

# PHILOSOPHICAL PRACTICE

## Journal of the APPA

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## A Moral Argument Against *Lying on the Couch*

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### Abstract

Is the writing of *Lying on the Couch*, a novel by influential existential psychiatrist, Irvin Yalom, an immoral act? Published in 1996, and touted on the book jacket as being the funniest and most sensitive book ever written about psychoanalysis, it contains a plotline that involves a psychiatrist, “Seymour Trotter.” Seymour justifies, with humor, his sexual relationship with his client, “Belle Fellini,” a victim and survivor of childhood sexual abuse, even claiming it was part of her healing process. I argue that this novel is no laughing matter, and that its writing constitutes an immoral act for three reasons. First, it dehumanizes women by presenting them in a caricatured and reductionistic way. Secondly, its negative depiction of psychologists and psychiatrists could have the harmful effect of steering women away from help offered by respected professionals whom it might be prudent for them to see. Finally, it misleadingly erodes trust in the scientific credibility of the professions of psychology and psychiatry.

**Keywords:** *dehumanization, ethics of representation, immoral, psychiatry, psychology, psychotherapy, sexual boundary violations*

The writing and publishing of Irvin Yalom’s book, *Lying on the Couch* was an immoral act for three reasons. The novel dehumanizes women, particularly those who previously have been the victims of sexual misconduct. It has the potential to discourage women who might benefit from psychotherapy from seeking it. Finally, it erodes trust in the professions of psychology and psychiatry.

To dehumanize a person is to deprive them of positive human qualities. It is a destructive practice because it distorts the behaviors of all the involved parties, destroys relationships, and spoils society. *Lying on the Couch* has two main female characters, each of whom is portrayed by Yalom in depersonalized, preposterous, alienating, isolating, and reductionist ways. In short, each of them has been largely deprived of any positive human qualities. They are dehumanized; this is one reason why I assert that Yalom’s book is immoral.

Anytime one human being dehumanizes another, it is an immoral act. In this case, the dehumanization has the potential to be even more harmful for two reasons. First, it is directed at women who are already damaged, and more specifically, at women who now have been sexually violated by men in positions of professional responsibility. Women who have been sexually violated are more vulnerable to dehumanizing influences than many other people might be. Therefore, they are more likely to be harmed by negative and unsympathetic portrayals of their plight. This is why I hold Irvin Yalom responsible for potential harm to his readers. He does not portray vulnerable women and their plight in a sympathetic way, not even in a realistic way.

A woman who has been traumatized by having been sexually violated by a psychotherapist is likely to feel re-traumatized by reading Yalom’s book. In part, this is because, unlike the claim on the back

cover that the reader will find a depiction of “an authentic mastery of the technique of psychotherapy,” she will not find professional or personal mastery by any of the male therapists the author depicts. Quite the opposite actually happens. The male therapists who are portrayed do not seem to have much insight into their own biases regarding women, nor do they display ability to give sympathetic, understanding treatment to women who have been sexually violated. On the contrary, one of the psychiatrists, “Seymour Trotter,” has sex with his female client and subsequently shows no remorse.

Frequent characteristics of women who are the victims of prior sexual boundary violations include cognitive dysfunction, emotional lability, emptiness, isolation, impaired ability to trust, guilt, increased suicidal risk, boundary confusion, sexual confusion, and anger (Capawana, M., 2016). To be even more specific about the negative effects upon women who had engaged in sexual intimacies with a therapist, consider these statistics: 32% had previously experienced incest or other child sex abuse; 14% later attempted suicide; 1% committed suicide; and 14% required hospitalization, at least partially as a result of the intimacies committed by a predatory therapist. ([www.pdresources.org/blog\\_data/sexual-misconduct-in-psychotherapy](http://www.pdresources.org/blog_data/sexual-misconduct-in-psychotherapy)).

Shockingly, none of these symptoms were at any time seriously addressed in the novel. Rather, the women clients depicted by the author and the deleterious effects of the boundary violations committed by the psychotherapists he calls his “alter egos” are pushed to the side. It is almost as if the women are puppets who are being manipulated for the purpose of a good read, rather than being particularly cared for and treated as vulnerable human beings.

I believe the book has the possibility of discouraging women who read it from seeking the psychotherapy from which they could potentially benefit, especially women whose sexual boundaries have been violated previously. Imagine that such a woman goes to Barnes and Noble looking for a book which would enlighten her about the process of psychotherapy and give her an idea of what an encounter with a psychotherapist might be like. She comes across *Lying on the Couch*, takes it off the shelf, and reads, “This may be the funniest and most sensitive book ever written about psychoanalysis.” (*San Jose Mercury News*.) So, in her mind, she thinks she is going to encounter a thoughtful psychotherapist who, in the course of offering useful insights, also offers humor as a source of healing.

Now imagine how she must feel when she reads that one of the main female characters, “Belle Fellini,” who is sexually acting out for a variety of reasons, is described by her psychiatrist, “Seymour Trotter,” in these terms: “Dangerous sexual acting out. Even she could see it. Imagine driving next to vans or trucks on the highway—high enough for the driver to see in—and then pulling up her skirt and masturbating—at 80 miles an hour. Crazy. Then she’d take the next exit, and if the driver followed her, she’d stop, climb into his cabin, and give him a blow job. Lethal stuff.”

This is only one example of the novel’s entire world in which women have had sex with more than one of their psychotherapists and in which the men describe the women—their own patients—in such pornographic, unsympathetic, and unrealistic terms. Here is a description of another psychotherapist, “Ernest Lash,” and his response to giving his female client a brief, upper-body hug: “Ernest sat down, his pulse throbbing. He liked Carolyn and loved her touch; the fleecy feel of her cashmere sweater, her warm shoulder, the thin demure strap of her brassiere across her back, the feel of her firm breasts against his chest. “

What woman, even one who has not been molested by her therapist, would be inclined to seek out a male psychotherapist for help, having read Yalom's depiction of them? If this is the "novel for anyone who wants to know how the mind of a psychotherapist really works," (*San Francisco Chronicle*) which is how it is described on the back cover, it is unlikely that a female reader would want to get close to a psychotherapist like these unsympathetic characters. They all lack the understanding needed to give her some real help. Parenthetically, one female reviewer on Amazon stated this concisely. A blurb says "It's supposed to show readers what is really going on inside the head of a psychiatrist while he or she is shrinking someone, and it does that alright, only a sensible reader will never want to visit one afterwards." (Emphasis mine.)

I return to my assertions that this novel is immoral and that writing it was an immoral act. In a good world, we would want all people who need help to be encouraged to seek it from respected professionals. I cannot think that given the descriptions of the psychotherapists and the unsympathetic ways in which they see and treat their female clients, any normal woman would be encouraged by this book to seek psychotherapy. Discouraging help that they might need is a harm done to women, and to the many reputable psychotherapists who treat them.

This leads me to my third point. The professions of psychiatry and psychology are eroded by the negative depiction painted in this novel. These fields are already viewed by much of the public as lacking scientific credibility. This novel's images deter clients who need help but do not perceive the methods of therapists as scientifically supported. When well-known personalities like Dr. Yalom set forth negative and confusing views about the field, none of which are scientifically or statistically validated, it invites further skepticism of the help it can offer.

Yalom's negative depiction of male psychotherapists causes harm to all those who are reputable, effective, and caring. To begin with, the ethical codes of the professions themselves deem that sexual contact with clients is prohibited. Along with that, a survey of counselors revealed that 11% of the respondents admitted to having had sexual contact with clients, while the vast majority deemed the behavior unethical (Akamatsu, T.J., 1988). In stark contrast, Yalom creates a world in which the harmful and unethical behavior is commonplace, rather than acknowledging that this occurs only among a minority of psychotherapists. By doing so, he casts doubt upon the whole profession. This is indeed harmful.

One could object to my argument by stating that because Yalom's book is a comedic work of fiction, he has the right, under the Constitution's First Amendment, to depict his characters however he pleases. This is true, but only if one does not consider how the exercise of this right may affect other people.

The first principle of the medical doctor's Hippocratic Oath is "First, do no harm." Likewise, a key consideration in the ethics of representation in fiction is how the work affects the people whose experiences, perceptions, and behaviors are portrayed. In the case of *Lying on the Couch*, the behaviors portrayed by the main characters are damaging to women, especially those seeking help from psychotherapists, and to the professions of psychiatry and psychology. And, if something is harmful, it deserves condemnation.

The only true good is that which is most essential to our flesh and blood lives, i.e. the needs shared by all human beings and the obligations to one another that result. Every human being has the

need to be represented in a way that keeps her or his humanity intact. This need binds us to the fundamental ideal of what is right, rather than to the lesser ideal of “rights.”

Yes, Dr. Yalom has the “right” to author any book he wants, whether or not it is the right thing in the higher sense. However, I assert that *Lying on the Couch* should not be used in any training or certificate program for counselors. My reasons are as follows:

First, there is no suggestion anywhere in the book that the kinds of unethical behaviors displayed by the male psychotherapists are not representative of the majority of their profession. Readers should be made aware that, though these fictional characters may display some unconscionable behaviors that resemble the truth, the majority of psychotherapists do not think or act this way.

Second, even though it is true that a small minority of psychotherapists do act in unethical ways similar to those of Dr. Yalom’s characters, the author, a psychotherapist himself, should condemn the behaviors, rather than seemingly condone them. Third, even if the story is meant as a cautionary tale, it is not presented as such.

If *Lying on the Couch* is to be used for a training or certificate course, a specific declaration should be made at the outset that it is a cautionary tale. Even so, I argue there are more effective, non-dehumanizing, and less traumatic ways to caution psychotherapists, and other types of counselors, about the need to refrain from traveling down such slippery moral slopes. For example, feminist and multicultural counseling theories could be taught that inform clinicians awareness of power imbalances. This would encourage them to create an egalitarian alliance with their clients. In every case, consultation and supervision, as well as professional courses which provide safe learning environments in which sexual attractions to clients and other ethical issues can be discussed, should be encouraged and taken advantage of by all counselors. After all, boundary violations and other ethical misconduct are not laughing matters, and they should not be treated as such.

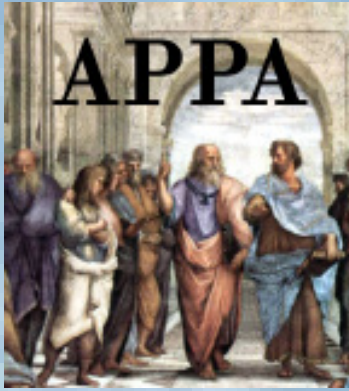
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### Aims and Scope

*Philosophical Practice* is a scholarly, peer-reviewed journal dedicated to the growing field of applied philosophy. The journal covers substantive issues in the areas of client counseling, group facilitation, and organizational consulting. It provides a forum for discussing professional, ethical, legal, sociological, and political aspects of philosophical practice, as well as juxtapositions of philosophical practice with other professions. Articles may address theories or methodologies of philosophical practice; present or critique case-studies; assess developmental frameworks or research programs; and offer commentary on previous publications. The journal also has an active book review and correspondence section.

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The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a non-profit educational corporation that encourages philosophical awareness and advocates leading the examined life. Philosophy can be practiced through client counseling, group facilitation, organizational consulting or educational programs. APPA members apply philosophical systems, insights and methods to the management of human problems and the amelioration of human estates. The APPA is a 501(c)(3) tax-exempt organization.

### APPA Membership

The American Philosophical Practitioners Association is a not-for-profit educational corporation. It admits Certified, Affiliate and Adjunct Members solely on the basis of their respective qualifications. It admits Auxiliary Members solely on the basis of their interest in and support of philosophical practice. The APPA does not discriminate with respect to members or clients on the basis of nationality, race, ethnicity, sex, gender, age, religious belief, political persuasion, or other professionally or philosophically irrelevant criteria.

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