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# Spiritual and Religious Issues in Counseling: Ethical Considerations

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*More and more counselors are addressing religious and spiritual issues in their clinical work. This article outlines some of the ethical concerns that may arise when working with clients in this arena.*

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Gregory is a marriage and family counselor in a community mental health center. He is also an ordained minister in the Presbyterian Church. Since earning his master's degree in counseling 3 years ago, he is not currently serving as a pastor in a local church. Gregory has been working with Amanda and Doug for 2 months regarding their decision to marry. Both Amanda and Doug presented for counseling, indicating that their spiritual differences were the major barriers to their decision to marry. Amanda was raised in a very religious family and has very strong beliefs about a marriage partner being a soul mate for her. Doug sees himself as a very spiritual person but does not share all of Amanda's beliefs and religious practices. Amanda and Doug sought out Gregory as a counselor because they knew of his background and training as a minister. They have asked Gregory to work with them as their spiritual director, to pray with them during their counseling sessions, and to officiate at their wedding if they decide to marry. Gregory seeks the advice of the ethics committee before agreeing to work with the couple in the way they requested. What are the ethical issues involved in this case?

In recent years, there has been a renewal of interest in religion and spirituality in American culture (Richards & Bergin, 1997). As a result, counselors have been urged to take seriously clients' religious and spiritual issues (Bergin, 1991; Frame, 1996; Kelly, 1995; Shafranske, 1996; Worthington, Kuru, McCullough, & Sanders, 1996). Unfortunately, the ethical standards of the profession have yet to address specific concerns that emerge as counselors make the effort to

**Author's Note:** The International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC) Ethics Committee responds to questions regarding real-life situations submitted by marriage and family practitioners, researchers, educators, and students.

increase sensitivity and awareness of religious and spiritual issues in their work.

The need for counselors to respect clients' dignity (American Counseling Association [ACA], 1995, Section A.1.a; International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors [IAMFC], 1993, Section I A), to foster positive growth and development (ACA, 1995, Section A.1.b; IAMFC, 1993, Section I A), to respect diversity in terms of religion (ACA, 1995, Section A.2.a; IAMFC, 1993, Section I D), and to attempt to understand the diverse cultural backgrounds of clients (ACA, 1995, Section A.2.b; IAMFC, 1993, Section I D) is addressed in the ACA's (1995) *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* and the *Ethical Code for the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors*. These responsibilities suggest that counselors must consider religious and spiritual aspects of clients' well-being and may view them as resources for promoting therapeutic change (Bergin, 1991; Miller & Martin, 1988; Richards & Potts, 1995; Shafranske, 1996). Gregory is justified in addressing his clients' spiritual and religious concerns because in so doing he is respecting them as people, honoring the diversity of their beliefs and practices, and promoting their personal growth and welfare.

There are, however, some ethical issues raised by this case. First is the question of Gregory's competence to work with Amanda and Doug on their religious and spiritual issues (ACA, 1995; IAMFC, 1993). The issue of competency is addressed in Section III of the *Ethical Code for the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors* (IAMFC, 1993). The code requires that members stay current with new developments in the field (Section III B) and that they do not attempt to treat problems beyond the scope of their training (Section III D). Gregory should consider carefully whether he has appropriate training and skill development to address Doug and Amanda's concerns. His seminary training and his role as a member of the clergy do not guarantee that he is competent to work with religious and spiritual issues in counseling. Gregory should ask himself, "What is

Amanda's religious background? What does Doug mean by referring to himself as 'a spiritual person.' What aspects of my training and experience prepare me to work competently with this couple?" It may be necessary for Gregory to boost his knowledge by reading the substantial body of literature that is emerging in the area of religious and spiritual issues in counseling (Bergin, 1991; Frame, 1996; Jones, 1994; Kelly, 1995; Richards & Bergin, 1997; Shafranske, 1996; Tan, 1996). It also might be helpful for Gregory to consult with other clergy (Weaver, Koenig, & Larson, 1997), particularly those of Amanda's denomination, to gain insight and understanding of the beliefs and practices that are important to his client.

Another ethical concern is related to dual roles and relationships (ACA, 1995, Section A.6; IAMFC, 1993, Section I J). Because Gregory has served in the roles of both clergyperson and counselor, it may be tempting for him to blend the two roles, thus creating role confusion, the potential for blurring of social and professional boundaries, and lack of objectivity (Haug & Alexander, 1992).

Despite his previous work in the church as a pastor, Gregory must focus on his current role as a family counselor in a community mental health center. Although this role may include discussions of religion and spirituality, its primary domain is psychological, not spiritual. The marriage and family counselor's role is to assist couples and families navigate the rough waters of family relationships. The spiritual director's role is to assist in the ongoing development of the spiritual self (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1991). Thus, for Gregory to take on the responsibility of a spiritual director would be to enter into a dual relationship and a blurring of roles. Likewise, officiating at a religious ceremony such as a wedding is outside the boundaries of Gregory's current profession.

Imposing religious values on the clients is another danger in this case. Both the ACA (Section A.5.b) and the IAMFC (Section IC) ethical codes prohibit counselors from imposing their values on clients or forcing families into prescribed attitudes, roles, or behaviors. Being trained as a clergyperson and having served in the role of a pastor, Gregory is vulnerable to overtly and covertly imposing his religious beliefs on his clients. The fact that his clients requested assistance with their spiritual problems creates even more risk for Gregory to compromise his clients' autonomy. It would be inappropriate for Gregory to have Amanda and Doug subscribe to his belief system or to encourage them to attend worship in his denomination or to tell or imply that they are "spiritually bad or deficient because of their behavior or lifestyle choices" (Richards & Bergin, 1997, p. 154). Praying with his clients, depending on how this is done, could result in an abuse of power, in Gregory's meeting his own needs, in an imposition of values, or in violation of the clients' autonomy. Gregory would need to be clear about his motives and the purpose that such prayer would serve in his overall treatment plan. He may need to talk with Amanda and Doug about their prayer request and how they perceive that his praying may be helpful to the

therapeutic process. After discussing the reasons for their prayer request, Gregory may choose not to pray in this context and may refer the couple to a clergyperson or spiritual director to satisfy this need.

Although outside the scope of the ACA (1995) and the IAMFC (1993) ethical codes, some writers (Richards & Bergin, 1997; Richards & Potts, 1995) have suggested that violating work setting (e.g., church-state) boundaries or displacing or usurping religious authority also are ethical concerns. Because Gregory is employed by a public agency, his engaging in prayer or other specifically religious interventions may be perceived as his seeking to promote, endorse, or establish a religion—acts that are considered violations of the First Amendment of the Constitution of the United States (Fischer & Sorenson, 1985). Should Gregory decide to use prayer or other religious or spiritual interventions in his secular workplace, it would be prudent for him to consult with his supervisor and other administrators in his mental health center prior to using these strategies.

Another unique ethical concern is the potential for Gregory to displace the clergy or undermine their authority. In this case, if he were to act as a spiritual director for Amanda and Doug, or to officiate at their wedding, he would be engaging in the tasks and functions appropriately reserved for ecclesiastical or spiritual leaders (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Despite the degree of overlap in the roles and functions of clergy and counselors (Ganje-Fling & McCarthy, 1991), boundaries are clearer if counselors refrain from performing religious rituals unless they are functioning in an ecclesiastical role (Richards & Bergin, 1997). Gregory is primarily acting in his role as a marriage and family counselor at the community mental health center, not as a clergyperson.

The ethical issues involved in this case include Gregory's competence to work with Amanda and Doug on religious and spiritual concerns, the potential for dual relationships, imposing religious values, blurring workplace (church-state) boundaries, and usurping religious authority. In addition to these issues, Gregory would be wise to have informed consent from his clients (ACA, 1995, Section A.3.a; IAMFC, 1993, Section II A 1) and to consult with his supervisor regarding the clinical and ethical dimensions of this case.

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