

BOOK REVIEW

Relational Ethics in Practice: Narratives from Counselling and Psychotherapy

Edited by Lynne Gabriel and Roger Casemore

Routledge, 2009

Reviewed by: Derek Truscott PhD

Associate Professor, Department of Educational Psychology,

University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada

Anyone who has ever practiced psychotherapy knows that doing the right thing is rarely simple. Professional ethics are often perceived by the non-practitioner as a set of rules dealing with what to do and what not to do in certain situations. Knowledge of these rules is thought to be sufficient to prevent us from going astray. The practitioner knows, however, that every therapeutic encounter is at once both common and unique. At one level there are commonalities of problems that clients bring to us such that rules can be helpful guides. Yet at another level the circumstances of our clients' distress are always unique, often to the extent that rules are of limited help.

After all, taking a strictly rule-based approach to being ethical would require the consideration of so many different combinations of variables that the number of rules would be almost infinite. Given that each professional circumstance—even if described by only a few possible attributes—is effectively unique, we are left to apply our professional judgment to adapting the rules within the ever-shifting context of practice. Being ethical while acknowledging, and actually honouring, the social context of our actions is the focus of relational ethics.

The editors of *Relational Ethics in Practice: Narratives from Counselling and Psychotherapy* are to be commended for attempting to contribute to this important and difficult undertaking. Unfortunately, I think they fall short of their goal. The problem begins as they define relational ethics as

a co-constructed ethical and moral encounter, with associated relationship experiences and processes, that both influences and in turn is influenced by the complex multidimensional context in which the relationship occurs. (p. 1)

I suspect that the contributors were as confused as I was by this definition because only one chapter—Subodh Dave's excellent "Relational ethics in psychiatric settings"—presents a coherent relational narrative or refers to the foundational literature in the field (e.g., Bergum & Dossetor, 2005). This is a shame—the richness of the various narratives is excellent and could serve to sensitize professionals to how the nuances of relationships influence the

ethics of mental health practice. Chapters cover such contexts as teaching, supervision, research, training, therapy with people suffering the effects of trauma, therapist self-care, and practicing in small communities. A consideration of the role of the relational aspects of these contexts could be very helpful to practitioners in their efforts to be ethical. Instead, *Relational Ethics in Practice* might be more accurately entitled *Ethics of Practice Relationships*, given that most of the chapters focus on challenging aspects of various professional relationships—such as dual roles—while looking to deontological principles for guidance.

Founded in the feminist thought of Carol Gilligan (1982) and Nel Noddings (1984), relational ethics is explicitly positioned as an alternative to deontology. Drawing on the analogy of the mothering bond to highlight that relationships are fundamental to the human condition, it is based on the observation that ethical actions always take place in relationship with others. Further, relational ethics considers behaving ethically to require us to act out of concern for and consideration of others. Ethical knowledge, reasoning and action are understood as being imbedded within a never completely predictable relational context. Being ethical is thus not a private exercise of dispassionate logical analysis—it is action in real relationship with real consequences. What is considered ethical is thereby also open to reconsideration as the context of our actions shifts in response to new events and changing relationships. Relational ethics is therefore concerned with how we ought to treat each other in particular circumstances and how certain circumstances facilitate or impede our efforts to do so.

In fairness, this is an edited book and thereby cannot be expected to avoid the limits to establishing a consistent theme or voice inherent in the form. Edited books are best suited for presenting varied perspectives and considerations in order to expand our understanding of a topic. Given that it is still a relatively new field, relational ethics in practice is, I believe, a topic appropriate to an edited book. The diffusion of content and lack of scholarly coherence in *Relational Ethics in Practice* will likely render the average practitioner bewildered rather than enlightened, however. As such, I would not recommend this book unless the reader is

already familiar with relational ethics. I fear the knowledgeable reader will be disappointed by its lack of grounding in the established scholarship, however.

References:

- Bergum, V., & Dossetor, J. (2005). *Relational ethics: The full meaning of respect*. Hagerstown, MD: University Publishing Group.
- Gilligan, C. (1982) *In a different voice: Psychological theory and women's development*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Noddings, N. (1984). *Caring: A feminine approach to ethics and moral education*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Competing Interests: *Author of my own book on ethics.*

Acknowledgements: *None.*

Address for Correspondence:

e-mail: derek.truscott@ualberta.ca