

# Thinking about ethics

By Vivian Broughton

A working definition of ethics:

Continual self-reflection and scrutiny, combined with committed dialogue with colleagues.

"We should be thinking about ethics", said someone at the recent ISCA gathering when Hunter was organising work groups. So I offered to host a discussion work group on ethics.

It seems to me that there are two components to this overall term of "ethics". One is the idea that we can protect our clients from what we term unethical behaviour by other practitioners, from damage and abuse; and ourselves from the impact that other facilitators' behaviours might have on us, and the good name of our profession. The second component is to do with how we deal with what we might see as an infringement of good practice, either in relation to ourselves, or to a member of the public.

Generally the first move when contemplating ethical issues is to attempt to make some rules or guidelines to cover a consensual view of good practice and common values. However this is not always as easy as it sounds. The difficulty with rules is that as soon as there is a rule, there immediately follows situations that are exceptions to the rule, arguments as to why such a rule cannot work, and then modifications followed by more modifications, in the end paralysing the original intention. Even with a rule on something that on the surface looks very clear, for example against having an intimate and/or sexual relationship with someone with whom one is working or has worked. Questions arise as to the following: what constitutes an intimate and/or sexual relationship? Should we ban all such relationships? Is it always exploitation, or could it sometimes be a genuine potentially loving relationship? Should we put some kind of timing on it, for example If one meets the person in a workshop, how long after the workshop could be deemed a reasonable lapse of time to pass before one could engage in intimacy? Or should we say that if you work with someone, even only once, then that person is off limits for life? If perchance one happens to meet the person who really is to be the love of one's life on a workshop one is facilitating, what then does one do? (In such a case in the UK more than once in the past a psychotherapist has had to relinquish their profession in order to be with their chosen life partner.) Is it really exploitation? Is it always exploitation? What *is* exploitation? And if we say it is exploitation are we diminishing our clients' ability to be self-responsible and make adult choices, such as who to have an intimate/sexual relationship with? I am reminded here of Hellinger's Orders of Helping:

**Helpers must confront their adult clients as adults and refrain from becoming substitute (better) parents.** It is seductive for helpers to think that they can do a better job than the parents, *immediately entangling the helper in an infantilising attitude to the client.* (my italics) (Broughton, 2010)

And then we have the second component to consider: how do we deal with such a situation; what can we enforce and how and with whom?

These are complex questions, not that they shouldn't be considered; of course they should. But how do you make a rule about any of this? Even guidelines are tricky: guidelines have been explored in depth by psychotherapy organisations across the world, and have a tendency, once

written down, to turn into rules without much bother. At the same time it is also my experience that the things that we attempt to develop into guidelines usually spring from things that we know very well as practitioners are the implicit shared values of the work that we do, that emerge when we engage in self-reflection and committed dialogue with colleagues.

There is another issue here: how easy is it for us as responsible practitioners, once given a well-intentioned set of guidelines, to get lazy, using this external authority as something that, so long as we stay within the guides, allows us to give up on the continual uncomfortable struggle of deciding for ourselves in a given situation what is right and what is not? Is this not, in effect, supporting a devolving of essential personal responsibility to some outside authority, in a profession where the central issue of our work with people is supporting an integrated self-knowing and self-authorising being? (This brings to mind an argument that I have with the whole notion of the present person gaining any kind of permission/blessing from their system/ancestors to be or do what they would. Isn't the issue here to understand the bind that unconscious loyalty keeps us in, rather than complying through loyalty with some ancestral/systemic – outside authority - requirements that may go against our conscious wish for ourselves, requiring a permission – blessing- for my choices?)

I would add as a footnote here that it is generally agreed that it is entirely debatable as to whether a comprehensive code of ethics and good practice actually diminishes transgressions. It is certainly no guarantee of anything.

So let's consider further the second component. What do we do in situations that arise that transgress our values of practice, perhaps affecting our own practice and us personally... our good name? If we have clearly stated rules or guidelines, how do we enforce them? Potentially this gives rise to many procedures: grievance procedures and complaints procedures. Committees are formed to decide on this and arbitrate on that, each 'case' causing a reconsideration of the effectiveness of the rule. Committees to make the rules, to assess situations, to advise and make decisions, to mediate, admonish, condemn, punish (and here is a whole other raft of complexities), or to decide against the complainant (i.e. for the alleged transgressor). And who will do all of this? And why? And what if, in the most extreme of cases, the issue heads for the courts? Which country's judiciary would it be under? I can't go further with this, it makes my head ache.

Added to which, of course, none of this would have any affect or authority for the literally hundreds, or perhaps thousands of constellations practitioners in the world who are not ISCA members and who may never have even heard of ISCA.

And troublesome things do happen there is no doubt. And practitioners will do things that bring the profession into disrepute and affect us personally. And clients/patients/issueholders/seekers do have bad experiences, and tell others about these experiences.

So what can we do?

About six months ago I had an email from someone I didn't know, asking if there were an association in the UK to which she could make a complaint about a constellations practitioner. And if there weren't, should she then make a complaint to the practitioner's psychotherapy association? Could I help?

I spent a couple of days thinking about this and discussing it with a colleague. I then wrote back thanking her for her email, expressing dismay that she should have had such a difficult experience that was causing her to want to make a formal complaint. I told her that there was no association in the UK and some reasons why<sup>1</sup>. I said she could of course approach the psychotherapy association, but that it was doubtful whether it would have sufficient knowledge and understanding of constellations to be able to make a suitable response. I then suggested she contact the practitioner and ask for a meeting to discuss face-to-face what she had not been happy about. I added that if she felt in need of support to do this she might see if she could find someone within the field to act as a mediator. I added that I would be happy to help in this capacity if necessary.

Finally I said that I hoped she could get appropriate satisfaction and that she might in spite of her difficulty find good ways of benefitting from the work in the future.

A week later I had an email back thanking me and saying that she was going to arrange a meeting with the person concerned. I replied saying that if I could help further to get back to me. I have heard nothing since.

I include this story as only one small way in which we might be able to work without a formal code of ethics and procedures for dealing with complaints and grievances. Of course in this instance the person was able to take the suggestion in the manner it was intended, and this is not always going to be the case. It also stands on the assumption that any practitioner who values their work and practice would always be willing to engage in such a meeting with a complainant.

So I think that there are two parts to resolving difficulties that arise:

One is a commitment to face-to-face dialogue when possible, perhaps mediated, as in the Truth and Reconciliation commission work.

And the second is agreement to the *isness* of things as they are when resolution in the way that I would wish seems unattainable.

The aspiration of always, if possible, attempting to resolve issues by inclusive and committed dialogue, combined with self-reflection and consultation with colleagues, seems to me a good way to go and, if resolution is not possible, a deep acquiescence to things as they are in the profound tradition of constellations work.

There is also here I would suggest a deeper potential for trust in the rightness of things; that, in the end, people are responsible for their own lives, and it is often the difficulties and stumbles that we make in our lives, that provide us with the greatest opportunities for learning. We all make mistakes, and learn along the way. Sometimes if someone politely points something out to us, we suddenly see it in another way, and can take another step towards greater wisdom and better practice.

The group that I convened at ISCA numbered 18. I was surprised. When we were organising the work groups only one other person said she would attend. I had thought I would be having a quiet

chat with one or two other people at the most. And yet 18 turned up, even though there were many other work groups happening at the same time, all of which had engendered much energy and enthusiasm.

18 interested people sat down and shared concerns, hopes, ideas and fears about ethics, the making of rules or not, the why's, the why-nots and the deeper personal concerns involved. At the end of our allotted time everyone had spoken and nothing was decided. Much had been covered and I think we all felt better for the discussion, but as a group we could not find one rule that we could all happily agree to. Indeed there was a general feeling that it was good to have talked about it, but that, with some exceptions, as a group we were reluctant to make anything concrete.

So I propose a working definition of ethics as a continual process of self-reflection and scrutiny in committed dialogue with colleagues. I learned this from our one-hour group at the ISCA gathering. I imagine that everyone in that discussion group learned something, by considering the issues in the company of others, having the space and intention to look deep within ourselves as to what ethics and good practice means to us, and putting that into words and sharing it with others. That was a process of self-reflection and scrutiny in committed dialogue with colleagues. Perhaps my initial attempt here will stimulate further reflection and discussion as we think about ethics.

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<sup>i</sup> I tend to see the practice of constellations as a post-graduate discipline, that is integrated with the practitioner's prior professional discipline, and requiring qualification for the practice of that discipline. In this way, in my opinion, we keep the field free for the practice of constellations in a variety of domains such as organisations, politics, environmental issues etc. Associations tend to be tied to one discipline i.e. psychotherapy.

Reference:

**Broughton, V.** (2010) *In the Presence of Many: Reflections on Constellations Emphasising the Individual Context*, Green Balloon Publishing, Frome, Somerset, UK.