

**Virtue Ethics in School Counseling: A Framework for Decision Making**

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### **Abstract**

Virtue ethics focus on the motives that guide ethical decision making and action, and as such, are critical to the competent application of the counseling profession's ethical codes. Knowledge of virtue ethics deepens understanding of moral responsibilities and ethical reasoning in professional practice. This paper is an overview of virtue ethics and discusses its relevance for school counselors and counselor educators.

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It is estimated that by 2040, no one ethnic or racial group will make up the majority of the national school-age population (National Association of School Boards of Education, 2002). The increasingly diverse student populations served by school counselors requires that they develop a conscious awareness of their morals from a multicultural perspective and to acquire a worldview that does not center on the values of mainstream culture. Ethical codes developed by professional organizations, such as the American School Counselor Association (ASCA), are derived from traditional Western standards. School counselors who adhere exclusively to professional ethical codes may not serve all individuals equitably or acknowledge the existence of cultural differences (Cook & Houser, 2009).

School counselors are entrusted by society with the care of its most vulnerable members—children and adolescents. Therefore, it is important that school counselors have honorable motives and adhere to an ethic of care that goes beyond the basic legal/ethical principles incorporated in professional codes. Virtue ethics encourage the development of other-regarding perspectives. A virtue perspective leads the school counselor to care for the best interests of the student, that is, from the student's perspective.

Virtue ethics is an integral perspective for achieving ethically appropriate professional conduct in school counseling given its focus on professionals' motives. More specifically, the ability to implement appropriate ethical decisions requires correct motives or acting out of benevolence. Professionals who follow virtue ethics are motivated to work on behalf of their clients (or students) by benevolence. Virtue ethics

can be viewed as a moral psychology, a theory about making moral choices (Meara, Schmidt, & Day, 1996; Jost & Jost, 2009). The saying, “virtues are caught as much as they are taught,” represents the notion that virtuous actions are communicated and adopted through informal means. They are habits or intuitions that evolve over a lifetime and are nurtured in the context of communities and religions. As ingrained habits of behavior, virtues make up character, which is the key element of morality. In fact, the word *ethics* originates from the Greek word *ethos* meaning character (Oxford Dictionary of Philosophy, 1996).

The Western approach to ethical decision-making originated with the Greek philosophers, including Socrates, Plato, and Aristotle, whom all endeavored to define characteristics of being good. Modern virtue ethicists still endorse the principle Aristotelian questions (Miller, 1991), including the following:

- What kind of person do I want to be?
- What virtues characterize the person I strive to be?
- What behaviors/actions will engender those virtues?

In contrast to ethical approaches that emphasize duties or rules (deontology) or to those which emphasize the consequences of actions (teleological or utilitarianism), virtue ethics emphasize the virtues or moral character of the person (Bessant, 2009). It shifts the emphasis from an appraisal of the act to an appraisal of the person who acts. Virtue-based ethics focus on helping people develop good character traits, such as kindness and generosity. In turn, these good character traits allow a person to make ethically correct decisions in life (Houser, Wilczenski, & Ham, 2006).

Of course, there are problems in deciding what constitutes a “good” character. Virtue ethicists have treated this issue as self-evident, but that position is problematic because it may suggest moral relativism: A virtue for one person or for one set of circumstances may be a vice for another. Bersoff (1996) cautioned that if acting ethically depends on character, which is a central tenet of virtue ethics, then ethical reasoning and actions may be too individualized and idiosyncratic. This could lead to “aberrant, if not problematic, resolutions of ethical conflicts” (Bersoff, 1996, p.86). Despite this concern, ethical dilemmas are complex and decisions should depend on the circumstances of the individual case. In instances where two or more ethical principles are in conflict with one another (e.g., confidentiality versus duty to warn), decision-makers are left on their own to determine which of the two take precedence. It is always important for practitioners to reflect upon the motives for their actions that go beyond professional ethical codes. This paper reviews ethical principles and virtue ethics. Three illustrative case examples are presented as well as a discussion of implications for school counselors and counselor educators.

### **Ethical Principles**

The five guiding ethical principles (Beauchamp & Childress, 2001; Kitchener, 1984), for which the school counseling ethical standards are based upon, provide a framework for ethical decision-making when school counselors encounter moral dilemmas in their work.

1. Nonmaleficence: the duty to do no harm;
2. Beneficence: the duty to do good;

3. Fidelity: the duty to be truthful and to respect the rights and responsibilities of others;
4. Justice: the duty to treat people fairly; and
5. Autonomy: the duty to facilitate one's right to make choices.

The principle of nonmaleficence dictates that counselors avoid engaging in acts that could potentially cause harm, both intentionally and unintentionally. For example, school counselors obtain and have access to information that could cause harm to a student when questions of confidentiality arise.

The principle of beneficence suggests that practitioners engage in behaviors and actions that promote the best interest of others. It implies a moral obligation to assist those individuals who are most in need of support. In addition, it emphasizes the responsibility that school counselors hold in maintaining competency within their field.

Fidelity is an essential requisite to achieving a successful counseling relationship. This principle suggests that school counselors uphold trust in maintaining loyalty and honesty with their students. For example, it behooves school counselors to fully explain and adhere to the limits of confidentiality, while respecting parents/guardians' concerns and rights vis-à-vis their children's educational needs.

The principle of Justice refers to treating others equally and fairly. In doing so, school counselors must not engage in any practices that are discriminatory or inadvertently promote the well-being of one individual over another individual or group. Rather, as leaders in their school, they hold the responsibility to advocate for change when they encounter inequitable practices.

The principle of autonomy refers to one's right to self-actualization through freedom from external pressures and controls. This suggests that school counselors are obligated to provide information to students and their parents/caretakers with clarity and transparency so they are in a position to make the best decisions. Issues regarding confidentiality and privacy are essential practices in forwarding the principle of autonomy.

### **Virtue Ethics Versus Principle Ethics**

Virtues are inclusive of personal and professional domains and can be considered as character strengths. In other words, virtue ethics emphasize one's character as a whole being (MacIntyre, 1999; Fowers & Tjeltveit, 2003). Punzo and Meara (1993) identified *self-regarding* virtues, including integrity and humility, which benefit the school counselor, while *other-regarding* virtues, such as respectfulness and benevolence, benefit students and families. In addition, the self-regarding virtues actually enable other-regarding virtues that are oriented toward producing good outcomes for the student or community rather than for the school counselor who possesses them.

Integrity (honesty) and humility (modesty) are especially important virtues for professionals (May, 1984). One's integrity is upheld when there are no changes in behavior across all situations. Engaging in dual relationships or over-stepping boundaries could result in the loss of integrity. Whereas most virtues address how school counseling professionals should give to the student, integrity and humility address the relationship (May, 1984). School counselors "need" the students as much

as the students “need” the school counselor. A humble school counselor recognizes the need to be open to learning the student’s perspective.

Meara and colleagues (1996) and Bessant (2009) differentiated virtue ethics from principle (or rule) ethics. The latter form the basis for various professional codes of ethics, including the American School Counselor Association Ethical Standards for School Counselors (ASCA, 2004). Principles such as those represented in the code of ethics engender greater professional objectivity in ethical decision-making. On the other hand, virtues ethics consist of values and professional beliefs that are upheld by practitioners and are achieved through immersion in the professional culture. In other words, virtues become the “character” of the profession, while concomitantly representing the counselor’s belief system as well (Houser et al., 2006). The primary distinguishing element between principles and virtues is that the former are duties and the latter represent ideals.

According to virtue ethics, counselors behave and think in ways that are morally and ethically appropriate in all situations, whereas ethical principles suggest counselors to exhibit correct ethical behavior only when faced with a dilemma. This does not indicate that professionals should disregard ethical principles; rather, virtue ethicists view them as being inadequate for guiding ethically responsible actions (Houser et al., 2006). In other words, virtue ethics can be considered ideals, while ethical principles serve as guides that can be followed to resolve particular situations or dilemmas. Campbell (2003) viewed virtue ethics and principle ethics as two complementary perspectives. More specifically, he described virtues as emotional and individual dimensions and principles as distinct, straightforward, and objective. When school

counselors are faced with challenging and unclear situations, virtue ethics remind professionals to assess their emotions and personal belief system in making ethical decisions. Essentially, virtue ethics can offer more than principle ethics: when principles are contested, human attributes can be considered.

### **Framework for Decision Making**

The following professional ethical dilemmas illustrate the importance of virtue ethics for a school counselor in deciding an appropriate course of action. It is helpful to incorporate not only ethical principles and professional codes of conduct in decision making but to engage in ethical reasoning from a virtues perspective as well. School counselors need to protect the rights of the person most vulnerable to an abuse of power in an ethical dilemma. Typically, children are most vulnerable because they lack power in adult relationships. However, parents also may be vulnerable when interacting with powerful institutions, such as schools. For each of the case studies, reflect upon the relevant *ethical principles*, the ASCA codes derived from those principles, the *ethical virtues* that may apply in decision making, and then consider the *risks* and *benefits* for various *plans of action* that might be decided for the following case examples.

### **Case Examples**

I. A well-meaning parent, who is an influential member of the town's school committee, wishes to send his child to an academically demanding private high school that the school counselor believes would not be in his child's best interests. He has asked the school counselor to write a letter of recommendation. In this case, ethical principles that relate to the parent's autonomy (right to make decisions) are in conflict with the school counselor's concern for the student's welfare (beneficence).

Professional ethical codes do not provide guidance as to which principle should take precedence. The school counselor's actions would be determined by his or her integrity (acting for the right reasons) and courage (firmness in the face of adversity).

II. A school counselor's laptop containing confidential student records was stolen. Who should be told of the theft—school authorities, students, parents? The first consideration would be the security of the records. Are the electronic files encrypted or password protected? Do the school authorities, students, or parents know that records are kept on laptops? Another consideration might be how disclosing the laptop theft to a particular parent or student would affect an ongoing relationship and whether nondisclosure would impinge on the school counselor's effectiveness. The school counselor's discretion (knowing what is at stake) and respectfulness (determining how others wish to be respected) will determine his or her actions.

III. Luis is a 6<sup>th</sup> grade student who is an English Language Learner (ELL). Since he entered middle school, he has presented significant behavior management problems for his teachers. The principal requested a psychological evaluation to determine a special education placement. As a school counselor, you are aware that ELL students are overrepresented in special education. Luis' parents are hesitant about agreeing to an evaluation and feel that his behavior problems should be addressed within the home. The principal stated that if Luis does not receive the evaluation, then the only option would be to place Luis in a disciplinary alternative school. In your opinion, Luis has emotional problems and a psychological evaluation may help to clarify his needs. You have been asked to obtain permission for the evaluation. Rather than obtaining consent through the threat of disciplinary action (which violates the voluntary standard of

informed consent), the school counselor needs to be open to learning a different perspective from the parents (humility). Luis' parents should be given an opportunity to voice their concerns about special education and to fully participate in determining the intervention. The school counselor can then work with the parents and the school to ensure that Luis gets the professional help that he needs (altruism).

### **Discussion**

School counselors need to be aware of virtue ethics in ethical decision making. It is the responsibility of counselor educators and supervisors to instill a sense of the moral obligations of professional practice to students. Raising awareness about the moral dimensions of professional practice should start at the time of admission to graduate school. During the pre-admission interview, presenting an ethical dilemma for discussion among prospective students may help to ascertain the moral reasoning of a prospective student. In addition to the principles of the ASCA's ethical codes, ethical reasoning and virtues need to be a component of the ethics courses offered in school counseling graduate education and for continuing professional development.

Virtue ethics go beyond professional ethical codes, which direct school counseling practitioners about how to proceed in a given situation, to ask the more challenging question of why to proceed in a given way. "Why" questions focus on underlying motives. When faced with an ethical dilemma, school counselors need to reflect deeply on their intentions and the virtues that can give guidance in deciding the issue and motivating action. Furthermore, it behooves school counselors to consider professional and personal virtues in ethical reasoning when addressing the needs of diverse students and their families.

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