

## Chapter 4

### Relations Between Social Workers

#### Introduction

1. Difficulties between colleagues
  - a. The ideal
  - b. Questions of competence
  - c. Failures to communicate
2. Less than the ideal
3. Relations with other professionals

#### Questions

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- (1) The fifth step of the method of tracking harms requires that we consider how it is that we are going to do what we have decided we ought to do. The issue it raises of the manner of our doing what we ought to do applies to the process of reaching a decision as well as to doing what we have decided, through that process, we ought to do. When that process best involves communicating with another, we need to consider how to speak to the other person. Confronting someone is not the same as enquiring of someone. Examine the ethical aspects of an example from your own experience of a good conversation. How did you each treat the other? For instance, did you listen? Did you interrupt? Etc.
- (2) What deference if any ought we -- ethically -- to give education and experience in coming to a decision about what we ought to do? Consider what appear to be the two extremes regarding how Margaret might respond to the boy's therapist in *4.1 Peers?*. She might do exactly what he says, or she might ignore him completely. Could either response be correct? If so, why; if not, why not? What response would be ethically correct? Why?
- (3) Why ought we to talk a case through with others when we can?
- (4) Judging whether someone is competent at something can be difficult to do. Take what may seem a simple example such as throwing a ball. Should we judge competence in terms of the effect -- the ball gets where it had to go? In terms of manner -- the ball is thrown gracefully? In terms of how well the thrower understands what it is to throw a ball -- and so is self-conscious about how to improve a throw? Now apply the same model to social work practice. Are we to judge social workers in terms of the results they obtain? The manner in which they go about proceeding with their work? Their capacity to understand why they are doing what they are doing and why things go wrong when they go wrong? Or some combination of all three? And if it is the latter, what counts the most ethically -- and why?

- (5) Someone who was competent may become incompetent through failing to learn new skills, or by becoming too jaded in the use of old skills, and so on. Suggest ways to ensure that social workers are competent and remain competent. It might help here to compare the situation of social workers with that of teachers. How are we to ensure that they are competent and remain competent?
- (6) In regard to (5), how are we to ensure that social workers are competent and remain competent without intruding on the privacy of their relationship with their clients? Without insulting them by presuming that they have become incompetent and must prove their competence?
- (7) A single failure can be explained away as a lapse, but we take a pattern of failures as a sign of a deeper problem. With this in mind, examine Mary's reaction to the judge's decision in *1.2 Dancing the legal dance*. Would she be justified in trying to change the system? If so, why? If not, why not?
- (8) When we are faced with a problematic colleague or employee, as Betsey was in *4.4 Bending over backwards*, we need to follow a set procedure to ensure that we are treating the colleague or employee fairly. Lay out the steps of the procedure and explain for each of them why they are essential if we are to be ethical.
- (9) Lay out the four ways in which we can fail to reach agreement even when we communicate well with colleagues. Taking each of the four ways, use cases from the book or from your own experience in which a failure to reach agreement occurred and show how agreement could have been reached. In other words, how do we rectify such failures to reach agreement?
- (10) As *4.5 Value Judgments* illustrates, cases of spousal abuse can be particularly difficult for social work colleagues. These are the sorts of cases where there is likely to be much disagreement about the means to achieving an acceptable end. Lay out the alternative ways we might proceed to handle a case of spousal abuse and then lay out and assess their strengths and weaknesses.
- (11) One of the problems Betsey had in *Bending over backwards* was that her counterpart at Jonathan's former agency was not open with her about Jonathan's problems. How can someone like Betsey ensure either that such a situation does not arise or that, if it does, she can double-check? In other words, what procedures might we put in place to ensure that such a consequence as hiring a problematic employee because of a former supervisor's recommendation does not occur?
- (12) What is harassment? Explain why a single act is sometimes sufficient to justify harassment and sometimes not.
- (13) *4.7 Lying about salaries* illustrates well the problems created by keeping private information about about such an agency matter as salaries. But making public such information has its downsides too. Explain what the problems are and then consider ways to prevent or mitigate the problems that arise from disclosure or from confidentiality. For instance, would it help for the director to turn this problem over

to the employees, asking for their solution as to how to mitigate the harms arising from the inequities?

- (14) We have considered cases where a social worker has had professional relations with a psychiatrist and with teachers. Describe a case -- real or imagined -- that could arise between a social worker and some other kind of professional and then consider whether the nature of the other professional makes a difference as to how the social worker ought to work to resolve the problem. Does it make any difference, for instance, whether the other professional is a psychiatrist or a teacher? If so, why? If not, why not? What does make a difference, that is, if anything?