Ethical Decision-Making Strategies for Conflicting Values in Therapy

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What we will talk about:

- Values & values conflicts
- Intersection of values & ethics
- Current literature
- Evidence-informed strategies for managing values conflicts
- Additional activities & resources
Values Defined

Values are beliefs, often deeply held, that individuals use to give meaning, purpose, and direction to their lives.

Often define individual judgements about what is “good” or “bad”, “right” or “wrong”, “just” or “unjust”.

Examples: being accountable, focusing on detail, delivering quality, being completely honest, keeping all promises, being reliable, being positive.

Moyo, Goodyear-Smith, Weller, Robb, & Shulruf, 2016; Rokeach, 1973
Different from attitudes and opinions:
- Basic convictions, stable and enduring

Values are not always considered simultaneously, priority can depend on context (e.g., focusing on detail vs. delivering quality)

Values become more pronounced when they are relevant or threatened

Professional and personal values may differ – but socialization is an important part of embracing professional values

Rokeach, 1973; Schwartz, 2012
Client Values

- Contribute to a client’s system of beliefs, ideas, & attitudes
- Affect how a person operates or responds in certain situations
- Often relate to client concerns
- Strongly shape treatment and goals

Consider how much client values shape their worldview?
So what are values conflicts?

- **Individual** conflicts pull a person in incompatible directions
- Conflicts *between individuals* must be negotiated, mediated, or considered an impasse
- Therapist/client conflicts are inevitable, yet important

Bergin, Payne, & Richards, 1996; Jackson, Hanson, & Cook-Ly, 2013
Conflicts help the counselor/client:

- Explore and further define their values
- Have a safe environment to explore dissonance
- Truly develop client-centered goals
- Find opportunities for a value “audit”
The not so good news…
Counseling is inherently value-laden (Sommers-Flanagan & Sommers-Flanagan, 2007; Tjeltveit, 1999)

 Therapists inadvertently convey values through nonverbals, selective attention to client disclosures, and microaggressions

 Values heavily influence how professionals’ approach clinical decision making

 Professionals tend to rely more on instinctual reactions and consultations than sound decision making practices or strategies

 Values-based referrals remain common

 Bergin, 1991; Levitt & Hartwig Moorhead, 2013
What the ACA Code (2014) says…

► “counselors are aware of and avoid imposing their own values” (A.4.b.)

► “seek training in areas in which they are at risk of imposing their values” (A.4.b.)

► Do not make referrals “based solely on the counselor’s personally held values…” (A.11.b.)

► Non-discrimination section (C.5)
APA Code

- “be aware of their own belief systems, values, needs, and limitations and the effect of these on their work” (Prin. B)
- “respect the rights of others to hold values, attitudes, and opinions that differ from their own” (1.09)
- “strive to benefit those with whom they work” and “seek to safeguard the welfare and rights of those with whom they interact” (Prin. A)
- “do not engage in unfair discrimination” (1.10 Nondiscrimination)
- 10.10 Terminating Therapy
Professional Codes also reference...

- Client welfare
- Advocacy
- Knowledge of standards
- Boundaries of competence
- Continuing education
- Standards for supervisees
- Gatekeeping
“Awareness of ethical codes is crucial, but formal codes cannot take the place of an active, thoughtful, creative approach to our ethical responsibilities.”

- Pope & Vasquez, 2011, p. xii
ACA Code of Ethics

Ethical counselors “engage in a carefully considered ethical decision-making process, consulting recourse as needed” and they use a “credible model of decision-making that can bear public scrutiny of its application.” (ACA, 2014, p. 3)
Ethical Decision Making

1. Identify the problem
2. Consider moral principles
3. Review relevant codes, laws, and regulations
4. Consult with qualified professionals
5. Identify Desired outcomes
6. Consider possible actions
7. Choose and act on choice
8. Evaluate the decision

adapted from Forester-Miller & Davis, 2014; Levitt & Hartwig Moorhead, 2013
Common Guidance Across All EDMMs

- Clarification of the problem(s)
- Reference appropriate ethical code(s) and law(s)
- Consult (consult, consult...)
- Consider alternatives
- Select and implement a course of action
- Evaluate and reflect on the identified course of action
Counselors tend to take a very simplistic approach to ethical decision making, which changes what they actually do in real life when faced with an ethical dilemma. It’s way more than just going from step 1 to step 2...
Little evidence to support EDMMs
(Foster & Black, 2007)

Counselors rarely use an EDMM in real-life practice
(Foster & Black, 2007)

Professionals tend to rely on instinctual reactions and brief consultations
(Levitt & Hartwig Moorhead, 2013)

Many models are time consuming to apply; not viable in real-time
(Levitt, Farry, & Mazzarella, 2015)

Managing values-conflicts is related to natural decision-making tendencies
(Levitt & Hartwig Moorhead, 2013)
Values-conflicts in professional practice

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Strategies

- Learn how to hold multiple perspectives
- Learn about interpersonal attunement
- Exercise cognitive and affective empathy
- Cultivate mindfulness practices
- Understand concepts such as ethical bracketing
- Find ways to foster/increase self-awareness
Holding multiple perspectives:
looking at ethical issues using a different lens
Holding Multiple Perspectives

One day a client comes in and threatens to embezzle small amount of money from a bank? What would you do?

- What if the amount was a very large amount?
  - What if it's a large amount from your bank? [DRAWING THE LINE]
Holding Multiple Perspectives

You are seeing a couple in therapy. One member of the couple calls you one night and tells you they're having an affair. Then they say, "Don't tell my spouse." Do you tell the spouse?

Would you tell if you were not their therapist, but a close friend? A cousin? Their dentist? [analogous relationship]
Holding Multiple Perspectives

Back to the couple example - change the facts of the case until the decision is different.

▸ What if you are friends with the “affairee”? [CHANGING THE FACTS]
Holding Multiple Perspectives

- Means understanding to accept and own one’s values, while working with clients who have conflicting values that guide their lives.

- Understanding the difference between the nature of a presenting issue and how to relate to human struggles.

- Professionals who are “stuck” often have trouble seeing the big picture (i.e., human struggle)
Interpersonal Attunement

- We experience “emotional attunement or resonance” when our brains “feel felt” by others.
- Facilitating the emergence of empathy helps us move beyond specifics of values conflict, reduces fear based on differences.
- Helps us connect to the personhood of the client and “share in states of others while maintaining secure, regulated states of self-awareness.”

Hollingsworth, 2008, p. 850
Empathy & Mindfulness Practices

Cognitive Empathy
Conscious drive to accurately understand client's emotional state

Affective Empathy
Automatic drive to respond "appropriately" to another's emotions

Mindfulness
Awareness of interpersonal and intrapersonal reactivity
Ethical [Bracketing]

- Intentional separation of personal and professional values in order to provide an ethical standard of care

- “reflexive process enables [counselors] to bracket or set aside their own experiences and assumptions … thus accurately capture their [client’s] voices”

Kocet & Herlihy, 2014
But that is not all...

Other supports

- Extra training and resources (e.g., strategies for helping clients achieve an amicable divorce)
- View this scenario through the lens of another profession (medial, human services, etc.)
- Role plays (e.g., working with challenging [sexist, racist] clients)
- Training/role plays involving non-directive problem solving techniques with clients
- Experiential activities, such as attending a divorce support group
Additional activities & resources
Strategies: Ethical Reflection & Values

- Which values do I rely on and why?
- How do my values affect my work with clients/colleagues/supervisors?
- Are there values/biases/beliefs that would negatively impact my work with clients? (i.e. values conflict)
- Ethical decision-making is a combination of cognitive and affective processes
- What are my “hot button” issues (both conscious and unconscious)?
Values Enhancement Plan (VEP)

- Establish a supportive supervision / consultation relationship with a qualified professional
- Engage in competent consultation
- Participate in external professional development activities
- Spend time on internal professional development activities (e.g., activities that foster self-reflection and self-analysis)

Levitt & Hartwig Moorhead, 2013
Questions / Comments


