# Ethical Dilemmas

Edited by **Andy Rogers**

## The Dilemma

While the dilemma set in the last issue seems relatively straightforward and uncontroversial, the proverbial Lucifer is in the layers. So under the practical concerns and suggestions of feelings in the vignette, we find deeper clashes and connections. As our respondents pick up, struggles with economics – both personally and organisationally – rip through the situation and fuel the inter- and intra-personal bonds and conflicts (and hints of conflicts) within. But this is also a dilemma about gender and work, life choices and constraints, and at another level again: birth, rebirth, transcendence and grounding, biology and spirituality, and the value systems and assumptions that weave all of these dimensions together.

Perhaps then, like human experience itself, the dilemma deserves an open-ended exploration of psychology, meaning and relationship, as well as of groups, politics and sociology – and the degrees to which each of these elements defines, empowers or ensnares the subjects at its heart – which is precisely the kind of multi-layered response a contemporary humanistic approach has the capacity to offer. All we can do here, in a few hundred words, is open some doors, ask some questions and be attuned to the infinite potential beyond.

**Andy Rogers**

## The Previous Dilemma

**You supervise a group of counsellors in a small and increasingly stretched charity-sector service, from which two paid counsellors are planning breaks of a few months. Sue is going on maternity leave while Josh is awaiting ordination as a Buddhist, for which he will go on retreat for four months, and return with a new name. As they discuss some of the issues, you think you pick up some tension between them. You have no involvement in management but, outside the supervision group, casual remarks among the staff reveal some discontent about the impact on long-term clients and on the service generally, all of which seem to centre on Josh and his imminent ordination. What are the issues, for you, Sue, Josh and the organisation?**

## Response 1

It's interesting that Josh's employer has given him permission to take four months leave at this time. They must be convinced that Josh needs to go, and want to hang on to him. However, colleagues may not understand either why he chooses to go, or why he chooses to go now.

They might feel he is being irresponsible and selfish with regard to the needs of both the charity and his clients. They might also find it strange that it is permitted by management. Sue is about to go on maternity leave. She has enough on her plate between ending with existing clients and imminent motherhood, without also being concerned about the service. Perhaps Josh's choice is making it harder for her to feel okay about going?

Josh may regard his religious duties as taking precedence over everything else. Ordination might well be the most important day of his life – a 'spiritual marriage' every bit as unavoidable, life changing and cause for celebration (and apprehension) as giving birth. Why should it be okay for Sue to take leave, and not for him?

There is no 'perfect' solution to the practical situation. A temporary counsellor might help if the charity also provides short-term therapy, but with their winding down period, recruitment, orientation and so on, the output gained is expensive in terms of resources. Other therapists may be able to increase their hours to compensate, but adjusting client hours up and down with long-term work takes time. The charity also needs to be extra vigilant for signs of wear and tear as the pressure of the increased waiting-list can end up resting with particular staff (including admin/reception).

Here we have the seeds for acute conflict within a team that is already stretched. Putting aside who is 'right' or 'wrong', the dynamics are worrying. A group under siege with a common goal can pull together. However, if one person is identified as letting the team down, all that intensity may get channelled their way. Awful for them, and unpleasant for everyone else, for now there is pressure inside and outside the group – a dangerous situation with regard to stress levels.

As the supervisor, I think it entirely appropriate to proactively check out non-clinical issues which may affect a therapist's ability to work. Even though it might not be the supervisor's job to resolve these, they can at least be made conscious. As such, Josh and Sue's upcoming absence, and its impact on individuals and the service as a whole, is fair game. If this opens a can of worms in terms of inter-staff relationships which is beyond the bounds of supervision, then at least it is out in the open, and some thought can be given to where and how to mediate the tension.

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## Response 2

This is a tricky, multi-layered problem, as there are so many parties that need to be thought about. The issues that spring to mind are: care of clients and staff; financial pressures of the organisation; tension between the supervisees; and the question of self-disclosure. I believe that these issues are interlaced.

I am making an assumption here that the counselling service in the example is struggling financially, which puts pressure on paid staff to perform better, perhaps having to limit how long they can see clients. Such changes possibly create resistance and discontent amongst staff. Having to meet targets in order to cut costs, as we so often hear from the NHS, often translates into neglecting patients' needs. It is possible that these organisational stresses are unconsciously being projected on to Josh.

As the dilemma suggests, the supervisor picks up on the tension between Sue and Josh. Putting myself in the supervisor's shoes, I would need to weigh up whether to address the interpersonal tension between them in the supervision hour. Here the focus is on attending to the group dynamics, which is an important aspect of supervision. I believe that bringing the conflict out into the open creates possibilities of processing and understanding how each individual is affected by the changes that are presently going on in this organisation.

The conflict between the two supervisees might partly be caused by possible cost-cutting measures. I wonder if, in the light of Josh being on retreat for four months, the organisation has asked Josh to end the contract with his long-term clients? Then there is the issue of whether Sue has paid maternity leave, whereas Josh may be taking unpaid leave. Perhaps he feels hard done by, losing out financially, and that his reasons for a prolonged leave are seen as less important than Sue's?

Another area that needs to be looked at is how Sue and Josh manage their absence with their clients. How are the clients going to manage not having counselling for four months? Might the more fragile clients need to be held by a replacement counsellor?

Lastly. I would encourage both Josh and Sue to think about what and how to disclose to their clients, and the implications such self-disclosure has on each individual client. For instance, how, or should, Josh announce his new name? Furthermore, it might be useful to think through some of the issues that may get triggered in clients in response to a counsellor's absence, such as abandonment, rejection and envy.

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# The New Dilemma

An adult male client in your private practice reveals in his first session that he has come to therapy because the media storm around high-profile figures being involved in child abuse has brought back memories of his own sexual abuse of a child some 20 years ago, of which he is 'deeply ashamed'. Apparently, he still has contact with the female 'victim', who is now an adult and, your client says, does not want to pursue a legal case against him.

What might be the personal, professional and ethical concerns here? Might a Humanistic Psychology approach have anything unique to offer an exploration of this dilemma?

Please send responses of around 400 words, suggestions for future dilemmas and other correspondence to: **andy.rogers@sparsholt.ac.uk**