Below the Belt: Situational Ethics for Uniethical Situations

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BELOW THE BELT:
SITUATIONAL ETHICS FOR UNETHICAL SITUATIONS

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The word "politics" generally conjures up images of smoke-filled, back rooms where unscrupulous men in shirt sleeves chew their cigars and make shady deals that serve partisan interests. But politics is neither inherently shady nor specific to back rooms. In fact, as long as society is differentiated along ethnic, sex and social class lines, politics pervades all of social life. You are involved in politics and so is your mother.

A statement or decision is political when either the content of the issue is viewed differently by people from different social groups, e.g. race, sex, age, or the decision has different consequences for different social groups, or both.[1] For example, consider the problem of unemployment among blacks and chicanos. Many of these people view the problem as lack of access to jobs in the primary economy, i.e. the large, manufacturing organizations in which workers are unionized and salaries reflect some accommodation to increases in the cost of living. Other people, largely white males who are employed, call unemployment among blacks and chicanos "lack of motivation". These two segments of society define the problem in terms of their own experience, including their special values, concerns and vested interests. That is to say, the content is viewed differently by the different people, hence, definition of the problem is a political statement. And when the people who call the problem "lack of motivation" decide to establish motivation programs, e.g. W.I.N., instead of expanding the job market, there are negative consequences for those who see their problem as lack of access to decent jobs. Thus, the decision is also political in consequence.

Moreover, since the people who call unemployment "lack of motivation" have more money than those who call it "lack of access to jobs", they are more powerful. And people who are more powerful get to impose their definition of problems and their rules for behavior on people who are less powerful because the former have greater access to resources for marketing and enforcing their rules. Less powerful people may not agree with these rules, but because they are less powerful, they cannot change them. They can, however, find ways around and under the rules, as will be demonstrated later. For now, it is sufficient to note that adults make rules for children; men make rules for women and whites make rules for blacks and chicanos.[2] The rules are based on the ruling group's values and vested interests and often have negative consequences for those outside the ruling group who may see the whole thing differently.[3] That is to say, some people obtain benefits for themselves at the expense of other people. This is an unethical situation.

Consider, for example, the old maritime rule about the captain being ethically bound to go down with the ship. Who do you think

made that one up? Captains? Their wives and children? Not likely.
Chances are that it was started by ship owners who figured that
captains who knew that they had to go down with ship would make
every effort to keep the ship afloat.. And they were right. More
captains lost their lives, but fewer ship owners lost their ships.
The ship owners benefited at the expense of the captains and their
families. This was an unethical situation. In other words, ethics
are usually functional, but only for some people - the more powerful
people. Right now, the upper and middle classes are alleviating
their energy problem by pricing gasoline beyond the purchasing
capacity of the lower class. This, too, is an unethical situation.

Consumers of social work services, especially in the public
sector, are often recipients of negative consequences in such un-
ethical situations. They are relatively powerless, and often vic-
timized. Yet, when they find ways around and under some of the rules
and ethics of the more powerful, rules that perpetuate their victimi-
zation, many of us frown upon them and denounce their strategic be-
havior as manipulative because it robs the more powerful of their
right to self-determination. This is accurate, of course. Political
tactics are manipulative, and manipulation does deprive the manipu-
lated of their right to determine their own destiny. But rules that
are functional for some and not others are also manipulative, for
they deprive those others of the right to be self-determining. So,
as Brager and Specht suggest, "For the social worker...to eschew
manipulative behavior...is to diminish even further the ability of
the disadvantaged to obtain a re-distribution of resources".4

Since social workers do not have much power in the larger
scheme of social organization, and line workers who do the actual
face-to-face work with clients do not even have much power in the
social welfare agencies, it seems reasonable to assume that the
social worker who categorically refuses to engage in behavior de-
signed to manipulate those who are far more powerful is denying her/
his clients what is frequently the only avenue to obtaining their
entitlement. In other words, rigid adherence to an a priori defi-
nition of ethical behavior is a luxury that those with limited
power can ill afford. As the late Saul Alinsky argued, "The most
unethical of all means is the non-use of any means"5 and "a means
that will not work is not a means. It is nonsense."6 Self-
righteousness is a poor substitute for helping clients when the
choice boils down to exactly these two alternatives.

Having experienced both the strides of the Sixties and the
backlash of the Seventies, it seems appropriate now, on the eve of
1980, to take moral inventory and choose or re-choose our ethical
base for social work practice in the coming decade. This paper
is one such effort. It calls for a contingency approach to ethics
and describes power tactics for use in helping client get what

they need where their interests are in conflict with the interests of the powerholders and no viable, traditionally acceptable alternatives exist.

CONTINGENCIES

When power is relatively balanced and both parties are concerned with solving problems instead of maintaining the status quo, joint problem-solving and bargaining are the strategies of choice. But, as previously indicated, this is rarely the case, because most clients of social service agencies are relatively powerless. Given this, we suggest the following ethics for determining strategies to use:

1. If a variety of viable alternatives exists for solving a particular problem, choose the least manipulative.

2. If only one alternative will work, use it.

3. When there is more than one victim, work in behalf of the one with the fewest choices and most basic, unmet needs.

4. Use power tactics only when dealing with more powerful others and only in behalf of client interest.

To illustrate these ethics in action, take the situation where a family is living in rat-infested housing and the landlord has failed to respond to requests for extermination. The social worker should first try non-manipulative strategies such as mediating the dispute between the tenant and the landlord. If this fails to bring the desired result, the social worker may appeal, through the courts, for a solution to the problem. If all such non-manipulative efforts at persuasion are not successful, then manipulation is both appropriate and in order. Even though the landlord, himself, may be the victim of increased urban taxation, housing code demands, medical bills and college expenses for his children, we can sympathize with his plight, but our primary concern would be for the tenant who has fewer alternatives. That is to say, the landlord is choosing to own property and send his children to college, while the tenant is seeking to meet far more basic needs - clean, vermin-free housing. It is for situations such as this that power tactics are necessary.

TACTICS

Within the guidelines set forth by these four ethics, many simplistic and useful tactics are available for obtaining compliance from power holders by manipulating their perception, motivation and the size and sequence of your requests.

Given that what a person sees, feels, knows and believes governs her/his behavior, manipulation of perception is a powerful tool. The power of it is demonstrated in movies that engage us to the point of evoking tears, anger and fear - all over an illusion skillfully created by sets, costumes, make-up, script, lighting and sound. In Biblical days, Gideon routed a host of Midianites by creating the illusion of a mighty army that was, in actuality, only 300 noisy men. During World War II, Rommel, the Desert Fox, held off an attack by allied forces by creating the illusion of a long line of armored tanks, ready and waiting for combat. In actuality, the tanks were nothing but wooden shams. In much the same way, a few concerned tenants, welfare mothers or unemployed black teenagers, with the help of an imaginative social worker who subscribes to situation ethics, can create the illusion of greater numbers and appear more powerful than they actually are, increasing the probability of their obtaining improved housing, more skill training, and increased job opportunities.

Besides creating the illusion of greater numbers, perception can also be manipulated so that target persons begin to doubt their own judgment and/or experience vague fear - both of which result in greater susceptibility to persuasion. For example, Charles Boyer introduced us to "Gaslight" as a strategy for leading a person to doubt the validity of her/his own judgment. In the movie of that name, a husband convinces his wife that she is losing her sanity by turning down the gas lights and denying that there is any change in the illumination of the room. For our purposes, the director of a children's institution who prides himself on "running a tight ship" may be more amenable to suggestions that he not be so rigid after a three-week "gaslight" campaign in which different staff members remind him of contradictory statements he supposedly made a day or two earlier and "must have forgotten", leading him to question his memory and worry about his inconsistency, during which time he will be more vulnerable to attempts at persuasion.

Similarly, Solomon Asch[7] long ago demonstrated the potency of what we call "Stooges Three" as a means of changing a person's perception when he presented two lines to three confederates and one naive subject and asked them to indicate aloud which of the two lines was the longer. All three confederates said the shorter was the longer and, in general, the naive person followed suit. This tactic, using group pressure to alter perception in the direction of conformity, can be used to persuade a policeman who regularly harasses teenagers at a local hangout that the gatherings are not only harmless, but beneficial in keeping the youngsters off the streets. All it takes is a campaign during which different small groups of adults walking past the hangout tell each other, within earshot of the policeman, what a wonderful idea it is for teenagers to have such a wholesome place to meet. If some adults, after

several episodes of walking past and commenting positively, can include the policeman in their conversation and ask him if he, too, doesn't agree with their opinions, the policeman may find himself saying positive things about the hangout, thereby commiting himself, in order to avoid cognitive dissonance, to a different position on the matter.

Vague fear that leads a person to compliance or susceptibility to persuasion[8] may be generated by the implied threat in "The Game of the Name" and the "Notebook Number". A government employee who is not responsive to requests for assistance may be moved to do so when asked for her/his name, title, and the name of his/her supervisor. Observing what is going on in a welfare office when a complaint is being discussed, pulling out a notebook and writing in it, creates a vague fear about who you are and what you're doing there and may lead to greater willingness to be of assistance to those requesting help at that time, just in case you are someone he/she should be concerned about such as a reporter, central office auditor, or a member of a citizen's review board.

Motivation, just as perception, can be altered through the employment of other strategies to manipulate the structure of the situation. One such strategy, "Sticks and Stones", involves defamation of character. For example, in an effort to get a reluctant rehabilitation counselor to authorize payment for a client's dentures, the social worker can have a confederate place an anonymous phone call to the rehab counselor during which the counselor is called a racist. Shortly thereafter, the social worker calls the rehab counselor about the client's need. The rehab counselor is more likely to authorize the payment since he now feels a need to do something good. Wherever defamation of character precedes a request for help made by a person other than the name-caller, the target person is motivated to comply with the request for help in order to offset the bad feelings created by the name calling. This is true whether or not the name is related to the request, because the name calling taps into the target's storehouse of guilt whether or not he/she has actually done something for which it is appropriate to feel guilty.[9]

Another strategy for altering motivation is "The Lesser of Two Evils Routine"[10] for stretching a group norm in order to get a favorable decision for clients. It goes like this. At a staff meeting, a confederate of yours takes an extreme position about extending work hours into the evenings to accommodate clients who cannot get off work. If the majority of the staff would rather not work at night, your confederate suggests that the agency should be open every evening and on weekends. You remain silent while he argues his case with the other staff members. His extreme position

makes your later proposal for two evenings open per week more accept-able. Two evenings is seen as a compromise as well as the lesser of two evils. The success of this tactic has been demonstrated on the macro level by the way the Black Panthers made the NAACP more accept-able to the white power structure.

In a similar situation one might use the "Like Sally and John Were Saying Ploy". All you have to do is wait until two highly re-spected staff members, Sally and John, have each said something. Then, you can propose that, "Like Sally and John were saying, a lot of our clients cannot get off work during the day and need to come in at night". You then go on to propose staying open only two nights a week. Even if Sally and John had not made the exact statement they aren't likely to refuse credit for a good idea, and other staff members are likely to go along with well-respected Sally and John and accept your proposal.

A variation of this tactic is the "Next Logical Step Phenomenon".[11] Even if Sally and John had not said that clients can't come for services during the day, but they had made comments in the discussion, you could state that the next logical step following Sally and John's reasoning is to have the agency open two evenings a week. In both instances your proposal is hooked to persons with whom the others tend to agree, in-creasing the probability that it will be accepted.

Other ways to increase the likelihood that clients will receive what they need involve manipulation of size and sequence of requests which the Fuller brush man and insurance salesmen have long been using to advantage. The best known of these tactics is the "Foot In The Door Ditty".[12] It involves making a small request with no justification whatever, that is likely to be granted by the target person. Then, you make a slightly larger request which is also likely to be accepted be-cause the target person, by agreeing to the first request, begins to attribute himself with the tendency to be responsive. In the context of social work, you have two young clients having difficulty in school. You ask the teacher to stay five minutes after school to make sure these two children understand the assignments for that day. After the teacher agrees to this and has done it, you then ask her to spend twenty minutes after school tutoring them in Math, the subject they find most difficult. If it can sell brushes, it can sell help.

A related tactic has been called "The Door in the Face Maneuver". In this case, you first make a large request that is likely to be re-jected and when the target person rejects it, you immediately reduce your request considerably.[13] Given the norm of reciprocity, this tactic puts pressure on the target person to reciprocate your con-cession with a concession of his own.[14] For example, you are trying to open a halfway house for alcoholic women, recently released from the detoxification center. No funds are available for furnishings

and you approach the owner of a local furniture store hoping to get him to donate a chair for the living room. The first thing you would do is ask for a contribution of an entire living room suite. When he says no, you immediately ask if he will donate a chair. Your reduced request sounds like a concession which should be reciprocated by him. This being the case, he may well donate a chair; whereas, he would be less likely to donate a chair if that was what you had asked for first.

YOU

Imagine that you are a social worker at the state public assistance office. If you visit the home of an AFDC recipient and discover that her husband is living there, what will you do? Agency regulations require that you report this so that the AFDC checks can be stopped. Will you comply with the agency regulation? Will you fail to report this so that the family can continue to get the check they so obviously need?

Imagine you are a social worker at the public housing authority. If the units are poorly maintained, and individual tenant requests for needed repairs, as well as your own requests on their behalf are continually ignored, will you organize the tenants and apply pressure to the housing authority even if the housing authority has expressly forbidden its social workers to take part in such activities? Will you sit on your ethics and comply with the housing authority's prohibition, thereby keeping your clients powerless?

Add to these moral dilemmas your own plight. On the one hand, if you violate rules and get caught ten times, five times, or even once - you may be denied promotion, salary increments, or worse: you may be fired. And the job market for social workers is not exactly wide open. On the other hand, if you comply with agency rules that run counter to your client's best interest in order to protect yourself, that is, if you place your self-interest ahead of the best interest of your clients, then you join the ever-mounting conspiracy against the poor. What will you do?

Perhaps you will say "What's the use?", drop out of social work and go into business or join a religious movement. Perhaps in order to stick with social work you will tell yourself that such situations are not common or are not common in your particular practice context. Perhaps your wish will come true. Or perhaps you will make it come true by redefining client interest so that it is consistent with agency rules.

If you do allow yourself to recognize the dilemmas and if you do not run from them, surely you will feel angry, outraged, even put upon. Such situations are not ennobling. They are not likely to make you more open to the needs of your clients. You will have to work at staying open despite the conflict of interest between you and them. But it

is possible to do. It is possible to face the dilemmas, feel the feelings they evoke in you, wrestle with the unpleasant choices, make the tough decisions and bear the consequences of them - not easy, but possible. Clearly social work is not for the faint-hearted.

FOOTNOTES

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7. Soloman E. Asch, "Effects of Group Pressure Upon the Modification and Distortion of Judgements", in Heinz Guetzkow (Ed.) Groups, Leadership and Men (Pittsburgh: Carnegie Press, 1951). Using different colors instead of different line lengths and a minority of stooges instead of a majority, similar effects were found by S. Moscovici, E. Lage and M. Naffrechoux, "Influence of a Consistent Minority on the Responses of a Majority in a Color Perception Task", Sociometry, Vol. 32 (1969), p. 365.

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