



Ethics and the systems perspective

When the public imagines what counseling looks like, it often envisions one client and one counselor in a small consultation room. It involves the sharing of intimate details and important issues from that client's life and requires careful listening and responses on the part of the counselor.

Yet, as we all know, counseling takes many different forms and can involve more than a singular client. When that occurs, our use and understanding of the *ACA Code of Ethics* must also take into account what happens when more than one client is in the room. That is especially the case when those clients have many complex relationships with each other, such as those found in couples and families. This *system of people* (i.e., couples and families) has now presented itself to the counselor, seeking help for a variety of issues that can lead to many unique and complex ethical dilemmas. The *ACA Code of Ethics* and the *IAMFC Code of Ethics* (developed by the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors, a division of the American Counseling Association) provide us guidance when working in the field of couple and family counseling.

Working with couples and families is perhaps best summed up in a quote from Aristotle: "The whole is greater than the sum of its parts." Essentially, the multifaceted and nuanced relationships between the individuals who make up a family or couple create something new and more complex than if the individuals were taken separately. This system of people is an interlocking set of relationships that influence one another in a circular fashion. This requires the counselor to *see the couple or family as the client* rather than the individuals within the system as the client. This affects how the ethics are applied.

For example, in providing for informed consent at the beginning of the

counseling relationship, the counselor will want to spend additional time explaining how the practice of confidentiality applies to this professional relationship with multiple people (see Standard B.4.b. in the 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics*). Additionally, the counselor working with a family will want to clarify who gives consent for the family (or whether it will be a system decision), determine how capable family members are of providing consent (especially when the counselor is working with children) and address the reality of change in the system's functioning as a result of counseling.

Change in counseling relationships

Questions frequently arise in couple and family counseling when there are potential changes in the counseling relationship. This dilemma may occur when one member of a couple or family asks to pursue individual counseling with the family or couple counselor. Thus, a counselor faces a dilemma of how to proceed in this situation.

In addressing this request, the counselor must first define the client relationship (i.e., who is the client?). The counselor should recognize that the couple or the family is the presenting and existing client. Thus, any change to the current client relationship in which one member enters individual counseling with the family counselor would present a dual relationship.

The *IAMFC Code of Ethics* addresses this situation by saying that counselors should avoid multiple relationships with clients. Section A.8. states, "Couple and family counselors avoid multiple relationships with clients, including, but not limited to, business, social or educational relationships." Although this does not specifically prohibit counselors from multiple relationships with clients, the intent is clear. Specifically, counselors should refrain from any form of multiple

relationship that might create boundary issues and questions.

Potential sources of harm related to initiating an individual relationship with one member of a family or couple client include numerous privacy problems. Doubts may arise from clients regarding what is being said in the "other" counseling relationship outside of the family/couple sessions. Counselors should not create this type of confusion for clients.

Section A of the *IAMFC Code of Ethics* specifically prohibits counselors from keeping secrets in family counseling. Thus, confidentiality and communication would be compromised if a counselor were to establish a stand-alone individual client relationship with only one member of a family or couple client.

The 2014 *ACA Code of Ethics* addresses this issue in a similar fashion in Standard A.6.d. At times, our roles change in our professional relationships with clients. When that happens, we are directed to obtain informed consent. Informed consent is an ongoing process during counseling — not just a singular event — that is required when there is a significant change in treatment, modalities or relationships. Clients are informed of any "anticipated consequences" that may result from any change, and they are given the option of refusing services related to any change. Additionally, should clients request services that would affect the professional relationship (e.g., changing from couple counseling to individual counseling), the counselor is responsible for explaining the risks and benefits of such a change. This consent is recorded in case notes.

Records and confidentiality

Records releases are another area of confusion for couple and family counselors. These releases are different when dealing with families and couples

versus individual clients. Keeping in mind that the couple or family is the defined client, counselors are prohibited from releasing information about family and couple counseling without first obtaining written releases *from all participants* who are legally competent and deemed as adults.

Additionally, counselors must inform clients of their rights and limitations to confidentiality. According to the *IAMFC Code of Ethics*, clients must be presented with clear parameters of confidentiality that are agreed to by the clients and the counselor. The IAMFC code specifically addresses areas related to confidentiality and privacy, stating in Section B.13. that in “situations involving multiple clients, couple and family counselors provide only the records directly related to a particular individual” and must protect confidential information related to any other client, unless all clients, *in writing*, sign a release of information. Furthermore, according to Section B.2. of the *IAMFC Code of Ethics*, the release of information must be time limited and consistent with legal statutes.

One of the most frequent, yet most misunderstood, couple and family counseling prohibitions is that of keeping secrets between family members. This confusion may be partially addressed and alleviated if counselors explain the purpose of family and couple counseling in their initial discussions with clients. If counselors are clear regarding this concept and the systems perspectives of couple and family counseling in the initial session, the situation rarely occurs.

According to the *IAMFC Code of Ethics*, couple and family counselors use systems perspectives as they work with

clients. In using systems perspectives, these counselors should understand that secret keeping is not productive to the counseling relationship. Therefore, these counselors must, in their informed consent, explain systems theory to clients and advise clients that counseling promotes systemic communication. If a client has a difficult situation that he or she must share with their partner or family, the counselor works with the individual to facilitate communication to the system.

At times, a counselor and client may decide that sharing certain information is not in the best interests of the family or couple. This is dealt with by working with the client to determine whether the information is systemically applicable to the presenting counseling situation. One way to approach this is by using an ethical decision-making model such as the relational ethical decision-making model by Donna Sheperis, Stacy Henning and Michael Kocet. In this model, the counselor continually examines the role of ethics in the therapeutic relationship. Then the counselor and the client follow prescribed steps leading to a course of action that considers the boundaries of the counseling relationship, the beliefs of the counselor and the client, and how the therapeutic relationship may be affected by sharing certain information. Thus, the counselor and the client can make decisions regarding information-sharing that are therapeutic for the family system.

In summary, the ethical confusion that counselors may experience in couple and family counseling occurs when counselors do not consider the ethical dilemmas in systems contexts. Couple and family counselors must never lose sight of who

the client is that they are serving. With this in mind, counselors must also educate their clients to prevent confusion regarding boundaries and privacy. When counselors do have questions, they should use the *ACA Code of Ethics* and the *IAMFC Code of Ethics* to seek answers. In addition, they should apply a decision-making model as they work with clients on complex dilemmas surrounding communication and counseling relationships. ❖

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