The good and the bad news about Kim Strom-Gottfried's book *Straight Talk About Professional Ethics* is that it is written from a social work perspective. Given Strom-Gottfried's position as the Smith P. Theimann Distinguished Professor of Ethics and Professional Practice at the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, she brings to bear the rich heritage of the profession, with its commitment to social justice and change. Related to this point is the underlying focus of the book that “ethical and clinical excellence are intertwined” (p. xi).

On the other hand, the profession-specificity of social work presents some limitations for readers from alternate mental health fields such as psychology, counseling, or psychiatry. Detailed reference to the...
Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers, to the exclusion of other professional ethical codes, presents some limitations for non–social workers who want to garner a greater understanding of the application of their ethical standards to professionally challenging situations.

The stated purpose of the volume is comprehensive and designed to assist the professional to develop the deliberative skills to address common ethical challenges in the areas of patient self-determination, informed consent, conflicts of interest, maintenance of professional boundaries, confidentiality and privacy, competence, professionalism, and nondiscrimination and cultural competence. Before getting to the meat and potatoes of the book, in which Strom-Gottfried applies her evaluative model for addressing ethical challenges, she devotes a chapter to exploring some of the philosophical underpinnings of ethical behavior. Although reviewing Kohlberg's moral developmental phases and Plato's contribution to our Western values regarding ethics may be interesting and may make for stimulating discussion in the classroom, it has little practical and timely relevance to the clinician in the trenches. Most of us do not undertake a historical review of the great Western thinkers when trying to decide what the ethical response is to a patient's homicidal or suicidal ideation. Also, clinicians who might not have advanced to Kohlberg's postconventional phase of moral development would be unlikely consumers of any text on ethics, nor would they take the time to rationally develop an approach to ethical behavior. Whether one is a green or gray professional, it is assumed that the audience for this volume is already sufficiently acculturated to accept adherence to professional standards of conduct.

Strom-Gottfried attempts to address the various professional specialties of social workers—researcher, clinician, instructor, and supervisor—and highlight ethical issues unique to their roles. This aspect of the book is too broad and diminishes the utility of the book for any one category of professional. A separate text devoted to each specialty is indicated, and there is precedence for this effort within psychology, for example for research with human subjects (Sales & Folkman, 2000).

The most useful aspect of the book is the template for ethical decision making that the author offers, based on the questions of “Who,
What, When, Where, Why, and How.” She tackles standards for ethical practice by offering obvious case examples of ethical and unethical behavior followed by more challenging, ambiguous cases that require a rigorous application of her decision-making process. The cases used to portray ethical dilemmas that she has collected over the course of her career are very engaging and thought provoking. Multiple factors such as age, class, ethnicity, and sexual orientation are artfully and sensitively woven into the case examples.

A significant flaw in the case examples is the absence of more recent developments that present new and unique ethical challenges to mental health providers, such as the introduction of telehealth services, the market saturation of managed mental health care, the erosion of income for some sectors of mental health service providers, and HIPAA privacy and security rules.

Probably the greatest contribution of the book, which may be worth the cost of purchasing the book, is Chapter 11, “Sustaining Ethical Habits.” Here Strom-Gottfried delineates a variety of barriers to ethical behavior. They are summarized as follows.

Risk aversion is the temptation to “dumb down” or avoid clinical challenges to guard against possible litigation. This impediment to ethical behavior reminds me of the frequent admonition therapists offer to reluctant patients to “step into their fears” and to live life courageously.

Intrapersonal characteristics is a recognition of our defects of character, which may lead to unethical or unexamined behavior. Strom-Gottfried recommends countering this barrier by relying on the wisdom and counsel of others.

Environmental factors identifies the impact of our professional environment on our behavior, whether it is oppressive organizational policies that are anathema to ethical behavior or, as is the case with many clinicians who are in solo practice, our solitary existence that may breed major misperceptions and irrational beliefs.

Misuse, the “use it or lose it” paradigm, acknowledges that by neglecting the exercise of our moral judgment we fall victim to what Strom-Gottfried calls the “boiled frog phenomenon.” This graphic and disturbing image refers to the danger of becoming so accustomed to the
ambient organizational temperature in which we work that we do not notice imperceptible changes and eventually succumb when the heat is turned up.

Last, there is disuse. This occurs when we lose our ethical compass through neglect. The author offers some practical solutions, such as exercising our ethical muscle through Web-based resources such as www.globalethics.org, interacting on professional electronic mailing list ethics conversations, or challenging the premises and outcomes of some of our favorite TV docudramas.

For psychologists looking for more directly relevant resources, there are books that are companion volumes to the American Psychological Association's 2002 Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct, such as Bersoff (2003), Nagy (2005), and Knapp and VandeCreek (2005).

References


