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# THE NATURE OF SOCIAL WORK ETHICS

Social work ethics has come of age. From its modest beginnings in the late 19th century when social work was formally inaugurated as a profession, social work ethics has matured into one of the most critically important domains in social work practice, education, and professional development. Social work's earliest practitioners began their work in the profession without a code of ethics or professional literature on the subject. In fact, the first National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) *Code of Ethics*—a mere one page in length—was not ratified until 1960, more than a half century after social work's formal start.

Until the late 1970s, social work's ethics literature focused primarily on the profession's core values and several key issues related to client confidentiality, social workers' relationships with clients, and clients' right to self-determination. After the emergence of bioethics as a discrete intellectual field in the mid-1970s and the simultaneous emergence of the broader discipline of professional ethics (sometimes known as *practical* or *applied ethics*), in the early 1980s a small group of social work scholars and practitioners began exploring ethical issues in social work in much greater depth. Now the subject is taught much more deliberately in social work education programs, continuing education conferences, and courses sponsored by licensing boards and professional organizations. Also, social work and human services agencies—such as family services agencies, community mental health centers, schools, hospitals, home healthcare agencies, correctional facilities, substance use disorder treatment programs, elder services programs, and public child welfare agencies, among others—have developed ambitious ethics-related staff development offerings.

It is not surprising that social work's ethics literature has burgeoned in recent years. The current social work ethics literature focuses primarily on the topics of ethical dilemmas, ethical decision making (including frameworks and protocols), ethical theory, codes of ethics, and ethics risk management (prevention of ethics complaints and lawsuits). It also explores narrower topics such as boundary issues, dual relationships, conflicts of interest, informed consent, confidentiality and privileged communication, professional paternalism, social workers' use of technology, ethics committees, ethics consultation, organizational ethics, ethics and managed care, and impaired practitioners.

Over time, social workers concerned about ethics education have discovered that case studies are compelling and essential. Social workers live their professional lives wrestling with complex case-related challenges. When is it appropriate to violate a client's right to confidentiality to protect a third party from harm? Under what circumstances is it ethical to interfere with a client's right to self-determination to protect the client from self-harm? Is it appropriate to communicate with former clients on online social networking sites? Is it ethical to deliver remote, electronic services to clients who live thousands of miles away and whom social workers never meet in person? How should social workers who live and work in remote rural communities manage complex boundary issues and dual relationships? What is the ethical way to resolve a potential conflict of interest when a qualified former client applies for a job at the social worker's agency and may become a colleague? How should a social worker act when they discover that a valued colleague has behaved unethically? Is it ever permissible to deceive clients, even if it is "for their own good"? How should a social work administrator allocate limited agency resources when budget cuts impair their ability to meet clients' needs?

Case material brings ethics theories and concepts to life. Clearly, ethics theories and concepts are important. They provide the conceptual guidance that professionals need to frame their assessments, program planning, interventions, and evaluations. Yet theories and concepts by themselves can be sterile when presented in a vacuum. Wrapping theories and concepts around actual case material enriches social workers' understanding and insights. Cases provide a valuable lens through which to view and apply important theories and concepts.

This book includes a broad cross-section of ethics cases related to every core aspect of social work: clinical practice with individuals, families, couples, and small groups; community practice; policy practice; social justice and advocacy; administration and management; and research and evaluation. To fully appreciate the implications and relevance of ethics cases, it is important to understand the ways in which ethical standards and conceptual frameworks in social work have evolved and can be applied. Much contemporary thinking on social work ethics resembles earlier perspectives; however, on other issues social workers' ethics-related perspectives have changed significantly over time. This shifting context provides a useful backdrop to the cases presented in this book.

## THE EVOLUTION OF SOCIAL WORK ETHICS

Social work's concern with ethics spans five major, sometimes overlapping periods: the morality period, the values period, the ethical theory and decision-making period, the ethical standards and risk management period, and the technology period.

### The Morality Period

In the late 19th century, when social work was formally inaugurated as a profession, there was much more concern about the morality of the client than about the morality or ethics of the profession or its practitioners. Social workers' earliest

practitioners focused on organized relief for people living in poverty and other vulnerable circumstances. Often this preoccupation took the form of paternalistic efforts to bolster poor people's morality and the rectitude of those who had succumbed to so-called "shiftless" or "wayward" habits.

Social workers' focus on the morality of poor people waned significantly during the settlement house movement in the early 20th century, when many social workers, taking particularly seriously social workers' ethical obligation to promote social justice and social reform, turned their attention to structural and environmental causes of individual and social problems. As has been well documented in the profession's literature, many social workers were concerned with *cause* rather than or in addition to *case*. This was evident in social workers' social reform efforts, which were designed to address the toxic environmental determinants of problems related to poverty, inadequate housing and healthcare, mental illness, alcoholism, and violence.

Emphasis on clients' morality continued to weaken during the next several decades as social workers created and refined various intervention theories and strategies, training programs, and educational models. During this phase, many social workers were more concerned about cultivating perspectives and methods that would be indigenous to social work, partly to distinguish social work's approach to helping from those of allied professions, such as psychology and psychiatry.

## The Values Period

Although a critical mass of serious scholarship on social work ethics did not appear until the 1950s, several efforts to explore social work values and ethics were made earlier in the 20th century. As early as 1919 there were attempts to draft professional codes of ethics. In 1922 the Family Welfare Association of America appointed an ethics committee in response to questions about ethical problems in social work. In addition, some schools of social work were teaching discrete courses on values and ethics in the 1920s.

By the late 1940s and early 1950s social workers' concern about the moral dimensions of the profession shifted. Moving past their earlier preoccupation with clients' morality, social workers began to focus much more on the morality, values, and ethics of the profession and its practitioners. Nearly a half century after its formal beginning, social work began to develop and publicize ethical standards and guidelines. In 1947, after several years of discussion and debate, the Delegate Conference of the American Association of Social Workers adopted a code of ethics. Several social work journals also published a number of seminal articles on values and ethics. Muriel Pumphrey published her landmark work, *The Teaching of Values and Ethics in Social Work Education*, for the Council on Social Work Education in 1959.

In the 1960s and early 1970s social workers directed considerable attention toward matters of social justice, social reform, and civil rights. The social turbulence of this era had an enormous influence on the profession. Thousands of new practitioners were attracted to the profession primarily because of social work's

abiding concern about values germane to human rights, welfare rights, equality, discrimination, and oppression. It is significant that NASW adopted its first code of ethics during this period.

Particularly important at this time was the proliferation of commentary on core social work values. These discussions of social work values were of three types. One group included broad descriptive overviews of the profession's mission and its core values, such as respect for people, valuing individuals' capacity for change, client self-determination, client empowerment, individual worth and dignity, commitment to social change and social justice, service to others, professional competence, professional integrity, providing individuals with opportunities to realize their potential, seeking to meet individuals' common human needs, client privacy and confidentiality, nondiscrimination, equal opportunity, respect for diversity, and willingness to transmit professional knowledge and skills to others. A second group of discussions included critiques of social work values. Finally, a third group of discussions included reports of empirical research on values held or embraced by social workers.

During this period many social workers focused on the need for social workers to examine and clarify their own personal values. The premise here was that social workers' personal beliefs and values related, for example, to people living in poverty, race relations, abortion, homosexuality, civil disobedience, and drug use would have a profound effect on their approach to and relationships with clients.

## The Ethical Theory and Decision-Making Period

Social work entered a new phase in the early 1980s, influenced largely by the invention in the 1970s of a new field known as “applied and professional ethics” (sometimes known as *practical ethics*). The principal feature of the applied and professional ethics field, which began especially with developments in medical ethics and is now known as *bioethics*, was the deliberate, disciplined attempt to apply principles, concepts, and theories of moral philosophy, or ethics, to real-life challenges faced by professionals. For decades before this development, moral philosophers had been preoccupied with fairly abstract debates about the meaning of ethical terms and the validity of rather abstruse ethical theories and conceptually complex moral arguments, a philosophical specialty known as *metaethics*. Several factors, however, inspired a substantial contingent of moral philosophers to turn their attention to more practical and immediate ethical problems. First, intense social debate in the 1960s concerning such prominent issues as welfare rights, prisoners' rights, patients' rights, women's rights, human rights, and affirmative action led many moral philosophers to grapple with contemporary concerns. Second, a number of technological developments, particularly related to healthcare (for example, reproduction, organ transplantation, genetic testing, abortion, and end-of-life decisions), led many moral philosophers to explore applied ethical issues. In addition, increasingly widespread media publicity related to moral scandals and ethical misconduct in public and professional life, beginning especially with Watergate in the early 1970s, stirred up interest in professional ethics. It

was during this period that now-prominent ethics organizations got their formal start, most notably the Hastings Center and the Kennedy Institute of Ethics at Georgetown University. (The number of applied and professional ethics organizations has grown so large that there is now a national Association for Practical and Professional Ethics.)

Along with most other professions—including nursing, medicine, journalism, engineering, dentistry, law, psychology, counseling, and business, among others—social work found its literature on ethics beginning to change significantly in the early 1980s. In addition to discussing the profession’s values, a small group of scholars began to write about ethical issues and challenges while drawing on literature, concepts, theories, and principles from the traditional field of moral philosophy and the newer field of applied and professional ethics. Using somewhat different approaches, several social workers acknowledged explicitly for the first time the relevance of moral philosophy and ethical theory, concepts, and principles in the analysis and resolution of ethical issues in social work. Furthermore, the 18th edition of the NASW *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, published in 1987, included the first article in this publication directly addressing the relevance of philosophical and ethical concepts to social work ethics.

Since the early and mid-1980s, literature on social work ethics that draws directly on ethical theory and concepts has burgeoned. Most of this literature explores the relationship between standard ethical theories (such as deontology, teleology, consequentialism, utilitarianism, virtue theory, and the ethics of care) and actual or hypothetical ethical dilemmas encountered by social workers. Relevant ethical dilemmas concern direct practice and clinical practice (exploring issues like confidentiality, client self-determination, informed consent, professional paternalism, truth telling, conflicts of interest, and use of technology), program design and agency administration (exploring issues like whether to adhere to unethical agency policies or regulations and bases on which to distribute limited resources), and relationships among practitioners (exploring issues like when to report colleagues’ unethical behavior or impairment). Examples of ethical dilemmas encountered by social workers include situations where social workers must decide between their duty to respect a client’s right to confidentiality and their obligation to protect third parties from harm, whether to place limits on a client’s right to engage in self-destructive behavior, whether to provide services to clients remotely using technology or communicate with them on online social networking sites, how to allocate scarce or limited resources, whether to comply with an allegedly unjust law or regulation, and whether to report a professional colleague’s ethical misconduct to authorities.

A significant portion of the literature since the mid-1980s has focused on decision-making strategies social workers can engage in when faced with difficult ethical judgments. Typically, these discussions identify a series of steps and considerations social workers can follow as they attempt to resolve difficult ethical dilemmas, focusing on their conflicting values, ethical duties, and obligations; the individuals, groups, and organizations that are likely to be affected; possible courses of action; relevant ethical theories, principles, and guidelines; social work

practice standards; legal principles and pertinent codes of ethics; social work practice theory and principles; personal values; the need to consult with colleagues and appropriate experts; and the need to monitor, evaluate, and document decisions.

### **Ethical Standards and Risk Management Period**

The next stage reflects the remarkable growth in social workers' understanding of ethical issues in the profession. It began primarily with the 1996 ratification of the NASW *Code of Ethics*, which significantly expanded ethical guidelines and standards for social work practice. During this period social workers began paying significant attention to ethics-related litigation and licensing board complaints. The profession's literature started to include discussions of the ways in which social workers can be sued or reported to their licensing board by individuals who allege that social workers disclosed confidential information without authorization, terminated services without clients' consent, developed dual relationships with clients or former clients, or used nontraditional or unorthodox intervention approaches, among other allegations. As a result, social workers began paying more attention to issues related to potential professional malpractice, liability, and disciplinary (licensing board) actions.

### **The Technology Period**

In recent years, increasing numbers of social workers have begun to use technology extensively to deliver services, administer programs, communicate with clients and colleagues, and gather and store information about clients. For example, social workers use technology to deliver services remotely via video, email, and online chat services; search online for information about clients; store information electronically; and communicate with clients on social networking sites. This trend has created unprecedented ethical issues related to client privacy and confidentiality, informed consent, boundaries, dual relationships, termination of services, and practitioner competence, among other concerns. This trend prompted NASW to update the *Code of Ethics* in 2017 with new technology-related standards and to adopt new practice standards related to technology.

## **CODES OF ETHICS**

As I noted earlier, few formal ethical standards existed early in social work's history. The earliest known attempt to formulate a code was an experimental draft code of ethics, published in 1920, attributed to Mary Richmond. Although several other social work organizations developed draft codes during social work's early years (for example, the American Association for Organizing Family Social Work and several chapters of the American Association of Social Workers), it was not until 1947 that the latter group adopted a formal code. In 1960 NASW adopted its first code of ethics, five years after the association was formed.

The 1960 NASW *Code of Ethics* consisted of only 14 proclamations concerning every social worker's duties: for example, to give precedence to professional responsibility over personal interests; to respect the privacy of clients; to give appropriate professional service in public emergencies; and to contribute knowledge, skills, and support to human welfare programs. A series of brief first-person statements (such as "I give precedence to my professional responsibility over my personal interests" and "I respect the privacy of the people I serve"; p. 1) were preceded by a preamble that set forth social workers' responsibilities to uphold humanitarian ideals, maintain and improve social work service, and develop the philosophy and skills of the profession. In 1967 a 15th principle pledging nondiscrimination was added to the proclamations.

In 1977, based in part on growing concern about this code's level of abstraction and usefulness, NASW established a task force chaired by Charles Levy to revise the code. In 1979 NASW adopted a new code, which was far more ambitious than the 1960 code. The 1979 code began with a preamble describing the code's general purpose and stating that the code's principles provided guidelines for the enforcement of ethical practices in the profession. The nearly 80 ethical principles included in the new code were written as brief, unannotated statements and divided into six major sections concerning social workers' general conduct and comportment and ethical responsibilities to clients, colleagues, employers, employing organizations, the social work profession, and society.

The 1979 code was revised twice (in 1990 and 1993) as a result of several important developments. In 1990, several principles related to solicitation of clients and fee splitting were modified after an inquiry, begun in 1986, into NASW policies by the U.S. Federal Trade Commission. The commission alleged that the code's prohibition of client solicitation and fee splitting constituted an inappropriate restraint of trade. As a result of the inquiry, principles in the code were revised to remove prohibitions concerning solicitation of clients from colleagues or one's agency and to modify wording related to accepting compensation for making a referral.

In 1992 an NASW task force, which I chaired, recommended that five specific new principles addressing two new concepts be added to the code. Three of the principles concerned the challenge of social worker impairment, and two concerned the challenge of dual or multiple relationships between social workers and clients. The challenges of social worker impairment and dual and multiple relationships between social workers and clients had been receiving increasing attention in the profession and, the task force argued, needed to be acknowledged in the code. In 1993 the NASW Delegate Assembly voted to add these five new principles.

By the time of the 1993 NASW Delegate Assembly there was growing awareness among social workers that the NASW *Code of Ethics* required significant revision and that modest changes and tinkering would no longer suffice. The vast majority of the scholarly literature on social work ethics had been published since the ratification of the 1979 code, which went into effect when the broader field of applied and professional ethics was in its infancy. There was widespread recognition that emergence of ethical issues in social work, not to mention the broader

applied and professional ethics field, since the ratification of the 1979 code needed to be reflected in a new code that would explore them in greater depth. These issues included new knowledge and discussions related to ethical misconduct, ethical decision making, informed consent, dual and multiple relationships and related boundary issues, confidentiality and the protection of third parties, privileged communication, electronic communications, ethical issues in social work supervision, ethics consultation, ethical issues in industrial social work, the teaching of social work ethics, ethics and unionization, ethical issues in organizations, impaired social workers, ethics in social work research and evaluation, professional paternalism, bioethical issues in social work, ethics committees, professional malpractice, and social work's moral mission.

Because of the exponential growth of ethics-related knowledge—with respect to social work in particular but also many other professions—since the development of the 1979 code, delegates at the 1993 NASW Delegate Assembly recognized the need for an entirely new code. In addition, they also acknowledged that the profession's code needed to pay more attention to ethical issues facing social workers not involved in direct practice and clinical practice, especially social workers involved in agency administration, supervision, research and evaluation, and professional education. Thus, the Delegate Assembly passed a resolution to establish a task force to draft a completely new code of ethics for submission to the 1996 Delegate Assembly. The task force was charged with producing a new code that would be far more comprehensive and relevant to current practice, taking into consideration the tremendous increase in knowledge since the ratification of the 1979 code.

The Code of Ethics Revision Committee was appointed in 1994 by the president of NASW and spent two years drafting a new code designed to incorporate comprehensive guidelines reflecting the impressive expansion of knowledge in the field. The committee, which I chaired, included a moral philosopher active in the professional ethics field and social workers from a variety of practice and academic settings. During the two-year period leading up to the final draft of the new code, the committee reviewed literature on social work ethics and on applied and professional ethics generally to identify key concepts and issues that might be addressed in the new code, reviewed the 1979 code (as revised) to identify content that should be retained or deleted and areas where content might be added, issued formal invitations to all NASW members and to members of various national social work organizations to suggest issues that might be addressed in the new code, shared rough drafts of the code with a small group of ethics experts in social work and other professions for their comments, and revised the code on the basis of the various sources of feedback.

The 1996 code, which became the most comprehensive set of ethical standards in social work and serves as the foundation for the current code, reflected the state of the art in social work ethics. The code's preamble signified a remarkable event in social work's history. For the first time, NASW's code of ethics included a formally sanctioned mission statement and an explicit summary of the profession's core values. The Code of Ethics Revision Committee felt strongly that the profession's code should include a forceful statement of social work's moral aims,

drawing on the profession's time-honored commitments and contemporary concerns. The mission statement, adopted in 1996 and retained in the current code, emphasizes social work's historic and enduring commitment to enhancing well-being and helping meet the basic needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment of people who are vulnerable, oppressed, and living in poverty. The mission statement stresses social work's venerated concern about vulnerable populations and the profession's traditional simultaneous focus on individual well-being and the environmental forces that create, contribute to, and address problems in living. The preamble also emphasizes social workers' determination to promote social justice and social change with and on behalf of clients.

A particularly noteworthy feature of the preamble is the inclusion of six core values on which social work's mission is based: service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. The Code of Ethics Revision Committee settled on these core values after engaging in a systematic and comprehensive review of the literature on the subject.

The code also includes a brief guide for dealing with ethical issues or dilemmas in social work practice. Drawing on literature on ethical decision making in social work, this section highlights various resources—including ethical theory, literature on ethical decision-making strategies, social work practice theory and research, social work practice standards, relevant laws and regulations, agency policies, and other relevant codes of ethics—that social workers should consider when they encounter challenging ethical decisions. Social workers are also encouraged to obtain ethics consultations when appropriate, perhaps from an agency-based or social work organization's ethics committee, regulatory bodies (for example, a state licensing board), knowledgeable colleagues, supervisors, or legal counsel.

Additions to the code's most extensive section, "Ethical Standards," greatly expanded the number of specific ethical guidelines contained in the code, again reflecting increased knowledge in the profession. The specific ethical standards were designed to guide social workers' conduct, reduce malpractice and liability risks, and provide a basis for adjudication of ethics complaints filed against NASW members. The standards are also used by other bodies that have chosen to adopt the code, such as state licensing and regulatory boards, professional liability insurance providers, courts of law, agency boards of directors, and government agencies. In general, the code's standards concern three kinds of issues: (1) mistakes social workers might make that have ethical implications (for example, mentioning clients' names in public or semipublic areas, forgetting to renew a client's expired release of information form before disclosing sensitive documents to a third party, disclosing confidential information online without authorization, or overlooking an important agency policy concerning termination of services); (2) difficult ethical decisions faced by social workers who have reasonable arguments for and against different courses of action (for example, decisions about whether to disclose confidential information to protect a third party, how to allocate scarce or limited agency resources, whether to honor a picket line at one's employment setting, whether to obey an unjust law or regulation, whether to provide services to clients remotely using technology, or whether to interfere with a client who is

willingly engaging in self-destructive behavior); and (3) ethical misconduct (for example, sexual exploitation of clients, conflicts of interest, deliberate misrepresentation, or fraudulent activity).

The code's standards fall into six substantive categories concerning social workers' ethical responsibilities to clients, to colleagues, in practice settings, as professionals, to the profession, and to society at large. The first section, "Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to Clients," is the most detailed and comprehensive, because it addresses a wide range of issues involved in the delivery of services to individuals, families, couples, and small groups of clients. In addition to presenting more detailed standards on topics also addressed in the 1979 code (for example, client self-determination, privacy and confidentiality, client access to records, sexual relationships with clients, payment for services, and termination of services), the code addresses a number of newer issues: the provision of services using electronic media and technology (for example, video, email, and text message); social workers' competence in the areas of cultural and social diversity; the use of intervention approaches for which recognized standards do not exist; dual and multiple relationships with former clients, colleagues, and students; confidentiality issues involving family counseling, couples counseling, group counseling, contact with media representatives, electronic records, electronic communications, consultation, and deceased clients; sexual relationships with former clients or clients' relatives or friends; physical contact with clients; sexual harassment; derogatory language; referral for services; and bartering for services.

The section in the code on ethical responsibilities to colleagues includes content on issues related to interdisciplinary collaboration; consultation with colleagues; sexual relationships with supervisees, trainees, or other colleagues over whom social workers exercise professional authority; sexual harassment of supervisees, students, trainees, or colleagues; and unethical conduct of colleagues. The section on ethical responsibilities in practice settings addresses issues related to supervision and consultation, education and training, performance evaluation, documentation in case records, billing practices, client transfer, administration, continuing education and staff development, commitments to employers, and labor-management disputes. The section on ethical responsibilities as professionals addresses issues related to social workers' competence; misrepresentation of qualifications, credentials, education, areas of expertise, affiliations, services provided, and results to be achieved; and solicitation of clients. The section on ethical responsibilities to the social work profession addresses issues related to dissemination of knowledge, especially evaluation and research. This section's standards concern social workers' obligation to evaluate policies, programs, and practice interventions; use evaluation and research evidence in their professional practice; follow guidelines to protect individuals who participate in evaluation and research; and accurately disseminate results. The final section—"Social Workers' Ethical Responsibilities to the Broader Society"—addresses issues related to social workers' involvement in social and political action. The code includes explicit and forceful language concerning social workers' obligation to address social justice issues, particularly pertaining to vulnerable, disadvantaged, oppressed, and exploited people and groups.

The next significant update of the code was adopted in 2017. In 2015 NASW appointed a task force, on which I served, to determine whether changes were needed in its code to address concerns related to social workers' and clients' increased use of technology. Since 1996, the most recent significant revision of the code, there has been significant growth in the use of computers, smartphones, tablets, email, texting, online social networking, monitoring devices, video technology, cloud storage, and other electronic technology in various aspects of social work practice. In fact, many of the technologies currently used by social workers and clients did not exist when the revised code was adopted in 1996. In 2017 NASW adopted a revised code that included extensive technology-related additions pertaining to informed consent, competent practice, conflicts of interest, privacy and confidentiality, sexual relationships, sexual harassment, interruption of services, unethical conduct of colleagues, supervision and consultation, education and training, client records, and evaluation and research. The most significant code updates related to social workers' technology use:

- encourage social workers to discuss with clients policies concerning the use of technology in the provision of professional services. Clients should have a clear understanding of the ways in which social workers use technology to deliver services, communicate with clients, search for information about clients online, and store sensitive information about clients.
- encourage social workers who plan to use technology in the provision of services to obtain client consent to the use of technology at the beginning of the professional–client relationship.
- advise social workers who use technology to communicate with clients to assess each client's capacity to provide informed consent.
- advise social workers to verify the identity and location of clients they serve remotely (especially in case there is an emergency and to enable social workers to comply with laws in each client's jurisdiction).
- alert social workers to the need to assess clients' ability to access and use technology, particularly for online and remote services. The updated code also encourages social workers to help clients identify alternate methods of service delivery if the use of technology to deliver services is not appropriate.
- advise social workers to obtain client consent before conducting an online search for information about a client, as a way to respect the client's privacy (unless there is an emergency).
- highlight the need for social workers to understand the special communication challenges associated with electronic and remote service delivery and how to address these challenges.
- advise social workers who use technology to comply with the laws of both the jurisdiction where the social worker is regulated and located and the jurisdiction where the client is located (given that social workers and clients might be in different states or countries).

- advise social workers to be aware of, assess, and respond to cultural, environmental, economic, disability, linguistic, and other social diversity issues that may affect delivery or use of services.
- discourage social workers from communicating with clients using technology for personal or non-work-related purposes, to maintain appropriate boundaries.
- advise social workers to take reasonable steps to prevent client access to social workers' personal social networking sites and personal technology, again to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships.
- suggest that social workers should be aware that posting personal information on professional websites or other media could cause boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, or harm to clients.
- remind social workers to be aware that clients may discover personal information about them on the basis of their personal affiliations and use of social media.
- suggest that social workers should avoid accepting requests from or engaging in personal relationships with clients on online social networks or other electronic media.
- advise social workers to take reasonable steps (such as the use of encryption, firewalls, and secure passwords) to protect the confidentiality of electronic communications, including information provided to clients or third parties.
- advise social workers to develop and disclose policies and procedures for notifying clients of any breach of confidential information in a timely manner.
- advise social workers to inform clients of unauthorized access to the social worker's electronic communication or storage systems (for example, cloud storage).
- advise social workers to develop and inform clients about social workers' policies on the use of electronic technology to gather information about clients.
- advise social workers to avoid posting any identifying or confidential information about clients on professional websites or other forms of social media.
- advise social workers using technology to facilitate evaluation or research to obtain clients' informed consent for the use of such technology.
- encourage social workers to assess clients' ability to use the technology and, when appropriate, offer reasonable alternatives.

The 2017 code updates also included several changes unrelated to technology, which reflect changes in the law and professionals' thinking since the last code revision (for example, concerning disclosure of confidential information without client consent to protect the client or others from harm).

Several additional revisions to the code went into effect in 2021: the inclusion of self-care language to the "Purpose" and "Ethical Standards" sections and the

addition of the term “cultural competence” as it relates to social workers’ ethical responsibilities described in standard 1.05 (replacing the term “cultural awareness”). With regard to self-care, the code states:

Professional self-care is paramount for competent and ethical social work practice. Professional demands, challenging workplace climates, and exposure to trauma warrant that social workers maintain personal and professional health, safety, and integrity. Social work organizations, agencies, and educational institutions are encouraged to promote organizational policies, practices, and materials to support social workers’ self-care.

The code’s updated standards pertaining to cultural competence highlight the importance of cultural humility (standard 1.05[c]):

Social workers should demonstrate awareness and cultural humility by engaging in critical self-reflection (understanding their own bias and engaging in self-correction); recognizing clients as experts of their own culture; committing to lifelong learning; and holding institutions accountable for advancing cultural humility.

## CONCLUSION

Changes in social workers’ understanding of and approach to ethical issues represent some of the most significant developments in the profession’s century-long history. What began as fairly modest and superficial concern about moral issues in the late 19th and early 20th centuries has evolved into an ambitious attempt to grasp and resolve complex ethical challenges. Social workers’ early preoccupation with their clients’ morality is now overshadowed by social workers’ efforts to identify and dissect ethical dilemmas, apply thoughtful decision-making tools, manage ethics-related risks that could lead to litigation, confront ethical misconduct in the profession, and explore the ethical implications of technology used by social workers and clients.

I explore these diverse issues in the case studies that follow. The cases in this book are based on actual circumstances. Identifying information has been changed to protect individuals’ privacy and confidentiality. The commentary that follows each case provides points of departure for discussion and constructive debate. Each commentary includes a summary of key ethical issues and citations of relevant standards in the current *NASW Code of Ethics*. Each section concludes with several discussion questions.

The relatively brief case studies and discussions cannot possibly capture all the complexity and subtleties that typically emerge when all relevant facts are known. Readers are encouraged to develop their own commentaries and analyses on the basis of their unique interpretation of the case-related facts and relevant social work concepts and standards. They are also encouraged to consult the “Relevant Literature” section in the back of the book.