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Abstract

The 2014 ACA Code of Ethics informs counselors of the need to avoid imposing their personal values and beliefs on their clients. There is a general messaging through academics and mental health professional associations of the inherent oppressiveness in Christianity and the conservative political ideology. As a Christian, conservative, counselor, and educator, I have found a need to keep my personal life separate from these professional settings. During the 2020 presidential election cycle I began to question whether I could ethically be in this profession while maintaining my personal values and beliefs. I found clients struggling to have conversations with those of opposing views. I noticed, as many have noticed, this country is polarized, and the division cannot stand for long. This article provides a glimpse into this journey. Ethical standards are defined and examined in view of political and religious views. Current research and literature are provided. Personal and professional experiences are shared. Finally, recommendations and personal reflections are added. It is hoped this article will open the conversation regarding diversity, equity, and inclusion for all people.

Keywords

Ethics, politics, religion, counseling, diversity, equity, inclusion

Cover Page Footnote

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Ethical Considerations Regarding Counselor-Client Discussions of Political Views and Religion: From a Christian, Conservative, Counselor, Educator Perspective

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Introduction

I am a Christian, conservative, counselor, and educator. That is where this ethical journey begins. I started my counselor education in 2008, receiving my master's degree in mental health counseling in 2010 and my doctorate in counselor education and supervision in 2019. From the 2005 ACA Code of Ethics to the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics I have consciously sought to set aside my values and beliefs and focus solely on the client's values and beliefs. Courses, textbooks, conferences, and training all discussed and practiced diversity, equity, and inclusion. From 2008 forward, I felt a subtle but distinct message in which "Christianity" and "Conservative politics" were wrong or at least rigid and did not fit into diversity, equity, or inclusivity. What was once subtle, however, is now openly and boldly proclaimed: Christianity and conservative thinking are in opposition to diversity, equity, and inclusion (Flynn, et al., 2021).

From my personal perspective as a Christian and a conservative, there is diversity, equity, and inclusion in my values and beliefs. From my professional perspective as a counselor, educator, and supervisor, my values and beliefs are not openly included in diversity or equity discussions except as the values or beliefs which need to be changed. How then do I reconcile this message for myself as well as my clients, students, and supervisees? Is it unethical to be a Christian conservative counselor? What about the call for advocacy in the ethical code (ACA, 2014)? Are there not political issues which land on opposite sides of protests? Where is the line between advocating for a client and imposing values? This article will discuss some of my personal and

professional experiences with these questions over the past sixteen years. It will present current research and literature on the issues. It will examine the ethical codes which direct and guide counselors' behavior. Finally, it will discuss approaches and interventions to broach the topics of politics and religion in the counseling relationship, regardless of the counselor's personal values and beliefs. Counselors, educators, and supervisors will hopefully benefit from hearing this side of the discussion.

Let's Start with the Ethical Code: What does it say and how did it change?

The American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics began in the 1960's to provide standards of behavior for the counseling profession (Jacob, et al., 2015). Over the past six decades, the ACA has revised these standards to improve clarity and to keep pace with societal changes and technological advances. It took three years and many hours of deliberation for the most recent Ethics Revision Task force to decide on the changes needed for the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics. Most changes involved choice of wording to provide clarity and stronger language for guidance. Technology advances were addressed, and dual relationships were more defined. With a focus on values and beliefs, there were significant changes to Section A.4.b Personal Values: The 2005 ACA Code of Ethics 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" (p. 4). Awareness and respect are the focus in this standard. The 2014 ACA Code of Ethics states:

Counselors are aware of—and avoid imposing—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 (p.5).

There are definite changes to the scope and tone regarding counselors' personal values in the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics. Awareness and respect continue to be important factors. Counselors are additionally called to seek out necessary training (which could include supervision) if there is a potential for imposing on the culture of the client. No distinction is made between religious or political views. The ethical codes provide some definitions in the glossary which serve to increase understanding of both the intent and purpose of these standards (ACA, 2005; 2014). I have provided them here in order of clarity not alphabetically:

Culture: “– membership in a socially constructed way of living, which incorporates collective values, beliefs, norms, boundaries, and lifestyles that are cocreated with others who share similar worldviews comprising biological, psychosocial, historical, psychological, and other factors.” (ACA, 2005, p. 20; ACA, 2014, p. 20). This speaks to the values, beliefs, worldviews, etc. of both the counselor and the client: religion, spirituality, and politics included.

Diversity: “– the similarities and differences that occur within and across cultures, and the intersection of cultural and social identities” (ACA, 2014, p. 20).

Multicultural/Diversity Counseling: “– counseling that recognizes diversity and embraces approaches that support the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of individuals within their historical, cultural, economic, political, and psychosocial contexts.” (ACA, 2005, p. 20; ACA, 2014, p. 20). This speaks to religious and spiritual practices as well as political ideology.

Discrimination is added to the glossary in the 2014 ACA Code of Ethics: “– the prejudicial treatment of an individual or group based on their actual or perceived membership in a particular group, class, or category” (p. 20). This speaks to the discriminatory wording in the section on personal values. If a counselor's personal values are found to be discriminatory, additional training is to be sought. No mention is made of a specific religion or political viewpoint being inherently discriminatory.

Advocacy: “– promotion of the well-being of individuals, groups, and the counseling profession

within systems and organizations. Advocacy seeks to remove barriers and obstacles that inhibit access, growth, and development” (ACA, 2005, p. 20; ACA, 2014, p.20). When looking at the problems we have in society today and how they impact individuals, groups, and the counseling profession, there are political differences in how to accomplish advocacy. No political view is presented in this definition as correct or right. Advocating may look different depending on the counselor’s religion or political ideology or worldview.

Social Justice is also added to the glossary: “– the promotion of equity for all people and groups for the purpose of ending oppression and injustice affecting clients, students, counselors, families, communities, schools, workplaces, governments, and other social and institutional systems” (ACA, 2014, p. 21). Again, no specific political or religious view is presented.

One word in these ethical codes which lacks definition is “impose.” The Miller-Keane Medical Dictionary (2003) defines impose or imposition as “the forcing of something upon a person or group without consent” (para. 1) and cultural imposition as “the tendency of a person or group to impose their values and patterns of behavior on other persons” (para. 1). The Cambridge Dictionary (2024) defines impose as “to force someone to accept something, especially a belief or way of living” (para. 2). Both definitions include “force” as a necessary component. Presumably, force can occur either directly or indirectly, actively, or passively. This speaks to the power dynamic within the counselor/client relationship.

Self-disclosure by the counselor in the counseling relationship is not mentioned in the ACA Code of Ethics (2014). No guidance is given on the specifics or nature of what personal information can or cannot be shared by the counselor to the client. This includes implicit and explicit disclosures. Self-disclosure itself, therefore, does not necessarily impose or force values or beliefs on a client.

At this point, there are additional definitions which might be helpful to understanding my personal and professional experiences as well as the current research and literature:

Counseling: “Counseling is a professional relationship that empowers diverse individuals, families, and groups to accomplish mental health, wellness, education, and career goals.” (ACA, 2014, p. 20). Counseling is similar, but different from other mental health professionals including psychologists, social workers, and marriage and family therapists. This article may reference research from other mental health professionals, but the focus is primarily on those within the counseling field (counselors, students, educators, and supervisors).

Equity: “– involves providing resources according to the need to help diverse populations achieve their highest state of health and other functioning” (APA, 2024, par. 2)

Inclusion: “– strives for an environment that offers affirmation, celebration, and appreciation of different approaches, styles, perspectives, and experiences” (APA, 2024, par. 4).

Political Ideology/view: “a set of ideas, beliefs, values, and opinions, exhibiting a recurring pattern, that competes deliberately as well as unintentionally over providing plans of action for public policy making in an attempt to justify, explain, contest, or change the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community” (Freeden, 2001, p. 11).

Religion: “is institutional and creedal and typically is socially defined” (Cashwell & Young, 2020, p. 13).

As the discussion of the ACA Code of Ethics (2014) demonstrates, there is no specific ethical code against being conservative and/or Christian. Where might these messages have originated for me and for other counselors who are either Christian, conservative or both (Slayer, 2019; McWhorter, 2019)? As the dominant religious culture in America, Christianity is often portrayed as privileged and oppressive within the multicultural framework (Hays, 2022). Christianity is diverse and crosses all cultural lines; however, the United States was founded on Christian principles and values which continue to be blamed for many of the current racial and ethnic problems.

Another cause might stem from the imbalance of political ideologies in the academic environment over the past five decades (Rothman, 2005). Additionally, several studies have found more mental health professionals (from the samples obtained) declared themselves liberal or Democrat rather than conservative or Republican (Bilgrave & Deluty, 2002; Solomonov & Barber, 2018; 2019). Political views which align with the “European American” values tend to be more conservative and are therefore viewed as oppressive (Hays, 2020, p. 290). Finally, the polarization of politics in the United States and the algorithms of social media may play a large part in the political divide messaging (Kleinfeld, 2023).

Spangler (2017) pointed out “Even if a client does not ask about our views, the books on our shelves or artwork on our office walls can reveal our values without us speaking a word. Within the current climate of general cultural divisiveness and mistrust, political self-disclosures—whether overt or unwitting—can potentially lead to ruptures. How, then, to address such ruptures? Are the methods for repair different when divergent political views are at the root of the sundering?” (p. 4). With the political climate continuing to be volatile, and the presidential election happening again this year, mental health professionals are potentially headed for more “turbulent times” (Debiak, 2020; Goldsmith, 2020).

Current Research and Literature

Politics and religion are intertwined within the individual’s culture and worldview (Scwartz, 2022). When there is conflict between two worldviews, people tend to either avoid each other or argue, both can result in broken relationships: a major cause of mental health concerns (South, 2021; Stewart-Brown, 2005). With the internet and video conferencing, the world appears to be more connected and more informed. However, people are more divided and less unified in understanding and acceptance of their differences (Arbatli & Rosenberg, 2021; Kleinfeld, 2023). Jurkowitz and Mitchell (2020) discussed data from a recent Pew Research Center study which found almost half of adult Americans had stopped talking to another person about politics based

on comments made by that person. The political climate since the 2016 and 2020 elections has continued to become more tense and sometimes volatile. Instead of a continuum on thoughts and opinions, there is a great schism between conservative and progressive political worldviews (Kleinfeld, 2023; Schwartz, 2022).

Although the research is limited, there have been studies over the past eight years which have focused on politics and religion within counseling (Hirsch, et al., 2013; McCarthy, et al., 2022; Solomonov & Barber, 2018, 2019). These studies have influenced similar studies in the United Kingdom (Farrar & Hanley, 2023; Winter, 2021). People are finding a strong need to talk through political differences but are unsure how to do this. Whether they are avoiding uncomfortable conversations or simply lack the skills to debate or argue a topic without taking the opposing viewpoint personally, these conversations are not happening enough.

Counselors are not immune to these worldview problems. When confronted with the prospect of causing undue influence on client's values or beliefs, many counselors refrain from addressing the subjects of politics and religion (Bilgrave & Deluty, 2002; Flynn, et al., 2023; Nadal, 2017). In essence, counselors tend to follow the same adage of "we don't talk about politics or religion" (McWorter, 2019). Nadal (2017) and Flynn, et al. (2023) examined the fear psychologists and counselors have sharing political ideology in their professional world in fear that clients will either leave or not choose them for counseling. Goldsmith (2020) and Debiak (2020) discuss the growing trend of clients needing to talk about politics in sessions and the emotional toll this is taking on counselors and psychologists.

It seems as if the more we stop talking about politics and religion, the less we can engage in these difficult and uncomfortable conversations. Perhaps the only way for society to return to civil discourse on these subjects is to learn the skills for arguing, debating, conflict resolution, and the ability to agree to disagree. These are communication skills which are common goals with clients who want to improve their relationships. As we enter another presidential election

year in the U.S., maybe counseling is the best place for people to start talking about politics as well as religion. Ethically, counseling should provide a safe space for clients to work towards their goals based on the client's values and beliefs (ACA, 2014; Spangler, et al., 2019). The Preamble in the ACA Code of Ethics states "2. honoring diversity and embracing a multicultural approach in support of the worth, dignity, potential, and uniqueness of people within their social and cultural contexts;" (ACA, 2014, p. 3). Political and religious views are important multicultural factors of the client which could impact the therapeutic relationship and need to be addressed (Hays, 2022).

What about counselors' values and beliefs? What if they conflict? How do we talk about politics and religion as counselors without our own values interfering? Perhaps we need to use the skills of bracketing (McWhorter, 2019), broaching (Hays, 2022), and self-disclosure (Solomonov & Barber, 2019) in ways that will benefit the client with these important cultural identities. One simple point to remember about being a counselor is that we are not doing this for us but for the client. These are all easier said than done when it comes to two topics which many counselors avoid for fear of ethical concerns (Schwartz, 2022) or loss clients (Nadal, 2017).

Solomonov and Barber (2018; 2019) examined the impact of political ideology disclosed in sessions on the therapeutic alliance. Although both studies were limited in number of respondents and diversity in political ideology of counselors, the findings point towards the need for more political discourse in sessions. This includes both implicit and explicit counselor self-disclosure. Counselors and clients who engaged in political discussions found increased therapeutic alliance. Even when the counselor and client had conflicting views, the experience was, for the most part, positive. "The study highlights the importance of discussing therapist–patient political divergence/convergence, not only in the therapy room, but also as part of training and supervision" (Solomonov & Barber, 2019, p. 1516). Similarly, McCarthy, et al. (2022) found a substantial amount of counselors-in-training desired either ways to discuss

politics with clients or ways to “notice and manage political reactions” (p. 109). Counselor education and supervision need to provide training for counselors to determine where self-disclosure is or is not beneficial for the client, including political and religious self-disclosure.

Singh, et al. (2020) discussed broaching/disclosing as a multicultural counseling competency; “Privileged and marginalized counselors possess skills to engage in discussions with clients about how client and counselor worldviews, assumptions, attitudes, values, beliefs, biases, social identities, social group statuses, power, privilege, and oppression influence the counseling relationship” (Singh, et al., 2020, p. 286). The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) places responsibility on the counselor to “...explore their own cultural identities and how these affect their values and beliefs about the counseling process” (p. 4). Counselors are called to be aware, to explore, and to identify their cultural identities, including their values and beliefs. They are also expected to broach cultural differences and discuss how these will impact the counseling relationship (Hays, 2022).

Counselors help clients with relationships, dreams or goals, work stress, and many more things without always discussing their own experiences. They help clients find ways to improve relationships, reach their goals, process through past trauma, and manage work stress. When it comes to religious or political issues, counselors need to be able to help clients work through these ethically and without taking things personally, making assumptions, or feeling threatened by these discussions. If a counselor is not able to do this, they may need supervision, their own counseling, or maybe counseling is not the right career for them (Cottone, et al., 2022).

My Personal and Professional Experiences

In this section, I will attempt to portray my personal and professional experiences which have caused me to question my ethics as a counselor, educator, and supervisor who identifies as a Christian and a conservative. The messaging I have received over the past sixteen years, and more explicitly over the past ten years, has been “if you’re Christian, you’re a bigot” and “if

conservative, you're a racist." Although they may or may not be the words used, these are the messages I hear again and again. Additionally, the messages from the academic setting and the counseling profession have been a continued call for diversity and inclusion while actively excluding Christians from the dialog.

From my perspective, this message has come from textbooks, course discussion questions and assignments, counseling conferences and seminars, counseling journals, as well as news outlets (television, newspapers, online articles) and social media. There has been an underlying current throughout my education and experience which encourages "personal growth" and "openness" while implying (or stating) Christianity is "rigid" and conservative thinking is inherently "racist" (Hirsh, et al., 2013).

As a counseling student, I learned early to keep silent regarding my own values and beliefs when responding to discussion or assignments. There did not appear to be the same constraint on other students who wrote from their liberal and secular values and beliefs. Many of the words they used in the curriculum matched those of the values presented by other students. When it came to counseling, I learned to bracket my values and beliefs. I focused solely on those of the client. Values bracketing sometimes presented a moral quandary when helping clients achieve their counseling goals in conflict with my personal values (McWhorten, 2019). Supervision was essential for working through many of these ethical issues or concerns. For much of my counseling career, however, I worked with children and adolescents. The political and religious discussions were minimal and did not present ethical challenges. During the 2016 presidential election, I heard many colleagues who were fearful, anxious, and depressed by the outcome. It was another reminder that my political ideology was a minority in my chosen profession.

In 2020, during the pandemic and the presidential election cycle, I began counseling adults online. Many of my clients struggled with the political climate and avoided talking with family and friends who they knew were on the "opposing" side. Religious views were also in opposition

and clients found it hard to manage family relationships. Many adult clients were hesitant to visit or even talk with family for holidays due to a fear of political or religious conversations. Most had not attempted to engage in discussion but remained fearful of what would happen if they did. The pandemic created additional division which fell primarily along party lines as well. This fear did not depend on their political ideology or religious views. Whether Democrat, Republican, or Independent, they found discussions with people in their lives who held different political views to be threatening. Similarly, the topic of religion brought about the same hesitation and avoidance.

One client became agitated and angry when thinking or talking about the political discourse coming from their parents. Through several sessions it became clear to both of us that the agitation and anger were primarily because the client was not showing up in these conversations the way they wanted. Once the client made the decision to be kind and compassionate in these moments, they stopped being agitated and angry. Their overall mood improved and the relationship with their parents was less contentious but remained distant. This client had political and religious views in conflict with my own. There was never a discussion of politics or religion beyond what the client stated. I wonder if the relationship with their parents could have improved if I had felt comfortable enough to broach the conflict in values. Perhaps not.

Another client openly discussed political views and concerns in conflict with my own. Over several sessions, the client discussed anxiety regarding family situations, economic concerns, and political fears. One session, I began asking several “what if...?” questions to challenge the negative thinking. From one “what if” question, the client inferred I was conservative and ended the session stating she could not continue working with me due to my politics. Thankfully, the client was able to efficiently transfer to another counselor. When reminded by the company that counselors avoid imposing their values, I was confused. At no point did I impose or force my values. I only posed a common counseling question. But it was politically focused. Had there

been a moment of broaching or intentional self-disclosure with this client, perhaps the interaction could have been therapeutic (Solomonov & Barber, 2018; 2019).

Other clients, both parents and adult children, have entered counseling due to anxiety or depression and state they are disconnected or distant from each other due to religious differences. Most either want to work on the relationship and do not know where to start, or they have no interest in working on the relationship but can identify how the disconnect impacts their mental health. Unfortunately, Christianity, or people in the name of Christianity, have harmed other people in excessive and horrific ways. The same can be said for every human institution, but as a Christian, there is an unsaid expectation of silence to not impose (Schwartz, 2022). As with politics, perhaps there is a space for broaching/self-disclosing with clients intentionally.

As an educator and supervisor, I was hesitant to be open with students/supervisees about my political and religious views. From my own experience as a student, however, I realized the importance of sharing my personal identity and allowing space for all students to share their personal identities. I must be willing to embrace diversity and inclusion in my classes. This includes openness and honesty. I hope that I demonstrate regularly how this can happen. I realize I am not perfect or even good at being open, but I am trusting the process and the ethical code which calls for diversity, equity, and inclusion.

These experiences brought about the following questions: What can I and other counselors do ethically to better support our clients in talking about politics and religion? As an educator and supervisor, how can I assist counselors-in-training to know when to bracket, when to broach, and when to self-disclose regarding two controversial topics many people try to avoid? Ethically, the answers are simple. Begin having those conversations with clients, other counselors, students, and supervisees. Learn to open space for clients to talk about politics and religion in a safe environment. Teach students how to open this space. Open the space in supervision. The research

all points in that direction. The conversations must start even if they are uncomfortable and challenging.

By maintaining our empathic stance and providing space for clients to feel they are heard, and their values understood, we can provide an opportunity to ease their anxieties and model a way for them to humanize the political “others” in their daily lives (Spangler, et al., 2017, p. 5).

A final thought on my personal and professional experiences involves social justice and advocacy. When I think of these two words, one thing that comes to mind is protests or rallies. Flynn, et al. (2021) defines it as “civil disobedience” which “comprises intentional violation of policy or law in service of higher principles or interests” (p.1217). My personal values and beliefs are at times in conflict with professional values (Flynn, et al., 2021; McWhorter, 2019). As a Christian, I have attended and been active in pro-life rallies. As a conservative, I have attended and been active in Republican, pro-military, and limited government rallies. I have attended and been active in protests regarding mandatory vaccinations. Just typing these into this article brings fear of professional repercussions. I hope my fears are unfounded.

Recommendations

How do we move forward and find diversity, equity, and inclusion for all people, no matter the culture? What are some best practices to start and continue these conversations? Singh, et al., (2020) believe it needs to start during the intake process. During the initial interview, the counselor can begin to gain both religious and political information. Hays (2022) would advise broaching during the early sessions to hear and understand the client’s perspective of any differences and how they feel these differences might impact the counseling relationship. Caldwell and Young (2020) provide various approaches to openly discuss religion and spirituality in the counseling session as a normal part of gaining understanding of the whole client. Such questions as “What sustains you during difficult times?” or “What do you hold

sacred?” (p. 172) are examples of ways to start the conversation. As with all values and beliefs, it is important for the counselor to have a clear understanding of their own values and beliefs.

Before asking clients about their religious views, a counselor would want to ask themselves, “What “self-of-the-therapist” issues do you think may interfere with your effectiveness in working with clients’ diverse religious, spiritual, or cultural backgrounds” (p. 89)?

Solomonov and Barber (2018; 2019) demonstrate through their research that political self-disclosure is happening and can be a positive experience. Spangler, et al. (2017) highlight the need to allow clients space to vent, process, or otherwise discuss political issues. Time to dare to hear the other side and truly listen.

How do we learn from each other about how to have these conversations so we can share them with our clients? Shaler (2019) reminds us to begin with listening to the people in our lives with different views, then thinking about the other person’s perspective, and finally asking questions for more understanding. Counselors and the counseling profession are in the best position to provide the way through these turbulent times.

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