



SOCIAL WORK  
RESPONDS  
TO COVID-19



PANDEMIC ETHICS:  
A RESOURCE FOR SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS,  
EDUCATORS AND PRACTITIONERS

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# Introduction

**This resource** comprises vignettes depicting ethical challenges faced by social workers internationally during the Covid-19 pandemic. Each vignette is accompanied by a series of questions that can be used to stimulate reflection by individuals, or by groups in professional supervision/support meetings and education and training contexts. The vignettes are drawn from an international survey on ethical challenges during Covid-19 (Banks et al, 2020a; 2020b). The framework for this resource is based on materials produced for the British Association of Social Workers (Banks, Rutter and Shears, 2021).

**The learning objectives** are for participants to:

- 1) Develop their skills in ethical analysis (identifying ethical issues in complex scenarios and deliberating possible judgements and courses of action); and
- 2) Gain new perspectives on the nature of ethical practice and the value of taking time for slow, reflexive deliberation in contexts where social workers may feel pressure to make quick decisions and take action.

**'Slow ethics'** involves taking time to stop, analyse, reflect, and, if necessary, reconsider initial reactions and emotional responses in situations where matters of rights, responsibilities, harms and benefits are at stake. It entails noticing and taking account of specific features of people and circumstances that call for a tailored response (see Gallagher, 2020; Banks, 2021, ps 224, 232). It also requires consideration of professional ethical values and principles relating to human rights and social justice, and attention to professional integrity (consistently upholding professional values). The International Federation of Social Workers' statement of ethical principles (IFSW, 2018) and national codes of ethics outline the important values and principles, but how they are prioritised and put into practice is a matter for social workers to work out in each situation.

**During pandemic conditions**, our habitual judgements and responses may be compromised as we encounter new risks, services are restricted, existing practices and policies may be unfeasible and new ones regarded as unfair. The weight given to certain values may need to be changed. For example, promoting the health and safety of individuals and the public may have to come

before respect for people's dignity and confidentiality. The ethical guidance published by the International Federation of Social Workers (IFSW, 2020), based on responses to the global survey on ethical challenges, is useful in suggesting how new considerations might be taken into account and values may need to be reprioritised.

**The vignettes** are based on accounts of ethical challenges during the pandemic given by social workers in response to the international survey in May 2020 (Banks et al, 2020a, 2020b). Some vignettes are largely as written by the social workers, others have been summarised. All the situations depicted are real.

**Use of the vignettes in groups.** In a group supervision or training session, one or two vignettes might be selected as a focus for discussion. Participants could also be invited to share examples from their own practice that raise similar or related issues, with due regard for anonymity of the people involved and confidentiality of sensitive information. It is helpful to have a facilitator who can move the discussion on and ensure there are some ground rules regarding respectful group processes and confidentiality of disclosures. Further guidance on group process and facilitation can be found in a practice toolkit published by the British Association of Social Workers (Kong, Noone, Shears et al, 2021).

**A threefold framework** for thinking about ethical practice is outlined below. The questions attached to the longer vignettes in Section II draw on this framework.

- 1) ***Ethical vigilance*** – being alert and sensitive to the ethical dimensions of practice when under pressure. This entails a heightened awareness of our own stress and exhaustion and the need to counteract the tendency to rush, make judgmental remarks or fail to see potential harms or infringements of rights. This encapsulates 'moral perception' – the capacity to notice and foreground ethical issues that may be hidden, and to see situations from several perspectives. Questions we might ask include: What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to contextual factors (e.g. Covid-19) that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgementally due to our own stress and anxiety?

- 2) ***Ethical reasoning*** – deliberating about how to balance different needs, rights, responsibilities and risks; weighing harms and benefits; judging what is the right approach or course of action; and justifying any decisions made. Due to new risks and reduced services, more weight may be placed on public good, safety and minimising health risks than in 'normal' circumstances. Hence the practice of slow, ethical reasoning is more important, as a process of rethinking and recalibration of values and principles has to take place. Questions we might ask ourselves include: What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) ***Ethical logistics*** – working strategically and practically to act on ethical judgments and decisions, promoting service users' welfare and respecting their dignity and rights as far as possible in constrained circumstances. This often involves complex work-arounds and time-consuming processes, including making efforts to resist unfair or unnecessary restrictions and find creative solutions to resource shortages. Questions we might ask ourselves include: How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

**Useful resources** when discussing the vignettes include the IFSW (2020) ethical guidance for practising during a pandemic, the IFSW (2018) global statement of ethical principles, and codes of ethics produced by national social work associations in your own country.

## The Vignettes

The vignettes are arranged in two sections, the first comprising shorter vignettes that can be used to prompt discussion following a poll/vote. The second section comprises slighter longer vignettes, using a framework of questions relating to ethical vigilance, ethical reasoning and ethical logistics to aid critical reflection on the ethical challenges and how to navigate them.

## **Section I: Short vignettes, using a poll/vote plus discussion**

The primary purpose of voting on and discussing these shorter vignettes is to prompt reflection and discussion.

A facilitator should introduce each vignette. Ask participants to vote on whether they think the decision or action depicted is “Ethical? Unethical? It Depends?” This can be done through a show of hands, a voice vote or an electronic poll, such as mentimeter ([www.mentimeter.com](http://www.mentimeter.com)). Do not emphasize the vote – just ask for a quick, first reaction. In a tone of curiosity and enthusiasm, ask about the support for each position. What personal or professional standards would render something ethical or unethical? What circumstances would affect the ethics of the choice? Note the interpretations of standards and internal inconsistencies as they emerge in the discussion. Some people may change their views as they hear what others have to say.

### **Vignette 1. Enabling family contact with nursing home residents in Spain**

During Covid-19 restrictions, family members were not allowed to visit their relatives in nursing homes, causing great emotional stress. A social worker, who worked with residents in a nursing home, decided to create a Facebook page from her mobile phone so residents and family members could see and talk to each other. Although it was forbidden to use private phones, she decided to do this, as there were no other technological possibilities in public residences. Was this decision:

- 1) Ethical
- 2) Unethical
- 3) It depends on ..... ?

### **Vignette 2. Hospital social workers breaking the rules to help family members in Nigeria**

During Covid-19 restrictions, there was no cash withdrawal available from banks. Family members of hospital patients were unable to get the money required to pay for hospital care. Hospital social workers decided to assist families by enabling them to transfer money to the social workers’ personal

bank accounts. The social workers then used cash machines to withdraw the money. This was not allowed according to hospital rules. Was this decision:

- 1) Ethical
- 2) Unethical
- 3) It depends on ..... ?

### **Vignette 3. Balancing human rights and disease control in a domestic violence shelter in Hong Kong**

During lockdown, the manager of a domestic violence programme realised that some women were not seeking admission to the domestic violence shelter because of strict disease control policies, including not allowing residents to go outside. The manager decided to relax this policy in her shelter. Was this decision:

- 1) Ethical
- 2) Unethical
- 3) It depends on ..... ?

### **Vignette 4. Handling suicidal calls without support in Puerto Rico**

A clinical social worker/therapist was working from home, using her private phone, with no support network. She had no means to carry out official procedures, as no technology was provided by her agency and official documents were not digitised. She received a call from a suicidal person, who needed help. Reluctantly she decided to end the phonecall in order to coordinate aid for this person. Was this decision:

- 1) Ethical
- 2) Unethical
- 3) It depends on ..... ?

## Section II: Longer vignettes for discussion using a three-fold framework of questions

The purpose of these slightly longer vignettes with the three-fold discussion framework is to encourage analytical and critical reflection and thinking about what precisely are the ethical issues at stake, what range of possibilities there might be for action and what might be the ethical implications and effort required by different decisions. If used in a group, then it is helpful for one person to facilitate the discussion, ensuring everyone is able to contribute, asking for clarification of arguments and ideas, moving the group to the next question and time-keeping. The vignettes and questions can also be used by individuals, who might note their responses in writing.

### Vignette 5. Deciding whether to place children in foster care in an emergency in Italy

A mother brought two children into a social work office on a Friday afternoon. She told the social worker who attended to her that she had to leave the children there, as she could no longer stand looking after them. This was due to educational problems and conflict with her new partner, by whom she was expecting a child. The children's birth father, who had been violent towards her, was not available to take the children as he was a truck driver and was often on the road for several days. The social worker found a foster family willing to take the children in an emergency. In order to avoid infection, it would be necessary to test both the children and the family. However, at the time Covid-19 tests would take several days to complete. The social work manager, who had ultimate responsibility for the work, had to decide what to do.

#### *Reflection/Discussion prompts*

- 1) ***Ethical vigilance***: What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgementally due to our own stress and anxiety?

- 2) **Ethical reasoning.** What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) **Ethical logistics.** How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

### **Vignette 6. Preparing to discharge an older man from hospital in Brunei**

An older man, who used a wheelchair and would have difficulty looking after himself, was ready for discharge from hospital. He reluctantly gave the medical social worker contact details of his brother. However, the brother was unwilling to take care of him, due to past family conflict. The social worker contacted a local Community Development Centre and several other agencies, seeking help. Due to Covid-19, most staff of these agencies were working from home and unable to meet the patient or to make home visits. One worker did visit the man in hospital, but was unable to understand him. Another called the man's sister, without his permission and without full information about his needs. With no viable support likely from these agencies, and with pressure from the hospital to discharge the man, the social worker decided to contact the hospital rehabilitation team to assess the possibility of the patient living alone, as he might receive some assistance in connection with his housing. Meanwhile, the man was very stressed and was also wanting to go home. The medical social worker said that she felt: 'frustrated with the current system and how other agencies are dealing with it [the pandemic]. I feel that I have to handle this alone without help from others, which they are supposed to [provide] on a community level'.

#### ***Reflection/Discussion prompts***

- 1) **Ethical vigilance.** What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgementally due to our own stress and anxiety?

- 2) **Ethical reasoning.** What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) **Ethical logistics.** How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

### **Vignette 7. Deciding whether to challenge racism in the UK**

This scenario was written by a social work student, working for a non-governmental organisation. The student identified as a Black and Minority Ethnic (BAME) man. He said: "I am making befriending calls to a man, who is clearly isolated and has history of depression. He is somewhat racist towards BAME, which I am. I am the only person calling him, as he has no one else to ring him. If I report him as being racist, he'll be dropped from the service, effectively meaning zero contact with the outside world. I don't like him being racist, but I want him to be able to express himself. If I inform him that I am BAME, I fear he might withdraw. If I report him, I fear he will be dropped and extremely isolated. If I keep it going, I feel I am encouraging him. I decided to keep it going until the lock down is over, before reporting it."

#### ***Reflection/Discussion prompts***

- 1) **Ethical vigilance.** What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgements due to our own stress and anxiety?
- 2) **Ethical reasoning.** What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) **Ethical logistics.** How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

## **Vignette 8. Deciding not to do a home visit in Slovenia**

A social worker received a call from a man in an apartment building, raising concern about his neighbours. He claimed he often heard yelling and raised voices. He insisted the family should be visited, as violence might be present, and advised that some family members should be moved. He expressed resentment and anger against the Roma population (the family in question was Roma). The social worker decided not to visit the family immediately, as she judged that the grievance was probably based on the man's prejudice against Roma people and his desire for the family to move out of the apartment building. She did not want to cause unnecessary stress to the Roma family, and felt justified in saying she would visit as soon as she could, as a ban on home visits had just been introduced as a Covid-related measure.

### ***Reflection/Discussion prompts***

- 1) ***Ethical vigilance***: What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgements due to our own stress and anxiety?
- 2) ***Ethical reasoning***: What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) ***Ethical logistics***: How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

## **Vignette 9. Deciding whether to purchase and deliver essential items to families in need in the USA**

A school social worker was working with a family of five, which included a single mother and three children with special needs. The mother had no transportation and her main source of support was the local school attended by some of her children. During the Covid-19 restrictions, she had no food and no way to get food and diapers as stores near her were closed, or had run out

of the needed items. School social work services had been suspended, including home visits. The social worker was in a high risk group for contracting Covid-19. She also had many families with similar needs, yet she could purchase and drop off needed items at their homes.

### ***Reflection/Discussion prompts***

- 1) ***Ethical vigilance***: What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgementally due to our own stress and anxiety?
- 2) ***Ethical reasoning***: What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) ***Ethical logistics***: How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

## **Section III: An example from your own practice**

Now think about an example from your own practice that raised ethical issues for you. Prepare a brief summary of the main points. You may wish to explore this using the ethical framework given at the start of the document and/or in the light of the national code of ethics for social work in your country. You can do this by yourself, or as part of a group discussion or training session. If the latter, then ensure your example is anonymised and there is a group understanding about confidentiality.

### ***Questions to ask***

- 1) ***Ethical vigilance***: What are the ethical issues in this situation? Are there unusual ethical issues due to the pandemic that we need to look out for? Is there a danger of reacting too quickly and judgementally due to our own stress and anxiety?

- 2) **Ethical reasoning.** What is the right approach or course of action in this situation? What reasons or arguments might we use? Bearing in mind the risks and restrictions, how do we balance the rights and responsibilities of all parties?
- 3) **Ethical logistics.** How can we carry out the right course of action? In the context of risks and restrictions, what creative strategies and new resources are needed?

### ***Reflecting on the outcomes***

If the example you have chosen is in the past (rather than being a current ethical problem or dilemma), and you are reflecting on it yourself, then you might ask some further questions (adapted from IFSW, 2020):

- 1) Did the situation turn out as I had hoped?
- 2) If it did not, is there anything I can do now to remediate the situation?
- 3) Is there any option I overlooked or wish I had done differently?
- 4) Were ethical principles well-served by my actions?
- 5) What learning can I take from this and apply in the future?

Considering your example through the lens of an ethical framework, personal reflection, discussion with colleagues, or conversation with service users helps to build social workers' ethical competence and inform future decisions.

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