

A FOREWORD OF THOUGHTS

SUSAN SWIM, M.A.
Houston Galveston Institute

With the help of colleagues, I became interested in welcoming a group of authors to write on the topic of “process ethics.” This view of ethics transcends traditional ideas about ethics and the politics of modernistic empiricism of our field today. Process ethics explores instead the social construction of ethics that is local to the therapeutic process and relationship between the client and therapist. This relationship focuses on what is “good and proper” or ethical, based on the voice of the client as consumer, and the therapist as partner and participator. Ethics, considered from this position, centers on therapeutic endeavors that *directly* represent clients’ voices and desires for change. Within process ethics, clients are viewed foremost as the experts in what they view as problem and change. The client, as consumer, defines with the therapist what characterizes ethical standards and clinical proficiency.

Process ethics serves to supplement traditional content ethics. Content ethics represents standardizations to protect the integrity and dignity of clients. Process ethics looks to communally agreed upon values and actions that the therapist and client mutually create.

The opportunity to pull together a special section on process ethics continues my informal and formal inquiry into what generates ethical actions to occur in therapy, and what mental health providers can do to facilitate and sustain them. The following presentations, three brief commentaries and two extensive articles, reflect these ideas.

When first reading the manuscripts that address the subject of process ethics, I was struck by the metaphor of a pebble skipping upon calm water. It was

I wish to extend further acknowledgement to Arlene Katz, Gisela Schwartz, journal contributors, the faculty, learners, and clients at the Houston Galveston Institute, and Rose Swim for their investment and promotion of process ethics.

I also wish to extend my deepest gratitude to Harry Goolishian. Harry embraced my thirst to question ethical actions in therapy. I miss these conversations. His wisdom continues to live in my memory.

Address correspondence to Susan Swim, Houston Galveston Institute, 50 Lakeridge, The Woodlands, TX 77381.

similar to watching the reverberation and mingling the pebble has when bounding from one part of the water to another with connection, consistency, beauty, and direction. Each author uniquely responded to my original inquiry, embracing and expanding my initial thoughts.

A community of conversations developed that produced parity of thought within postmodern contributions. Harlene Anderson, Tom Andersen, Kenneth Gergen, Faith Ray, and the combined efforts of myself, Sally St. George, and Dan Wulff offer novel perspectives of process ethics that speak to the challenges and applications of this type of participation with our clients.

H. Anderson invites those involved in therapy to create ethical opportunities. T. Andersen contributes the idea of “collaborative connections with Others” that invites thought about the protection of “dignity and integrity” in therapeutic “connections.” Gergen proposes “relational responsibility,” where the emergence of ethics is a “generative movement,” forming out of relational underscores. Ray raises the idea of maintaining the “humanity” in our therapeutic endeavors despite the provocative need for preoccupation with theory. Swim, St. George, and Wulff collaborate on a trio of experiences of building partnerships of ethical collaboration through “relational connectedness, full presence, and sacred conversations.”

I am grateful to the authors whose work reflects hopefulness, allows the voice of the client to be dominant, and addresses our struggles to provide therapeutic discourse that draws upon value, integrity, and ethics. The writings emphasize a collaborative effort that brings forth a marriage of content and process ethics. In keeping with the shifts of thinking in the millennium, it is a time to think of a shift into the challenges of cooperation, where the beauty of relationships is generative and allows for clients and therapist to embrace the purity of discourse that does not become fixed in inquiry and empiricism of what is broken and requires intervention. Instead, these relational opportunities represent the hardship life has in store for us as real people in search of self-tailored opportunities for change. Herein, the client can instruct us in what is good, proper, and ethical and what directions they wish to seek.