

Ethical Dilemmas

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At a recent *Society* meeting on the future of occupational psychology¹ concern was expressed about a seemingly widening gap between the routinised application of ethical codes and the true seriousness of the ethical dilemmas faced by our profession. This view is also perhaps discernible behind some otherwise “intrusive” comments made by Lindsay and Clarkson (1999) when reporting the results of a study of the ethical dilemmas faced by psychotherapists (see below). My aim in this note is to articulate this concern.

Let me illustrate the problem as it presents itself in education. As most parents, teachers, and pupils know, the so-called “educational” system fails to identify and develop most of the talents of most children. Thus, since the word “education” fails to identify and develop most of the talents of most children (see Raven, 1994, for a discussion). This is bad for children and bad for society – since the system fails to develop competencies vital to us as a species (e.g. confidence and initiative to identify and solve social problems). In other words it is unethical.

It is also incompetent. The word “education” comes ultimately from the Latin *educere* (“to draw out”); but the ‘educational’ system instead functions as a sociological system to legitimise and sustain huge differentials in wealth, well-being, and power. These differentials then force everyone to participate in, a (psychologically unjustifiable, and evolutionarily destructive) culture of hierarchy and domination that is psychologically unjustifiable. (I will later discuss the implications of the unease which the “intrusion” of this “unscientific” statement often generates.)

Teachers who actually find ways of intervening in this network of social forces to create genuinely developmental experiences for most of the children in their classrooms are the only ones who can legitimately be said to be behaving competently. Further in our research (see Raven, 1994) we observed that such teachers had usually been driven to undertake the difficult and demanding activities involved by ethical considerations. They did what they did because they had been horrified at the damaging effects which conventional “education” was having on their pupils.

Of course, neither individual teachers nor individual psychologists can do much by themselves to influence the wider social constraints which overwhelmingly determine their

behaviour. They need to engage in collaborative, system-oriented, action. The structures and arrangements required to do this seem to be those that Kanter (1985) has labelled “parallel organisation activity” and I have explicated more fully (Raven, 1995).

Working out priorities

One conclusion to which these observations point is, therefore, that our competence as psychologists is centrally dependent on our ability to engage in such collaborative action. Strange, then that it should so often be regarded as an excursion beyond both professionalism and science. Perhaps this is why it seems to have been left to Lindsay and Clarkson themselves, when reporting the results of a survey of the ethical dilemmas faced by psychotherapists, to point up some dilemmas that had *not* been mentioned.

Now, what, exactly, is the scientific status of an observation about something that has not been said by survey respondents? Does it constitute an unjustifiable intrusion of the researchers’ values? Or does it have some more scientific, ethical, or professional status?

The answer to this question is fundamental to advancing understanding of the scientific method and ethics and the way the two are linked.

As Shiva (1998) has shown, the reductionist science which currently imbues our thinking is both highly unethical and deeply unscientific. For example it should be considered simultaneously unscientific (in terms of lacking objectivity) and unethical for a scientist to concentrate on documenting the effects of a pesticide on the yields of wheat without raising questions about other short- and long-term effects on soils, other plants, animals, and the human species.

By the same token, it is both unethical and unscientific for research psychologists to concentrate on showing that certain educational practices do, or do not, have particular effects on pupils. They should attempt to identify *all* the unintended (and often destructive and damaging) short- and long-term, effects of those practices (see Raven, 1977, for a fuller discussion).

At the heart of this shift in orientation lies the observation that it is just as important for scientists to get a rough fix on all relevant outcomes than to get an accurate fix on any one of them. In short, it is necessary to move away from reductionist science, in which we tend to focus on one variable at a time and to pursue *comprehensiveness*, or (w)holism.

Such an observation enables us to re-frame comments which might at first be regarded as “intrusive value judgements of the author”. The truth is that science, understanding, advances more through *the insights built up in the course of a study* than through the observations documented within it. It is dissemination of awareness of the lacunae (nay voids) in understanding that most rapidly advances scientific understandings. Such insights depend on the wider scientific competence of the researcher and usually involve going well beyond initial terms of reference.

So, to return to the feelings of unease which were probably generated by the statements I made earlier about the functions of the “educational” system, I need to insist that these are *scientific* observations, not unsupported assertion: They are conclusions that follow from putting together otherwise disconnected observations to discern and illuminate a wider hidden reality. They do this every bit as surely as the inference of glaciation follows from the observation of terminal moraines, hanging valleys, and denuded mountain ranges.

In the case of Lindsay and Clarkson’s psychotherapists, it was indeed disturbing that there was not more evidence of concern about the role which psychotherapists play in adjusting people to inhumane and personally socially destructive, living and working arrangements. Psychotherapists track clients into positions in which they are required to actively contribute to a social system that is heading the species toward its extinction. What could be more unhealthy? Jung and Adler noted the problem. Why did no modern psychotherapists seem troubled by it?

The difference between such problems and those that were actually mentioned is, perhaps, that the failure of the healthcare professional to get together with others to do something about these wider issues is an ethical lapse of *omission* rather than a lapse of commission.

Of course, getting together with others – and not just psychologists – to influence the wider social and economic forces which lead us all to do things which we know to be wrong (such as to drive cars or produce and market junk foods, junk toys, junk medicines, and junk insurance) is not something that we have been encouraged to think of as an activity central to our competence as psychologists.

I would argue that such activity is central to that competence. Unless we attempt to get together with others to gain control over forces which are heading our clients toward the elimination of our species we cannot reasonably be said to be nurturing their competence or caring for their health.

What behaviour on the part of our clients could be more incompetent or unhealthy than failure to engage with such environmental determinants of extermination? Should not our top priority as educators, healthcare professionals, and as occupational psychologists, be precisely to help people develop the competencies required to avoid this fate?

The conclusion to which these reflections seem to be leading us is, therefore, that individualistically-oriented ethical codes incorporating conventional prescriptions (like “no sex with clients”) are usually unhelpful. Ethical guidelines and standards must somehow prescribe and induce appropriate proactive collaborative action.

Ethics and state behaviour

Another example may help us to discern what is needed. In the constitution of UNESCO it is written: “...since wars begin in the minds of men, it is in the minds of men that the

defences of peace must be constructed.” Such a statement, simplistic though it is, clearly places the problem with psychologists. Reflection and investigation quickly reveals the oversimplification, but in no way removes the responsibility.

The search for explanations for war leads us down several avenues. In one direction the problem spills off into the dominance mind-set: Man over man, man over woman, man over nature.

In another direction it takes us into the investigation of the myths supporting faith in the efficiency of hierarchy, and myths supporting the notion that we have collectively agreed to give up personal liberties for the sake of protection (by central authorities) from personal abuse from our neighbours. (This despite the fact that all the evidence is that the more powerful the centralised authority, the greater the crimes committed against individual persons and humanity in general.)

In yet another direction it flows off into investigation of the structures of society that create wars and manufacture useless work to keep people occupied and under control.

Such reflections reveal wider complexities and sense of impotence for psychologists. But psychologists would still seem to have both a special competence and a special ethical responsibility (indeed, in view of our Charter, even a legal responsibility) to do something about such problems. My dilemma – our dilemma – is to find ways of doing something about them. My ethical lapse – our ethical lapse – in this area seems to be so great that I cannot work up much enthusiasm to persecute psychotherapists who even press euthanasia beyond what is currently regarded as legitimate.

Compare a bomber pilot who releases Cruise missiles which kill thousands of innocent people in the name of “making the world safe for democracy” – particularly when the situation in which he is operating has largely been created by arms manufacturers who not only set up the targeted “unscrupulous dictator” in the first place but also the usurious “money lending” arrangements required to enable him to use his country’s resources to purchase the “necessary” armaments. Who is the guilty party here?

We *all* contribute to this process. We manufacture armaments or we provide food or “psychotherapy” for those who do. We pay our taxes to support both the war machine and capitalism more generally. We develop the staff-selection and staff-development processes used by the arms manufacturers. We run educational programmes which promote and designate as “able” a disproportionate number of those who are least concerned with the social consequences of their actions and which promulgate, both directly and indirectly, a network of myths which support the system.

Thus we are all confronted by a huge discrepancy between the ethical codes we profess and our actual behaviour. In such a context, both our existing ethical codes and the pre-occupations of those who sit on ethical committees seem somehow wide of the mark.

A failure of psychology

What we need to do, as a Society, is to invent ways of inducing our members to consider and engage with issues of the kind that have been mentioned. And it is not just an ethical issue. As Becher (in press) has documented in his study of incompetent professionals, unless we do these things, we cannot consider ourselves competent professionals – let alone competent scientists. Incompetent practise, incompetent science, is unethical.

One way of moving forward might be to insist on, perhaps five-yearly, re-credentialling of psychologists. This should be based, not on such things as demonstrating that one has taken one course or another, but on demonstrating that one has not only recognised ethical dilemmas but actually taken proactive, collaborative steps to do something about some of them.

It would be like the compulsory confession of sins complete with a plan of action to remedy the situation. Psychologists could no longer claim not to have sinned, to be free of guilt; this cannot be entertained because it reveals failure to consider sins of omission.

Put another way, *failure* to contribute in one way or another to studying, and intervening in, the network of social forces that is responsible for our grossly unethical behaviour is not merely a personal matter. It is conclusive evidence of unethical, incompetent, unhealthy, and unscientific behaviour that should not be tolerated in a professional group.

Note

1. Consultation Workshop to Map the Domain of Occupational Psychology, held on 17 January, 2000 jointly by the Society's Division of Occupational Psychology and Occupational Psychology Section..

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