Chapter 13
Developing Ethical Practice through Inquiry:
It's not Know-What, It's Know-How

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores a graduate course designed for process consultant practitioners and change managers on the ethics of intervening in human systems. The course uses an ethical inquiry process which involves both individual and collective exploration. This is described through the background philosophy of embodied knowledge which underpins the design of the course and is further elaborated from the perspective of the professor and a previous student. Enactive and embodied knowing through an inquiry process draws attention to our skilful action through the challenges we face in acting ethically. This involves practicing three main methods used in the journey towards ethical know-how: the Discipline of Noticing (Mason, 2002), identifying the gap between espoused theory and theory-in-use (Argyris, 1995), and an individual and collective inquiry process (Roy et al, 2003) into ethical issues the authors have faced in their personal and/or professional lives.

INTRODUCTION

Warren teaches, and Andrew was a student in, a course on the Ethics and Philosophy of Human Systems Intervention in the Masters program in Human Systems Intervention (HSI) at Concordia University. The HSI program aims to integrate theory, values and skills in organization development and human systems intervention and is designed to develop expertise as process consultants (Schein, 1999) for future organizational leaders and consultants who are interested in facilitating change processes within human systems. An understanding of this approach to consultation evolves through developing a learning community where students engage with theory in order to reflect on their experience and interaction with others.

Schein (1999) defines process consultation as "a set of activities on the part of the consultant that help the client to perceive, understand, and act upon the process events that occur in the client's environment in order to improve the situation as defined by the client" (p. 11). These activities constitute interventions with the client through a collaborative process of data gathering and a series of interactions appropriate to the client context.

According to Taylor, De Guerre, Gavin, & Kass (2002) (who developed this cohort program) the purpose of intervention "at a process level is to enable the client system to catalyze its own learning and renewal, to change normative patterns to be more proactively adaptive; that is, to become a learning system" (p. 361). In year one of our program, students take a course in consultation methods which enables them to engage in an off-campus project matching a student consulting team with a client organization. The students organize themselves into consulting teams, find a client, obtain ethics approval to carry out fieldwork, and work with their client to design and implement a project related to organizational change.

In the second year, this process is replicated, except that each student engages individually, based on the process consultation model, with a client organization, be it a community, non-profit, governmental or corporate organization. These projects challenge the student consultants to develop an understanding of their values and attitudes as they work with a client.

One of the required courses in the first year is the Ethics and Philosophy of Human Systems Intervention. The pedagogical approach to this course is the subject of this chapter. Before we describe the activities in this course, which involve writing about ethical dilemmas and engaging in a collective and individual inquiry process about the themes that arise from these dilemmas, we feel it is important to provide the epistemological background which underpins its design, and which is rooted in a concept of the development of ethical awareness and action which is called "ethical know-how" (Varela, 1999).

BACKGROUND TO THE COURSE: ETHICAL KNOW-HOW

Moral knowledge, as Aristotle describes it, is clearly not objective knowledge, i.e., the knower is not standing over against a situation that he merely observes; he is directly confronted with what he sees. It is something that he has to do (Gadamer, 1999, p. 314).

"The change process is one not merely of transmitting ideas but of changing values… the process consultant is concerned about passing on his skills and values" (Schein, 1999, p. 191, 194). While this change process involves the consultant passing on values, the student becoming consultant is often unaware of his/her personal values and ethical practices. Therefore, the *teaching of ethical practice in process consultation does not just involve knowing-what* set of techniques or activities to lead a client group through; learning *knowing-how and when* to use them is just as important. John Dewey (1922) notes:

We may be said to know how by means of our habits. We walk and read aloud, we get off and on streetcars, we dress and undress, and do a thousand useful acts without thinking of them. We know something, namely, how to do them (p. 177).

According to Dewey, all human action is *moral* action because it has an impact on, and implications for, both self and society. The basis of the course's approach to inquiry is that the development of an understanding of our values requires us to become attuned to, and act appropriately in, our environment. Through repeated engagement, our ethical know-how is employed and, through feedback, modified. What we experience is determined by what we do and what we know how to

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