

# History and Evolution of Research Ethics in Social Work

Aakarshan Chauhan

Ph.D. Scholar, Tata Institute of Social Sciences

**Abstract:** Social work as a profession is young and evolving. The impact of the other disciplines in its evolution is evident. Researchers, scholars and academicians have to adhere to ever-evolving norms laid down in the form of codes. Profession to stand on its own and create a mark must theorize, which is possible through quality research. A robust study is only feasible if the research is ethical. Numerous factors can impact an investigation if the researcher is ignorant of the fundamentals of ethics. The assignment attempts to cover the evolution of ethics in social work and aspects that a researcher needs to follow while working on research.

**Keywords:** Ethics, social work, theorization



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## Introduction

Social Work emerged as a profession in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, and ethics have been its integral part since the beginning. The domain has been ever-evolving, and so have the codes guiding professionals. Ethics, as a concept, enables a professional to reflect on one's conscience and belief system, which promulgates them to be truthful and honest with their work (Banks, 2008). This very aspect is undoubtedly required to be followed by all professionals. Still, the onus on Social Workers is more, as the core values of social work define striving for the vulnerable and marginalized to ensure equality and justice. (Social Work Educators' Forum Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 1997). The literature on Social Work ethics is evolving and is coming in from countries that have recently started the social work practice (Banks, 2008).

As a first-person, Mary Richmond attempted to codify ethics for social work (Reamer, 1998). The evolution of ethics in Social Work has evolved post series of developments in the West (Hugman, 2003). This evolution was predominantly a result of social/religious worldviews that prevailed in that period. Scholars raised questions on the philosophy of earlier Greek and Roman philosophers, after which a series of developments in medieval European society's thought process. These changes brought in the thoughts led to the emergence of modernity – the age of reasoning and liberal ideas, which was associated with industrial development. The characteristics of 'modernity' which are inherently focused on individualism, rationalism and universalism, paved the way for ethics in professions. Modernist thought believes in the potential of a person's reason to determine truths that apply to all classes of subjects through correct methods (Lyon, 2005). Today, thoughts and ideas shaping modernity are under question. The advent of 'post-modernity' is marked by fragmentation, plurality and diversity (Hugman, 2003).

## History and Evolution

Medical and bioethics significantly impact the emergence of social work ethics. With this, there has been a paradigm shift in creating ethic codes, charters and pledges for social workers. I believe that ethics were an inherent part of the profession; it was just the process of formalization that was pending from the origin of social work as a profession. Ethics is required in a discipline when its domain grows and stakeholders' expectations are associated with the field. Hence, this was the codification of ethics in the social work profession rather than its emergence. Reamer (1998) says in doing so, "the profession spanned four significant periods; the morality period, the values period, the ethical theory & decision-making period, and the ethical standards & risk management" (Banks, 2008).

The *morality phase* started when social work became a formal domain in the late 19<sup>th</sup> Century. Practitioners during this time emphasized the client's morality rather than ethical concerns in social work or social workers. This initial phase focused on clinical care and support for the poor, focusing on a case rather than community or society. The prevailing idea among practitioners was to extend support for the ones who required individualistic attention than the ones who were accomplished (Dunlap, 1993; Reamer, 1998). It was during the early 1920s when deliberations started on bringing ethics in a formalized way by some educators of social work and marked the beginning of the second phase, termed the *value phase*. In this era, scholars started writing on the importance of ethical standards in the social work profession and provided a rationale for its codification. This phase which lasted for over half a century played an instrumental role in shaping the domain for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. During this phase, the American Association of Social Workers adopted codes of social work ethics in 1947. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) adopted its first code of ethics in 1960 (Reamer, 1998). This phase existed till the 1970s and focused on the concerns related to social justice, social reforms and civil rights. The global economic and political turmoil after the two world wars majorly shaped the outlook of professionals (Reamer, 1998). Social workers now started questioning the injustice prevalent in society. The focus was not on an individual but community and society at large. The scope of work extended with this profession and became a popular choice amongst the masses, which led to the influx of new professionals. This increased scope made formulating ethical guidelines all the more important (Dunlap, 1993; Reamer, 1998; Butler, 2002).

The third phase, which started in the late 1970s and early 1980s, witnessed remarkable inventions and contributions in science & technology and medical/bio-medical fields. The creation of television led to telecasting events directly to people's homes and played a vital role in exposing many ethical concerns in various professions. Medical ethics were also under scrutiny. However, medical practitioners made careful, orderly attempts to work on principles, ideas, and representations of moral beliefs, or ethics, to address genuine concerns faced by professionals. In the preceding decades, the debate around the formulation of ethics was abstract, considered complex, and primarily governed by commentators (meta-ethics). Reports of unethical practices were on the rise, making the practitioners decide to rewrite the existing ethical guidelines. The social work profession was not untouched. This period saw a surge in the literature on ethics, challenges of professionals and philosophy around ethics. Reamer (2013) mentions that the social work books that came out during this phase were remarkable in this regard: "*Ethical Decisions for Social Work Practice* (Loewenberg & Dolgoff, 1982), *Ethical Dilemmas in Social Service* (Reamer, 1982), and *Ethical Dilemmas in Social Work Practice* (Rhodes, 1986)".

The most recent period in the development of ethics has seen the emergence of understanding among social workers about the ethical concerns in the social work profession. It saw the ratification of the code of ethics by NASW in 1996. India, too during this time Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Social Work Educators' Forum (SWEF) deliberated on the formulation of ethical codes for social work students and professionals (Banks, 2008). SWEF members started reflecting on social workers' issues and concerns at the beginning of the early 1990s. To prepare a draft of the code and ethics committee under the chairpersonship of Ms Lata Narayan

was formed. With support from members like Dr Murli Desai and Ms Jeroo Billimoria, after considerable deliberations, discussions and multiple drafts final sixth draft was formalized in the form of a code of ethics for social workers (Social Work Educators' Forum Tata Institute of Social Sciences, 1997).

### **Ethics in Research**

The ethical concerns that have implications in social work research span multiple arenas. Social work research aims to find new techniques, interventions, and people-centric solutions (Banks, 2008). Ethical concerns start from the very point a researcher conceptualizes a research idea and remain forever with the researcher. There are multiple opposing 'worldviews' and various vested interests; supporting one person/community may limit the rights of another, and the protection of any particular section may involve the attachment of stigma to someone else (Butler, 2002). Therefore, a researcher must have a clear research ethics framework (Sutar, 2022). A researcher must address fundamental questions about autonomy, confidentiality, privacy, consent, assent (in the case of children), maximizing benefits, minimizing risk for the participants, and respect, rights and dignity of the participants (Sutar, 2022). A researcher must ensure academic integrity and avoid getting involved in any activity that may alter the research results for any particular reason or benefit (Dodamani, 2022).

*Research integrity*; research is a tool to find solutions to the intricate issues prevailing in society. Any dilution of the sanctity of research will lead to problems in society, as research is directly related to innovation and growth. The researcher's responsibility is to ensure that the research integrity is always maintained. There are cases where one false depiction of the facts has led to dire consequences for the researcher. The motive to initiate a study must be to enhance knowledge and solution-mining an issue rather than any personal ulterior reasons. Currently, cases of cheating, fraud, bribery, fabrication of data, ghostwriting, publishing in predatory journals and plagiarism are on the rise, and it is the responsibility of all scholars, researchers and academicians to stop the increase of such malpractices for the betterment of the academia (Butler, 2002; Howard & Garland, 2015; Dodamani, 2022; Sutar, 2022).

*Research Ethics Framework* is essential as it lays down the foundation of how research is planned, with a probable impact that it can have on the participants and whether the research is doable. Ethic framework in research span three significant aspects: research questions & methodology, respecting and protecting research participants & communities, and implications & implementations of the research findings. The research questions & methodology are the most important of all that defines research. It is not that others are not important. It's just that this is an initial indicator of the path research shall proceed. The research question and methodology lay downs the foundation of a study. It entails asking what research the question is, what knowledge gap it will fill, why it is essential for the community, how the present method will benefit others, and what harm shall arise in its absence. This aspect forces the researcher to ground the research and make it robust. It helps avoid potential harm to the participants by engaging in anything irrelevant. The ethical framework provides insight for the researcher to examine how methodology and proposed analysis are appropriate for the research questions and how research designs will enable the best possible answers for the questions (Sutar, 2022).

### **Conclusion**

Social Work as a profession is 100 years old, which is a relatively new domain compared to natural sciences, and other social sciences. The ethics in a social work research are still evolving, and the introduction of new techniques of online interventions using smartphones, emails, video calls and messages has detracted from the traditional form of ethical concerns (Reamer, 2013). In addition, the emphasis of social work is currently on practice rather than developing theories. Theorization in the discipline can only happen if research is of good quality and ethically sound. Therefore, the two concerns need to be addressed simultaneously as in the

next two to three decades, and the social work profession will see enormous growth, for which preparation must start now.

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