

# Assets and Impediments in the Use of Ethical Decision-Making Models

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Social workers must frequently navigate ethical dilemmas and decision making (DM) in daily practice. Some authors claim that DM models have limited practical utility (Banks, 2009). Others consider their use to be essential for effective practice and risk management (Reamer, 2006). DM models can encourage thoughtful, objective, and consistent responses to dilemmas rather than responses that are subjective, ungrounded, or haphazard (Gambrill, 1997; Mattison, 2000).

Dozens of DM models for are available in the health and helping professions (Cottone & Claus, 2000). Although practitioners generally react positively to DM models (D'Aprix, 2005), they also report a preference for employing intuition over existing frameworks (Gambrill, 1997). Little is known about the factors that influence adoption and use of models. As the profession of social work endorses evidence-based practices, information is needed on the conditions that promote or impede the uptake of new methodologies. Research suggests that content, perceived quality, and characteristics of the professional and practice setting affect uptake of new methods. Likewise, research in social work indicates that individual, organizational and systemic factors affect use (Manuel, Mullen, Fan, Bellamy, & Bledsoe, 2009). For example, professional issues related to legal risk and malpractice may influence the adoption of evidence-based practices (Barsky, 2009).

This study examined US practitioners' use of DM models when facing ethical dilemmas. Two-hour ethics trainings were offered free-of-charge to subjects solicited from alumni, field, agency, and education consortium mailing lists ( $N = 85$ ). Participants were trained in one of two DM models ( $n = 44$  Model 1 and  $n = 41$  Model 2). Pre- and post-session questionnaires examined participants' education, practice experience, training in ethics, intentions to utilize frameworks in future practice, and perceptions of factors that could influence model use. Subjects randomly selected from each group participated in a process evaluation of the respective models. Subjects ( $n=17$ ) kept diaries for 6 months in which they cataloged dilemmas encountered in practice, steps used in resolution of the dilemma, the elements of the model used, and the factors that influenced model use. The presentation will address the findings from training participants as well as the subset of diary keepers.

Participants had substantial practice experience ( $M=11.8$  years,  $s=8.9$ ) and diverse educational and practice backgrounds. Few (16%) reported typically using a model to guide DM. In response to the training, participants reported that they were more likely to use elements of a model to make decisions, rather than using a given model in its entirety. Workshop participants identified the following as factors that would affect model use: the time available to make the decision (40%), difficulty remembering the model (16%), and access to consultation and information (9%).