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Dale, Heather

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Can ethics be sexy?

Heather Dale believes so. Here, sharing some ethical insights, she makes the case

Writing about ethics is a delight! Boy George once said he would rather have a cup of tea than sex. I suspect many people may feel the same about ethics. However, in the absence of a cup of tea, my job is to convince you that ethics are alive, fascinating, and a lot more stimulating than a set of rules which must be obeyed.

The title of this article is 'Can ethics be sexy?' The answer, I am sure at least some of you will be saying, is a resounding *no*.

We all talk about ethics more often than we think – we discuss whether politicians should be allowed a duck house on expenses, we discuss assisted suicide, we decide whether or not to tell a white lie (or even a thumping great lie); we talk about our views on abortion, we discuss the pros and cons of women priests or arranged marriages. These are all ethical conversations.

It's odd, then, that in counselling, outside of a select band of people, I hear so little said about ethics. Even colleagues at my university wonder aloud if we need a whole module on ethics. A whole module? I think we need a whole course, and that ethics should be built into every module. And I hope that by the end of this article, even if you don't agree that ethics are sexy, you will agree that they are often better than a cup of tea; more enthralling and enticing than you currently think.

I suppose my own fascination with ethics comes from my childhood: from growing up in a household where both parents held strong ethical beliefs – but completely different ones. In

addition, my mother's philosophy, that children should be left alone to run wild, meant that in a household where ethics were discussed at table – an early childhood memory is debating nuclear disarmament way before I was old enough to understand the terms – there were also rules. We ran wild, but were also expected to have moral standards – a good training, really, for working with BACP's *Ethical Framework*, when we have so much freedom to make our own decisions, but within a strong framework of good practice.

At its very simplest, an ethical code is a set of moral rules. They are the values by which we live our lives, and for most of us that may include things like being helpful, wanting to do good in an unkind and unfair world, a sense of duty, wanting to feel fulfilled by our work rather than making bagloads of money.

In terms of organisational ethics, these happen when like-minded people get together and decide what principles they share. Out of these principles, a code of ethics is formed.

In many other counselling organisations, these codes get enshrined as a series of dos and don'ts. An early example of an ethical code is the Ten Commandments, given to Moses by God, written on a tablet of stone (and therefore inviolable). This is an early example of a mandatory code – a code that has a list of musts and must-nots, and which must be obeyed. There are some advantages to a mandatory code, in counselling, as in life. If the rules are clear, breaking them is a clear decision. However, issues in the counselling

world are often even less clear-cut than outside.

Thanks to Tim Bond, we now have an *aspirational* code (BACP's *Ethical Framework*) – that is, a framework for best practice that encourages us to think for ourselves – to be ethically mindful. This means that we need to be thinking ethically – or morally – all of the time. You are not expected to think what would Tim Bond do, but what should *I* do? What is my best ethical decision in the circumstances? This makes working more interesting, but also more challenging.

Whether mandatory or aspirational, an ethical code is a set of moral principles that everyone who joins the organisation signs up to. Now we have established what ethics are, let me ask, 'What's the *point* of an ethical code?'

Within counselling organisations, we would probably take as read that the point of any ethical code is threefold. It will:

- offer a frame, or a boundary which protects the relationship, in order to create a safe space in which helping can happen
- protect from exploitation: who has the power in the counselling relationship? In the *Ethical Framework* this comes down to not sleeping with our clients and not extorting money from them
- set minimum standards for professional practice.

This is not original – both Tim Bond and Gerard Corey say much the same thing in much the same words and I imagine it is fairly similar to the way you have all been taught. These

are of course all important values, but what I ask you to consider is what lies beneath these statements: the music behind the words, or the psychological implications underlying these points, and to consider what lies beneath and behind them. That is, the values and principles that are the backbone of our profession.

When I was pondering this article some weeks ago, I mentioned it to a (non-BACP) colleague. We agreed that a strict adherence to ethical codes can cloud or camouflage lack of psychological insight. So I intended to write about the need for psychological insight, and how, without it, we can work for years and do no harm, but not much good either; but by developing it, we will allow our clients to heal and change.

However, I then came across a piece of research (Richardson et al, 2009) that was so shocking to me I tore everything up and started again. This research was to do with the values that experienced counsellors attach importance to in their work. Some of the values that they looked at were the ones I intended to write about:

- empathy
- compassion
- warmth
- integrity
- humility.

You would think, wouldn't you, that these are all fairly non-controversial? I certainly did.

However, while 100 per cent of respondents thought that empathy, compassion and warmth were important in being an effective counsellor, only 32 per cent thought it was important to be ethical, or to have integrity, and only 13 per cent thought that humility was important. I was absolutely fascinated by this research, as in my experience so many complaints that I hear are to do with a lack of humility on the part of the therapist.

By humility, I do not mean going around like the Dickens character,

‘The joy of counselling is that it is such a risky business – a high-wire affair’



Uriah Heap, abasing ourselves. It is not intended to be the opposite of self-confidence. However, it does mean knowing that I do not have all the answers, and however experienced I am, getting other people's points of view is always helpful. It means being open to new ideas and new suggestions, however knowledgeable I think myself. I suppose I really think of humility as the antithesis of arrogance.

At this stage, I probably need to define humility a little more carefully. In the *Ethical Framework*, it is defined as 'the ability to access accurately and acknowledge one's own strengths and weaknesses'.

Why is it important to acknowledge one's own weaknesses and strengths? Well, most of us probably come into this work to help, to do good, and it is important to recognise that we have limits in that role – we have to recognise that for all of us, there are some clients who, for whatever reason, are beyond our skill to heal. Sometimes, our desire to help can blind us to our own limitations, and we need help to see that. Most of us will have a certain type of client who hooks us in – makes us think that we can work miracles. Knowing, for example, that I am a sucker for praise helps me evaluate it more clearly.

To make this point more clearly, I am going to tell you about the well-trained, experienced and well-

meaning therapist who had done some innovative work with a client and who, out of a wish to share this with others, talked about his client at a conference. He thought he had disguised his client well enough, and did not think that anyone would recognise the description anyway, as it was a conference for professionals.

However, a friend of the client was at the conference, and there was enough detail in the story for him to recognise the client. What had happened at the conference was therefore reported back to the client, and as you might imagine, the therapeutic relationship was irretrievably ruptured, and indeed that particular therapist was subsequently excluded from his professional body.

At this stage, I hope you are all thinking ethically, and wondering if I have my colleague's permission to tell the story. I don't, but then, it is not a true story, but a version of a story that I have heard many times over the years.

There are many issues to be considered here, but the one I want to focus on is the counsellor's lack of humility. How did he demonstrate that lack of humility? Well, I think there are several ways, but here is a selection:

- by seeing himself as the expert, and not expecting that the client or client's friends would be clever enough to be at a counselling conference
- by thinking that what others would learn from the sharing of his client's story outweighed any possible harm to the client
- by thinking that it was all right to go on working with someone whose story he had made public; that he could somehow hold boundaries even as he breached them
- by not asking the client's permission to talk about her
- by thinking that he knew best how to disguise the client's story, and doing so without express consent
- by not considering what his own motives might be for making that speech – for example, kudos in the professional world – and therefore

not properly analysing strengths and weaknesses

- by not having proper supervision before he made that decision; that in itself demonstrates an unwillingness to acknowledge weaknesses.

I want to stress that the therapist I am talking about was experienced and well-meaning. However, in this instance, at least, he had not acted with due humility. My thesis is that in that lack of humility there was another lack: the forgetting that psychological mindfulness has to be applied to self as well as client.

I have no doubt that this particular therapist had been of great help to the client. I am sure that many useful interventions had been made, and psychological insights given and received. However, what was forgotten was to apply ethical (or psychological) thinking to self.

When we begin to think about psychological thinking, we can see that there are four main components that link to ethical mindfulness:

Self-reflection, which means:

- a willingness to examine one's own part in the therapeutic alliance, and to be rigorous in so doing
- reflecting on one's own part in the session – what happened, and was it helpful. In my example, the therapist could have usefully reflected on why he wanted to talk about his client, and his reasons for not talking to his client first.

Reflection on the process

- This means reflecting on the underlying dynamics between counsellor and therapist. In the case of my example, thinking about how the dynamics between them may have changed once the therapist had made public some private information, and what the effect of his withholding information about having done so may have had on the therapeutic relationship.

Supervision

- Supervision, at its best, gives a chance to reflect on the above issues

– to look at some of the issues that are hard to see when you are in the middle of working.

- The process of supervision encourages us to think psychologically (to separate the wood from the trees).
- However, what our supervisors tell us is not like the Ten Commandments written in tablets of stone, and while we should take on board their view, we are not obliged to act on it.

These three together then add up to the last: **psychological insight**.

Through these processes we can come to a deeper understanding of our own unconscious motives by a rigorous examination of ourselves, and the dynamic between ourselves and the client. If we think about my example of the therapist who talked about his client, we can see how a rigorous examination of his own motives may have enabled him to make a different decision. He might, for example:

- have sought permission from the client before publishing/talking
- thought harder about his own motives for making public private information
- considered in depth the psychological reasons for not wishing to give the client a choice about making their work together public.

Conclusion

Ethical mindfulness comes from a position of psychological knowledge, a willingness to engage with psychological processes, and a knowledge that there will always be things that we do not know.

The joy (for me) of counselling is that it is such a risky business – a high-wire affair. If, as Bond describes, we wish to 'establish a relationship of trust, a relationship of sufficient quality and resilience to withstand the challenges arising from difference, inequality, risk and uncertainty', then we are taking risks nearly every time we are working.

However, if we are on a tightrope, we need a safety net. Humility can provide us with that net, if we are

prepared to use it.

I may not have convinced you that ethics are sexy but I hope that I have convinced you that they are thought provoking. ■

This article is adapted from a talk, written by Heather Dale, which was given recently in adapted form by Barbara Mitchels at the Torquay Making Connections meeting of BACP members in the Southwest. The article is published here with Heather's permission.

Heather Dale MBACP (Snr Accred), counsellor, psychotherapist and supervisor in private practice; senior lecturer, University of Huddersfield; Fellow, BACP. Heather will deliver her presentation at a future Making Connections event. For details please visit www.bacp.co.uk/makingconnections

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