



Understanding the Nuances of Ethical Behavior

A Review of

Essential Ethics for Psychologists: A Primer for Understanding and Mastering Core Issues

by Thomas F. Nagy

Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2011. 252 pp. ISBN 978-1-4338-0863-0.

\$49.95, paperback

doi: 10.1037/a0022836

Reviewed by

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Professional ethics, although often associated with health service provider psychologists, are equally important to all psychologists. Although different psychology doctoral programs provide varying degrees of formal training in the American Psychological Association's (2010) *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct*, I firmly believe it is among the most important topics for all psychologists to understand.

As the discipline has continued to become more focused on specialty training with its accompanying unique courses, less attention seems to be paid to the singular importance of ethics training for all psychologists. In order to ensure a timely graduation of doctoral students, curriculum developers have added specialty courses to the curriculum, and other courses have been removed from the list of requirements. Some doctoral programs infuse ethics training across the curriculum rather than having a separate course on ethics. The separate ethics course, where it remains, is a class that is often required only for those students who wish to become licensed rather than a class in which all doctoral students are enrolled.

Such compartmentalization of ethics education furthers the myth that it is relevant only to a subset of the discipline. Failure to develop an adequate understanding not only of the words of the code but also its nuances can lead to such future negative consequences as professional sanctions, personal embarrassment, or even job loss. Nagy's latest book, *Essential Ethics for Psychologists: A Primer for Understanding and Mastering Core Issues*, is designed to help psychologists as well as psychologists-in-training avoid such problems.

In addition to learning the difference between mandated and aspirational behavior, psychologists need a framework for developing their own understanding of the ethical decision-making process. This framework allows the psychologist to adapt to emergencies, deal with conflicts among situation-specific regulations, and understand the role of unique components of each facet of the question. Unlike some content information in psychology, definitions of ethical behavior change over time. Therefore, it is important not only to know the specifics of the current code but also the process of ethical decision making.

As a form of encouragement for remaining current on the topic, some state licensing boards require continuing education credits in ethical issues for license renewal. For those who wish to remain current but are not mandated to take continuing education courses, a range of books are available for updating knowledge. Some of these references are intended for the health service provider (e.g., Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 2008; Pope & Vasquez, 2007), while others are written for the entire spectrum of psychologists (Barnett & Johnson, 2008; Campbell, Vasquez, Behnke, & Kinscherff, 2010; Nagy, 2005).

Nagy's latest book follows the latter tradition. Although some chapters are specific to health service provider

psychologists (e.g., privacy and confidentiality, psychological assessment), others (e.g., research and publication, teaching) apply to all psychologists. He indicates that this book is intended to serve as a companion to his previous ethics casebook (Nagy, 2005), but it is also a stand-alone work. Although the current book appears to be designed primarily for classroom use, it is also a good reference for psychologists who are employed in a range of settings.

The focus of this book is more on the decision-making process than on a section-by-section presentation of the ethics code. The accompanying website (<http://pubs.apa.org/books/supp/essentialethics/>) provides links to 10 supplemental files. Especially helpful for those who use this book in the classroom are the discussion questions designed to accompany the text. There are multiple questions for each of the book's chapters. These questions can stimulate class interaction and help students appreciate the nature of ethical decision making. A broader understanding of the general topic of ethics for psychologists is provided through links to the ethics code for Canadian psychologists as well as to the Association of State and Provincial Psychology Boards's supervision guidelines. There is also an extensive reading list subdivided by topic area.

Nagy's discussion of the differences between deontological and teleological approaches to ethical decision making provides an interesting foundation for understanding what many perceive as the gray areas of APA's ethics code. It also provides a foundation for the reader to develop an internal ethical decision-making mechanism. Nagy covers multiple models for ethical decision making when the code is not clear about the appropriate action to be taken.

For example, a common ethical dilemma for psychologists involves the issue of multiple relationships. Although some of these relationships are clearly inappropriate, in other cases the decision is not as clear. Nagy provides several models that can be used by the psychologist who is trying to decide whether it is ethical to maintain multiple roles with a specific person. These models include not only the traditional factors but also the role of less frequently included topics such as gender and culture. Vignettes are used throughout the book to illustrate points made and to bring them into a real-world context.

The reader who expects clear answers to ethical questions will be disappointed by this book. Although considerable information is provided regarding a range of ethical issues, the strength of this book is its ability to illustrate the personal side of ethical decision making rather than the absolute answer to questions. This book can be used for graduate-level ethics courses but is also a good read for psychologists at any career stage and in any employment setting. It not only merits a place on each psychologist's bookshelf but also should actually be taken from that shelf periodically and reread to stimulate thinking about ethical issues.

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