

Book Review: Windows on ethical practice – A review of ‘Questions of ethics in counselling and therapy’

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Jones, C., Shillito-Clarke, C., Syme, G., Hill, D., Casemore, R. and Murdin, L. (2000). *Questions of ethics in counselling and therapy*. Buckingham: Open University Press.

This book makes a welcome addition to the growing literature assisting counsellors to examine their own practice in the light of their professional associations’ requirements. As the book originates in Britain, it relates most directly to the professional culture there. However, given the many similarities between the counselling context in Britain and New Zealand, the material is of high relevance to New Zealand counsellors, too. The New Zealand Association of Counsellors’ Code of Supervision owes much to the equivalent British Association for Counselling (BAC) code and the two countries’ legal frameworks are similar, making books such as this more comprehensively relevant than North American texts. Reading material on ethics from overseas does much to sharpen a critique of our own codes, to bring to attention areas in need of development and to highlight aspects that are culturally specific to Aotearoa/New Zealand.

One of the strengths of the book is the background and experience of the authors. The six identify as counsellors, psychotherapists, supervisors, trainers and/or psychologists and represent amongst them a range of theoretical perspectives. They have worked in agencies, institutions, in private practice and as volunteers. All have long term associations with BAC and particular expertise in relation to that Association’s ethics, standards and

complaints.

The introduction states that the book is aimed at a wide readership, including actual and potential clients, and those with a broad interest in the profession. My own view is that the detailed consideration of particular dilemmas will be beyond the interest and understanding of many outside the profession. The book’s greatest value will be as a training resource, and as a reference manual for supervisors and practising counsellors. Service providers and referrers will find it useful if they are already well informed about counselling, or belong to an allied profession themselves. For New Zealand clients, and probably British ones too, Manthei and Miller’s ‘*Good counselling: A guide for clients*’ (2000) provides a much more accessible resource.

The book discusses a total of 36 ‘questions’, organised into six sections. After an introductory section that provides an overview of ethics in relation to counselling and therapy, the others cover questions and answers on ethics: in counselling (19); in training and continuing professional development (four); in counselling supervision (four); and in research (two). The final section, ‘other important questions’ (seven of them), comprises problems that relate to more than one of the preceding sections, such as dilemmas about dual or multiple relationships, or the supervision of counsellors in training.

This is not a book to sit and read sequentially, but to dip into according to current interest or need. However, as with medical dictionaries, it is easy to get distracted into following up other inviting ‘problems’ on the way to finding the one selected! Reading

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the answers, one after another, can become a somewhat miserable experience. Frequently discussion ends by recommending the need for more detail, further information, additional consultation or just careful weighing of a number of factors. In fact, straightforward 'answers' are hard to find (which may explain why the title focuses instead on 'questions'). This is not surprising, and in fact is highly appropriate, given that it is the nature of true ethical dilemmas to require the careful weighing of conflicting ethical principles. However, a series of quite different questions, read in quick succession, does make professional practice seem both dismal and uncertain.

The questions themselves vary considerably. Some address familiar territory such as record keeping, disclosure of sexual abuse, the limits of a supervisor's responsibility for a counsellor's clients or the particular problems of working with young people. Others confront questions that do not appear regularly in discussions with New Zealand counsellors, such as the ethical considerations when ex-clients stalk counsellors or whether it is appropriate to teach classical psychoanalytic perspectives on homosexuality. Some questions are briefly stated and general: "*What are my responsibilities when I suspect another counsellor is behaving unethically?*" (p.89). Others begin with specific case studies: "*Neil is confined to a wheelchair and....*" (p.69). The authors appear to have constructed questions to answer for themselves and Hill's, in particular, are lengthy and detailed, sitting somewhat awkwardly beside other more generally phrased dilemmas.

New Zealander readers will be interested in the rather glowing perception of bicultural developments in this country. A question about the ethics of training counsellors on the basis of Western thought, only, is answered with reference to the partnership of NZAC with Te Whariki Tautoko, around the provision of both culture-specific and cross-cultural counselling services (p.101). However it is rewarding to see ideas from the New Zealand context being valued overseas, even if the provision is not as far advanced as might be desired.

The question and answer format creates advantages and disadvantages. Unlike Bond's '*Standards and Ethics for Counselling in Action*' (1993), ethical issues are not clustered to create viable chapters, for example on confidentiality, and the actual wording of relevant clauses in the codes is not frequently cited, although clause numbers are noted. This, however, makes it potentially a more convenient resource for quick reference and gives the book a more obvious relevance, beyond BAC members. Readers are not directly encouraged by the format to arrive at answers for themselves, as users of the Corey, Corey and Callanan (1998) text on ethics are, although the practical and personalised language used by some writers makes it easy to imagine engaging in discussion with them about their decision-making. In this sense it may suit practitioners better than a book that is designed as a training text. The casebooks put out by the American (Herlihy & Corey, 1996) and Canadian (Schulz, 2000) Associations, take clauses from their professional codes and present illustrations of both good and bad practice. The questions and answers in this book are more interesting to

read, if less exhaustive, but do not have the same potential to build readers' familiarity with the codes themselves or to assist their becoming adept at linking specific clauses with practice dilemmas. However by not providing 'good' and 'bad' case examples, the book probably does a better job of encouraging readers to identify more readily with the dilemmas described and to model their own thinking-through of issues on the thought-processes presented by the authors.

'*Counselling*', the journal of the BAC, has a regular section entitled 'Counselling Dilemmas', where case examples are discussed independently by several experienced practitioners (see, for example, the five views on how to respond to a request for a hug in Volume 8, No.1). These usually demonstrate that a number of perspectives can be valid and tend to highlight the most problematic aspects, through the variance in writers' positions. As an encouragement to think for oneself, this approach is extremely valuable, but in a book like this it would have been difficult to cover so many questions in this manner.

References in this book are grouped at the end. With the number of questions addressed, it makes sense to avoid the inevitable duplication if references followed each answer. However, for a reader wanting to obtain further material on a particular question, or wishing to establish at a glance the literature base a writer has used, the process of turning to the back pages is laborious.

Finally, it is a little disappointing that the whole topic of counselling via Internet and email, while acknowledged, is not addressed specifically. This is a rapidly growing area

internationally and counsellors, moving into this work, face new ethical dilemmas.

Overall this is a very valuable book for New Zealand counsellors, of relevance to counselling, supervision, training and to a lesser extent research. Also, as the NZAC moves into reviewing its own codes, this book provides useful up-to-date information on the state of thinking in Britain on a range of issues that are envisaged as needing further consideration here in New Zealand. By providing a window on the thought processes of experienced practitioners from all walks of the profession, it encourages us all to share not only the outcomes of our own learning, but how we got there too. Once the NZAC codes have been revised, the challenge will be for New Zealand to produce an equivalent.

References

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