



# Values-Based Conflicts as Barriers to Effective Counseling

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SESSION 4



# Introduction

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It is OK for counseling professionals to have personal and moral values.<sup>1</sup>

However, counselors' values may be inconsistent with counseling goals, create conflict between counselor and client, and/or affect quality of care.

<sup>1</sup> Kocet MM, Herlihy BJ. 2014. Addressing value-based conflicts within the counseling relationship: A decision-making model. 92(2): 180-6. *J Couns Dev*. doi: 10.1002/j.1556-6676.2014.00146.x.

# Examples of Values-Based Conflicts

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- Conservative counselor with very young, sexually active adolescent client
- “Feminist” counselor with a very young adolescent engaged in transactional sex
- Counselor strongly opposed to alcohol and drug use with very young adolescent client who regularly drinks/uses various drugs
- Human rights activist counselor with a young male client who beats his girlfriend and comes from a violent home
- Devoutly religious counselor who suspects that adolescent client is homosexual



# Ethical Bracketing: A Strategy for Values-Based Conflicts

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Ethical bracketing (EB) is the “intentional separating of a counselor’s personal... or professional values... to provide appropriate counseling to all clients, especially those whose worldviews, values, belief systems and decisions differ significantly from those of the counselor.”

EB can help “to avoid imposing those values onto clients and [contribute] to empowering clients to achieve their goals.”

EB can help to ensure client is not harmed or negatively affected in his/her decision-making.



Source: American Counseling Association (ACA). 2005. *ACA Code of Ethics*. Alexandria, Virginia: ACA.

# Ethical Bracketing Steps

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1. Immersion: self-reflection/exploration to identify and understand the nature of the conflict
2. Education: seeking continuing education/further training about codes of ethics/literature on best practices
3. Consultation: seeking advice from colleagues on best practices
4. Supervision: seeking supervised consultation/further training to apply EB to the conflict
5. Personal counseling: identifying barriers/personal biases that prevent creation of an effective, therapeutic relationship with the client

# Other Steps to Add to Ethical Bracketing

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Collaborative or relational ethics: exploring the conflict with clients, but only with consultation with other colleagues to avoid ostracizing or alienating the client

Adding a co-counselor: with consent of client, incorporating another counselor to provide affirmative care/counseling (co-counselor can provide objective view, feedback, and insights to help resolve the issue)



# Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model

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- Incorporates EB.
- First, determine the nature of the values-based conflict.
- Then, determine if the conflict is rooted in personal or professional issue(s).



# Steps for Addressing Personal Values-Based Conflicts

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# Step 1: Determine the nature of the values-based conflict.

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Identify personal issue(s):

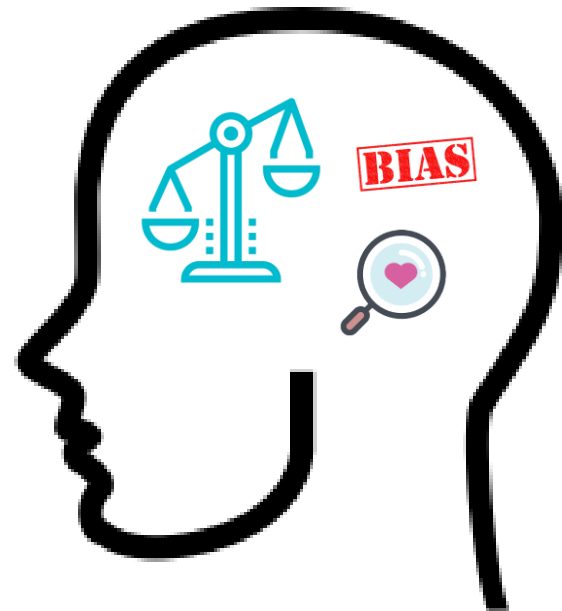
- Cultural
- Religious
- Moral
- Beliefs
- Life experience
- Potential countertransference issue

## Step 2: Explore core issues/potential barriers to providing appropriate standard of care.

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What judgmental perspectives or biases are hindering the counseling relationship?

What barriers prevent provision of appropriate standard of care (empathy and nonjudgmental care)?



## Step 3: Seek assistance/strengthening to provide appropriate standard of care.

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- Identify the best approach to working through the conflict, including consulting:
  - With colleagues/supervisors
  - Local code of ethics
  - Professional literature
  - Other ethical decision-making models
- Consider EB. Integrate personal values while not imposing them on the client.
- Determine how to understand and accept the differing value(s) while still promoting the welfare of the client.
- Consider creating an action plan to reduce bias and increase skills in a deficient area.

## Step 4: Determine/evaluate possible courses of action.

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- Is the counselor willing to set aside her/his beliefs/values and continue working with the client? If so, draw up an action plan to work through personal bias, including:
  - Studying professional literature
  - Continuing education/further training
  - Seeking additional clinical supervision
- Decide whether the client will benefit from being referred or from continuing the counseling relationship with the counselor.
- Note: Referral should NOT be an automatic response. The decision to refer should be made within the context of an action plan.

## Step 5: Ensure that proposed actions promote client welfare.

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Determine whether the final decision promotes the welfare of the client.

# Steps for Addressing Professional Values-Based Conflicts

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# Step 1: Determine the nature of the conflict.

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Confirm that the **conflict** is due to professional issue(s).



## Step 2: Explore core issues and potential professional barriers.

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Professional issues may include:

- Countertransference: For example, an adolescent client may remind a counselor of her/his own child and thus trigger feelings in the counselor about his/her own children, so the counselor may react/treat the client like her/his own child (see Handout 6).
- Lack of professional expertise, training, or competence

Do the issues represent barriers to providing the appropriate standard of care?



# Step 3: Seek assistance/strengthening measures.

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Seek assistance/measures to strengthen counseling to provide appropriate standard of care, which might include:

- Continuing education or training
- Consulting local code(s) of ethics
- Developing a professional action plan
- Seeking additional training/skills building



# Step 4: Evaluate possible courses of action.

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- Determine whether referral to another provider/counselor is necessary or ethical.
- Clarify the rationale for potential referral.
- Assess effectiveness of action plan as it relates to increase in competency/effectiveness. Will the plan eliminate the need for such referrals in the future?



# Step 5: Does the action plan ensure client well-being?

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- Clarify whether the steps of the action plan ensure client welfare.
- Identify lessons learned.
- Determine whether lessons can be discussed/shared with colleagues to ensure ethical treatment of other adolescent clients.



# To Refer or Not to Refer?

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- Counselors may refer clients, but this is not always necessary.
- Values-based referrals should be made in accordance with local codes of ethics.
- Such referrals may benefit the client or deny the client valuable or urgent care.



# Question of Referring Is Controversial

“Consider referring clients to another counselor when substantial moral, religious or political value differences exist.”

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“The ethical mandates of the profession must be upheld regardless of the personal values and beliefs of the counselor.”

Source: Tjelveit AC. 1986. The ethics of value conversion in psychotherapy: Appropriate and inappropriate therapist influence on client values. *Clin Psychol Rev.* 6(6):515–37. doi: 10.1016/0272-7358(86)90035-8.

Source: Granello DH, Young ME. 2012. *Counseling Today: Foundations of Professional Editing.* New York City: Pearson; 392.

# Conclusion

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Remember the overall goal of the Counselor Values-Based Conflict Model: to ensure nonjudgmental support AND help counselors maintain fidelity to their primary responsibility: respecting the dignity and welfare of clients.

Source: ACA. 2005. *ACA Code of Ethics*. Alexandria, Virginia: ACA.

# Questions

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Are there any questions?