Embracing Excellence: A Positive Approach to Ethical Decision Making

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Abstract

Ethics courses may provoke fear and uncertainty in art therapy students and practitioners if taught from a risk management perspective, which focuses on reducing therapist exposure to risk and avoiding harm to clients. In contrast, a positive ethical approach fosters empowerment, embraces limits, and enhances trust between art therapists and their clients. This viewpoint emphasizes the aspirational qualities of the ethical principles that guide professionals within the field, with a goal to reduce fear about ethical decision making and to encourage art therapists to strive for excellence in all endeavors.

"He who merely knows right principles is not equal to him who loves them." —Confucius

As a teacher and workshop facilitator, I have noticed that art therapy students often approach the topic of ethics with trepidation. They report feeling coerced and besieged, fearing they are doing something wrong—a reaction that may be due to a focus on wrongdoing. When taught from a risk management perspective, ethics courses highlight the prospect of reducing therapist exposure to risky situations and thereby avoiding harm to clients (Barnett, 2008). This point of view can cause undue worry, which may become overwhelming or paralyzing. The risk management perspective also tends to promote compartmentalized thinking in which ethical principles are considered only in light of difficult situations or ethical dilemmas (Handelsman, Knapp, & Gottlieb, 2009).

How can we be competent practitioners if we are so afraid of harm that the risks of practice overwhelm us? Do we only want to meet minimal standards of competence? I propose that if instead we strive for excellence, we need not be overcome by fear or self-doubt. Therapists function better when they approach practice with a positive ethical frame of mind that empowers them to be the best they can be, and this in turn promotes the highest standards for themselves, their clients, and the institutions that employ them (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006).

The positive approach to ethical decision making grew out of the positive psychology movement, which emphasizes client strengths and cardinal virtues rather than client deficits and psychopathology (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). According to Moon (2006), the document "Ethical Principles for Art Therapists" of the American Art Therapy Association (AATA; 2011) was written as a set of aspirational statements that can be conceptualized in terms of therapist and client strengths, and as active guidelines for becoming the best possible practitioner. However, certain areas of the document detail potential shortfalls that could confuse or overwhelm students, or lead them to get caught up in negativity. In this viewpoint, I assert that a positive reading of AATA's ethical principles fosters empowerment for therapists and clients, and embraces positive limits, trust, and excellence in the practitioner and in the profession. Teaching ethics from this positive perspective can reduce fear and instill self-confidence.

Empowering Therapists and Clients

"Ethical Principles for Art Therapists" (AATA, 2011) might be naively interpreted as disempowering, beginning in Section 1.1 with admonishing art therapists to avoid discrimination. However, when teaching from a positive approach, "do not discriminate" (p. 2) can be reframed as "embrace diversity," a statement that maintains the original intent of advancing the welfare of clients. People from various ethnic, socioeconomic, and religious backgrounds ought to be invited to experience the benefits of art therapy. The most recent edition of the ethical principles (AATA, 2011) reflects a positive stance towards diversity by its replacement of the guideline for multicultural awareness with that of multicultural competence. The acquisition of multicultural competence is an active process whereby art therapists investigate the cultural and ethnic groups they are likely to encounter, and incorporate into their practices diverse cultural values about art, image making, and expressions of color and symbols. Positively oriented art therapists approach clients with different backgrounds and cultures from their own from a position of knowledge and strength (Hinz, 2009).

Section 1.2 of "Ethical Principles for Art Therapists" states that one should "explain client roles and rights" (AATA, 2011, p. 2), a principle that can be enhanced by emphasizing "sensitive explanations" that increase clients' trust in therapists and the therapeutic process (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). As art therapists, we should make our purposes and methods transparent to clients who might otherwise fear being "analyzed" through their images. Providing sensitive explanations about roles and rights is a way

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to emphasize a therapist–client partnership in which clients are the experts on their art products. The positive approach empowers clients to become active partners in formulating treatment goals and making treatment decisions (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). Art therapy is a powerful modality that requires thoughtful use. However, positively oriented therapists understand that not all clients will benefit from art therapy; they are familiar with community resources and make sensitive referrals.

Embracing Limits

A positive view of ethics encourages healthy engagement with limits. Our awareness of limits reinforces the practice of self-care as well as the development of expertise; such awareness also encourages the adoption of healthy boundaries by clients. A risk management approach admonishes therapists to refrain from entering into multiple roles with clients and stresses the potential negative effects that could result from such interactions (Pope & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). A positive perspective reframes this idea by encouraging us to consider that clients are always clients and therefore we should always maintain a professional role with them. It is in the client's best interests to be able to return for future consultation. This possibility is precluded if the therapist's role has changed from professional to friend or other nonprofessional.

The positive approach to ethics also encourages us to understand the difference between boundary crossings and boundary violations; not every boundary crossing constitutes a boundary violation (Gottlieb & Younggren, 2009; Pope & Keith-Spiegel, 2008). Certain boundary crossings by therapists, such as attending a graduation or wedding ceremony, can be in a client's best interests. However, every boundary crossing should be mindfully undertaken and accompanied by a sound therapeutic rationale to ensure that it does not create a boundary violation. Self-disclosure is another example of a boundary crossing that we can anticipate and for which sensitive responses can be prepared. Positively oriented art therapists understand that creating images with clients is a form of self-disclosure; we should be prepared to respond sensitively to a wide variety of artistic situations.

Section 1.6 of AATA's (2011) ethical principles cautions art therapists to avoid professional practice when personal problems likely will prevent them from performing competently. A positive interpretation of this principle is that therapists need to maintain self-care (Handelsman et al., 2009). Art therapists frequently report that it is difficult to create their own art (Andrus, 2008). However, if creating art were conceptualized as self-care there could be a greater incentive to engage in this important activity. Likewise, whereas a risk management approach may cause anxiety about practicing beyond one's scope of education and training, art therapists in training can be reassured from a positive perspective that limitations are not weaknesses but are boundaries that help identify strengths. Thus, clinical expertise can be approached as a positive means of defining strengths and becoming exceptional practitioners. With greater expertise,

we will be in a better position to discern population-specific resistances and challenges, breakthroughs and joys.

Enhancing Trust

Trust is essential to an effective therapeutic relationship. Ironically, a risk management view of ethics puts an emphasis on "breaches" of trust, such as the circumstances under which confidentiality must be broken. The positive ethical approach enhances the formation of trust by emphasizing the values of providing clients with sensitive explanations about informed consent and confidentiality, openly discussing financial arrangements, emphasizing privacy and security of health information, and assuring continuity of care.

Providing sensitive explanations to clients about their roles and rights in therapy does not stop at imparting information and completing forms. A positive orientation encourages art therapists to anticipate unique client circumstances or concerns that could undermine the building of trust. The therapist can then strategize about how to best structure sessions to reduce wariness, to develop trust, and to improve therapeutic engagement. For example, confidence is increased when clients understand the appropriate use of art materials. They must trust that it is acceptable to be messy and they should have an idea of how messy they can be.

As art therapists we need to be confident that we are offering a valuable service; thus, it is best to behave unambiguously about finances. When financial arrangements are discussed openly and a fair price is set, clients' trust in the therapeutic process can be strengthened. Bartering for professional services is permissible (AATA, 2011), but clients' best interests might not be served by this kind of negotiation if the pricing of goods and services is applied subjectively.

Trust is enhanced when art therapists explain federally mandated regulations surrounding clients' private health care information and act on them by consulting clients when private information is shared. Additionally, trust is deepened when privacy and security are ensured in ways clients may not have expected, such as by explaining restrictions on the use of cell phones, e-mail, and social networking sites for conveying information or displaying artwork (Martin, 2010).

The risk management approach to ethical decision making is implicated when therapists are admonished not to discard therapy records prior to state-mandated time limits. The positive approach puts this concern into context by stressing the improvement of treatment and continuity of care. Treatment is enhanced when client artwork is available for reference. Images have a natural lifespan and can continue to inform therapeutic change long after their inception (Moon, 2006). Therefore, they should be accessible for the duration of treatment and after. When we maintain client artworks we help ensure continuity of treatment for those clients who seek subsequent therapy services. A positive approach also promotes continuity of care by encouraging art therapists to have a "professional will" or emergency agreement. In the event of therapist disability or death, this document designates another

professional to contact clients and refer them to other practitioners, to close office functions, and to distribute and safeguard records (Pope & Vasquez, 2005).

Ensuring Excellence

As mentioned earlier, the risk management approach to ethical decision making focuses on the reduction of harm via adherence to minimal professional standards. Emphasis is placed on avoiding inaccuracy and errors such as misleading advertisements, exploitive relationships (supervisory, research, teaching, financial), and inappropriate use of assessments. Teaching ethics from a positive viewpoint encourages therapists to expect excellence in themselves, their clients, and their institutions (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006, 2008). Aware of the power differential that puts therapists in the position of role model, we should act in ways that demonstrate the highest standards. We model appropriate self-care and our behavior shows that we are thinking first about what is in our clients' best interests.

Art therapists operating from a positive ethical perspective become proficient in a few, well-chosen assessment methods (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). Use of these techniques helps to promote the best possible understanding and use within the institution while at the same time promoting clients' optimal health. Assessment results can have life-altering consequences and therefore it is important to recognize and emphasize client strengths as well as their pathologies. The positive ethical approach asserts that clients are to be enlisted as active partners in the formulation of treatment goals based on assessment results (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006).

Partnership also defines the relationship between art therapy students and supervisees, and between researchers and their participants. When partnership is the model of engagement, risk management–based statements about avoiding exploitation can be perceived as overly negative and keeping exploitation rather than optimization in mind. Promoting excellence is a goal to guide choices of teaching materials and methods, supervisory practices, and interactions with research partners (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). These activities are based on the highest institutional standards and the most current professional principles and practices. Finally, recognizing that traditional advertising is limited and limiting, positively focused art therapists will seek innovative opportunities to educate about art therapy and to demonstrate its benefits.

Aspiring to excellence, art therapists will want to engage in high quality continuing education and keep abreast of relevant professional literature. We engage in regular, ongoing peer consultation to improve clinical skills, we examine transference and countertransference reactions, and we ensure that we have professional support (Knapp & VandeCreek, 2006). Excellence implies ownership of the profession and working to promote it at all levels, such as taking leadership positions in professional organizations and working to ensure the advancement of the field.

The positive perspective implies that art therapists offer expert services, and this extends to digital-based services for those who have such expertise and can ensure privacy and security, superior quality, and the clients' best interests. When therapy is not delivered face-to-face, several challenges to excellence can occur. These include the potential for privacy and security breaches, as well as the difficulty of accurately assessing the client's commitment to therapy. Nevertheless we should consider how to do our utmost to ensure excellent service and to reach clients who otherwise might not be inclined to seek art therapy (Poole, 2008).

Conclusion

Ethical decision making extending as far back as Confucius and Aristotle has emphasized acting in the best interests of others and helping others achieve their highest potentials (Hinz, 2009). Because modern professional ethics codes were developed following the atrocities committed during World War II, it is perhaps understandable that they have been oriented toward risk management and the avoidance of wrongdoing (Handelsman et al., 2008). However, wrongdoing is often what first springs to mind when the topic of ethics is contemplated, causing undue worry and self-doubt. A positive interpretation of the ethical principles that guide art therapy practice highlights their aspirational character. Such a framework allows the document "Ethical Principles for Art Therapists" (AATA, 2011) to be the list of gentle but firm guidelines it was conceived to be, helping art therapists confidently strive for excellence.

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