

## *Dear Students of Social Work,*

One of the greatest concerns among professionals is the occasion when the conduct of a fellow professional calls public attention to the practice. In the case of social work around the world, people often quote the American National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics when identifying the ethical obligations of social workers. In the case of social work in Singapore, it will be the Singapore Association of Social Workers Code of Professional Ethics. A copy of the Code is available on the Association's website.

### Complying with a Code of Ethics



Did you know, however, that not all social workers are bound to comply with the profession's Code, at least not in the legal sense? Did you also know that even if you follow the NASW or SASW Code, you might be engaging in unethical behavior? Did you know that you might need to follow the Code even if you are not acting as a social worker? Before you start thinking that this is incomprehensible, let's understand the context.

The SASW is a national association, but it is a voluntary association. We also have the Social Work Advisory and Accreditation Board that is appointed by MSF to preside over accreditation at the SASW. All social workers in government funded programmes are expected to be accredited. A social worker who chooses to be a member of SASW or is an accredited social worker agrees to abide by the SASW Code of Professional Ethics. Any accredited social worker who violates the Code (or is alleged to have violated the Code) may be subject to the Board's professional review process. The professional review process could include mediation between the complainant and the social work-respondent, or an adjudication to be heard by a panel. However, if a social worker chooses not to become an accredited social worker, the Board has no authority to hear complaints or grievances against them.

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### Reasons to be an Accredited Social Worker

So, a social worker might ask, "Why should I become an accredited social worker if I don't have to?" and "Why would I want to subject myself to a complaints process when I don't have to?" There are many reasons to be an accredited social worker. It is a clear declaration of professional practice. One of the most essential reasons, however, is to inform the clients and the broader community that you believe in social work's core values and ethical code of conduct. It is declaring that you are willing to be held accountable, as a professional, to these standards.

"So, if I follow the SASW's Code, does that mean that I am acting ethically?" The answer is yes most of the time. However, there may be times when the Code does not cover a particular ethical situation, or when there are conflicting obligations that make it difficult to determine the most ethical course of action.



### Applying the Code in Context

Consider the SASW Code which states:

*“Social workers respect and safeguard the rights of persons served in a relationship of mutual trust, to privacy and confidentiality in their use of the service and to responsible use of all information given and received.” (SASW Code A2)*

This standard requires context for application. For example, how does this apply to a social worker who is conducting a child custody evaluation or a report called by the court for sentencing purpose? Although the Code does not specifically address reports by the courts, it would still be ethically appropriate for the worker to follow the guidelines and inform the parties how the information that is disclosed will be used.

This is also a good opportunity to debunk the myth of ‘absolute’ confidentiality in practice. There may be instances which would warrant an escalation of the case to the relevant authorities despite the rights of clients to self-determination. For example, this would take place in a situation where the client is posing a threat to his/her own safety or that of others. Moreover, the current body of literature increasingly seems to postulate that practitioners move away from the minefield of debates surrounding ‘absolute’ versus ‘conditional’ confidentiality and instead acknowledge explicitly and honestly to their clients that confidentiality cannot be guaranteed, but that their information would be treated with respect.

### When Ethical Obligations Conflict



There can also be a situation when ethical obligations can conflict with each other or with other considerations. For example, what if an agency requires the social workers to ask prospective clients certain questions and, depending on the response, deny the client’s request based on a specific orientation? Under the Code, a worker is supposed to follow the agency policy because she is committed to complying with the policy of the employing agency. And yet under the Code, a worker is also not supposed to discriminate. Thus, the worker is caught in a bind as to whether they should follow the agency policy (which means “discrimination”), or to refuse to discriminate against the client. When faced with conflicting obligations, a worker may need to prioritize one ethical obligation over another. What usually happens is that a worker would usually avoid such a dilemma by not working in an agency that is likely to have specific practices running counter to his or her own values and hence avoid conflicting ethical obligations.

Although much of the Code focuses on work with clients, some sections apply to conduct outside of the social worker’s role, for example

*“Social workers refrain from any personal behaviour which damage the functioning of the profession, in accordance with the values stated in this Code.” (SASW Code D4)*

Consider a social worker who posts disparaging remarks about the poor on social media. Although posting comments on one's personal pages is a form of private conduct, this can bring disrepute to the profession whose mandate is to help the poor and vulnerable.

Social work, like a number of helping professions, requires the substantive use of self within the client-worker dyadic relationship. Thus, in light of the requirements of the self in the engagement process, social work is also one of the unique professions whereby the personal self needs to continually grow and develop in tandem with the professional self. This in turn would help to foster better congruency in the practitioner across private and professional spheres. Additionally, it would reinforce the vital need for supervision and the development of reflective practice.

When faced with ethical challenges, broaching the topic with our colleagues and supervisors would help us make sense of what is the best approach to take. There is a group of social workers who are drawing up guidance on various scenarios as a resource to support social workers when faced with complying with the code of ethics. Their commentaries can be accessed via a regularly updated website: <http://ethicalsocialwork.wix.com/ethicalsocialwork>.

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