

Book Review *Ethics and Values in Social Work*

Alan Edward Barsky

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REVIEWED BY PATRICIA SHERMAN

Are you looking for a comprehensive book on social work ethics? One with lots of interesting and challenging ethical dilemmas? One that provides guidance for BSW as well as MSW students? Or one that accelerates ethical acculturation? You would do well to consider *Ethics and Values in Social Work* (2nd ed.) by Alan Edward Barsky (2019). What makes this book even more valuable is that although Barsky is teaching about ethics, he also provides an excellent tutorial on several other topics, including developmental and practice theories, legislative policy, cultural competency, and the DSM-5. There is so much that is excellent in this comprehensive text that its tempting to just point out its value and minimize the few areas that could be enhanced; however, both must be examined to help you make the most appropriate adoption decision.

The first section focuses on the foundations of values and ethics. Professional ethics cannot be understood without an understanding of the values that undergird the ethical principles guiding the profession. Barsky devotes a chapter each to the practice values and ethics of social work practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. He also discusses their application to research, micro, and policy practice. In each he does an excellent job articulating some of the ethical issues in these areas. The reason for titling the chapter on Theory, Values, and Ethics—Macro Perspectives was a bit unclear to me, because Barsky said the objective was to assess the underlying values of organizations, neighborhoods, communities, societies, and other macro systems. Yet most of the examples discuss the application of theories to an individual. The exception is a rich discussion on restorative justice that includes “a range of interventions including victim-offender mediation, family group conferencing, Native American healing circles, and faith-based healing processes” (p. 39).

The second part of the book is titled Advanced Values and Ethics and is written for MSW students. Its eight chapters focus on various fields of practice

and include two valuable chapters not in the first edition: international social work and private practice. In addition, Barsky presents his framework for managing ethical issues. It includes the usual steps provided by most authors of texts on ethics. One factor he includes that some others do not articulate as clearly is Step Two, Determine Appropriate Help. In this step he mentions identifying the type of help needed—ethical or legal advice, clinical expertise, moral or financial support, conflict resolution, risk management, implementation. I wish he had gone further to include an element I have not seen anywhere else, except in Rothman's (2013) text, and that is the information you not yet have that would enhance your ability to make an ethical decision. This may be implied in Step Two, but I believe it needs to be emphasized. It could lead to workers' exploring topics such as cultural norms and statistics on HIV transmission and survival rates for an ethical dilemma involving an HIV+ client from a different nationality. I would also recommend that he group the values elements together—professional values (Step One) and personal values (Step Three)—and include a consideration of the values of the client. Guidance on exploring client values would also be helpful. Asking students to consider the worst-case scenarios often helps them prepare for the unexpected. I tell students that I never want them to make a decision and then have to say, "I never thought that could happen." Mentioning that a potential complication of seeking advice from a supervisor is that the decision may be taken away from the worker (which could come as a relief) would be a helpful addition. Although I appreciate the author's desire not to overwhelm undergraduate students with complex decision making, I wish that he had put the framework in Part One, because I think that would provide a foundation for undergraduates being socialized into thinking ethically and help them as they navigate the discussion questions posed at the end of each chapter.

Each chapter contains the learning objectives and at least one provocative ethical issue. Barsky uses that issue throughout the chapter to guide the reader through the thought processes necessary for deciding the most appropriate course of action. He is never prescriptive, opting for the Socratic method to teach the way to make decisions rather than telling the student what to do. Barsky concludes a section on Key Points, pulling together the essence of the information in the chapter. Perhaps the most valuable element is what comes next: a series of discussion questions and exercises that encourages readers to apply the information learned in the chapter. Again, he provides no answers, although many students might wish for clearer guidance on how to determine the most ethical decision to make. This is especially true of the issues raised in Part Two that reflect many of the dilemmas that could be found by social

workers at the master's level. For example, in the chapter on mental health, values, and ethics, he presents a scenario in which a street worker meets a man who has been living on the streets for 3 weeks and refuses to go into a shelter even though the weather is frigid and there have been attacks on others living on the streets. The reader is asked to determine whether an involuntary commitment is called for because there is deep concern about the man's safety. Even experienced social workers could debate the most appropriate action to take, and beginning social workers might want a bit more direction regarding the most relevant ethical principles. But just as in real life, workers must develop that for themselves.

I appreciate his using the situation of Shirley in the chapter on advanced values and ethics to explore the area of dual relationships and wish he had called for the Code of Ethics to clarify what constitutes a professional relationship that could later turn into a dual relationship potentially leading to the risk of exploitation. We have been taught the concept of once a client, always a client, but is that really so? Certainly, a client who comes to us for psychotherapy would fit that category, but what about when a social worker sees someone in the ER for the purpose of gathering demographic data? How about when a former client becomes a colleague, a not-infrequent occurrence in substance abuse treatment? Or, as the in the case of Shirley and Chester, a student and instructor? Explicating the ways that someone could go about asking for revisions or clarification in the Code could be an invaluable tool of empowerment.

Barsky's chapter on supervision deals with many of the issues faced by supervisors. I wish he had discussed the challenge faced by a staff worker promoted to supervisor more thoroughly and how to ethically handle the changed role. His chapter on administration was thorough, and I really appreciate his including the discussion of an ethics audit. I am not sure that many agencies use this, and teaching students its value could help them advocate for it when they become workers. I would suggest that he also mention malpractice insurance in his discussion of risk management. Another valuable tool that Barsky discussed is the ethics committee. Students placed in hospitals have probably heard of them, but others may not. They have also been used in community placements, such as nursing and group homes where vulnerable adults reside. It would be invaluable if their use could be institutionalized.

Barsky is not afraid to address controversial topics such as abortion and assisted suicide. He even suggests in Chapter Two that Marxism could be an important theory to study because, in its purest form, it reflects the social work values of equality, collaboration, and maximizing human potential. He also talks

about whether to refer when something about a client is challenging to one's values, although he points in different directions when discussing referral of an LGBT client. On page 72 he seems to advocate for referral, whereas on page 110 he opts for improving one's ability to handle challenging situations. Both could be equally valid ethical options.

All in all, this is a comprehensive, well-written, student-friendly textbook that would enhance anyone's undergraduate or graduate social work practice classes. The first part is relevant for all students, and the second part would be especially valuable for graduate students. Barsky's encyclopedic knowledge of social work in general and social work ethics in particular infuses every chapter and provides a solid foundation for social work students and practitioners in their quest to become competent and ethical social work professionals. I highly recommend this book if you are looking, as I am, for an excellent resource for making the teaching of ethics both interesting and challenging.

References

Rothman, J. C. (2013). *From the front lines*. London, UK: Pearson.