

# Monograph Study on Client Self-Determination

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## Abstract

There is general agreement in the literature that self-determination is to be considered as a right of all individuals, at least in a democratic society. It is also a helping technique because helping the client to solve a problem for himself gives him increased confidence in his ability to solve additional problems as they arise. The overlapping of confidentiality and self-determination principles are discussed in the review of previous studies. In this monograph, importance of client self-determination in the field (micro and mezzo) of social work is studied. This study found that, Self-determination is, however, not absolute and should be limited when it may be harmful to the individual or to the rights of others in a social work settings.

**Keyword:** Client, Self-determination

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## Introduction

Self-determination is an ethical principle in social work and it recognizes the needs and rights of clients to be free to make their own decisions and choices. It is the prime duty of the social worker to help the clients to know what the choices, decisions, implementation and its consequences of selecting any one of them will be (Barker, 2003). Social workers are suggesting that self-determination is the cornerstone of their profession. The first two standards in the NASW Code of Ethics (2008) say that social worker’s primary obligation is to honour a client’s right to self-determination and it is built on the respect and value of autonomy for the worth and dignity of all people (Dickson, 1998).

The NASW Code has just one standard that specifically refers to involuntary clients:

***Standard 1.03(d): In instances when clients are receiving services involuntarily, social workers should provide information about the nature and extent of services and about the extent of clients’ right to refuse service.***

The above standard say’s that, involuntary clients are being pressured into services, they hold certain rights. First, social worker needs to inform their clients about the services being offered in a particular setting.

For instance, the following questions are relevant.

- What are the purpose and goals of the services?
- What model of intervention will be used?
- What does research say about the benefits and risks of the services?
- What are the expectations of the client as a participant in the services?

Although producing such valued information does not comprise informed consent, it does provide informed notice. Social workers do not physically force clients into the services. As the above mentioned standard explains, social workers should tell clients about the extent of their right to reject services (Benjamin, 1981). In particular,

- Social workers should make clear what the client is mandated to do?
- What the client may refuse to do?

The worker should also help in clarify the consequences, if the client does not fulfil what has been mandated (e.g, will the client go back to court or to incarceration, will the client be denied access to his/her children?). If the clients need legal advice, the social worker should ensure that client has access to such advice. Self-determination is not a situation and it may be imperfect for involuntary clients (Pincus, 1973).

This study emerged after an exhaustive search on current secondary sources of data and field experience data from different articles and books. The term self-determination became quite common in social work literature and was considered essential to the establishment of a meaningful worker-client relationship. Two studies in the area of confidentiality were found that concerning ethical dilemmas that arise in the field of social work settings with both individuals and

groups (Strom, 1999). Self determination is a sound decision of clients from different choices available to him in social work settings or any other worker-client settings. The social worker's task was to assist the client to do this and to lend support to the client's decision (Levy, 1983). Self-Determination was considered important because it worked in individual problem solving and also because of the value placed upon individual freedom by a democratic society (Freidlander, 1958). Perlman (1965) felt that man's sense of choice is what builds in him his sense of responsibility and self-worth. Further reading concerning self-determination revealed that Perlman (1957) viewed it as individual right but expected case workers to be more authoritarian when dealing with clients whose capacities were in some ways limited.

### **Statement of the problem**

Client self-determination is one of the major principles that need to be followed while dealing with clients in social work settings. It is up to the client that the decisions need to be made. It is he/she who should follow the decisions and there is no point in someone directing them to do something. The researcher through observation found that in case work and group work, self-determination plays an important role. So this study has evaluated the self-determination concept in micro and mezzo settings.

### **In case work (Micro)**

The researcher observed that the counsellor in the agency, while dealing with a client tried to give some instructions and advices on how to re-build a good relationship with her partner. But the client could not accept or follow those instructions as that was not her decisions. After explaining the

situation, the counsellor asked the client to select some options from what he/she provides. Then the client chose options that can be followed. Thus the researcher understood the importance of the principle of client self-determination.

### **In group work (Mezzo)**

The researcher selected an SHG for group work. The SHG was at the risk of low income and weak group cohesion. Therefore the researcher introduced problem tree analysis to analyse their problems and concerns. From those inferences, the researcher tried to come up with solutions that can be undertaken by the group to excel and overcome their constraints. From those solutions a few was selected by them which could be applied to their group and they were fully confident on implementation of those solutions. Here the social worker took the role of a facilitator. Thus, only when the client is given the freedom to choose what is good for them, only then they will accept and follow it. This may not be always applicable as client self-determination can be sometimes harmful for the individual and sometimes others.

### **Results/Discussion/Implications**

There is general agreement in the literature that self-determination is to be considered a right of all individuals, at least in a democratic society. It is also a helping technique because helping the client to solve a problem for himself gives him increased confidence in his ability to solve additional problems as they arise. It may be easy for people to say, "This person committed a heinous crime. He doesn't deserve self-determination," or "These parents abused an innocent child. Of course, we have to take away their rights." As professional social workers, however, we realize that respect for the dignity and worth of people includes all people,

including those who have harmed others or pose risks of serious harm. Honouring self-determination as much as possible may be more difficult with some clients than with others.

In a setting, social workers enhance self-determination through various strategies. Some of the suggestions are explained below.

- Social workers may engage clients by acknowledging, empathizing with clients, building trust, pressures on the client, and validating client concerns, so the client is more willing to involve him or herself in services
- Social workers may give power to clients by helping those set objectives and goals that they really want to pursue even if they did not initially choose to take part in services
- Social workers may put forward clients a range of choices, including which models and methods of intercession will be used (e.g., individual vs. family counselling, cognitive vs. narrative therapy)
- In appropriate cases, social workers may advocate with authorities to respect client wishes and revise court orders or other mandates
- Self-determination in social work practice is the worker's conscious acknowledgment of the right of the client to direct his own life, to pursue his own goals, to meet his own needs, and to determine how these needs should be met, as they are compatible with the realities of his diagnosed capacities, in relation to the rights of other persons, and within the background of society's boundaries

In conclusion, for the profession of social work, this is a challenge that we accept with conviction and pride. Self-determination is, however, not absolute and should be limited when it may be harmful to the individual or to the rights of others. Self-determination is one of the principles of group work but looked to the worker to help the clients use it within the limits which are necessary in relation to the welfare of the community. So it is important in both micro and mezzo social work settings with limitations.

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