SHIFTING FROM INDIVIDUALISM TO A RELATIONAL FOCUS

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

In their classic book, *Habits of the Heart: Individualism and Commitment in American Life*, Robert Bellah and colleagues argued that most psychotherapists were unwittingly promoting a form of "expressive individualism," which is a cousin of "utilitarian individualism."

Utilitarian individualism is the idea that if individuals are free to pursue their private economic self-interest, then the whole society will benefit.

Expressive individualism follows the same logic in the area emotional well-being: focus on yourself and then the well-being of your family and community will follow.

Bellah also observed that that therapy lacked a language of ethical or moral responsibility—a way to think and talk about commitments and responsibilities to others that cannot be translated and reduced to "What do I need to do for me?" In fact, the language of "should" is often framed as either inauthentic or oppressive.

The challenge for therapy is how to transcend individual self-interest in a way that respects the autonomy and personal needs of clients.

Two fundamental assumptions: a) humans are fundamentally moral/ethical beings in relational webs of mutual responsibility from birth to death, and b) that like it or not, therapists are ethical consultants to our clients.

But lacking an articulated framework for this ethical consultation work, most therapists just make it up as they go, generally defaulting to an individualistic orientation that downplays the role of responsibilities and obligations to others and to community.

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

We are not bringing ethics or morality to our clients.

Instead, we help them sort through the moral thoughts and feelings they already have as social beings. Clients don't separate the psychological and ethical aspects of their lives—"What am I feeling?" is not disconnected from "What should I do?" Therefore, we owe it to them to become more skilled at ethical consultation.

Reference:

Bellah, R. N., Madsen, R., Sullivan, W. M., Swidler, A., & Tipton, S. M. (1985). *Habits of the heart: individualism and commitment in American life.* University of California Press.

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