

# Ethics and Professionalism in Counselling

Jussi Onnismaa  
Finland

## Abstract

In the present situation the counsellor no longer holds a specific given role. Because definitive operation models and formula do not exist as they once did, questions of right and wrong force one to approach each question and case individually. Therefore, counselling work can no longer be based strictly on the "counsellor knows best" philosophy, but should be based both on the personal relationship that exists between the counsellor and help-seeker and the reinterpretation of problems and solutions concerning risk and ethics. Questions concerning counselling professionalism, professional ethics and the ability to cope with work are intertwined in many ways with everyday working situations. It would appear that ethical issues often become concentrated, visible and cause friction in the various relationships and boundaries to be found in counsellors' daily work settings.

Uncertainty brings out a normative horizon (Beck 1993), and it would appear that ethical questions arise in new forms in counselling practices. Professional ethics may be objectionable if the counsellor attempts to avoid painful ambivalence and, instead, for the benefit of the help-seeker, acts out a performance of the picture of the counsellor as an omniscient expert. According to Mark Savickas, counselling professionals have moved or are in the process of moving past the attitude in which the client is seen as the "problem" and the counsellor as the "solution." Instead, by specifying themselves as facilitators of truth, the professionals can create time and space for the clients, who, in turn, can then speak and act for themselves (Savickas, 1993; see also: Harju, Kallio & Kurhila, in press; Onnismaa, 1998).

The article is divided into three parts. First, we shall shortly examine the controversial nature of moral and ethical issues in late modernity.

Secondly, codes for professional ethics are discussed. Thirdly, a suggestion is made that counselling expertise could be depicted as "boundary expertise", identifying and redefining work related boundaries. Ethically problematic situations can, via the identifying and redefining of boundaries, bring forth new and more fruitful points of view.

## Ambivalence and Narratives

Alasdair MacIntyre (1981) states that the moral precepts of everyday life form a chaotic composition, which can be compared with the playing of several games simultaneously. Zygmunt Bauman (1991) maintains that continuous negotiations have replaced familiar strictly binding values. In the work community, leaders are being invited to negotiate with those working under them. This way of thought can also be seen in many current child-rearing manuals, where parents are being encouraged to negotiate with their children. The age-old questions, like pondering the meaning of life and life-values, are especially painful. The traditional values, on which one would like to lean, unavoidably narrow the field of choices, while, simultaneously, bringing about the desire to broaden the field of choices. This ambivalence causes the accumulation of moral self-consciousness. According to Bauman (1996) to let morality out of the artificially constructed ethical codes, means to re-personalise it.

Ambivalence in life can cause individuals to feel themselves alone and to have been "thrown into the world" at large. This sense of isolation stems from the notion that moral and ethical questions have a shared and communal nature. Gergen (s.a.) states that the moral identity of the individual is created in connection with others and from the narratives of the self. These stories are used both to create and to maintain the merit and worth of self and others. Individual integrity is strongly connect-

ed to moral identity, defining self as something worthy and acceptable individual by the standards inhering in one's relationships.

According to Riikonen and Smith (1997) narrative is often seen as the most comprehensive form of synthetic understanding, and therefore moral reasoning and moral imagination should be examined in a narrative context. Gergen (s.a.) suggests that, in Western culture, to intelligibly narrate oneself is to approach a state of moral identity, of communal decency. One can "narrate her/himself" as a stable and coherent individual (*stability narrative*), who is attempting to achieve a standard of excellence (*progressive narrative*) and is fighting against earlier setbacks or injuries (*regressive narrative*).

By one's narratives, one's moral status is negotiated, and the result is one to which the person can subsequently be held responsible. The stories perpetrated about oneself also form the foundation of a morally sound community. Each of us is "knitted into" others' historical constructions, as they are into ours. The ability to form a moral individual identity is dependent on the history of the community:

People with our history do not engage in x; we uphold the ideas of y; as you chose y over x, you are one of us; you are a good and worthy person, a moral being. (Gergen, s.a., 11).

## Individualisation

In past decades, individuality and individualisation have been strongly emphasised (Beck, 1993, Giddens, 1994). According to Rose (1995) individuals are nowadays expected to fulfil their obligations to society through an attempt to fulfil themselves, although not based on dependent relationships of responsibility between people. Individuals must control their lives in such a way that their choices in this world represent and actualise the "truth

of their inner selves.” Consequently, caring about others can “hinder” the realisation of self-fulfilment.

However, Peter Jarvis (1997) states that at least one more value, caring for others, seems to be a constant principle throughout all ethical thinking. Bauman believes that emphasizing individual rationality in ethics isolates the self, exactly that which is seen as being moral:

Reason cannot help the moral self without depriving the self of what makes the self moral: that unfounded, non-rational, unarguable, no-excuses-given and non-calculable urge to stretch towards the other, to caress, to be for, to live for, happen what may. (Bauman, 1996, p. 247.)

Bauman, who sees ethics as “the first philosophy”, bases his thinking largely on the work of Levinas (1985). Moral responsibility towards the Other is placed above all else. The adoption of a moral stance of “I-for-the-other” can help to offset the dangers of post-modern relativism and isolation of the individual. The morally responsible counsellor often finds herself living out Dostoevsky’s famous maxim: “*We are all responsible for everyone else—but I am more responsible than all the others*” (cit. in Peavy, 2000).

### Codes for Professional Ethics

Traditionally, it was thought that the mere existence of a code of professional ethics was enough to earn a professional group professional status. Can the guidance field, then, be considered as a “genuine profession”?

The birth of *professio* is connected with the evolution of division of labour and also with the battle for power. According to Lindqvist (1995), *professio* signifies a distinctly profiled and independent profession. There is a common professional socialisation, identity and a clearly defined status in society for all those who work in that profession. To a great extent, the same seems to apply to both guidance professions and areas of social work, where there is a great uncertainty about the theoretical and knowledge foundation of the professions and professional identity. As a profession, social work is relatively young, the field evolved from

a rather unprofessional function, which involved a variety of tasks and duties. It has been observed that the level of respect held by society for the social field is not very high.

One prerequisite for the existence of *professio* is the classification of individual qualification standards for each helping field. Another kind of point, according to Lindqvist (1995), is whether the qualification standards - if indeed the reaching of such a consensus would be possible - would correspond directly with the inner mental image concerning what fundamentally provides the work with justification and identity.

The functions of professional ethical codes can vary greatly. Firstly, they can contain the characteristics of professional *norms*, for instance, respect for the client. There is no exact predetermined sanction for the breaking of norms, whereas there may be one in the case of breaking a professional *rule*. For example, the writing of a certification by a doctor, without sufficient or proper grounds, of a person’s inability to work. Secondly, professional ethical codes can be seen either as helping tools for ethical consideration in specific cases or as principles which define the profession as a whole. In the latter case, the purpose is not support in practical situations but to inform workers of the significance of their work. Thirdly, ethical codes are *political*, in that they give justification for the profession, in which case the message is pointed outwardly. However, if the sole purpose of ethical codes is to justify the methods already chosen by a profession, the ethical significance of such codes is questionable (Räikkä, Kotkavirta & Sajama, 1995).

One way of categorising professional ethical codes is to examine collective internal traits. Corey (1996) claims that there are some basic principles that have been observed behind all counsellors’ ethical codes, which are as follows: 1. *beneficence*, doing good to others, 2. “*nonmaleficence*”, not causing harm to others, 3. *autonomy*, respecting personal integrity, 4. *justice*, equal and fair treatment to all clients, and 5. *fidelity*, being just and honest.

Principles in abstract level are problematic merely as a result of their

lack of problems. Helping work is “good” by definition. However, in different helping professions, as in counselling work, harm is sometimes inevitably being done, either intentionally or unintentionally. When there is a lack of resources, a limited freedom to function or when one is forced to choose between the lesser of two evils, moral courage and thoroughly pondered ethics are needed.

It might be problematic when ethical codes are abstract and hard to apply to specific situations, but, on the other hand, the highly detailed professional ethical codes in the counselling field seem to communicate more about the desire to avoid time consuming lawsuits than about the desire to lead professionals towards their primary task.

Professional ethical codes have been evaluated from various different points of views. According to House (1988), power holders appreciate a formal view of ethics-as-action that is carried out according to just standards, as this is not seen as a threat to the ideological *status quo*. Edwards and Payne (1997) contend that the professional codes are a reflection of an implicit liberal-humanist view of the self while the quality frameworks inscribe a rational-choice model of the self. Both are individualistic and abstract and both universalise certain characteristics as intrinsic of all human beings. Meijers (1995) sees the professional ethical codes observed in the guidance field reflecting a individual-societal dualism and portraying too little about the goals of guidance, against which professional action could be properly observed.

According to Silfverberg (1998), in the counselling field the professional ethical standards apply to how the counsellors ought to relate to their clientele, colleagues and society as a whole. Adoption of rules leaves an impression that ethical behaviour is somehow measurable and that there is a predetermined, correct way of acting in every possible situation. Most professional ethical codes are expressed as general principles, rules and guidelines.

Aristotle wrote in *Ethica Nicomachea* (1975) that there is no definitive mode of performing in any given situation; the choice must come down to each person as an individual.

Aristotelian virtue as a basis for professional ethics refers to ethics that have been conceived, relating to action rather than in obeying abstract guidelines. Silfverberg (1998) believes that professional ethical codes are pointed backwards, not forwards and that *obeying rules has no connection with ethics*. The process in which the professional becomes only gradually aware of what is expected of him or her is usually ignored in professional ethical instructions. New situations crave new methods of reaction, imagination and listening. In working with people, the sorting out of an acute situation and the demands involved in that situation is, in itself, moral behaviour. Moral responsibility begins well before a decision for action is made. Also Bauman (1996) points out that re-personalising begins well before a decision for action is made. Also Bauman (1996) points out that re-personalising morality means returning moral responsibility from the finishing line (to which it was exiled) to the starting point (where it is at home) of the ethical process.

Instead of seeing ethics in counselling work as predetermined codes, ethics could instead be seen *as a resource and tool for every phase of the counselling process*. For example, the quality of communication should be defined using moral criteria. Good communication is what does good things to people. It expands people's possibilities and increases their experience of self-worth (Lahikainen, 1995, Riikonen & Smith, 1997).

### Counselling Field Ethics as Relationships and Boundaries

In the counselling field, ambivalence, in the sense of Bauman,<sup>1</sup> should not be swept under the carpet but should be taken openly into general consideration. Ambivalence should not be seen as putting an additional strain on counselling work that should be gotten rid of but should be seen as an intrinsic part of counselling work.

Three suggestions about counselling professionalism and ethics in the counselling field are as follows:

**Thesis 1.** Questions concerning counselling professionalism, professional ethics and the ability to cope with work are intertwined in many

ways with everyday working situations. These questions become concentrated, visible and cause friction in the *relationships and boundaries*<sup>2</sup> that exist between people and relevant issues. These stress-filled boundaries may exist, e.g., in relationships between professionals and their clients, their colleagues, their organisations, their partners, and their professional identities (Nummenmaa & Yli-Vakkuri, 1998). Additionally, boundaries, and the crossing of them, can become heightened through the realisation of the counsellor's and client's past, present, or future selves.

**Thesis 2.** It is possible to depict the above-mentioned relationships, concentrations and friction as so-called critical incidents or dilemmas. In depicting a dilemma, the situation is such that there are only bad alternatives to choose from. The depiction method may be in some way illustrative, but it does not necessarily empower counselling practitioners. Everyday work occurrences that are contemplated in retrospect and that offer ethical problems and possibly reveal a turning point can better be portrayed to both oneself and others using a critical case method. It is these cases with which one often can't find adequate time to deal in daily work.

**Thesis 3.** Professionalism in counselling and guidance can be depicted as *"boundary expertise"*, identifying and redefining work related boundaries. Ethically problematic situations can, via the identifying and redefining of boundaries, bring forth new and more fruitful points of view. Better identification of boundaries, both individually or together with colleagues or in supervision encounters, clarifies the primary task and contributes to coping in work situations and to well-being, which quite certainly is conveyed in the help-seeker - counsellor relationship.

In the following section, the relations and boundaries between the counselling professional and the help-seeker, organisation and professional identity is covered. Little attention will be paid to separate questions conceived from practical work situations. The section will instead concentrate on the relationships and boundaries concerning the ethical starting points of counselling work.

### The Client-Counsellor Relationship

In the counselling encounter others cannot be "known" nor can they be defined. Levinas asserts that no one can penetrate into other people's time or link their time to one's own time through recollection or anticipation. How is it possible to have a connection between individuals in the first place, when one cannot have knowledge of others? Levinas (1985) feels that connection with another person need not be thought of as knowledge, but can be seen as closeness, being face to face, or stepping into a communal relationship. To be social is to have contact and to reach out to others.

Also Bakhtin opposes the "knowing" and defining the Other. As long as a person is alive he/she is not finalized, he/she has not uttered his/her ultimate word:

The truth about a man in the mouth of others, not directed to him dialogically and therefore a secondhand truth, becomes a lie degrading and deadening him – The consciousness of other people cannot be perceived, analyzed, defined as objects or as things – one can only relate to them dialogically. To think about them means to talk with them; otherwise they immediately turn to us their objectivized side: they fall silent, close up, and congeal into finished, objectivized images. – Truth is not born nor is it to be found inside the head of an individual person, it is born between people collectively searching for truth, in the process of their dialogic interaction. (Bakhtin, 1984, pp. 59, 68, 110)

By applying the ideas of Bakhtin and Shotter, it can be suggested that all knowledge concerning relationships cannot be given a descriptive form. Shotter (1993) claims that relationships between people base themselves mostly on a special kind of knowledge, "knowledge of the third kind." It is not knowing *what* (descriptive, theoretical) or knowing *how* (methodological), but knowing *from* (a social situation). This type of knowledge has to do with how we relate to our situation or circumstances.

As with Wittgenstein, one can see

that the primary function of research is to discover mental images and metaphors that stop the automatic flow of events and better bring forward things that have become self-evident truths, while at the same time revealing new connections and possibilities. New situations and topics are constantly being created through interaction and speech, as well as through internal dialogue, which momentarily binds those who are communicating, giving the interaction and experiences a more concrete structure. The borders that enfold situations and topics are intrinsically nebulae, negating the existence of objective borders. Every attempt to discuss or define borders or to control them concurrently ends in changing them (cit. in Riikonen & Smith, 1997).

In this context, guidance and counselling professionalism as “boundary-professionalism” can signify, among other things, that the borders of both the help-seeker’s and counselling professional’s responsibilities and roles are identified and made visible through negotiations. While taking responsibility for the help-seekers’ well being is an important part of the counsellor’s job description, it should not be confused with taking responsibility for the client, as such. Attempts must be made to make it clear what boundaries and possibilities exist within interaction. The client and counselling professional can examine together the borders the help-seeker is ready to cross at the given moment, and what kind of new situations could possibly develop as a result of the crossing.

Riikonen and Smith (1997) see *providentiality* as an essential feature of dialogical interaction. Providential interaction invites all participants to use their skills to create connectedness, meaningfulness and promise together.

### Counsellor’s Relationship with Organisation

Counselling professionals often work in connection with an organisation. The justification for such organisational structures is to provide the possibility and framework needed to commence with the primary task. However, this doesn’t always occur. In recent years, the basic objectives of many organisations have been in constant

flux. Those “learning organisations” have been forced to acknowledge that examples of constant change have been provided for interest groups. In such cases, counselling professionals are forced to do their jobs as if apologising or, even, in secrecy. The “top” expert seems to be the one who reacts quickest to rapidly changing and, often, conflicting demands.

Consistently running after new ideas, denying the past and, on the other hand, hanging on to the past are, according to C. G. Jung, two sides of the same coin. The opposites of these are reflectivity, ability and a willingness to put every action into its proper context, while pondering the starting points and possible consequences, as well as making self-clarification problematic.

It seems that, in many places, contemplation of professional ethics have been taken underground. The so-called discussions of values and declarations of visions by the management of organisations are in many cases too abstract and much too difficult to apply in practice. Through the use of technical standards, the quality standard systems seem to be overshadowing the professional ethical point of view. Correct performance in counselling is reduced as the consistent avoidance of mistakes. In spite of the fact that counselling involves many agonising, distressing and multifaceted issues, the quality of client satisfaction is being monitored using superficial meters. Such circumstances are not always likely to bring about a high level of immediate client-satisfaction. Another problem is that the consumer oriented point of view, which at first sight seems to be a very contemporary approach, transforms the help-seeker into a mere functional object, in a manner varying only slightly from the traditional objectifying “specialist” systems. This marketing trend, which is particularly evident in the adult guidance and counselling, has swept through many organisations. This market oriented counselling creates other kinds of difficult-to-define relationships and boundaries between people and issues. According to Varto (1999) the marketplace itself has no clear definition, since it is merely a matter of technique that allows one to take something as something, so that thing can be eval-

uated in relationship to anything else. The marketplace as a producer of semantic correlation can both create and destroy qualities, but above all it makes it impossible to identify issues and events as being a part of the world at large. The greater the part the marketplace is given in everyday life, the less things there are that can be evaluated using moral guidelines. If counselling is turned into manufactured service, the most effective aspects of counselling are lost.

Rose (1995) presents one explanation for the lack of alternatives available in market discourse. The marketplace concept has, perhaps, touched all political groups, one reason being that even the left-wing groups haven’t been able to offer any alternative which would be on the same level with the ethics of the modern self. In the currently dominating self-ethics, the individual is presented as an autonomic, free agent whose objective is to maximise the quality of his/her life via choices.

In relation to one’s own organisation, counselling professionalism as “boundary-professionalism” can include continuous, persistent reminders of the primary task of the organisation in various ways. The best way for this to succeed is in connection with concrete co-operation projects, using dialogue, not monologue declarations. Also, quality projects at time may include positive potential. While work evaluation criteria are being pondered, it is possible to raise discussion about the often disregarded object of evaluation. It should also be kept in mind, that allies can be found in unexpected places. It is important to take time with colleagues for the contemplation of guidance work.

### Counsellor’s Relationship to Professional Identity

In practical counselling, there are daily so many ethical contradictions that are encountered that it is impossible to deal with others, or, even, what is going on in one’s own mind. In situations containing ethical choices, counselling professionals may be exposed to continuous “inner trials.” This can, in time, reflect on the ability to cope with work.

In a counselling encounter it is possible to study the client's multiple-selves of past, present and future. Narratives, metaphors, as well as drawing of life-space maps, can all be useful in re-searching the surfacing potential in making use of future selves (Peavy, 1997). Similar measures are also possible when counselling professionals connect their own professional identity to themselves or colleagues. In the latter case, a certain amount of trust is needed among colleagues, which means that the process will inevitably involve the revealing of insecurities. A jealous work atmosphere is not going to be particularly fruitful for this kind of discussion.

According to Hyyppä (1983, p. 51), some criteria for professional development and maturity can be said to be "a living connection with one's internal experience, fantasy, imagination and contemplation, and also the capability to connect these with one's primary task." If counselling professionals are buried beneath the burdensome thought that they are indispensable and "good", or if the organisational power structures and power struggles cause continuous friction, then it is possible that the joy of work, self-esteem and the use of imagination are in danger of vanishing. Since morals are based largely on imagination, in a narrowing work situation one's own professional ethics are diminished to the point of becoming mechanical and outward looking. In helping professions, taking care of oneself and maintaining functional ability are professional ethical responsibilities.

Supervision cannot be seen as the once and for all solution for unwanted friction and ambivalence caused by the myriad of relationships and boundaries which belong to the field of counselling. It can, however, offer the time and the place to contemplate the relationships and boundaries. The same can be achieved in supervision situations than in counselling: to discover mental images and metaphors that stop the automatic flow of events and better bring forward things that have become self-evident truths, while at the same time revealing new connections and possibilities. (Riikonen & Smith, 1997, see above).

When colleagues and, possibly, an outside supervisor, work as mirrors and, as a result, a new kind of situation with new rules is created, the professional future "me's" can become integrated and connected and new stories can be conceived. The boundaries of professional identity can be discovered at those points of intersection where the individual's dynamics, inner dynamics or those of the community become evident in supervision. Supervision in itself includes situations that can correspond to the work situations of those doing the counselling, and the situation can bring out experiential data about both the work and individual as a professional.

### Conclusion: "Centrifugal" professional ethics?

According to Bakhtin, all speech, writing and behaviour is created through the tension that exists in centrifugal and centripetal powers. Centrifugal powers are attached to the uniqueness of speech situations. The latter can be oppressive and they standardise meanings. Each and every expression is thus both a creative happening and a result of foreign and normative forces (Cit. in Riikonen and Smith, 1997). The use of "centrifugal" professional ethics can help to return to counselling professionals the language and expertise that may have faded into the background under the pressure of apparent efficiency, reacting to demands strange to counselling work. Also, in this way, the well-being of employees and the working environment can be improved, obtaining more permanent results than through the implementation of detached and restricting so called "improvement projects".

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<sup>1</sup>According to Bauman (1991) the traditional values, on which one would like to lean, unavoidably narrow the field of choices, while, simultaneously, bringing about the desire to broaden the field of choices. This ambivalence causes the accumulation of moral self-consciousness (see above).

<sup>2</sup>In this article "boundaries" are looked in a perspective of systems approach in organisational psychology, see e.g.