

Navigating Ethical Advocacy: Adaptive Leadership and Moral Courage in Politically Charged Contexts

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Abstract: Helping professionals constantly struggle to navigate the complexities of ethical dilemmas while promoting just and equitable policies in the current unstable political environment. With emphasis on how social workers and other helping professionals can evaluate and resolve conflicting policies to advance social justice, this essay examines how moral courage and adaptive leadership are essential to this work. Drawing on an ethical decision-making model and incorporating Afrocentric principles such as humanistic values and autonomy, the essay provides a framework for understanding the empowerment and self-determination necessary for effective advocacy. Reflecting on these concepts can help professionals sharpen their approach to ethical leadership and drive meaningful change. The essay concludes with three thought-provoking questions to strengthen ethical advocacy and decision-making in today's politically volatile world.

Keywords: Afrocentric Perspective, autonomy, belonging, ethical decision-making, humanistic values, social justice, well-being

Introduction

In a world where political polarization grows daily, helping professionals are increasingly called upon to navigate complex ethical dilemmas (McIntosh et al., 2021). These professionals often work within systems that challenge their core values while advocating for fair and equitable policies (Reamer, 2018b). Tools such as adaptive leadership and moral courage are essential for making complex judgments under systemic barriers that threaten clients' well-being and sense of belonging. This essay explores the critical role of advocacy in politically charged environments, discussing how social workers and other helping professionals can apply ethical decision-making frameworks to make difficult decisions and stand up for what is right. Drawing from the Afrocentric Perspective, this paper examines humanistic values and autonomy as guiding principles for understanding empowerment and ethical advocacy in social work practice (Foster, 2011, 2014; White, 2021; Wright, 2013, 2025).

Adaptive Leadership in Times of Uncertainty

One framework that stands out in navigating these challenges is adaptive leadership, a concept first introduced by Heifetz and Linsky (2002). This approach is about tackling challenges that do not have easy answers. It is not about solving technical problems with straightforward solutions but about confronting adaptive challenges that require flexibility, resilience, and creativity. In social work, adaptive leadership is critical when political shifts deeply impact marginalized communities. Addressing these challenges involves difficult conversations, challenging unjust policies, and pushing for systemic change (Wright, 2022, 2025).

Take, for instance, social workers who work with undocumented populations. These professionals may face tough ethical decisions when immigration policies contradict their profession's values (National Association of Social Workers, 2021, Sections 1.01, 1.02, and 1.16). An adaptive leadership approach would call for carefully examining the political climate, identifying allies, and maintaining an unwavering commitment to advocacy for policies that honor human dignity. Even when the path is unclear, social workers can take action, knowing their work is rooted in social justice principles (Martinez & Fleck-Henderson, 2014).

Moral Courage and Ethical Decision-Making

In politically volatile times, moral courage becomes indispensable for professionals, particularly social workers and nurses. Kidder (2005) defines *moral courage* as the strength to act in accordance with one's ethical beliefs, even when such actions may involve personal risk. Reamer (2018b) further emphasizes that true leadership in social work requires moral courage, the willingness to challenge authority and take on unpopular causes in the name of justice, even when facing risk of opposition and failure. This concept is particularly salient in environments where institutional policies may perpetuate harm, compelling practitioners to confront ethical dilemmas head-on. For instance, Numminen et al. (2019) highlight that nurses often face challenging ethical issues within hierarchical hospital structures, requiring them to advocate for patient welfare despite potential repercussions from their superiors.

Moral courage aligns with the findings of Taraz et al. (2019), who emphasized that an ethical climate within healthcare settings fosters moral courage among nursing staff, ultimately benefiting patients and promoting a culture of empathy and cooperation. Moreover, ethical decision-making frameworks, such as Reamer's (2018a) model, serve as critical tools for navigating these complex situations. Reamer's framework offers a systematic way to navigate ethical dilemmas. The key steps in the process are as follows:

1. **Identifying the Ethical Issue:** This step involves recognizing the dilemma and understanding how conflicting values are at play.
2. **Identifying Affected Parties:** Who will be impacted by the decision? This step ensures that professionals are aware of the consequences for various groups.
3. **Exploring Possible Actions:** What are the potential responses? This step helps brainstorm alternatives and consider their pros and cons.
4. **Considering Ethical and Legal Implications:** Professionals should weigh their options against ethical codes, legal guidelines, and professional standards.
5. **Consulting with Others:** Consulting with colleagues or ethics committees can shed light on perspectives that may not have been previously considered.

6. Making the Decision and Documenting the Process: After thoughtful consideration, professionals must take action and record their reasoning.
7. Monitoring and Evaluating the Impact: Ethical decision-making does not stop at the action; it requires ongoing reflection and adjustment to ensure continued alignment with ethical principles.
(Reamer, 2018a)

For example, imagine a social worker in a public school who encounters a policy requiring the reporting of undocumented students to immigration authorities. This situation creates an ethical conflict between following institutional policy and protecting vulnerable children. By applying Reamer's framework, the social worker can consider their choices' legal, ethical, and human rights implications and advocate for policies prioritizing student safety.

The Afrocentric Perspective: Humanistic Values and Autonomy in Advocacy

In my article "Black Males' Plight to Breathe in America—Black Racial Injustice" (Wright, 2022), I introduce important Afrocentric principles to the discourse, specifically humanistic values and autonomy, which offer a robust framework for understanding how advocacy can drive social change.

The Afrocentric Perspective: A Foundation for Advocacy

Before discussing the principles of humanistic values and autonomy, it is important to provide context for the Afrocentric Perspective (ACP) and its relevance to advocacy. As articulated by Molefi Kete Asante (1980), Afrocentricity advocates for the centrality of people of African ancestry within the context of their own personal and historical experiences, emphasizing human agency, location, centeredness, and subject position rather than victimhood. Building upon this foundation, the ACP emerged as a culturally grounded social work practice model that acknowledges, codifies, and integrates shared cultural experiences, values, and interpretations among individuals of African origin (Wright et al., 2018). This perspective also considers the interaction of race with other sociocultural characteristics, including gender, ethnicity, social class, ability status, and sexual orientation. While rooted in African-centered thought and cultural traditions, the ACP offers broader insights into resilience, collective responsibility, empowerment, and social justice that are relevant to advocacy across diverse communities. It highlights traditions such as family, spirituality, community solidarity, empowerment, cooperation, creativity, and mutual aid, which serve as foundational social and cultural strengths within social work practice.

Humanistic Values

Humanistic values prioritize eliminating human oppression and enhancing human potential through principles that advance equity, fairness, and social and economic justice (Wright, 2026). This principle is fundamentally concerned with fostering well-being and belonging. *Well-being*

reflects a holistic state of physical, mental, and emotional health associated with happiness, life satisfaction, and stability. *Belonging* refers to a sense of acceptance, connection, and value within one's community. Both are essential to human flourishing, and a strong sense of belonging significantly influences overall well-being (Gautam et al., 2024).

These humanistic values help social workers challenge ideologies, policies, and systemic practices that limit human potential and obstruct positive social change across communities (Gregoire et al., 2025; Martin & Martin, 2002; Mbiti, 1970; Wright et al., 2018).

Within the social work profession, this principle calls practitioners to oppose policies and systems that disproportionately harm marginalized populations and undermine their well-being and sense of belonging. Whether confronting restrictive voting laws or the systemic neglect of communities of color, advocacy grounded in human dignity, justice, and fairness remains central to social work practice. Humanistic values should therefore guide efforts to advance justice, equity, and inclusion for all (Foster, 2011, 2014; White, 2021; Wright, 2013, 2026).

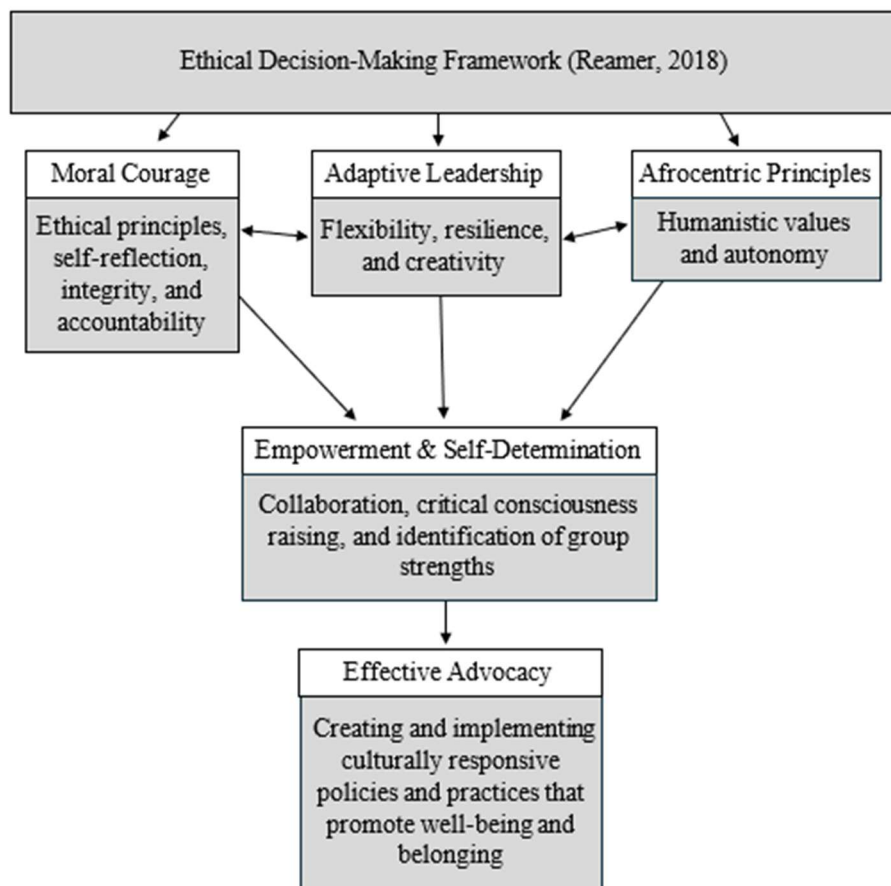
Autonomy

As understood in the Afrocentric context, *autonomy* involves resisting oppression and actively working to dismantle it. This principle emphasizes the importance of self-determination in advocacy (Foster, 2011, 2014; White, 2021; Wright, 2013, 2025). Social workers and other professionals must challenge oppressive systems and empower individuals and communities to take control of their futures. Advocacy efforts must, therefore, focus not just on changing policies but on strengthening the ability of marginalized communities to shape the decisions that affect their lives (Wright, 2022).

See Figure 1 for a conceptual framework visualizing the key principles of effective, ethical advocacy discussed in this essay.

Figure 1

Key Principles of Effective, Ethical Advocacy



Reflective Questions for Advocacy and Ethical Decision-Making

In my advocacy work, I have found the following three reflective questions helpful in guiding ethical decision-making:

1. How can I apply adaptive leadership to my advocacy efforts, especially when navigating political uncertainty?
2. In what ways do my personal and professional values align or conflict with existing policies, and how can ethical decision-making models help me address these challenges?
3. How can the principles of humanistic values and autonomy help me advocate more effectively for marginalized communities?

Conclusion

In sum, advocating for ethical change in politically charged environments presents significant challenges, but helping professionals remain essential catalysts for change. Social workers and other professionals can navigate these complex situations effectively by utilizing adaptive leadership, demonstrating moral courage, and applying ethical decision-making frameworks (Reamer, 2018a, 2018b). Additionally, Afrocentric principles such as humanistic values and autonomy provide a much-needed framework for understanding that empowerment is essential to effective advocacy (Martin & Martin, 2002; Ramirez et al., 2024; Wright, 2022, 2025). By reflecting on these approaches, professionals can strengthen their ability to create meaningful change in today's unpredictable sociopolitical climate. As the late Congressman and civil rights icon Rep. John Lewis urged, "We must engage in good trouble, necessary trouble" (as cited in Hayden, 2020, para. 3) to confront injustice and push for transformative change. Using this reflection on ethical advocacy, social workers and related professionals can better address systemic inequalities and create culturally responsive policies and practices that benefit their client systems' overall well-being and belonging within their ecosystems (Watson, 2023).

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