

Cracking the Codes

What and How do Psychotherapists need to learn about Ethics?

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"A map is not the territory ... The only usefulness of a map depends on similarity of structure between the empirical world and the map...."

Alfred Korzybski

My time on the Ethics Committee of UKCP has alerted me to numerous longings, from individuals and organisations, to have some external authority of righteous wisdom, to preside over all difficult situations that we face in the arenas of practice, training and supervising.

Even better, to have such an authority neatly packaged into an all encompassing, written dictum, (preferably less than 1000 words long). Ethical choices could then become a process of simple reference, without doubt, regret, disagreement or reprisal – "It said in the code of ethics..."

To this outcome, any Ethics Committee will always disappoint.

Ethical practice is a dynamic, complex, swirl of events, set within a relationship that includes therapist, client and the wider social field.

This introduction uses the metaphors of map (cognitively constructed codes), territory (sensorily experienced practice) and cartography – map-making, or processes of mediation between these two ways of processing information in exploring what is best to do, and when, in ethical psychotherapy.

A Code of Ethics is just that – a statically coded representation of a constantly changing system – a map to a complex territory. It is a linguistic representation which, to make sense in a code congruent way, necessarily excludes historical and empirical details, flattens dimensions and limits scope. It cannot legislate for the meanings and values that the traveller ascribes to the land they traverse and their diverse encounters on the way.

We can learn the legend of a map, such as a Code of Ethics, but its limits need to be understood as clearly as knowing that we cannot smell the pines by pressing our noses to the ordnance survey of the forest.

In such a metaphor for training or practicing therapy, cartography is those processes of finding agreement, consciously or unconsciously, about what do we give our attention. As attendance weaves into a shared experience, we can ascribe labels and meaning to construct a shared understanding of *what is right to happen between us*.

I believe this is enabled if we mark some explicit points on the cognitive map that we develop as ethical practitioners.

I would include in these cognitive markers a working knowledge of the nominalised outcomes of Western culture, often called the Ethical Principles of *Fidelity, Autonomy,*

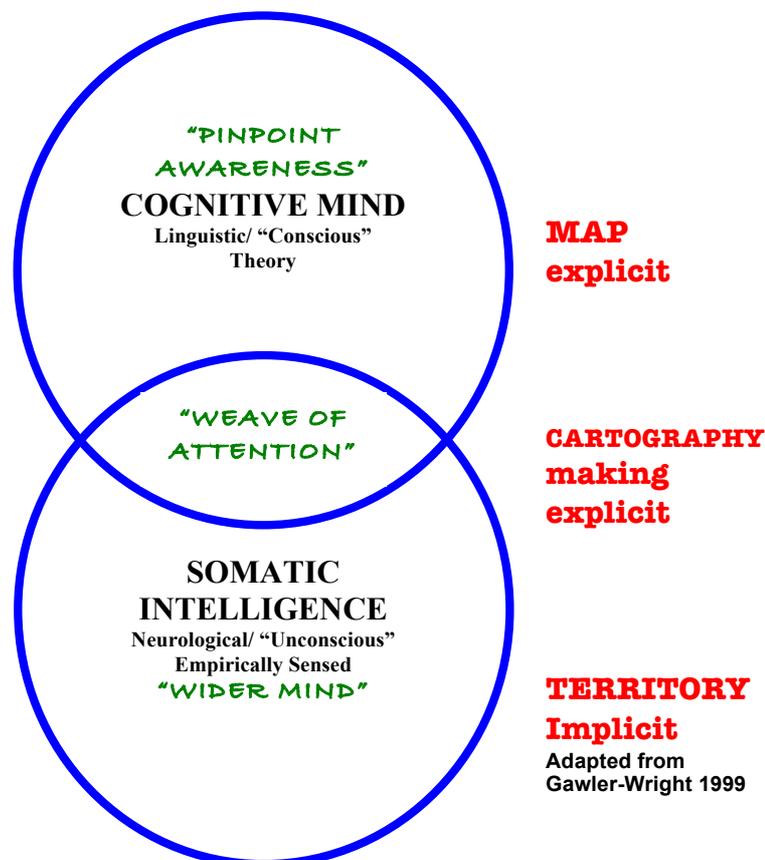
Beneficence, Non-Maleficence, Justice and Self-Respect (Corey, 1996). Practitioners need to develop a sensed understanding of these outcomes and skills in how to measure actions and meanings according to them.

Helpful to this is an accurate understanding of the term “ethical dilemma” and thinking skills to identify and process conflicts of obligations (Foulk et al, 1998) within a basic understanding of the philosophy of ethics (Kent 2002).

Through the cognitive sponsorship of the genuine experiences of fear, shame and regret as well as love, compassion and admiration, the somatic wisdom of internal communication can alert and align with cognitive formations allowing such feelings to transform into a wider precision of thinking and actioning (Gilligan, 1999).

To this end, training in Ethics for the psychotherapist necessitates safe spaces, such as personal development groups, supervision and stage-appropriate clinical practice, in which to engage in real-time experience that affords empirically sensed events, and not just cognitive responses to pre-formed recipes and edited descriptions of another’s cases.

At BeeLeaf we have found that making an open door for graduates to return to the Ethics modules of training has both enhanced the learning of the current group, and served to reinforce the notion that ethical understanding is revisiting familiar ideas in unfamiliar contexts. And due to the uniqueness of each client, each case has elements of an unfamiliar territory.



Learning about ethical practice requires complementary engagement of both cognitive and somatic knowing. Even greater multi-dimensionality is present in the ongoing processes

between two or more parties, such as client and therapist. I suggest that in training ourselves to be ethical practitioners we need to understand ethical practice as an unfolding agreement, co-created between therapist and client into a boundaried familiarity.

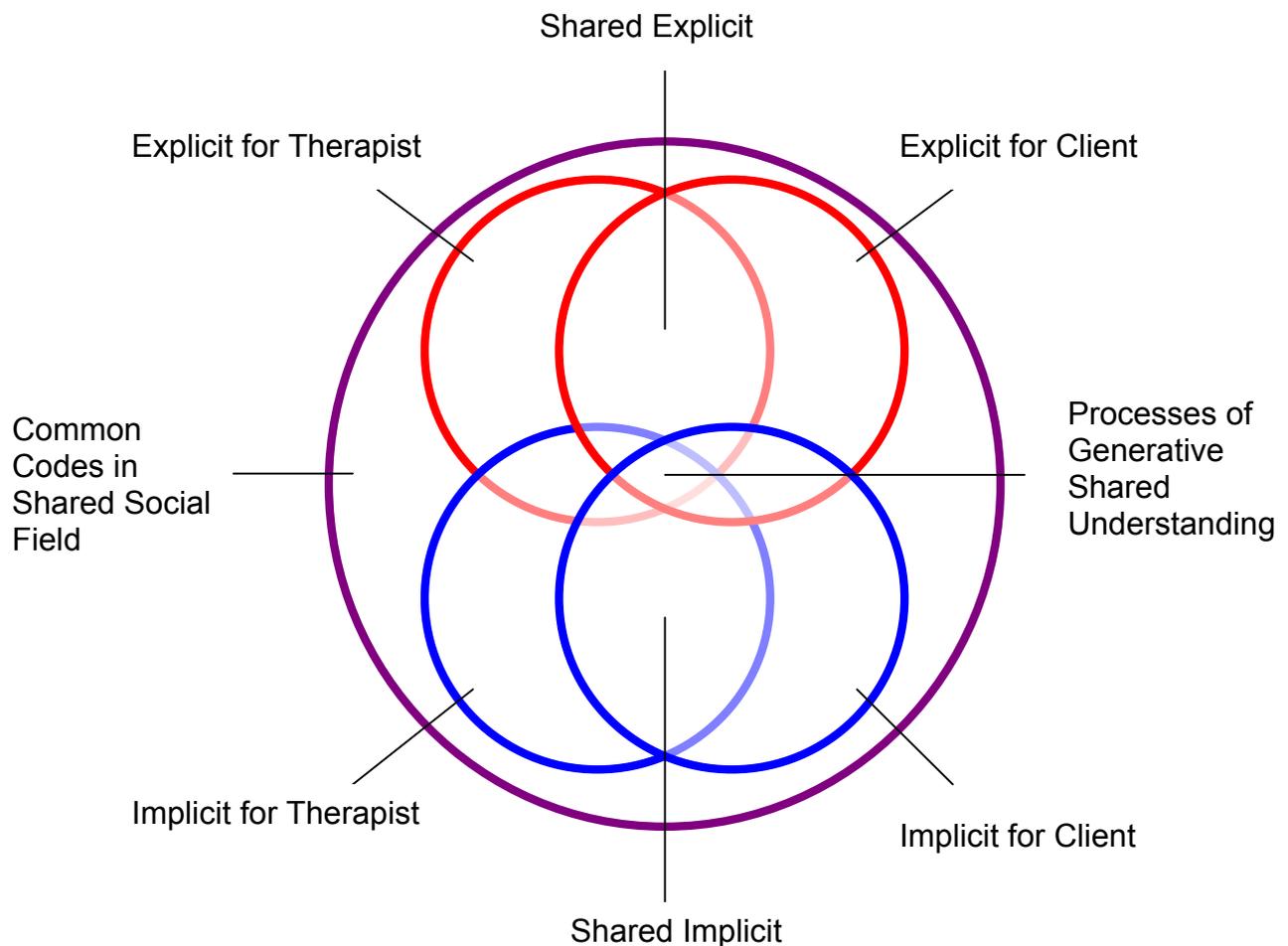
“If even a pebble lies where I want it to lie, it cannot, except by a coincidence, be where you want it to lie. And this is very far from being an evil: on the contrary, it furnishes occasion for all those acts of courtesy, respect, and unselfishness by which love and good humour and modesty express themselves.”

C. S. Lewis

To expect a map alone, such as a Code of Ethics, to ensure that we will both meet up at the same point within a wide country, denies the fact that both therapist and client arrive with pre-made maps that greatly differ. A generative, shared understanding of how we should proceed with one another with appropriate consideration and respect cannot be attained instantly or for all-time.

Now structure can be considered as a complex of relations, and ultimately as multi-dimensional order. From this point of view, all language can be considered as names for unspeakable entities on the objective level, be it things or feelings, or as names of relations.

Alfred Korzybski



Gawler-Wright 2002

The multi-layered and ever evolving system of understanding between therapist and client, is made up of what is individually implicit and explicit, and what is shared implicitly and explicitly. It is also positioned within society's concerns, judgments and laws.

For the therapist, a Code of Ethics may be an explicit understanding, believed to be made explicit to the Client by the Therapist's verbal or written contract. However, a genuinely common understanding of what this really means may only be developed once shared relationship has translated the symbols of the code into the four dimensions of experience for both parties. Because of this, an experience of breach for either party, within the therapeutic relationship or other experiences of the client, is potentially an opportunity for deepening of both shared ethical understanding and more skilled acts of love.

"The Ethical Code", as shared between client and therapist, is therefore a map to construct and decipher together using a variety of "obvious", "revealed" and "unspoken" shared premises, acceptable to each and sufficiently understood within the wider social field.

Therefore, the position of "informed not-knowing", which is a psychologically mature state of humility and courage, is as important an achievement in our ethical practice as any security we can derive from the most sagaciously penned Code, as it is only in this sensitive space that we can knowingly draw on the developed maps of profession, society and the law to guide rather than plot the course through an uncharted and dynamic landscape.

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