



Ethics in Social Work

An ethical code for social work professionals

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This document deals in its entirety with the ethical code for social work professionals. The essence of the code—its core text—is expressed in the Ethical Guidelines on p. 13.

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Introduction

This document presents an ethical code—ethical reflections and guidelines—for social work professionals. The intention is to offer a fundamental direction concerning the role of ethics in social work.

An ethical code is meant to focus attention and give direction in matters demanding the exercise of own judgement. The code is also intended to stimulate an ethical debate between social work professionals and within the organisations where they practise their profession.

Why an ethical code?

In social work one is forced to make decisions that involve ethical judgements. There will be difficult choices to make that will have important consequences for individual lives. Aspects of control and dominance are inevitable in the work. The individual help seeker is in a position of weakness that is sometimes very evident. This makes it important to be aware of value judgements in social work and how the work affects people's lives. Social work, in other words, demands observance of ethical behaviour.

Competence and professional identity

The value of an ethical code—with ethical reflections and guidelines for the work—is evident in a growing number of professional fields. Such a code is intended to create an insight into ethical norms for the profession and to focus attention on ethical issues. It is an important professional competency to be able to conduct a line of reasoning and come to ethically informed decisions. An ethical code serves as guidance in taking up a stance.

An ethical code also contributes to the strengthening of professional identity. The code has both a symbolic and a guiding role and is a reminder that the person practising a profession is also a representative of that profession. Ethical codes for different professions also have a value for the organisation. They add clarity to the tasks and should lead to greater ethical observance within the organisation.

In an ethical code important themes can be brought forward that are not found in statutes, rules and regulations; for example, how to receive and treat clients, basic approach to humanity, and the personal ethical qualities that are desirable in professional practice.

It is important for the public to know how social work professionals view their tasks and what kind of support they can expect to get, beyond what is written in laws and other official regulations.

Social work professionals

This ethical code is intended for social work professionals. A majority of these are social work graduates, but there are many persons working within the profession who have other academic qualifications.

Different activities stand under different responsible authorities

Core activities in social work are carried out within the municipal social services. But social work is also extensively carried out within the field of health and sick care, in schools, correctional care, treatment institutions, and by National Social Insurance offices.

The greater part of social work takes place within the public sector, but a significant amount is also carried out by professionals in voluntary organisations, client organisations and churches, as well as in private enterprises. A large part of this work, however, is financed by the public sector and is under public supervision.

Clients and other citizens

We use different words to denote the persons who become the concern of social work professionals. These terms vary with the context and its character. The persons may be pupils, children, young people, patients, care receivers, relatives, customers, clients, inhabitants, inmates, and substance abusers. Throughout this document we use the general term client.

Ethical issues in social work

Different forms of social work entail different kinds of ethical problems. An approximate picture of the diversity of social work can be gained by asking what aspects the work covers.

Different aspects of social work

Social work can be categorized and described in different ways. This document has already pointed out the divisions between responsible authorities and their respective activities. Social work can also be described from the viewpoint of how regulated it is by law, i.e., whether and to what degree there are elements of the exercise of public authority in the work. Another classification—that mirrors a frequent discussion in social work—can be made on the basis of methods and ways of working.

In this document, aspects or dimensions of social work refer to salient features of the work and their purposes. Any social work activity—irrespective of regulations and responsible authority—has different aspects, of which one is often particularly dominant, but each separate aspect will involve ethical problems, if of partly different nature.

Empowerment

One aspect of social work with a strong position in the international discourse is that the work shall be characterized by and aim towards empowerment, the term used to lift forward the basic idea that individuals or groups of citizens shall develop their own resources and in this way be able to influence and improve their living conditions.

Such themes as consciousness-raising and liberation belong here as well. Social work is then seen as a liberating pedagogy that can strengthen citizens' ability to act independently.

Advocacy

That social work is a form of advocacy is signalled by the term client, which is Latin and means charge or protégé. In contemporary language the expression is mainly used in legal contexts and in social work. In the same way that a lawyer advises and represents her client in legal proceedings, the social work profes-

sional represents her client before—and sometimes in opposition to—various authorities and social groupings in the society.

While the empowerment theme foremost aims at strengthening the client, the advocate's role is more about being a strong and driving ombudsman championing the client's interests.

The idea of advocacy also refers to social groups or categories of citizens. The role of advocate may then mean—e.g. in an evaluation or a research project—that one should choose a perspective representative of persons and groups in a vulnerable position.

Community work and social integration

Social work representatives can play an important role in community planning and the development of social support programmes. A part of community work is also to create meeting places and to work in social problem areas.

Another important aspect of community social work is the attempt to promote better social integration. That work may have elements of troubleshooting/conflict solving and lead to better understanding between individuals or groups. The work may also aim at creating increased participation in the social life of the community and a greater sense of loyalty with the democratic social system.

Guidance and fostering

Fostering is a classic aspect of social work and involves—when the society finds the client's attitudes and way of life problematic—guiding the client towards a more constructive social bearing. But here balance is vital. If this aspect should be allowed to dominate, there is the risk of intimidating or bullying individual citizens.

Fostering and 'disciplining' can be used to get the client to accept an inferior position in society; to create muteness and obedience, which is clearly repressive behaviour. But disciplining and repression do not necessarily go hand in hand.

Fostering and disciplining should rather aim to help a person to gain control over his/her life and to promote social consideration, so that the client is no longer a threat to other citizens' safety and welfare.



Care, support and protection

A very important aspect of social work is to offer care and support to citizens in different life situations. There is also an essential, shielding aspect to social work; to protect against violation and assault.

Welfare services and counselling

The aspects of social work that now have been brought up often aim to change people's lives and social identities. But social work can have a more purely service-minded aspect, to assist people with advice and other services in various situations. Social work also means offering a person what s/he needs and has a right to without any ambition to change that person's life, social identity or role in the society.

The diversity of social work

These different aspects or dimensions of social work indicate the diversity found within the field. We can view such aspects as alternatives to choose from, but it is more relevant to see them as a repertoire to be combined in various ways.

What aspects should dominate depend on the field of activity in which we practise. This may also mirror ideological judgements on the role of social work in shaping better welfare and a good society to live in.

The professional identity of the social worker

The different aspects of social work—combined in different ways—involve partly different professional roles and partly different professional ideals. An emphasis on empowerment places one in a different role from seeing oneself foremost as advocate, community builder, guide and fosterer, support, caregiver, or citizens' service function.

In certain professions, established phrases exist that briefly outline of the essentials of their task. An example of this is the formulation, "prevention, healing, alleviation and comfort", mainly used in the medical profession. There is no such key expression in social work, but an example of a condensed professional identity might be the ambition "to help a greater number of people to live a life of dignity".

Ethical dilemmas and risks

Situations arise in social work that involve ethical dilemmas. Often these concern the social worker professional's own self-understanding and appear in different variations in different fields of activity, some of them related to the matter of which aspect of the work ought to be the primary one.

A list—with no claim to completeness—of such dilemmas might include the following:

- Care, support and assistance versus control and demands.
- The risk of a—seemingly necessary—caring attitude leading to the loss of a person's own power of initiative and sense of dignity.
- Respect for a person's right to self-determination and freedoms versus the risk of one's efforts leading to the stigmatization of that person and their wounded self-esteem.
- Difficulties in treating clients with respect and of creating a positive relationship in a job that has unavoidable elements of demand and control.
- Maintaining democratic values such as individual freedoms and equal opportunities for both sexes versus showing admiration for persons and groups who do not uphold these values.
- The conflict between, on the one hand, defending/protecting certain clients and, on the other, taking into consideration the interests of those closely related and others.
- The right of the child to advantageous living conditions versus the right of the parents to exert their parentage and live their family lives on their own terms.
- Prioritizing time and resources between different client categories with different needs.
- Carrying out measures deemed necessary and proper versus demands for economic stringency.
- Maintaining loyalty with the work and the organisation, even when one finds policy and working conditions to be contrary to well-founded practice and the best interests of the client, and perhaps also to juridical norms for the work.
- Conflicts of loyalty between defending the client's best interests and support and defence of a colleague.

Some of these dilemmas entail conflicts of role or of loyalty for the social work professional. Others may concern the difficulty of making priorities within a limited range of resources or of choosing the most constructive solution to a problem. Such dilemmas are often coupled to difficulties in assessing the consequences of different courses of action, e.g. the risk of a person being harmed by a measure intended to help.

Ethical dilemmas in social work may be related to overall ideological issues: To what degree is the public society responsible for the individual citizen? How much of the responsibility for a person's situation and future is entirely his own? Which ethical values and norms are essential for judging the balance between the responsibility of the public society and that of the individual?

Dilemma and risk

Apart from these dilemmas about making constructive choices and judgements, there is also in the job the risk of a negative personal development. One such dilemma is the risk of becoming insensitive, of exhibiting insufficient empathy or plain cynicism, arising from the problem culture encountered in social work, the stress and strains of the job, or disappointment over the behaviour of clients.

Another common dilemma is the objectifying of the client, who becomes merely another in the endless line of problematic citizens each day encountered, with the risk that each person's unique conditions and role as subject is reduced to a diagnosis to be cured or a case to be dispatched.

AFTER THIS ROUGHLY OUTLINED reminder of the ethical problems that may be encountered in social work, let us now discuss the ethical values and norms that are essential in social work.

Ethical values and norms

Fundamentals of ethics

In ethics there are many different issues and themes to explore. We will here make a division into three fundamental ethical questions and areas of discussion: human value, what is right, and what sort of person we should strive to be.

Human value

A fundamental question is how we view human worth and the value of human life. We are then faced with the established position constituted by the principle of human dignity, which maintains the equal and eminent worth of every human being. This worth is inherent and not dependent on how useful we are, what status we have or how great our sense of well-being. The principle of human dignity can be seen as a declaration of love for human life and entails showing respect towards and taking responsibility for our own and others' lives.

What is right?

Another basic question in ethics is what makes an action, rule or structure right? In that discussion we can refer to established principles and norms as a point of departure or goal for our efforts.

Respect for every person's dignity and integrity is an established norm, as is respect for every person's freedom and right to self-determination. Values such as justice and equality are also central in the assessment of actions and rules, along with the principles of human rights, humanity and solidarity.

Such values and norms can be seen as valid in themselves so need no justification. But they can also be recognized as leading—if we utilize them—to best outcomes for human lives and societal conditions.

Reference to consequences confronts us with a follow-up question: What do we mean by best outcomes? Or in other words, what is—or can lead to—quality of life and a satisfactory existence?

What is my own responsibility and what sort of person ought I to be?

A third basic question in ethics directs attention to the perpetrator of actions. Here, we are confronted with issues of moral responsibility and of personal ethical qualities or virtues.

Responsibility presupposes freedom to act. The greater the power and the freedom to act, the greater the responsibility. The concept of responsibility raises questions of our intentions and of our fundamental attitude to life and to other people. What sort of person—from an ethical viewpoint—should I strive to be? And how are we to evaluate other people's intentions and motives? When is moral criticism justified? These are classic ethical questions that have gained renewed attention both in the moral philosophy and the media debate since the 1990's.

IT IS IMPORTANT to keep apart these different ethical themes even if they touch upon each other. In the following section on ethical values and norms, both the principle of human dignity and the different values and norms that answer the question of "what is right?" will be commented upon. Personal ethical qualities are later discussed in a special section.

Ethical values and norms

A professional should be well grounded in the general ethical values most strongly entrenched in our society. Ethical values and norms in social work are mainly the same as for other professions, but the choice of these values and the emphasis placed on them varies between different professions, organisations and activities. The following brief overview comments on those viewed as generally applicable, but with special reference to the social work professional role.

The principle of human dignity

All the following ethical norms build on the principle of the equal, high worth of all human beings, which constitutes the basis for other ethical norms and on the whole for the exercise of ethical responsibility. This principle means that all persons should be met with equal respect and care, and be allowed equal influence; also that every form of discrimination is disallowed.

This is a core value for all public administration, finding expression in, e.g., the Swedish Constitution along with the 1948 Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which opens with the following words:

... recognition of the *inherent dignity and of the equal and inalienable rights* of all members of the human family is the foundation of freedom, justice and peace in the world ... (our italics).

Human rights

Human rights are a core principle both on ethical grounds and on grounds of juridical relevance. By this principle the individual has the right to certain living conditions and resources which in turn puts demands on nation-states, but also on organisations and other individuals. In social work the concern is mostly for those types of resources and measures that correspond to social rights, e.g. an adequate standard of living, dwelling, work and access to health and sick care.

Apart from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the 1950 European Convention and the 1966 European Social Charter are important texts that help define the extent of human rights and show the unity of support for the belief in entitlement.

Human dignity and human rights are two concepts that belong together. We then see others as equal citizens to whom we owe respect.

Humanity

Humanity is another central ethical principle that denotes that one ought to be particularly observant and sympathetic towards persons in a vulnerable and difficult situation. We then see others as fellow beings whom we shall meet with empathy, sensitivity and compassion.

Solidarity

Solidarity is a sister concept to humanity, but solidarity also suggests comradeship, a particular affinity with (certain) others, whose projects and aspirations we support. The solidarity idea expresses fellowship and an expected mutuality, "being there for each other".

However, the difference between humanity and solidarity becomes clearer if we consider these ethical norms in relation to correctional care. We can demand human correctional care, but hardly anyone would advocate solidarity in that context, since the fellowship and sympathy entailed would there be quite out of place.

Solidarity presupposes that other people can be viewed as friends with whom we have some form of kinship and feel sympathy for.

The first article of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights contains a compelling exhortation to

"brotherhood" that can be interpreted as a principle dealing with both humanity and solidarity:

All human beings are born free and equal in dignity and rights. They are endowed with reason and conscience and should act towards one another in a spirit of brotherhood.

Welfare, resources and security

The expression welfare is one of the code words for social work, as for the caring sector generally. With expressions such as 'welfare' and 'the welfare society' we mean that citizens have access to different kinds of resources and security guarantees that can contribute to their personal well-being.

Dignity and integrity

Dignity-integrity is an important ethical principle of huge relevance in social work. This is a composite concept and it is not entirely self-evident what it really means to safeguard people's dignity and integrity.

However, there is cultural agreement on some of the central aspects of dignity. For example, that we are treated with respect and shown interest, that there is space for us to exert influence, i.e. that we can make our voices heard and that what we say is paid due regard. Further, we have the right to a private sphere. We need to be protected from other people's curiosity and from simplified judgements about ourselves, and we experience any infringement of these aspects of our personal dignity as an offence.

Respect for our dignity and integrity also means that we can share in the resources and the help offered by the society when we are affected by difficulties in life. Certain welfare resources, therefore, form an integral part of dignified living.

Dignity is also an important value for social work in the sense that the work aims at giving people better chances of living with dignity. The ambition is then not only to respect a person's dignity and integrity but also to help strengthen that citizen's sense of dignity.

Freedom and self determination

Freedom and self-determination are a closely related ethical principle. As with the dignity principle, there are also here the double aspects of respect and strengthening.

In social work we ought both to respect and to strive to help individuals to develop the capacity to make free choices and come to own decisions as far as this does not involve a threat against others' freedom



and well-being. This is partly about respecting a person's actual self-determination, and partly attempting to increase and bolster a person's chances in life and margin for action.

Democracy and participation

Principles of democracy connect with the freedom and self-determination concept. Social work should have a democratic framework on the organisational level. In the work itself the democratic approach means openness, dialogue, and the influence and participation of clients and other persons involved.

(Social) justice

Justice is another code word for social work. The question of justice is imbued with the complication, however, that there are several concepts of justice that are defined by different criteria.

Justice can be weighed from the point of view of equality, to treat similar cases in a similar manner. But justice may also be based on need, to pay attention to the unique needs of each individual.

A concept of justice based on different needs for support and care must combine an assessment of

wants with what are considered human rights; those very rights that usually are related to basic human needs. Social justice based on needs and social justice based on human (social) rights therefore mainly have the same content.

Other criteria of justice are reward for achievement and justice as compensation. Certain aspects of compensatory justice are found in some forms of social work.

Equality

The keyword equality emphasizes the importance of having a significant portion of needs- and similarity-based justice in any social work operation. This concerns not least the matter of equivalence in the reception and treatment of clients, which shows respect for the equal and high worth of each individual.

The endeavour to give an equal reception does not mean, however, that we ought to ignore the imbalance that exists between social work professionals and their clients with regard to the preferential right of interpretation and the exercise of authority. There is indeed a marked asymmetry in such a relationship; one does not meet on equal terms. Equal reception

is especially therefore a necessity. This means that a social work professional must receive and treat the client-citizen as an equivalent human being.

Consequence-ethical judgement —what helps create a good society and a good life?

We can ask the question “why?” of all these values and norms. Why should we assert/uphold rights, humanity, solidarity, dignity, freedom, justice and equality?

There are several answers to this question. One of which is that we do not need to justify these principles; they are valid in themselves!

An alternative is to give a consequence-ethical response: These values and norms are valid because they lead to a good life and a well-functioning society. If we want to achieve total consequences that are as positive as possible then we should stick to these norms. If we think in terms of consequences, then what is decisive for right action is the answer to the question “what makes a good life?”

It happens that some of these values come in conflict with each other. There are also situations when it is unclear which norms we ought to follow. Social work professionals may find themselves faced with difficult choices where there is no self-evident particular norm to lean against. It is important here, then, to make an assessment of probable consequences based on the ambition to create the best possible conditions for those involved, although even that assessment may be hard to make.

Particular attention to persons in a vulnerable life situation

There is a vital tradition in social work not to count on total consequences alone. We also—all the more so—need to be attentive to whether there are individuals or groups at risk of ending up in a vulnerable life situation. This implies a principle of awareness of possible harm and minimization of damage. Clearly, making an assessment of total consequences for all concerned is not enough. We must also be attentive to whether a particular individual or group is—or risks being—especially affected.

The Social Services Act's opening paragraph

A majority of these values and norms are expressed in the opening paragraph of the Social Services Act (Ch. 1, § 1):

The social services shall, taking into consideration the individual's own responsibility for his and others' social situation, aim at liberating and developing the innate resources of individuals and groups. Activities shall be based on respect for the self-determination and integrity of the individual. In measures concerning children, particular attention shall be paid to the demands placed by consideration of the best interests of the child.

Not least the reference to the “best interests of the child” can be seen as a consequence-ethical rule with due attention paid to a vulnerable life situation in order to prevent or minimize the risk for harm.

An international ethical code for social work

An international ethical code for social work drawn up by the International Federation of Social Work (IFSW), which is made up of various national organisations, and the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW) can be accessed at www.ifsw.org – Publications – Ethical Documents. See also Human Rights Manuals.

The Swedish ethical code adopted by *Akademikerförbundet SSR* naturally has a great deal in common with the IFSW code. Of the values and norms briefly discussed above certain principles in particular are denoted as central in the IFSW ethical code; Human rights, Human Dignity and Social Justice.

The relation between different ethical values and norms

There are, then, quite a number of ethical values, norms and principles that are relevant to social work professional ethics including some not discussed in this document.

These ethical values can be related to each other in several ways. Some principles have certain common aspects and so overlap each other. Some principles constitute the argument for other principles and have a more fundamental character. The most fundamental position is the principle of every human being's equal worth.

There are naturally other ways of grouping these values and norms but in the following we have elected to relate them to each other by placing them on different levels of argumentation.

Ethical arguments for social work

Welfare—resources, dignity—integrity, freedoms—self-determination, social justice, and equality are very common answers to the questions of *why* we should carry out social work as well as *how* this work should be carried out. These values have a strong position in our understanding of society. They can be combined in different ways and have then somewhat different connotations. The combination, for example, of welfare and equality gives other associations than combining dignity with freedoms. But all the five main values listed above can be combined and can also be used as motivation for each other. We can, e.g. assert that the why of welfare (resources) corresponds to a life lived in dignity or because it is fair (based on any of the various justice criteria).

Asking “why?” with reference to each of these five values leads to the next level; humanity, solidarity, rights and democracy. But we can also bypass this level by simply pointing to the positive consequences or go directly to the next, final and most fundamental level, the principle of human dignity.

Continuing our line of reasoning, we may also ask the question “why?” of the second level; humanity, solidarity, rights and democracy. Naturally, these principles can also be combined in different ways and used to strengthen each other. We can, e.g. justify the why of social rights on the basis of the humanity principle. But we can also there point to the good consequences or bypass that argument and refer to the principle of human dignity.

But why should we be so anxious about good consequences and a good life for all? Pointing to the principle of human dignity is the almost self-explanatory answer to that question. The principle of paying particular attention to persons in vulnerable life situations (awareness of possible harm and minimization of damage) can also be connected to the principle of human dignity.

Here, however, we need to be reminded that between consequence-ethical assessment of what is best for all and assessment of individual consequences for persons in a vulnerable life situation there may be difficult decisions to make.

The principle of human dignity is a fundamental precondition for the entire argument. The idea of each human being’s equal and high worth backs up other values and norms and provides the basis for at all taking ethics seriously.

Ethical traits of character

The qualified practice of social work demands all-round knowledge and professional competence. While professional skills may not directly be of an ethical character, an ethical demand is to maintain and develop those skills.

However, a part of social work professional competence is of a directly ethical character. These are the personal qualities normally included in classic descriptions of ethical consciousness and integrity. Examples of such ethical qualities in social work are:

- Integrity
- Critical self-insight
- Responsibility
- Courage/moral courage
- A sense of justice
- Balanced judgement
- Tolerance/ broad-mindedness
- Empathy/sensitivity
- A basic attitude of respect, friendliness and equality in relation to others

These qualities normally find expression in the actions taken and in many cases refer to a manner of treating other citizens, but they also indicate an inner bearing.

Personal qualities with an ethical dimension

There are other important personal qualities and abilities that are not foremost of an ethical character but that can harbour an ethical dimension and that link up with ethical traits of character. For example,

- Objectivity and clarity
- Creativity
- Social competence
- The will to understanding and the ability to co-operate
- Independence
- Humour

Developing and maintaining ethical integrity

In all professions with social responsibility, the exercise of the work itself can contribute to ethical devel-



opment, but this does not take place automatically. There is the risk of losing one's ethical integrity and of instead developing a meagre standard procedure in dealing with clients or even a stunting cynicism.

The qualities listed constitute a powerful ideal that is relevant to many professional areas and life situations. We are normally attracted to these qualities and strive to develop them. Since we realize their relevance for both our own lives and for practice of the profession, we can hopefully also develop in a positive direction.

Ethical qualities can also be developed through the positive input of other persons and through a stimulating and open-minded work environment. Supervision and collegial dialogue can also be of great value. It is probable that we can also develop in a positive direction by reacting and protesting against attitudes and behaviour/actions that signal a destructive approach, e.g., indifference, intolerance and cowardice.

The personal mooring of ethics

A genuinely ethical attitude presupposes a fundamental experience of worth and love, a binding understanding of the other person's importance and of the value of life. In that sense, love is a central theme in ethics. In the introduction to *Akademikerförbundet SSR's* 1997 Ethical Guidelines for Social Work Professionals, now superseded by this present ethical code, one particular passage has been paid due notice and is cited in the international literature on ethics in social work. It is the following formulation, which expresses the importance of having a personal rooting in an ethical ground:

“Moral lacks a deeper personal basis without experience of values and love. Ethics purely under subjects such as rational egoism, obedience, group pressure or care of one's own conscience is not sufficient, as they have not been touched by love and seriously discovered the other individual and the values of one's own life.” (Banks, S. (2001, p. 93). *Ethics and Values in Social Work*. Palgrave, England.)

Ethical guidelines

In the following ethical guidelines—a summation and specification of the arguments presented in this document—directions are given as to how social work professionals should view their ethical responsibility. The guidelines are also intended to contribute to continued ethical reflection.

The basis of social work and the profession

- Social work and the professional role of the social worker shall be related to scientific findings and proven experience. Fundamental values in the work and for the profession are human rights and humanity. The work shall contribute to creating a good and dignified life for all citizens and to developing the welfare of the society.

Profession and personality

Social work professionals shall

- in their work and way of life respect each individual's equal and high worth
- show particular responsibility towards persons and groups in a vulnerable position
- use their professional position with responsibility and be conscious of the limitations of their own competence
- maintain and develop their social work skills and strive towards ethical consciousness and personal development.

The client/citizen

Social work professionals shall

- show an equalitarian attitude to other citizens and treat clients with respect, empathic attention and amiability
- respect the client's personal integrity and safeguard the individual's right to self-determination in so far as the same right for others' is not infringed upon and there is no risk of damage to the client. Measures shall as far as possible be based on participation and mutual understanding
- inform the client as to rights and duties, i.e. clarify the conditions and resources that exist within the current activity and other authorities involved

- make sure that the demands placed on clients have a reasonable foundation and are capable of contributing to an improvement of their situation
- never use the position of dependency of the client in different situations to own advantage
- maintain client confidentiality and make sure that information concerning the client is handled in conformance with the law and generally with great prudence.

The organisation, colleagues and the workplace

Social work professionals shall

- be aware of and show loyalty to the organisation's basic task
- show loyalty and respect towards colleagues and other members of staff as well as towards members of the board
- challenge and work against offensive or discriminatory attitudes and actions within the organisation or in the behaviour of colleagues or clients, aware that this may be in conflict with other loyalty demands
- contribute towards the upholding of high standards of quality in the work so that the profession can develop in step with citizens' needs and with changing conditions in the society
- help to make the workplace a constructive and responsive social environment.

Society

Social work professionals shall

- be open to co-operation with other organisations and other professions, under the condition that this is of value to clients and other citizens
- strive to build up confidence in social work and in their own professional competence, as well as being open to demands for accountability and critical appraisal of the way the work is performed
- as a professional and as a citizen stand for a democratic social ideal comprising human rights, humanity and solidarity.

Case reports for reflection and discussion

The following cases give examples of the ethical dilemmas that social work professionals may encounter. One can naturally arrive at a standpoint concerning these cases through engaging in an open discussion, but it may also be useful to formalize the discussion using structured questions based on the texts in the code. In the first instance, the following questions may be asked of each case.

- What ethical principles and norms are relevant to this situation?
- How should one act in consideration of the probable consequences for all involved?
- How should one act in consideration of the probable consequences for those in a particularly vulnerable position?
- What personal ethical qualities are important for right action in this situation?
- Which ethical guidelines are relevant to the problem?

A racist ‘back problem’

A man of about 25 comes to the social services with an unusual problem. He has since his teens been a member of racist groups and has had “whites only” tattooed on his back. He has now given up these convictions and even moved on to new friends. The tattoo on his back feels increasingly alien to him and he now wants it removed but the public medical services say that it is not the business of the public sector to bear the cost. He will have to go to a private surgery and himself pay the cost of SEK 30.000. This money he does not have and neither does he know anyone from whom he can borrow it. A debt registered with the enforcement service prevents him from getting other loans. His hope is that the social services will pay the cost so that he can be quit his racist blemish.

Is this a problem that should concern the social services? What, in that case, should one do?

Exclusion from a treatment programme on account of broken rules?

At the *Soberia* treatment centre, persons live and are cared for who have problems with substance abuse.

The rules clearly state that no drugs are tolerated on the premises. Should any one of the house inhabitants break this rule then the rule demands immediate discharge from the treatment programme. Each new member on arrival is informed of this rule and requested to sign a promise to keep it.

One morning when the personnel arrive at the treatment centre they find the place in chaos. There has been partying during the weekend involving the use of cocaine. Urine tests show that at least three of the inmates—Pia, Hugo and Claes—have clearly been offenders. It is suspected that others have also participated, but of this there is no proof.

According to the rules these three offenders should now be discharged, but there is disagreement among the personnel. Some say discharge is the only reasonable action since they have clearly broken the treatment centre’s most important rule. Any exception to this would simply undermine the rules and lessen confidence in the treatment and the personnel.

Others argue that an exception should be made in this case since a discharge would have serious consequences and perhaps even lead to some person’s early demise. Pia has been in and out of treatment institutions since the age of eight. She has now for the first time been able to receive the help offered and has begun to achieve some kind of order in her life. She has been at *Soberia* for a long time and it is an important source of security for her. The personnel fear that discharging her will send her back to prostitution and the use of drugs. If Claes is discharged several of the personnel are concerned that he may fall into a deep depression and become suicidal.

How should one act in this situation?

Medicine in yoghurt?

A man in an old people’s home suffering from dementia will not take his medicine and spits out the tablets when placed in his mouth. Without his medicine he becomes very depressed and has aggressive outbursts. After consultation with the head of unit the personnel decide to crush the pills and put them in yoghurt to make it easier for him to ingest. The first time they do this, they show him what they are doing.

He neither comments nor protests so they continue to administer his medicine in this way without each time demonstrating the procedure.

Are the head of unit and the personnel acting in a proper manner? If the man had refused the yoghurt-medicine when it was demonstrated the first time, should the personnel anyway secretly administer the medicine in this way?

A certificate attesting to virginity?

A high school counsellor receives a visit from a pupil requesting a certificate attesting that she is a virgin. She wishes the counsellor and the school nurse to write such a certificate or to refer her to a gynaecologist who can issue one. She is not a virgin, but needs a certificate to convince her own and her boyfriend's family. She insists that it is crucial for her whole future and that without it she will be in very deep trouble.

What should the counsellor do?

Offensive language on the Internet

Michael, a 28-year old man with Asperger's syndrome, lives in an own apartment close to sheltered communal housing, where he visits daily and where he eats most of his meals. The personnel know that he often engages in chats on the *Lunarstorm* youth site.

One day, one of the personnel browsing the site to check up on what her own children may be up to, notices that Michael is active, which is possible because he has told them his user name. She sees that he is chatting with young girls and using very sexually explicit language. Before the personnel can take any action, Michael comes to the home complaining that some of the girls have called him "a dirty old man" and written that they were going to report him.

The personnel urge Michael to stop chatting on *Lunarstorm*, which advice he appears to accept. After this he speaks of quite other types of dialogue that he engages in on the Net and seems convincing. But after some weeks another member of the personnel browses *Lunarstorm* and discovers that Michael has not changed his behaviour and is still using the same extremely offensive language.

In that situation, what should the personnel/persons in authority do?

Allow an inveterate vegan to eat meat?

A man who was deeply involved in the vegan movement for many years falls ill with Alzheimer's disease and is placed in a home, where in accordance with his



previous habits he is served vegetarian meals. One day he happens to eat by mistake a portion of meatballs, potatoes, brown sauce and lingonberries intended for another patient. He enjoys this very much and at the next meal notices for the first time that he is being served different food to all the others. The personnel persuade him to eat his vegetarian meal, but the next day he refuses point blank to eat "any special muck that's only for me".

The personnel discuss the situation with his wife who in no uncertain terms expressly forbids them to give him anything but vegetarian food. She insists that it is against his (and her) convictions to eat meat or "warmed-over dead body parts", as she puts it. The personnel try to comply but encounter vociferous protest at each meal from the man, who sometimes with triumph and great delight manages to appropriate food left over by someone else at the table.

How are the head of the unit and the personnel to handle this? Should they allow him to eat meat? What shall they tell his wife?



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