

Notebook on Ethics, Legal Issues and Standards in Counselling

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Valuing Diversity and Acting Ethically: The Practitioner's Dilemma

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As the Canadian population becomes increasingly diverse, counsellors can anticipate working with more clients who bring with them values, beliefs and behaviours that are culturally different from the western principles on which the CCA Code of Ethics is based. The CCA Code of Ethics does contain specific articles (A9, B8 and D10) mandating counsellors to practice in a culturally sensitive manner. Yet, in some cases sensitivity to the client's cultural norms and maintenance of professional standards of practice may pose an ethical dilemma for the practitioner.

Scenario

The following case illustrates how a counsellor may be caught in a conflict between professional ethical standards and the cultural norms of the client.

You are a counsellor working at an educational institution. A Vietnamese student, Tu Li, is assigned to you because of academic difficulties. You note that the student is a reluctant speaker and is slow in his conversational style.

In attempting to establish a positive relationship with Tu Li, you lean toward him, look him straight in the eyes and ask him directly to tell you about the difficulties he is having in his academic work. When the student looks away and does not respond, you suggest that he has a language problem and that a class in English as a second language might help him to communicate more effectively.

In the course of your counselling sessions, Tu Li says that he is feeling mounting pressure from his father to major in the sciences in order to pursue a career in medicine. Tu Li feels he is not suited for medicine and is keen to study interior design. Besides, he is getting "B" and "C" grades in his biology course, which he fears will bring embarrassment and shame to his family.

You notice that the student is becoming increasingly despondent because of his perceived academic failures. You encourage Tu Li to follow his passion and pursue the career path of his choice.

Cultural Encapsulation

It is not difficult to discern that the above scenario is riddled with examples of cultural encapsulation or ethnocentric bias on the part of the counsellor. The attending skills which the counsellor uses to build a therapeutic alliance may be inappropriate with a client from a culture in which directness is regarded as a lack of respect. The counsellor's assumption that a hesitant manner of speaking is symptomatic of an English language deficiency reflects a disregard for cultural variation in communication patterns. The counsellor's encouragement of the client to be self determining in his career choice demonstrates a misunderstanding of cultural norms regarding filial piety, family obedience and collectivist decision making.

Risks of Cultural Encapsulation

The risks associated with the type of cultural encapsulation exhibited by the counsellor in the above scenario are well worth considering because they raise legal, ethical and practice based concerns.

First, by failing to integrating a respect for diversity into their practices, counsellors may infringe on the client's basic human rights. From a legal perspective, counselling practices which are culturally encapsulated may be construed as a form of systemic discrimination against clients that are not from the dominant groups in our society. Cultural encapsulation has a disproportionately adverse impact on clients from non-western cultures and has the negative effect of excluding them from the benefits of counselling services. Under the Canadian and provincial human rights codes systemic discrimination is prohibited on numerous grounds including race, ethnicity, nationality and country of origin. To practice counselling in a culturally encapsulated manner may thus constitute a human rights violation.

Secondly, a counsellor's failure to demonstrate respect for diversity may infringe on the client's cultural autonomy and thereby constitute an unethical practice under the CCA Code of Ethics. Counsellors who hold stereotypical beliefs about racial and ethnic minority clients or who practice without an awareness of the unique cultural realities of their clients may cause harm to these clients. The failure to demonstrate sensitivity to the culture of clients may violate several of the fundamental ethical principles of the profession, such as respect for the dignity of persons, not harming others and responsible caring.

Thirdly, failure to understand the culture differences of clients may reduce the chance of establishing an effective therapeutic relationship or lead to a rupture in the therapeutic alliance between practitioner and client. In acquiring sensitivity to cultural variation, counsellors reduce the probability of miscommunication with the client, misdiagnosis and misinterpretation of client behaviour.

The Culturally Skilled Counsellor

One way to minimize the risks of cultural encapsulation is for counsellors to ensure that their counselling practices are compatible with the cultural differences of their clients. Many professionals in the field regard the development of multicultural competencies as the best route to practitioner/client compatibility in a diverse society.

Multicultural competencies can be defined as a set of knowledge, skills and attitudes which increase counsellor awareness of a) their own values and biases; b) the worldview of the client; and c) culturally appropriate intervention strategies.

Just as important as these competencies is the counsellor's ongoing surveillance of the cultural biases inherent in the way counselling is practiced. The counsellor's willingness to modify theories and techniques to meet the client's cultural needs will help the profession of counselling remain both effective and ethical.

The following are helpful resources:

Corey, G., Corey, M. And Callanan, P. (1998). Issues and Ethics in Helping Professions. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Das, A.K. (1995). Rethinking multicultural counselling: Implications for counsellor education. Journal of Counseling and Development. 74(1), 45-52.

Pedersen, P. (1994). A Handbook for Developing Multicultural Awareness. (2nd ed.). Alexandria, VA: American Counseling Association.

Sue, D.W., Ivey, A.E. and Pedersen, P.B. (1996). A Theory of Multicultural Counseling and Therapy. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Sue, D.W. and Sue, D. (1990). Counseling the Culturally Different: Theory and Practice. (2nd ed.). New York: Wiley.

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The following references are helpful resources:

Amundson, N., Westwood, M. & Prefontaine, R. (1995). Cultural bridging and employment counselling with clients from different cultural backgrounds. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 29(3), 206-213.

Arthur, N. and Januszkowski, T. (2001) The multicultural competencies of Canadian counsellors. *Canadian Journal of Counselling*, 35(1), 36-48.

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Corey, O. Corey, M. and Callanan, P. (1998). Issues and ethics in the helping professions. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole Publishing Company.

Diller, J.V. (1999). Cultural diversity: A primer for the human services. Toronto, ON: Brooks/Cole-Wadsworth Publishing Company.

McCormick, R.M. & Amundson, N.E. (1997). A career-life planning model for First Nations People. *Journal of Employment Counseling*. 34(4), 171-179.

Sue, D.W., Ivey, A.E. and Pedersen, P.B. (1996). A theory of multicultural counselling and therapy. Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.

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