Personal and Professional Ethics: Post-Workshop Thoughts and Growth

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This narrative is a result of the author conducting a three-hour ethics workshop for a local Texas Chapter of NASW. The challenge of merging personal and professional ethics is integrated through the conducting of a workshop that led to new ways to monitor ethical standards.

When I was initially asked to do an ethics workshop, which is required content for licensing in Texas, I thought of past ethics workshops that all seemed to focus on models for professional decision making. When the President of the Rio Grande Valley Local NASW Chapter, Gilda Bowen, initially contacted me, she mentioned that the last ethics workshop focused on decision making and a *different approach* would be welcomed.

As I thought in an exploratory manner and tried to figure out a different approach, I realized the idea of assessing how my own personal and professional ethics eventually merged could be the foundation for developing a workshop that focused on the integration of personal and professional ethics. I knew that I wanted to cover basic foundation material such as morals (conscience) and how they develop, the acquisition of values from life experiences, and the cognitive processes that lead to the adaptation of right and wrong standards of behavior. For myself, I think the morals I developed early on are somehow more ingrained and almost unchangeable, whereas my values have shifted and changed over time as I have grown and matured personally and professionally.

My current perception of personal versus professional values and ethics is one and the same. However, early in my career my values and ethics often competed between personal and professional, with the winner determined by the setting, time of day, and situation. At work or any other work situation, my professional ethics basically ruled. During my own non-work time, my personal ethics ruled. This does not mean I did illegal things during my own time, but I made clearly different decisions based on whether it was a personal or professional situation. A very simple and basic example would be that during work, if a client said something to me, there was no question that it was between me and the client (excluding duty to warn). In a non-work setting, I would by no means consider something said to me as having elements of confidentiality unless it was specifically requested, which would change the situation for me to a professional setting.

Values are the guiding principles in social work and have to be considered in relationship to both personal and professional standards that are either self or organizationally imposed. How personal values guide social work intervention differently than professional values do is individually driven. These types of differentiation guide many ethics workshops that deal with dilemmas, decision making, and how to weigh relevant factors with critical analysis to arrive at an informed decision. I wanted to explore through the workshop both personal and professional values as well as a means to develop an awareness and integration process of them.

One of the main topics that I wanted to address with the participants was willful blindness. I define willful blindness as an *effort* to turn away from an action that needs
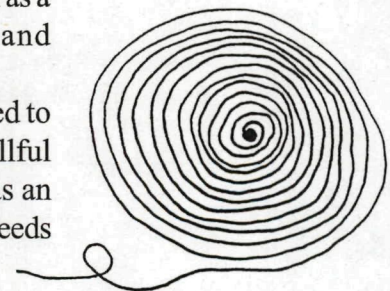
attention. Willful blindness is when one sees a situation that needs attention and chooses to ignore it. According to Goleman (1997), "There is an almost gravitational pull toward putting out of mind unpleasant facts" (p. 244). He is referring to lies that protect and allow social interaction to flourish by not being totally truthful to others and at other times utilizing self-deception to protect or convince oneself of a certain fact. In willful blindness there is no intent to lie to another or oneself, but to just put something out of sight and mind. As an illustration, I have occasionally directed clients to give their marriage one more chance even when one of the clients seemingly decided that the marriage was not in his/her best interest. I have allowed my belief in the sanctity of marriage to encourage the client to try rather than to support the client in exploring divorce. I have since learned that the more I supported a client's decision, the more effectively things worked out than had I imposed my willful blindness to support my own ideologies. This is known as client self-determination.

After years of practice, I began to have an understanding that I did not know everything I thought I knew. Much of what I learned was the need to *unlearn* personally driven decisions. This realization is often hidden in our own rationalization when we are unwilling to accept that we do not inherently know what is right. I realized that I also relied heavily on my own personal experiences with religion and spirituality. If a client or family acknowledged practicing a religious faith of which I had knowledge, it was easy to engage and direct these clients to use their beliefs to further develop strength and support their situation. Upon deeper reflection, I now recognize that I overlooked or just ignored references to religion or spirituality that were unknown to me in a dramatic case of willful blindness.

I have also seen frequent utilization of willful blindness by students who are easily

moved to refer a client to another *expert* when the client presents an issue they, the students, do not want to either work on or deal with interpersonally. How often have I and others in our profession turned our heads just far enough away to overlook the actions of other colleagues, rather than initiate a dialog regarding what we determined to be questionable behavior? It is not easy to confront someone who is using alcohol inappropriately (referred to as an impaired professional). I must admit that in this situation I have turned to a colleague who is a recovering alcoholic to intervene, because who better than someone who has been there? Why did I, or why do others, avoid this type of uncomfortable confrontation? I attribute the *excuse* of not knowing as being willful blindness because it is just easier than the confrontation.

Another example of willful blindness relates to personal and professional growth. I know I am not the only professional to say (or to hear from colleagues) that they/I need to apply to themselves/myself what is recommended to my clients. However the actual application to self is easily overlooked and results in taking no personal action to improve self. I view this as a direct act of willful blindness that excuses all of us as professionals from having to practice what we preach.

An often overlooked contradiction by students and professionals is the common declaration that they trust what their clients say to them, and then they proceed to question what their client has just said by responding with probes for more details. Early on in my clinical days I recall asking a client how he felt about his mother (I had already told him I trusted what he told me), and when I got the reply that he hated his mother I was somewhat shocked and said "I do not believe you really hate your mother." Was this willful blindness or naiveté that challenged my own professional competence? This incongruence

displayed evidence that use of words and phrases can contribute to the experience of ethical dilemmas.

As professionals we need to believe that we are competent. When incongruence is evident, it is a clue that one is operating with willful blindness. As my personal and professional ethics merged, ethical dilemmas became less (internal congruence) and I seemed more willing to reflect, examine, and explore what I needed to do to maintain awareness of professional competence and developed ways in which to monitor myself objectively.

In gathering my thoughts for the workshop I was asked to give, I sensed be the important ingredient was an awareness of personal and professional ethics and a beginning for an integration process. I wanted participants to *challenge themselves* with risk-taking, self exploration, and *honesty*. It was my hope that by discussing my own experiences with willful blindness, the participants would begin to take their own risk by participating in an exercise that called for identification of one of their own acts of unethical behavior. The actions were reported anonymously by groups (7 to 10 persons per table) so that no one person could be identified as a "bad social worker."

As I faced an audience of 120 plus, mostly social workers with BSW and MSW degrees, I thought about how the format of the workshop would lead the participants to an understanding of how their own morals and values developed and guided their decision making. The logical next phase would be to examine the manner in which one thinks and makes deductions (either deontological or teleological) and the role willful blindness plays in this process. This would set the stage to ask the participants to share both negative and positive ethical acts respectively. I realized that I was asking them to ultimately explore, take risks, and admit to unethical actions or behaviors. As they wrote down their unethical

act (anonymously) and put it into the middle of their respective tables, one representative compiled the list of questionable and/or unethical acts and read these unethical acts to the entire audience. A verbatim sample of responses included:

• Re-scheduling a client appointment under false pretenses, i.e., lying about having other commitments when there were no other commitments.

• Billing an hour for a case management meeting that was only five minutes.

• Billing for a case management appointment that did not occur.

• Having lunch rather than doing a home visit.

• Reporting Continuing Education Units for a workshop that was not attended.

• Rating a workshop presentation highly when it was poor to not hurt the presenter's feelings.

Startling honesty! But I was lost for a moment as to where to go from there, so I immediately thanked everyone for participating, especially for their willingness to take the risk of self-disclosure. I was unprepared for many of the candid disclosures that came from the different groups. As I processed these disclosures, I found myself re-examining my own process for getting to my current ethical practice state: the merging of personal and professional ethics. I continued to think about these responses following the workshop. They prompted me to think seriously about what is expected of new BSW and even MSW graduates. I do not believe that these types of acts or actions are being frequently reported to the Texas Social Work State Licensure Office. These disclosures suggest the presence of self monitoring and, on the rare occasion, some of these incidents may come to someone else's attention. I would suspect, however, that too many are brushed aside by means of willful

blindness and forgotten or dwelled on with guilt.

Although it has always been my intention, I do not fool myself by thinking I have been completely ethical throughout my career. Today, to me there is no difference between acting ethically and legally. However, experience and maturation have led me to this point in life. The NASW Code of Ethics (1999) does not address obeying the law relative to stopping at a stop sign, proper turns, speeding, or accepting incorrect change when it is more than what is due. These are all too often self-monitoring actions and reflect the highest standard of personal integrity. With closer scrutiny of self, I have found it simply too uncomfortable to accept incorrect change even if it is only a dime too much. It does mean an active effort to hold myself to the highest possible standard of ethical behavior at all times.

I work to be ethical in the here and now but this is after many years on earth; it did not happen upon graduation. Through my process of ethical maturity, self monitoring, self-reflection, and accepting my professional ethics as integral to my personal ethics, a merging of the two occurred. My effort to present an ethics workshop that did not focus on ethical dilemmas and decision-making models resulted in clarification of a practice model that encourages ethical maturity with self-monitoring, self-reflection, and acceptance of *professional ethics as personal ethics*. This is what I refer to as **honest ethical practice**.

When I asked participants at the end of the workshop for feedback, a number mentioned that they felt a sense of relief that they were allowed to express an unethical action and/or that it was disturbing but helpful to know they were not alone in some unethical action. More importantly there was a pervasive feeling that *now* is the time to stop unethical actions and work at acting ethically during all situations.

There needs to be an objective, quantifiable way to measure the degree of ethical practice that would reflect a sense of ethical grounding. A colleague and I are taking the next step to develop a personal and professional ethics audit that will provide a self measure to determine one's degree of ethical grounding. This is similar to what Reamer (2000) has done with a call for agencies to conduct a management audit.

Unexpectedly, what also surfaced was that some of the participants reported a sense of having cleansed past unethical actions by proclaiming, writing out, and facing possible residual guilt feelings that had not been addressed. This may serve as a catalyst for a willingness to merge personal and professional ethics by becoming aware of the importance of the effect of incongruence and resulting dilemmas. Throughout the workshop, I focused on modeling and speaking openly about my maturing process and eventual honest self-awareness. To what extent can I base my perception of the workshop as worthwhile? I am confident that the subject matter touched the participants positively and, I hope, provoked growth toward ethical maturity and self-awareness. It should be evident that as I reflected back on this ethics workshop, I greatly benefited as the presenter.

Closing Thoughts

In an effort to make sense of what I experienced, it is important to note that the workshop was a forum for my own learning (not an original objective) that related to the discovery that we, as people, need to mature and grow continuously. As professionals,
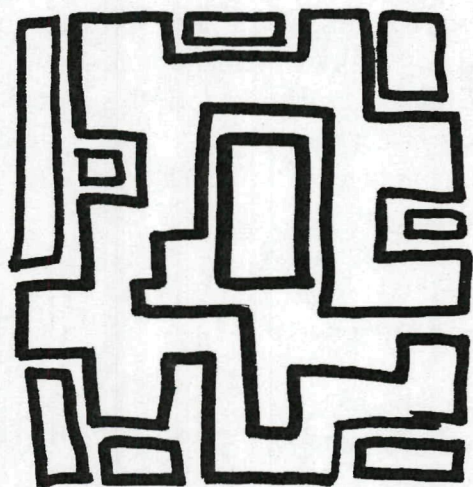
maturity and growth must come in accepting that the greater good of all is represented in adaptation of a standard of ethics that is not individually driven, i.e., NASW Code of Ethics.

I attribute my own experience of merging and integration of personal and professional ethics as a willingness to create congruence in my life, maturing experientially, honest self-awareness (always being on the alert for willful blindness), holding myself to a higher standard of personal integrity, and accepting a professional standard of ethics as my personal ethics. I truly believe that anyone can take these steps to move toward a merging and integration of personal and professional ethics, but it takes work and it will occur not by thoughts only, but by actions and reflection.

References

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