**APSY 603**

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**Ethical Decision Making Paper**

*A couple, who are your close friends, are aware that you will likely be spending Thanksgiving alone. They invite you to share Thanksgiving Day with them, preparing the meal during the morning, feasting at lunch, going for a leisurely walk in the woods during the afternoon, then returning for a light dinner. You show up to discover that they have, without letting you know, invited another unattached person who presumably your blind date for the day. That person is currently a client to whom you have been providing psychotherapy for two years (Pope & Vasquez, 2007, pp. 222-223).*

**Step 1. Identification of the Individuals and Groups Potentially Affected by the Decision**

Those who will be affected by the decision I make are my client, who is supposed to be my blind date for Thanksgiving Day, myself, the couple who invited me to spend Thanksgiving with them, and the profession of psychology. The profession of psychology will be impacted by the decision I make due to my professional obligation to promote the best interests of my client, and how my choice of action reflects the standards they have set out for psychologists. My professional reputation as a licensed psychologist will be influenced by the actions I take, and my personal reputation can also be affected; this scenario will provide me with the opportunity to either promote my own self interests or the interest of my professional designation. My client/date will be affected by the fashion I handle the situation in, in regards to our professional relationship. Finally, the host couple will be also be affected by the decision I take in order to deal with being placed in this coincidental predicament.

**Step 2. Identification of Ethically Relevant Issues and Practices, Including the Interests, Rights, and Any Relevant Characteristics of the Individuals and Groups Involved and of the System or Circumstances in Which the Ethical Problem Arose.**

 Using the chart that outlines the code (“The Four Ethical Principles with their Respective Values and Standards”, p.134), I can identify 11 ethical values that I think are important in resolving my dilemma: three under Respect for the Dignity of Persons, three under Responsible Caring, three under Integrity in Relationships, and two under Responsibility to Society. Furthermore, principle 15(1) in the section regarding dual relationships in the CAP Standards of Practice also pertains to this situation.

CPA CODE OF ETHICS

PRINCIPLE I: RESPECT FOR THE DIGNITY OF PERSONS

**Value: Fair Treatment/Due Process**

I.12 Work and act in a spirit of fair treatment to others.

**My Thoughts**

This situation that I am in puts me in an awkward position, and also puts my client in an awkward position. I must act professionally in order to reduce any tension that I or my client may be experiencing, and act in a manner that promotes the best interests of my client.

**Value: Confidentiality**

I.43 Be careful not to relay information about colleagues, colleagues’ clients, research participants, employees, supervisees, students, trainees, and members of organizations gained in the process of their activities as psychologists, that the psychologist has reason to believe is considered confidential by those persons except as required or justified by law.

**My Thoughts**

Due to the surprising nature of this run-in with my client, I need to be careful with what I say and act in a way that protects her confidentiality. It would be unethical to outright identify her as one of my clients and use this as a reason for leaving the party, or discuss confidential information that she has shared with me about herself in therapy sessions throughout the day as we celebrate Thanksgiving Day together.

**Value: Extended Responsibility**

I.46 Encourage others, in a manner consistent with this code, to respect the dignity of persons and to expect respect for their own dignity.

**My Thoughts**

Due to the possibility of my client breaking down due to uncomfortable nature of the situation that she finds herself in, I must persuade her to act in a rational manner that will protect her confidentiality and respect as an individual.

PRINCIPLE II: RESPONSIBLE CARING

**Value: General Caring**

II.1 Protect and promote the welfare of clients, research participants, employees, supervisees, trainees, colleagues, and others.

**My Thoughts**

I must promote the welfare of my client in this situation; the onus is on me to act professionally to defuse the tension of the situation in an appropriate manner. So by the means I see as necessary, I must proceed in a cautionary manner while handling this unanticipated scenario.

**Value: Minimize Harm**

II.29 Be careful not to engage in activities in a way that could place incidentally involved persons at risk.

**My Thoughts**

The nature of this situation is purely coincidental, and as such I need to act appropriately in order to avoid engaging in activities that could place my client at risk. As there are numerous ways I can handle this situation, I must choose the appropriate one in order to avoid the probable consequences that could be enforced as a result of me acting unethically. I do not think that it is sufficient to respond to the situation with the mind frame that because this scenario is coincidental I can just proceed as if this lady who is my supposed date was not my client. I need to avoid the possibility of an intimate dual relationship by acting professionally.

II.34 Give reasonable notice and be reasonably assured that discontinuation will cause no harm to the client, before discontinuing services.

**My Thoughts**

A possible mode of action I can engage in is to take my client aside and tell her that I cannot be her therapist anymore because of this situation and that we should proceed with the situation as the host party intends. This would be extremely unethical and likely result in psychological damage to my client. Due to the fact that this therapeutic relationship has lasted for two years I would assume that my client is in a fairly vulnerable position, and this would merely cause further harm.

PRINCIPLE III: INTEGRITY IN RELATIONSHIPS

**Value: Avoidance of conflict of interest**

III.33 Avoid dual or multiple relationships and other situations that might present a conflict of interest or might reduce their ability to be objective and unbiased in their determinations of what might be in the best interest of others.

**My Thoughts**

The basic intention of my friends setting me up with this girl was to help me begin a romantic relationship with someone. However, I already have a relationship with the woman they have selected for me: a professional relationship. This situation arouses a conflict of interest for me because it would entail me becoming involved in a dual relationship with one of my clients. I must act in a way that would not jeopardize our relationship, allowing us to continue what has worked out to be a positive working alliance for the past two years.

**Value: Reliance on the Discipline**

III.37 Familiarize themselves with and demonstrate a commitment to maintaining the standards of their discipline.

**My Thoughts**

No matter how tempting this “blind date” may be to engage in, I must demonstrate a commitment to maintaining the standards of my discipline. Upon evaluating what I should do, I have to keep in mind that I must act accordingly with respect to the ethical and professional standards designated for psychologists.

**Value: Extended Responsibility**

III.39 Encourage others, in a manner consistent with this code, to relate with integrity.

**My Thoughts**

My client may start acting very flirtatious once she sees me at the Thanksgiving dinner, and want to begin a romantic relationship with me. I need to take this opportunity, no matter how much I may regret it, to inform her of my responsibility to act in a way that will not influence our working relationship and convey to her that she must do the same if she wants to continue working with me professionally.

PRINCIPLE IV: RESPONSIBILITY TO SOCIETY

**Value: Beneficial Activities**

IV.10 Uphold the discipline’s responsibility to society by promoting and maintaining the highest standards of the discipline.

**My Thoughts**

My decision in this situation needs to reflect my professional obligation to promoting the highest standards of the discipline.

**Value: Respect for Society**

IV. 16 Convey respect for and abide by prevailing community mores, social customs, and cultural expectations in their scientific and professional activities, provided that this does not contravene any of the ethical principles of this code.

**My Thoughts**

Despite how I feel regarding the fact that I have been set up on a blind date with one of my clients, I must remain vigilant of the purpose of the date. I am at a friend’s house celebrating Thanksgiving Day: a social tradition of society. I need to factor this into my decision of what to do next, possibly providing grounds for either staying at the celebration or leaving immediately.

CAP STANDARDS OF PRACTICE

**Value: Prohibited Dual Relationships**

15 (1) Psychologists shall not undertake or continue a professional relationship when they are aware or should be aware that they face a potentially harmful conflict of interest as a result of a current or previous professional, familial, social, sexual, emotional, supervisory, political, administrative, or legal relationship with the client or a relevant person associated with or related to the client

**My Thoughts**

Interacting with my client in a social manner throughout the Thanksgiving Day celebrations would violate this standard of practice. I need to be aware of the potentially harmful conflict of interest that this situation places me in and rectify the situation by taking the necessary action to avoid this conflict of interest that can prevent me from maintaining my professional relationship with this client.

**Step 3. Consideration of How Personal Biases, Stresses, or Self-interest Might Influence the Development of or Choice Between Courses of Action**

It is possible that I have had very little luck with women in the past, and am desperate to get into an intimate relationship with somebody I am attracted to. I am very particular about whom I foresee myself being in a relationship with; it cannot be someone who I am not attracted to. This client of mine, who I am supposed to be getting set up on a date with, may be someone who I find very attractive in terms of personality and looks, but have not acted on my feelings in the past because I know it would be unethical to do so. Now that the groundwork has been taken out of the equation, I have all the more reason to simply acknowledge the situation as a coincidence and participate in the blind date as my friends intend me to. My feelings about this situation is that I find my client very attractive and that I could easily win her over her if I choose to, due to the powerful position I have over her. This would be allowing my own self interest to supersede over my professional judgment. Despite the fact that I can likely attain the relationship I know I want, it would be extremely unethical for me to do so and engaging in a romantic relationship with my client could result in severe penalties.

**Step 4. Development of Alternative Courses of Action**

I think that the following three courses of action are all realistic alternatives for me to resolve the dilemma that I have been placed in; however, they are quite different.

**Alternative 1**

Due to the fact that I know I want to go ahead with this relationship I can remain at the Thanksgiving Day celebration at my friend’s house, and go along with everything as they have set out for the day. Throughout the activities I can talk to my client about beginning a relationship with her and see what her opinion of this is.

**Alternative 2**

Another available option to me is that I can leave the celebration as soon as I see who it is that my friends have set me up on a date with. I can pretend to be suddenly ill, from something that I had eaten earlier, and excuse myself from the celebration without making any further interactions.

**Alternative 3**

Finally, a third option available to me is for me to continue with the celebration at my friend’s house. However, at my earliest opportunity I would take my client aside, in order to protect her confidentiality, and explain to her that it is a sheer coincidence that we have both ended up at this party and in the uncomfortable situation we are now in. I would tell her that we should be respectful of our friends’ efforts to host this celebration and enjoy the rest of it with them, but we must not interact with each other in private throughout the day as this would impose on our professional relationship.

**Step 5. Analysis of Likely Short-term, Ongoing and Long-term Risks and Benefits of Each Course of Action on the Individuals Involved or Likely to Be Affected**

**Possible Positive Consequences**

**Alternative 1**

* Allow me to engage in an intimate relationship with a woman whom I find attractive
* Makes my friends happy that they have chosen to set me up with someone who I approve of.

**Alternative 2**

* Promotes the best interests of my client
* Allows me to continue working with my client in a counselling context
* Upholds the highest standards for the profession of psychology by placing the interests of my client before my own

**Alternative 3**

* Promotes the best interests of my friends because everyone will remain at their celebration and enjoy it
* Allows me to protect the therapeutic relationship I have established with my client over the past 2 years

**Possible negative Consequences**

**Alternative 1**

* This will destroy the therapeutic relationship that my client and I will have worked on establishing over the past 2 years
* As a result of this disturbance in our relationship my client may suffer setbacks in counselling as she would need to find a new counsellor, and suffer from the loss of my psychological services.
* The profession of psychology would be tarnished due to my unethical behaviour where I attempted to take advantage of the power relationship between counsellor and client
* My client may decide to notify the College of Alberta psychologists about my actions, and as a result I may be forced to undergo whatever consequences they deem appropriate.

**Alternative 2**

* I may end up offending my friends because of my sudden departure from their party that they worked so hard on putting together
* Disables me from engaging in a romantic relationship with someone I find attractive

**Alternative 3**

* Makes the situation at hand even more awkward for my client and myself by placing restrictions on our interactions throughout the day
* Puts both our therapeutic relationship and my client’s confidentiality at risk by interacting in a social manner with her at a friend’s house
* Presents the frowned upon possibility for establishing a dual relationship with my client, and thus disregards the standards put in place for psychologists by the Canadian Psychological Association and the College of Alberta Psychologists.

**Step 6. Choice of Course of Action after Conscientious Application of Existing Principles, Values and Standards**

I think that alternative two would be my most suitable course of action in this scenario. It has many positives, and few negatives. It allows me to maintain my professional relationship with my client, stay respectful of my friends’ hospitality, and embrace the professional standards of ethics set out for psychologists by the Canadian Psychological Association and the College of Alberta Psychologists. This option allows me to be respectful for the dignity of my client and my friends, and at the same time act in a manner that promotes both responsible caring.

**Step 7. Action with a Commitment to Assume Responsibility for the Consequences of the Action**

This step is clear; there is no possible resolution to the dilemma unless I carry out what I consider to be the best initial course of action under the circumstances. Following my sudden exit from the Thanksgiving Day Celebrations, I can inform my friends within the next couple of days that I had a bad stomach ache but am now feeling better. As far as assuming responsibility for the consequences experienced by my client I made an effort to minimize them. Minimal to any consequences should be experienced by her in our counselling sessions. However, if need be, I can explain to her my professional duties as a psychologist and that these were the reasons I left so abruptly. I can assure her it was not because of any personal feelings towards her, but because it was the action I needed to take in order to maintain and promote the ethical practices of my profession; it is unethical for psychologists to engage in dual relationships of a sexual manner with clients.

**Step 8. Evaluation of the Results of the Course of Action**

In evaluating the results of my decision, I need to focus on the situation of my client and myself within our counselling sessions. It is important for me to do this in order to ensure that the individual is able to continue on in counselling, and that this incident has not evoked any new issues in counselling for her or for me. For the first month or so following the incidental run-in at the party, the evaluation and results of my decision will be ongoing. In my continuation of working with this client, I need to do my best to foresee any issues or biases that stem from our encounter at this party and deal with them immediately, in order to prevent a difficult situation from arising later.

**Sep 9. Assumption of Responsibility for the Consequences of Action, Including Correction of Negative Consequences, If Any, or Re-engaging in the Decision-making Process If The Ethical Issue Is Not Resolved**

If any unanticipated negative consequences arise they must be dealt with promptly. This would involve an open discussion with my unsatisfied client exploring her point of view on the matter. The ethical decision making process may be useful in considering what remedial actions to take.

**Step 10. Appropriate Action, as warranted and Feasible, to Prevent Future Occurrences of the Dilemma**

It will be important for me to engage in serious personal reflection in relation to this occurrence. Although the encounter with my client was purely coincidental, I need to think about how it may affect our counselling relationship, and how it may influence my personal opinions of my client. While I did what I thought was necessary to protect the client-counsellor relationship, the confidentiality of my client, and the best interests of my client I need to be certain that this occurrence had no effect on any of these categories. This scenario will definitely serve as a learning experience for me, helping me to further understand the sensitivity of the professional relationship I have with my clients and the implications of this in relation to contact between us outside of my office. As a result of this experience, I will always address this concept of contact outside of my office with my clients during our initial sessions during our discussion concerning informed consent. This way we will both be aware of how and why certain actions may be taken in potential social encounters, and we can develop strategies for managing them that protect both the client’s privacy and professional boundaries.

References

**Sinclair, C. & Pettifor, J. (Eds.). (2001).** ***Companion manual to the Canadian code of ethics for psychologists*** (3rd ed.). Ottawa, ON: Canadian Psychological Association.