

Q&A about Ethics and Relational Responsibility

Q: *What is postmodern ethics and how is it different from traditional ethics?*

A: A postmodern approach to ethics, unlike a "traditional" approach to ethics (i.e., modernist ethics) does not identify what is or is not ethical but privileges the local, situational, communal, cultural, and historical aspect of relationally constructing what "counts as" ethical. What this means is that one acknowledges that there is always an ethical standard in place but that ethic is particular to the situated activities of persons in relation.

Q: *What is relational responsibility?*

A: Relational responsibility is attentiveness to the process of relating, itself. Individual responsibility focuses on holding individuals responsible for their actions. With relational responsibility we shift our attention to what we are constructing in our relations with others and *how* we are constructing particular moral orders.

Q: *Will this stuff get me in trouble with my licensing board?*

A: I hope not! To adopt a relational, postmodern ethical stance does not mean that we do as we wish because there is no ultimate ethical position. On the contrary, we are responsible to each other and we are not free to "do as we wish." The challenge we face (when dealing with licensing boards and other institutional authorities) is the challenge of elaborating the multiple moral orders circulating within any community, institution, or relationship at one time. Rather than presume that dominant ethical standards are value-neutral, we ask what values are touted as "no values but only the right values."

Q: *Why should we consider this perspective on ethics?*

A: We should consider this perspective on ethics because we live in a world of difference. Modernist/traditional ethical stances presume that we live in a world where uniformity, singularity, and consistency dominate. However, this is not the world in which we live. Until we acknowledge and embrace the multiplicity of world views (moral orders) that are communally constructed in the world, we will do violence by imposing what we claim are value-free ethical standards and expectation.

Q: *What will our clients notice is different when we practice relational responsibility?*

A: Clients will notice that in place of blame we examine what we construct in our interactions with others and come to realize that if we act in different ways, we have the possibility of inviting others into the co-construction of preferred worlds.

Q: *How can we ethically have a different set of ethics for different contexts?*

A: I would say that it is only ethical to acknowledge the "local coherence" of a given relationship, community, institution, or culture. If ethics is treated as a "one size fits all" enterprise, we do harm to the local coherence and situated practices of participants.