SELF-DETERMINATION DISSECTED

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ABSTRACT: Clinical social workers highly value client self-determination yet little is known about how the practitioner applies the concept in ongoing practice. In a small exploratory study, 20 social workers, randomly selected from Utah's licensure list, were interviewed in depth about decision-making related to client self-determination. Even in a small, relatively homogeneous population, enormous variations were found in the application of the principle.

Client self-determination is a value considered basic to social work. Yet, its application in actual social work practice is not clearly defined and may vary according to the practitioner. An exploratory study was conducted to see how practitioners would respond when confronted with situations in which a professional or personal value or goal might conflict with client self-determination.

BACKGROUND

Social workers have traditionally modeled their professional goals after a "value-free social science" in an attempt to be morally neutral while facilitating people's fulfillment of their needs and desires. Nevertheless, the social work profession is laden with values (Levy, 1972) and workers are concerned about situational outcomes as well as the helping process.

Part of the helping process is aimed at assisting clients to make choices and ethical decisions to become morally responsible agents, to build their moral wills and integrity.... Although social workers claim that they do not impose their values upon clients, social work talk with clients is full of normative and prescriptive statements, of moral judgments, which seek to help guide clients in their choices of right behavior, in deciding what they ought to do in resolving their problems. (Siporin, 1975, p. 65)

Social worker communication with clients is therefore a "moral discourse." Hardman's delightful article (1975) highlights the moral dialogue inherent in social work practice as well as the practical impossibility of failing to impose values on clients.
Social work is replete with contradictory values or what Siporin (1975) calls "both-and" values such as independence and interdependence, openness and probity in self-expression, tolerance and the setting of needed limits, self-awareness and empathy, self-help and mutual aid, competition and cooperation, material well-being without excess, work that is necessary and satisfying, good manners and genuineness.

Client self-determination is an "ethical practice principle" (Siporin 1975) that is considered both a means and an end (Biestek, 1967). The development of the client's ability to make responsible decisions is part of growth toward self-realization. Participation in decision-making is also considered a desired goal. Social workers promote client self-determination by permissiveness, encouraging the client to exercise free will and active judgment in making informed choices and decision, obtaining the client's informed consent for helping actions, and encouraging the client's conscious consideration of others, that is, the exercise of social responsibility.

Many questions arise about the implementation of self-determination. How, for example, do the facilitative techniques of acceptance, reassurance, and encouragement affect client self-determination? Does the worker's choice of when and how to respond to a client influence the client's autonomy especially if the worker has become a significant person to the client? When the worker chooses to support a client and his or her decision, is the worker supporting the client or the decision? Can the client differentiate support for the decision from support for his or her decision-making abilities? Does the interaction in the social work interview facilitate the client's decision-making abilities or guide the client toward a decision? In this regard, Florence Hollis writes that self-determination is an unfortunate choice of words, implying as it does an over-simplified notion of autonomy and self-sufficiency. 'Self-direction' is perhaps a more accurate term, denoting not absolute independence, but rather the capacity to guide oneself through the maze of interactions that make up the pattern of life. (1966, p. 95)

Others suggest that the application of self-determination is a myth or, in Perlman's (1967) words, "nine-tenths illusion, one-tenth reality." In this context she notes that social work vocabulary contains many words that connote directive control or intents such as "intervention," "reaching the hard-to-reach," and "social workers as agents of change or of social control." One might add to the list our prevalent notion of the social workers as a "model."

Long ago Biestek (1957) suggested that the client's right to self-determination is limited by "the client's capacity for positive and con-