

Professional Discretion Part 1

Jessica Toft ([00:06](#)):

Hello everyone. Welcome to this podcast hosted by the Center for Advanced Studies and Child Welfare. My name is Jessica Toft and I'm an associate professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Minnesota. And I'm so pleased that you have joined us today, and I'm excited to have with me two bright PhD students, Channel Lowery and Elin Amundson. I'm so, uh, happy to have you with me and to talk today about this topic of professional discretion. Here's the format. In the first half these two PhD students will ask me a question about the background of the research, and then we'll turn the tables and I'll be able to ask them some questions about their own professional work life. So, welcome Channel and Elin.

Elin Amundson ([00:56](#)):

Thank you.

Channel Lowery ([00:57](#)):

Yeah, thank you. I'm so excited to be here. Um, so my name is Channel. I am going into my third year as a PhD student at the University of Minnesota. And I have about six years of direct practice experience and then four years as a supervisor. Um, so I'm really excited to talk about this topic.

Elin Amundson ([01:17](#)):

My name is Elin and I just finished my first year as a PhD student. Um, before this program I worked at a local nonprofit and we contracted with Hennepin County Mental Health Case Management and the Juvenile Probation Department to provide an evidence-based family therapy model. So that's the experience I'm bringing.

Jessica Toft ([01:37](#)):

Okay, fantastic. Um, so, um, I'm going to just let you both ask me some questions. I'm ready whenever you are.

Channel Lowery ([01:47](#)):

Yeah. So let's jump into it. First I think let's talk about how you actually got interested in this topic.

Jessica Toft ([01:55](#)):

I am interested in this topic of professional discretion for a couple of reasons. I've taught for a couple decades, uh, social work students who have become professionals, and I've heard, um, through them and seen through their eyes, um, what it's like to be a social worker. And I've seen it over a number of years how this has sort of changed how their ability to practice what we're talking about in the classroom and in their field has been sort of changing, maybe being limited. And then I was the president of the, uh, Minnesota chapter of the National Association of Social Workers here in the state of Minnesota. And we heard from so many social workers about their working conditions and the limitations and pressures they had in their workplace. So this is one of the reasons I became interested in this topic.

Channel Lowery ([02:42](#)):

So I wanna back up for a second. I know we kind of always hear about the word profession, right? And, you know, social work profession, teacher profession, nursing profession. Can you talk a little bit about

what does that word actually mean? Like, what is the difference between a profession and let's say a job or a career?

Jessica Toft ([03:00](#)):

Yeah, that's a really great question. I don't think we talk about that enough. So, um, Freidson wrote his book on professionalism that I think helps us clarify what professions are. And, uh, he makes an argument that professionalism is actually a third logic. Um, and that in their pure form, they are really not about making money. They're really not about, you know, uh, prestige. They are really about promoting the common good. Um, so when you think about it, we as citizens, we all wanna have people who work with us as professionals who are really educated and they know what they're doing. You can think about doctors and we wanna have, you know, really well educated, uh, doctors who've had, who've had lots of practice, um, and that they are ethical, they're abiding by, let's say the Hippocratic Oath, for example. Um, think about nurses. You think about dentists.

([03:53](#)):

Think about engineers. You know, we want them to be as best educated as they can be. They, we want them to have supervised practice so that we know that they've tried out there what they know in the field, and we want them also to have an ethical code so that we know that they're really out there to promote the wellbeing of people. Um, and you know, this kind of seems like a no-brainer when you think about it, but what's happened over time, and this is the same for social work too, right? But yeah, what, what's happened over time is that, um, professionals have become more and more managed, right? So that they have less ability to really dig into maybe their professional education or to really abide by think about, oh, when I've been in that situation in the past, I've done things this way, I've practiced in this way and it's worked out well.

([04:39](#)):

Um, instead they're sort of being told what to do. They're sort of more of a managing of them. So professionals are, are kind of being pressured, um, maybe by markets to make more money. And also, um, they're, they've been pro, um, pressured to actually save money. You think about people who pay them like states and contracts to do it for as much as they can for as little as possible. Um, so these are some of the ways that professions are, um, distinct from careers and jobs that we care about their education, we care about their having practice and we care that they're abiding by a code of ethics and all these things together mean that they're promoting the best for everyday people like you and me.

Channel Lowery ([05:26](#)):

That makes a lot of sense. Thank you.

Elin Amundson ([05:28](#)):

So how does this apply to the field of social work and why is this idea of professionalism important for social workers?

Jessica Toft ([05:35](#)):

Yeah, that's a really important, I think social work is an unusual profession by any standard. I mean, we are, uh, we stand between marginalized groups of people, disenfranchised groups of people, and the powerful, both the market and the state. And so social workers have to think about, and, and that's one of the reasons I think we have such a strong code of ethics, is that we really need to think about the wellbeing of the individuals we're working with. Um, so for profession and also social work's probably

one of the most complicated professions that there is out there. We often hear in social work about the biopsych and social aspects of social work, but I think it's broader than that. I think we can also think about social work as having also a political context and also historical context, a cultural context. If you add all those dimensions up together with this profession, we are being asked to think about humans in a really broad, big way.

[\(06:28\)](#):

And, and we're stepping into an epic movie, not a snapshot. And we have to practice in a movie and not a snapshot. So, um, professional discretion is especially important, important for complicated professions because they have to pull from so many different kinds of educational backgrounds and they have to pull from so many different kinds of practice experiences they've had and all the while keeping their code of ethics. And this requires us to be nimble and to be able to do lots of different kinds of things, not to be standardized or routine. Like we're working with machines, we're working, we're working with really dynamic groups of people. So given this, I think that social workers especially need to have professional discretion cuz we need to be able to be knowledgeable and ethical and, um, think about our, what we know from practice.

Channel Lowery [\(07:17\)](#):

Yeah, that, that makes a lot of sense. Um, and I, I mean, I could think of like a lot of different examples of how social work is outside of the biopsychosocial that we often talk about when, or think about when we, you know, talk about social work. Um, I, I kind of wanna go back to something you mentioned before about this kind of, um, being limited and having professional discretion with contracts and just kind of trying to save money and things like that. Do you think there's a reason to believe that professional discretion is limited when it comes to the field of social work?

Jessica Toft [\(07:51\)](#):

Absolutely, I do because, um, and, and, and the research we did just prior to this research we're going to be doing on, uh, interviewing social workers, we did a statewide survey of all licensed social workers and we paired it down to the 2,300 plus direct practice social workers. And, um, we asked them about what kind of professional discretion they had in the workplace. And we took those three parts of professionalism. We talked about their education, we talked about their practice, um, their practice experience, and then we talked about their ethics and we asked them questions about these three dimensions and we found that, um, they were really feeling limited in being able to, um, to, uh, engage those parts of the professional discretion. So for, for example, um, when asking them about their, uh, uh, educational knowledge, um, we asked them, uh, to what ability were they able to incorporate the ecological framework and assessment and we, and the ecological framework is the most basic theory we have in social work.

[\(08:54\)](#):

And a nearly 68% of them said that it was problematic for them to use the ecological framework in assessment. Um, also, for example, are you able to tailor interventions with clients to address unique needs? This relates to, you know, education and practice. Uh, more than 45% of them said it was, that was problematic for them to engage in interventions that were specifically tailored to their clients' needs. Um, when you think about, um, let's say values, the ethical, um, uh, base, when we ask them, are you able to practice professional values as a social worker, almost 40% said that it was problematic for them to, um, practice professional values as a social worker. Um, you know, something as basic as building trusting relationships with people you serve, which is really something that, you know, we

engage in practice. Uh, a third of them said that was problematic for them to build trusting relationships with people they serve. When you think about the broader political and historical piece of social work that maybe doesn't get as much discussion, this was especially problematic. We found that "able to address clients' issues at the macro level", nearly 90% of social workers said who were direct practice social workers said it was very problematic for them to, um, engage, uh, political issues, um, at, at the macro level that, uh, really impact their clients. Um, so yes, we definitely have evidence that professional discretion is limited in the state of Minnesota based on our statewide survey.

Channel Lowery ([10:30](#)):

Wow. Yeah. You were able to get, um, a good amount of direct line social workers and I'm just kind of wondering about, you know, what areas they even work in. Um, cuz these are some really powerful findings, especially the macro part. Um, for sure.

Jessica Toft ([10:47](#)):

Yeah. We, you know, the, uh, the breakdown of social workers really reflects sort of what you see even a national level too. We had a, a large percentage of social workers who work with children and families who work in the health field, who work in schools, um, who work in, uh, all different sectors. County, private nonprofit, private for-profit. Um, the private for pro for-profit was a little bit smaller than the other two categories. Um, but, uh, and, and a lot of kinds of work they were doing mental health work, case work, school, social work, um, uh, tho those kinds of direct line, uh, types of positions. So it was a really, really varied So it was interesting to see such similar responses despite their practice settings.

Channel Lowery ([11:35](#)):

Absolutely. Yeah.

Jessica Toft ([11:37](#)):

Thanks for asking me some questions about professional discretion. It's been an exciting area to contemplate and really there's not much literature and research on what is professional discretion. So, uh, we're doubly excited about this particular topic because I think it's helping social workers think about and give voice to their own professional discretion and you know, where they, where they work and what they do. So what I would like to do is to get a little bit more into the details about what professional discretion is, and then I'm going to, we're gonna switch the tables and I'm gonna ask you some questions and I'm going to welcome Amelia LeGarde at that point too. First of all, professional discretion, again, incorporates those ideas of, we, we go to these graduate programs in order to learn some specialized theoretical concepts. Um, and because these are important when we are thinking about proper practice. We also go to our graduate programs and other kinds of professional programs in order to get supervision by professionals who graduate from these programs often are licensed, um, should be licensed in these programs. Um, and we, professional discretion is important because it helps us put our code of ethics in the forefront of our mind. And, but finally, it's more than just avoiding improper practice. Professional discretion should be, uh, having social workers engage in highly effective and high quality practice. And so that's, that's the hope for why most of us come into the profession is to be able to help in those ways with our full capacities.

Elin Amundson ([13:22](#)):

So what is all included in this concept of professional discretion?

Jessica Toft ([13:27](#)):

Yeah, so when we were developing the survey and in the, uh, interview project that we were going to be conducting, we got pretty explicit about this. So again, the three big containers are education, practice experience as an apprentice, and then the third one is abiding by your code of ethics. So the first bucket, education, when you think about it, knowledge that you learn in your social work program is pretty specific and it's also fairly standardized across the country. So for example, um, think about your classes, human behavior and the social environment and all those theories about the way humans behave and, you know, motivations and how, how, um, uh, groups work in interaction with, uh, with each other in theories, et cetera. Think about your social policy classes and how government works and how policies are formed and how to analyze them and how groups have been affected over time.

([14:20](#)):

Think about your research methods course. This is real basic to assessing your practice and whether or not you are making a positive impact or maybe even making a negative impact. You know, we should know how to do some of these things. Diversity courses are particularly important. We're a very diverse society and becoming more so, so we need to under have words and ways to think about diversity. And then also, um, our methods courses and how you would actually work in our different settings. Um, so those are just a few of the kinds of courses. History courses, for example, like the groups, the history of different marginalized groups in the country. Again, if we're stepping into an epic movie instead of a snapshot, we need to understand the history of different groups. Um, also when you think about the second bucket about the practice skills, you know, the signature component of social work is your field placement or your practicum placement.

([15:13](#)):

This is where you actually get to take your knowledge and uh, try it out with a professional who is supervising you. You can reflect back on it. This is a really important part of professional development. You have someone that you can, um, participate in discussing what, you know, how that went, what make what, what went well, what did not go well, they that is a professional honing. Um, and then finally abiding by a code of ethics. When you're in your practicum and you're even in your classrooms being able to talk about ethical dilemmas and having consultation. This is a really another, another important part of professional development. So these are the important parts of what it means to be, um, uh, have professional discretion. And so these were things that we wanted to tap into, um, in as and we move into our future interview project.

([16:04](#)):

And what I'd like to tap into with our guests we have on our program. And joining us for this next section in addition to Channel and Elin is a third guest, Amelia LeGarde, who is a child protection case manager for the last 10 years. Six of those in tribal welfare. What I would like to do is to ask you each to describe your practice experience in the field of social work. I think this will be very interesting to our listeners who will be able to relate to you. And Amelia, I'm hoping that you can start us off and tell us about your professional background in social work.

Amelia LeGarde ([16:46](#)):

So my name's Amelia LeGarde and my family comes from Grand Portage. And I currently live on the Fond du Lac reservation. Um, I've been working in child welfare for over 10 years, uh, most of which have been in direct service to families. So I have, uh, six years of, uh, tribal social work, so working within the tribes. And then the last four years I've been working, um, in a county agency. And, um, just recently in this in between place where I'm not a supervisor and I'm not a boss, but my hope is to

support, um, some ongoing staff in the work that they're providing to families. That's my professional experience, so thank you.

Jessica Toft ([17:29](#)):

Thank you. Welcome. We're so glad you're here. Thanks for coming here. Uh, Channel, why don't you tell us a little bit about your professional background?

Channel Lowery ([17:37](#)):

Yeah, of course. Um, so I worked in direct practice, um, before I came into my PhD program. So I was in community, I was a community integration specialist, which really just means that I was helping people that were diagnosed with the mental health, um, diagnosis with finding housing and working on goals related to housing, keeping their housing, um, and kind of like life maintenance stuff. And then I also was working at, um, a community residential rehabilitation center also with people that have mental health conditions to help them become more independent, um, to one day move out of that. So, um, working in those two places, that was about, I would say six years. And then I spent some time in Colombia and South America where I, was working with children and helping them meet their needs. Um, doing some English teaching, but mostly around kind of just helping them meet their needs on the island they were living on. Um, who some of these children were, were, were unhoused as well. So that's kind of my experience.

Jessica Toft ([18:48](#)):

Fantastic. Thanks so much Channel. Elin, how about you?

Elin Amundson ([18:53](#)):

Um, I earned my MSW in 2019, but prior to that I'd been working for about five years in community food systems, kind of like at the intersections of local food, school food and community health. Um, and then after earning my MSW, I worked in a local nonprofit, who contracted with Hennepin County to provide an evidence-based in-home intensive family therapy model for families whose adolescent children were involved, either in juvenile probation or children's mental health case management through the county.

Jessica Toft ([19:28](#)):

Okay. Well, welcome all three of you. I would like to now ask about your personal experiences with professional discretion. And I'm going to just start off, there's really kind of two parts to this. I'm gonna ask about maybe about four aspects of it and another four aspects about it. And then I'll have you talk first of all about the ways that you felt like maybe it was tough for you to, embody your professional discretion and maybe then ways that you think that you were supported in engaging it. So, but we'll lead you along. So here when we think about professional discretion there are some specific aspects to it. First I'm interested when you have you, the ability to adhere to the code of ethics is an important part of professional discretion. Also, to what degree have you been able to implement the ecological framework with clients? Has that been problematic sometimes? Also, um, have you had times, has it been problematic for you at times to build trusting relationships with clients in your professional world? And then finally have, has there ever been times where it's been problematic for you to tailor interventions to those specific client needs and those specific clients? Um, we're gonna start off here with any problematic instances of these four parts and I'll just let anybody jump in who wants to,

Channel Lowery ([21:00](#)):

So I can start kind of what sticks out to me first is the building trusting relationships with clients. So in the work that I did the first part of meeting with a client and kind of getting them set up was always about doing an assessment. Um, and that part really felt a bit problematic at times just because it went right into like, okay, what's the problem? Um, let's get all this stuff down on paper or at that, you know, in that, in that time in the computer and then it like, you know, we had to do all the paperwork and it had to be done during that first appointment. And um, you know, sometimes the clients just wanted to talk and they wanted to build. I could sense that they wanted to build that relationship. Um, but because of the standard of practice that we had, um, particularly because we were funded by the county, um, we had to do those assessments. And so, you know, I felt like it was more difficult to build those trusting relationships, especially if someone was more closed off. And I wanted to build that rapport before engaging in these hard questions that's like, you know, can really bring up trauma, um, sometimes. And so I felt limited in that way and had to find ways to kind of maneuver around that to be able to build trusting relationships with clients. So that's kind of what stood out to me.

Jessica Toft ([22:25](#)):

Interesting. Um, so that assessment piece, kind of getting in the way of building a relationship right off the bat, others have um, similar or kind of different experiences

Elin Amundson ([22:35](#)):

I can relate to the feel to that idea of feeling rushed in getting your assessment done before trust has been established. Um, and I think built into our model was also this kind of time pressure on getting the assessment completed so you can get onto the intervention, but I, a lot of the families who were involved in this program had had horrible experiences through either mental health systems or county systems in the past and they even spoke up about feeling like their voice had not been heard or like their perspective had not been taken into account. So I did, I felt like there was this tension between the pace that the model wanted us to move at and the real, the day-to-day realities of like what pace we could move at ethically with the families we were working with. Um, so I can relate to that time pressure big time.

Amelia LeGarde ([23:29](#)):

I wonder, um, if you guys ever felt like little data collectors, cuz that's certainly how I have felt <laugh>, um, when completing intakes with clients and my role's a little different, right? As a child welfare, social worker. Um, and so many times I'm coming into contact with families who aren't willingly coming into contact with the system. Um, and so, but I certainly have sat there with the paperwork or back at my desk and just knowing that like the information I have is important cuz it feeds a bigger system that pays for services. Um, but then also like at what cost, right? To whose cost, um, is it at? And so feeling, yeah, like a little data analyst. Um, and then something too that I think is important to note is when I think about the code of ethics, you know, I've got an educational background that has me familiar with the code of ethics, but in child welfare, um, we don't necessarily need people who are social workers or licensed social workers providing services to the families and the communities that we're serving. And you know, as someone with a social work background, um, you know, the code of ethics is something that I find helpful and something that I think can guide our practice in a really good way. But that's not something that is necessarily a shared value, um, within the like, uh, child welfare system, at least the one that I'm working in.

Jessica Toft ([24:54](#)):

Mm-hmm. <affirmative>. Yeah. Yeah. So Amelia, that's that, that, but I hear from all of you, I love this term data collector. It's almost coming in conflict with, um, human connector mm-hmm. <affirmative>. And so that's an interesting part of that building, trusting relationships and then also the code of ethics piece of it. You know, being part of that, the human connector piece of it. If, if you don't have a social work degree, you might not even have that concept as something that you're really striving for. You're so interesting kind of bracket there to this whole piece of it. So, uh, I'm wondering about the other three we've got, implementing the ecological framework with clients. Was that ever problematic to any of you?

Elin Amundson ([25:34](#)):

Yeah, I think a lot of the, so the model that we were working with had several priorities built right into it, and that these priorities were kind of promised to families who were, you know, it, it was kind of a gray area between willing and unwilling participation. Um, but often we were pressured to get right into the model-based priorities, but many of the families were facing basic needs issues at different levels in, in the ecological model. Um, and our supervisor supervisors were really flexible and, um, encouraging for us to help families meet their basic needs so that they could focus on these model based priorities. But if we were adhering to the model to a t which was there was pressure on us to do so, um, it, they would maybe sometimes have us focus on these other priorities above the basic needs that were more fundamental to what the family had going on.

Channel Lowery ([26:34](#)):

Yeah, I would say similarly, like in thinking about the program that I worked for, focusing on housing, um, sometimes people's needs fall outside of that, but they're very connected to housing, you know, so making sure people are well mentally making sure their basic needs are met. And oftentimes we were discouraged from assisting clients with things that felt outside of the realm of housing. So I know oftentimes, you know, I would think it was important that, that my clients were able to get to the grocery store to get their, the groceries that they needed. And so at first I was, you know, doing that and I didn't think there was a problem with that just because I was like, yeah, this is connected to their housing. Like to, in my mind, <laugh> um, but then kind of being discouraged from doing that and being told like, oh, that's their case manager's job, um, kind of dividing up the roles of people and so things were more siloed, which then, you know, people have to reach out to different people and it's just a lot of, it can get very confusing for the client.

([27:39](#)):

So I think being discouraged from helping clients outside of what is considered a housing need was frustrating at times for me.

Jessica Toft ([27:49](#)):

Right?

Amelia LeGarde ([27:51](#)):

I sit here and I might be jumping the gun a little bit as I recognize that we're wanting to be talking about how we are maybe inhibited or discouraged from utilizing our professional discretion. Um, and as I sit here and I think about the ecological model, um, and you can correct me if I'm wrong, but I'm under the impression that that's like the whole person is that, is that right?

Jessica Toft (28:15):

Or or the micro meso macro aspects, yes. Okay. Of, uh, of a person's wellbeing.

Amelia LeGarde (28:20):

Yeah. And so, um, something to I think bear in mind is, you know, I come from a tribal background and coming into a a county agency, I can speak to my own practice, which is like tribally influenced, and we think about all those pieces, right? And we recognize that all of those pieces need to be together. Um, but that was a different reality when I came and worked for a government agency. And that's something that I see, um, with colleagues and those that I'm trying to support, is having to step into a space to remind people to think about this. And, you know, um, I think it all ties together is you get so caught up in these expectations of the work that needs to get done, that you don't get a chance to look at that whole person, right? And, you know, in child welfare, and child protection in particular, oftentimes we're dealing with people who are using substances is a, is a huge one, right?

(29:18):

And so we're putting all of the puzzle pieces in to like trying to address that one issue, but then you like miss that whole person. Um, and so I, I'm gonna keep going for just a minute here. Um, but you get into a space where then we're creating and cultivating plans tailored to clients' needs. And as I'm stepping into this role of trying to support my colleagues, we're talking about like spirituality. And that's a huge piece that is oftentimes missed when we're serving the families. Um, but that comes from this framework of like having to address like the whole needs of the family and that ultimately creates more work for the workers. And that's super challenging. And so again, that's a piece that like oftentimes gets missed because of the time crunch and that time crunch is influenced not necessarily by that direct practice that we're providing to families, but by our data collection and all the paperwork that needs to get done.

(30:11):

You know, I think about a simple example of like our out-of-home placement plans, and those are court ordered, right? They're required by the court and they need to get done within 30 days. Um, and so here you are trying to form a relationship with the family, but then also identify their needs and what needs to happen. Oftentimes their children are out of home and they wanna know what they need to do to get their children back home. And um, I go to the out-of-home placement plan and a, a good out-of-home placement plan takes like three to four hours to complete for one child. And so you have a one hour maybe conversation with the family to influence this four hour document that you ultimately deliver to the clients. And many of it is like boxes for us as child welfare workers to check, right? So there's lots of good information in there, but it's often like super repetitive and it's just phrased in different ways so that we're hitting all the marks that we need to hit. And then you're finally sitting down with the family after you've sat with them to create this plan and you're like, here's a 40 page document, and really all you have to worry about is page two.

Jessica Toft (31:12):

Yes. It, it comes back to Amelia, thank you so much for that. It was just really a great overview or snapshot of some of the real pressures that, that social workers are facing and love to hear your your perspective on that. And I wanna remind listeners that we do have these podcasts on, on managerialism and neoliberalism in social work practice, which really has sparked this whole discussion about what does professional discretion look under a neoliberal environment. Um, and Amelia, what I heard you saying is who's the client? Is it the system that's the client of our work, or is it actually people? And

sometimes I think of social workers, we feel like the system's, our client, uh, uh, and we're doing all these, all this paperwork and all this sort of stuff for the, that the need of the system, maybe not for the welfare of the client always.

[\(32:01\)](#):

So, um, I, boy that was a wonderful, um, overview of what it, of a really frustrating experience as a educated social worker about how you are working with the client in these kinds of systems, um, neo liberalized managerial systems. So thank you for that. And um, I want to also just go back to this first one too, because I think we're kind of touching on this one. The ability to adhere to the code of ethics. I mean, if you're time crunched, if you're asked to do more with less, if efficient efficiency is the goal, do any of you have stories about times when you felt like your ability to adhere to the code of ethics was compromised somehow problematic?

Channel Lowery [\(32:45\)](#):

I mean, I would say just going back to not really being able to address the fullness of a client's needs, um, that feels very unethical to me. Um, I can think of a particular example that, um, you know, I had a client who missed or was going to miss her methadone appointment to go to the clinic, and if she didn't go to that appointment, she was gonna go through terrible withdrawal. Um, and so from my past experience of talking to, you know, my supervisor at the time and, and asking about these different things that felt kind of outside of housing, I was like, okay, if I ask about this, I'm probably gonna be told don't take her. That's not outside the realm of your job. So I didn't, I didn't ask <laugh>. I sometimes I'm like, okay, you know, it's better to ask for forgiveness <laugh>.

[\(33:40\)](#):

So, um, you know, I I feel like being, being told to not kind of do those things is really, uh, can really be egregious when it comes to the, the health and safety of clients. Um, so in that particular instance, I, you know, I, I took her to, to the appointment, but I think that kind of like Amelia was saying, like the people in the, in that profession in that particular job didn't necessarily need to be social workers, um, or licensed social workers. So, um, maybe me thinking about the code of ethics, I was, you know, really impacted by, you know, just meeting the needs of the clients and putting, you know, centering them and things like that. So I felt like not being able to do that is really unethical for, for me and morally too.

Jessica Toft [\(34:30\)](#):

Great. Thank you. And I, I, I, what I'm gonna do now is I'm gonna flip this on its head and ask about what ways, um, in what ways have you been supported in engaging your professional discretion related to, uh, fulfilling your code of ethics, ecological engagement, trusting relationships, tailoring interventions? Can you give some stories where you felt supported?

Channel Lowery [\(34:55\)](#):

Yeah, I mean, I would say that to me, this is where good supervision comes into play and having a good supervisor in that role. So I've had two different supervisors in the role that I had as a community integration specialist. And you know, I can say that one supervisor was very discouraging in terms of doing things outside of what was considered housing, really strict about, you know making sure that we're getting all the paperwork in and, and things like that. And that the assessments were done on time and things like that. I know like everybody gets behind on paper, but my second, my second supervisor, you know, during supervision I felt more comfortable explaining the things that I was doing and how I felt like some things were problematic and I was, you know told that like encouraged to think

about the whole person and think about how to best meet the client's needs and really learn to talk about it in a way that was like, if we need to address this later, like if this comes up, I will support you. I will have your back and you know, we can talk to the regional director about this, because you have a good reason for do you know for doing things the way that you want to. So I felt really encouraged and supported in utilizing my professional discretion and being able to say like, this is what I'm doing and this is why I'm doing it, and supported and kind of coached in like how to talk about it to maybe upper management.

Jessica Toft ([36:22](#)):

Thanks Channel, how about others of you?

Elin Amundson ([36:25](#)):

I totally agree with the role of a supervisor can like, encourage or kind of shut down your use of the code of ethics? Again, I'm thinking about the time crunch pressures that were built into this model. Many times our supervisors would help us justify why we needed an extension beyond the five months that was like the maximum amount of time that we were allowed to work with a family. Um, and they really helped us articulate it in terms of the code of ethics and helped advocate for the need even when, you know, it happened over and over or when the county would be asking like, what's the, what's the progress with this family? Um, they were just really supportive. And I think that if with with with supervisors who are more beholden to adhering to the model, it would've been a lot harder to voice our concerns about ethical dilemmas that were at play.

Jessica Toft ([37:21](#)):

Great. Moving on to some other parts of professional discretion, you know, the ability to collaborate with other agencies for client wellbeing. Also the ability to address clients' issues at the macro level. Um, thinking about using a sociopolitical or even historical lens to shape practice with clients and advocating on behalf of clients or against unjust policies. I'm wondering all three of you, in what ways have you been kept from utilizing your professional discretion on any one of those aspects?

Amelia LeGarde ([37:54](#)):

I'm over here and I'm like, that's a really dangerous space that you're asking us to step into <laugh>.

Jessica Toft ([37:58](#)):

Yeah, that's, that's an important point, Amelia, right? I mean it, the fact that it's tough to talk about these things is reminds us it's a political profession underneath it all perhaps. But any one of these in particular folks feel comfortable talking about,

Amelia LeGarde ([38:15](#)):

Just cuz it was dangerous doesn't mean I wasn't willing to go there. <laugh>.

Jessica Toft ([38:19](#)):

Oh you go.

Amelia LeGarde ([38:20](#)):

Um, and I say it's dangerous and I like say it with a little tongue in cheek, but I'm like honest about it. And what I mean by that is, you know, when I look at, these other points and then the work in child welfare in particular, right? There's a lot of racism. And I look at the history of child welfare and I think about the history of child welfare. Um, and I'm under the impression and you're gonna know much better than I am, but I'm under the impression that it started with a bunch of like nice white church ladies who wanted to do good, right? And then that carries over and you know, I think that there's lots of nice white church ladies that do really good work and then there's lots of nice white church ladies who like don't recognize their bias and their racism.

[\(39:08\)](#):

And when we look at communities that we're serving, oftentimes the communities that we're serving don't look like the workforce, um, serving them. And like, and then as a frontline worker you're like, Hey, my clients are not being served in a good way because there's racism and bias at play and there's like an unwillingness or an inability to see that. And so, um, that's super challenging cuz then you look at the reports that are coming in and oftentimes the reports are biased and racist, right? Um, and there's an overrepresentation of kids of color and then that same lens is being used to provide services. Um, you know, at my agency and my practice, we talk a lot about like messy houses for example. And you know, are these houses messy and do they pose a threat or a risk to the child's safety or wellbeing? Or are these houses just messy in relation to what is sometimes considered a like norm, right?

[\(40:07\)](#):

Um, so, and that makes it difficult. It makes it difficult to have these conversations cuz you know, nobody, I don't think anyone's coming into this profession cuz they wanna be biased or they wanna be racist, right? I think people are showing up cuz they wanna do good work and they wanna like, um, like at least you know, in where I'm at, like I think people are showing up cuz they wanna see good things for kids. And so then to come along and like, um, be told that you're doing something in a way that's harmful to the community. Like that's, that's a tough pill to swallow.

Jessica Toft [\(40:41\)](#):

Amelia, you, that's, you've named something really important there about, um, the sociopolitical or historical lens is important to understand about the people that social workers work with. Uh, but then also amongst social workers themselves, how do social workers talk to one another about their practice and the way they engage the clients, the families is another important part. So politics are, is definitely within the social work profession and among us something to talk about. Thank you for that great example. And how about what do you think anybody else feel that same way or have had experience along the same way that Amelia's talking about there?

Elin Amundson [\(41:19\)](#):

I mean, I don't think I could sum, sum anything up better than what Amelia just said because you, you spoke to experiences that I had in my position, you know, even though our, our work is totally different, the same themes came up.

Channel Lowery [\(41:32\)](#):

Yeah, I, yeah, I'd completely agree. And I would also add like the way that kind of this macro issues show up in, in our micro practices, um, I'm thinking of like advocating on behalf of clients and against unjust policies. Um, well we, you know, we know about history of housing practices and you know, things like redlining, um, and, and things like that and discrimination, racism when it comes to housing and even in

the role that I had, um, you know, being mindful of what clients can afford and the areas they can live in, um, and kind of just being encouraged to like, okay, you know, you work with these landlords cuz these are the landlords that, uh, work with us, but all the, you know, a lot of times those landlords weren't the best landlords, right? When we think about what a slum lord is and, um, having people, you know, of a certain demographic be in a certain area of the city, like all those things were challenging for me, um, in terms of where to encourage clients to live. Um, and then just the macro issues of like not being able to afford to live outside of a certain area and still needing to meet basic needs. So things like, you know, that they're not involved with the child protective services and things like that so that they can say they have a home. So all of those things kind of working in tandem. Um, it was difficult to advocate in ways that I felt were, were more ethical in those kind of environments. So that really jumped out at me, that advocating on behalf of clients.

Jessica Toft ([43:10](#)):

Yeah. Um, so it, what I'm hearing is that, uh, having the knowledge about how these complex social factors actually interact is important as social workers really understanding that because you need to use that in terms of your direct practice. Um, and so maybe the the ways in which our workplaces are set up make it difficult for us to be able to do that. Anybody have some wanna have thoughts about that?

Amelia LeGarde ([43:36](#)):

I always have thoughts about everything <laugh>. Um, and I, you know, I hear that and I think about like, my early career, right? And, you know, I remember sitting in school and being like, ah, it's always about money, right? And then getting to a point where, um, like I was providing the direct practice and being over here and being like, whatever, like, I'm just gonna show up and do good work, right? And I'm gonna encourage my colleagues to show up and do good work. But then you get to a point where then there's this realization and recognition that if we wanna do good work and we wanna like influence work beyond just that individual family, we have to be thinking about these like meso and macro macro practices. But I'm also here and I'm like thinking about this 10 years later, right? I wasn't thinking about this five years ago.

([44:21](#)):

And, when it comes to child welfare, you know, we got high burnout rates, you know, you hit two years and you're like, oh, you mostly know how to do your job. You hit five years and you're like, oh, maybe you're a lifer. Um, but to have a tenure, uh, like length of time I think is significant in child welfare. And, you know, I have the privilege and opportunity to work with those that have 15 and 20 years, but that's few and far between, right? So, uh, to understand this is, I agree, critical, but like you spend so much of that beginning part of your career just trying to get your feet under you and trying to like know how to do the work that, and then you get burned out and then you're out. And then like it takes time to, to know this and like see the value in it, um, and, and know and recognize how that ultimately then impacts your, your clients.

([45:09](#)):

And then also I think about like the advocacy piece and you know, again, I go to like, so much of our time is spent trying to like understand our roles and our jobs and meet the immediate needs of our families. Um, and then there's us as individuals with our own families. And then then how much time and energy do you have to like, give back and like do that advocacy piece, right? And to like be like aware of what needs to be going on. You know, I think about like my role in ICWA and MIFPA and that's a lifestyle at

this point, right? Like my kids know about ICWA and MIFPA but that's because it's been like an absorbed lifestyle and that's like a privilege in and of itself. And so, you know, yeah, these things are super important and where's the time for it and where's the energy for it.

Jessica Toft ([45:55](#)):

Great points, Amelia. And I was gonna ask the other, the other half of this and, and one thing I think that I've heard from students, um, so many times and, and also when I was at NASW, the Minnesota chapter is the time, the time crunch. I don't have time on my jobs. And yet when we think about it, if we take a step back, why is my job constructed in such a way that I can't practice social work, fully, you know, why is it constructed? So I'm just leaving it out there as just sort of like a question for us to continue to think about. But in your places of work, have there been ways in which you have been supported in engaging your professional discretion in terms of engaging with the agencies or advocating at the macro level using historic lens?

Elin Amundson ([46:40](#)):

You know, one thing about the model that I was hired to prac to, you know, deliver is that it's the adolescent who gets referred to the program, but the focus is really on the family systems and the interaction that the family systems has with the other systems present in that person's ecology. So we did a lot of collaborating with schools and community organizations and even like friends families. Um, so in that way the model even like facilitated using my professional discretion about like, it's not just about the individual adolescent's behavior and that's not where our focus should be. We should focus on the systems that this kid interacts with and see if there's any places that we can tweak those relationships to improve their behavior. I mean, it was still come down, came down to their behavior, but we took a much more expanded view on what drives that behavior.

Jessica Toft ([47:38](#)):

So promoting a vision of a, of systems interacting and how to engage those systems perhaps.

([47:38](#)):

Channel Lowery ([47:45](#)):

Yeah, I would say, you know, thinking about collaborating with other agencies for the client's wellbeing, I had a particular client who was involved with the child protective system and for me it was, um, you know, being in a room of other professionals and hearing them talk about, you know, what this mother was not doing or what, what resources she didn't have. I felt like it was my duty to, as a social worker think in a strength-based perspective and bring that to the meetings. And so just trying, I was encouraged also by my supervisor to do the same, because I was the one interacting when it came to the housing aspect of her journey. And so being able to bring that perspective and position into the meetings, I think ultimately helped her to be able to keep you know, along with everything else she was doing, you know, to keep her child in the home.

Jessica Toft ([48:41](#)):

Fantastic. Well thanks so much to our participants. Um, and hearing your stories. I mean, there's such a variety of experiences in social work, so, um, it makes sense for us that we're doing this research and these interviews because we understand that there's so many different kinds of experiences as social

workers and it'll be really interesting to hear from social workers across the state. I wanna thank Amelia, Channel and Elin for your expertise and time.

Channel Lowery ([49:11](#)):

Yeah, thanks for having us.

([49:13](#)):

Yeah,

Amelia LeGarde ([49:14](#)):

Always a privilege to be able to have other people to talk about this with, so I'm loving it. Thank you.

Jessica Toft ([49:20](#)):

Wonderful. Um, and if this is interesting to you listeners, our next podcast relates to resistance to managerialism and social work practice to help engage professional discretion. So hopefully you'll listen to the next podcast as well. And I wanna send a big thank you to the Center for Advanced Studies in Child Welfare for this platform and to our listeners for your interest. Uh, take care. Have a wonderful day.

Speaker 5 ([49:48](#)):

This podcast was supported in part by a grant from the Minnesota Department of Human Services, Children and Family Services Division.