Evaluating the Attitudes of Social Workers Toward Ethical Dilemmas in Turkey

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ABSTRACT

Objective: The social work profession, by its very nature, interacts with people with many different characteristics. Individuals are directly or indirectly affected by the decisions made by the social worker. Social work is one of the branches of service that aims to provide social justice and social peace for individuals, families, groups, and communities. The probability of encountering ethical dilemmas in the service models offered by social workers is quite high. The values and ethical principles of the social work profession are very important for social workers to solve this dilemma. In this study, it is aimed to determine the attitudes of social workers toward the ethical dilemmas they encounter within the ministries they work.

Methods: Social workers of active duty in 81 provinces were included. It was designed in the general survey model. In the study, The Nathanson and Giffords Social Work Ethics Scale and a sociodemographic information form prepared by the researchers were used. The collected data were analyzed with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences program.

Results: The results indicated that women have higher dilemma-solving skills than men; similarly the professionals working in the Ministry of Health have higher dilemma-solving skills than those working in the Ministry of Family and Social Services. In addition, it was observed that these skills decreased as the age and years of experience increased.

Conclusion: In the light of the results, recommendations are made for a broader range of ethics education and training for social workers, and the importance of keeping an updated professional knowledge through academic activities is emphasized.

Keywords: Social work, social worker, ethics ethical dilemma, ethical decision-making

Introduction

Rapid urbanization and industrialization process caused social problems. They have been effective in the formation of social work.[1] Social work is a profession and an academic system that approaches the problems of micro, mezzo, and macro groups in a holistic manner, acting with an "individual within the environment" perspective.[2] It aims at revealing the strengths of individuals, increasing their welfare level, and working to increase the social functionality of individuals. The aim of the profession is to eliminate social injustice and to provide professional support to groups with low social functionality. Social work emphasizes the uniqueness of individuals. It approaches people with a "rights-based" perspective based on knowledge, skills, and values. Professional values and ethical principles are formed in accordance with the nature of the profession. They form the backbone of the ethical decision-making process of social work intervention plans. For this reason, it is important for social workers (SWs) to be well trained in professional values and ethical principles. Social workers are highly likely to encounter ethical dilemmas in the public institutions. Other possible causes of ethical dilemmas could be the ethical perception of the institutions and the cultural values and problems of their clients. That is why high problem-solving skills and devoted working principles are required of SWs.[3]

What Is Social Work

Social work is the ultimate result of improving the individual's conditions within the scope of the social rights of the client.[4] In other words, social work is expressed as "the art of saving people from sorrow."[5] In this context, social work should be able to build the most appropriate

environmental and social factors for the individual to realize themselves. The social work profession focuses to the groups with disadvantages. The multidimensional nature of social work allows SWs to make systematic interventions in different fields. Social workers work in many areas that change and concern social life such as family, children, women, the elderly, health, youth, and poverty. Social workers are a professional group that accepts that the care and protection of disadvantaged groups is the responsibility and duty of the state. Social work provides public services for the subculture of the society in a systematic and regular manner that will ensure the protection of individuals, solve their problems, and contribute to the development of society.[6]

What Is Ethics

Ethics guides individuals in defining which attitudes and behaviors are acceptable in social life. It is an important compass in the regulation of interpersonal relations.[7] It is a branch of philosophy that describes the moral rules or behavior patterns of people and societies.[8] According to Aristotle, ethics is defined as "the art of living well and happily."[9] In other words, ethics is the art of coexistence of people with different values, beliefs, and cultures.[7]

Ethics emerged as a result of morality and values, emphasizing the ideal and the abstract. From this point of view, ethics is more cosmic and philosophical than moral rules.[10] On the other hand, while moral rules are affected by the cultural values, ethics can appear in a more universal way. It questions the qualitative reasons for accepting an ethical action or situation as morally right. It covers the liabilities that a behavior includes toward the individual and their conscientious values and obligations. For this reason, the behavior of the individual toward others is also included in the scope of ethics. However, whether a behavior is ethical or not depends on one's relationship with one's own conscience and values. Thus, ethics appears as a relative concept.

Even though the social environment affects ethics, it is separated from moral rules by including universal qualities and values. On the other hand, Şengör argues that ethical principles are not objective and that individuals evaluate ethical principles within their own conscientious value systems.[11] The application of ethics can produce different truths in the face of different events according to the time, place, and the individual's own internal factors. From this point of view, ethics is not to tie the truth to a purpose or rule but to evaluate it through the filter of reasoning.[11] Individuals with logic and will should be able to make the right choices and take responsibility for the choices they make. In this respect, ethical principles can be defined as a set of systematic rules that

- deal with the actions of individuals,
- regulate these behavior patterns by laws depending on social moral rules and values,
- are aware of public conscience and authority, and
- regulate individual and social relations.[12]

Social Work and Ethics

Social work is established based on knowledge, skills, and value index. The process of transferring the social work into practice takes place within the value index framework. The value-based nature of social work constitutes the main structure of the profession.[13,14] Every profession must have ethical boundaries in order to increase the welfare of the society, to provide better and qualified service, and to receive service in a manner worthy of human dignity. Professional ethics is defined as the set of principles that regulate and direct the behavior of the professionals and draw boundaries on how their behavior should be.[15] It is a general necessity for a professional group to have standards of expertise and to establish ethical principles.[16] The National

Association of Social Workers (NASW) mentions 6 basic ethical responsibility areas:

1. clients,
2. colleagues and other professionals,
3. practice environment,
4. professionalism,
5. the social work profession, and
6. society.[17]

From this point of view, civil servants employed in public offices are required to comply with ethical principles and values in the public sector and to determine solution strategies appropriate to their professional values when faced with ethical dilemmas. The fact that the members of the profession adhere to the ethical codes drawn with a certain limit plays an important role in making ethical decisions. From this point of view, ethical principles and codes act as a guiding compass in the decision-making process. It is important for professionals to adopt and assimilate these principles and values and to reduce the possibility of unethical behavior. To put it briefly, the main purpose of ethical principles and codes is to protect the client system and to ensure that the profession reaches a certain standard level.[18] The main ultimate goal is to minimize the possibility of encountering unethical behaviors, especially for the disadvantaged groups. At this point, it is vital that the professionals provide services within the framework of ethical principles in order not to harm the clients again.

Ethical Dilemma

Ethical dilemmas may occur in shaping the boundaries and relations between the professional staff and the group they work with during the stage of fulfilling their professional duties and responsibilities. Social workers experience ethical dilemmas between which role they will choose in a case management process or between their professional life and values and norms in daily life.[19] Examples of this can be an emotional or social bond with the client system due to being a member of that group or establishing complex relationships including gifts and/or debts.[20,21]

Methods

The main purpose of this research is to examine the attitudes of SWs against the ethical dilemmas they encounter. These SWs are professionals who have received basic education in the field of social work and are employed within the related ministries. For this purpose, the following questions were formed:

- Do the Nathanson and Giffords Social Work Ethics Scale (NGES) scores of SW differ according to their gender?
- Do the NGES scores of SW differ according to their age groups?
- Do NGES scores differ according to the education levels of SW?
- Do NGES scores differ according to job durations of SW?
- Do the NGES scores of SW differ according to the ministry they work for?
- Do the NGES scores of SW differ according to where they live?

Quantitative research method was used in the research. In quantitative research, variables are examined by measuring them numerically. By taking a certain sample from the universe, it is predicted that the sample's detected opinion represents the universe.

Sample

The sample of the study consisted of 440 SWs who worked actively in the social work field. The online research link was shared in applications such as WhatsApp, telegram, Instagram, and Twitter with the convenience sampling method.

Data Collection Tools

In the study, a Sociademographic Information Form and the NGES were used to collect data.

Sociodemographic Information Form

The researchers created the form. It consisted of 8 questions: age, gender, education level, work experience, ministry of employment, unit, place of residence, and working disadvantaged group.

Nathanson and Giffords Social Work Ethics Scale

The scale was created by Nathanson et al to evaluate the ethical decision-making process of SWs.[22] It was adapted into Turkish by Artan et al.[23] The original 5-point Likert-type scale consists of 18 items, in the range of 1-5 points ("1—Strongly Disagree" and "5—Strongly Agree"). Reverse coding is required for questions 3, 9, 12, and 18. A total score of 18-36 points mean very low, 37-54 points low, 55-72 points medium, and 73-90 points high ethical dilemma-solving skills.[23] The reliability coefficient of the scale was 0.73.[22]

As a result of the adaptation study, the second and the fourth items were removed and the Turkish scale consisted of 16 items. Items 2, 7, 10, and 16 require reverse coding. The scores can vary between 16 and 80. For this version of the scale, 16-32 points were considered as very low, 33-48 low, 49-64 medium, and 65-80 high ethical dilemma-solving skills. The reliability coefficient of the Turkish scale was 0.73.[23] In the current study, the reliability coefficient of the scale was determined as 0.601.

Data Analysis

The research is a cross-sectional study in the general survey method. The NGES and Sociodemographic Information Form were applied to the participants who had an equal chance of entering the sample. Statistical Package for the Social Sciences 25.0 (IBM SPSS Corp.; Armonk, NY, USA) program was used to evaluate the data. The significance levels were based on $P < .05$ or $P < .01$. Skewness–kurtosis (skewness–kurtosis) values were used to evaluate whether the obtained data showed a normal distribution.

After a normal distribution was determined, parametric tests were used. In line with the research questions, independent groups t-Test and analysis of variance (ANOVA) test were used for between-group analysis.

Ethical Aspect of Research

Prior to the research, ethics committee approval was obtained from Istanbul University Social and Human Sciences Ethics Committee at the meeting dated 21/11/2022 and numbered E-74555795-050.01.04-543281. In this study, the participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the way the data is used, the duration of its storage, and the information that the data will remain confidential. Their informed consent was collected before their participation.

Results

Descriptive Analysis and Reliability Analysis

As a result of the descriptive analyses, the sociodemographic characteristics of the participants were found as in Table 1. The mean age of the group was 29.90 (range = 22-59). In addition, the mean of the total scale scores was 62.62 (SD = 6.16).

The current study carried out the reliability analysis for the scale. The Cronbach's alpha value was found as 0.601. The means of the scale scores in terms of various groups were examined. Small groups were combined. The results of the evaluation are as in Table 2.

Table 1. Sociodemographic Characteristics of the Participants

	Number	Percent
Sex		
Female	272	62.20
Male	165	37.80
Other	0	0.00
Education level		
Bachelor	358	66.30
Masters	75	13.90
Doctorate	4	0.70
Work experience (years)		
0-1	187	42.50
2-4	92	20.90
4-6	52	11.80
6-8	0	0.00
8-10	33	7.50
10 +	72	16.40
Ministry of employment		
Family and social services	199	36.90
Justice	52	9.60
Internal affairs	22	4.10
Youth and sports	6	1.10
Health	157	29.10
National defense	0	0.00
Place of residence		
Town	25	4.60
City	184	34.10
Big city	230	42.60
Working group		
Old	169	38.40
Disabled	189	43.00
Child	175	39.80
Martyr and veteran	37	8.40
Woman	194	44.10
Migration	66	15.00
Dependence	95	21.60
Family	173	39.30
Poverty	113	25.70
Detainee/convicted	42	9.50
Youth	51	11.60
Other	23	5.20

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Normality Analysis and Comparisons Between Groups

Before moving on to the analysis, it was evaluated whether the data showed a normal distribution. To this end, skewness–kurtosis (skewness–kurtosis) values were used. As a result, the skewness value of the scale was −0.318 (standard error = 0.118) and the kurtosis value was

Table 2. Scale Scores of the Groups

Group	Mean	SD	Range
Woman	63.34	5.788	16-80
Male	61.55	6.525	
License	62.54	6.236	
Graduate	63.22	5.637	
Family and social services	61.70	6.51	
Health	63.51	5.946	
Other ministries	63.39	5.197	
Big city	63.08	5.560	
City-town	62.11	6.738	
SD, Standard Deviation.			

Table 3. Independent *t*-test Results of Scale Scores by Gender

Scale	Groups	N	Mean	SD	t	df	P
NGES	Female	264	63.34	5.788	2.959	423	.003
	Male	161	61.55	6.525			

NGES: Nathanson and Giffords Social Work Ethics Scale, SD: Standard Deviation, df: Degrees of Freedom.

1.538 (standard error = 0.236). According to George and Mallery, the fact that these values are between 2.0 and −2.0 is sufficient to accept that the data are normally distributed.[24]

The independent sample *t*-test was used to make comparisons between genders. As a result, it was seen that women ($M = 63.34$, SD = 5.788) had higher scores than men ($M = 61.55$, Ss = 6.525) (t (423) = 2.959, $P = .003$) (Table 3).

For the educational status evaluation, the master's and doctoral groups were combined (the "graduate" group) because there were only 4 people in the doctorate group. Results showed that there was no significant difference between the graduate group ($M = 63.22$, Ss = 5.637) and the undergraduate group ($M = 62.544$, Ss = 6.236) (t (423) = −0.879, $P = .380$).

In terms of work experience, group differences were evaluated with 1-way ANOVA. As a result, it was determined that there were significant differences between the groups (F (4, 420) = 2.573, $P = .037$) (Table 4). Post hoc evaluations showed that the significant difference was due to the "2-4 years" group ($M = 63.73$, SD = 6.013) and the "10 and above" group ($M = 60.74$, SD = 7.598).

One-way ANOVA was used to examine whether the scale scores differ in terms of the ministries. Considering the number of groups, it was decided to make the comparison between the groups of "Ministry of Family and Social Services," "Ministry of Health," and "Other Ministries." As a result, significant differences were found between the groups (F (2, 421) = 4.432, $P = .012$) (Table 4). Post hoc analysis showed that this difference was between the Ministry of Family and Social Services ($M = 61.70$, SD = 6.517) and the Ministry of Health ($M = 63.51$, SD = 5.946). When the scores were examined in terms of place of residence, there were no significant difference between the groups (F (2, 424) = 1.718, $P = .181$).

The relationship between the scores and the age of the participants was examined by Pearson's correlation analysis. A significant negative correlation was found between the 2 variables ($r = −0.135$, $P = .005$). This result means that as age increases, the ability to solve ethical dilemmas decreases.

Discussion

In this study, it was aimed to examine the ethical dilemma-solving skills of SWs. When the data are examined, it is seen that the average of ethical decisions of social workers is at a moderate level. This finding is

Table 4. Significant Analysis of Variance Results

Source	Sum of Squares	df	Mean Square	F	P
Working year					
Intergroup	381.374	4	95.343	2.573	.037
Ingroups	15 563.511	420	37.056		
Employed ministry					
Intergroup	346.061	2	164.324	4.432	.012
Ingroups	15 591.713	421	37.076		

df: Degrees of Freedom.

similar to some NGES studies conducted with social work students.[25,26] On the other hand, it differs from other studies conducted with SWs that have low levels.[27,28] The moderate or low level of responses of SWs to ethical dilemmas indicate that they experience contradictions to the dilemmas they encounter in their cases.

It has been determined that more women participated in the study than men did. In addition, women have the ability to produce solutions to ethical dilemmas at a higher rate than men do. This is in line with some studies.[29,30] This difference was related to women's self-perception being more related to their relations with other individuals. Moreover, the care shown to others plays a more important role in the personality development of women.[31,32] However, there are also studies showing that women and men do not differ in finding solutions to ethical dilemmas.[33,27]

It was determined that as the education level of the participants increased, their ethical dilemma-solving skills increased, but the difference was not significant. In the Massey study, it was determined that SWs with an undergraduate degree had higher ethical dilemma-solving skills than the ones with a graduate degree.[28] Aguilar and Williams stated that these skills do not increase significantly despite the increase in the education level, and that the undergraduate education includes courses on ethics significantly more than the master's education.[34] It is concluded that the increase in the education level does not increase the ethical dilemma-solving skills of SWs. At this point, which skills (activating moral imagination, developing analytical skills, revealing moral obligation, personal responsibility, responding to ethical debates and uncertainty, etc.) are tried to be developed in ethics education is important.[35]

It was found that as the years of work increased, ethical dilemma-solving skills decreased. Social workers who worked for 2-4 years showed higher ethical-solving skills than experts who worked for 10 or more years. Similarly, it is observed that the age and ethical dilemma-solving skills of SWs are negatively correlated. Reamer attributes the deficiencies of SWs who spend longer time in the profession to their professional training time period.[35] It was when ethics education was not an important and mandatory component of the curriculum.[35] On the other hand, in another study, SWs with longer years of experience presented a more rational approach to conflicts in ethical principles and values rather than being rules based, while novice SWs focused on their knowledge.[29] The discussion was that they experience insecurity in integrating and are more inclined to act according to the "book." In addition, it is stated that the increase in age and work duration may make it difficult to adapt to technological social changes, updated ethical education approaches, and ethical dilemmas that have moved to different dimensions.[27]

It is seen that the working groups of the participants are concentrated in women, people with disabilities, children, family, and the elderly, the areas of martyr/veteran, youth, and prisoner/convict are less dense. The majority of the participants work in the Ministry of Family and Social Services and Health. When the ethical dilemma-solving skills are compared according to the ministries, a differentiation emerges between the Ministry of Health and the Ministry of Family and Social Services. This difference may be related to the fact that Ministry of Family and Social Services is the oldest institution in the field of social work in Turkey. It was transformed from the Social Services and Child Protection Agency and took its current form. It has long-used regulations in the fields of children, people with disabilities, elderly, etc. The Ministry of Health is a relatively new ministry for the employment of SWs. It can be deduced that the experts working in the Ministry of Health produce more comfortable solutions to ethical dilemmas

without being limited by the newly formed legislations. Finally, it was determined that the region where the SWs live did not affect their ethical dilemma-solving skills. This finding is similar to the Boland study.[29]

Conclusion

Ethics has been one of the central components of social work over the past 3 decades. Due to the uniqueness of each individual in social work, each social work practice has its own uniqueness. However, the ethical rules that determine the framework of the practice are a part of social work as in every profession. The SW is an important component as a decision maker where these rules conflict with each other. This study aimed to examine the solution skills of SWs for the ethical dilemmas they experienced according to the institution, field and demographic variables they work in. In the light of the data obtained, the recommendations can be listed as follows:

- In this study and similar studies, it is seen that the ability to solve ethical dilemmas is at a medium or low level. Social workers working with disadvantaged groups need to be active in finding solutions to the ethical dilemmas they experience in order to provide social justice and to provide services worthy of human dignity. Considering that there are no clear dynamics of social work education in Turkey, there is a need for practical knowledge as well as theoretical knowledge in the ethics training of SWs. Ethics education needs to be included in the courses related to the field of application such as women, children, the elderly, and the people with disabilities.
- Social changes and emerging new social problems prevent the realization of social work in a static structure. Therefore, the need for SWs to adapt to the changing dynamics and to benefit from current approaches while making decisions is inevitable. Trainings, group studies, and conferences about current problems and approaches should be organized for SWs who have been working over a certain period, regardless of their field of study.

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