CLIENT ETHICAL DILEMMAS
BROUGHT TO THERAPISTS

Selections from Chapter One of
The Ethical Lives of Clients - Transcending Self-Interest in Psychotherapy
by William J. Doherty, Ph.D.

We know of no research on which client ethical issues come up in therapy.

However, we have polled several hundred therapists who have taken our workshops on ethical consultation in therapy. During the first morning of the workshop, after we describe what we mean by the ethical dimension of client's lives, and describe the five moral foundations from Haidt's work, we give participants a sheet of paper with these directions:

Please briefly describe an example or two of an ethical issue in the life of a client that you found challenging to address therapeutically. It could be something that the client brought to you or something that you saw but was not an issue raised by the client.

Most fall under the umbrella of client actions or decisions that can potentially cause harm. The therapists were asked to write a paragraph about the challenges they faced in handling these situations. Mostly they reported feeling unprepared and inadequate, especially when it came to challenging a client about potentially harmful behavior the client did not see as problematic.

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LIST FROM WORKSHOP PARTICIPANTS ABOUT THEIR CLIENTS' ETHICAL LIVES

SECRETS

- Affairs (past and ongoing)
- Intent to divorce/leave relationship, not telling spouse
- Abortions
- Limits on how long to keep secrets
- About the biological mother
- Pornography use

DIVORCE

- Kids
- Financial security
- Spouse physical or mental illness
- Ambivalence

ILLEGAL OR DANGEROUS BEHAVIOR

- Cheating on taxes
- Past crimes (e.g., murder, sexual abuse)
- Substance abuse during pregnancy
- Drinking and driving

PARENTS' AND CHILD SAFETY

- Fitness to parent
- Client denying responsibility for child sexual abuse or not believing child's accusations
- Sexually active minor
- Child not in school
- Parental threats to abandon

OTHERS' SAFETY

- Spreading STDs
- Young/vulnerable sexual partners
- Systemic impact of client's unhealthy behavior
- Working with a pedophile client

Reference:

Doherty, W. J. (2022). *The ethical lives of clients: Transcending self-interest in psychotherapy.* American Psychological Association.

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