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Ethics Beyond the Obvious: Psychologically Based Ethics Instruction

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Substantive instruction in ethics is a requirement of state licensing boards and professional organizations. This fact reflects the importance the profession gives to instructing students and refreshing practitioners about the ethical dimension of their work. The counseling profession's focus on teaching ethics is paralleled by similar requirements in other professions: law, medicine, and business come most readily to mind (Robinson, Dixon, Preece, & Moodley, 2007). The near universality of some form of ethics instruction highlights both the importance of ethics and the realization that appropriate, in this case ethical, behavior does not come naturally: our first instinct may not be the best.

In the counseling field there is a remarkable consistency in what is taught and how it is taught (Hill, 2004). Ethics texts tend to cover essentially the same material and are organized in a similar fashion, focusing on ethical codes and legal responsibilities, as well as on the importance of processing ethical questions and ethical quandaries by means of a decision-making model. Research focusing on the content of ethics courses concludes that most courses are

divided into three areas: decision-making models, principle ethics, and the standards of care (Hill, 2004). Common themes were found throughout ethics curricula, indicating that an identifiable “core curriculum” exists in the discipline.

The focus of the content areas is on what students need to know to be in compliance with ethical standards and how they ought to engage in a decision-making process when confronted with an ethical dilemma. While focusing on the mechanics of ethical practice is necessary and important, it is not sufficient for a thorough training of professionals. Nor has it proven to be consistently successful in training ethical counselors (Neukrug, Milliken, & Walden, 2001; Phelan, 2007; Rapisarda & Britton, 2007; Zibert, Engels, Kern, & Durodoye, 1998). In addition, it presumes that ethical lapses result from a lack of knowledge or from a hasty and ill-conceived response to an ethical dilemma, one that was not informed by an adequate decision-making model. What this approach neglects is a sufficient focus on the whole person of the ethical decision-maker.

The Need for Psychologically Based Ethics Instruction

Ironically, in a field that acknowledges the role of unconscious motivation and defense mechanisms employed to ward off conflicts and unacceptable emotions, ethics instruction operates as if an individual who is expected to adhere to standards of ethical practice is a rational and unconflicted human being who will calmly and assuredly put aside self-interest and personal experience in order to make ethically informed decisions. In order to account for the psychological blind spots which contribute to ethical violations, we must turn to a consideration of the personal psychology of the counselor.

Not surprisingly, when attention is turned to the personal psychology of the counselor, certain themes begin to emerge. First, once we eliminate those breaches of ethics that arise out of a truly disordered personality, such as an individual with antisocial personality disorder, we are left with situations which give credence to Freud’s classical image of the psyche as an iceberg. In this image,

the psyche is portrayed as an iceberg with only a small tip (i.e., consciousness) appearing above the surface. This tip represents the conscious good intentions of the majority of counselors. However, an old adage says, "The road to hell is paved with good intentions." What rests below this tip are preconscious and unconscious needs, wants, and motivations. It is this churning unconscious that is not accounted for by ethics instruction that is intellectual, based essentially on the conscious mind.

The philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok discusses the effect of the unconscious on ethics and decision making when she refers to the lies we tell to, and the secrets we keep from, ourselves (Bok, 1982). In her work she assigns many ethical lapses to the fact that self-interest overpowers moral principles and rules. It feels desirable, and so we do it. It fulfills our unconscious and is not allowed to enter fully our consciousness. So actions are taken before reflection reaches the level of our conscious mind where actions would be tempered by ethical codes. This activity of the unconscious mind has been termed 'ethical fading' by the business ethicists Tenbrunsel and Messick (2004). These authors argue that psychological processes cause ethical principles to fade, to recede into the background. Their work builds on the work of Messick and Bazerman (1996) who held that psychological tendencies create unethical behavior. The key, then, to preventing ethical lapses is to find some way of locating and then defusing these unconscious mechanisms. What is needed is a method that can be incorporated into a classroom or lecture setting which takes into account the individual psychology of a particular person, and the general tendency of people to deceive themselves in identifiable ways.

In order to create a psychologically based ethics curriculum, it is useful to review what is known about educational approaches that have a strong track record of success with adult learners. The literature on adult learners emphasizes the need for adults to be active participants in the learning process (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2005; Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2006). Adults need to feel in charge of the process and assured as to the relevancy of what

they are being asked to do. The learning process itself must be seen as relevant: clearly practical, arising out of the lived experience of the learners, constructed from lived as well as intellectual experience. What is clearly called for is a constructivist approach, one that puts the learner in the driver's seat. In this case, the goal is to have individuals examine their own psyches in order to determine where and how ethical violations are likely to occur. In essence, participants are encouraged to deconstruct, take apart, and analyze their own personal psychology.

What follows are initial attempts to create a curriculum which leads participants through the process of examining their personal psychology and then identifying areas of potential ethical lapse. As this curriculum has been piloted, it has proven most successful when conducted in a small group setting. It is possible to have a large group, but the group should ideally break down into smaller groups so the participants can benefit by sharing the process with others. This is important because often an issue that one person is not yet prepared to share, or perhaps even to consider in a conscious way, is raised by another participant.

Identifying the Counselor's Personal Psychology

The first step is to have participants identify past developmental themes. They are asked to apply two adjectives or phrases to each of three earlier periods: infancy through preschool, childhood, and adolescence. After they have completed this exercise, at least 10 to 15 minutes should be allowed for its completion, the results should be shared with the group. Responses might include: For the infancy/preschool period — loved, tantrum-filled, frustrated, nurtured, frightened; For childhood — bullied, ignored, dreamy, contented, shy; For adolescence — sad, wild child, angry, confused, in love. At this point the group processing is focused on listening to the experience of another, helping each person to connect with a present felt sense of that younger self.

The next step is for the same process to be conducted

focusing on present developmental themes. Here participants are asked to apply two adjectives/phrases to each of the following common aspects of adulthood: personal/intimate identity, professional identity, and social identity. Some responses have been: Personal/intimate identity — fragmented, confusing, contented, squared away; Professional identity — comfortable, don't think of myself that way, constraining; Social identity — fun-loving, reserved, supportive friend, a giver. Again, all responses should be processed with the group.

These two steps are meant to reacquaint the participants with the themes of their lives, both past and present. Obviously, these are not the only ways to begin to access the self-statements and subconscious motivations that drive behavior. This approach is meant to exemplify the kind of investigation which must occur, because until these currents within are identified, they can cause a good deal of damage. If an individual is unaware, or only partially aware, that she sees herself as a fun-loving, thrill-seeking, free spirit, or a neglected, shy, yet caring person, the force of these currents can result in inappropriate actions being taken in personal life, but more importantly from a counseling ethics perspective, also in professional life.

After reviewing developmental processes, uncovering and examining issues or topics that emotionally involve the counselor should occur. The first step in this process is to identify the “hot” issues, those events that arouse passion by inducing either sadness or anger—producing tears or raising blood pressure.

For instance, participants may be asked: “What events or issues arouse your passion? What kinds of people raise your blood pressure? What kinds of clients make you sad or make you feel incompetent?” By responding to these prompts, individuals are led to consider the clients and circumstances that “push their buttons.” Responses to these questions have included the following: “I can't stand working with men who mistreat women.” “Rich people whining annoys me.” “I can't work with people who hold extreme religious views.” Finally, participants might be asked: “Based on what you have discovered about yourself, what kinds of clients are

most likely to raise a red flag or most likely to place you in an ethically risky situation?” Here again, the goal is to assist the participants in gaining some useful information about themselves. In this case the information gained focuses on the kinds of clients and client issues that are most emotionally inciting for the counselor.

Participants may next consider the exact opposite kind of client and circumstance: those clients and situations which leave the counselor cold and unmoved. In this case the following questions are asked: “What kinds of events or issues leave you cold, uncaring, without any passion? What kinds of clients induce boredom, lethargy, lack of concern or interest?” Responses to these questions include: “Women who complain about the men in their life without being willing to do anything about it.” “People who repeat the same story each week.” “Clients who do not feel alive if they are not complaining.” At the end of this process, participants are asked once again to consider, based on what they have learned about themselves, what specific kind of client is most likely to leave them bored and unresponsive, disengaged from their role as helper and facilitator.

Following this brief examination of personal psychology, attention is turned to the mechanisms of ethical violation. This section of the curriculum presents to participants two of the more common psychic mechanisms which may result in a developmental theme or emotional issue being inappropriately expressed in a counseling setting outside the awareness of the clinician.

Identifying Mechanisms of Ethical Violations

The first of these mechanisms is the already familiar concept of countertransference. Countertransference refers to feelings the counselor has for the client that are triggered by the counselor’s past history rather than being an accurate reading of the client (Frosh, 2003). For instance, if the counselor had a difficult adolescence during which she made decisions which negatively impacted her life, she might overly react to a teen client’s normative rebellion against family rules. Countertransference is felt to be ubiquitous during the

counseling session. Neither good nor bad, what is important is for the counselor to recognize when countertransference is occurring. Unfortunately, this can be a very difficult task since one of the hallmarks of countertransference is that it is, almost by definition, beneath one's awareness. If left out of awareness, countertransference can negatively affect the counseling process. The counselor is not responding to the client in front of her; rather she is responding to her own projection onto the client.

The second mechanism to be discussed here is the defense mechanism of splitting. Splitting occurs when an individual is confronted with two competing desires (Freud, 1989). The psychic conflict created results in the individual splitting off this conflict. Metaphorically speaking, it is placed into a corner of the mind: visible, but only if looked at directly. An example is the married minister who is not able to fully enjoy sexual relations with his wife because he feels it would be lustful and sinful. He splits off these desires and puts them out of his conscious awareness. Away from his wife, he meets a young attractive woman and without making a fully conscious decision, he finds himself having sexual relations with her. The split off part has emerged.

Whenever these mechanisms become active during a counseling session, it is imperative that the counselor recognizes their activation. However, this is difficult to accomplish since the aim of the psyche is to keep their emergence unconscious. Instructing counselors to continually introspect about their emotions and actions within the counseling session will assist in this process. Shea (1998) has developed a model which describes how the counselor must shift among attentional vantage points during sessions. One of these vantage points requires the counselor to shift attention inward in order to be able to identify and assess any changes in his own psychic equilibrium. While obviously not foolproof, this approach reduces the likelihood that the counselor will unknowingly fall victim to unconscious impulses.

Developing Ethical Violation Equations

The three components of a psychological and experiential approach to ethics instruction are now in place. First, developmental themes are identified; second, issues that either arouse passion or produce withdrawal and lack of interest are described; finally, instruction in countertransference and splitting is provided in order to enable the clinician to identify these both if they emerge in the counseling setting. Putting these three components together is the next important step in the development of a curriculum which aims to develop individuals who are operating from a realization that ethical action must finally arrive from the core of an ethical individual. A metaphor to help visualize how these components work together is the ethical violation equation:

Developmental Theme + Hot Issue + Countertransference = Possible Violation

Developmental Theme + Cold Issue + Countertransference = Possible Violation

Developmental Theme + Hot Issue + Splitting = Possible Violation

Developmental Theme + Cold Issue + Splitting = Possible Violation

At this point, counselors who worked through the curriculum have had an opportunity to evaluate themselves in terms of each component of the violation equation. Putting all of the components together allows them, in advance of a specific incident, to foresee their potential vulnerability in a counseling setting. For instance, if I know that one of my developmental themes is a feeling of having been uncared for and abandoned emotionally as a child, which has led me to develop an identity as a caring person who would never abandon anyone, and I know that children who are feeling abandoned or neglected arouse a great deal of sympathy from me, when a child climbs onto my lap and says "I wish you were my Mommy. You would take care of me," I am in great danger of responding to the youngster's transference with a countertransference action of my own: buying the child a toy she has wanted, taking the child to McDonald's, allowing the child to spend the weekend with my

family. On the other hand, if one of my developmental issues is the feeling of rejection I experienced by the “in crowd” during my school years, and my present social identity is as a reserved, loner-type person who has difficulty in social gatherings, when I have as a client an attractive, socially gregarious man who is clearly enjoying my company, there is a high potential for splitting. My needy high school self emerges and I find myself in Starbucks having coffee and sharing personal stories with my client.

Conclusion

These are only two of myriads of possible examples. What is important is for participants to work through each component by plugging in issues specific to themselves. While not absolutely guaranteeing that a violation will not occur, the old adage “Forewarned is forearmed” is apt here. Counselors who have formally worked through their own issues and potential areas of lapse, are in a much stronger position to avoid committing ethical violations. When this experimental, psychologically based approach is combined with the knowledge based approach of the traditional ethics course, a truly comprehensive curriculum has been developed, one that will hopefully reduce the number of ethical violations.

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