



An Analysis of Ethical Dilemmas and Countermeasures in the Process of Gerontological Social Work Services—Taking Community M in Wuhan City as an Example

Siyuan Zhang

School of Public Administration, Sichuan University, Chengdu, Sichuan, China

122099098@qq.com

Abstract. Against the backdrop of the continuous increase in aging, the development of gerontological social work is in full swing. However, in the practical process of gerontological social work, it is inevitable to face a series of ethical dilemmas, which have a series of impacts on the implementation and operation of projects. Whether the ethical issues in the practical operation process of the project can be properly solved directly affects the degree of acceptance of social work services by the elderly group, and is also related to the healthy development of the entire industry. Based on this, taking a series of events encountered in the practical work of gerontological social work in Community M of Wuhan City as examples, this article explores the possible ethical dilemmas in the service process of gerontological social work: ethical dilemmas faced by social workers themselves under different subjects, ethical dilemmas arising from the conflict between the professional value of "helping others to help themselves" and the ideology of "professional parenthood", and ethical dilemmas under multiple relationships brought about by transference and countertransference. At the same time, this article briefly analyzes the countermeasures for dealing with ethical dilemmas encountered in the service process of gerontological social work, and puts forward four types of countermeasures, namely, always adhering to the principle of protecting life, establishing a social support system for clients, strengthening the capacity building of social workers themselves, giving play to the role of social work supervision, and applying for referral services from professional institutions when necessary. It is hoped that this can provide ideas and suggestions for the development of gerontological social work in China.

Keywords: Elderly Care Social Work, Ethical Dilemmas, Social Work Practice.

1 Introduction

Introduced to China in the early 20th century, social work has evolved over a century, mirroring the nation's socioeconomic transformations and political shifts. Recent decades have seen accelerated professional growth alongside escalating ethical di-

lemmas in practice, sparking intensified debates on social work ethics. While existing scholarship on ethical challenges in elderly care social work provides theoretical foundations, practical frameworks for resolving real-world dilemmas remain underdeveloped. Though theoretical models propose conceptual solutions, the lack of empirical validation hinders the formation of mature implementation strategies. Practitioners often navigate complex, multi-layered issues—clients' resistance, fragmented knowledge systems, and inconsistent practice standards—making universal ethical guidelines elusive. Yet these very complexities highlight the urgency of systematic exploration to bridge theory and practice, ensuring ethical rigor in China's evolving elderly care landscape.

2 The Raising of the Problem

2.1 Policy Context

As an imported concept introduced from the West, social work has evolved through decades of localized development into a vital force addressing social issues and promoting harmonious development in China. Functioning as "applied sociology," it inherently interacts with contextual factors such as environmental conditions, client characteristics, and value systems during practice, inevitably generating challenges. Current Chinese social work practice reveals that ethical dilemmas have emerged as a major obstacle to both the effective delivery of professional services and the improvement of service quality. Navigating these ethical issues poses a critical test for practitioners, impacting not only service implementation and the achievement of "helping others help themselves" but also shaping the developmental trajectory of the entire profession.

Amid China's socioeconomic progress, public demands have shifted from material satisfaction to heightened expectations for spiritual fulfillment and societal adaptability[1]. The country now faces profound demographic shifts, with aging populations characterized by large scale, rapid pace, and significant regional disparities. Unlike other vulnerable groups (e.g., women, youth, or people with disabilities), older adults exhibit unique vulnerabilities: declining physical functions, diminished fluid intelligence (despite preserved crystallized intelligence), and psychological challenges stemming from health decline, role transitions, and existential anxieties. These factors not only necessitate social work interventions but also complicate service delivery[2]. While respecting clients' dignity and enhancing professional competencies are imperative, China's gerontological social work remains nascent. Practitioners confront dual barriers—technical limitations and value-based ethical dilemmas across diverse scenarios—while operating within an underdeveloped localized ethical framework. Addressing these operational and ethical challenges has become pivotal to service quality, particularly given the absence of mature indigenous ethical guidelines for elderly care social work in China. [3]

2.2 Historical Context

According to data from the China Statistical Yearbook 2024 published on the official website of China's National Bureau of Statistics, the population aged 60 and above in China reached 296.97 million by the end of 2024, accounting for 21.1% of the total population. This marks China's official transition into a "moderately aging society." With the accelerating pace of aging, older adults are undergoing a significant shift in their perceptions of elderly care, increasingly emphasizing proactive aging concepts and demanding higher-quality, innovative care services. In this context, elderly care social work is poised to become a critical component of China's elderly care industry, with social work professionals emerging as indispensable forces in shaping the new-era care service system.

The 13th Five-Year Plan for the National Development of Aging Affairs and the Construction of the Elderly Care System outlined key objectives: "cultivating a positive view of aging by guiding society to correctly recognize, actively accept, and strongly support older adults' participation in social development" and "developing elderly volunteer services through the implementation of a volunteer service registration system, encouraging older adults to engage in volunteer activities, with a target of registered elderly volunteers reaching 12% of the total elderly population by 2020." In January 2024, the General Office of the State Council issued the Opinions on Developing the Silver Economy to Enhance the Well-being of Older Adults, explicitly proposing the "exploration of incentive and evaluation mechanisms for elderly care volunteer services" and the "promotion of mutual aid elderly care models."

Advocating mutual assistance among older adults of the same or different age groups to provide elderly care services within their capacity has become an effective strategy to address the current shortage of care resources in China. The pursuit of advanced elderly care philosophies, the establishment of proactive mutual aid-based support systems, and the exploration of approaches to enhance older adults' physical health, mental well-being, and social adaptability are now critical to alleviating the challenges of population aging and empowering seniors to realize their self-worth.

3 Analysis of Ethical Dilemmas in Elderly Care Social Work Practice

3.1 Ethical Dilemmas Faced by Social Workers Across Multiple Stakeholders

To enrich the cultural and spiritual lives of elderly residents, Wuhan's Community M established a senior choir under the guidance of social workers. The choir, designated as a "flagship community program," rehearsed every Monday afternoon and evening regardless of weather conditions, demonstrating unwavering enthusiasm. During a public performance, however, conflicts arose when the community administration shortened the scheduled performance time due to logistical adjustments. Choir members strongly opposed the change, insisting on completing their original program. In unstructured interviews, participants expressed frustration: "Why cut our performance

time? Others weren't affected! This clearly reflects poor communication by the organizers. We're the ones bringing prestige to this event!"

This incident highlights tensions between institutional priorities and elderly participants' aspirations. For the seniors, choir participation represents self-actualization, and shortening stage time felt like a denial of their value. Conversely, the community administration viewed the choir not only as a recreational outlet but also as a tool for promotional visibility and organizational stability. While both parties shared overlapping goals, their differing motivations—personal fulfillment versus institutional reputation—created friction.

Similarly, elderly care social workers frequently navigate conflicts among multiple stakeholders, including older clients, their families, employing agencies, colleagues, and broader societal expectations. Despite shared overarching interests, divergent priorities among these parties often lead to ethical quandaries. For instance, balancing an older adult's autonomy with family preferences, or reconciling agency resource constraints with clients' unmet needs, forces practitioners into ethically ambiguous terrain[4]. Furthermore, when stakeholder interests clash with legal obligations, social workers face the added challenge of safeguarding all parties' rights while adhering to statutory frameworks. Such multi-layered conflicts epitomize the ethical dilemmas inherent in gerontological social work.

3.2 Ethical Dilemmas in the Conflict Between "Helping Others Help Themselves" and "Professional Paternalism"

Aunt Li from Community M in Wuhan tripped and fell while walking her dog, sustaining an iliac fracture. As a widow living in a financially constrained household, she adamantly refused hospitalization, insisting on recuperating at home. Her only son repeatedly urged her to seek medical diagnosis, but she dismissed his appeals. Unable to resolve the disagreement, the son turned to community social workers for intervention. However, their efforts faced resistance: Aunt Li downplayed her injury as "not serious," dismissed the matter as "family business," and expressed embarrassment about involving outsiders, stating, "This is a private issue—airing it publicly would bring shame. I don't need social workers meddling."

The principle of "helping others help themselves" lies at the core of social work practice, aiming to empower clients to develop autonomy rather than dependency. Client self-determination, a key ethical tenet, directly embodies this principle. It requires social workers to respect older adults' perspectives and decision-making rights, provided their choices do not jeopardize their well-being. However, practitioners sometimes adopt "professional paternalism"—overriding clients' wishes under the justification of superior expertise or perceived protection of their interests.

In gerontological social work, self-determination is permitted only under two conditions: The older adult must possess unimpaired cognitive capacity and consistent decision-making ability, and the decision's outcomes must pose no foreseeable harm to the client. [5] Yet, aging-related cognitive declines, stubborn dispositions, or rejection of beneficial advice often complicate these criteria. Social workers thus face persistent challenges in balancing respect for autonomy with protective intervention—a

tension epitomized by Aunt Li's case. Her refusal of medical care, driven by financial fears and stigma, forced practitioners to weigh her right to self-determination against potential health risks from untreated injury. This dilemma underscores the fragile equilibrium between empowering client agency and exercising professional guardianship in elderly care practice.

3.3 Ethical Dilemmas Arising from Dual or Multiple Relationships Caused by Transference and Countertransference

Granny Wang, a resident of Wuhan's Community M, lives alone with no nearby relatives and minimal social interaction, struggling with severe depressive symptoms. Social workers established a trusting relationship with her through professional methods and empathetic engagement. However, during the intervention, Granny Wang developed a strong dependency: she began inviting social workers to share meals at her home and insisted on gifting them fruits and snacks as tokens of gratitude. Despite the social workers' explanations about professional boundaries and repeated refusals, Granny Wang felt deeply rejected, exacerbating her loneliness and depression.

In elderly care social work practice, clients like Granny Wang often belong to vulnerable groups. During initial rapport-building, social workers typically engage with seniors through daily life interactions to foster trust. While this approach reduces psychological distance, it risks triggering transference (clients projecting emotional needs onto practitioners) and countertransference (practitioners' unconscious emotional responses). Such dynamics may lead to dual or multiple relationships—e.g., blending professional roles with pseudo-familial bonds—which severely compromise service efficacy.

This ethical challenge is further complicated by China's localized relational culture, where gift-giving is embedded in social interactions to affirm emotional ties. Rooted in Fei Xiaotong's concept of the "differential mode of association"—a social structure prioritizing hierarchical, context-dependent relationships—this cultural norm conflates with therapeutic transference. For instance, Granny Wang interpreted gift offerings as a culturally sanctioned expression of gratitude, while social workers perceived them as boundary violations. Such clashes between indigenous relational ethics and professional codes epitomize the unique ethical tensions in China's gerontological social work. [6]

4 Strategies to Address Ethical Dilemmas in Elderly Care Social Work

4.1 Unwavering Adherence to the Life Protection Principle

The primacy of safeguarding life—a cornerstone of legal and ethical frameworks—mandates that protecting life remains the paramount obligation in all circumstances. This principle transcends legal safeguards for the right to life, permeating social work ethics and even practices in biosecurity and disaster prevention. Only when life safety

is assured can individuals pursue personal growth and societal contributions. [7] For social workers serving older adults, prioritizing clients' physical and psychological safety is non-negotiable. Whether assisting seniors in overcoming challenges, unlocking their potential, or achieving the goal of "helping others help themselves," practitioners must recognize that life is the foundation of all rights and obligations, and its intrinsic value admits no hierarchy. Thus, the "life-first principle" must universally prevail.

4.2 Establishing Social Support Systems for Clients

To address client transference issues, establishing a robust social support system for elderly clients remains paramount. Social workers must strategically integrate resources by developing both formal and informal support structures to enhance seniors' social adaptability. [8] This involves advocating for governmental improvements in elderly protection laws and welfare systems to strengthen policy-based safeguards for this vulnerable group, alongside upgrading community infrastructure to create safe, accessible recreational spaces that encourage social interaction and integration. Guiding older adults to engage in community activities—from leisure centers to neighborhood gatherings—helps mitigate isolation while fostering peer communication. Beyond family members, neighbors emerge as critical pillars of support, particularly during emergencies when relatives are unavailable, offering practical assistance and daily companionship. Regular social exchanges with neighbors and friends not only enrich seniors' support networks but also cultivate mental resilience, contributing to holistic physical and psychological well-being. By interlacing institutional safeguards with grassroots relational ties, this approach transforms culturally rooted practices of reciprocity into sustainable mechanisms for ethical elderly care. [9]

4.3 Strengthening the Capacity Building of Social Workers Themselves

The study of ethical values is a lasting and continuous process, which runs through daily work from beginning to end and requires continuous summarization and reflection. While adhering to the correct and objective judgment standards, social workers also need to constantly summarize and conduct self-criticism of their work behaviors, continuously correct their attitudes towards service behaviors, dare to question professional practices and special ethical issues, and use an attitude of daring to deny to contribute to the improvement of the professional value system of social work. It also requires actively discussing the priority order of ethical choices during the learning process, enhancing the awareness of dilemmas, cultivating the sensitivity to ethical issues in actual work, and making better ethical choices.

4.4 Give play to the role of Social Work Supervision

Professional supervision plays a pivotal role in identifying and resolving ethical dilemmas that social workers may overlook or inadequately address during practice. Supervisors intervene in community work by critically examining challenges faced by

practitioners, offering timely corrective guidance, and facilitating discussions on complex ethical issues to inform micro-level decision-making. [10] This necessitates proactive observation of social workers' professional development, coupled with targeted education to heighten ethical awareness and preempt potential dilemmas. Through structured mentorship and reflective dialogue, supervision cultivates practitioners' capacity to navigate ethical ambiguities, ultimately elevating service efficacy and quality while reinforcing the integrity of elderly care interventions.

5 Conclusion

This study examines ethical dilemmas in elderly care social work practice through case analyses from Community M in Wuhan, exploring their causes and proposing mitigation strategies. In gerontological practice, social workers face multi-stakeholder ethical tensions—balancing client interests with community obligations while maintaining service quality. Conflicts arise between client self-determination and professional paternalism, where well-intentioned protective measures may inadvertently restrict autonomy, complicating the demarcation of client welfare. Additionally, practitioners risk compromising value neutrality and objective analysis when navigating multi-relational ethical codes. To address these challenges, social workers must uphold the life protection principle, enhance professional competencies, establish client-centered support systems, and seek referrals when necessary, while agencies should strengthen supervisory mechanisms to ensure sustainable service delivery.

As elderly care social work remains nascent in China, research on its ethical frameworks requires further empirical validation. This study acknowledges limitations—including a small sample size and potential representativeness constraints—that may affect the generalizability of findings. Future investigations should expand case diversity and refine theoretical constructs to advance ethical standardization in China's aging society.

References

1. Wang, X. (2020). Social work ethical dilemmas and coping strategies in institutional elderly care practice. *Reform and Opening*, (Z2), 64–67.
2. Liu, L. (2023). Research on ethical dilemmas in social work practice in institutional elderly care: A case study of social work practice at X Elderly Institution in Huzhou City [Master's thesis, East China Normal University]. China.
3. Dai, M. Y., & Wang, K. Q. (2023). Ethical dilemmas of client self-determination in elderly social work: A case study of a solitary elderly in a community. *Journal of Harbin University*, 44(11), 38–41.
4. Yang, M. W., & Li, Y. (2019). Analysis of ethical dilemmas and response principles in elderly social work practice. *New West*, (11), 20–21.
5. Liu, J. (2019). Ethical dilemmas and solutions in elderly social work. *Shangqing*, (32), 245–246.

6. Dong, J. (2020). Ethical dilemmas and responses in elderly social work under the context of "ritual" culture. *Journal of Jiangsu Vocational College of Engineering and Technology*, 20(1), 71–74.
7. (2017). PROTECT LIFE OR ALLOW TO DIE? PERFORMANCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN PUBLIC HEALTH WITH THE 'RABBLE'. *Trabalho*, 15(3),
8. Martin Davies. (2023). Support Systems in Social Work.
9. McFadden Paula, Moriarty John, Schröder Heike, Gillen Patricia, Manthorpe Gillian & Mallett John. (2020). Growing Older in Social Work: Perspective on Systems of Support to Extend Working Lives—Findings from a UK Survey. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 50(2), 405–426.
10. Galit Harel. (2024). Becoming a Supervisor: The Interplay Between Subjectivity and Intersubjectivity in Clinical Social Work Supervision. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, (prepublish), 1–10.

Open Access This chapter is licensed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>), which permits any noncommercial use, sharing, adaptation, distribution and reproduction in any medium or format, as long as you give appropriate credit to the original author(s) and the source, provide a link to the Creative Commons license and indicate if changes were made.

The images or other third party material in this chapter are included in the chapter's Creative Commons license, unless indicated otherwise in a credit line to the material. If material is not included in the chapter's Creative Commons license and your intended use is not permitted by statutory regulation or exceeds the permitted use, you will need to obtain permission directly from the copyright holder.

