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Revising the Ethical Standards for Human Service Professionals: A Discussion

Linda Wark and Shoshana D. Kerewsky

Abstract

Nearly 30 members of the National Organization for Human Services gathered at the annual 2012 conference to discuss the revision to the Ethical Standards for Human Services Professionals. Presented here is a summary of their discussion.

Members of the Ethics Committee of the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) provided a workshop at the 2012 annual conference. The purpose of the workshop was to solicit member views on the revision to the Ethical Standards for Human Service Professionals (Wark, 2010). Rather than the attendee-guided discussion format used previously, members were asked to specifically address four domains selected by the authors.

The first area was which new material to include in the ethical code. This was an obvious theme in past discussions with members, but the authors chose to highlight three other areas which would provide more concentrated information than had been gained in the past: format, aspirational ethics, and adjudication. Thus, the second area was the format of the ethical code. Format could have included structural issues such as organization of subject areas, length of the code, and sections addressing particular groups of NOHS members.

The third area was the role of aspirational ethics in our ethical code. Aspirational ethics are principles-based versus compliance-based and are not an enforceable part of an ethical code. They serve to encourage members of a professional organization to strive for ideal or exemplary behavior (Fisher, 2007). Some judge the current NOHS ethical code to have aspirational ethics embedded in some of its standards while others do not. Finally, the last area, adjudication was given attention in the discussion. Adjudication is related to the processing of ethical complaints with consequences for members against whom the complaint has been filed. At this time, NOHS has no adjudication process.

New material

Ethical codes tend to reflect changes in society (Neukrug, 2010). Not surprisingly then, attendees wanted guidance on the use of social media through the ethical code. Clear-cut standards would be useful to those members brought up in the social media age. Electronic communication, such as email, followed closely behind as a concern which the ethical code would hopefully address. Participants also suggested that standards to maintain expertise in using electronic communication be named.
Some attendees wanted expanded clarification on dual relationships and the multiple roles in human relationships. Becoming friends with ex-clients was an example of an ambiguous multiple role relationship.

Due attention was paid to diversity. There was discussion of whether or not the code should have separate standards for cultural competence or embed such standards within the code. One attendee sought to decrease confusion for users by not having a separate code. Other attendees agreed and submitted protests against separation of the primary ethical code and standards on diversity and cultural competence. One attendee suggested that a separation could make these standards seem less important or open separate standards to being ignored. On the other hand, some ethical codes in social sciences professions have separate documents for practice standards and cultural competence. An alternate opinion was offered to highlight those parts of the code and make them more obvious. Likewise, a strong discussion of social justice and related issues highlighted the need to examine this topic for inclusion in the revised code.

Several new topics came to light. One was related to a section in the ethical code on consequences for non-adherence. Another topic was concerned a way to define terms used in the code. Guidance for resolving ethical conflicts led to a suggestion for an ethical decision-making model. Further guidance was desired to resolve any potential conflicts between the NOHS ethical code and the HS-BCP ethical code. A description of the scope of practice for Human Service professionals was also proposed, and one attendee urged the group to make certain that there be an expansion of community practice guidelines.

With regard to the process of implementing the ethical code, attendees wondered about the gatekeeping functions of faculty and supervisors at internship sites. A member of the Council for Standards in Human Services Education was present and asserted the possibility that CSHSE could be helpful in communicating the use of the ethical code to accredited programs. Another attendee advised NOHS to help non-accredited programs understand they have a responsibility to encourage faculty and students to adhere to the ethical code.

Another thread of discussion emerged on the revision process itself. It was proposed that teams of reviewers could give feedback on drafts of the ethical code. Using NOHS members who are professionals in other professions’ codes to help evaluate harmony and conflicts among codes was also suggested. NOHS members would vote on final drafts.

Aspirational Ethics

The topic of aspirational ethics was pursued as a possible section in the code on the principles behind the ethical code. NOHS members’ commitment to social justice and advocacy were two main areas of discussion.

Format

Participants proposed that the revised code include thematically-organized subsections that would make the code easier to use. Technology-related suggestions included tying sections of the code to practice competencies using hyperlinks. In addition, key terms would be
hyperlinked. It could also be useful to college and university instructors if the organization allowed them to pull out sections for teaching purposes. Organizations could also organize standards around different users, including students. A final suggestion was to have a section that clarified the relationship between ethics and laws or policies.

Adjudication

When asked about adjudication, a comment was made that an ethics code without a means to process complaints for violations is an ethics code with no teeth, so attendees pursued this topic also. Questions were raised about the purpose of the code and whether or not it should have educational, aspirational, or adjudicatory functions. Is it a measure of professionalism that could be used in educational and employment settings? Should NOHS have a gatekeeping function for the profession?

Suggestions

Finally, a request was made for suggestions that had not been covered in the conversation so far. First, the National Organization for Human Services should ensure that both the national and regional conferences should have programming on ethics. A second suggestion was to make the NOHS ethical code more accessible on the NOHS website. Third, an investigation should be made into the absence of the NOHS ethical code in textbooks. Advocacy for inclusion, and not just in appendices, was urged. Last, it was suggested to the Ethics Committee that there should be readers for a draft of the revised ethical code who are students or persons early in their career for usability of the code. One attendee noted that a preface that would clarify values and principles, ethical decision making, and highlights in the code.

References


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