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# The Ethical Continuum as a Teaching Tool

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## Introduction

In our common language, we often use the terms “ethical” and “unethical” to describe behaviors that we strive to emulate or avoid. In reality, however, we know that human behavior is not as straightforward as these two simple categories imply. When we struggle to identify what is ethical, we are confronted with the true complexity of ethical decision-making that human service workers deal with from the day they begin working with clients. For example, workers are responsible for empowering clients, ensuring that in the process they neither rescue nor abandon them; they must maintain professional relationship boundaries while being neither entangled nor rigid; they are called to communicate child welfare authority without being too passive or aggressive. Even training and development professionals must balance their care for learners with providing sufficient control of the environment to support learners’ development (National Staff Development and Training Association, 2004). In none of these examples is there a simple “ethical” or “unethical” response; all embody complexities that permeate human services work.

In order to be equipped with the decision-making tools necessary to ethically address these complex situations, human services professionals must be capable of thinking beyond a dualistic categorization, beyond a simple catalog of rights and wrongs, to successfully organize complex situations and responses within an ethics conceptual framework.

To meet this learning challenge a training experience is required, in addition to regular workplace supervision and effective role modeling, which will directly address these issues in a way that allows for discussion, reaction and thoughtful reflection. This is critical in order to effectively enable human service professionals to make their unconscious thinking and values conscious, and grasp relevant concepts in a way that leads to more reflective, and more ethical, casework (Reamer, 2001a).

The need for conscious awareness of the values that influence our doing applies at every level...not only may subjective and unanalyzed values motivate the case-worker but...indeed all of us are pushed and pulled by often unseen value assumptions and commitments. Only as we continuously raise these assumptions and commitments to full consciousness can we take possession of them. (Perlman, 1979, p. 389)

The learning activity described below strives to address the need for both these elements identified above: teach clear ethical responses based on a code of ethics, and develop learners’ skills of self-reflection and consultation with others, to prepare for the inevitable moments in human service practice when an ethical response is not clear cut.

Traditional approaches to education risk limited transfer of learning from the classroom into the workplace, as they “often overemphasize cognitive strategies” (Curry, Caplan & Knuppel, 1994, p. 11) and fail to address the varied learning needs of adults. This activity aims to target the range of adults’ learning requirements to maximize the value of their experience through instructional strategies that are “instructor-led, participant-centered” (Pike, 1994) and which take into account the variety of adults’ learning styles (Curry et al, 1994). In addition,

this activity is highly adaptable to a wide range of ethical contexts, and has been applied in various topic areas within workshops offered by the Protective Services Training Institute of Texas to child protection, adult protection and child care licensing specialists employed by the Texas Department of Protective and Regulatory Services.

### **The “Ethics Continuum Framework”**

#### *Activity Objectives*

This activity intends to provide participants with an ethics conceptual framework to 1) contextualize their casework practice, 2) recognize the factors that determine what acceptable casework practice is, 3) better differentiate between the gray zones that can exist between unethical and ethical behavior, and 4) identify the implications of unethical practice.

#### *Group Size*

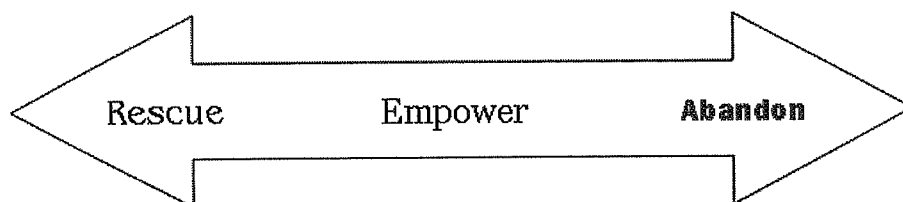
This activity is a combination of large group and small group interactions. Ideally, there should be no more than 40 participants in total, who are clustered into smaller groups of no more than six people each.

#### *Time Required*

The time required to accomplish this activity is partly dependent upon the amount of discussion generated in the large group components, and can usually be conducted within 60 to 90 minutes.

#### *Materials*

Ahead of time, the instructor posts a poster the size of three flip-chart pages taped together lengthwise, and on it draws a double-headed arrow, as below. S/he labels the arrow based on the ethical focus of the day. In this example, the concepts of rescuing, empowering and abandoning will be used.



During the activity, participants are provided with (1) a handout with the above diagram, and three lists of adjectives describing workers with each of these empowerment styles, and (2) a handout with several short, relevant case scenarios, which will be assigned one to each small group. There should be enough case scenarios for each group to have a different case, and to create variety between each case example, ensuring that the worker in each scenario reflects a different degree of empowerment or disempowerment along the continuum. Finally, (3) participants should have a copy of learners' relevant code of ethics and/or agency standards of conduct.

Other required materials include: (1) a visual listing the four key directions (below), (2) an area with columns labeled with the headings: "Rescuing" and "Abandoning" (the extremes of the continuum) and (3) one sticky notepad for each small group.

### *Physical Setting*

Participants should be seated in a way that allows the small groups to talk easily among themselves, the room should be large enough to manage the noise level of many small groups speaking at once with each other, and all participants should have visual access to the continuum poster.

## **Procedures**

### *Understanding the Continuum*

This activity begins with the instructor asking the group to define the categories of the “Rescuing” worker, the “Empowering” worker and the “Abandoning” worker. The large group lists adjectives that describe each of these types of workers, and the instructor writes their words on the arrow poster under each category. Examples may include a “Rescuing” worker being over-involved, afraid, passive; an “Abandoning” worker being a poor listener, insensitive, inauthentic; and an ‘Empowering’ worker being balanced, caring, reflective, attentive and fair. To conclude this step, the instructor hands out a page with a list of descriptors under each category, and together the group compares their list with this one.

### *Application of Case Examples*

Following this, the instructor distributes a page of case scenarios to all groups, and assigns each small group a different case scenario. (For examples, see National Association of Social Workers, 1998; National Staff Development and Training Association, 2004)

Participants are asked to consider and organize the worker’s behavior in the scenario within the terms of the empowerment paradigm presented, identifying where the caseworker in their scenario would be situated on the continuum.

Next, participants are asked to work in small groups. Groups are given four key directions to follow:

1. Come to a consensus about where the worker is situated on the continuum and why.
2. Referring to your code of ethics and/or agency standards of conduct, name the ethical issues involved in this case.
3. What changes does the worker need to make in order to be “Empowering?”
4. Is there a context where this worker’s behavior would be considered “Empowering?” (Consider, for example, specific program areas or differences between rural and urban settings that may mandate worker responses. See Davidson, 2005; Deverell & Sharma, 2000; Gonsiorek, 1995 for further exploration of this subject.)

After approximately 15 minutes, one person from each small group is asked to stand in front of the continuum on the wall to represent where the group situated the worker in their scenario, thereby offering a hidden stretch break for some (Pike, 1994). Groups briefly present their scenario, rationale and answers to the large group. The large group is permitted to ask questions to clarify rationale, and to share their perspective if it differs from the presenting group’s perspective. It is at this point that differences in opinion may come to light, which are very often a reflection of people’s differing experiences and professionally mandated roles. Barring any clear ethical transgressions, the instructor’s role, in addition to clarifying what is a most ethical response given the circumstances, is to facilitate the discussion in such a way as to bring to light the subtle differences along the continuum, and to identify what factors are informing each opinion.

This facilitation approach should aim to model reflective practice and highlight the value of hearing from others in order to broaden one's own perspective of a situation. The discussion time for this step may last up to thirty minutes in total.

### *The Implications of Less-than-Empowering Practice*

A final component of this activity involves identifying the implications of unethical practice. Using a blank sheet of paper, participants are asked to individually brainstorm several short-term and long-term implications of "Rescuing" and "Abandoning" behavior on clients and caseworkers. After three minutes, participants share their list within their small group.

Each group is asked to choose their top three most critical implications of "Rescuing" and "Abandoning" behavior, take six sticky notes, write one implication per note, and post them on a pre-prepared area under the appropriate columns. The instructor then asks for volunteers to read the sticky notes from the flip chart. The implications of "Rescuing" behavior, for example, may include client dependence, inability of worker to accurately assess clients' strengths, and worker burn-out. Likewise, examples of the implications of 'Abandoning' behavior may include clients' inability to reach goals, clients' resistance to further professional intervention, workers' uninformed assessments, and again, burn-out.

### **Potential Challenges**

The most challenging aspect of this activity is the potential for differing points of view to be voiced. Naturally, differing opinions exist, and a continuum framework within an interactional format will surface people's values and perceptions in a way that a categorical, didactic presentation of the content may not. The challenge lies not in the differing opinions, but in the instructor's ability to both create a sense of safety for the group and normalize differing opinions before they arise, thereby validating the richness of differing perspectives. The instructor strives to "promote a climate of trust and mutual respect...so that participants feel supported enough to take risks to promote their learning and development" (National Staff Development and Training Association, 2004). This activity is most effective when participants have some disagreement, as it is in their active discussion that a respect for and capacity for reflective practice is developed.

### **Adaptations**

There are several possible ways to facilitate the scenario component of this activity. In the above example, the small groups are given a scenario and asked to identify where they would situate the worker on the continuum. Equally effective, small groups may be assigned a conceptual position on the continuum, and be asked to create a scenario which reflects a worker with that approach to empowerment. The small groups then present the scenarios to the large group, and may find creative ways to communicate their cases, from telling the story to acting it out.

This activity has been described using an "Empowerment" continuum for its conceptual framework; however, other ethical challenges can also be used as effectively with the same activity. For example, with the question of communicating authority in a balanced way, the continuum can be labeled with "Passive" and "Aggressive" extremes, with the ideal being "Assertive" authority (Davidson, 2002). When considering the ethics of professional relationship boundaries, the continuum can be labeled with "Entangled" and "Rigid" professional boundaries on either extreme, with the ideal being "Balanced" boundaries (Davidson, 2005).

Similarly, instructors' ethical responsibility to be both caring for participants and in control of the learning environment may be understood on a continuum, with the center labeled "Balanced," and the extremes labeled "Overly concerned" and "Overly controlling."

### **Impact of Learning Activity**

The ethics continuum framework and related activity presented in this paper has been used within several different six-hour professional development ethics workshops offered by the Protective Services Training Institute of Texas. These qualify for social work licensing ethics education credit, and have been modified for graduate schools of social work practice classes, produced as part of a distance education video and workbook, and presented for community agencies, and various state, national and international conferences. Participants rated the courses highly (Appendix I: Participant Workshop Evaluations) and the application activities, intended to facilitate their transfer of learning from the training room to their practice context, are shown to be successful (Appendix II: Participant Action Plan Assessments).

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### **Appendix I: Participant Workshop Evaluations**

At the conclusion of every workshop, attendees complete an evaluation form that lists 10 positively worded statements related to the presentation and content of the workshop and provides a five-point response scale, ranging from (1) "strongly disagree" to (5) "strongly agree." To summarize, 529 attendees responded over a two-year period with a mean overall response rate of 4.5, an average response that falls between "agree" and "strongly agree." More specifically, participants indicated that 92 percent agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "I feel my time in training was well-spent"; 91 percent agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "I am more confident in my knowledge about this topic"; and 97 percent agreed or strongly agreed to the statement, "I plan to apply this knowledge to my specific job situation" (Protective Services Training Institute, 2001 and 2002).

### **Appendix II: The Participant Action Plan Approach: "Knowing Where to Draw the Lines" Workshop Final Report 2001**

The Participant Action Plan Approach (PAPA) is a method of determining whether workshop attendees are able to use the knowledge and skills they gain in training. At the completion of the training session, participants identify behaviors that they want to implement once they return to the work setting. Two months following the training, the Protective Services Training Institute sends out surveys to determine how successful the participants have been in implementing those behaviors.

One hundred and twenty-seven persons responded to the PAPA survey that was sent out two months after each of the thirteen "Knowing Where to Draw the Lines" workshops offered between September 2000 and August 2001. The response rate was 52 percent, very high for a mailed survey. Of those responding (n=127), 88 percent of participants said they were able to implement their planned action items once they returned to work. Rating the success of implementation of action items, 92 percent of the participants agreed or strongly agreed that the implementation was successful. Of those who were not able to implement their action

items, 31 percent said it was due to lack of time and 58 percent said that they had not yet had an opportunity to do so. No participant said that their inability to do so was related to the training they had received. Ninety percent of those who had not been able to implement their action items at the time of the survey said that they planned to do so in the future (Protective Services Training Institute, 2001).

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