

## Article 43

### Counselor Ethics Circles and Sources of Ethics Information

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As many of the counselor certification and licensure boards are requiring continuing education credit in ethics for licensure renewal as a way to reduce complaints and adjudication proceedings, the counselor's source of ethics information becomes critical. Although many types of ethics workshops are available and in different formats including online seminars, it is difficult to make the transition from the involvement in workshops to changes in counselor behavior. An examination of the counselors' perceptions of sources of ethics information, the willingness to use ethics circles as a source of ethics information, and ethical issues involving counselor relationships with colleagues can be considered.

Ethics circles are an adaptation from the ancient world of philosophy where face to face ethical debates were created from random meetings between citizens, according to the St. James Ethics Centre in Sydney, Australia (<http://www.ethics.org>). More recently, philosophy has developed within academic settings whereby informal opportunities for people to discuss ethics or philosophical issues usually occur within a circle of chairs. Some modern day examples of ethics circles may be listservs with ethics as a discussion topic, but the debates are not face to face. Other examples may involve chat rooms that evolved from a person's involvement in an ethical decision-making simulation such as "You're in the Hot Seat," (Frame & Flanagan, 1997).

In a study by Gibson and Pope (1993), 579 National Certified Counselors (NCCs) were asked to identify their beliefs about 88 behaviors and sources of ethics information. With regard to resources for ethical counseling, participants had low regard for local ethics committees (10.5%), state ethics committees (14.3%), published clinical work (5.2%), agencies where one worked (11.2%), and state and federal licensing laws (10.2%). Resources with higher ratings were the American Counseling Association (ACA) *Code of Ethics*, the ACA Ethics Committee, and graduate programs.

The survey instrument provided a list of 16 ethics sources. The ratings consisted of five choices: terrible, poor, adequate, good, and excellent. The age range of the 579 counselors was 35 to 50 years. Of the participants, 51% were women; 35% were men; and 14% did not indicate their sex.

The weakness of the study was related to the sample. The participants were NCCs, and it may not be possible to generalize the findings to all counselors since these professionals work in a variety of work settings and may be licensed and/or certified by different boards.

Ethics circles can be beneficial in working through ethical issues since many counseling professionals must abide by multiple codes of ethics. The proliferation of the various ethical codes may be counterproductive to the profession, according to Herlihy and Remley (1995).

Professional counselors with membership in several associations and who hold a license from their state and are certified by a national board may face inconsistencies and conflicts within the ethical codes from the licensure and certification boards and professional associations. Based upon the low regard for local and state ethics committees and the tendency of counseling professionals to be obligated to several codes of ethics from professional associations and licensure and certification boards, ethics circles may be useful to counselors in resolving conflicts among ethical codes.

According to Mississippi Code 73-30-25, after January 1, 2004, Licensed Professional Counselors in Mississippi are required to complete 12 continuing education hours, of which 3 hours must be ethics, on an annual basis for licensure renewal. As a result of the change in licensure renewal for LPCs in Mississippi, there may be an increased interest in ethics. The requirement of the completion of 3 hours of continuing education credit in ethics on an annual basis could enhance counselors' ethical reflections upon their practice.

## **Purpose and Rationale**

The purpose of this study was to examine the sources of ethics information, the willingness to use ethics circles as a source of ethics information, and ethical issues involving counselor relationships with colleagues for National Certified Counselors, Licensed Professional Counselors, and state certified school counselors in Mississippi. Ethical issues involving counselor relationships with colleagues is important in that the relationships may influence a person's decision to participate in an ethics circle.

This study is an adaptation of the study by Gibson and Pope (1993). The weakness of the Gibson and Pope study was related to the subjects. It was determined that the results could not be generalized to all counselors. In an effort to strengthen the current study, subjects were expanded to include National Certified Counselors, Licensed Professional Counselors, and state certified school counselors.

## **Method**

The survey was distributed to counselors who attended the presentation on ethics circles at the state convention of Mississippi Counseling Association. It was explained to the counselors that the completion of the survey was voluntary, and that they could withdraw from completion of the survey at any time without penalty. The names of the participants and specific descriptors were not collected on the survey. Participants were given a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, its benefits, protection of confidentiality of results, contact sources, and telephone numbers for further information. The surveys completed by the participants were kept in a secure location. Only research personnel involved in the study could review the information.

The results of the study were examined in terms of percentages. The responses were coded so that the identity of the participants would not be known.

This study was an adaptation of the study by Gibson and Pope (1993) in which data were obtained from 579 National Certified Counselors concerning their beliefs on 88 behaviors and sources of ethics information. The Gibson and Pope study was the first national study on counselor ethical beliefs, the first national project that identified counselor beliefs on ethical behavior and sources of ethics information. Because the Gibson and Pope study examined the ethical beliefs and sources of ethics information for only National Certified Counselors, it was determined that the results of that study may not be generalized to all counselors.

## **Subjects**

The subjects in this study included counselors who were not only National Certified Counselors but also Licensed Professional Counselors and state-certified school counselors in Mississippi. A total of 57 persons participated in the study, and these included 44 women, 12 men, and one person who did not specify a gender. About 30% of the participants were between the ages of 41 and 50 while 23% were between the ages of 51 and 60.

## **Procedure**

Counselors who attended the workshop on ethics circles at the state convention of the Mississippi Counseling Association were introduced to the study on counselor ethics circles, sources of ethics information, and counselor behaviors. Written instructions were provided to the participants that their involvement in the study was voluntary and that they could withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. Participants were given a consent form explaining the purpose of the study, its benefits, protection of confidentiality of results, contact sources, and telephone numbers for further information.

The random assignment of counselors who participated in the study was determined by their self-selection to attend the workshop on ethics circles at the state convention of the Mississippi Counseling Association. Further random assignment was accomplished by the counselors' voluntary participation in completing the survey.

## **Analysis of Results**

A total of 56 counselors completed the survey. About 25 percent of the counselors had 6 to 10 years experience in the field while 21% had over 20 years experience.

In terms of certification, 23% were state certified school counselors, 38% were National Certified Counselors, 23% were National Certified School Counselors, and 34% were Licensed Professional Counselors.

In terms of preferences for sharing information about ethics, 59% preferred a face-to-face format, 29% listed workshops as a preferred method of sharing ethics information, and 3% stated that the state ethics committee was a first choice for sharing ethics information.

With regard to the willingness to participate in ethics circles, 66% agreed that they would participate in an ethics circle. About 20% strongly agreed with

the preference for participation in ethics circles. Based upon the respondents preference for a face-to-face format for sharing ethics information, it appears that ethics circles will be accepted as a format for ethics discussions in Mississippi.

The survey regarding ethics information and ethics circles can be easily adapted for research in most states. In addition, the results regarding ethics information will be of assistance to presenters in terms of preparation, planning, and examination of formats to insure a high interest level in the topic of ethics.

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