleagues upon request.

Canon 16. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not solicit clients from the member's agency for private practice unless such is in accordance with the agency's policies.

Section III: Ethical Responsibilities to Clients

Canon 17. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not discriminate on the basis of race, nationality, religion, color, age, sex, sexual orientation, mental or physical disability, political belief, marital, or legal status in providing Forensic Social Work services.

Canon 18. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall clearly identify the source of referral, inform individuals being evaluated or treated of the nature and purpose of the evaluation, and use applicable standards of confidentiality with whom the information will be shared.

Canon 19. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not provide treatment that could endanger the physical, emotional, or psychiatric health of the client.

Canon 20. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall seek consultation when appropriate.

Canon 21. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall make referrals to other professionals and agencies when it is deemed to be in the best interest of the client. The client shall be informed of such referral.

Canon 22. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall avoid potential conflicts of interest by refusing to accept clients when there is a possible conflict between personal, family and/or professional responsibilities.

Canon 23. When terminating treatment against the client's wishes, care shall be taken to adequately explain the basis for the Forensic Social Work Practitioner's decision and to insure the opportunity for continuity of services by appropriate referral to other professionals or agencies.

Canon 24. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall protect the confidentiality of all records and documents subject to law. Disclosures of information shall be made only with the client's informed, written consent.

Canon 25. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall set reasonable and customary fees which are in accordance with rates for services performed of a similar nature by other professionals.

Canon 26. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall make services available to selected indigent clients.

Canon 27. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall receive remuneration for services performed.

Canon 28. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not engage in any illegal activities, fraud, or deceit.

Canon 29. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not accept, demand, give, or receive anything of value for making or receiving a referral from a colleague.

Canon 30. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not allow his/her personal problems, mental illness, or drug or alcohol dependency to interfere in the delivery of services to clients. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner has the responsibility to seek appropriate treatment.

Canon 31. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not engage in any sexual contact with clients, students, or any person under the authority of the Forensic Social Work Practitioner.

Canon 32. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall report any documented or suspected child abuse or neglect, abuse of patients or any other dependent persons to appropriate local or federal agencies in accordance with relevant local and national laws.

Canon 33. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall notify both the appropriate legal authorities and identified potential victim(s) when serious threats to do imminent bodily harm are made by clients.

Canon 34. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall obtain written consent of clients when videotaping or recording interviews for professional or educational purposes.

Canon 35. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall be mindful of special duties to clients under legal age and shall insure that only the

necessary information to maximize the client's progress in treatment be given to parents, guardians, or appropriate agencies.

Section IV: Ethical Responsibility to Society

Canon 36. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner has an obligation to impact proposed legislation affecting the practice of Forensic Social Work.

Canon 37. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall promote quality services and high standards for Forensic Social Work care equally to all people.

Canon 38. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not perjure him/herself.

Canon 39. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not delegate duties or responsibilities to any person not qualified to perform those duties or to accept those responsibilities.

Canon 40. The Forensic Social Work Practitioner shall not use professional knowledge and skills in any enterprise detrimental to the public well being.

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