

Using Stories to Teach Ethics in Family Science

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ABSTRACT. The issues our students will face as practicing family science professionals are complex and require the ability to translate and apply ethical principles and guidelines. Family science faculty members are responsible for sensitizing students to situations they may face in professional practice, supporting them in developing ethical reasoning skills and awareness of moral and ethical behavior, and introducing students to the notion of ambiguity related to ethics and ethical situations (Kitchener, 1986). Addressing these goals in the classroom can be challenging. Faculty need tools to teach this critical content in meaningful, engaging, and effective ways. One pedagogical approach that can address these needs is the use of stories. This paper shares one faculty member's experience with using stories as a means of teaching ethics in the family science classroom. Recommendations and guidelines for practice are also addressed.

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The National Council on Family Relations (NCFR) has adopted a set of ethical principles and guidelines to guide the professional practice of family scientists (NCFR, 1998; Adams, Dollahite, Gilbert, & Keim, 2001; Adams, Gilbert, Dollahite, & Keim, 2015). According to these guidelines, family science professionals must “understand and abide by ethical principles and assist others to do so” (NCFR, 1998). As family science faculty, a key part of performing this task occurs through our teaching in the family science classroom.

In today’s postmodern era, it can a challenge to know what “moral, responsible, or professional behavior” is (Adams et al., 2001, 2015). Therefore, the need to address issues related to ethics and ethical decision-making in family science is all the more critical. The issues our students will face as practicing family science professionals (which include but are not limited to serving as Certified Family Life Educators) are highly complex (Adams et al, 2001, 2015; Palm, 2015) and require the ability to translate and apply these guidelines. As faculty, we must support students in mastering, versus simply understanding, ethics and the process of ethical decision-making (Adams et al., 2001, 2015; Schvaneveldt, Payne, Hubler, & Merrill, 2013).

Kitchener (1986) suggests education on ethics should

- Help students become sensitive to the wide range and the complexity of issues they may face in professional practice
- Support development of ethical reasoning skills
- Enforce our and students’ responsibility to behave in a moral, ethical manner
- Introduce students to the notion of ambiguity related to ethics and ethical situations.

Addressing these goals in the family science classroom can be challenging for various reasons. Some students may find issues related to ethics to be value laden, uncomfortable, and best left to discuss only on “ethics day” and never again. Students may feel that knowing how to make ethical decisions and behave in an ethical manner is something they “just know” and therefore do not need education on this topic. As faculty, we may also have concerns about teaching ethics. Ethical decision-making is more of a “craft” than a science (Pawlukewicz & Ondrus, 2013), which can push us out of our comfort zones (Cohen, McDaniels, & Qualters, 2005). We may avoid difficult conversations related to ethics because we are not sure if we know the answers or because we lack experiences that represent challenges our students may face in the field.

As faculty, we need tools to challenge and support students (Brookfield, 2015) when addressing this critical topic in our discipline. As a discipline, we need to develop strategies for teaching that lead students to engage in ethical behavior and practice (Schvaneveldt et al., 2013). Such strategies must address complexities of ethical practice and decision-making (Schvaneveldt et al., 2013) and expose students to ethical dilemmas within contexts (Adams et al., 2001, 2015). One pedagogical approach that can address this challenge is the use of stories in the classroom. In particular, “real life” stories from professionals in the field can add depth, relevance, and reality to our discussions of ethical practice in family life education.

Stories are a natural part of effective teaching for many instructors (Bain, 2004). They can be a powerful way of connecting with others and making sense of our own experiences. Stories can help us understand others and ourselves (Lawrence & Paige, 2016), connect us to our students, enhance the relevance of our subject matter, and help us reach wider ranges of learners (McNett, 2016). Storytelling may be particularly useful in the family science classroom when discussing ethics because storytelling “facilitates thinking, enhance(s) imagination and visualization... supports the review and understanding of situations (specific to professional practice), strengthens the creation of caring communities, and links theory and practice” (Koenig & Zorn, 2002). Stories can be shared in the classroom through case studies, longer narratives, anecdotes, short vignettes, and more (McNett, 2016). Collecting stories from professionals in the field can also provide us with a window into experiences and settings with which we are not familiar.

This paper will share my experiences with using stories I collected from interviews with family science professionals in a specific and unique setting—rural America. My desire to have better understanding of the ethical dilemmas my students might face in their day-to-day lives as family professionals prompted this project. Many of my students come from rural communities and plan to return to these same communities to live and work. Since family science professionals practicing in rural settings face unique challenges related to privacy, confidentiality, and dual relationships (Olsen & Archuleta, 2012), I feel it is important to discuss these and related issues, and to have stories to bring these concepts to life.

Method

I conducted six interviews with family science professionals. Each professional was practicing in a rural setting in a state located in the intermountain west region of the United States. I purposefully selected participants based on the types of setting in which they were employed. I also considered the unique rural cultural geography of the state in my selection process. Each potential participant was contacted by phone so I could explain the project and invite their participation; all contacted participants agreed to participate. All participants were women who worked in various settings including Cooperative Extension, a youth crisis center, a family intervention program, Head Start, and a domestic violence agency. I provided a small gift (valued at \$20) to participants as compensation for their time. The University Institutional Review Board approved the project (including procedures for protecting participant confidentiality). The University Center for Teaching and Learning funded this research.

Interviews were conducted in-person using standardized interview protocol (Creswell, 2007) at locations that participants selected. Specifically, I asked participants about their roles and duties at their workplaces, about challenges and rewards of working in rural communities, and about ethical dilemmas they encountered in their work as rural family professionals. I used this definition of an ethical dilemma as a starting point for our conversation:

A situation in which it is hard to know what is the right thing to do. Sometimes an ethical dilemma occurs when there are policies, rules, or laws that say one thing and you feel like you need to do another. Other times they occur when there is more than one right way to handle a specific situation.

Each interview lasted between one and three hours. I audiotaped the interviews. A third party transcribed the interview tapes. I reviewed these transcripts and identified themes related to ethical practice for rural family science professionals.

Results

Dual relationships, everyday ethics, and small-town issues and rewards emerged as themes related to ethical practice for rural family science professionals.

Dual relationships. Dual relationships occur when a professional has more than one relationship with a client (Boisen & Bosch, 2005). An example is having your child's teacher as a student in your parent education class. In rural communities, these relationships are often inevitable (Gonyea, Wright, & Earl-Kulkosky, 2014; Strom-Gottfried, 2005) and may be sources of significant stress and challenge (Boisen & Bosch, 2005; Chipp et al., 2011; Gillespie & Redivo, 2012). The professionals I interviewed confirmed the reality of these challenging relationships. One example was a dual relationship between a staff member and a director of another community-based program:

One of my staff members really wanted her child to get into a certain program, so she called the director of that program and got her kid in. Of course, later on, when we have to work with that program it may be awkward because she essentially had to ask for a favor. We will have to count on those people to be professional in that situation. But, what do you do when it's your kid in question? You do what's best for your kid, and hope that it doesn't come back to hurt you professionally, and vice versa.

Another example of a dual relationship describes the challenges of being the only program in town:

All of our families in our community need to be able to access our services. Even our own staff. I need to be able to offer my own child the services that we offer. It's impossible to avoid dual relationships when you offer the only services within a two-hour drive. We have taken special precautions to make sure our records are confidential and have developed protocols to deal with this. But it doesn't always work like we want it to.

Everyday ethics. This theme describes the "everyday" nature of ethics and ethical decision-making for family professionals in rural settings. The professionals I interviewed shared that their work lives are full of ethical dilemmas and challenges on a daily basis. As one participant commented, "ethics are the decisions we make every day." The social work literature on rural ethics suggests that ethical situations are not likely to be the "big and scary" or scandalous topics. Rather, they are more likely to be everyday things: issues regarding confidentiality that come up during casual conversations with the moms at your son's baseball games (Strom-Gottfried, 2005), decisions on how you spend your time at work, and internal debates about how you address the competing needs of stakeholders who are also your friends and neighbors.

This story describes the challenges of balancing the needs of the program you work for with the expectations of stakeholders:

Balancing the different hats I wear its hard. I essentially have two part-time jobs. Yet, in reality, they are both full time. It can be really hard. The last couple of weeks I've been saying "okay, today's (program name's) day and today I am going to get this done". Or, you know "today's (the other program) and...but, you know it's always (the other program) that takes over. And, I am not sure that's right. The one program has more people involved in it and they are more demanding. And, the other program is seen as less important by some of the decision makers in our community, but the people we serve are still really important. But, they aren't the ones that are going to call and complain so it can be easy to let the other program take over.

A second quote that illustrates the everyday nature of ethics involves issues of balancing work and family:

What about the issue of balancing work and family—is this an ethical issue? If you are hired to do a job but to do it well, it takes 13 hours a day, but you also have a family? What about night meetings? How do I make time to take my kids to swimming lessons? When I got this job, I didn't think about things like this. I was just excited to have a job! I was single then. When I got married, I was more like "whoa—I barely get to see my husband." And, now I have a kid, and it's even worse.

Small town issues and rewards. This theme describes the benefits and challenges of living in a small town. In particular, issues related to dual relationships, lack of anonymity, and limited human capital were cited as issues unique to small town living. The words of this participant capture the essence of this theme:

It can be hard that everybody knows everybody, but it's really nice to have that relationship and the trust that goes there and to know that you know. I know that the people I'm dealing with really care about kids and really want to make a difference and so we're all trying to work for the common good and we get things done in this community.

Participants appreciated that they knew decision makers on a personal level and their clients or program participants as friends and neighbors. Yet, as others have noted (Boisen & Bosch, 2005), this was not without concern:

One time we had a person on our board who felt like she didn't have a good experience with us. She was on a different board that was making decisions about our funding. She called me up, though, right at the beginning and offered to excuse herself when they were making decisions. I told her that I didn't think she needed to do that. But, of course, I fretted over whether or not I should have said that or not. But, I guess the bottom line is—she can still talk and tell people things, even by her sitting out it would send a message. So, in a small town, it's not always so great that you know everyone! We don't always have success stories, and there's nothing I can do about that. And, in a small town it's more likely that someone that isn't happy with you is going to show up sometime on a committee or something.

This story provides another example of a “small-town challenge” when there are limited numbers of people to serve on boards and provide services for program clients:

We had someone that was on our board that wasn't happy with us. She then was on a committee that made decisions about our funding. She was also a service provider and came to our program to work with our families on different issues. It was really hard on her because she was the only one that could do the job. Hard on us too. It's not like someone else could come in. We just had to work through it.

Another topic typically mentioned in the literature when there are discussions of small-town rewards and challenges is the sense that “everyone knows every else's business” and that being anonymous is not an option (Boisen & Bosch, 2005; Bosch & Boisen, 2011; Chipp et al., 2011; Ginsberg, 2011; Lee, 1998; Olsen & Archuleta, 2012). This was also a significant issue for the participants in this study. The quote below illustrates this point:

Being a family professional in a rural, small community where everyone knows your name, who you are, and where you came from can be tricky. One thing I have a hard time with is childcare. I had my child in one childcare center, and it just wasn't working out for us. It wasn't a bad place, but I wanted something different. But, in this town, it's not that easy. In a small town, everyone knows your business and if you move your child from one place to another it can start a lot of gossip. You know “Why did she stop going there? Is it a bad place? Is she too picky? Is she too good for us?” It can really cause a lot of problems. I did have to take my child out of one daycare and that person is still really cold to me when I see her.

The literature on rural social workers discusses the limited social capital in rural communities and the need for rural professionals to take on multiple roles (Ginsberg, 2011). The women I interviewed shared this concern. This example illustrates the dilemma of balancing one's own social capital with the needs of the community:

I am being asked to choose between two of the part-time jobs I hold. I worry that they will end the program that I decide not to do. Partly because of money and partly because it's hard to find people who are qualified and want to live here. I want to do what's best for the community, and it's a lot of pressure. I have seen the impact of the program for low-income families. Both programs are great but different. Either decision I chose is right, but it's still going to trickle down and affect a lot of people, you know. It's just hard to know what to do. I want to do what's best for the community but also what is best for me and my family. In a small town, jobs with insurance are few and far between. And, good-paying is even harder. If I go with one program, the pay will be less. And, I have to think about that. How will I pay my bills? And, to be honest with you, I do wonder what people might say. One of the jobs is seen as more of a “better” job than the other. Not that it matters, but it doesn't look good for the program if I choose one over the other. It's just a really hard position to be in.

Discussion

The stories discussed above prompt rich conversation about real-world ethical dilemmas facing rural family science professionals and opportunities to practice the process of ethical decision-making. In this section, I share reflections on how I use stories related to each theme in the family classroom, along with additional resources that have been useful to me when discussing issues related to rural practice for family science professionals.

Dual Relationships

The stories and quotes from participants that are related to dual relationships in rural communities spark meaningful conversations on the concept and complexity of this issue. The work of Strom-Gottfried (2005), Boisen & Bosch (2005), and Bosch & Boisen (2011) has been useful in adding depth to the discussion. These authors note that dual relationships are not necessarily problematic, yet one must reflect carefully on how to manage these relationships to avoid the potential for harming one's clients. Stories related to dual relationships also allow for discussion of key principles in the NCFR Ethical Principles and Guidelines for Family Scientists (NCFR, 1998), such as Guidelines 1.04 & 1.05, which specifically address dual and multiple relationships.

The concept of dual relationships is highly relatable to my students. Many can share examples of dual relationships that they have been a part of or observed (students from urban and suburban areas also have personal stories). Students seem to appreciate having the language to discuss how dual relationships could lead to ethical challenges. However, I have also found that when students have personal experience with a concept, it is important to stay vigilant to the "Well, it happened to me and it's not a big deal" attitude and address this issue in a respectful, sensitive manner. Sharing stories from professionals in communities that are familiar to them helps to address this attitude. The stories support students in viewing this situation from multiple perspectives and becoming more sensitive to complexity and ambiguity of professional relationships (Kitchener, 1986) in rural settings.

Everyday Ethics

Stories on everyday ethics start numerous conversations about issues relevant to ethics and the family science profession. First, the stories illustrate the reality of working in a community with limited resources and how "everyday" decisions, such as how one spends time, can have consequences for clients. Second, they provide another opportunity to discuss challenges of dual relationships in rural communities. This is a critical issue for students preparing to practice in rural settings. Having multiple angles to discuss this topic is beneficial.

The everyday ethical issue of balancing work and family is not unique to rural professionals. However, when living in a rural community where you are the only professional in your field, unique issues related to balancing work and family may emerge. From my experience, many students planning to practice and live in rural areas have not considered this issue. The stories my participants have shared, along with stories I share from the professional literature (Bosch & Boisen, 2011; Chipp et al., 2011), prompt useful conversations about issues related to balancing work and family. This particular "everyday ethical issue" also opens doors to other conversations related to work and family. For example, some of my students come from religious

backgrounds that place particular value on the roles of women in the home (and discourage women working outside the home). It has been my experience that traditional conversations about work and family appear irrelevant to these students. However, their engagement increases when I present issues of work and family balance in a conversational format, with a stories from familiar settings.

The issue of balancing work and family also provides an opportunity to discuss what an ethical situation is or is not, and whether that matters. I use *NCFR Ethical Principles and Guidelines* (NCFR, 1998) to discuss principles that apply to this situation and the process detailed in the *Tools for Ethical Thinking and Practice in Family Life Education* (2012) to guide this conversation. As you can imagine, unanimous agreement on the principles and guidelines is rare. This conversation is difficult because some students tend to be leery of sharing for fear of being “wrong” or of taking a stand, but the conversation is critical for several reasons. First, the process of stepping back, defining the situation, and looking at principles models the process of ethical decision-making and gives students a chance to practice applying these skills. Ethical decision-making is a skill our students will need as professionals, and they will benefit from the opportunity to practice this process in the classroom (Pawlukewicz & Ondrus, 2013). Second, the process of discussing “whether or not this is a true dilemma” forces conversation on the grey (versus black and white) aspects of ethical decision-making, along with the complexity of issues students may face in practice (Kitchener, 1986; Pawlukewicz & Ondrus, 2013). This issue may be particularly real for new professionals as they distinguish between ethical dilemmas versus problems that can be solved with good technical skills (Palm, 2015). Using stories adds depth and meaning to conversations on this aspect of ethics in the family science classroom and in future professional practice.

Small Town Issues & Rewards

As you can imagine, stories of small-town living prompt lively discussion of a wide range of issues related to ethics (Kitchener, 1986). Students from rural areas often have their own stories of the issues and rewards of small-town living, but typically they are not familiar with the language we use to discuss ethical dimensions of professional practice. Adding language and a process to explore ethical dilemmas in rural settings allows students to look at these issues through new lenses.

One issue I noticed when I first started using these stories was that they focused primarily on negative aspects of rural work. Therefore, I now try to provide counter-balance with positive stories from my students or with examples from the literature that focus on positive aspects of working in rural areas. These include professional autonomy and independence, the opportunity for leadership and promotion, and a sense of personal contribution (Ginsberg, 2005) and satisfaction (Chipp et al., 2011).

Other issues related to ethical practice in rural settings

The themes identified above and the stories associated with them provide powerful examples of potential ethical dilemmas family science students may face in professional practice. However, it is worth noting that participants in this study did not mention several themes identified in the literature on rural practice. For example, issues related to confidentiality and privacy were not mentioned (Olsen & Archuleta, 2012; Weigel & Baker, 2012). Yet, Letiecq &

Bailey (2003; as cited in Olsen and Archuleta, 2012) have highlighted these as key issues for family life educators in rural communities. Participants did not mention issues related to being role models or having to be “perfect” (Boisen & Bosch, 2005; Bosch & Boisen, 2011; Ginsberg, 2005), or issues of personal and professional isolation (Ginsberg, 2011; Weigel & Baker, 2002). Issues related to diversity, ethnicity, and immigration were also absent from our conversations, although these issues are very real and relevant in many (if not all) rural communities (Bosch & Boisen, 2011; Ginsberg, 2011, King, 2011).

There are a few reasons these themes may not have arisen during the interviews. Perhaps participants were not comfortable disclosing these concerns to me; maybe the issues identified in the literature are not pressing issues in the lives of my participants. Therefore, during class, I share other stories and examples or ask students to share their stories. The “missing” stories highlight the variability of ethical dilemmas and situations that may or may not be relevant to family science professionals.

Recommendations for Practice

Based on my experiences using stories to teach ethics in the family science classroom, I offer the following advice. First, I strongly encourage family science faculty to conduct similar interviews with populations that may be unique to settings in which their students may be working. If possible, conduct the interviews in person. I guarantee these stories will be invaluable for teaching ethics; they will also be relevant to many other topics we address in our classrooms. In addition, the experience of traveling to communities my students come from (and may return to) helps me better understand my students and has improved my teaching practice.

Second, using stories to facilitate learning requires a unique set of skills. The effective use of stories to teach about ethics in family science requires faculty to be comfortable with being uncomfortable, to not know all the answers, and be okay with being “off the cuff” or off script. Good stories make emotional connections (McNett, 2016), which can lead to vulnerability for faculty and students. The methods examined in this paper relied heavily upon discussion, which requires attention to creating a classroom environment conducive to discussion. The writings of Bain (2004), Brookfield (2015), and Brookfield and Preskill (2005) have been invaluable to me as I have worked to achieve this goal in my classroom.

Third, I recommend using a structured ethical decision-making process to complement the use of stories in the classroom. For example, the process outlined in the *Tools for Ethical Thinking and Practice in Family Life Education* (NCFR, 2012) is useful because the process relies upon principles of relational ethics, which are critical to family professionals (NCFR, 2012). This process prompts students to first identify relationships critical to the situation (with the practitioner as focal point). Next, students are to apply a set of specific principles and identify contradictions that exist between principles and then identify solutions and a course of action. Alternatively, faculty could use a more general ethical decision-making process. These processes are plentiful in the literature. Key elements of decision-making processes typically include 1) Defining the issue at hand, 2) gathering facts and relevant information, 3) evaluating alternatives and options, 4) brainstorming possible options and alternatives, 5) acting and evaluating.

My experience using stories to discuss ethics in family science has been very positive and rewarding. The use of stories from rural family science professionals adds great depth to conversations and discussions related to ethics in the family science classes I currently teach or have taught over the years. This project provides initial anecdotal evidence to suggest that gathering stories from practicing family science professionals can be beneficial to teaching ethics in the family science classroom. Taking time to meet with professionals in communities my students came from and may return to transformed my teaching in ways that are hard to quantify.

Limitations and Future Research

Although this project is limited in scope, its results can inform future research on the experiences of family science professionals in rural settings, ethics in family science, and the role of stories in the family science classroom. Future research should build on the introductory concepts in this paper by soliciting more information on the backgrounds of rural family professionals (e.g., education, job descriptions, professional memberships, and certifications), and gathering more specific information on the types of ethical dilemmas that rural family science professionals face. In addition, future research should validate the use of stories in the undergraduate family science classroom to teach ethical decision-making. This paper is an initial attempt to address the void in the literature on ethical practice for family science professionals (Adams et al., 2015) and to provide a call for continued work in this area.

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