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## Ethical considerations in social work research

### Etični razmisleki v raziskovanju v socialnem delu

### Considerazioni etiche nella ricerca di servizio sociale

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#### ABSTRACT

Too often, discussions of research ethics focus on the steps needed to avoid fraud or protect human subjects. These topics, while essential, are only a fraction of the considerations for ethical research, and excessive attention to them can obscure other important and meaningful decisions. Ethical dilemmas are inherent throughout the research process, from the choice about what to study and how to study it through to analysis and dissemination of findings. Attention to these considerations is especially important for researchers in social work who, by their professional discipline, code of ethics, or research foci are expected to demonstrate particular sensitivity to vulnerable populations, issues of social justice, conflicts of interest, and respect for dignity and privacy. Rooted in three workshops held during ECSWR since 2014, this paper examines the nature of embedded ethical dilemmas, with special attention to the challenges related to the principle of nonmaleficence and to the role of the researcher. In light of illustrative examples, the paper presents recommendations and resources to build ethical awareness and research integrity beyond regulatory compliance.

#### POVZETEK

Prepogosto je razprava o raziskovalni etiki omejena le na korake, potrebne za preprečevanje ponaredb ali za zaščito sodelujočih oseb. Čeprav osrednjega pomena, pa so te teme le delček razmislekov o etičnem raziskovanju – kadar jim posvečamo pretirano pozornost, zanemarimo druge pomembne in pomenljive odločitve. Etične dileme so prisotne skozi ves raziskovalni proces, od tega, kako izberemo raziskovalno temo, kako preučujemo in analiziramo podatke, ter kako te predstavimo. Osredotočenost na tovrstne razmisleke je še posebej pomembna za raziskovalce in raziskovalke v socialnem delu, od katerih se pričakuje, da zaradi svojega področja, kodeksa etike ali teme raziskovanja pokažejo še posebno občutljivost za ranljive populacije, vprašanja socialne

#### KEYWORDS

Ethical dilemmas; nonmaleficence; social work research; social justice; advocacy

#### KLJUČNE BESEDE

etične dileme; načelo neškodovanja; raziskovanje v socialnem delu; socialna pravičnost; zagovorništvo

#### PAROLE CHIAVE

dilemme etici; non-maleficenza; ricerca di servizio sociale; giustizia sociale; advocacy

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pravičnosti, konflikte interesov in spoštovanje dostojanstva in zasebnosti. Pričujoči članek temelji na treh delavnicah od leta 2014 v okviru European Conference for Social Work Research in raziskuje naravo etičnih dilem v raziskovanju; posebno pozornost namenja izzivom, ki so povezani z načelom neškodovanja in z vlogo raziskovalke oz. raziskovalca. Na podlagi predstavljenih primerov članek ponudi priporočila in vire za krepitev etične zavesti in raziskovalne integritete, ki sega preko spoštovanja pravilnikov in zakonodaje.

#### SOMMARIO

Le considerazioni sull'etica nella ricerca si concentrano spesso sui passi necessari per evitare le frodi o per proteggere gli esseri umani. Pur essenziali, questi aspetti rappresentano solo una parte delle attenzioni necessarie alla ricerca etica, e un'eccessiva concentrazione su di essi può nascondere altri snodi altrettanto significativi. I dilemmi etici sono infatti insiti lungo tutto il processo di ricerca, dalla scelta su come e cosa studiare fino all'analisi e alla diffusione dei risultati. Questi aspetti sono particolarmente importanti per i ricercatori di servizio sociale dai quali ci si attende che, per la disciplina professionale, per il loro codice etico e per i temi di ricerca, abbiano una sensibilità specifica verso i soggetti vulnerabili, le questioni di giustizia sociale, i conflitti di interesse e il rispetto della dignità e la privacy delle persone. Basato su tre workshop tenuti dal 2014 al 2017 durante le Conferenze Europee sulla Ricerca nel Servizio Sociale (ECSWR), l'articolo esamina la natura dei dilemmi etici insiti nella pratica della ricerca. In particolare, considera le sfide legate al principio etico della 'non maleficenza' e al ruolo del ricercatore. Utilizzando due esempi illustrativi, l'articolo presenta alcune raccomandazioni e risorse per sviluppare la consapevolezza etica e l'integrità della ricerca, al di là della conformità alla normativa.

## Introduction

A good deal of attention is paid to the application of ethics to scientific research. Principles such as autonomy, beneficence and justice are operationalised through informed consent, non-deception, the prevention of psychological or physical harm, privacy, confidentiality, and a commitment to collecting and presenting accurate findings (e.g. Banks, 1995; Gray, 2008; Panter & Sterba, 2011; Peled & Leichtentritt, 2002). Too often, however, ethical research focuses narrowly on avoiding fraud or protecting human subjects. A quick literature search demonstrates that the most recurrent debates on research ethics involve regulatory mechanisms regarding research, research processes involving humans and animals, and values in research. While these emphases are vital in light of atrocities such as those revealed in the Nuremberg trials and the Willowbrook and Tuskegee experiments (DuBois, 2008), they can obscure other subtle and vexing ethical dilemmas in the research process (Vanderpool, 2002).

Addressing the implicit ethics of research, Guillemin and Gillam (2004) delineate three relevant subtypes: procedural ethics (seeking approval from a relevant ethics committee to undertake research), ethics in practice (the everyday ethical issues that arise in doing the research), and research ethics (as articulated in professional codes of ethics or conduct). More pointedly, Canella and Lincoln (2007) note that ethical research can be viewed both 'as a regulatory enterprise that creates an illusion of ethical practice and as a philosophical concern for equity and the imposition of power within the conceptualisation and practice of research itself' (p. 315). To delve into the easily overlooked ethical issues, Canella and Lincoln (2007) offer a number of questions for reflection, among these

why have I as the researcher chosen the particular problem I'm addressing?; what is relevant or what counts as research?; what data or information are given legitimacy?; what research methods are acceptable and who is

entitled to decide this?; how are the resources for research obtained and distributed?; what or whose interests does the research really serve?

When viewed broadly, therefore, ethics are inherent in the research process, from the decision about what to study and how to study it, through analysis and dissemination of findings. Ethics challenge both the integrity of scholars and the wellbeing of the populations under study.

This paper has roots in European Conference on Social Work Research (ECSWR) workshops that aimed to create space for shared reflections among social work researchers, to overcome the isolation in which researchers face dilemmas and offer process recommendations for sound ethical decisions. Responding to most frequently raised issues during the workshops, we chose two particular sets of dilemmatic ethical considerations – involving nonmaleficence and conflicts of interests – in order to examine dilemmas that may be obscured by a focus on regulatory requirements or misconstrued as only methodological problems. Beyond the identification and illustration of dilemmas, this paper offers a framework and resources to assist social work researchers in resolving ethical issues that may arise throughout the scientific process.

### **Ethics and social work research**

For the purposes of this paper, *social work research* refers to research done by professionally educated or credentialed social workers or it may refer to scholarship by people from other disciplines that examines the populations, problems and settings commonly associated with the practice of social work.

Ethics refers to the determinations of right and wrong that may be embodied in principles (beneficence, justice, fairness), laws, policies or codes (DuBois, 2008). The demand for attention to ethics is apparent in all research as scholars must consider their impact on the lives of the subjects involved, the appropriateness of the methods used, the role that the researchers will play and justification for these choices (Jonsen, 1998). Yet the focus on ethics is particularly salient in social work research because of the expectations outlined by the profession and because of the populations and problems studied by social work researchers.

Standard research ethics and the unique populations, problems and settings studied in social work research invoke ethical demands. Beyond these, however, professional associations explicitly charge social workers with the responsibility to conduct research that is informed by the profession's values. For example, the British Association of Social Workers (BASW) Code of Ethics states: 'The aims and process of social work research, including choice of methodology, and the use made of findings, will be congruent with the social work values of respect for human dignity and worth and commitment to social justice' (BASW, 2002, p. 14). And researchers should

seek to ensure that the research in which they are engaged contributes to empowering service users, to promoting their welfare and to improving their access to economic and social resources and seek to work together with disempowered groups, individuals and communities to devise, articulate and achieve research agendas which respect fundamental human rights and aim towards social justice. (BASW, 2002, p. 14).

The International Federation of Social Workers' Statement of Principles (adapted together with IASSW in 2004) explicitly declares that it is the task of social work to promote social justice, which in practice means that social work practitioners (including educators and researchers) should challenge negative discrimination, recognise diversity, distribute resources equitably, challenge unjust policies and practices and work in solidarity with service users (Statement, 2012). And the International Association of Schools of Social Work statement on social work research (The IASSW statement, 2014) states that

social work research aims to develop knowledge in support of the mission and purposes of social work . . . is applied and emancipatory, constructed with service users in an interactive, dialogic process and therefore informed by specific practice environments.

Nevertheless, even when codified, the relationship between ethics and research is not simple or straightforward. While research methods such as participatory, action or critical social research are closer to social work ideals of social justice (Humphries 2008), Rommelspacher claims that social work's value of social justice has never actually prevented it from reproducing social realities inscribed with social classes, gender hierarchies and a division to 'us' and 'them' (2003, p. 205). Analyses suggest that social workers' actions (including those of researchers) are at times in opposition to ethical practice (Humphries, 2008; Jordan, 2004). And even when social workers are committed to ethical conduct, relying alone on codes of ethics (which are not themselves static or value-free) is insufficient, as no code can encompass all possible situations or prescribe every facet of behaviour.

Beyond the values of the profession, ethics codes are also shaped by external factors such as compliance and risk management, and the resulting standards, focused on the prevention of ethics complaints, misconduct and liability, may similarly influence research (ALLEA - All European Academies, 2017; Reamer, 2005). For example, the United States' National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics contains 17 rather prescriptive standards regarding research, such as

Social workers should never design or conduct evaluation or research that does not use consent procedures, such as certain forms of naturalistic observation and archival research, unless rigorous and responsible review of the research has found it to be justified because of its prospective scientific, educational, or applied value and unless equally effective alternative procedures that do not involve waiver of consent are not feasible (2018, p. 5.02h).

In addition to the values and standards that influence social work research, unique considerations emerge for scholars of any discipline who elect to study certain populations, settings and problems. The issues and people commonly associated with social work services are often fraught with social and political implications, systemic power imbalances and stigmatised statuses (Shaw & Holland, 2014). As such, research on social work settings or service users is consequential and ethically charged. Whether programme evaluation or epidemiological investigation, research assigns value to that which it studies, is shaped by 'personal, professional and societal beliefs and norms', and has societal and individual effects (Leviton, 2011, p. 242), and researchers are obligated to be sensitive to ethical imperatives throughout the scientific process.

### *Ethical considerations in the research process*

Clearly, ethical considerations inhabit each phase of the research process. Initial ethical issues are related to the auspices, funding and directions of research, in which conflicts of interest and influence may arise between funders or sponsors and the principal investigator (McLaughlin, 2011, p. 59). Related to this is the identification of relevant research foci. What is the litmus test for selecting what to study? '[I]n light of social work's mission and ethical norms, are the project's results likely to generate important information that will enhance social work's ethical duty to assist people in need?' (Reamer, 2001, p. 432). This has implications for the study design and sampling '[S]ocial workers must ensure that their samples sufficiently represent ... diverse groups and clientele ... consistent with social work's ethical obligation to address issues of diversity and social justice' (Reamer, 2001, p. 434). Also, the choice of methods can be framed ethically, considering research methods that 'seek to empower service users (...) to promote emancipatory research and work with disempowered groups, individuals and communities' (Butler, 2002, p. 245).

Conflicts of interest can also result from the researcher's reputational, financial, emotional or professional advancement interests. They may also arise from 'situations (in which) we experience both compelling and repelling values about the same matter' (Hugman, 2010, p. 153). Some topics, populations and settings have fewer dissemination outlets, are less desirable or well-funded, or are more difficult to access for study. Research on sex offenders may be a compelling topic for a scholar, but an area in which support, accolades and opportunities are limited (Grady & Strom-Gottfried, 2011). Academics seeking professional advancement may be forced to choose between an area where there is a great need for understanding and one in which there are greater resources.

Researchers whose interests stem from lived experience (experience as a caregiver or service user, membership in a particular community of identity or location) may have to navigate perceived or actual conflicts of interest that arise from their identification with the issue under study (Konrad, 2005). Similarly, researchers who are social workers can experience tension between the roles of scientist and practitioner, a conflict that can be exacerbated when harms are discovered or when research subjects expect the provision of services as a result of their participation (Orme, 2004; Shaw & Gould, 2001). Related to these tensions are conflicts around confidentiality and the limits on sharing information collected in the course of research. While the social work role might instigate intervention and referral in light of troubling information (e.g. about medical conditions or criminal activity) the research role would likely preclude (and even be jeopardised by) those actions.

In order to clarify roles and expectations that may arise in the course of research, informed consent is a prominent issue in the design, sampling and data collection phases. Of all ethical considerations in research, informed consent may be most recognisable, as researchers must commonly seek regulatory approval of the safeguards to protect subjects from breaches of confidentiality or other harms. While the specific standards may vary by country, population studied, funding source or research type, a common expectation is that 'research participants must be informed about the purposes, methods and risks associated with the research, and they must voluntarily consent to participate' (Reamer, 2001, p. 434). Obtaining informed consent is subject to cultural, linguistic and social divides and thus can be ethically and methodologically complex (Faden & Beauchamp, 1986; Israel & Hay, 2006). Ethical researchers must uphold the principles of justice, respect and fairness while ascertaining participants' capacity to truly understand what consent means, assuring that they possess the right to refuse or withdraw consent, free of adverse consequences.

A wide array of ethical considerations also emerge in the closing stages of a study, when the results are disseminated and published. Should data be returned to or shared with the study subject? What impact might null or negative findings have on the likelihood of publication and the reputation of the researcher or the profession? Is the researcher entitled to withhold information considered irrelevant or harmful? How do structural imperatives bias which research is chosen for publication? (Dalton, Bolen, & Mascha, 2016; Franco, Malhotra, & Simonovits, 2014). Dissemination and publication raise the risk of transmitting '... unfavourable stereotypes ... or other derogatory or damaging representation of service users', toward which the BASW Code of Human Research Ethics advocates special attention (Butler, 2002, p. 247).

## Illustrative examples

Ethical dilemmas are abundant as a result of the particular focus of social work research, professional ethical expectations in the social work domain and the demands of various stages of the research process. For the purposes of this paper, we offer two illustrative examples involving the ethics of (1) upholding the principle of nonmaleficence and (2) addressing the conflict of interest between the roles of researcher, social worker and citizen. Each case is preceded by a review of the ethical constructs involved.

### **Nonmaleficence**

One of the abiding principles of ethics is that of nonmaleficence. In the research context, it compels scientists to avoid the accidental or intentional infliction of harm and to minimise the risk of harm or discomfort for research subjects (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001). The concept is especially clear in bioethics and medical research, where pharmacological experimentation and medical treatments may be invasive and life-threatening and thus the notion of harm can be narrowed to physical harm, pain or disability. In social work research, the notion of harm is less straightforward and requires a perspective that includes psychological, social and economic damage (ESRC, 2005). Therefore, the array of possible negative consequences is expanded to include issues such as invasion of privacy,

social exclusion, emotional harm, psychological discomfort or infringement of rights (Israel & Hay, 2006; McLaughlin, 2011). The BASW code requires that subjects be protected from 'physical and mental harm, discomfort, danger and unreasonable disruption in their daily lives and unwarranted intrusion into their privacy' (Butler, 2002, p. 245).

Yet, virtually all social research is exploitive and intrusive to some degree (Davidson & Layder, 1994) and this is especially true for studies that involve service users, directly or indirectly, who can be classified as vulnerable, or with less power than the researchers or auspices of the study. With such subjects, harm can derive from the simple involvement in the study if researchers are insufficiently attentive to confidentiality, exposure to traumatic content or recollections, the possibility of family or community retaliation, etc. (Ellsberg & Heise, 2002; Mendis, 2009). Other risks of harm may arise in the publication and dissemination of research results: Were subjects protected and supported in not disclosing beyond what was necessary? How are issues of potential identifiability handled in construction of the report or manuscript? How do researchers avoid adverse reactions after the research encounter? How are subjects' expectations of the research's impact addressed? Ethical researchers are expected to weigh the consequences of their activities and find the right balance between the risks of doing harm and the benefits that people involved and the wider society can gain from the research.

### *The example*

The first example is drawn from an evaluative study about a child protection and family service in Italy, commissioned by an NGO to assess the opinion of different stakeholders about the quality of the services offered. Researchers proposed an evaluation design congruent with a multi-stakeholder and pluralist participatory approach (Hall, 2004; Stame, 2016), which included survey, quantitative measures and the solicitation of service users' advice. The proposal was influenced by principles of justice and non-discrimination, yet it encountered resistance from research sponsors, service managers and practitioners. These concerns were openly discussed and the decision was made to seek service user input through focus group methods.

One set of sensitive choices was related to identification of participants. Should the subjects be current or former service recipients? Those who voluntarily sought service or those who were compelled to do so? What risks and barriers to free expression might arise if subjects were still highly dependent and influenced by the relationship to social workers? At the same time, it was necessary to involve people who could provide meaningful and relevant feedback and reflect on the quality of care without extreme distress or animosity. Finally, those parents would be invited who had a court care order but had their children at home, thus balancing the two set of concerns. In this decision, methodological aspects (collecting the data from representative service users) were balanced with the ethical aspects (justice, fairness, risk of harm).

Moreover, who should be selected was considered in light of methodological considerations and concerns for privacy and vulnerability. Ultimately, availability played a role; while parents were also reassured about confidentiality: researchers would not have any information about the family history and the social worker would not have any information about the contents of the interview. It was emphasised that the focus of the study was on the quality of service and not on their family history.

Respect for privacy and confidentiality were also considered in relation to the choice of the focus group participants and to the context of a small town. In their attention to nonmaleficence researchers realised that parents could be embarrassed or stigmatised by others knowing of their involvement in child protection matters. For this reason, during the first contact, the researcher explained the protocol, which allowed a parent who discovered a troubling connection with another subject to refuse to participate or leave the group, the invitation or the focus group's room without giving any further explanation. Respect for subjects was also reflected in decisions about meeting time, so that participation in the focus group would not hamper daily life or take time away from work and childcare.

Whilst these dilemmas were identified before the onset of the research, some others occurred during the study, in particular during the focus group or data collection, stage. While discussing

the negative aspects of the service and commenting on the failures of the wider protection system, participants started animated exchanges, sharing their experiences and asking for and giving each other suggestions, thus transforming the interview into a sort of a self-help group. Researchers were puzzled: on one hand, they were happy to see parents engaged in helping each other, giving suggestions on how to overcome bureaucratic obstacles, expressing their opinions regarding the protection of their children, or describing problems raised by their partner's behaviours. On the other hand, the impromptu discussion prohibited researchers from addressing all the items considered meaningful to address the evaluation of the service and, fundamentally, exchanging the interests of the NGO and study sponsor for those of the subjects. Their first attempts to put forward research questions were overwhelmed by the lively exchanges among participants. Time was running. What should they do – stop the exchanges, emphasising the remaining research questions or let the discussion run freely, analysing the materials collected post hoc, with the risk of missing important information? Researchers faced a clear situation of conflicting goods: on one side, they observed the interest of carrying out an important part of the evaluative research (and collecting data from a group rarely consulted) yet this conflicted with respect for the research subjects, whose appropriation of the agenda clearly seemed useful for them. Moreover, as social work researchers, interrupting the group might also have betrayed some principles of the profession, such as respect, empowerment, and self-determination. The choice made was to comment what was going on and to ask participants if they wanted to carry on with the discussion or to conclude the few issues remained unanswered regarding the quality of the service. Not enthusiastically, participants opted for the second.

This experience gives rise to several ethical reflections. Did the choice of focus group methodology invite or exacerbate the parents' activism? Did it provide safety for candid input and mitigate isolation and powerlessness? Was the purpose insufficiently clear, such that the subjects viewed the meeting as a support group rather than a research group? Were the mutual energy and advocacy that resulted beneficial or harmful outcomes for the subjects? For the NGO?

The researchers' decision to re-focus the group on the research questions and the parents' begrudging compliance raised additional ethical insights. Did curtailing the discussion create a harm or prevent a good? Was it a misuse of power? Does it exemplify the scientist-practitioner tension where the latter would encourage this construction of social networks while the former would focus on completing the study without jeopardising the results?

### ***The role of the researcher***

The previous case alludes to another dilemma in social work research, the potential for role conflict. The practice of research involves relationships, knowledge creation and exclusion, and usually the construction of privilege (Lincoln & Cannella, 2009). Contemporary research is increasingly influenced by the availability and stipulations of funding, which can determine what is researched and how, who will conduct the research and how data will be used and disseminated. As the research environment becomes more commodified and contractual, whose needs does the research actually serve and to whom does the researcher owe moral responsibility – herself/himself, the subjects or population researched, society or some other? (Aldred, 2008; Ferdinand, Pearson, Rowe, & Worthington, 2007; Fook, 2003). And beyond obvious role conflicts, one might ask if any research can or should be completely devoid of politics. As Collins and Wray-Bliss (2005) contend, researchers are civically and politically formed individuals. They possess their own personal moral views and values that influence how they believe they should act in any given situation. A research commitment that is not impartial to human suffering, that identifies unjust processes and 'makes them known', that ensures that subordinated voices are not silenced and unheard, is 'entirely compatible with the best traditions of rigorous and systematic research approaches' (Humphries, 2008, p. 31).

As such, an ethical challenge for social work researchers may result from the superimposition of two roles, those of researcher and agent of change. This overlap is clearly expressed in the global

definition of social work as 'an academic discipline that promotes social change (...) the empowerment and liberation of people' and 'engages people and structures to address life challenges and enhance wellbeing' (Global definition, 2014). After the completion of a study, what is the researcher's responsibility as a 'witness' and an 'expert'? In 'acquiring' data from the subject and understanding the problem better must the social work researcher fight for change? Yet what is the researcher's authority to speak on the behalf of others? How far can researchers go in claiming subjects' voice (s) and how should they deal with the perils of appropriation? Does claiming the voices of vulnerable groups make them more excluded or less? Does it empower their views or paternalistically appropriate them? How should ethical social work researchers deal with issues of empathy with or aversion to their research subjects? The question of whether the researcher should go beyond analysis and dissemination of research results is especially acute in cases where the research was not designed specifically to produce knowledge for action (such as action research, user-led research, critical social research) (Sobočan, 2010).

McLaughlin (2007) contends that if social work is to survive it must engage with contemporary debates and seek to shape, as much as being shaped by, external events. Even if research is intended to be non-political that is a difficult aspiration to achieve. Is it ethical for scholars in positions of power to refuse the responsibility to act against injustices they observe through their research? Yet even if researchers embrace the potential that their work will influence social change, they must consider whether that action will generate positive or negative consequences for the group whose situation they want to ameliorate. It is difficult to calculate whether research will galvanise social change or create backlash. Although researchers cannot control the variables that facilitate or prevent social transformation, ethical practice requires that they consider whether unanticipated side effects of the research itself or of efforts to use it to effect social change are likely to undermine or enhance the intended goal (Mertens & Ginsberg, 2008).

### *The example*

The second illustrative case arose in a study on the everyday life of same-gender-parented families. A finding that the families' lives could be substantially improved by legislative changes dealing with partnership gave rise to the question of the researcher's responsibility to aid in this amelioration. During the study, interviews with subjects revealed a readiness to seek solutions to discrimination regarding their family constellations (with social work services, questions of custody, adoption, fostering and many others). Conflicts of interest arose in the researcher's role: was it to simply report the results or to initiate social change, based on the research?

These dual roles were made more complex by the nature of the research and the relationships developed during the study. Parents, who were respondents, invited the researcher to their social and sports and other activities, created as safe and familiar environments for their children. The researcher responded to these invitations also as a way to better understand, analyse and describe their lived experiences, narratives and issues. She occasionally met some respondents after the research was completed and the group of parents whom she studied perceived her as their ally.

The research methods and topic necessitated a relationship of respect and trust and the researcher did disclose herself from the outset as someone who favours equal opportunities and non-discrimination toward homosexual parents and their children. Thus, when public debate began on the rights of same-sex parents and proposed legislative changes, the parents confronted the researcher with expectations of her appearance and advocacy role in these events. These expectations, fuelled by the relationship developed during the study, were heightened by the fact that the parents recognised the researcher as additionally 'obliged' to advocate, as a social worker and as a gay person herself. Was she right to respond to these calls? Might her partisanship have tainted the 'objectivity' of the completed research or was she merely following the social work mandate? Did she have a right to voice and speak on behalf of all her respondents, even if she was 'asked' to do so only by some respondents? Was it ethical to focus particularly on those research results that served the purposes of advocacy and to omit some that could potentially produce backlash?

Surely, the researcher could have been perceived as a (biased) advocate, so it is important that she would be able to demonstrate the scrutiny of her methods if asked. The social work mandate and the social justice values do lead her to work beyond the mere reporting of results, and benefits of the respondents should continue to be paramount; hence, she can become an advocate for the group, but with sensitivity in her voicing of the issue towards all respondents, and with prudence about what information she should voice. Learning from such a case, it would make sense to include the possibility of advocacy built on research results already in the process of obtaining consent for participation in the study.

## Discussion and recommendations

The examples above consider several aspects of ethics and research: novel variations on longstanding concepts such as nonmaleficence, the trade-offs in balancing competing interests in the course of a study, and tensions in the role and experiences of the scholar vis-à-vis the topic or population being studied. Researchers often consider ethical dilemmas that present themselves during a study as mere methodological problems. But methodological decisions are often also ethical decisions that must be addressed thoughtfully and intentionally using unique tools, skills and lenses (Panter & Sterba, 2011). Any methodological decision has the potential to positively or negatively impact the human dignity of the study subjects (DuBois, 2008). Including an ethical perspective in research, decisions require personal virtue and sensitivity to the concepts of anti-oppression practice in addition to knowledge of conventional ethical principles and procedures (DuBois, 2008). In this section, we describe strategies to improve the ethical capacity of researchers and research teams, including educational preparation, systematic attention to ethics and acquisition of decision-making tools.

Generally, educational programmes acquaint researchers with ethical principles (what actions are right and what actions are wrong) and the requirement to maintain procedural ethics, such as submitting a design to an Institutional Review Board (IRB) or other bodies tasked with protecting human subjects. However, virtue ethics, 'the innate sensitivity to matters of justice, right and wrong, and duty and obligation' (Reamer, 1993, p. 80), may be an overlooked area in research and thus it requires more purposeful attention. Students must be prepared to examine their own characteristics and motivations to determine if the choices that are being made are indeed ethical and not driven by selfish or exploitive impulses, especially because the pressures for scholarly productivity in contemporary higher education may promote decisions that are guided by expediency or competitive advantage. Therefore, education and mentoring systems must cultivate researchers with the awareness, will and skill to act with integrity and challenge oppressive research practices.

In an analysis of 57 published qualitative and mixed methods research studies, Peled and Leichtenritt (2002) found that only a minority mentioned justice or other beneficial outcomes that would result for research participants. These omissions are surprising in light of the oft-cited emphasis on value-based research in the social work domain and suggest that greater attention must be paid to the ethical dimensions of research, making it a responsibility on par with the knowledge and skills necessary to gather data, analyse them correctly, and provide apt conclusions and recommendations.

The awareness and engagement of ethical matters in research design aligns with sensitivity to anti-oppressive concepts, in which scholars are challenged to consider power dynamics in the research process and how the process itself may contribute to further exploitation and marginalisation of the populations studied (Parada & Wehbi, 2017). To prepare students to be reflective researchers, Silver challenges them to think of the concepts of subjectivity, representation and positionality through basic questions: in considering subjectivity asking 'how am I historically, culturally, politically and institutionally positioned in relation to those whom I am studying?'; for representation asking 'who do I have the right to represent?' and 'how do my acts of representation constitute acts of domination?'; and for positionality asking 'what right do I have to enter communities of which I am not a member?' and 'what are the consequences of using my "western eyes" to represent the "other"?'

(Silver, 2017, p. 120). These questions introduce significant considerations of privilege, respect, rights and power into the research process. They also represent a departure from important but more technical issues of how to minimise risk and assure informed consent. To effectively address the range of research ethics, both reflexive and technical proficiencies must be reinforced as equal and integral part of education about the scientific process.

Social work programmes and senior researchers play influential roles in educating and acculturating novice scholars. As such, they must integrate the language of ethics and anti-oppression considerations when teaching research and modelling the scholarly process in their own work. Their role as gatekeepers to the academy suggests attention to issues of virtue and integrity in selecting and advancing future researchers. Faculty must also prepare novice researchers with the skills to engage in self-reflection and in consultation about questions of privilege, position, harm and expectations. A crucial element of these processes is the comfort and courage to engage in difficult conversations with colleagues, some of whom may have differential authority and power. Concepts such as courageous followership and appreciative inquiry may be of benefit to research team members in initiating challenging discussions (Chaleff, 2009). Scholars who are steeped in these processes will be capable not only of deeper self-reflection but also the capacity to serve as sounding boards for fellow researchers.

Another opportunity to enrich the attention to ethics in research rests with funding bodies, professional organisations and research associations. These groups can play crucial roles in hosting education programmes, convening conversations and sharing resources electronically, at conferences and in planning meetings. These steps would make implicit ethics as visible as the attention that is now paid to protecting human subjects. They could offer valuable support and consultancy to break down the isolation and confusion researchers may experience when confronted with subtle but substantive ethical dilemmas. Local affiliates of these organisations could also provide linkages to consumer groups to assure that the input of service users and other traditionally marginalised groups are fully represented in researchers' decisions.

In addition to integrity, education, socialisation and consultation, the ethical researcher must be equipped with skills to aid in decision-making in the face of ethical dilemmas. While there are many frameworks available for ethical case analysis, they are often discipline-specific and overly detailed, leading them to be difficult to recall and burdensome to employ (DuBois, 2008). Here we summarise the elements of two frameworks that guide researchers to processes for uncovering and resolving dilemmas (Childress et al., 2002; DuBois, 2008).

DuBois (2008) proffers the four-point model known by the acronym 'SFNO' wherein the key words (stakeholders, facts, norms, options) serve as memorable prompts for the steps in the ethical decision-making process. The model can be employed as a form of self-regulation by the individual researcher, but is more robust and credible when processed with a group. Such groups could consist of members of the research team, a standing committee in a university or research setting, or an ad hoc group convened by the researcher based on the dilemmas of the case. These 'case review groups' can be multidisciplinary and include service users and ethics specialists unrelated to the study at hand. Each letter of the framework SFNO prompts researchers to consider potential ethical roadblocks (Table 1).

While not explicitly employed in the illustrative cases described above, each offers examples of the researchers following these steps. In the child welfare case, the researchers were aware of the

**Table 1.** The SFNO framework.

Stakeholders	Who has a stake in the decision – who will be significantly affected by the decision made?
Facts	What factual issues might generate disagreement? What facts are relevant to a solution?
Norms	What ethical principles, norms, or values are at stake? Which are relevant and which might appear to conflict or generate disagreement?
Options	What actions or policies deserve serious consideration? If the ethical ideal is not possible, what compromise solutions are most attractive?

and cons of the study design and sampling plan, regarding a population of non-voluntary service users. The team also demonstrated flexibility and attention to norms and values of the social work profession when the focus groups took an unanticipated change in direction. In the study on same-sex families, the researcher was cognisant of the implications of personal identity and the level of involvement required by the study's design and purpose and thus took steps throughout to set boundaries and engage in consultation and self-reflection.

The SFNO framework provides a method for case analysis to ensure that all relevant ethical aspects are remembered and considered. However, the decision about whether to proceed with a given research strategy or alter it in light of ethical concerns requires additional considerations.

The Action-Decision model (Table 2), for example, assists researchers in reconceptualising their methodological choices in light of ethical considerations (Childress et al., 2002; DuBois, 2008).

In the illustrative example of the child welfare NGO, the researchers demonstrated awareness of ethical issues and openness in reconciling competing imperatives to construct the focus groups. In doing so, they firmly sought the involvement of service users, without capitulating to the sponsoring agency's discomfort. However, during the group itself, when participants were energised by mutual aid, the facilitators asserted their power, gently, but perhaps in a way that valued the research focus over the subjects' interests.

In the same-sex parenting case, the researcher demonstrated deference to the subjects and their children, utilising, next to interviewing, an ethnographic approach that immersed her in the daily activities of the household. Continuous reflection on the proper process (as described in Table 2) in this case meant a sound method, obtaining informed consent from all individuals she met during the research process (not just respondents), and following principles of fairness, confidentiality, respect, etc. Upon deciding she will also act as an advocate, she sought approval for that during various social events she joined long after completing the interviews. She also dedicated herself to make the analysis rigorous (including involving other researchers, detached from this study, to inspect her data and comment on her analysis). A less personal approach (double-blind coding of diary-keeping by subjects or webcam videotapes of daily life) might be a safer choice in light of the possibility of being accused of partisanship and bias by communities that do not support same-sex equality rights. Nevertheless, this would be at the cost of interpersonal relationships that allowed for richer findings as well as a check of mandate to speak for the research group and simultaneous checks of validity of analysis.

In the United States, there is a very well-developed system through IRBs for ensuring that human subjects are protected. However, these review boards do not consider whether the study subjects have a voice in the development and implementation of the study and whether the goals of the study are ethical; specifically, do they benefit the study subjects more or do they benefit the researcher more? Similarly, in research activities funded by the European Union, where ethics is an integral part of research from beginning to end, a large part of ethical screening falls into legal compliance, while (ethical) research excellence is expected to go beyond that. Employing frameworks like SNFO and the Action-Decision framework requires researchers to consider these very questions and the systems in place. For example, the question over who most benefits from the study is revealed through the SFNO process and the Action-Decision framework may indicate that the study insufficiently respects or rewards those who participate and thus must be reconsidered.

Expanding the capacity of researchers to attend to broad ethical considerations requires the support and involvement of all sectors of the research enterprise. Those efforts can be bolstered

**Table 2.** The Action-Decision model.

Necessity	Is it necessary to infringe on the values or norms under consideration in order to complete the research?
Effectiveness	Will the methodology be effective in achieving the research goal?
Proportionality	Is the desired goal important enough to justify overriding another principle or value?
Least infringement	Is the methodology designed to minimise the infringement of the principle or value that conflicts with it?
Proper process	Has the decision been made with transparency, community input, proper approvals?

and sustained by normalising the discussion of ethics, for example, through regular case discussions in scholarly journals and at professional meetings and by including ethics and values in rubrics that determine funding, publication or presentation of research studies. Organisations that fund, oversee and disseminate research can be of service in assuring that the studies they promote are not only methodologically sound, but also ethically sound. The finding processes of the European Commission and European Research Council are already incorporating ethical considerations their application processes. Increased awareness and adoption of these tools has the potential to institutionalise broad ethical considerations in the scholarship process, for social work and other fields.

Implicit ethical dilemmas are already part of the research process, as the cases illustrated here demonstrate. Increased support, visibility and knowledge will help remove those challenges, and the researchers who encounter them, from isolation.

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