

When Values and Ethics Conflict: The Counselor's Role and Responsibility

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Abstract

Based on the core conditions of client-centered counseling and supported by aspects of psychodynamic, cognitive developmental, and behavioral theories, a perspective is introduced that provides a resolution to the dilemma experienced by counselors and counseling students whose personal values and beliefs conflict with the ethical guidelines of the American Counseling Association.

Introduction

Recent court cases have highlighted significant issues related to dilemmas faced by counseling students whose personal values are in conflict with ethical guidelines of the American Counseling Association (ACA). Most notable are the cases based on incidents at East Michigan University and Augusta State University where personal values and beliefs related to sexual orientation as held by counselor education students were found to be in conflict with the requirements of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (Shallcross, 2010). The outcome in both cases resulted in the dismissal of one student and the other student's decision to withdraw from the program because she chose not to follow the conditions stipulated by the faculty for remediation.

The issue raised in both cases was addressed in an *Alabama Counseling Association Journal* editorial outlining a specific and relevant list of ways potential conflicts between personal values and ethical requirements can be avoided or minimized in counselor education programs (Tyson, 2010). In response to the expressed hope that these ideas be discussed among counselor educators, this article is offered as a possible contribution to the discussion by means of a suggested perspective for the resolution of conflicts between personal values and ethical guidelines when these conflicts arise for practicing counselors and counselors-in-training.

Possible Value Conflicts

As indicated in the introduction, the value conflicts highlighted in the Eastern Michigan University and Augusta State University cases involved the students' unwillingness to counsel gay clients because of their personal, religious values opposing homosexuality. While conflicts regarding sexual orientation and gender identity often receive attention, other value conflicts may emerge in the counseling process both for practicing counselors and counselors-in-training; e.g., counseling issues related to termination of pregnancies, euthanasia and the "right to die," sexual relations outside of marriage, counseling offenders, and counseling individuals from cultural and racial backgrounds different from that of the counselor (Consoli, Kim, & Meyer, 2008). In all these situations, counselors who have very strong beliefs and values regarding these issues may experience serious dissonance between their values and beliefs and the requirements of the *ACA Code of Ethics*.

Relevant Ethical Guidelines: *ACA Code of Ethics*

While several sections of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005) are relevant to the counselor's role and responsibility in resolving issues related to personal values, the following sections are particularly applicable. Section A.1.a. clearly states: "The primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and to promote the welfare of clients" (p.4). Regarding the imposition of personal values, Section A.4.b. states: "Counselors are aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and avoid imposing values that are inconsistent with counseling goals. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants" (pp.4-5). Adherence to this ethical guideline provides an essential safeguard against the potential abuse of power inherent in the counseling relationship and is necessary if counselors are to be both ethical and therapeutic when engaged in the practice of counseling (Elliott, 2003). In reference to counselor competence, Section C.2.a. asserts: "Counselors practice only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, state and national professional credentials, and appropriate professional experience. Counselors gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills pertinent to working with a diverse client population" (p.9). In a relevant article by Shallcross (2010) noted ethicist David Kaplan commented on the issue of appropriate referral when the question of referral relates to personal values: "...counselors refer on the basis of competency, not their own values." He further stated that "...meeting our clients' needs is more important than meeting our own needs" (p.34).

Particularly germane to the discussion of the role and responsibility of counselors is the statement on nondiscrimination in Section C.5.: "Counselors do not condone or engage in discrimination based on age, culture, disability, ethnicity, race religion/spirituality, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, marital status/partnership, language preference, socioeconomic status, or any basis proscribed by law. Counselors do not discriminate against clients, students, employees, supervisees, or research participants in a manner that has a negative impact on these persons" (p.10).

Suggested Solutions to Value Conflicts

In response to the value conflicts experienced by counselors-in-training as well as practicing counselors, some ethicists in the field of counseling have suggested that counselors who are unwilling to follow the ethical guidelines should consider leaving the counseling profession or practice in a setting that does not require adherence to the ethical guidelines of licensure boards and professional counseling associations (Hermann & Herlihy, 2006; Remley & Herlihy, 2007). As a result of their research on homonegativity among members of the Alabama Counseling Association, Satcher and Leggett (2006) also concluded that counselors who have negative attitudes toward homosexuality should consider not engaging in the practice of counseling.

In states that require licensure only for counselors in private practice, an alternative solution exists to leaving the counseling profession as a means of resolving value conflicts. For example, in Alabama, counselors who work in nonprofit agencies and institutions are exempt from the licensure requirement (W. Cox, personal communication, September 20, 2011). While a nonprofit agency or institution may require licensure as a condition of employment, the state does not require licensure in these cases. Thus, in states similar to Alabama, counselors who are unwilling to follow the *ACA Code of Ethics* or the ethical codes of their respective licensure boards can forego licensure and membership in the respective

state branches of the ACA. These counselors can choose to practice in nonprofit agencies or institutions whose values are consistent with the values of the counselors.

It is reasonable to assume that while the foregoing resolutions to value conflicts are possible, for many counselors it is unlikely that either resolution is acceptable. There remain counselors-in-training and practicing counselors who have personal values and beliefs in conflict with the *ACA Code of Ethics* yet who choose to complete their degrees in counseling and seek to be licensed and to hold membership in the ACA. These counselors need a perspective for the resolution of the conflict between their personal values and beliefs and ethical requirements. The following perspective is suggested as a means of meeting this need.

Proposed Perspective

All counselors and particularly those who experience a conflict between personal values and ethical guidelines are encouraged, and some would say required, to ground their practice of counseling on the core conditions of the therapeutic process identified with the client-centered approach to counseling (Raskin & Rogers, 2000; Rogers, 1957). It is the position of this author that these conditions – unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence – provide a perspective that holds the potential for the resolution of the conflict that occurs when personal values are at odds with relevant ethical guidelines. The importance and the efficacy of the client-centered approach continue to be emphasized in the field of counseling and are especially relevant when counselors face controversial issues in the practice of counseling (American Psychological Association, 2009; Clark, 2010; Elliott, 2003; Lemoire & Chen, 2005).

The proposed perspective does require counselors to embrace fully the role and responsibility of the professional counselor when engaged in the practice of counseling, accepting the responsibility to follow ethical guidelines as conscientiously as possible. Thus, counselors are committed to respecting all clients, promoting their welfare, and not imposing their personal values on clients (ACA, 2005). Nevertheless, counselors also have the right as citizens to believe whatever they choose to believe and to adhere to whatever values they as citizens have chosen.

In contrast to rights as a citizen, when a person is enacting the role of a counselor in the practice of counseling, the counselor is required to follow the ethical guidelines even if the guidelines conflict with personally held beliefs and values. Therefore, in respecting a client, the counselor strives to extend unconditional positive regard and acceptance of the client as a person deserving of respect while at the same time responding with empathy as the counselor attempts to understand what the client is experiencing from the client's frame of reference. For counselors whose personal beliefs and values may conflict with their role and function as a professional counselor, this perspective is offered, based on the core conditions of the client-centered approach to counseling and supported by aspects of psychodynamic, cognitive developmental, and behavioral psychology theories.

Psychodynamic

A component of the psychodynamic theory of Carl Jung (Wilmer, 1987) suggested a possible standpoint for those counselors who experience conflict between personally held values and the ethical guidelines. This standpoint requires an acceptance of the concept of "both/and" rather than "either/or" as a view of the reality of the counselor's conflict

between ethical guidelines and personal beliefs and values. That is, the counselor chooses not to surrender either reality but accepts the reality of both the counselor's personal values and beliefs as well as the counselor's obligation to follow the ethical guidelines.

By accepting both realities, the counselor is willing to experience the resulting tension between the "either/or" conflicting realities until a "both/and" standpoint and resolution can be achieved which transcends the opposing realities without denying either one of them (Wilmer, 1987). This approach requires not only a willingness to endure the tension between the opposing realities but it also requires moral courage in honestly facing the conflict (Kidder, 2006) as well as a willingness subsequently to seek a resolution. The possibility of achieving this standpoint is supported by the following aspect of cognitive developmental theory.

Cognitive Developmental

In striving to achieve the standpoint of "both/and" the role of a supervisor or consultant is very helpful if not essential. The kind of supervision or consultation that can lead to a resolution of the conflict requires a supervisor or consultant who understands the dynamics of the conflict, follows an accepted, ethical decision-making process, and, very importantly provides the core conditions of the client-centered approach in the supervision or consultation process. Such supervision or consultation provides the needed opportunity for self-exploration and increased self-awareness of the impact of counselor's own beliefs on the counseling process (Balkin, Schlosser, & Levitt, 2009). In a sense, the supervisor or consultant serves as a mentor fostering the professional development of the counselor-in-training or practicing counselor.

What is possible in a supervision or consultation process grounded in the core conditions is that eventually the counselor is able to move to a level of moral reasoning that provides a resolution to the dissonance experienced in the conflict (Elliott, 1986; Hoffman, 2000; Kohlberg, 1975). The counselor develops what Hoffman describes as an "empathic morality" which incorporates the moral principles of justice and care, values inherent in the ethical guidelines. The counselor's personal beliefs and values may or may not be modified in this process, but what is gained is a clarification of the role and responsibility of the counselor. This important clarification results in a "both/and" standpoint from which the counselor can engage ethically in the practice of counseling with congruence and comfort. From the "both/and" standpoint or perspective the counselor can still retain both personal beliefs and values while not imposing those beliefs and values on clients. Thus, the counselor is able to follow the ethical guidelines when enacting the role of the counselor in the practice of counseling.

An example of a supervision process that resulted in the resolution of an "either/or" conflict and led to a "both/and" solution is found in the case of a school counseling supervisee who found herself working with a lesbian student during internship (Elliott, 2005). The student's presenting problem was her anxiety about her "coming out" process and her pain over the taunting episodes she had experienced at school. The supervisee described herself as conservative in her religious beliefs about homosexuality. However, during supervision, the supervisor encouraged her to explore her ethical responsibility not to discriminate and not to impose her own personal value system on the student. Subsequently, she was able to keep a boundary between her professional obligations and her personal belief system by focusing on and being empathic with the student's pain and struggle. By maintaining an affective focus and responding to the emotional content of the student's issues and

concerns, the supervisee was able to address the student's needs successfully (C. Daughhetee, personal communication, April 12, 2005). What is significant in this kind of supervision process is the willingness of the counselor to accept the supervisor's encouragement to focus on being empathic. Subsequently, the counselor discovers in the process of being empathic he or she is not being judgmental or attempting to impose his or her personal values and beliefs.

Behavioral Psychology

Support for the incompatibility of imposing one's personal values and simultaneously being empathic is suggested by the technique of systematic desensitization found in behavioral psychology. This technique is based on the incompatibility of muscle relaxation with the response of anxiety (VanderBos, 2007). With this technique, a client or patient learns to relax when faced with an object, event, or situation that previously elicited fear and anxiety. Just as one cannot be relaxed and anxious at the same time, this author suggests as a corollary it is cognitively impossible for a counselor to be judgmental and empathic at the same time. In genuinely seeking to be empathic, the counselor will not attempt to impose his or her personal values on the client and thus will be more likely to follow ethical guidelines.

The Resolution of the Conflict

As the counselor attains an emerging perspective grounded in the core conditions of the client-centered approach, the counselor comes to trust his or her commitment to the validity, usefulness, and interdependence of unconditional positive regard, empathy, and congruence. Regarding the interdependence of the core conditions, the counselor discovers that unconditional positive regard and empathy are inseparable. Furthermore, the counselor recognizes the third core condition, congruence or genuineness, is also inseparable from the other two conditions and is essential to the capacity to extend unconditional positive regard and empathy. That is, if the counselor is not genuine in the desire to be accepting of and empathic toward the client, the counselor's lack of authenticity will be apparent and will prevent the counselor from communicating the conditions of unconditional positive regard and empathy and thus will inhibit the counselor's ability to be therapeutic as well as ethical (Elliott, 2003).

Conclusion

When counselors and counselors-in-training experience conflict between their personal values and beliefs and the requirements of ethical guidelines, they are faced with three ethically sound choices. They can choose not to engage in the practice of counseling; they can practice in a setting that does not require licensure and adherence to a code of ethics for licensed professional counselors; or, by following the proposed "both/and" perspective, they can find an acceptable way to resolve the conflict. From this third perspective, counselors are able to retain their personal values, follow the ethical guidelines, and fulfill the role and function of a professional counselor when engaged in the practice of counseling. Significant to the third choice is the role of a supervisor or consultant, serving also in the role of mentor, who is able to facilitate the process of achieving a positive and acceptable resolution between a professional counselor's conflicting personal values and ethical responsibilities.

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