

Addressing Religious Value Conflicts in Counseling

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Abstract

In the helping profession of clinical mental health counseling, counselors must have the ability to work with a wide range of clients with diverse worldviews and values. Clients often come to therapy in search of a safe place to share their struggles in an effort to overcome any burdens they may be experiencing. Knowing this, it is important for the counselor to manage their personal values and beliefs and have the ability to properly bracket them when entering into a session where a client's values differ from their own. The imposition of values by the counselor is an ethical issue that can and should be avoided if the counselor develops proper education and training in addressing value-based conflicts. Religious-based value conflicts can arise when a counselor's religious beliefs differ from that of the client, or when the counselor's religious beliefs and values conflict with the client's presenting problem and the counselor feels that he or she is unable to properly help the client due to this conflict. There has been a growing number of legal and ethical cases that have involved religious-based value conflicts between counselors, counselors-in-training, and their clients. As a result of these cases, there has been a great deal of discussion regarding the issue of whether counselors can use their religious beliefs as the basis for referring LGBTQ (Lesbian, Gay, Bi-Sexual, Transexual, Questioning) clients as well as the broader scope of whether referrals based on value conflicts are ever ethically appropriate. In this paper, I will be addressing and analyzing various peer-review articles that discuss this subject of religious-based value conflicts; including the role of spiritual and religious values in counseling, legal and ethical implications of using religious beliefs as the basis for refusing to counsel certain clients, affirmative counseling practices in regard to religious value conflicts and the idea of reconciling conflicts between counselor's beliefs and affirming the LGBTQ community as a whole.

Addressing Religious Value Conflicts in Counseling

It is important for counselors to take the time to consider the possible impact that their values can have on their clients as well as the possible conflicts that can arise if a counselor and client have different value systems. Clients have the right to live by their personal values, even if those values conflict with the counselor's personal values. Counselors are expected to respect the rights of their clients to have their own personal views; and by demonstrating a non-judgmental attitude toward clients with different values, counselors can remain invested in the work the client is doing. The ability to practice ethically and abide by the code of ethics, including appropriately applying models of ethical decision making are important when addressing value-conflicts in counseling. I specifically focus to understand how counselors and counseling students learn how to reconcile conflicts between their personal and professional values and how this can interfere with the ethical decision-making process. In the article, *Teaching Ethical Decision Making: Helping Students Reconcile Personal and Professional Values*, Amertrano (2014) states, "even the most experienced professionals find such situations difficult, and the process of learning to make value-laden, ethical decisions is even more challenging for students" (p. 154). As a counseling student, it is important that I learn to make appropriate value-based ethical decisions when working with clients. Learning to make ethical decisions is an important developmental process of acculturating to the ethics of the counseling profession as well as integrating professional ethics into my own value and belief system.

Although values can incorporate a wide variety of beliefs and behaviors, religious values are considered some of the most deeply personal and difficult to reconcile because of personal faith systems, community involvement and religious doctrine (Bayne et al., 2021, p. 60). Addressing religious-based value conflicts in counseling was an important subject for me to

research because I identify as a Christian and I have strongly held values and beliefs that relate to Christianity. I understand that “the value system of the decision maker is a prominent factor in how ethical dilemmas are resolved and that biases, even those of which the decision maker is unaware, will influence behavior” (Ametrano, 2014, p. 155). Knowing this, it is imperative that I understand that I am not expected to be without bias, but I am expected to engage in a process of self-examination so that my biases can be evaluated, examined, and reconciled with according to the standards of the profession. As Corey et al. (2019) states, “the emphasis is on what the client wants, not on the therapist’s spiritual experiences or agenda for the client” (p. 89). It was interesting to learn that the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) is not black and white and that counselors do have choices when value-based ethical dilemmas arise. This gave me some comfort in knowing that value exploration is important and essential in the ethical decision-making process and that a counselor’s personal values, beliefs, and experiences play a role in ethical decision making. Corey et al. (2019) confirms that “it is possible for students to integrate their personal values and religious identity with a new professional identity” (p.70). The integration strategy “reflects adoption of the new profession’s values while retaining important aspects of one’s personal values” (Ametrano, 2014, p. 155) which is what I believe is ideal in the counseling profession. This process enables me to bracket or set aside my own experiences and assumptions when interacting with my clients and thus, accurately capture my client’s voice (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014, p.182).

Legal and Ethical Implications

As I was reading and reviewing the peer review articles related to this subject, there were a number of court cases that were mentioned in regard to the legal and ethical implications involving religious-based value conflicts in counseling. These cases were *Keeton v. Anderson-*

Wiley (2010), *Ward v. Wilbanks* (2010, 2012), *Bruff v. North Mississippi Health Services, Inc.* (2001) and *Walden v. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention* (2010). In reading about each of these court cases (Herlihy et al., 2014), much of the controversy was based on whether counselors can use their religious beliefs as the basis for referring LGBTQ clients as well as whether referrals based on value conflicts was ethically appropriate. As I read these articles, there were several standards in the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) that stood out to me in regard to the broader issue of value conflicts. One in particular was “Counselors must practice only within the boundaries of their competence” (Section C. 2. a.) and if they “determine an inability to be of professional assistance to clients” (Section A. 11. b.), they should facilitate a referral to another provider. When first reading these ethical codes, I understood why the petitioners in these cases would attempt to use these codes in support of referral. However, if you research the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) further it states, “Counselors are expected to be aware of their own values, attitudes, beliefs and behaviors. Counselors respect the diversity of clients, trainees, and research participants, and seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values onto clients, especially when the counselor’s values are inconsistent with the client’s goals or are discriminatory in nature” (Section A.4.b.). In my opinion, counselors should be able to work effectively with all the diverse populations they encounter, being conscientious of both their own personal values and understanding their professional ethics codes related to the matter at hand. After reading these articles, I believe that an “inability to be of professional assistance” (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014, p.180) refers to lack of competence to work effectively with a particular client, not an entire community of clients, which is the case in all of these court cases. It is the counselor’s responsibility to “gain knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, dispositions, and skills pertinent to being a culturally competent counselor in working with a diverse client

population. (American Counseling Association, 2014, Section C. 2.a.) which includes LGBTQ clients. The literature is consistent in acknowledging that it is perfectly acceptable for counseling professionals to hold personal and moral values of their own but that “ethical concerns may arise, however, when counselor’s personal values conflict with those of their clients and counselors question whether they should refer those clients to other providers” (Kocet & Herlihy, 2014, p.180). Refusing to counsel someone based on his or her sexual orientation is a clear and major violation of the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*. The nondiscrimination section of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) is clear that the counseling profession identifies sexual orientation as a protected class. Section C.5. states, “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 prescribed by law” (p. 9). After reading about these court cases and studying the *ACA Code of Ethics*, I concluded that personal morals and values cannot negate professional ethics. The ethical mandates of the profession must be upheld regardless of my personal values and beliefs as a counselor. If I cannot maintain objectivity regarding a certain value, this is my dilemma to work out, and is not the client’s problem.

Before reading about legal and ethical implications in counseling, I didn’t really understand the difference between the two as far as disciplinary actions within the professional licensing board. In regard to legal implications, what I found most interesting was that “not all complaints to licensing boards result in disciplinary actions” (Wilkinson et al., 2019, p. 99). This does not mean that I should not focus on the legal implications, as both ethical and legal issues are important. However, I think it is more important for me to do no harm to my client and follow whatever course of action is appropriate for the situation. Kaplan (2014) states, “A

counselor who cannot keep their personal values out of the interaction has great potential to do harm to her client” (p. 144). After reading about the legal and ethical implications in the preceding court cases, this affirmed to me that “refusing to counsel clients on the basis of issues related to sexual orientation can result in ethical sanctions, licensing sanctions, and lawsuits accusing the student or counselor of malpractice” (Kaplan, 2014, p. 143). I have an ethical obligation to take action to be competent in understanding the clientele I am serving. I must hold true to the principle that it is the client’s goals and values, not mine, that are the focus of the counseling relationship. I must also understand the legal implications involved if I do not adhere to serving all clientele that I am presented with and not discriminate based on sexual orientation.

Approaches in Addressing Religious-Based Value Conflicts

The position held by the American Counseling Association, reflecting acceptance, affirmation, and nondiscrimination of the LGBTQ community has created conflicts for counselors and counselors-in-training who hold religious beliefs about sexual orientation. However, Whitman & Bidell (2014) found that “counselors who held prejudicial views about LGB individuals reported significantly lower LGB counselor competency, especially regarding attitudinal awareness-based competencies” (p. 164). Knowing this fact, I think it is important for counselors to learn various approaches in addressing religious-based value conflicts. As I read the various approaches in addressing religious based-value conflicts, there were a few that stood out to me from the peer-reviewed journals that I read. The first that stood out to me came from the article, *Affirmative Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Counselor Education and Religious Beliefs* where Whitman and Bidell (2014) discuss that “counselor educators take a leadership role and model professional values of self-exploration and social justice advocacy by examining and addressing their own biases and prejudice regarding LGB clients and affirmative counselor

education” (p.165). After reading this and also interacting with some of my professors, I understand that value exploration and addressing my own biases while I am still a counseling student is so important. Some opportunities for self-exploration could include questioning my beliefs, empathy building activities and spending time with LGBTQ individuals to help me better understand this and spending time with this population before I begin working with them. I understand that this could help me reconcile any value conflicts and doing these things reflects important steps toward becoming an ethical and culturally competent counselor (Whitman & Bidell, 2014, p.167). Another approach in addressing religious-based value conflicts is to for me to understand where my beliefs and values originated from and why I believe the things I do. Corey et al. (2019) states, “It is important to be aware of and understand your own spiritual or religious attitudes, beliefs, values, and experiences if you hope to facilitate an exploration of these matters with clients” (p. 88). I think a good approach is one that can be done through contact with a supervisor or mentor who shares the same belief system that can help the individual integrate personal values with ethical practice. In the article, *Christian Counselors and Affirmative Counseling of Lesbian and Gay Clients* Bayne et al. (2021) discusses various strategies for resolving value conflicts in regard to religion and spirituality. One aspect that stood out to me was the idea of balancing religion as being important but viewing the client through the lens of love rather than discrimination. This is one that I can particularly relate to because I identify with the idea that “God is love” and I commit to my clients to expressing a loving and nonjudgmental attitude towards them, regardless of my own beliefs and values. This also goes along with another strategy discussed which is “prioritize the client” (p. 65). I think it is important to tune into what the client’s values are, what their identity is, what their hurts and needs are and then meet them in their world, so to speak. In another article, *Counselor Empathy;*

Religiosity; and Lesbian, Gay and Bisexual Perspectives, Bayne et al. (2020) discusses the role of practicing empathy and unconditional positive regard as a strategy when working with diverse clients. When practiced as intended, “empathy provides a means for counselors to suspend judgment and work alongside a client on the basis of the client’s perception of reality” (Bayne et al., 2020, p.60). I believe that this is also linked to person-centered therapy, where empathy, unconditional positive regard, and congruence work together to benefit the client and “provides a perspective that holds the potential for the resolution of conflict that occurs when personal values are at odds with the relevant ethical guidelines” (Bayne et al., 2020, p.60). As one can see from the various articles, there are multiple approaches and strategies that I found to be helpful in approaching value-conflicts, particularly religious-based value conflicts when counseling.

Differing Approaches Based on Religious Beliefs

Counselors and counselors-in-training who hold religious beliefs that conflict with the LGBTQ community have varying ways in which they address these beliefs. In fact, after reading the literature, there are differing approaches among counselors in regard to the best course of action in addressing religious value-based conflicts in counseling. One that I found to be an interesting conflict was between Christian versus Buddhist perspectives. In the article, *Buddhist Perspectives for Addressing Values Conflicts in Counseling: Possibilities From Practice*, Choudhuri & Kraus (2014) discuss that “in Buddhism, conflicts are not conceptualized as a difference of values or morals but as a resistance to a certain set of assumptions of beliefs that then create challenges to being in relationships” (p. 195). It seems that a Buddhist perspective allows counselors to practice an appreciation of and attention to their client’s experiences rather than seeing it as a value conflict. This perspective invites less knowing and less assumption and affords clients to grow and change as they will. Using practices such as meditation and

mindfulness is growing among techniques used in the counseling relationship and I think this is because it helps both counselors in their personal life and growth as well as helps the client in theirs. There is a mutual relationship among the client and counselor when meditation and mindfulness is brought into the session. As Choudhuri & Kraus (2014) state, “as counselors take an increasingly mindful posture while working with clients, their tendency to espouse personal beliefs, diagnose prematurely, conceptualize incorrectly, or treat inappropriately or perceive the client through a personal cognitive framework or values lens can be minimized” (p. 196). Among the Christian community, they seem to lean more into the structure of their religious doctrine and support from the church when approaching value conflicts. In the article *Reconciling Counselors Christian Beliefs and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender Affirmation: A Grounded Theory*, Minnix (2018) describes three major factors that helped Christians to overcome the obstacles they faced and their approaches to addressing religious-based value conflicts. These included: finding a community where it felt safe to question, encountering evidence that gender identity and sexual orientation are not a choice, and deepening one’s trust in God through spiritual practices such as prayer and scripture study (p. 118). It seemed to me as I read both of these articles that Christian’s reconciled their differences and approached their value conflicts from a self-exploration perspective, which Buddhist’s looked more from an external perspective on how to focus on the client and approach their value conflict through a mutual understanding between counselor and client. Both perspectives were interesting to read about, and I believe that both approaches, although differing in nature, can work well when addressing religious-based value conflicts in counseling.

Conclusion

The calling to be a counselor is a high calling with exceptional expectations and responsibilities. Some believe that the relationship between Christian ethics and professional ethics is complex and the two rival one another. In my opinion, Christians who publicly declare themselves to be mental health professionals should, for reasons of honesty and integrity, and other substantive reasons, abide by the *ACA Code of Ethics*. The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* directly states that counselors may not use values conflicts as an appropriate referral strategy (American Counseling Association, 2014, Section A. 11. b.). Rather, counselors need to take steps to pursue further training to ensure that differing value systems do not affect clients in discriminatory ways (Section A.4.b.). I believe that the good Christian counselor is the counselor who understands the importance of putting the client first and not imposing their values on the client, unless it is requested by the client to do so. Regardless of approach, “counselors need to understand how their own values can permeate their work with clients for good or ill, perhaps unconsciously and unintentionally and counselors are ethically responsible to monitor the various ways they may communicate their values to clients (Corey et al, 2019, p. 69). However, it is not enough to just know what the professional code of ethics says. One must also be able to make ethical decisions, especially in cases where a code doesn’t provide direct guidance and in dilemmas where ethical standards or principles conflict with one another. This is where counselors must develop a mastery in incorporating the ethical decision-making model and knowing when to bracket their own values and beliefs and put the client first.

Personally, I believe that counselors need to value the idea of continual self-exploration as this helps them to recognize cultural blind spots that can cause them to unknowingly show disrespect of lack of sensitivity to the client’s value system that may differ from theirs. As

Cashwell & Young (2011) state, “counselors should also be aware of their biases so that they can circumvent them when necessary, while at the same time clarifying their values to identify those client issues with which they cannot effectively work” (p.76). Counselors need to increase their spiritual and religious self-awareness in order to enhance their understanding and acceptance of diverse belief systems and provide competent services. Ultimately, ethical considerations must hinge upon what is best for the client and what does the least harm.

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