

# From ethics to ethos: An expanded agenda for counsellor training and development

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## Introduction

Professional codes of ethics are designed to perform a number of crucial functions, such as informing professionals of the standards of conduct, providing a means of protection to the public through accountability, and offering a reference point to guide practice (Herlihy & Corey, 2015). At the same time, ethical codes also contain unavoidable limitations, the most essential being that while they effectively communicate the minimum requirement for professional practice, they are not sufficient to guide moral actors to fulfil their ethical potential, namely what it means to be good—let alone excellent—in one’s profession (Pope & Vasquez, 2011). Both the purpose and limitations of professional codes of ethics are concisely summarised by the following questions: “What do you think it takes to be an ethical professional? Is it primarily knowing and following the ethics code of your profession? What else might it take to be an ethical practitioner?” (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2007, p. 8)

Professional bodies often recognise this limitation and seek to address it, if only in part, by including in their codes more aspirational statements of the values and intentions of the profession, often in the preamble to the contents of the code (Welfel, 2015). In this context, the publication of the Psychotherapy and Counselling Federation of Australia’s ([PACFA], 2017) *Code of Ethics* (hereafter referred to as “PACFA’s Code”) contains several notable extensions in the professional aspirations on which the ethical standards are based. These inclusions hold the promise and the potential to shape an expanded agenda for research and practice in the training and development of counsellors and psychotherapists.

This paper explores this potential in the following ways. First, the distinctive features of PACFA’s Code are highlighted and discussed. Second, these features are considered in light of the moral theory of virtue ethics (VE), and this article will propose the VE concept of *ethos* as a useful organising philosophy. Third, the paper argues that the formulations of professional ethos that are expressed within PACFA’s Code should be a catalyst for more deliberate emphasis on the development of professional identity and personal character in the training and supervision of therapists, and explores possible models through which this may be achieved.

## Distinctive Features of PACFA's Code of Ethics

In comparison to the standard features of professional ethical codes, PACFA's Code contains a number of distinctive features that extend beyond the basic standards of practices to consider the moral foundations and aspirations that inform the profession.

First, in line with the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy's *Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions* (Bond, 2016), the entire PACFA Code is framed within the premise of a "commitment to clients" (PACFA, 2017, p. 2). Such language emphasises that the PACFA Code is not solely an internal discourse, written by professionals to professionals; rather, by naming the group of people that the profession serves, and by using the language of commitment, the PACFA Code positions itself as a discourse of promise, a notion that in itself is morally valenced. In doing so, it restores the nature of the helping relationship—in this case the therapeutic relationship of counselling—as being a public covenant of trust, whereby a helper professes to act with both good intentions and full competence in order to keep the faith that has been placed in them through the expression of vulnerability of the person in need (Pellegrino, 2002). Such a trust-based ethical commitment as the basis for the helping relationship stands in contrast to the dominant commercial framework of "human services," where relationships are more likely framed in terms of contracts or transactions (Banks, 2011).

A second distinctive feature of PACFA's Code is the inclusion of a list of "personal attributes of counsellors and psychotherapists" (PACFA, 2017, p. 5). While the notion of values and principles provides something akin to a compass heading for moral deliberation, there is a further essential step involved in making these aspirations *embodied* through the actions of the moral actor (Shaw & Carroll, 2012). While most moral discussions focus on identifying the "right" moral choice, many ethical traditions note the human experience of knowing (or even intending) the right thing to do, and failing in actually doing it. This is consistent with the model proposed by Rest (1984), in which moral development is not limited to developing the capacity for moral recognition, decision-making and intention, but also the capacity for the individual to develop the capability to actualise their moral choice through their actions. Given that an individual's moral decisions will be evaluated more by their actions than their intentions, it is appropriate that professions attend to the attributes their members need to fulfil the ethical commitments that they have made to their clients (Bebeau & Monson, 2014). Furthermore, it could be argued that aspiring toward these qualities is especially important in a practice like psychotherapy, where the person of the professional is so intrinsically linked to the mastery of the practice (Norcross & Karpiak, 2017).

Finally, before outlining the ethical standards of practice, PACFA's Code draws the practitioner's attention to the reality of "competing ethical obligations" (p. 5). Again, such a statement is not unheard of in ethical codes—for example, Section 1 of the National Health and Medical Research Council's ([NHMRC], 2017) *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research*—yet more often it is excluded, and therefore its inclusion in PACFA's Code is noteworthy. Given that a great proportion of human behaviour is habituated, it follows to say that moral behaviour can also be developed to the point of

habit and, should the circumstances remain predictable, not require a high degree of conscious reflection (Kitchener, 1984; Shaw & Carroll, 2012). What makes a dilemma a dilemma is that there are not immediately obvious answers, but rather that the individual is choosing between two (or more) competing goods or unavoidable wrongs (Corey et al., 2007). Consequently, a moral dilemma is precisely the kind of situation that an ethical code cannot resolve; it may provide guidance through its principles, but cannot possibly contain the flexibility to prescribe a right action in face of complexity (Welfel, 2015). It is therefore appropriate that PACFA's Code acknowledges that an ethically mature practitioner must also develop the capacity for moral judgement and practical wisdom in order to resolve the dilemmas that they will inevitably face (Fowers, 2003).

In order to organise and integrate these aspirations for the profession, it is appropriate to expand the range of ethical frameworks that inform our moral development. This paper will propose that the moral theory of VE is a framework which holds this potential.

### **A Virtue Ethics Reading of the Code of Ethics**

In a passage that has become standard reading for students of philosophy and ethics, Alasdair MacIntyre (2007, p. 1) opens his account on VE with a “disquieting suggestion”. In this section he creates a thought experiment in which the natural sciences suffer a catastrophe whereby the existing knowledge of science is systematically destroyed in an anti-science movement. In later times, a new movement emerges that seeks to recover science from fragments of books, raw data of experiments, and analysis of strange instruments. What no one realises is that such artefacts cannot recover the very frameworks that the writers assumed, and it is these frameworks that gave meaning to their searches and which organised a diverse range of thoughts into a systematic world of knowledge. The result is that people think they are doing “science” when they undertake such activities as debating which theory is correct or reciting the conclusions of surviving studies. MacIntyre concludes this thought experiment with the following words:

The hypothesis which I wish to advance is that in the actual world which we inhabit the language of morality is in the same state of grave disorder as the language of natural science in the imaginary world which I have described. What we possess, if this view is true, are the fragments of a conceptual scheme, parts which now lack those contexts from which their significance derived. We possess indeed simulacra of morality, we continue to use many of the key expressions. But we have... lost our comprehension, both theoretical and practical, of morality. (pp. 2-3)

While MacIntyre was not the first to propose it (cf. Anscombe, 1958), his passage is emblematic of the re-emergence of VE as a major framework for normative moral reflection (Pence, 1993). As the passage suggests, VE posits that that state of moral discourse is in dire need of reorganisation, and, in particular, it contrasts itself with deontological and consequentialist ethics (Anscombe, 1958; Blum, 1988). In comparison with the deontological focus on abstract universal rules which the moral agent must follow out of duty, and in contrast with the consequentialist emphasis of judging an action based upon its intended and real outcome, VE puts forward that the proper starting point of

moral enquiry is to define the end purpose or goal of human living, usually termed *eudaimonia*, or human flourishing (Fowers, 2012). This is what gives meaning to the whole moral conversation, from the deontologist's rules to the consequentialist's assessment of outcomes. In providing the organising system for morality, VE poses two questions: What are the goods that are the ultimate purpose and goal for human living? and, What kinds of characteristics do people need to develop in order to achieve this end? (Pellegrino, 1995).

As VE become established as a major approach to moral philosophy, increasing attention was paid to its potential relevance in variety of fields of applied ethics (Axtell & Olson, 2012). One such application was to the field of professional ethics, a field that had been largely dominated by a principle-based approach to ethical conduct, even though this framework struggled to capture the complexity of moral excellence in professional practice (Spielthener, 2017). As a result, numerous professions have explored VE for its potential add to the professional conversation something similar to what it added to the philosophical one: a framework to justify a profession's commitment to its purpose and ideals, an account of excellence in conduct, and an emphasis on the personhood of the professional as the centre of moral achievement (Kole & de Ruyter, 2009).

In seeking to establish a common philosophical framework for a professional VE, Oakley and Cocking (2001) described what could be considered a VE philosophy of the professions. The philosophy starts with the end goal, or *telos*. So that human community and the individuals within it can survive and thrive (i.e., achieve a sense of eudaimonia), certain segments of the community are given unique power and privileges in order to protect and assist in the attainment of fundamental human goods. These segments of society are called *professions*. Those who occupy a profession must undergo formation into a particular disposition that maximises their potential to protect and assist in the attainment of the particular human goods with which they are entrusted. Consequently, professionals who fulfil their role will embody a number of qualities, characteristics, and virtues that enable excellence. In practice, these professional adopt these ideals as a standard for excellence, against which they adjust and regulate their motivation and conduct to maximise that standard within each given situation.

Whether intentional or not, it is clear how PACFA's Code aligns philosophically with Oakley and Cocking's (2001) perspective. Rather than writing exclusively on the ethical standards, the Code frames its ethics within a perspective of the *telos* of the profession: the purpose, identity, and contribution that counselling and psychotherapy makes to human living. The opening section on the *commitment to clients* highlights the fundamental human goods (i.e., the *telos*) that the profession sees itself as protecting and providing to the community. By formulating the *attributes of counsellors and psychotherapists*, PACFA's Code articulates the kind of disposition that should be developed in the people who are looking to fulfil this purpose. Finally, the principles and values communicated in PACFA's Code act as the regulative ideals (Oakley & Cocking, 2001); in other words, the aspirational standards against which those professionals regulate their behaviour.

Finally, by including the section on *competing ethical obligations*, PACFA's Code acknowledges the need for a central element of VE, namely the importance of practical wisdom (i.e., *phronesis*) in the process of assessing and judging a course of action in the face of ethical complexity. In this way, practical wisdom acts as a "meta-virtue" (Harrison & Khatoon, 2017), in that it mediates between the agent's ideals and their expression in the reality of living. To this end, *phronesis* is essential for determining the sphere of living that the current situation relates to (e.g. a situation involving fear or risk), the associated virtue needed in that sphere of living (e.g., courage), the potential vices of deficiency (e.g., cowardice) and excess (e.g., rashness) of this virtue, and the course of action that best aligns with the ideals of character in this specific situation (Fowers, 2003).

In summary, the VE framework of teleology (i.e., purpose), virtuous character, regulative ideals, and practical wisdom provides a useful framework for organising the notable components of PACFA's Code. Given that this professional body has established a standard that extends beyond compliance and into excellence, it is worthwhile considering how the profession—in particular its "gatekeepers" in training and supervision—might respond in developing an expanded agenda for therapist development.

### **An Expanded Agenda for Training and Development**

The added emphasis on the moral categories of VE sets in motion an intellectual shift from the traditional emphases of professional ethics. The shift is significant enough that some authors have contended that when a profession discusses its essential character—its purpose, ideals, and characteristics that signify excellence—it is better to use the term "ethos" than the term "ethics" (Caza, Barker, & Cameron, 2004). Whereas ethics has often come to signify the minimum standards required for compliance, the term ethos enables a profession to conceptualise and pursue excellence (Caza et al., 2004).

Ethos is the expression of the maximum moral potential of a profession, and if a profession has managed to define its ethos, it is then only right to pursue it also (Jungers & Gregoire, 2013). This ethos is what is in effect *promised* to the client, and the trustworthiness of the professional—and, by extension, the profession—relies on how well that promise is fulfilled (Pellegrino, 1995). In the profession of counselling and psychotherapy, this promise is primarily fulfilled through the person of the counsellor. Consequently, the counsellor's capacity for embodying this ethos in their interactions with their clients has the potential to increase the overall credibility of the profession in the eyes of the community.

To this end, an essential yet often unnoticed or unacknowledged function of professional training and development is to immerse and integrate the trainee into the ethos of the profession (Rodríguez-Sedano, Rumayor, & Paris, 2011). However, extensive research shows that ethics curricula in professional training programs (including counselling) generally lack deliberate emphasis on ethos and virtue, and are instead focused on decision-making models, principles, and standards of care (Harrison & Khatoon, 2017; Hill, 2004b).

To this end, if the members of the profession follow the lead of PACFA (2017) in defining and pursuing the ethos of counselling and psychotherapy, then it is right to establish a purposeful agenda for training and development. This paper proposes that education and supervision in ethics for counsellors and psychotherapists be extended to further emphasise at least two things: (1) professional identity development that is consistent with the ethos of the profession; and, (2) personal character development in the qualities necessary to fulfil the potential of the profession's ethos.

### **Professional Identity Development**

The key task in forming a professional identity is discovering the intersection and the resulting integration between an individual's sense of self and the core values of the profession (Gibson, Dollarhide, & Moss, 2010). The importance of ethos is obvious, as the achievement of professional identity essentially requires the individual to find a congruence between their personal worldview and the worldview of the profession to which they belong (Reisetter et al., 2004).

In this context, a profession's ethos constitutes a large part of its moral vision. A moral vision refers to the way in which the culture of a select people group envisions what is important and imperative for human beings to be and become (Geertz, 1973). At a general level, the moral vision of counselling and psychotherapy is constituted by the underlying and often unarticulated values about what a human being is and what a human being should be and become (Christopher, 1996; Hill, 2004a). From a professional ethos perspective, a profession also holds a moral vision for its members; in other words, that the profession has a vision of what a *therapist* is and what a *therapist* should be or become. While often this vision operates at an unspoken level, PACFA's Code (building on previous codes and statements) has articulated the profession's commitments, qualities, and ideals for its members. This use of ethos is what the profession *professes*, that is, what it publically proclaims to be able to do in service of the community (Pellegrino, 2002).

For the trainee to be able to develop a professional identity, they must achieve a level of congruence between their own visions, values, priorities, and behaviours, and that of the ethos of the profession. A common pathway for professional identity development that has been identified by research sees that this identity is often firstly validated externally through peers and supervisors, but in time shifts to an internally felt and owned identity (Gibson et al., 2010). The pathway to this identity is inherently transformative as the individual confronts the dialectic of personal and professional, and synthesises these two worldviews into a new identity (Meijer, 2011). While this process will be different for each individual, key markers of professional identity development include being able to articulate a personal definition of and attitude toward counselling, taking responsibility for professional growth, finding energy within work, identifying with a professional community, and feeling congruent rather than compartmentalised in the professional role (Gibson et al., 2010; Moss, Gibson, & Dollarhide, 2014).

In order to promote the progression of professional identity in counsellors and psychotherapists, educators and supervisors need to be familiar with the various active elements of transformative learning (Neumeister, 2017). First, the philosophy, pedagogy, and practices of the program need to communicate the ethos of the profession and provide the primary immersive experience for the new professional, beginning the process of introducing and integrating new identities (Hoshmand, 2004). This said, it is likely that the act of adopting the professional role in the experience of direct practice will constitute a unique opportunity for transformative learning through creating the requisite disequilibrium necessary for formation or re-formation of identity (Prosek & Hurt, 2014; Prosek & Michel, 2016). Finally, these experiences need to be mediated by supporting relationships and personal meaning-making, in order for the individual to be able to internalise, integrate, and articulate their personal expression of the professional ethos (Owens & Neale-McFall, 2014). These elements—immersion in ethos, the challenge of direct experiences of being a professional, supportive mentoring, and personal meaning-making—hold promise for counsellor trainers and supervisors to help develop the professional identity of their students and supervisees.

### **Personal Character Development**

As alluded to earlier, the ability to be sensitive to moral issues, make moral judgements, and even intend to do moral actions, cannot be considered complete ethical development without the capacity to fulfil moral intentions with moral action (Rest, 1984). Consequently, professional education could be deemed incomplete unless it leaves the student with greater facility in moral action (Bebeau & Monson, 2014).

This development of the person of the professional could be considered even more important in counselling and psychotherapy, given the research indicating the importance of the therapist in relation to the outcome of therapy (Blow, 2017). Nearly three decades of such evidence has led to a robust conclusion that the therapist who provides therapy has a significant effect on the outcome, and certainly more effect on the outcome than what therapeutic approach is chosen (Wampold, Baldwin, Holtforth & Imel, 2017). Further, research has identified that the therapists who more consistently achieve the goals of therapy are distinguished by non-specific, less quantifiable personal characteristics akin to traditional virtues (Ackerman & Hilsenroth, 2003; Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Laska, Gurman & Wampold, 2014; Blow & Karam, 2017).

The definition of personal development has been difficult to clarify and has been the subject of extensive debate (Donati & Watts, 2005). However, from the perspective of the ethos of the profession, the key task of personal development is formation in the virtues—the developed habits that both signify an individual's assent to the ethos, and also give that individual the ability to fulfil the ethos (Rodríguez-Sedano et al., 2011). Traditionally, this has been termed not as “development” but rather “formation”, in that the training of the profession not only imparts knowledge and skills, but also has a role in shaping the habits that will constitute the persistent disposition of the professional throughout their practice (Jordan & Meara, 1990).

The return to the notion of professional ethos and to the formation of the virtues as characteristics of the professional has led to increasing exploration in how this might be achieved in training and supervision (Carr, 2018). Along with counselling and psychotherapy, there has been a growing push to include virtue and character development as part of the core curriculum of many of the helping professions (Carey, Curlin, & Yoon, 2015; Eckles, Meslin, Gaffney, & Helft, 2005; Hill, 2004a; Pullen-Sansfacon, 2010; Vanlaere & Gastmans, 2007). At this stage, however, there is a decided lack of empirical evidence for what works in virtue formation amongst professionals, which has prompted some authors (Oakley, 2015; Spielthener, 2017) to call for more research in this area.

If counsellor educators and supervisors take on the ethical mandate to support the development of the personal qualities needed to fulfil the ethos of their profession, then there are two obvious first steps that are needed in order to establish evidence regarding this process. The first is to clearly define which qualities and virtues constitute such practitioners. Again, PACFA's Code becomes a valuable document in this regard, along with a long research tradition into counsellor qualities (Jennings & Skovholt, 1999; Wheeler, 2002). Second, given the widespread agreement that counsellor training programs should include some element of personal development (Donati & Watts, 2005), those already engaged in such activities should consider undertaking evaluation and research, in order to develop evidence for what works in the development of personal characteristics and virtues for practice. Given that the profession has publicly affirmed this very ethos, the establishment of best practice in promoting personal character development is a worthy pursuit.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has proposed that PACFA's Code contains numerous extensions to traditional formulations of professional ethics that shift the conversation beyond an ethic of compliance and toward an ethos of excellence. By understanding a profession's ethos through the VE categories of the profession's commitment to its end purpose in promoting the particular goods of its clients, the ideal qualities of the professional who fulfils this purpose, and the need for practical wisdom in regulating practice towards those ideals, educators and supervisors are prompted to consider ways to support the development of this ethos in the therapists with whom they work. Attention to the processes of professional identity development and personal character development are the most likely immediate priorities for those in these professional positions. In conclusion, it should be said that those adopting these priorities are in themselves already acting in congruence with the ethos of therapy, as they seek to fulfil the potential of the collective commitment that this profession has made to those fellow human beings who have come into the care of its members.

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