

# Values and Ethics in Counselling and Psychotherapy

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# ONE What are your personal values?

## Introduction

This chapter will encourage and suggest exercises for us to assess our own values and beliefs. It will touch on the notion of identity and the relationship between identity and values. It will consider how we perceive the values of others and whether sharing values is an important foundation of relationships. We will think about origins of values and the concept of 'conscience'. Each of the exercises will be illustrated by at least one of the four students completing them, so we learn more about each of their identities and values.

## What are values?

I argue that every decision we make is underpinned by what we value in life: every action and inaction. Our values shape everything we do; they underpin human agency, choice and autonomy. Values express what it means to be human and make choices about our behaviour. Values are inescapable and inherent in our behaviour and everyday decisions. For **Sartre**, we are always engaged in a world of values, saying, 'my acts cause values to spring up like partridges' (1943/2003: 62). Behaviour acquires value through the culturally agreed social significances of acts. Sartre explains: 'Values are sown on my path as thousands of little real demands, like the signs which order us to keep off the grass' (1943/2003: 62). How much do you think values influence or even determine your behaviour?

### Exercise

- 1 Think of the first decision or choice you made today.
- 2 Explore what your options were at that time.
- 3 Work out what value was behind you picking the option you picked.
- 4 Repeat for the next three decisions you made and see if there are any commonalities in the list of values you acquire.



### Maxine

The first decision Maxine thought about was the decision on whether or not to turn up to the counselling course that morning. She had been very nervous and apprehensive and had identified that she was worried what her ex-counsellor and new tutor would think of her in this new context. She had felt fairly confident in their therapy relationship that her counsellor had liked her and she did not want this to change. However, Maxine did not want to discuss this situation with her peers or with her tutor so thought again what decision to discuss. She instead chose to talk about her decision about what to wear that morning. She noted that she hadn't wanted to look as though she had made an effort to dress up but wanted to appear informal and casual. She also noted that in one of her favourite tops, she was particularly aware of the shape of her breasts and she did not want to draw attention to this or for other students to perceive her as overtly sexual or sexually available so she rejected this option. She was also aware she would be sitting still all day and wanted to wear something she felt comfortable in so did not choose a pair of trousers that were a little too tight around her waist. She identified that the values she had prioritised in her decision of what to wear were comfort, wanting to belong and not intimidate or distance people, and wanting to feel good about herself (feeling attractive but not overtly sexual which to her would feel desperate or needy as opposed to self-contained and content).



### Rubina

Rubina could not decide what decision to discuss and finally decided to discuss the decision of what to discuss! She found it difficult to assess how much information she wanted to disclose about herself and her life, as she did in her work. She considered that the values important to her about this decision were privacy, openness and humility. She was interested to think more about the value of humility and consider how much she felt vain and selfish to talk about herself, and concluded that this value was possibly much more deeply held and influential than she had previously realised. She decided that this course was an opportunity to challenge her usual mode of saying very little about herself.

We can see from these examples that our personal values are many and various and different ones may be prioritised at different times, depending on our physical and emotional needs at the time and the context of each decision.

## Identity

To the extent that our values are personal to us (although developed intersubjectively), they are connected to how we describe or think about our identity. I see identity not as fixed but as developing and being actively shaped by us according to our values and in response to our context. The features or characteristics we think are important to describe ourselves reflect our values. Values are the root of ethical decisions and **Sartre** is adamant that there is no justification for our values; we are free to choose them. Our values, developed from our social intersubjective context, shape who we become and this in turn further shapes our values.

### Exercise

This and the following two exercises came from Sue Wood\*, who worked with me on the School of Health's Postgraduate Certificate in Citizenship and Community Mental Health, University of Bradford. She works as a freelance creative writing facilitator with at-risk groups and in professional health training.

- 1 Choose three adjectives to describe yourself.
- 2 Which three adjectives do you think you would have chosen 10 years ago?
- 3 Which three adjectives do you think you would have chosen 15 or 20 years ago?

### Anne



Anne completed the exercise above very quickly. Without hesitation she described herself currently as caring, responsible and fun. She thought more carefully about how she was 10 years ago and situated herself in

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recollecting that at that time her children would all have been in primary school and she was very involved in their everyday lives. She chose for that time: caring, exhausted and proud. Thinking back further, she reminded herself of her life 20 years ago, before she had become a mother, excited to have just met her husband and just begun her career in teaching. She chose for then: excited, loving and hopeful.

## Tom

Tom spent a lot of time trying to work out which three adjectives to pick, finding great difficulty as he experienced himself as changing so much in his moods. After much deliberation he chose: self-confident, emotional and concerned. Thinking back to being 18 was a distressing thought for Tom as being diagnosed with a major psychiatric illness was not a positive experience for him, although the resulting medication did make his life temporarily easier. The adjectives he decided on were: unhappy, unconfident and worried. Finally thinking back to being eight years old was easier for Tom. He described himself aged eight as: carefree, emotional and interested.

The students spent much time discussing how they saw themselves and how this had changed over time, noting what characteristics had remained constant and which had changed or developed and why. They noted how their identities can be vulnerable to how others see or treat them, and also discussed with some sadness what parts of their identities they felt they had lost and would like to reclaim. They also noted how their descriptions of themselves were so dependent on their self-esteem and how positively or negatively they saw themselves at any one time. As a result, their tutor suggested a further exercise.

### Exercise

- 1 Choose three adjectives to describe how you'd like to be.
- 2 Compare these to the adjectives you have chosen to describe how you think you are. If these are very different, this can be an indication of low self-esteem, whereas if they are similar, this suggests high self-regard or esteem.

### The students

The group discussed this exercise and its usefulness as a measure of self-esteem, and generally agreed they felt it was more useful to help them identify areas for self-development than to use as a measure. They discussed how it highlighted that their identities are connected to their values,

with the characteristics they chose showing what they value, whether they are characteristics they would like or that they think they already have.

## Identity and roles

Our identity is also tied up in how we see ourselves in terms of the roles we fulfil. The roles that are central to our identity may say something about our values too.

### Exercise

- 1 List all the roles that you have in life and list them in order of how central each is to your identity.
- 2 Write a poem, beginning each line with 'I am a ...'. Include all your roles; more than one can complete each line.
- 3 Think about how much this poem reflects your identity.
- 4 What aspects of your identity does it miss?

### Anne



Anne listed in order of centrality to her identity: mother, wife, daughter, sister, friend, listener, Brownie leader, singer, swimmer, reader, cleaner, cook, ironer, tidier of clutter, appreciator of flowers, gardener, accountant, first-aider. She wrote the following poem:

I am a mother, a wife, a daughter and sister,  
I am a woman in relationships.  
I am a helper, a listener, a Brownie leader;  
I am a singer, a swimmer, a reader and gardener;  
I clean, I tidy, I iron, I count money and  
I apply plasters to sores.

She reflected how much time she spends in her life fulfilling roles that are important to her sense of identity as a caring and nurturing woman. She also reflected that singing, swimming and reading are important parts of her identity that she rarely fulfils now, and decided she must prioritise these activities more highly. She was glad that the counselling course will involve a lot of reading and is determined to make time for this and be clear with her children that she is unavailable for their needs when she is focusing on this.

## Values and ethics

### Exercise

How do you define what is ethical for you? What are the most important values in your life? Try and complete the sentence: 'An ethical life for me is ...' Compare your answer to the examples in the box below of my interpretations of how various philosophers have defined an ethical life.

### An ethical life is ...

- Rational to pursue by developing virtues, particularly wisdom, courage, temperance and justice (Plato: virtue theory)
- Good habits and virtues, by developing the reasonable and appropriate balance between extremes (e.g. between selfishness and altruism) (Aristotle: virtue theory)
- Pursuing your own pleasure (Epicureans)
- Seeking to be in tune with the universe (Stoics)
- Following human reason and the scriptures to divine God's purpose (Aquinas)
- A duty to treat others equally and as you would be treated and without using people for your own means (Kant: rationalism/deontology)
- Conscious awareness of ourselves and nature to become active rather than passive with our reactions and emotions (Spinoza)
- Critical rational thought and awareness of oneself (Hegel)
- Following your immediately compelling rational intuitions about what is self-evident (Moore: intuitionism)
- Following our emotions and passions which are informed by observation and experience (Hume: empiricism)
- Judging an action by its consequences and choosing that which is most favourable to most people (Bentham: consequentialism/teleology)
- Following rules laid down by various societal institutions (Hobbes: contractarianism)
- Becoming habitually sensitive to the needs and interests of others, and evaluating our habits to check their appropriateness in changing circumstances (Dewey: pragmatism)
- Caring for others according to our relationships with them, including compassion for unknown others and self-care (Gilligan: care ethics)
- The duty of love for all (Kierkegaard)
- Searching for meaning and developing ourselves as unique people (Nietzsche)
- Authenticity (being true to oneself), and resoluteness (taking on personal responsibility for the choices we make) (Heidegger)

- To respond to the Other who is different from me – heteronomy – starting with the Other (Levinas)
- Encounter in I–Thou relations (Buber)
- Grasping our freedom to develop our authentic selves and make our ethical decisions without justification and without excuse (Sartre)
- Awareness that most philosophical thinking in answer to this question has been done by men who often see women as ‘other’ and not a subject in their own right (De Beauvoir)

(More on these philosophical concepts can be found in the **Appendices**)

## Religion and philosophy

### God

God and Christianity are invoked regularly throughout western moral philosophy, sometimes assumed and sometimes argued against. The **Stoics** believe that each individual fits within a divine plan for the whole universe, and morals should consist in seeking to be in tune with the universe, and to act with integrity to be part of the wider world soul. The later ‘natural law’ theory of Aquinas added Christianity to the idea of the Stoics’ divine plan for the universe, suggesting that God gives human reason to be supplemented by the Scriptures, although human reason has been flawed since the ‘fall of Man’ such that we must look to God’s purpose primarily. **Kierkegaard** argues that individual choice is sovereign and advocates that the ethical choice is to obey God and to love others. At the same time he argues that there are no outside criteria to make any choice more right than any other. He critiques **Hegel**, who tried to present religion as rational and thus reduces it to something other than itself. **Nietzsche** accuses Christianity of a systematic devaluation of this world in favour of the next, thus destroying all moral values. He claims that God is dead and defines power as the human goal.

### Anne and Tom



Anne decided that for her ‘an ethical life is to love and care for others’. She thought her philosophy was close to Gilligan’s ethics of care and Kierkegaard. She was aware that Kierkegaard’s injunction of love was for all without preference, whereas the ethics of care focuses on preferential relationships, and thought that her approach was probably closer to



the ethics of care. Tom thought that for him 'an ethical life is to be true to myself whilst treating others and the world with respect and care'. He considered the list of philosophers and decided that his approach had aspects of the Stoics, Kant and Heidegger. He liked Heidegger's idea of resoluteness to add to his philosophy of life. He also really liked Spinoza's ideas of being active rather than passive whilst experiencing himself.

## Values and friendship

Often our values are important to us in who we choose as friends. Most of us choose friends who are like ourselves in some way, often people who share our values or what is important to us. Perhaps values are equally involved when relationships break down where conflicting values come into play, or perhaps when our values move us in different directions away from each other.

### Exercise

- 1 What characteristics do you value in other people?
- 2 Think of your friends – how much do they share these characteristics?
- 3 In relationships or friendships that have broken down, did this reflect a conflict or divergence of values?



### Tom

Tom thought about whom he likes spending time with, both in terms of his friends and colleagues or people he has turned to for help, such as his psychologist and psychiatrist. He reflected that he really values an ability to question what can be taken for granted, and noted this quality in his psychologist and several of his friends. He also reflected that he likes people to be confident but not arrogant; to have opinions but also be interested in the opinions of others. Finally he decided that he really valued a dry sense of humour and that humour was an important antidote to his serious questioning of life.

## Origin of values

How much do you think nature or nurture influences your values? What aspects of your context and culture most influence your values? For

some, religion or spirituality is an important part of values and ethical beliefs. Values and beliefs influence each other such that behind each of your values you can find some beliefs about yourself, others and the world. In turn your values influence how you perceive yourself, others and the world.

### Exercise

- 1 Consider yourself at the ages of 5, 10, 15 and 20 years old and list for each age all the influences on you (include significant people, institutions and broader cultural influences such as the media).
- 2 For each influence, list the values that you were taught.
- 3 Decide how important each of these values is to you still now.

### Maxine



Maxine thought back to when she was five years old. At that time she spent most of her time with her parents, her aunt, uncle and cousins, and at school. The values taught all seemed similar from her family and were values of enjoyment and freedom. She remembered being allowed to watch a bit of television but limited to cartoons or children's programmes which she could not recall influencing her. By the time she was 10 years old, the influences on her had broadened. She was a keen gymnast and competed for her county, spending a lot of time with her gym teacher, who supported and encouraged her enormously, giving her the values of care, effort and achievement, and valuing her body. She also had friends from different schools through gymnastics. She played with a couple of other similar-age girls on her street who attended different schools, one of whom was of African-Caribbean descent, so she was also aware of different cultures. From these friends and their families, she came across the values of politeness, curiosity and respect for different opinions. At age 15, Maxine spent a lot of time with a few girlfriends who were interested in shopping and boys, from whom she learnt the values of appearance and covering up feelings. However, she also had other local friends who she relaxed with much more and learnt the values of having fun and being herself. She realised that nearly all the values she had learnt were still important to her now, depending on context and how she was feeling about herself. It made her wonder if any of her values were *hers* alone, as opposed to influences from other people. She considered whether her interest in other people is just *her* but realised that she has been influenced by others who have shared this value, such as her gym teacher.

## Impact of life experiences on values

Major events or changes can have big impacts on our values or be critical events in leading us to re-evaluate our values. For example, the experience of someone dying who was important to us can lead us to evaluate the impact of their values on us and can help us prioritise our values in considering whether we are leading the life we want to live, having been reminded of the finiteness of life. Of course, the values we already hold also influence how we react and respond to such events.

## Conscience

The conscience is often referred to as though it were a separate entity: we might say 'She has no conscience' or 'how does your conscience let you do that?' It seems to refer to the most strongly held values we have that influence our behaviour. Could the idea of a 'conscience' represent the way our most deeply held values influence us?

- ◊ For **Heidegger**, we are called upon by the nature of our being to make our own choices, to choose to choose, and then we can have an individual conscience.

### Exercise

- 1 List any behaviours that you think would be against your conscience.
- 2 How would you feel if you carried out each of these behaviours?
- 3 Can you remember a time when you acted against your conscience?
  - i Why did you do this?
  - ii How did you feel as a result?
  - iii How did you deal with this feeling?

### Anne

Anne listed various behaviours as being against her conscience: killing, stealing, hurting someone else, lying and breaking a promise. She remembered a time when she stole a sweet from a shop when she was seven, but decided she was too young then to think fruitfully about this now. She then considered a time when she felt she had broken a promise to her mother to always look after her father when she had gone. She thought about how guilty she had always felt about putting her father in a care home when he

had dementia and was unsafe on his own, and she felt it would be too much and possibly dangerous for her children (who were young at the time) for her to bring him to live with her. As she reflected on how guilty she has always felt as a result, she decided she had probably never really dealt with this feeling; it just returned intermittently with all the same intensity. She was tearful when relating this experience and no reassurance from the other students that she had done what she could seemed to reassure her. She realised how deeply she felt the guilt as she had acted against such a deeply held value to her, of caring for those close to her and keeping promises.

## Rights

We live in a legal framework of rights and responsibilities, with legislation such as the human rights framework. Legislation uses the discourse of rights and responsibilities to enshrine moral duties in law.

### Exercise

- 1 What do you think should be the human rights of every individual?
- 2 List these in order of priority so if there is a conflict between rights you know which you would prioritise.
- 3 What do you think should be our responsibilities?
- 4 Are there any circumstances in which, or for any individuals, you believe these rights or responsibilities should be waived?

### Tom



Tom considered the rights he would defend and begins with the right to life and the freedom to make our own choices about how to live that life. He continued with the rights to follow a religion of our own choosing, the right to choose our own sexual orientation and sexual expression without discrimination, and after a little thought about how he would exclude the rights of people to have sexual relationships with children, he adds the condition of not impeding the freedom of others. He started to think of the kind of life he believes everyone in the world should be able to live whilst knowing that many currently do not. He added the right to have enough money to live on, and the right to have enough food, water, comfort and warmth. He then began to think more psychologically about welfare and added the right to be free from fear of violence. Finally, he thought about a life of flourishing rather than just existing and added the right to be occupied in productive

and valued activity, the right to friendships and valued relationships, and the right to choose whether or not to reproduce.

Tom wondered about how to prioritise among all these rights and considered Maslow's (1943) hierarchy of needs, where our needs move up the hierarchy when the lower needs are fulfilled. According to Maslow's hierarchy, basic survival rights would have to be prioritised above rights to flourish. Tom was clear that we all have responsibilities not to impede the rights of others and more actively to help others to access their rights and be able to flourish.

### **Maslow's hierarchy of needs (1943)**

- Self-actualisation
- Esteem
- Belongingness and love
- Safety
- Physiological

Tom was unsure when these rights or responsibilities should be waived, and worried about what this would mean to designate a group of people to not have these rights. However, he did think there is a limit to how much children can be expected to be autonomous individuals with rights and responsibilities, suggesting instead that adults have a particular responsibility to protect the future rights of children for them. He considered people with dementia and people with mental health problems and thought that there are perhaps some circumstances in which people may not have the capacity to make autonomous decisions and therefore need to be protected.

## Values, beliefs and judgement

Judgement can occur when we believe others to hold different values from ourselves. It can be difficult to hold values for ourselves without judging those who hold different values. It is important for us to be aware of our own basis for judging others, so we can question these judgements, try and understand why another's values are different from ours, and work to prevent acting unfairly. If we can deduce the beliefs behind our values, this can sometimes be an easier basis from which to understand different beliefs of others and thus be able to accept different values.

## Exercise

- 1 What values do some other people hold that you strongly disagree with?
- 2 When you meet someone who seems to hold a value that you strongly disagree with, how do you feel about them?
- 3 Think of an example of this situation:
  - i Do you have any understanding of why this person held such a value?
  - ii Does your understanding change your feelings towards them?
  - iii How did your feelings towards them influence how you acted towards them?

## Maxine



Maxine considered the value of having fun, which is important to her. She remembered a conversation with another woman who goes to a yoga class with her who questioned why Maxine had a hangover during yoga and why she would drink to the extent of her feeling poorly the following day. Maxine interpreted this question as this woman not valuing having fun as she generally found her very serious and completely focused on healthy living to the exclusion of all else. After this challenge, Maxine had avoided her. She realised how much she has kept away from her after assuming that this woman did not share her value about having fun and also realised she had made a lot of assumptions about this woman's values and why she challenged Maxine's hangover. Other students suggested that this woman may have had her own historical reasons for questioning Maxine's drinking, perhaps having a history of drinking too much herself and seeing it as progress to move to a point of prioritising looking after herself by not drinking. Maxine realised that, for her, having fun is a key value connected to looking after herself, as it is about valuing her freedom from being controlled by or having to answer to anyone else. She wondered whether on this level she actually shared a value with the woman at yoga and decided she would like to speak to her more to understand better her questioning of Maxine's drinking.

## Summary

This chapter has been designed with the hope of stimulating you to think about your own values and underlying beliefs about yourself, others and the world. The exercises demonstrate how our values shape our interactions with the world and others and are foundational in our decisions about how we live our lives. Our relationships provide

sources for the origins and development of our values, and then our values inform our choices in relationships.

Values are intrinsic to notions of identity and the various roles that we fulfil. This is one area where values are relevant to therapy, with respect to therapist identities and how we define ourselves. For example, do you call yourself a counsellor or a therapist, and why? It is likely that behind your answer to this question lie values that are important to your identity. What kind of therapist, or counsellor do you define yourself as? If you identify with a particular approach to counselling or therapy, what led you to this particular approach? Again, it is likely that your values lie behind your answers to these questions.

This leads us to the following chapter, which looks specifically at our values in the context of being a counsellor or psychotherapist and how these relate to ethical practice.