

Book Review

Reamer, Frederic G. (2006). *Ethical Standards in Social Work: A Review of the NASW Code of Ethics, 2nd Edition*. Washington, DC: NASW \$40.95

Reviewed by Stephen M. Marson, Ph.D.

Within the context of social work values and ethics, Frederic Reamer has become a household word. For example, during six years of committee meetings, we often discussed ethical dilemmas. Often a committee member began the discussion by saying, “Well, Reamer’s says....” With that in mind, I wanted to quantify Reamer’s influence on the study of social work values and ethic. Since its inception, *The Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics* has published 24 refereed articles (this count excludes books reviews, forum articles, editorials, and letters to the editor). Of these, Reamer is cited within 13 articles and not cited within 7. Of the articles that *do* mention him, Reamer is cited 77 times. He is cited more times than any other single author. Thus, we can conclude that Frederic Reamer is the ideal person for the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) to select as the author of *Ethical Standards in Social Work: A Review of the NASW Code of Ethics*.

Ethical Standards in Social Work: A Review of the NASW Code of Ethics reviewed herein is the second edition. The first edition was published in 1998. After the NASW Delegate Assembly approved major changes within the *Code*, NASW asked Reamer to compose a volume that would address the major revisions. It was apparent that the 1996 revisions of the standards were more complex than the previous standards. In addition, practice in the social work environment was becoming more and more litigious. What is the need for a second edition?

There are three primary reasons for the second edition. First, in 1999, the NASW Delegate Assembly made a modest but critical revision. Standard 1.07c was changed. The following phrase was deleted: “when laws or regulations require disclosure without a client’s consent.” According to Reamer, this change has brought forth a great deal of confusion regarding disclosure of information affecting undocumented workers. The second edition addresses the concerns of practicing social workers regarding Standard 1.07c.

Second, litigiousness has increased since the first edition. I doubt that the increase in lawsuits is a reflection of increasingly bad social work practice, but rather a change within our social structure.

Third, in Reamer's own words (page x):

This edition updates the literature and examines a number of emerging issues in more depth (for example, boundary issues, social workers' use of computer technology, and involvement in end-of-life decisions). It also includes a new appendix that provides readers with an opportunity to apply the *Code of Ethics* to case scenarios.

The second edition includes most of the passages found in the first edition. One way to assess changes in the second edition is to scrutinize the citations. The first edition includes 280 citations, while the second edition cites 286. Reamer deleted 23 citations and added 29 in the second edition. A few of the citations were meant to update information from the first edition, but most of them include new information that was not addressed or unavailable for the first edition.

The book is like a roadmap for clarifying the standards so often misinterpreted. For example, I heard a social worker note that the *Code* states that practitioners should never accept gifts from clients. This is not what the *Code* says, but a cursory reading of the *Code* could easily be interpreted in this manner. Reamer's major contribution is his clarity. He demonstrates that professionals need to understand the *Code* for the betterment of their clients and as a standard to avoid a malpractice suit.

I can identify only two ethical issues that lack clarity within this book. The first is Reamer's discussion of *Tarasoff v. Board of Regents of the University of California*. Simply stated, this California decision mandates that a clinician must breach confidentiality if a client threatens to kill another person. In particular, the California court demanded that the clinician must warn the potential victim – not merely the police. Some social work textbooks treat *Tarasoff* as universal. It is not. Some state supreme courts and state legislators actually prohibit the clinician from warning the potential victim. Reamer's explanation of this is weak. All social workers must check

their local jurisdiction for determining their legal responsibility. As a side issue, research demonstrates that warning the potential victim does not have the intended effect.¹

My second concern relates to the ethics of computers and electronic media utilization. Most of the issues addressed within this volume are well cited, but not computers and electronic media. Even though a number of publications address the ethics of technology and social work practice, Reamer did not cite as he does in other ethical issues in this volume. With the rapid growth of clinical practice on the Internet, one would expect more. For example, the simple art of password selection and password change has ethical implications for social work practice. These issues are absent.

Even with the two weaknesses, I strongly recommend the second edition of *Ethical Standards in Social Work: A Review of the NASW Code of Ethics* be adopted at every academic library that has holdings for accredited BSW and MSW/Ph.D. programs. Faculty members need to read this volume and to require their students to do the same. Every social work practitioner should read it and have it available on the shelf in times of ethical conflicts.

¹ See: Furlong, A. (2003). The why of sharing and not the what: Confidentiality and analytic purpose. In C. Levin, A. Furlong and M. K. O'Neil (Eds.), *Confidentiality: Ethical Perspectives and Clinical Dilemmas*. (pp. 40-49). Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press.