Book Review: The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships

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ABSTRACT

Firestone and Catlett's The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships (2009) presents a deep dive into how an individual's negative behavior is seated in early childhood trauma. Built on Firestone's Separation Theory, the book presents multiple examples of an individual's childhood influencing their decision making capabilities as adults. In addition, the book delves into the concepts of effective leadership, power, and what makes an ethical state. This book review provides an overview of each section and their associated chapters and concludes with some commentary showing implications for practicing ombuds.

The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships is a wide-ranging book that commences with early childhood development and ends with a discussion of the state's ethical role in creating a space for interpersonal relationships to flourish. Although written for an academic audience, the book is helpfully broken into five digestible sections. Additionally, the authors include narrative examples from their clinical psychology practices. This book review will commence with a discussion of the associated sections and chapters. It will conclude with some thoughts about possible applications to the ombuds community.

Firestone and Catlett set their intentions early, hypothesizing that destructive behavior is expressed through immoral actions — frustrations, personal torment, hostility, and aggression (p. xvi) — rooted in early childhood pain. The balance of the book is an attempt to support that thesis. Part 1: An Innovative Approach to Ethics contains three modest chapters. Early in Chapter 1, the authors reveal that their use of ethics is agnostic. Further, they encourage the reader to think beyond the individual and consider dyadic, familial, small group, and state relationships. Chapter 2 more fully explores the personality and behavioral traits of the idealized ethical person. One of the challenges Firestone and Catlett acknowledge is that living an ethical life requires a high level of personal introspection; that is, a willingness to identify negative aspects of our personalities and a desire to change those negatives into positives (p. 20). The authors then proceed to share thirteen elements of relational ethics: personal integrity, honesty, lack of duplicity, consistency, reliability, a willingness to self-disclose, non-defensiveness, love and compassion, empathy, generosity, independence, vulnerability, a search for transcendent meaning, and tolerance of others. Finally, Chapter 3 operationalizes the concept of ethics. As should be expected in a book targeted at clinical psychologists, the authors believe that ethical actions are tied to sound mental health that can be achieved through psychological analysis (p.46). They then proceed to lay out myriad examples of adult destructive behaviors mapped to early childhood traumas around the subjects of abuse, socialization, boundaries, deprivation, emotional hunger, inconsistent parenting, and a lack of positive role models.

With the challenges firmly in hand, Part 2: Coping with Unethical Ways of Living attempts to reveal how early childhood traumas are commonly expressed. Chapter 4 deals with the causal factors of anger. The authors drill down into the manifestations of anger, externalized anger, internalized anger, violence, suicide, addiction, pseudo-aggressions, and maladaptive aggressions. Firestone and Catlett conclude that mastering anger is a re-education process where individuals should come to understand "that anger is a normal and inevitable reaction," but that said reaction has implications in our relationships (p. 90). Thus, dealing with anger is not about suppressing one's anger, instead, it is about acknowledging the feeling and finding healthy ways to channel anger. Chapter 5 deals with identifying and altering toxic traits. A common theme throughout the book is touched on in Chapter 5; that is, individuals tie their identities to their traits/habits. When one tends to see their traits as part and parcel of their identity, asking them to change those habits is painful.

Part 3: Dynamics Underlying Unethical Behavior establishes the basis of primary author Firestone's theoretical approach of Separation Theory. Across a pair of chapters, the authors introduce the concept of the sources of unethical behavior and what they term the "fantasy bond" in partner and familial relationships (p. 151). Much of Separation Theory is rooted in existentialism as tied to death anxiety. In brief, our path through life can be seen as a cascade of separation events. Children leave home, and we leave jobs. Others might experience divorce or the death of loved ones. Each of these events causes anxiety, and how one handles anxiety around those separation events governs our interpersonal relationships. Often one is driven to create an idealized version of reality— the fantasy bond — to explain perceived injustices to the self. Fantasy bonds are "an imaginary illusion of connection with one's parents, family, ethnic

group, nation, religious or ideological cause" (p. 130). Thus, once again, as previously seen in Part 2, a fixed identity becomes synonymous with self-preservation.

Building on the principles of Separation Theory, Part 4: Destructive Lifestyles, builds on the groundwork laid in Chapter 4 and the causal factors of anger. In Chapter 8, the researchers perform a deep dive into addiction. Meanwhile, in Chapter 9, they discuss how withholding is tied to identity by the aforementioned fantasy bond. Withholding has several forms including passive aggression, insulation, self-denial, and a fear of independence. Chapter 9 is the first chapter where the authors begin to move their framework from the interpersonal to the worldview. From a business perspective, the authors see withholding as possessing a negative ethical valence rooted in anger (p. 200). Moreover, withholding can lead to playing the victim in a situation. Thus, ethically it becomes akin to directly harming others. Chapter 10 delves more deeply into a victimized point of view. The researchers tie adult victimization mode to an individual's inability to separate from their childlike perception of the world. By refusing to acknowledge their own innate adult power, the victim purports to feel helpless and insubstantial. Finally, Chapter 11 addresses vanity and narcissism, especially as tied to leadership. The authors lean into the work of Jim Collins as an example of non-toxic traits leading to business success.

Part V: Ethical and Unethical Societal Practices opens where Part IV ended by tying business leaders to employees. In the various sub-headings of Chapter 12, Firestone and Catlett tackle honest communication, focusing on employee needs and goals, and what ethical leadership looks like. The chapter concludes with a discussion of ineffective, unethical, and destructive leaders. Chapter 13 continues the leadership theme and considers the sources and ethical uses of power. The authors posit that power is a neutral entity that is often abused by the individual, group, or state. Chapter 14 concludes the book and attempts to frame an ethical society.

Clearly, the audience for The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships is other psychology scholars, if not practicing clinicians. A smattering of communication and sociology scholars might find some useful tidbits. When the authors trend away from their subject expertise, for example, during their discussion of leadership and power, their analysis becomes superficial. For example, the last few chapters rely heavily on long passages from other scholars and attempt to make connections to the book's original thesis. Additionally, during their discussion of the sources of power, the researchers did not discuss power asymmetry, respectful communication, or purposeful gatekeeping when specific stakeholders are purposefully left out of a conversation.

In spite of the differing audiences, there are some valuable insights for working ombuds. The authors did a thorough job of exploring how anger (Chapter 4) and toxicity (Chapter 5) develop and lead directly to the withholding of talents (Chapter 9). In business or scholarly settings, anger is not tolerated. Instead, individuals express their anger through "procrastination, incompetence, disorganization, complaining, acting overwhelmed, forgetfulness, and errors that could otherwise be easily avoided" (p. 203-204). Such passive-aggressive behaviors are rooted in a victim mode (Chapter 10) that practicing ombuds will easily recognize. Some examples of victim mode include an inability to identify anger in oneself, passivity, and a sense of entitlement (p. 230).

Aligned with the positionality of their target audience, the authors clearly believe that therapy is essential to the healing process. However, ombuds do not provide that service. Instead, a final takeaway for practicing ombuds is to adopt a compassionate rather than prescriptive attitude with those they encounter (p. 40). Compassion goes beyond sympathy. Whereas "a sympathetic person commiserates," a compassionate person "shows understanding" and attempts to provide "appropriate helpfulness" (p. 28). On balance, the biggest takeaway might be the renewed appreciation that negative behaviors are rooted in long-ago trauma that is now discreetly tied to an individual's identity. Therefore, when one is asked to alter an attitude or belief, they might perceive that they are being asked to alter their identity.

REFERENCES

Catlett, J. (2009). *The Ethics of Interpersonal Relationships*. Routledge.

AUTHOR BIO

Scott Taylor is a communication scholar with a post-graduate degree in Organizational Leadership from the University of Alabama. He has owned several businesses in his career including a small soils engineering firm and a mid-sized property management company. He is currently a volunteer in the ombuds office at California State University Channel Islands. (taylor93010@gmail.com)