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Cover Page Footnote

The author is very grateful to the anonymous reviewers and editor whose careful editing and knowledgeable suggestions greatly improved this article.

Abstract

The motive of self-interest is the driving factor behind many situations faced by those who have chosen the human services profession. In this article, the author provides two original fact-based human service cases (one involving case work and the psychological needs related to a closed adoption and one about community organization and advocacy related to a proposed regional landfill) that can be studied and debated in social work classes. The cases reflect the double identity of contemporary social work. The questions after each case require the students to reflect on and talk about the ramifications of self-interested behavior to families and communities. Each case involves value-laden situations and ethical issues to be considered in the exploration of various courses of action. Addressing answers to the case questions should lead students to better understand themselves and the nature of their chosen profession.

Keywords: self-interest, closed adoptions, landfills, family dynamics, community activism

Consequences of Self-interested Behavior: Pedagogical Questions and Dilemmas Relating to Cases of a Closed Adoption and a Regional Landfill Proposal

Human service providers must be prepared to face a broad spectrum of situations that range from those involving individuals, families and communities. The skills required to be successful in this occupation include critical thinking, data analysis, research, problem solving and decision-making (Fauri, Wernet, & Netting, 2000; Williamson-Ashe, 2019). These skills can be taught by exposing students to the synthesizing and analyzing of real or fact-based cases (Rivas & Hull, 2004). This is especially important for generalist social work practice that recognizes the important influence of the culture and environment on actors at different levels of intervention (Packard & Austin, 2009). The following two fact-based cases tell different human stories that can be used to foster higher-order thinking and lead to increased student self-awareness and empathy towards the actors involved. The major similarity between the two cases is that the initial actions that are taken out of self-interest result in major consequences for others. One significant dissimilarity between the two is that they represent different sides of the dual identity (Brown, Livermore & Ball, 2015) of social work, case work and community advocacy. This author does not believe nor, hopefully, imply that acting out of self-interest is bad. But it cannot be denied that the consequences have domino effects and human service providers have a role in responding.

When someone acts out of self-interest that person is concerned “for one’s own advantage and well-being” (Merriam-Webster, 2007, p. 1128), basically looking out for one’s self. The idea that people innately act out of self-interest is certainly not new. Thomas Hobbes, the seventeenth-century English intellectual, philosopher and scientist who wrote *Leviathan* (Hobbes, 1957 [1651]), theorized that the natural state of man is selfishness and that individuals in pursuit of their own well-being will take advantage of others. For more discussion about the

results of self-interest, one could also go back over 100 years to the French sociologist Emile Durkheim and the Scottish economist/ philosopher Adam Smith.

Durkheim theorized in *Suicide* (1951, [1912]) and *The Division of Labor* (1933, [1893]) about the relationship between individuals' innate insatiable desires and community. For him, the community is needed to control the pursuit of self-interest (egoistic drive) because it threatened social harmony and equilibrium. The norms of social solidarity subordinated this self-interest (Vila-Henninger, 2017). Equally applicable is the Scottish economist/ philosopher Adam Smith's *The Wealth of Nations* (2007, [1776]) in which he explained the relationship between self-interest and prosperity. Self-interest to him was an important motivator for economic decisions and the creation of goods and services that can benefit many people. Market action is thus based on the norms of self-interest (Kissane, 2012; Sachweh, 2012).

Since the time these classic works were published, scholars have explored the concept of self-interest as it relates to voting for or against ballot measures (Vila-Henninifer, 2017), managing organizations (Grant & Wrzesniewski, 2010), supporting government-sponsored solutions to societal needs (Funk, 2000), setting selfish and prosocial goals (Frimer, Schaefer & Oakes, 2014) and making rational choices in criminal or political endeavors (Monroe, 1991; Petracca, 1991; Tibbetts & Gibson, 2002). The broad spectrum of literature on behavior motivated by self-interest also focuses on the more philosophical goals of pleasure obtained from the seeking of justice and fairness (Kahneman, Knetsch & Thaler, 1986; Turillo, Folger, Lavelle, Umphress & Gee, 2002;), of the pursuit of cooperation (Bolton & Ockenfels, 2000) and the enforcement of social norms (Fehr & Gächter, 2002).

While each of the following two cases commences with the self-interested behavior of one or two people, the individuals effected by this behavior find it necessary to respond in their

own best interest, but they request help from the social work profession in deciding what they want to do and how to do it. In the first case, “Jacob Warren’s Lawsuit,” an adult who was given up in a closed adoption as a newborn hired an attorney who successfully argued in court that the health of his teenage child depends on obtaining some medical information from the biological parents (the teenager’s grandparents). This might have been a ruse just to find his biological parents. The lawyer contacted one of the biological parents who must now decide what to do next with this sudden surprise interruption into his family tranquility. In the second case, “The Pullar Brothers’ Landfill Proposal,” the brothers seek economic profit by trying to convince the local residents that their taxes would go down if they voted to allow a regional landfill. A social worker is brought in to organize the opposition that consists of environmentalists and residents who did not want the landfill in their back yard.

Jacob Warren’s Lawsuit

This first case is about the opening of closed adoptions records. Since the early 1900s, most adoptions in the United States have been closed (confidential) with sealed birth certificates. This was to shield the birth mothers and the child from the stigma of “illegitimate birth” and to protect the privacy of the adoptive parents’ infertility (Farr, Grant-Marsney & Grotevant, 2014; Siegel, 2012). However, due to cultural shifts and changing legal rights in some states, many older adoptees are seeking out their adoption records (Howard, Smith, & Deoudes, 2010). Today, about 95% of adoption agencies offer open arrangements between the biological and adoptive parents (Siegel & Smith, 2012).

Research into the controversy over the opening of adoption records is obviously not new. Aumend and Barrett (1984) traced these investigations back to Fisher (1973) who searched for her biological parents for 20 years. One of the motivating factors for these searches is the

searcher's desire to establish a sense of identity (Depp, 1982). This task has become easier with the expansion of open adoptions (MacDonald & McLoughlin, 2016; Sobol, Daly, & Kelloway, 2000) over closed, or confidential, adoptions. When adoptions are closed the adoptive family does not know the identity of the birth-family (Leon, 2002) and the birth parents and the adoptive family have no contact (Gillespie, 2006; Robinson, 2017). In an open adoption, identifying information is available to both the adoptive parents and the birth parents so contact can be made after the adoption is final (Beauvais-Godwin & Godwin, 2005).

The dispute over the benefits of each method of adoption continues. In brief, closed adoption advocates argue that opening the records that were sealed by agreement by all parties at the time of adoption interferes with the birth mother's grieving process and can cause stress to family dynamics should there be subsequent intrusion into the biological mother's new life and family (Blanton & Deschner, 1990; Curtis, 1986; MacDonald & McLoughlin, 2016; Silber & Speedlin, 1983). In contrast, supporters of open adoption argue that the psychological well-being of adopted children can be improved (Robinson, 2017).

The following first case raises questions about closed versus open adoption and the legal rights of all those concerned. It also involves issues of health and law. A consideration of ethics and many levels of analysis are required to obtain an in-depth understanding of conflicts between individual and family. Due to cultural changes, many states no longer allow closed adoptions like the one in this case. This original and never-before-published case, in which the author was involved, is real except the identifiers (names, genders, etc.) have been altered to protect those involved. An important question to be considered while reading the case is, "Who are the winners and losers of the decisions made by those involved?"

Case #1. Thirty-five years ago Alison Stephens, aged 18, gave birth to a baby boy. The father was Newton Worthington II, Alison's college boyfriend. While the child was conceived out of love, it was not expected. When Alison told "Newt" she was pregnant he told her he didn't want to get married or to take care of the child because it would ruin his career path to which he was focused and devoted. Alison decided after considerable soul searching to have the child, but to give him up for adoption. So before the baby was born she found an adoption agency that was owned and run by social workers. They promised to find a good home for the child.

Alison decided to have a closed, or sealed, adoption. That meant that there would be a birth certificate with the parents' names on it, but that no one other than the agency would ever know who the parents were, even the adoptive parents or the child would not be able to find out should they ever inquire. Alison gave birth and never saw the child or Newton again. Alison never knew it, but her child was adopted by Paul and Sondra Warren, who had no children of their own.

Three years after the adoption, Alison fell in love with Peter Dell. During their courtship she told him about the adoption. Peter's response was that everyone brings a past into a marriage, but they move on to start new lives together, that's what really counts. The past is the past. So they got married and had two daughters, Terri and Ruth. For the first several years of their marriage, Alison, a marketing executive, gave up her career to raise the girls, and Peter advanced in his profession. The Dell family had a wonderful life together. Eventually, Alison resumed her marketing career; both daughters graduated from college, went on and earned their master's degrees and got married. Terri, the older of the two daughters, and her husband had a child of their own. Alison finally retired, but Peter continued working.

Alison died a few years later after a sudden illness. She had never told her girls that they had a half-brother. Peter, Terri and Ruth had been her life and she did not want anything to interfere with that. Also, it is important to note, that 35 years ago having a child out of wedlock was still a cultural taboo.

Now Alison had a younger sister, Judy. Judy knew about the adoption because she had accidentally discovered a copy of a letter Alison had written some time back to the adoption agency informing them that if her child ever wanted to contact her that she was willing to be contacted. Back then Judy and Peter had talked about the adoption and the discovered letter and eventually agreed that Judy would honor her sister's desire to keep the adoption a secret from Terri and Ruth.

About six months ago Judy called Peter, her brother-in-law. She had just received an email from a lawyer asking her if she was Alison Dell's sister. The lawyer's client was Jacob Warren, the boy (now 35) who Alison had given up for adoption. He had filed a lawsuit in court to allow him to pursue the identification of his birth parents. The social workers at the adoption agency fought against the suit, but a new state law had been passed that allowed adoptees to have access to their birth records, and of course to the names of their biological parents, if there was a dire medical reason.

Jacob Warren had argued that his son had a genetic abnormality called *ectodermal dysplasia*. This is a non-life-threatening condition for which a cure has not yet been found, but treatment and corrective surgery is available. The disease had left his son (now 17) with a cleft lip, a low nasal bridge, disfigured finger nails and fewer than the normal number of teeth. There was nothing else wrong with him; in fact he was a star athlete in high school. But the court ruled in Jacob Warren's favor and the social workers at the agency were forced to unseal the adoption.

What did Jacob Warren want? The lawyer had already told him that his biological mother was deceased. He was distraught over this. He had been too late in pursuing this legal battle, but nothing could be done about that. Maybe Judy would give him Terri and Ruth's contact information so he could call them and see if they would mind being referred to the *Ectodermal Dysplasia Society* to have genetic tests done to help find a cure.

He also, of course would like to connect with his blood relatives, his half-sisters. Judy and Peter suspected that this was the real reason the law suit had been filed, since his son's medical condition could be surgically corrected.

What was Peter to do? Terri and Ruth didn't know about the half-brother because their mother did not want them to know. But now Judy had all this new information. She was interested in talking with her sister's first child, her nephew. She might let the information slip one day and Terri and Ruth would find out from her. Now that Judy had acknowledged to the lawyer that she was Alison's sister, Jacob could more easily discover the whereabouts of Terri and Ruth, contact them and take them totally by surprise. Should Peter tell his married daughters after all these years? How would he go about that? How would they respond?

Terri and her husband now had three children, were well established in their careers and had just had purchased a new house. Ruth and her husband were expecting their first child. In addition, Terri and Ruth were very close. Did they need to discover they had an adult step-brother? Did they need to find out that their father and mother had kept a secret from them? With these questions weighing on his mind, Peter asked a local social case worker for help.

Discussion Questions:

- (1) Given the description of this case, what are some values and attitudes that might have influenced Alison to use the closed adoption option?

- (2) What are your thoughts about the new law permitting old closed adoptions to be unsealed?
- (3) What are the pros and cons associated with the law allowing old closed adoptions to be unsealed? Describe the short and long-term implications of this legal decision.
- (4) What might have been the underlying variables that led to the legislation that opened files of closed adoptions?
- (5) What might have been the adoption agency staff's most appropriate responses to the adoptee's (Peter) inquiry? To the legislative body who made the legal decision? To Alison's family members (i.e., husband, sister, daughters)?
- (6) What might you have done in the same scenario as a member of the adoption agency staff? What would be your rationale for doing so?
- (7) Each of the parties indicated in the case, has a perspective that benefits their personal self-interest: the biological mother, the daughters of the biological mother, the Legislative body, the adoption agency staff, etc. Rank order the individuals based on whose self-interest should be most important to whose self-interest should be least important. Provide rationale for your decision-making. What personal values, beliefs, and attitudes influenced your decision-making in developing the rankings?
- (8) How might you resolve the conflicts in self-interest in a way in which each party's perspective is addressed in some way?

The Pullar Brothers' Landfill Proposal

This second case is about community upheaval that resulted from action taken by two brothers to sell their land to a regional landfill company. According to Kim and Owens (2010), 95% of all waste is dumped in landfills. In the United States, this includes over 97% of our food

waste along with hazardous waste (Levis, Barlaz, Themelis & Ulloa, 2010). So a focus on landfills and how they come about reveals a lot about ourselves, our relationship to the community, the economy (Maclaren & Thi Thu, 2003) and the health and politics of the environment (Hird, 2013). One problem with these landfills is that no matter how well designed and constructed using the latest technologies, the containment of the waste is never fully contained or controlled and may eventually leak (Hird, 2013; Wynne, 1987).

Another problem is the public conflict experienced in the communities where landfills are being considered. As Botetzagias and Karamichas (2009) have pointed out, the need for a landfill being sited in host communities seems evident to supporters and advocates. For some residents, landfills and other proposed land-use changes would bring jobs, tax revenue and better access to goods and services (Carmin, 2003). Other proponents accept the greater good that waste is inevitable and must be put somewhere. Other community members do not share this perspective citing a number of reasons: lack of trust in the promoters (Cavatassi & Atkinson, 2003; Kasperson, 2005); aesthetic concerns; physical dangers; falling property values (Bacot, Bowen, & Fitzgerald, 1994); and the NIMBY (not-in-my-back-yard) response (McClymont, 2008; Schively, 2007). Local opposition towards unwanted land uses has been well researched (Botetzagias & Karamichas, 2009; Cavatassi & Atkinson, 2003; Hird, 2013; Kasperson, 2005; Shen & Yu, 1997).

There are several reasons why it is proper that the social work profession should be concerned with environment issues like landfills. For one, there are not many social problems that have proven more contentious than the location of these facilities (Kasperson, 2005; Islam, Ali, Afzaal, Iqbal, & Nageen, 2018). Typically, selected sites tend to be located where the communities are disadvantaged economically and disenfranchised (Tuhus, 1996), where their

voices are not counted as sufficiently valid to counteract placement decision-making (Erickson, 2016). Another important reason is that in 1999 the National Association of Social Workers published a policy on the environment in which they announced urgency to correct years of professional disinterest in environmental issues by encouraging its members to actively engage in efforts to reduce pollution and environmental contamination (NASW, 2006). They linked this call to action with their already stated commitment to the promotion of social and economic justice for all (Jones, Merritt, Brown, Davidson, Nulliner, Smart, Walden, & Wings-Yanez, 2017).

The case that follows involves political, financial, environmental and organizational issues. Like for the “Jacob Warren’s Lawsuit” case, one question to be considered while reading this second case is “Who are the winners and losers of the decisions made by those involved?” This case raises questions about the pursuit and value of economic gain versus environmental pollution and property devaluation. This is another original and never-before-published case, in which the author was involved. The case is real except the identifiers (names, ethnicities, etc.) have been altered to protect the community members. To develop critical thinking, the reader might ask, “Who is benefitting from self-interest and whose self-interest should be the most important?”

Case #2. Andrew Pullar and his brother, Douglas, were multi-millionaire owners of a large home construction company, over 800 acres of farmland and a 225-acre parcel of hardwood forest (zoned residential) with highway access in a rural town with a population of 13,500. The town had a poverty rate of 18.5% while the poverty rates of the adjacent towns were 6.7%, 5.3% and 6.1%. Sixty-four percent of the town residents had incomes that were below

50% of the poverty rate, compared to 1.6%, 1.4% and 2% for the surrounding towns. The median income of their town was \$41,077 which was \$20,000 less than each of the other towns.

The brothers purchased this land 30 years ago for \$450,000 (\$2,000 per acre). They had planned on waiting a few years for land values to increase and then develop the property by selling it in 40 five-acre house lots with a house on each lot that they would build as “spec” houses. These would be \$400,000 homes that their construction company would build without first having a buyer, thus for speculation. The remaining 25 acres would be for the roads and a neighborhood playground. They hoped to sell each house, including a five-acre lot, for \$500,000. Thus, if all went well, they could make \$20 million.

While they waited for their land investment to increase in value, the residents in their town voted to change the zoning in the undeveloped part of town where their property was located. It was changed to be zoned commercial and no house lots were to be allowed. Their land was not grandfathered, nor protected from the zoning change. Basically, the Pullar brothers had waited too long to carry out their home development plan. The only thing they could do now was to sell it to commercial interests and definitely not get the \$20 million they had hoped for.

The reason the town residents changed the zoning from residential to commercial was that the town needed businesses to come in that would bring higher property tax revenue to the town. The voters did not want more residential homes because that would mean more children and more children meant more money would have to go towards schools, and the town property taxes were too high already. The local planning board started reaching out to Home Depot, Lowe’s, Walmart, Staples and other retail stores to see if they were interested in coming to their rural town.

For three years, the politicians and the Chamber of Commerce tried to lure businesses to come to town. The Pullars joined the effort because they saw it as a great opportunity to sell their property and get at least some profit from their investment. But no businesses were interested. The business owners didn't believe there were enough people in town or the surrounding towns to support their big stores. The Pullar brothers were getting impatient and started to panic. They were accustomed to being successful in negotiating business agreements and they did not like being held hostage by rules and regulations. In addition, many of their family members were on the company payroll and depended on the brothers for financial support. The undeveloped woodland property was now costing them more money for taxes because commercial taxes were higher than residential taxes. How were the brothers going to solve their problem? What was all their 225 acres good for anyway?

Then the brothers had an idea. What if they could sell to a landfill company? Better yet, a regional landfill company. So they did some research. They found two different landfill companies that would love to come to town. One of the companies said they would pay \$2.25 million for the land. That was five times the \$450,000 the Pullars had paid. The company knew it could easily get many towns and cities to truck their waste to their landfill. Even towns and cities 500 miles away would be willing to truck their waste because it would be cheaper than hauling to other places. The only problem was that even though this was commercial use it still had to be approved by the voters. Would this be a problem? One of the things the Pullars had in their favor was that there was a large group of their extended family in town and a quaint church to which they belonged that had roughly 4,000 members (3,000 adults and 1,000 children).

The brothers knew they could count on their family members for support, and if they could get all their fellow church members in town to vote for the landfill they would have a

majority vote, and that's all they needed. The church minister agreed to help them get votes. Of course, not all registered voters would come out to vote. The brothers got enough signatures to get Warrant Article #3 on the next town election ballot that, if approved, would allow them to sell the land to the landfill company.

When the sample ballot with their warrant article was made public and the town residents saw what the Pullars were trying to do there was mixed reaction. Many residents saw this as an opportunity to lower their property taxes. The Pullars said that if the regional landfill came to town that people would have their property taxes almost vanish for 35 years. This is because outside towns would have to pay the landfill company big fees to dump their tons of trash. The landfill company profits would then be taxed and millions of dollars would come to town.

The residents who liked this idea were mostly the older generation family members who lived very comfortable life styles and who strongly supported free-enterprise and laissez-faire capitalism, and were residents from the other side of town many miles away from the proposed site. Opponents of the regional landfill and the warrant article were of three groups. First, there were many low income folks who grew up in town and did not want the small-town character to change and they did not like being bullied by the Pullars who had intimidated them on past land-use issues. The second group was the environment-conscience, middle-class residents. This group knew that the landfill would bring many waste-filled trucks into town and that toxic waste liquids could seep into the ground and effect water sources, and that birds and animals could pick hazardous material like hospital waste and discarded hypodermic needles out of the landfill and transfer potentially dangerous materials to lawns and roadways. The third group were the residents who lived close to the proposed site. They did not want the landfill in their backyard (NIMBY).

Needless-to-say, quite a bitter political battle started to brew about five months before the town vote. The landfill proponents brought in landfill consultants, brochures and videos that educated people on how clean and safe landfills were these days. Landfill opponents held meetings at people's homes with consultants and videos depicting how life would turn to the worst in their rustic rural town. These grass-roots, anti-landfill forces mounted signage campaigns all over town. The opponents finally decided that they would collect money to hire a professional community organizer to help them in their fight.

The local politicians saw a very disruptive and increasingly vocal and hostile electorate. It was too late to get the warrant article off the ballot. Even though the Pullars were within their rights to try and get the voters to approve the warrant article allowing the sale of their forest to the landfill company, there were health, social, environmental and financial issues to be considered, especially for the politically and financially least-represented group of opponents. They tried to dissuade the Pullars from pursuing this plan for their land. The Pullars refused.

Discussion Questions:

- (1) Should the social worker be value-neutral while doing this job? Could you be? Would you take the social worker's job in this case? Explain.
- (2) Do you believe it is appropriate for a social worker to be involved with environmental issues? Why? What are the relevant guiding principles from the social work code of ethics? What schooling and/or training would a social worker need to take on this job?
- (3) Did the opponents need to bring in a community organizer? Would it have been better to just let the voters decide at the polling booth?
- (4) Given the description of this case, what are some values and attitudes that might have influenced the Pullar brother's decision?

- (5) What are your thoughts about the placement of landfills? What process should be used in the decision?
- (6) What are the pros and cons associated with landfills? Describe the short and long-term implications of landfills.
- (7) What might you have done in the same scenario as a member of the town? What would be your rationale for doing so?
- (8) Each of the parties indicated in the case, has a perspective that benefits their personal self-interest: the Pullar brothers, the politicians, the voters who changed the original zoning from residential to commercial, the employees who worked for the Pullar brothers, the church minister, and the voters who are concerned with lowering their taxes. Rank order the individuals based on whose self-interest should be most important to whose self-interest should be least important. Provide rationale for your decision-making. What personal values, beliefs, and attitudes influenced your decision-making in developing the rankings?
- (9) How would Emile Durkheim, with his focus on self-interest and social solidarity, and Adam Smith, with his focus on self-interest and a free-market economy, theorize about this case?

Discussion

Having introduced the cases about a closed adoption and a landfill proposal with a discussion about the pursuit of self-interest, it should now be repeated that this author does not believe self-interested behavior is necessarily wrong or unethical. The author has not posited that forcing open a closed adoption is wrong or that advocating for a landfill is wrong. The world will always have waste that needs to be disposed of and children who need to be adopted. People

create and pass the policies that control how these things get done. The point is that individuals need to reflect on their intended actions and invite all stakeholders to participate in the decision-making process before there are negative implications for themselves, those close to them and their community (Cavatassi & Atkinson, 2003). These reflections, if made through open dialog about the gains and losses and importance of each to everyone, will increase understanding and acknowledgement of different points of view and the final decision could result in goals more people could accept (Botetzagias & Karamichas, 2009).

The social work and human services profession is well positioned to respond to the ramifications of those self-interested behaviors that are identified in the cases. It can do so at the micro, mezzo and macro levels. Admittedly biased towards advocating for the neediest in society, social workers are trained in critical thinking, respectful and empathic understanding, and social justice. The social work field has long asked itself the following questions. Should people care less about their own life and more about the lives of others? Why does it matter how our actions affect others (Parfit, 1984)? Why does it matter why something happens to others (Wolf, 1986)? “How can we justify so much about our own happiness or the happiness of a few persons close to us when there are so many others whose lives are so much worse off?” (Wolf, 1986, p. 718-719). This is not to say that self-interest is only good when the disadvantaged benefit. As Bentham (1879, [1780]) and Mill (1879) wrote many years ago, self-interested behavior is good when it results in the most happiness for all. These philosophical questions are fodder for the inquisitive social work/human services students and by using the use of the case method and its inherent inquiry, analyses, debate and dialog students should increase their self-awareness and social perspectives.

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