

Weaving Ethics into Gerontology Curriculum

Maria L. Claver, PhD, MSW
CSU Long Beach, Gerontology Program

I write this article from a hotel room in Cincinnati, Ohio, where I am attending the 19th Annual Meeting of the Association for Practical and Professional Ethics. After a particularly interesting session about the ethics involved in dealing with hoarding (Koenig & Spano, 2010), I spoke with one of the presenters about the inclusion of the topic of ethics in gerontology curriculum.

It is important to consider and explicitly address ethics as an integral part of every class discussion, regardless of topic, rather than solely focusing on it during the class when the chapter on "Ethics" comes up in the assigned reading. My conference colleague and I agreed that one does not have to be an expert in ethics to be able to accomplish this educational goal.

After thinking a bit more about how one would regularly incorporate ethics into course content, I realized that the ethical decision making framework and case study presented in this afternoon's session about hoarding provided a practical, thought-provoking approach to including ethics in my curriculum.

The ethical decision making framework presented by Koenig and Spano was that of Maguire (1975) and included six questions: 1) Who is involved? 2) What are the facts of the situation? 3) Why (or what are the motivations of the decision makers)? 4) How will the decision be carried out? 5) What are the foreseeable effects? 6) What are the viable alternatives?

Although the case study in this particular conference session was about hoarding, a case study could describe just about any situation pertaining to an older adult and her family (e.g., physician assisted dying, driving and dementia, intimacy among residents in long term care institutions). Students could work individually or in small groups to use the ethical decision making framework to think through the situation presented in the case study and then bring the discussion to the larger class.

We expect that our students will behave ethically as professionals working with older adults, but rarely give them the concrete tools to systematically think through the type of ethically-challenging situations that they are likely to face from time to time in practice. The regular inclusion of ethics in our gerontology curricula will allow students to become more comfortable and confident with ethical decision making.

References:

Koenig, T. L., Chapin, R. K., & Spano, R. (in press). Using multidisciplinary teams to address ethical dilemmas with older adults who hoard. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*.

Maguire, D. C. (1975). Ethics: How to do it. In D. C. Maguire *Death by Choice* (pp. 77-114). NY: Schocken Books.