MORAL FOUNDATIONS THEORY

Jonathan Haidt's Model

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

Main principle: "intuitions come first."

Moral judgments happen quickly and are influenced heavily by emotion. Therapy, of course, is a venue for the exploration of all kinds of emotions and intuitions.

Moral intuitions are heavily influenced by culture because we are social animals.

The following moral intuitions have been found in all cultures studied thus far, although they play out differently in different cultures.

- **Care/harm,** our ability to feel and dislike the pain of others. This domain comes up in therapy around clients' responsibilities for caregiving and for managing relationships where there is attachment and vulnerability.
- **Fairness/cheating,** ideas of justice, rights, and autonomy. It comes up in therapy around issues such as lying and secret keeping as well as sexual infidelity.
- **Loyalty/betrayal,** connected our history in tribes and coalition building. It comes up in therapy in issues such as obligations to spouse versus family of origin, divided loyalties in stepfamilies, and differences in group allegiances (e.g., religious, political) that can create conflicts among family members.
- **Authority/subversion,** connected to our human history with hierarchy and respect for traditions. In therapy it comes up around parenting differences in discipline, conflict over respect for family elders and traditions, and family differences over following religious and political leaders.
- **Purity/degradation,** which relates to disgust and contamination. This comes up in issues related to sexuality and religion.

© The Doherty Relationship Institute for educational distribution purposes
RelationalEthicsInTherapy.org

These five constructs can provide a map for listening to and respecting a client's moral intuitions and the tensions among them.

And in a culture of expressive individualism (where only care/harm and fairness/cheating seem to be authentic), they can help us avoid the temptation to ignore or devalue moral emotions and intuitions that are important for many clients in a pluralistic society.

References:

Haidt, J. (2012). The righteous mind: Why good people are divided by politics and religion. Pantheon.

Haidt, J., & Joseph, C. (2007). The moral mind: How five sets of innate intuitions guide the development of many culture-specific virtues, and perhaps even modules. *The Innate Mind, 3*, 367-391.

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

© The Doherty Relationship Institute for educational distribution purposes
RelationalEthicsInTherapy.org