

Learning from authentic practice-based Ethical Dilemmas: A Pedagogical Framework for Applied Ethics in Social Work

SW 611 & SW616 - Breda O'Driscoll



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LEARNING FROM AUTHENTIC PRACTICE-BASED ETHICAL DILEMMAS

A Pedagogical Framework for Applied Ethics in Social Work (SW611 & SW616)

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Breda O’Driscoll | Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University

Overview

This teaching and learning framework was designed to enable social work students to engage actively with the complexity of ethical reasoning in real-world contexts. The module adopts a scaffolded, experiential learning approach grounded in Universal Design for Learning (UDL) principles and constructivist pedagogy. Students work in small groups through structured weekly exercises that culminate in a Poster Showcase, where they present their ethical analysis to peers.

Pedagogical Design

The framework emphasises active, collaborative, and reflective learning. Each week, students progress step-by-step through a structured ethical inquiry process: identifying a dilemma, analysing value tensions, applying theoretical frameworks, and justifying a decision using professional codes and legislation.

Learning activities are designed to:

- Integrate theory and practice through authentic, practice-based dilemmas.
- Support critical reflection on values, responsibilities, and rights.
- Foster peer learning and professional dialogue through group analysis and debate.
- Develop ethical confidence and reasoning skills applicable to professional contexts.

Universal Design for Learning (UDL) Alignment

The framework integrates UDL principles to promote equity, accessibility, and engagement:

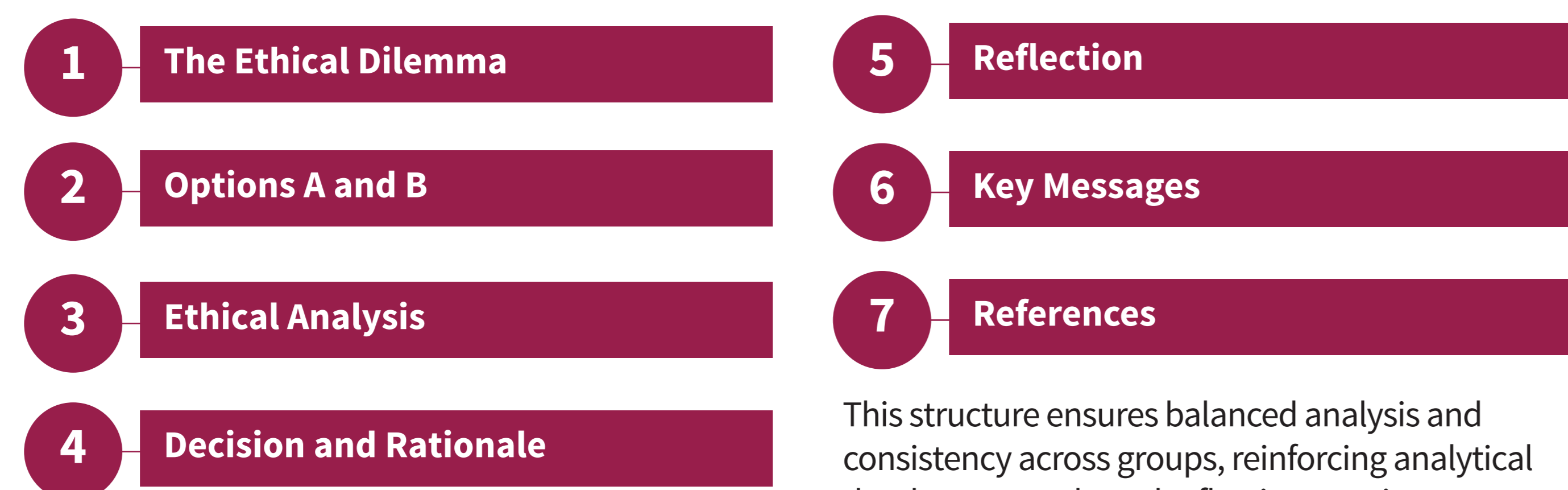
- **Multiple Means of Engagement:** Collaborative group work and real-world relevance increase motivation and participation.
- **Multiple Means of Representation:** Core materials, templates, and readings are provided in varied, accessible formats.
- **Multiple Means of Action and Expression:** Students demonstrate learning through written, visual, and oral forms (poster, discussion, Q&A).

Teaching and Learning Framework (Weekly Structure)

Week	Focus
1. Why Ethics Matters	Explore ethical principles and social work values; identify tensions and uncertainties.
2. What is an Ethical Dilemma?	Define and test examples; analyse values, rights, and responsibilities in conflict.
3. Analysing the Dilemma	Select one case; identify stakeholders; generate and compare response options.
4. Applying Frameworks	Apply deontological, utilitarian, virtue, feminist, care, and recognition ethics.
5. Making the Decision	Evaluate and justify chosen option using codes, policy, and law.
6. Reflection and Poster Preparation	Reflect on process, group learning, and practitioner identity.
7. Poster Showcase	Peer-learning event where Year 2 students present findings to Year 1.

Assessment as Learning

The Poster Assignment functions as both an assessment and a pedagogical tool. A detailed template guides students through the ethical reasoning process, including:



This structure ensures balanced analysis and consistency across groups, reinforcing analytical depth, teamwork, and reflective practice.

Pedagogical Outcomes

- Enhanced ethical reasoning and critical analysis skills.
- Deeper understanding of ethical frameworks in applied contexts.
- Improved collaboration and communication within professional teams.
- Strengthened professional identity and reflective capacity.
- Peer learning and mentoring through the Poster Showcase, fostering community and belonging.

This activity immerses students in real-world ethical dilemmas, encouraging analysis of complex scenarios, reflection on ethical tensions, and consideration of multiple perspectives. Through creating and sharing posters, students develop critical thinking, ethical reasoning, professional judgement, and learn from peers’ insights.

Phase 2 will evaluate the effectiveness of this pedagogical approach, incorporating student feedback.

Phase 3 will explore how the framework can be applied in interdisciplinary social work and adapted for other student groups across the university

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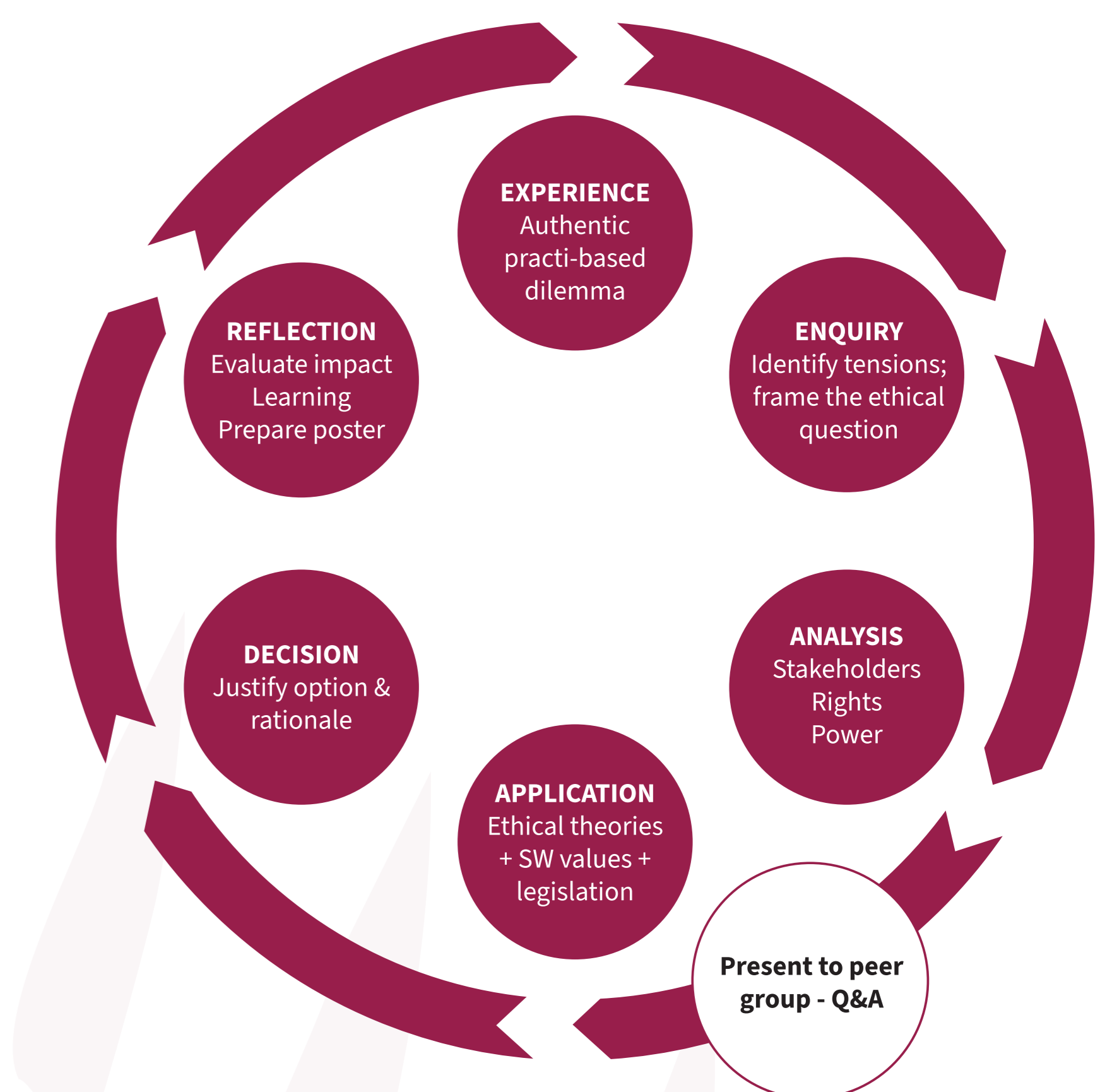
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Ethical Reasoning cycle



UDL–Ethics Integration Framework



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WALKING THE LINE

Self-Determination versus Duty to Keep Safe

An ethical dilemma in a domestic violence refuge

Background

Mam plus three children, from the Traveller community, arrive at a women's refuge after she was physically assaulted by her husband, and attempted to set her on fire. She sustained burns requiring medical attention but refused Garda involvement or protective orders. Mam fled out of fear for her and children's safety, with no belongings. Children, two boys and a girl, aged 5, 7 and 12, were visibly distressed and confused about why they couldn't return home. Despite the violence, Mam expressed love for her husband, explaining his behaviour worsens with alcohol but he apologises when sober. From a cultural perspective, maintaining family unity is deeply significant for Mam, creating a conflict between respecting her autonomy and self-determination and the social worker's duty of care to safeguard her and the children from harm through protective interventions. Stakeholders include:

- 1 Mam
- 2 Dad
- 3 Children
- 4 Social Workers
- 5 Direct Support workers
- 6 Gardai

Option A

CLIENT SELF DETERMINATION TO LEAVE REFUGE WITH CHILDREN TO RETURN TO FAMILY HOME

Support Mam's right to self-determination while ensuring she understands risks and supports available.

- Use trauma-informed, culturally sensitive practice, recognising Traveller community values around family unity (Pavee Point, 2018).
- Complete risk / safety assessment; develop safety plan if Mam returns home.
- Apply empowerment-based and motivational intervention techniques to explore safe options.
- Maintain children's welfare as priority under Children First (DCEDIY, 2017).

Pro

- Promotes autonomy, empowerment, and cultural respect (HIQA, 2012; CORU, 2019).

Con

- May increase risk to children, requiring mandatory reporting (DCEDIY, 2017).

Option B

DUTY TO KEEP MAM AND CHILDREN SAFE

- The social worker's primary dilemma is conflict between the mother's right to self-determination and professional duty of care. While respecting the mother's autonomy, Irish law (Children First Act 2015) establishes children's welfare as paramount. This duty is ethically rooted in non-maleficence (do no harm), as children are the most vulnerable party.

- The social worker's role is not to forcibly prevent Mams return but to fulfil their statutory duty in protecting children from harm. If a significant risk is identified, this legally requires making a mandatory report to Tusla.

Pro

- This upholds children's absolute right to safety.

Con

- It can disempower Mam and rupture the therapeutic relationship.

Ethical Analysis

Before making our decision, we applied several ethical frameworks to explore the complex tensions in this case. Deontological ethics emphasised our duty to protect life and prevent foreseeable harm to the Traveller woman and her children (Banks, 2012, pp. 28–30; Reamer, 2018, pp. 42–43). A utilitarian lens encouraged us to consider which action would produce the greatest overall good, balancing safety, wellbeing, and trust (Banks, 2012, p.53-54). In contrast, the ethics of care reminded us to approach Mam with empathy and cultural understanding, recognising her Traveller identity, sense of loyalty, and the trauma she had experienced (Gray & Webb, 2010, pp. 94–95). Reflecting through these frameworks helped our group weigh the moral costs of intervention versus autonomy before arriving at our final decision.

Decision

OUTCOME = Option B – Duty to Keep Mam and Children Safe by making a mandatory referral to TUSLA.

The safety and welfare of children must be the priority in cases of DV (CORU, 2019). Mam values family unity and wishes to return home, her decision exposes herself and her children to serious foreseeable harm, including physical injury and psychological trauma. Social work ethics emphasise balancing autonomy with protection, and in this context, non-maleficence and duty to protect take precedence. By prioritising safety, the social worker can implement protective interventions, develop risk-informed safety plans, and ensure multi-agency collaboration with Tusla, Gardaí, and DV services. This approach maintains ethical and legal compliance while providing trauma-informed, culturally sensitive support. Upholding duty of care ensures that both Mam and children receive protection, stability, and ongoing professional support until it is safe to reconsider her choices.

Key frameworks guiding practice include:

Children First Act 2015 (child safeguarding, mandatory reporting),
Domestic Violence Act 2018 (legal protection from abuse), Child Care Act 1991 (welfare of children),
CORU Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics 2019 (client autonomy, duty of care), and
HIQA National Standards for DV Services 2012 (empowerment, risk assessment, culturally sensitive support).

Reflection

Our group used a structured ethical decision-making model (Banks & Gallagher, 2020). We discussed safety, culture, and autonomy, referencing policy and ethics frameworks. Consensus was achieved through discussions around care and justice perspectives. We learned that ethical reasoning in social work is rarely black and white, frameworks guide reflection rather than dictate action. The case illuminated the emotional complexity of respecting culture while prioritising safety. We also recognised the value of inter-agency collaboration and the importance of reflective supervision to manage ethical stress.

Remaining tensions include balancing self-determination with protection and navigating cultural sensitivity in crisis situations. Overall, the exercise deepened our understanding of critical reflection and ethical pluralism in practice.

Key Messages

- Children's safety must take priority even when parental autonomy is valued.
- Culturally sensitive, trauma-informed practice supports empowerment while managing significant risks.
- Multi-agency collaboration and ethical reflection guide decisions in complex domestic violence cases.

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WHEN IMMEDIACY MATTERS

The choice between an immediate response to child safety vs the inclusion of the parent (father) in the safety planning process

An ethical dilemma in child and family social work

Learning from authentic practice-based Ethical Dilemmas: A Pedagogical Framework for Applied Ethics in Social Work

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Hope Igie, Jamirah Iman, Chinyere Onuoha, Emilia Bingwa Suhbesi, Agatha Sibamba, Blessing Egharevba

Description

During a school discussion on bullying, siblings a girl aged 10 and a boy aged 9, disclosed to their class teacher that their mother would hit them with a stick when they made mistakes in their homework. The boy stated that his mother would use the stick to hit him and make him erase his work and redo it. The girl confirmed her brother's account, adding that their mother always pulls her ears as a form of punishment. Both parents are not English speakers. However, the mother can speak and understand a little. During the initial assessment (screening), the social work department realised that there was a language barrier, and an interpreter was required for the father. However, an interpreter was not available. The social workers had to choose between the child's right to safety and the father right to participate in the safety planning process. This decision was taken due to legislations and policies guarding children's protection.

Why it is an ethical dilemma

It qualifies as an ethical dilemma because there was a dilemma in balancing the child's right to immediate safety vs the father's rights to participate in safety planning for the children and understand why Tusla is involved with his family.

Values, rights, responsibilities in tension

Social justice

being able to advocate for the child, presenting justice for the child. Thus, the timely intervention to prevent further harm.

Human rights and dignity

the children should have an inherent right to safety and to live free from abuse.

Integrity

Even though there was a lack of an interpreter, the social workers must not delay protective action when there is credible evidence of physical abuse.

Rights to safety

All children have the rights to safety from harm.

Rights to safety

All children have the rights to safety from harm.

Stakeholders

Stakeholders are any individual such as a child, family members, social workers or agency who is involved in or impacted by the decisions and actions made to support and protect a child. Therefore, within this ethical dilemma the stakeholders are: 7-year-old twins, mother and father, social workers, student social worker, teacher, principle and Garda.

Option A

Description, pros, cons, ethical reasoning

Social workers needed an immediate safety plan for the child which was time pressured and had to have an immediate response, while navigating miscommunication, misunderstanding and language barriers.

Pro

- Mum got rid of the stick/harmful object.
- Mum realised the harm she was causing.
- Immediate early intervention for the child's safety.
- Voice of the child was heard.
- The safety of the child was prioritised.
- Parents are aware and recognise the rights and legislations guiding the child's rights.

Con

- There was a language barrier limiting the father's participation in the safety planning. (Lack of interpreter)

Option B

Description

Waiting for the interpreter to become available to explain the referral to the father, so that dad can participate in the safety planning.

Pros: The father will be able to participate in the safety planning. Theory [Anti-Oppressive Practice].

Cons: Oppressive practice. father unable to contribute to the safety planning. Waiting for an interpreter to become available will slow down the safety planning for the children.

Ethical reasoning: Child's right to immediate safety versus father's right to understand and participate in the safety planning.

Other alternatives (brief note):

Social worker visits the family home to discuss the referral with the parents and make a safety plan. [Safety planning is usually done over the phone within the screening team in TUSLA].

Ethical Analysis

Apply 2–3 ethical frameworks (e.g., deontology, utilitarianism, virtue ethics, ethics of care, recognition ethics)

Recognition Ethics: Compassion and empathy for the father as he was not included in the safety planning process.

Utilitarianism: Pragmatic - Social worker recognition of the father's right to an interpreter. However, the lack of resources constrained the father's right to contribute to the safety planning. Practical – Acting in the best interest of the child [Child First 2015]. Due to the disclosure made by the children regarding the ongoing physical abuse, a safety plan had to be put in place immediately. There was no time to wait for an interpreter to become available.

Explain how frameworks influenced your group's evaluation: The social worker had compassion and empathy for the father by realising that he needed an interpreter. The social worker was pragmatic and practical by making immediate safety planning with the mother of the children without the contribution from the father.

Option A

Acting in the best interest of the child by making an immediate safety plan and acting on the voice of the child [UNCRC, Article 12]. The children's right to be safe at home. Early intervention for the children to foster a healthy relationship between the children and their mother. Including creating a safe environment for the children to learn and do their homework. To educate the mother on her method of discipline [corporal punishment] and to be aware of the possible negative impact such method can have on the children's psychological well-being.

Supporting codes, legislation, policies

- CORU Ethical Code of Professional Conduct in Social Work, acting in the best interest of the children.
- Children First National Guidelines for protection and welfare of children 2017,
- Acting on the voice of children Article 12 of the UNCRC
- The children's First Act 2015 legislation
- Article 19 of the UNCRC, "the rights of the child states that the child has the rights to be protected from violence, abuse and neglect".
- Signs and safety framework

Reflection

Step-by-step account of group decision-making

Each person within the group spoke about our own ethical dilemmas, we were then able to come to a decision on which ethical dilemma to select.

Insights about ethical frameworks and reasoning

As a group, we learned that ethical decision-making in social work often balancing competing rights and values. ethical frameworks helped us recognise that there is rarely a clear rights or wrong choice, but rather a need to justify our reasoning.

Applying a right based framework (Utilitarian) reminded us that both children and parents have fundamental rights to safety, dignity and participation.

Remaining issues or tensions

Within our group, some tensions arose around how to prioritise the children's safety while still respecting the parents' rights. We had different views on whether immediate action without an interpreter was fully ethical or if waiting for proper communication would have been more just.

Learning outcomes: ethical decision-making, group collaboration, personal/professional values

Through this group task, we developed a strong understanding of ethical decision making and the challenges of balancing competing rights and values. We learned that ethical dilemma rarely has clear answers, and that decision might be supported by sound reasoning and relevant legislation.

Key Messages

- Child safety must take precedence in immediate risk situations.
- Parental inclusion is vital but may be limited by urgency.
- Ethical decisions require balancing competing rights and responsibilities.
- Communication barriers must be addressed to ensure fair participation

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NAVIGATING THE TOUGHEST CHOICE

Safety or Family unity

An ethical dilemma in child and family social work

The Ethical Dilemma

The family consists of two parents, a seven-year-old son, and a six-year-old daughter with a disability. The daughter disclosed sexual abuse perpetrated by her brother. The parents were unaware of the incident and appeared shocked when they were informed. The daughter is now withdrawn and avoids contact with her brother following the incident. Social workers and inter-agency support are currently assisting the family to ensure the children's wellbeing.

Why it is an ethical dilemma

Option A: Removal of Lucy from her family home for protection

Option B: Keep Lucy at home under a safety plan

Removing Lucy from her family home ensures immediate safety from potential abuse but risks trauma from separation. Keeping Lucy at home prioritizes family unity but risks further harm if the abuse is ongoing or the parents are unable to protect Lucy.

Values, rights, responsibilities in tension

Child's right to protection and safety
Family's right to unity and support
Professional duty of care and non-maleficence

Principles of justice, autonomy and beneficence

Lucy has the right to protection from harm, but also the right to family life. The parents have a responsibility to protect their children, while social workers are responsible for ensuring the safety and welfare of children

Stakeholders

Lucy (victim) safety and wellbeing)

Adam (perpetrator) assessment and rehabilitation needs)

Parents (emotional support and parenting education)

Child and family agency (legal obligation to protection children).

Health and education professionals involved in aftercare and therapy

Option A

Removal of Lucy from the family home

Description:

Option A is for Lucy to be removed from the family home and to be placed in a placement

Pro

- Ensures Lucy and Adam's immediate safety.
- Lucy can begin her healing process in a neutral and stable environment. Lucy will be removed from a potentially triggering environment.
- Lucy and Adam will understand that this behaviour is unacceptable.
- This will ensure proper supervision and therapeutic supports.
- Allows Lucy to get space from her family and homelife so she can process the trauma she experienced with no family pressure.

• This will display to Lucy that what she experienced was unacceptable and the child and family agency is taking the situation seriously.

Con

- Lucy cannot speak for herself as she is nonverbal
- Social workers are concerned about what changes will occur if Lucy is not removed?
- Lucy's parents were unaware that Adam had abused her sexually.
- A failure to address this concern may increase psychological harm to Lucy.
- Lucy's voice may have been muted and diminished.
- So the family bonds and attachments are disrupted.

Ethical Reasoning

- A serious assessment of the risk of harm to Lucy is paramount
- Upholds the principle of non-maleficence avoiding further harm.
- Prioritises the best interests of the child (Section 7, Children First Act 2015).

Option B

Description

Not removing Lucy but allowing the child to remain in family home with the parents and sibling for family unity.

Pros of B

Lucy has a right to express her opinion freely on matters that concern her. Respect for her personal choices and her preference to seek therapeutic support from her family Assists Lucy in healing in a natural environment by maintaining family unity. Social workers encourage therapy and rebuild relationships under professional supervision. Tusla offers a Lundy approach to family participation, fostering trust and collaboration.

Cons of B:

The risk of facing ongoing emotional harm, trauma or limiting Lucy's sense of safety. Adam's presence may retraumatize or trigger fear if their parents her nonchalant with supervising the children.

Lucy's disability in speech may delay disclosure to further abuse.

Ethical Reasonings:

This ethical reasoning requires a child-centred approach.

Lucy is to remain in the home where promoting family unity is encouraged, her emotional healing and her right to family.

The decision to keep her home can help rebuild trust especially.

Ethical Analysis

Utilitarianism: Many people benefit from actions that promote great happiness (Deininger, 2022). For the greatest good of all.

Based on the pros and cons, Group A and B selected option A which promotes overall family happiness and the safety of the child.

Lucy's removal maximizes her overall wellbeing and prevents potential harm.

Ethical of care: Ethics of care focus on relationship and feeling rather than the social rules (Payne, 2020).

There is a moral significance to the relationships between caregivers and children.

Focuses on empathy, nurturing relationships, and trauma-informed interventions.

Deontological Perspective: Social workers' moral principles guide their actions about what is right or wrong. Social workers are governed by ethical codes, such as the CORU Code of Ethics (2019)

Decision

Option A

Combining these ethical frameworks supports Option A (an ethically defensible decision). Option A balances duties, compassion, outcomes and the best interest of the child.

A Lundy model underpins Tusla's approach and training in sharing practice for parents and their children in the intervention approach.

Tusla focuses on signs and safety including identifying potential risks and taking proactive measures to ensure the children's safety.

The decision is underpinned by an evidence base approach of Tusla which focus on transparency, accountability and carefully considers evidence.

For Tusla, the best interests and safety of the children must be the primary considerations under section 3 of the Childcare Act and children first 2015.

Tusla is committed to promoting, protecting, and supporting the development and welfare of Adam and Lucy (Tusla, 2013).

Reflection

Option A

We spoke with a lawyer for some advice.

The child will be removed from the home if the parents refuse to co-operate.

This decision was challenging without the child's voice. Lucy is also non-verbal and unable to express herself due to her disability.

The child's voice should be considered in all social work decisions.

Using deontology, we recognize the professional duty, rule and obligation to protect children.

Learn how ethical theories contribute to legal guidance in social work practice.

A Key Message from each group participant

- In decision-making, children's best interests come first. My role is to ensure Lucy is protected, believed, safe and supported. (Joy)
- Putting aside any notions of right or wrong and choosing what is in the family's best interest. (Tolu)
- Social workers must ensure that their decision will not negatively impact the family in the future. (Melissa)
- In addition to parental rights, care and control had to be balanced. (Sithandiwe).
- The law aligns an organisation's options and outcomes with society's values and ethical considerations. (Akole)

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BALANCING THE SCALES

Voice of the Child vs Rights of the Parents

An ethical dilemma in child and family social work

Section 1: The Ethical Dilemma

Tusla received a referral after a child was admitted to private psychiatric unit. The parents wanted support for their son who was presenting with mental health difficulties and physical aggression. The child alleged physical abuse against the parents. The parents admitted to the allegations, but within the context of managing the child's violent behaviour. Tusla threshold for an interim care order (Government of Ireland, 1991) was not met. This is the legislation which allows Tusla to take children into care on an interim basis up to 28 days, while options for reunification and/or more long-term care are explored.

The child ceased all contact with his parents and began to voice that he would kill himself if he was sent home. The child requested to be put into care. The psychiatric unit wanted Tusla to take the child into care, but Tusla advised that an interim care order threshold was not met.

Two options: allow the child to be discharged from the psychiatric unit into the care of his parents as there was no threshold for a care order or grant the child's request to come into care by convincing the parents to sign a voluntary care agreement (Government of Ireland, 1991). This is the legislation which allows parents to voluntarily consent to their child's admission to care outside of court.

Values, rights, responsibilities in tension

Values

Family autonomy/unity – agree with family, encouraging family to sign, uncomfortable with sending child home, legally supported by constitution for parents right to raise their child. Protection – listen to child's concern, take suicide threat seriously, uncomfortable with admitting child into care without threshold.

Rights

Parents' right to raise child
Child's right to participate in decisions
Child's right to be safe

Responsibilities

Act in the best interest of the child
Advocate for child's voice
Work within legal frameworks
Safeguarding siblings in home

Stakeholders include

The child
Parents
Tusla
Psychiatric unit
CAMHS

Section 2 Option A: Voice of the child

Grant the child's request to come into care by convincing the parents to sign a voluntary care agreement.

Pro

- Guarantee child's safety, safeguard siblings from the child's behaviour, access to a range of interventions and services, respects child's autonomy and right to be heard, fosters trust between child and professionals, child centred approach.

Con

- The constitutional rights of the parents to raise their child, creating a barrier to reunification, shortages in foster and residential placements.

Ethical Reasoning

- The ethics of care (Gilligan, 1982) demand that the social worker forgoes generalised practice and instead responds to the individual. This option presented the best-case scenario for ensuring safety in the short-to-medium term.

Section 3 Option B: Tusla's threshold/parents' rights

Discharge the child into the care of his parents and attempt to provide interventions for the family.

Pro

- Family-based recovery, increased involvement of the family unit in the child's care, more opportunity for restorative work with family members, cost-efficient allocation of resources.

Con

- Risk of suicide, high risk of physical and emotional harm to parents and younger siblings, deterioration of the child's mental health, inconsistent support and services, concern that the child's extremely high care needs may not be met in the community, child's voice not respected.

Ethical Reasoning

- Legal ethical framework, following the procedure, upholding the constitutional right of the family to remain as one unit, consideration of high waiting lists.

Section 4: Ethical Analyses

Ethics of care: All group members shared the ethics of care insofar as the principles of compassion, empathy and relationships are often key to producing the best outcome for people in crisis (Hugman, 2005). This framework supported Option A, as it instructed us to ask: 'what does this individual need right now?'

Utilitarian: Decision based on harm reduction and what would do the least amount of overall harm (Mill, 1949) and stabilise – prioritise hierarchy of risks.

Section 5: Decision

We chose option A. Although care order threshold was not currently met, this case was likely to deteriorate without high intervention. The child's view that he needed to be in care may not have been supported by Tusla thresholds, but it was a strong view which was difficult to ignore. Risk of harm to the siblings played a large role in this decision. It was felt that our duty of care to all children was best served by Option A.

We drew on CORU proficiencies, particularly 1.3 (CORU, 2019) which states that social workers should act in the best interests of children with due regard to their will and preference. In addition, we drew on the child's constitutional right to form their own views (Constitution of Ireland, 2015). We drew on Children First legislation (Government of Ireland, 2015) to inform our view that we have a duty to safeguard all children including the siblings in this case.

Section 6: Reflection

Some members took a firm stance from the outset, believing that once threshold had not been met, this was a simple decision to choose option B. Other members reasoned that the risk of harm, particularly the threat of suicide, was too great to ignore. There was a lot of insightful debate about how to make a decision which ensured the lowest risk of harm.

Option A was chosen for the reasons outlined above, but it was acknowledged that neither option could produce a harm-proof result and that we had placed priority on short-term safety. We learned that cases received by Tusla can be complex and the best decision is not always straightforward.

Section 7: Key messages

- Apply ethical frameworks to complex cases
- Not always a right answer – just 'least wrong'
- Vital to have ethical agency separate from procedures
- Could apply different ethical frameworks to either option)

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CAUGHT BETWEEN CARE AND CONSENT

Disclosure vs Confidentiality

An ethical dilemma in an addiction recovery context

Case description

During my social work placement, I worked with a client who was told if he consumes alcohol again it will be life-threatening. He has no safe support network such as family or friends whilst struggling with an addiction. My practice teacher located the client's foster sister's email address however their relationship broke down 15 years ago due to his criminal activity. The client's vulnerability outlines the importance of appropriate recovery interventions (Department of Health, 2023).

Why it is an ethical dilemma

The ethical dilemma involves whether we should disclose to his long-lost sister, without explicit consent from the client, the severity of his addiction and his suicide attempt. When going through the ethical process in coming to a decision we took into consideration different elements such as duty of care, respecting the right of confidentiality and to advocate on his recovery and safety based on the client's vulnerability. Referring to the national drugs strategy strategic 2023-2024 and the strategy of reducing harm and supporting recovery, a client centred approach ensures the support provided is recovery focused. Therefore, paramount consideration was given to the client's safety and long-term emotional and mental well-being (Department of Health, 2023) (Department of Health, 2020).

Values, rights, responsibilities in tension

The client's values, rights and responsibilities including the client's right to confidentiality, duty of care, and autonomy were considered. Conversely, the social worker's responsibility and duty of care to the client includes advocating and empowering the client's emotional and mental well-being and assessing health concerns including life-threatening risks.

Stakeholders

Client: The dilemma focuses on a client with alcohol addiction recent hospitalisation, overdose and suicide attempt whilst struggling with mental health issues.

Red Door Project: Safeguarding and making ethical decisions based in the client's best interests referring to the National Drugs Strategy framework (Department of Health, 2023).

Medical team: His stomach is monitored consistently.

Foster's sister: The sister can be a potential safe support network for in line with recovery strategies in having a safe network for recovery (An Garda Síochána, 2017).

Section 2 - Option A - Telling the Sister

Grant the child's request to come into care by convincing the parents to sign a voluntary care agreement.

Option A

Share critical information with client's foster sister regarding client's vulnerability and risk.

PRO of Option A

- Facilitates social support for the client who is significantly at risk.

No other network supports - except partner who is actively engaged in addiction - client owns his house and partner lives in client's home - increased risk of financial abuse or exploitation.

Cons

- Loss of trust with client.

Client has right to self-determination - Could create tension between SW/Client/Sister - may contribute towards mental health challenges or relapse.

Ethical Reasoning

Given the client's risk, reconnecting the foster sister and client may offer a protective relationship for him, overruling confidentiality for a vulnerable person at risk (HSE, 2014).

Section 3 - OPTION B - Not Telling the Sister

Option B

Maintain confidentiality and not share information. Respecting clients wishes.

PRO of Option B

- Client's addiction may get worse
- Client's mental health may deteriorate

SW runs the risk of client's relapse and mental health deterioration. SW acknowledges the client are the best authority on their own needs (Ginneh & Akbar, 2019).

Ethical Reasoning

Given the client's risk, reconnecting the foster sister and client may offer a protective relationship for him, overruling confidentiality for a vulnerable person at risk (HSE, 2014).

Section 4 - Ethical analysis

Deontological ethics (Duty based): Through applying Kant's deontological approach, actions are informed by duty and not consequence (Barrow & Khandhar, 2023). It highlights the significance of confidentiality; by maintaining this it fosters a sense of autonomy and dignity for the client. Hence, by not contacting the sister (option B), without consent, this aligns with respecting the client's privacy and agency.

Care ethics: Gilligan (2011) states 'care ethics is relational, grounded in a premise of interdependence' - Through choosing option A, the professional focuses on the emotional needs of the client following their suicide attempt and addiction concerns. Through empathy and trust, this can encourage the service user to involve their sister to build on their connection and promote the individual's recovery.

Utilitarianism: Focuses on maximising overall happiness and minimising harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 2019). Though utilising option A may increase the likelihood of improving the well-being of the client, providing emotional support and reducing the likelihood of relapse, it will also lead to breaching the trust of the individual may cause further distress and disengagement with services. Choosing the option which possesses the best overall benefit should be prioritised.

Section 5 - Decision

We chose option B—not to disclose the client's attempted suicide, hospitalization, or substance misuse to his sister—because he was actively engaging with the service, abstaining from substance use, attending all appointments, and adhering to his medication plan. As the client did not consent to contact his sister, sharing this information would breach confidentiality and professional standards. Our decision was guided by relevant ethical and legal frameworks, including the CORU Code of Ethics for Social Workers (section 2), the Social Worker Standards of Proficiency emphasizing confidentiality (CORU, 2019), and the Data Protection Act 2018 (Irish Statute Book, 2018).

Section 6 - Reflection

Our group approached this ethical dilemma by dividing the group into two sides: Option A, supporting the decision to disclose information to the sister, and Option B, prioritizing client confidentiality. Through discussion, this allowed us to examine each perspective and consider various aspects and implications of either decision. We applied ethical frameworks such as deontology, care ethics, and utilitarianism.

This process highlighted the complexity of ethical decision-making in social work. It was noted that as social workers within this profession, choices often exist in the grey areas, and not black and white. This ethical conversation furthered our understanding of balancing professional duty of care, with respect for client self-determination.

Ultimately, as a group we agreed that Option B, not disclosing information to the sister, best valued the client's autonomy, confidentiality, and trust in the professional relationship. We recognized the importance of adhering to legislation and professional standards as set by CORU's Code of Ethics, and the Data Protection Act (2018).

Section 7 - Key Messages

- Outlines the ethical tension between duty of care to safeguard a client's well-being and confidentiality.
- Using deontological, care ethics, and utilitarian frameworks, the group explored both moral duty and consequences, reinforcing that social work often exists in complex grey areas rather than black and white.
- The final decision best aligned with CORU's Code of Ethics, preserving the client's trust and autonomy.

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PROTECTING CHILDREN WITHIN THE LIMITS OF THE LAW

Children's Wishes versus Statutory Boundaries

An ethical dilemma in child and family social work

Learning from authentic practice-based Ethical Dilemmas: A Pedagogical Framework for Applied Ethics in Social Work

SW 611 & SW616 - Breda O'Driscoll

Ruth Keady, Melody Parsons, Saoirse Daly, Hannah Corcoran, Cassandra Abass, Susan Mary Raleigh

Ethical Dilemma

Three children witnessed their father and stepfather physically fighting in a shop and subsequently expressed that they did not want to return home to their mother and stepfather. It was unclear which adult instigated the incident, creating uncertainty from a child protection perspective. Following the altercation, the father made a referral to the Child and Family Agency, indicating that the children did not wish to return to their mother and step father.

This dilemma centres on a private family court-mandated custody and access arrangement for three children whose parents are separated. The father was legally required to return the children to their mother's care; however, after the public altercation between the father and stepfather, witnessed by the children, he reported his concerns to the Child and Family Agency. The confrontation involved pushing and shouting but resulted in no serious injuries. As there was no clear evidence about who initiated the incident, the child protection threshold for emergency intervention was not met.

The student social worker, under supervision, was tasked with assessing the children's immediate safety and wellbeing as part of the Agency's statutory duty. The children were interviewed and confirmed that they did not want to return home. The student relayed this to the team leader, who explained that the student could not advise the father on whether to comply with or breach the court order, this decision rested with him.

This situation constitutes an ethical dilemma because it exposes a conflict for the student between their social work values, the remit of Tusla, and the authority of the State.

Key Issues

- Respecting the child's voice while not diminishing their relationship with them.
- Professional judgment may clash with organisational limits.
- Acting in the child's best interests is constrained by parental authority. [shortened "limitations persist, like the dad having power"]
- Upholding CORU Code of Ethics under uncertainty.
- Understanding where conflict arises in the work environment; obligations remain to the Code.

Stakeholders

Social work team leader, student social worker, and family.

Options

Option A

Follow the team leader's direction and inform the father that Tusla has no standing to decide for him. The children were not at immediate risk, so Tusla could not prevent their return home.

Pro

- Follows team guidance, ensures safety, avoids further family conflict.

Con

- Children directly expressed reluctance to return home; conflicts with professional values.

Ethical Reasoning

- CORU standards (2019) require adherence to laws, guidelines, and regulations, including Tusla guidelines, court directions, and ethical practice. [simplified sentence structure]

Option B

Advise the father of his rights to determine whether to breach access and seek a Section 20 report.

Pro

- Maintains parental autonomy, transparency, and judicial oversight.

Con

- May cause emotional distress, prolong uncertainty, and disregard children's wishes.

Ethical Reasoning

- Aligns with CORU Code of Ethics (Section 23.1a) by recognising individual rights and dignity but creates tension between child's best interests and parental rights.

Ethical Analysis

Deontology: Focuses on duties and intrinsic right/wrong, regardless of consequences.

Utilitarianism: Ethical action produces the greatest good for the most people.

Virtue ethics: Focuses on the moral character of the professional.

Deontology influenced group decisions by justifying adherence to the court order above respecting individual wishes.

Reflection

• Step-by-Step Account of Group Decision-Making:

We discussed an option A and option B as a group for the ethical dilemma we decided to use. Option A was concerned with following the direction of the team leader while option B was concerned with taking direction from the courts. We discussed how we found it challenging as a group that the Child and family agency does not have the power to make a decision in a situation like this.

• Insights about Ethical Frameworks and Reasoning:

We took the perspectives that it was a Friday evening and there was no immediate danger to the children. Tusla had no threshold to prevent the children going back to their Mam's house.

• Remaining Issues or Tensions:

Although we made the ethical choice, we all agreed that it was a tough and contentious decision as we were solely acknowledging the word of dad, pertaining to what occurred.

• Learning Outcomes:

We learned to navigate ethical dilemmas by encouraging open dialogue between our group of six and letting everyone have their say before we came to a decision on picking option B.

This experience assisted us most of all in realising that expressing personal viewpoints on ethically challenging matters is invaluable, markedly in social work practice.

Key Messages

- Deontology influenced group decisions by justifying adherence to the court order above respecting individual wishes.
- Balance policy, legislation, and CORU Code of Ethics.
- Document decision-making.
- Seek supervision.

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LEARNING FROM AUTHENTIC PRACTICE-BASED ETHICAL DILEMMAS

A Researcher's Observations on Pedagogical Design

Breda O'Driscoll | Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University

Introduction – Why This Framework Matters

This scaffolded, experiential framework engages social work students with authentic, real-world ethical dilemmas. It combines collaborative problem-solving, reflective practice, and application of ethical frameworks, legislation, and professional codes. Through structured weekly exercises culminating in a Poster Showcase, students develop critical

thinking, ethical reasoning, and professional judgement while reflecting on their own values, emotions, and professional identity.

Poster Series – Student Learning in Action

Students created six posters and presented these to Year 1 peers, engaging in structured roundtable discussions to debate values, explore the role of the social worker, and analyse ethical and practical challenges. Ethical learning focused on applying multiple frameworks (deontology, utilitarianism, ethics of care, virtue ethics) to weigh competing values and justify decisions. Pedagogical learning emphasised experiential, reflective, and collaborative approaches that foster metacognition and professional confidence.

Poster Title	Key Ethical Learning	Key Pedagogical Learning
1: Walking the Line: Self-Determination vs Duty to Keep Safe – DV Refuge	Balancing client autonomy with statutory duty; respecting cultural values; managing competing rights.	Experiential, reflective learning; application of frameworks & legislation; stepwise scaffold; group discussion fosters awareness of ethical tensions.
2: When Immediacy Matters: Child Safety vs Parental Inclusion	Urgency may require prioritising child safety; balancing harm, rights, and practical constraints.	Problem-based learning; collaborative discussion; reflection on personal values and professional responsibilities.
3: Navigating the Toughest Choice: Safety or Family Unity	Balancing child protection and family cohesion; weighing long-term relational harm.	Applying multiple frameworks; reflective discussion strengthens critical thinking, metacognition, and ethical literacy.
4: Balancing the Scales: Voice of the Child vs Rights of Parents	Responding to high-risk child situations while respecting parental rights; legal constraints.	Experiential engagement; reflective practice; accountability & collaboration in group work.
5: Caught Between Care and Consent: Disclosure vs Confidentiality	Autonomy vs duty of care; relational trust & proportionality.	Realistic scenarios; structured debate; link theory, law, and values; collaborative skills.
6: Protecting Children Within the Limits of the Law	Children's wishes may conflict with parental authority; legal constraints.	Navigating grey areas; reflective & collaborative learning; scaffolded learning & peer feedback; bridging theory and practice.

Ethical and Pedagogical Synthesis

Students learned to navigate complex dilemmas, weighing safety, rights, and cultural considerations while applying professional frameworks and legislation. Pedagogically, the exercises reinforced:

- Experiential, case-based learning
- Reflective discussion
- Collaborative problem-solving
- Stepwise scaffolding supporting ethical

literacy and professional growth

The combination of student engagement, guided reflection, and structured debate created a rich learning environment bridging theory and practice. Phase 2 will evaluate the effectiveness of this approach, including student feedback, and Phase 3 will explore adaptation for interdisciplinary social work and other student groups.

Guide for Lecturers / Future Facilitators

Effective facilitation relies on both student engagement and lecturer preparation. Key tips:

- Scaffold groups while allowing confident groups to explore complexity.
- Encourage peer-led debate and respectful discussion.
- Schedule sessions when students are alert; avoid end-of-day or post-heavy lectures.
- Use authentic, emotionally engaging cases from placements or cultural contexts.
- Ensure full attendance; plan to support absent students.
- Guide reflection and debate without giving direct answers; highlight policy, law, and professional guidance.
- Monitor group dynamics; recognize effort; ensure all voices are heard.
- Shared accountability between students and facilitators ensures positive outcomes.
- Lecturers may benefit from practice in managing discussions, scaffolding debates, and supporting students through challenging scenarios.

Strengths & Limitations

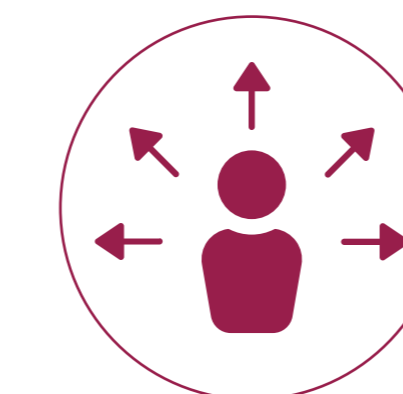
Strengths



Engaging; promotes critical thinking, reflective practice, ethical reasoning



Peer learning and collaborative problem-solving



Exploration of personal values, emotions, and professional identity



Stepwise scaffolding supports deep learning and ethical literacy

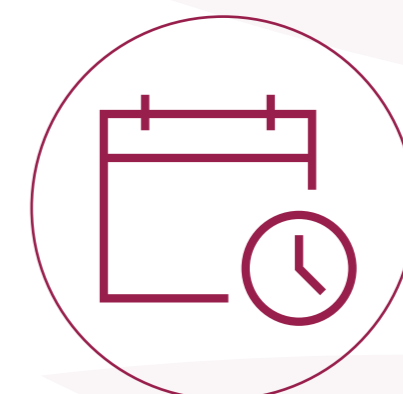
Limitations / Considerations:



Labour- and energy-intensive for both students and facilitators



Some students may struggle with reflective debate or group dynamics



Careful timetabling required; full attendance is critical



Facilitator skill and preparation strongly influence success; some lecturers may need development to guide debates and manage ethical dilemmas effectively

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EXPLORING AUTHENTIC PRACTICE-BASED ETHICAL DILEMMAS

Spotlight on Emotions: Insights from the Social Work Classroom

Learning from authentic practice-based Ethical Dilemmas: A Pedagogical Framework for Applied Ethics in Social Work

Breda O’Driscoll | Department of Applied Social Studies, Maynooth University

Emotions, Ethics & Learning

Ethical decision-making in social work is both cognitive and emotional. Students experience guilt, discomfort, and moral unease—not as obstacles, but as signals guiding reflection. Across the classroom work, it became clear that ethical decisions rarely produce satisfaction or certainty; rather, they generate an ongoing tension between wanting to do more and recognising systemic limits. Students described this as an “underlying chronic discomfort”, not disillusionment, but an acceptance that social work involves navigating imperfect choices.

A key challenge was naming the ethical dilemma itself. Many initially conflated emotionally difficult situations with ethical dilemmas. Through guided reflection, students learned that a dilemma requires a “**versus**”, a tension between two values, duties, or legitimate courses of action. This skill of identifying “A versus B” became foundational to ethical learning.

Collective reflection, peer debate, and emotional exploration help students process complex cases safely. Structured engagement with feelings transforms learning, fostering ethical awareness, resilience, and reflective capacity in real-world practice.

Classroom Approach: Experiential & Reflective

- 1. Frame the Exercise** – Introduce dilemmas, emotional labour, and the meaning of “versus”
- 2. Case-Based Problem Solving** – Small groups analyse real scenarios from placements
- 3. Emotional Reflection** – Identify guilt, fear, frustration, compassion, and hope
- 4. Plenary Debrief** – Explore competing principles, cultural tensions & systemic constraints
- 5. Consolidation** – Identify supervision needs, peer support, and self-care strategies

Pedagogical Principles

- Self-directed & problem-centre Students select cases and dilemmas
- Experience as resource: Lived placement experiences deepen analysis
- Collaborative learning: Debates surface differences in reasoning
- Emotion + cognition: Feelings are legitimate ethical data
- Conceptual clarity: Supporting students to distinguish conflict from ethical dilemma

Key Insights from Classroom Learning

1. Emotional Labour is Central

- Emotions are ethical signals, highlighting tensions between values and duties
- Moral unease, discomfort, and guilt arise when ideals clash with systemic realities
- Students often sought the “least-worst option,” carrying the emotional weight of risk
- Decision-making involves ongoing discomfort but also professional acceptance

2. Moral Distress & Systemic Constraints

- Students encountered dilemmas where **all** options carried potential harm
- Legislative mandates, agency protocols, and resource limits shape ethical choices
- Tension emerged between procedural correctness and relationally meaningful practice
- Discomfort reflects ethical engagement, not incompetence

3. Ethical Complexity Beyond Right/Wrong

- Dilemmas commonly involved two good options or two poor options
- Ethical reasoning required identifying what the dilemma was between:
 - rights vs safety
 - autonomy vs duty of care
 - empowerment vs legislation
 - values vs agency protocols
- Poster titles like *Walking the Line and Caught Between* captured the “tightrope” nature of ethical decision-making
- Students learned to justify differing decisions—recognising gradients of ethicalness

4. Values, Bias & Cultural Awareness

- Groups with similar values sometimes reached different ethical conclusions
- Cultural background shaped interpretations of risk, rights, and best interest
- Reflection helps distinguish personal discomfort from actual safeguarding concerns
- Ethical neutrality grows from recognising one’s biases and assumptions

Representative Classroom Scenarios

- **Non-English-speaking father & safety plan**
 - *Tension:* Child safety vs fairness & transparency
 - *Response:* Anxiety, guilt, concern about cultural fairness
- **Sibling sexual abuse case**
 - *Tension:* Harm of abuse vs harm of removal
 - *Response:* Sadness, fear, moral distress
- **Cultural physical discipline**
 - *Tension:* Legal enforcement vs relational practice
 - *Response:* Discomfort, uncertainty, desire for respectful engagement
- **Domestic violence refuge case**
 - *Tension:* Woman’s autonomy vs duty to protect children
 - *Response:* Fear, moral conflict, empathy
- **Suicidal client & confidentiality**
 - *Tension:* Confidentiality vs duty of care
 - *Response:* Unease, responsibility, emotional weight
- **Children witnessing parental conflict and custody tension**
 - *Tension:* Children’s wishes vs statutory/parental authority
 - *Response:* Frustration, ethical uncertainty, concern for children’s wellbeing, awareness of professional limits

Observations on What Motivates Student Social Workers

- Compassion, empathy, and commitment to wellbeing underpin ethical judgment
- Strong desire to “do good” drives efforts to empower and protect
- Students held intense concern for consequences (e.g., suicide, violence, removal)
- Motivation persisted even when outcomes were imperfect or constrained
- Students **reported dissatisfaction but not disillusionment**, a hallmark of ethical maturity

Wanting What Is Best

- Ethical reasoning balances rights, needs, safety, and context
- Students weighed competing harms to choose options with the least negative impact
- “Best” was understood relationally, not just legally or procedurally
- Even when ideal outcomes were blocked, the aspiration for what is best guided practice

Doing What Is Right

- Students integrated personal values, professional codes, legislation, and policy
- Organisational constraints sometimes limited what “right” looked like
- Moral discomfort remained even after a decision was made
- Ethical growth involved learning to stand over a decision while accepting imperfection
- Hope, integrity, and justice-oriented thinking supported ethical resilience

Key Takeaways

- Emotions are intrinsic to ethical reasoning
- Discomfort is part of ethical maturity, not a sign of failure
- Ethical dilemmas require identifying the “versus” at their core
- Peer-led experiential learning deepens ethical capacity
- Differences in ethical conclusions are normal and defensible
- Emotional labour is a sign of engagement, responsibility, and reflective practice

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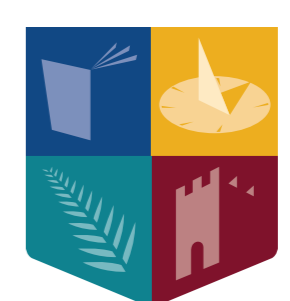
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