

WITNESSING - Ethical Considerations

**Ethics Café
26 February 2024**



SOPHIA TOWN
Community Psychological Services

About the Ethics Café process



- Learn more about the topic.
- Practice skills necessary to navigate ‘ethics territory’:
 - Name and understand different viewpoints.
 - Explore reasoning from different viewpoints.
 - State reasons why viewpoints are believable/ right/ justifiable/preferable ... And why not ...
- Cautionary reminders:
 - Real experiences, life-changing at times, emotions evoked.
 - Generosity in arguing, be prepared to change your mind.

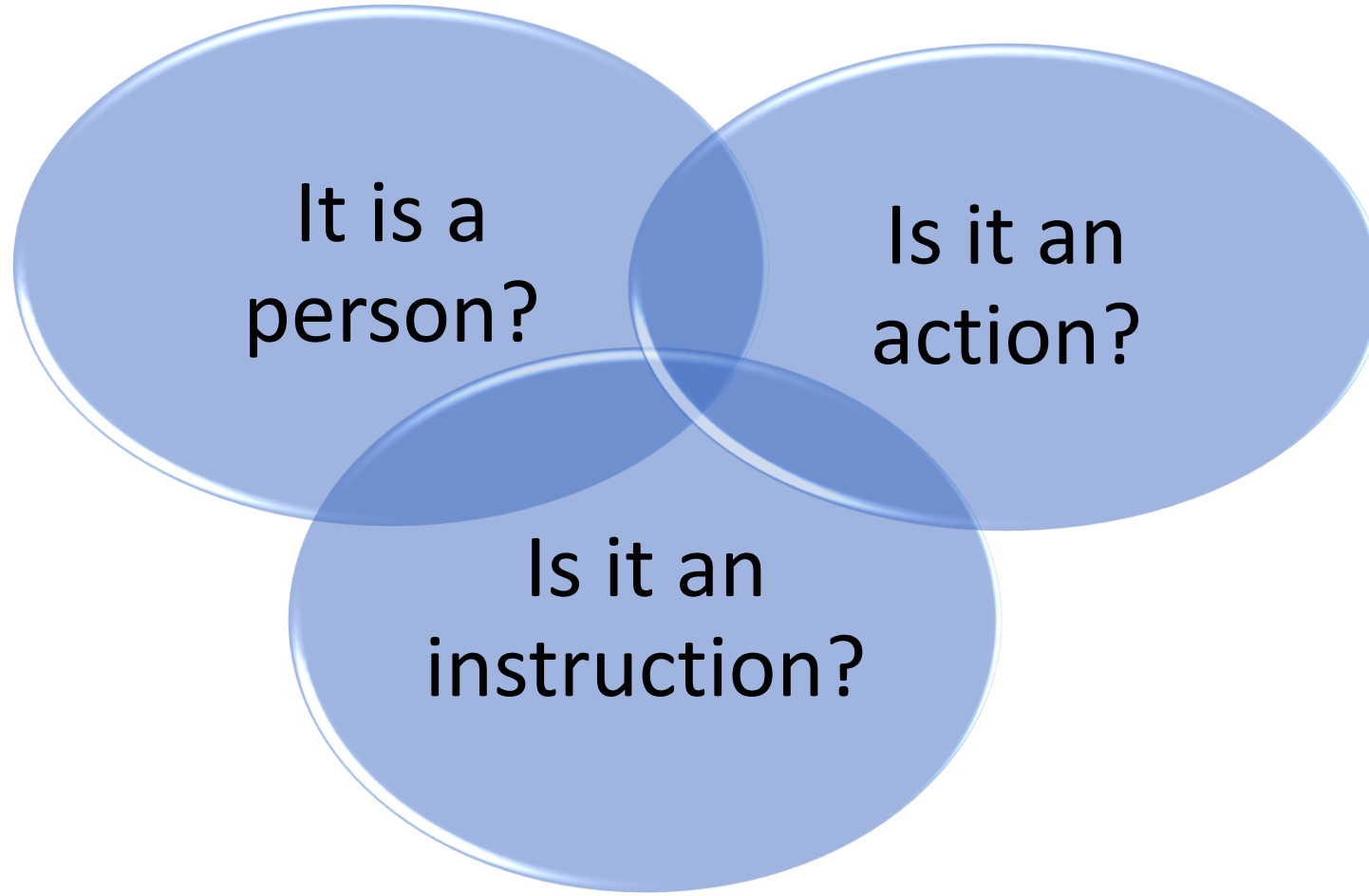
Ethics Café today ...



What do we do when social justice problems play out in front of us every day? Some of it we experience firsthand, perhaps in our own circles, as well as seeing injustice as it happens in the lives of people we pass by or know. Some of it is told to us by those who have experienced injustice, for example when our clients share what happened to them. Some injustices may happen in far-away places, yet the knowledge comes to us immediately through the media. Whichever way, we cannot un-see what we have seen, and un-hear what we have heard and experienced.

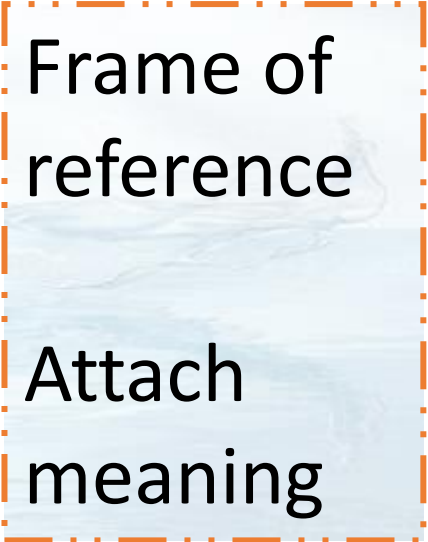
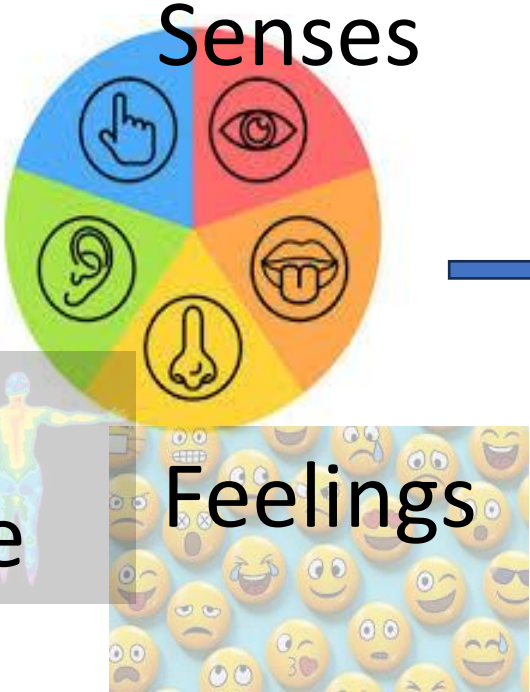
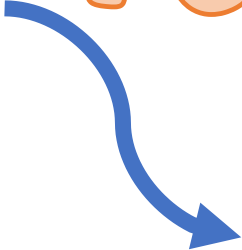
In this Ethics Café, we will explore the concept of being a witness - the feelings of upset, anger, sadness, and maybe fear it may bring, and how to think about our duty as human beings and social service organisations when we witness moral wrongs.

What does *witness* mean?



What happens when we witness?

Event



Event



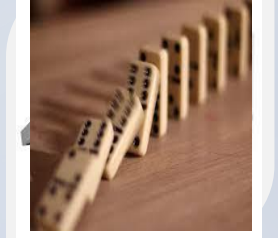
SCALE



INVOLVEMENT



PROXIMITY



IMPACT

Witnessing / having witnessed ►► processing

Frame of reference:

- searching: past, reference points, own experiences
- what is important
- assumptions, stereotypes
- ethical values & beliefs
- roles

Attach meaning:

To process an event, we try to explain it, to 'put it somewhere' in our experience framework, to attach it to what we know already.



What was seen and heard cannot be un-seen and un-heard

Whichever way,
you make a decision, as a
witness.

Consider dynamics involved in the process:

- risk
- our defence mechanisms
- our sense of agency
- support available to us
- our roles

Decision options, drawing on ethics frameworks:

- What is my **DUTY** in this circumstance?
- What are the anticipated **CONSEQUENCES** of what I choose to do?
- Who has what kind of **RIGHTS & RESPONSIBILITIES** in this circumstance?
- **CHARACTER ETHICS**: What kind of a person / worker am I if I ...?



Social Services Organisations - Witnessing

Social service organisations and its workers as moral agent, positioned to champion social justice.

What does it mean to be a responsible witness - through one's role/profession, and as an organisation?

What is one's duty when witnessing social injustice, as an organisation?

NPOs work on different levels: direct services, advocacy, recording history?

Avenues of action: protest, advocacy, academic work, recording history.

Consider this view:

“In this dissertation I examine the nature and significance of ethical responsibility for witnessing others in life writing, especially vulnerable subjects who have suffered racial oppression and/or personal crises. ... I argue that witnessing others is not simply a matter of testifying to truths about their lives but of responding to them as people beyond what can be seen or known about them. ... ethical witnessing is a responsive way of being with and for others that challenges one’s being for oneself and informs how one sees and tells the lives of others: in openness, existential generosity, and mutual responsibility”.

Stumm, B. M. (2010). *Witnessing others : ethical responsibility in relational life writing* (T). University of British Columbia. Retrieved from <https://open.library.ubc.ca/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0071283>

Consider this view:

“Sustaining hope in the face of accelerating destruction is the emotional burden witnessing professionals assume. Despite advances in knowledge and organized political activism, mitigation is anemic.

Targets are missed, greenhouse gas emissions are rising, and 2019 was the second-warmest year on record, in the warmest decade on record.⁴ In 2020, there were wildfires in the Arctic. Research is underfunded. International cooperation is brittle and intermittent. Entrenched obstacles, including impenetrable layers of legal and political jurisdiction, stymie local efforts at adaptation to protect against foreseeable climate-related disasters.

Yet hope is elemental to witnessing. Despair is not just psychologically harmful but would be a “mistake.”⁵ And by continuing to expose and act upon painful truths witnesses can communicate a sense of hope”. (p 8)

“Speaking out as scientists of the Arctic did is the oppositional face of witnessing. There is also a constructive side: witnessing as education, advocacy, and institution-building.” (p. 9)

Nancy L. Rosenblum; Introduction: Paths to Witnessing, Ethics of Speaking Out. *Daedalus* 2020; 149 (4): 6–24.
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Closing



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