

# Professionalism, Ethics, and Value-Based Conflicts in Counseling

## Professionalism, Ethics, and Value-Based Conflicts in Counseling: An Introduction to the Special Section

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This introduction to this special section of the *Journal of Counseling & Development* explores the importance of a code of ethics to the establishment and maintenance of a profession. Recognizing a code of ethics as a communication of a profession's collective values and expectations, the editors of this special section acknowledge the dilemmas that arise when a counselor's personal values do not align with the profession's collective values. The authors of each article address value-based conflicts in counseling.

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The primary purpose of a code of ethics, for any profession, is to establish norms and expectations for practitioners in order to collectively minimize the risk of harm to clients and the general public (Welfel, 2010). In a broader sense, a code of ethics is also a reflection of the profession's collective values and moral principles. Indeed, the establishment of a code of ethics, which communicates a normative orientation to the service of others and a commitment to protect the welfare of clients, is considered the "hallmark of professionalism" (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011, p. 279). Promulgation of a code of ethics places the needs and interests of clients over and above the personal needs or values of any individual member of the profession (DeMitchell, Hebert, & Phan, 2013; Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). A code of ethics helps to ensure the primacy of client welfare by articulating a profession's collective set of values and communicating standards of practice for all members of that profession. Because laws set the minimum standards of acceptable behavior, ethical standards often exceed the legal requirements articulated in federal and state laws (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). Entry into and continued association with a profession requires all of its practitioners to make a commitment that they will abide by the profession's code of ethics and the profession's collective values as reflected in that code.

By all measures, counseling is a profession (Gorman & Sandefur, 2011). Counseling is a vocation that requires individuals to obtain specific, university-based training to acquire expertise in a specialized set of knowledge and skills; confers status and power upon its members; has an

established national association through which it establishes a collective identity, communicates professional values, disseminates scholarly research, and advocates for its members; and regulates itself through licensure and a code of ethics.

Although counselors vary with regard to specializations and/or the settings in which they practice, they are united as a single profession through the American Counseling Association (ACA). Through this umbrella association, counselors of varied specializations come together for the purposes of promoting a shared professional identity, protecting clients, and promulgating the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005) to which all members must adhere. In addition, many counselors join divisions within ACA, which are focused on more specialized areas of practice (e.g., college or school counseling) or shared goals or ideals (e.g., social justice). When these divisions have established their own code of ethics, those codes are designed to supplement, not supplant, the *ACA Code of Ethics*. As such, their members are responsible for adhering to those specialized ethical standards and the *ACA Code of Ethics*.

### Values and Expectations Communicated by the *ACA Code of Ethics*

The collective values of the counseling profession are communicated in the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005). Included within these values and most relevant to this special section are the recognition of each client's inherent worth and dignity; a respect for each client's uniqueness, autonomy, and right

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to self-determination; an honoring of human growth and development; and a respect for diversity within our clientele and a valuing of cultural competence in counselors. Related to the communication of these values, ACA (2005) also communicated expectations for professional behavior, stating “the primary responsibility of counselors is to respect the dignity and promote the welfare of clients” (Standard A.1.a.).

Toward this goal, professional counselors are expected to conduct themselves in ways that demonstrate a genuine valuing of each client as a unique individual, that honor each client’s right to make choices in accordance with his or her own personal beliefs and standards, and that facilitate each client’s growth within a myriad of developmental domains (ACA, 2005, preamble). Professional counselors are also expected to constantly strive toward increased levels of cultural competence (Standard C.2.a.) and to avoid discriminatory practices with respect to a wide variety of cultural dimensions (Standard C.5.). Indeed, competence as a professional counselor is contingent upon one’s ability to “embrace a cross-cultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts” (ACA, 2005, preamble). In respecting the diversity of clients, professional counselors must be “aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and avoid imposing values” (ACA, 2005, Standard A.4.b.).

## ■ Values, Power, and Potential for Harm

In light of the prohibition against counselors imposing their values on clients, counselors should recognize the ways in which their personal values may be directly or indirectly communicated to clients and be aware of how the power differential that exists within each counseling relationship may result in the imposition of their values. Although most counselors understand that directly communicating their values to clients is unacceptable, concerted effort and constant vigilance are necessary to avoid communicating their values indirectly. Without such vigilance, counselors may inadvertently communicate their personal values through nonverbal and extraverbal responses to client disclosures, by which client stories they focus on and which they avoid, by how convincingly they communicate caring and respect for a client, by which interventions they select, by the suggestions they make or the homework they assign, and by their willingness to continue seeing a client. In such ways, counselors may intentionally or inadvertently communicate their personal values to their clients.

Although communication of one’s own values within an equal, reciprocal relationship would not constitute an imposition of values, communication of one’s personal values within an unequal relationship with a vulnerable client can result in the imposition of values. Zinnbauer and Pargament (2000) showed that, when a counselor’s values are communicated during psychotherapy, clients demonstrate a tendency to

move toward adopting those values. Factors likely to contribute to such influence include the power differential present within the counseling relationship, the counselor’s perceived expertise, and the client’s vulnerability. Individuals who are most vulnerable to this potential imposition of values include clients or students in any setting where the choice of a counselor may be restricted (e.g., K–12 schools, small colleges and universities) or where professional services are limited to a handful of potential practitioners (e.g., clients in rural or underserved areas).

To be sure, though, the potential for an abuse of power exists in every counseling relationship, and clients are vulnerable to undue influence and microaggressions that can occur when a counselor communicates any personal values that are contrary to those of the client (Sue, 2010; Zinnbauer & Pargament, 2000). When clients are struggling with issues about which they feel confused, conflicted, or ambivalent, even the most subtle communication of personal values has a likelihood of swaying a client to act in accordance with the counselor’s values rather than facilitating the client’s exploration of his or her own values. In this way, values can be imposed. Therefore, the expectation that counselors take special care in not imposing their values is especially important in demonstrating respect for each client’s right to make choices in accordance with his or her own personal beliefs and standards and in avoiding discriminatory practices. In the absence of such restraint, counselors place clients at risk for harm in ways that may be blatant or subtle and rationalized as a means to providing the best care for the client (Shiles, 2009; Sue, 2010).

## ■ Value Conflicts

Although the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005) prescribes expectations for professional behavior, the ultimate hope is that each individual counselor will internalize the profession’s collective values. The preamble of the *ACA Code of Ethics* delineates this:

Professional values are an important way of living out an ethical commitment. Values inform principles. Inherently held values that guide our behaviors or exceed prescribed behaviors are deeply ingrained in the counselor and developed out of personal dedication, rather than the mandatory requirement of an external organization. (ACA, 2005, preamble)

Such internalization, however, does not always occur. This lack of internalization is most likely when there are areas of conflict between an individual’s personal values and the profession’s collective values as articulated by the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005). Such value conflicts are the focus of this special section. Specifically, this special section is designed to address the dilemmas that occur when an individual counselor’s personal values conflict with the profession’s collective

values as communicated in its code of ethics. At the heart of these dilemmas is the issue of how best to protect clients from harm that may result from counselors acting in accordance with their personal values and in violation of the collective values of the profession.

## Recent and Not-So-Recent Value Conflicts

Recent court cases (i.e., *Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley*, 2010; *Ward v. Wilbanks*, 2009) challenged the profession about what to do when the personally held values of counselors are in conflict with the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005). The aforementioned court cases focused on a specific conflict between the personal values of some counselors and the collective values of the profession. Whereas the profession values diversity, prohibits discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (and many other factors), and requires that “counselors gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills pertinent to working with a diverse client population” (ACA, 2005, Standard C.2.a.), some counselors and counselors-in-training object to the idea of providing counseling services to nonheterosexual clients in any manner that could be mistaken for acceptance of their lifestyle. They contend that any requirement for them to do so is discriminatory against their constitutional right to practice in accordance with their religious beliefs. In contrast, the profession (via ACA) argued that communication of such beliefs reflects an imposition of one’s personal values and that a refusal to see nonheterosexual clients represents discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation (Ex. at Sep. 30, 2009; see also <http://www.counseling.org/resources/pdfs/EMUamicusbrief.pdf>).

Central to this dilemma for some counselors is a belief that the only ways to honor their personal and/or religious beliefs as counselors are by directly communicating one’s values to the client, refusing to discuss same-sex relationships with clients, or implementing a policy of automatically referring nonheterosexual clients to other counselors. We respectfully disagree with this belief and offer a discussion of a much less recent dilemma to illustrate another possibility. Whereas sexual orientation and gay rights are the hot-button issues of the day that most frequently conflict with religious beliefs, a different issue caused similar controversy in the 1960s. That decade was marked by the sexual revolution and an increasing level of societal acceptance of sexual activity outside of marriage. This issue, too, caused great consternation for people who held religious beliefs against such activity.

One can easily imagine a counselor in 1965 feeling deeply conflicted when faced with a client engaged in sexual activity outside of marriage; the counselor’s conflict would have reflected religious beliefs that were opposed to such activity. If counselors also believed that the only way they could honor

their religious convictions was to communicate their values to the client, refuse to discuss extramarital sexual relationships with clients, or implement a policy of automatically referring those clients to other counselors, how would this action have affected those clients? As it happens, Carl Rogers encountered just such a client, and his session with “Gloria” was recorded on a widely disseminated training video that is still used today (Shostrom, 1965) and is now available on YouTube.

Although we do not know what religious beliefs Carl Rogers held or whether he experienced any value conflict when counseling Gloria, we do know that (a) Gloria revealed her participation in casual sexual relationships after her recent divorce and (b) her counselor could have experienced a value conflict in this situation. In a particularly tender point in the session, Gloria expressed feeling guilty about engaging in these sexual relationships and guilty for lying to her daughter about it. When Gloria directly asked Carl Rogers what she should do, she was clearly vulnerable to an imposition of his values. Consider how the following possible responses—none of which were made by Carl Rogers—could have affected Gloria:

- “This is your life and you can do as you like, but I believe that sex outside of marriage is a sin.”
- “Your sexual relationships aren’t something I am comfortable discussing with you. What else would you like to talk about?”
- “I know a great counselor across town who specializes in these issues, and I would like to refer you.”

Our hope is that the potential harm that could befall Gloria as a result of such responses is clearly evident. Already feeling guilty, Gloria was especially vulnerable to signs of disapproval or rejection. Carl Rogers’s actual response offered neither. Additionally, and very importantly, his response also did not communicate acceptance. Instead, he acknowledged hearing Gloria’s plea for advice about what to do and communicated that, although he wished he could tell her what she should do, this was a very personal decision that only she could make.

For counselors facing any similar dilemma involving a conflict between their personal value system and the profession’s values, we suggest that this approach may offer a way to resolve the conflict. This nondirective approach does not violate the *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005) and allows a counselor to honor personal religious beliefs. It simply does not involve communicating those beliefs to the client via direct statements; indirect, selective attention to topics; or referrals.

## Focus of the Special Section

Each of the articles in this special section addresses the issue of value conflicts and explores means by which they might be

reconciled. The section begins with three articles addressing the recent *Ward v. Wilbanks* (2009) court case. In the opening article, Suzanne Dugger and Perry Francis describe the case and offer insights into the lessons learned. Next, ACA's chief professional officer, David Kaplan, analyzes the ethical implications of the case and describes ACA's position on the issues raised by this case. Then, Barbara Herlihy, Mary Hermann, and Leigh Greden explore the legal and ethical implications of using religious beliefs as the basis for refusing to counsel certain clients.

The section then shifts from this narrow focus on the *Ward v. Wilbanks* (2009) case to a broader exploration of value-based conflicts within the counseling profession. In her article, Irene Ametrano addresses ways in which counselor educators can teach ethical decision making and help students reconcile their personal values with the profession's values. Also addressing ways to prepare future counselors to deal with values conflicts, Joy Whitman and Markus Bidell's article explores ways to bridge the gap between religious beliefs and affirmative counselor education. In the next article, Markus Bidell explores the experience of individual counselors experiencing discord between their conservative religious beliefs and the expectation that they, as professional counselors, will not discriminate in offering positive regard to clients. Next, Michael Kocet and Barbara Herlihy reveal their newly developed model for ethical decision making. This model is focused on addressing value-based conflicts that may arise within a counseling relationship.

Finally, this special section concludes with two articles dedicated to exploring the perspectives of various religions pertaining to sexual orientation and value conflicts. Richard Balkin, Richard Watts, and Saba Ali offer Jewish, Christian, and Muslim perspectives on the intersection of faith, race, and sexual orientation. In the final article, Devika Choudhuri

and Kurt Kraus address ways in which Buddhist perspectives may be useful in reconciling value conflicts that arise in counseling.

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