

Book Review

Ethics in Practice: A Guide for Counsellors

Edited by Kathie Crocket, Margaret Agee, and Sue Cornforth

Dunmore Publishing, Wellington, 2011

Reviewed by Tim Bond

A good book on ethics is like travelling. It should transport the reader to encounters with the new and unfamiliar that set everyday life in a fresh context and open up new possibilities and insights. I read this book with interest as someone who has been actively involved in developing the ethical practice of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy and who enjoys my contacts and friendships with New Zealand counsellors. I also watch developments in the NZAC with great interest via the web. However, none of this quite prepared me for this book. Distinctively different from any of the other texts on counselling ethics that I have read, it is a bold experiment in advancing ethical policy and practice.

There are two main tasks in developing professional ethics. The first is constructing ethics that are appropriate for their purpose and intended audience. The second is engaging the profession in adopting and applying the ethics. I will consider these challenges in reverse order in this review of *Ethics in Practice: A Guide for Counsellors*.

The fate of most ethical codes and frameworks is to gather dust, untouched and unread on bookshelves or on the computer hard drives of busy professionals, until an issue of sufficient seriousness is encountered that the professional feels ethically troubled or at risk of being censored. Ethics are something that we consider in our training then all too frequently let fall into the background as new developments in counselling theory and practice and the challenges of routine practice compete for our attention in the foreground. This makes it difficult for national associations to engage their membership fully in revisions and updates of their ethical codes and frameworks. This difficulty is compounded by the rather dull language of duty, responsibilities, and accountability that is usually found in codes of ethics. Writing such codes requires the linguistic precision of poetry but without the evocative and persuasive power of poetic metaphor.

One way of exciting interest and engaging the ethical imagination is to unpack the rather dull and compressed language of codes and demonstrate their practical

application by providing a more lively commentary that links ethics with the challenges of practice. Typically, such commentaries are written by sole authors or by small groups. This book is much bolder in its attempt to engage a wide readership within the NZAC by involving 29 contributors, from a variety of cultural identities and with experience of providing counselling in different contexts. This approach can be risky. The multiplicity of voices has the potential to create confusion and incoherence, with a detrimental effect on the book and the reputation of the organisation behind it. However, if successful, the rewards can be considerable. The cumulative impact of a focused examination of issues of interest to counsellors in a spirit of respectful dialogue can in itself become a powerful and persuasive example of ethical practice. This book succeeds in becoming such a powerful example.

This success will be due in substantial part to the hard work of the editors. Editing books is much harder than it looks. I do not know what private tribulations were suffered by the editors in the process of bringing this book together. I know from experience of my own editing projects that the tribulations can be considerable, without ever having attempted anything as ambitious as this project. The editors—Kathie Crocket, Margaret Agee, and Sue Cornforth—are to be congratulated on producing a book that is both enriched by the multiplicity of voices and yet sustains a sense of ethical focus and coherence. It powerfully communicates a sense of an ethic that engages with differences among people, and it models what it espouses—namely, partnership that takes account of varied individual and collective identities. This alone is good reason for reading this book—but there is much more to it.

The coherence of the book comes from a combination of its structure along with the sense of being ethically positioned and confident of its position. This position is established in the opening and closing sections. I will return later to the issue of position because it is distinctive. For the moment I will consider the structure and content of the middle sections that consider ethics in practice. These are the sections to which busy practitioners are likely to refer for discussions of specific ethical issues, for examples of good practice, and for guidance on how to implement the NZAC Code of Ethics. These contributions make up 80% of the book and are organised in distinct sections.

The first of these sections considers counsellors “presenting ourselves as professionals.” The seven contributions cover many of the issues related to advertising, setting up a private practice, and soliciting private clients. One contribution considers the ethical dilemmas around using testimonials from clients to promote a service and

explains the NZAC approach—which explicitly forbids the use of testimonials from clients—then proposes alternative sources of positive information to promote a service. This is one area in which ethical practice varies between the UK and New Zealand. In the UK, we recognise the potential difficulties surrounding clients refusing, or giving valid consent, to provide testimonials within a relationship of unequal power, including the potential difficulties relating to issues of privacy. We expect counsellors to be accountable on these issues but have not gone so far as to prohibit the use of client testimonials. This section of the book concludes with the vexed question of research that essentially leads to publication for the public good but may compromise the counselling work, which is typically undertaken in conditions of privacy. It also considers other challenges in the production of professional knowledge through research.

The largest section includes 17 different contributions and is entitled “Some pragmatics for practice.” A wide range of topics of interest to counsellors is covered, which I found particularly interesting because they address some of the recurrent ethical challenges that are of concern to both the novice and the most experienced counsellor. In this section we get two views on “counsellors’ notes” and on “even-handedness in relationship counselling.” These companion pieces illustrate the application of an NZAC ethical principle in different contexts and successfully serve their explicit purpose of adding “depth perception” on the selected issues. A similar sense of strengthening ethical depth perception is elicited by three contributions on multiple relationships as a general ethical issue followed by a consideration of multiple relationships in church and pastoral counselling and, in contrast, in LGTBI communities. It would probably have made the book too unwieldy to have repeated this process on all topics, but having multiple perspectives on a similar issue is a distinctive strength of this book. It is an approach that could have been used to great advantage in that most stressful and ethically challenging of situations in which a client poses an imminent threat of serious harm to him- or herself or to others.

The next section concerns counsellors and the law. The four contributions cover the relationship between law and ethics, appearing as a witness, supporting a client in court, and the counsellor’s responsibilities when aware of illegal practices. In my experience, these issues cause the greatest concern for counsellors, and the essentials of each topic are clearly communicated.

The penultimate section considers “When things go wrong.” Here, six contributions consider responses to a colleague’s practice being impaired, the decision-making process

about whether to complain, being a complainant or a respondent, and the regional ethics processes.

It will be clear that I am very positive about this book, and after reading it several times to write this review I have been asking myself whether there are any topics that have been missed that I would have expected to find in a book of this kind with its particular focus. There are some issues missing. I expected to see more about the management of situations in which the counsellor has conscientious objections to one aspect of an agency-endorsed role; for example, over the termination of pregnancy or, from the opposite point of view, excluding women from the right to control their fertility. I think even more challenging may be the dilemmas that arise when clients are making good use of counselling to develop themselves but in ways that conflict with the counsellor's or the profession's values. I would have expected these issues to have been included because they take on added significance in a book that adopts an ethic of relationship and partnership. Similarly, issues of gender and disability seem curiously understated as ethical issues. One of the issues about which I feel quite ethically challenged as a counsellor is how to respond to culturally endorsed power differentials within communities that disadvantage a client. How do I combine being respectful of difference with being effective in cultural contexts in which I may be regarded as an outsider? These ethical dilemmas may be overlooked in more individualised approaches to ethics but can take on added significance in ethics that emphasise social justice.

Finally, I will return to my opening point about the significance of constructing ethics that are appropriate for their purpose and intended audience. This is clearly of critical importance for any evaluation of a book of this type, intended to inform and support busy practitioners. It is particularly challenging in professional ethics where there is a philosophical basis for different approaches to ethics that may be unfamiliar and of little interest to practitioners. In my view, an excellent text in professional ethics does not shirk this issue but grapples with it in clear and accessible language that explains the significance of the ethical issues at stake and how they relate to contemporary ethical challenges. Succinctly, it requires the adoption of an ethical position and then systematically working out the implications of the selected position. Here, I think this book is particularly strong. The opening and closing sections are among the best I have read for a very long time and capture something that is distinctive in the values and ethics promoted by the NZAC.

There are so many good contributions in this book that I have avoided identifying them individually in the interests of brevity. Nonetheless, the chapter "Te Tiriti and

ethics as dialogue: A unique call to partnership” is particularly thought-provoking for someone like me who is immersed in professional ethics in the UK, with all the virtues and detriments of being Pākehā. It sets the context for an ethic rooted in a concern for social justice that provides the ground for a very distinctive approach to the issue of relationship and partnership. This is followed by equally informative discussions about the relationship between culture and ethics, and how the NZAC’s approach is positioned with regard to primarily European ethical story lines. It is so hard to do this well, yet each contribution by the multiple authors moves the ethical narrative forward to a distinctive position that provides the platform for consideration of the specific issues of interest to counsellors in the following sections. The final section is similarly challenging, placing counselling ethics in the bigger context of sustainability and environmental ethics.

When I consider the book as a whole, it creates a coherent agenda for challenging the notion of counselling ethics either as being individualised and private or as generalised abstract principles. It is an elaboration of an ethic of social justice with a particular focus on relationship and partnership, forged in a nation under the distinctive dynamics of geographical separation by distance yet with the interconnectedness of people with different backgrounds and cultural identities. The volume is a source of valuable ethical guidance for counsellors in New Zealand but is also a useful challenge and support to those of us working elsewhere.

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