

# Examining ethics in individual and group counseling essay sample

[Sociology](#), [Ethics](#)



## Abstract

Ethics is a foundational and guiding principle within the counseling profession. Ethics provide counselors necessary boundaries and parameters to assist them in operating successfully and responsibly for the best interests of the clients in their care. This paper will seek to examine the topic of ethics in counseling as it applies to both individual and group counseling. This paper will further expound upon the characteristics of these two unique and purpose-specific counseling methods; examining both the benefits and shortcomings of each. Ethical considerations and challenges will be also be explored in light of these two counseling disciplines. Potential approaches for effectively dealing with ethical issues will be observed through empirical case studies. The approaches provided are but a few of many available however; and are not intended to be comprehensive or exclusive. Lastly, the issue of appropriateness and qualification for both counseling methods will also be considered.

## Examining Ethics in Individual and Group Counseling

The counseling field is an ever-changing and fluid environment, and new ethical issues are continually emerging. This makes counseling all the more challenging and comprehensive for even the most conscientious professional. A recent Delphi study of counseling practitioners examined the most important ethical issues facing the counseling profession (Herlihy; Dufrene. 2011, pg. 10). The study questions involved were open-ended and counselors were given the ability to contribute broad answered responses to ensure thorough research and objectivity. The research results concluded

that the number one issue in the counseling field is: ensuring that counselors practice ethically and abide by the codes set forth.

This ranked higher than multicultural issues, social justice, confidentiality, marital or child custody issues, and even professional identity and boundaries (Herlihy, et al. 2001, pg. 14). This clearly indicates that there is both a need and a concern for how ethical issues affect and are dealt with in context of the counseling relationship. Whether individual or group counseling occurs, ethics play an integral and all-important role in ensuring that professional guidelines are adhered to, and that the beneficial fruits of the counseling field are free to flourish for the clients who come into the counseling service. Individual Counseling

Individual counseling is defined as “ a process between a counselor and an individual which helps the individual to gain an understanding about oneself and one’s behaviors and fosters the development of skills to be used in dealing with difficulties associated with personal, academic and social life” (METU, 2014). There can be a myriad of reasons someone may seek individual counseling, but all of the reasons are primarily rooted in a person’s attempt to find wholeness, healing, guidance, clarity, or understanding regarding certain areas of their lives. Benefits and Limitations of Individual Counseling

The ability to gain an outside objective opinion one-on-one from a trained professional is one of the many benefits of individual counseling. “ The highly personal nature of the exchange between the therapist and the client allows

for specific focus on the issues presented” (Tomasulo, 2010). This individualized attention is not possible within the confines of group therapy, so the ability of the counselor to dissect, lead and delve deeper into the client singularly can have more immediate and potentially exponential benefits. Group Counseling

Group therapy, while sharing some foundational traits of individual counseling, differs significantly. Individual therapy is singularly based and client specific, whereas “ group therapy, on the other hand, involves simultaneous interaction with people typically outside the client’s social and familial network: relative strangers” (Tomasulo, 2010). Group therapy serves a distinct and important role, providing tools, an environment, and relational qualities that individualized counseling cannot always provide. Benefits and Limitations of Individual Counseling

Counselors’ may find that they are not always able to meet certain client needs or exact meaningful results with a client, and must accept the fact that there will be specific limitations that will arise. For example, “ the 2005 ACA Code of Ethics (A. II. b.) states that counselors must be aware of when they are moving beyond their scope of competence and have referrals available for clients who may need to explore spiritual issues beyond the counselor’s depth, capabilities, or willingness” (Rheta; Engels; Thweatt III; Steen, 2006. Pg. 113). These limitations do not indicate failure on the part of the individual counselor, but that a client may need a specialized form of care that another counselor may be certified and proficient in.

## The Purpose of Ethics

“ The primary purpose of a code of ethics, for any profession, is to establish norms and expectations for practitioners in order to collectively minimize the risk of harm to clients and the general public (Welfel, 2010). In a broader sense, a code of ethics is also a reflection of the profession’s collective values and moral principles” (Francis; Dugger, S. M., 2014 pg. 131). This is an important distinction, because it essentially serves as a set of ethical parameters for the counselor, guiding them within professional constraints and best practices. The law will set minimum standards of behavior, but the ethical standards of an organization or larger profession will often times exceed the basic standards of the law (Francis, et al. 2014). These ethical practices are how we professionally build and exhibit virtue. As these virtues are practiced, they become standards of excellence that are built upon through wisdom, study, and even failure, revision and adaptation.

Furthermore, these principles should be rooted in the very counseling virtues they are meant to uphold, in order to build upon a strong foundation (Stewart-Sicking, 2008, pg. 158). Ethical Considerations of the Counselor

It is imperative that counselors’ consider how they will handle ethical issues before they arise. It is also important for counselor’s to consider how their own personal beliefs and values will come into play. “ A person’s values and worldviews influence what she or he perceives to be just and ethical. A person’s values, virtues, and dispositions are related to and resultant of her or his philosophical, ethical, spiritual, and religious perspectives” (Crethar; Winterowd, 2012, pg. 7). By evaluating their own

personal views and feelings regarding particular ethical issues, and considering how those potential situations will be addressed; counselors can be both preemptive and prepared when ethical dilemmas present themselves. Ethical Considerations in Individual Counseling

### Individual Counseling Ethics Case Study

Consider the individual ethical case study of Martha, conducted using the integral approach to counseling. Martha is a community counselor who is counseling a middle-aged client that has drug related issues and is HIV positive. Martha learns through disclosure that her client has been having an affair with a married man who has three children. As details emerge through the counseling sessions, Martha strongly suspects that she may know the client's male lover, as they attend the same church, and are acquainted in the same social circles (Foster; Black, 2007, pg. 230). Using the integral approach to counseling, this ethical issue can be broken into four discernable steps. Step 1: A video camera view can be used to allow for separation of facts from interpretation. This allows for Martha to take a systematically responsible approach based upon the facts she has been told, and only using the knowledge she can prove. This approach assists in setting personal opinions or judgments to the side, while remaining focused upon the client's version of truth (Foster, et al. 2007, pg. 231). Step 2: Using a systems regulatory view, Martha must consider the ethical, legal and policy issues involved within the case.

The basic ethical issue is that Martha may have a conflict of interest in this case due to her potentially knowing the client's paramour, and warning him

of the potential high-risk behaviors he may be engaging in, while still maintaining her client's confidentiality. The legal issue is that Martha must adhere to the law and observe and respect her client's right to privacy despite the client being HIV positive, as well as having a duty to warn her acquaintance of his potential risk factor. There is unfortunately no policy issue that addresses this dilemma for Martha. This approach allows Martha to consider the three systems that guide her professional obligation, and can be beneficial in giving clarity or structure to the ethical issue at hand (Foster, et al. 2007, pg. 231). Step 3: A relational-contextual view considers consulting with both affected parties regarding the facts of the case. It can be wise to consult with a superior or professional colleague for help in dealing with the specifics of the ethical issue. During this step, Martha will also disclose to her client that she may in fact know the client's paramour, and discuss her concerns regarding the at-risk behaviors involved.

There should be a clear and appropriate plan of action before this conversation occurs. The contextual factor at-hand is that Martha must consider the viewpoint, and ability of understanding that her client is capable of, while also considering the greater moral and health-related implications. This viewpoint allows the client and counselor to look at the foundational, emotional, and moral issues while developing a plan of action going forward (Foster, et al. 2007, pg. 232). Step 4: Finally, the moral virtues view is often overlooked in professional ethical decision-making, yet this view may be one of the most important due to its unique approach. This viewpoint directly considers the counselors emotions, morals, values and belief systems. Using

this viewpoint, Martha is able to use integral journaling to analyze her own needs and personal values in light of the ethical issue. She can ask herself the pointed questions that are flowing through her heart and mind, putting them down on paper and providing objectivity and realism regarding her own feelings.

Martha can also expound upon the three previous views and how she feels those have assisted or conflicted the issue at hand (Foster, et al. 2007, pg. 232). A final step in the integral counseling approach involves taking the four viewpoints, and integrating and developing those into a plan of action. The four-step process inherently provides some conflict-resolution strategies and definitive movements as the process is followed, such as; discussing the ethical issues with the client. This ensures that the issue is examined and that a plan is being constructed to hopefully mitigate or solve the ethical dilemma. It is important to remember that there can be many outcomes, and these are most highly influenced by how the client responds (Foster, et al. 2007, pg. 233). Ethical Considerations in Group Counseling

Much like individual counseling, group counseling has some shared ethical issues, as well as some distinct ethical issues that are involved due to the differing environmental and relational dynamic involved. It was not until 1989 that a division of the American Counseling Society finally established a compiled and more comprehensive set of guidelines for group counselors (Corey; Williams; Moline, 1995. pg. 161). One issue to point out in regard to group counseling, is that there is currently no requirement to be licensed specifically as a group therapy provider, so long as you have the educational



and professional credentials for individualized therapy. There are some specializations in this construct, but not in the same way there is with individualized counseling.

This presents a glaring need and possible change to the best practices of the counseling field. Some would say this is in itself a professional ethical issue in need of address and adjustment. Screening, orientation, and informed consent are important ethical issues to consider prior to forming a therapy group. It is important to convey the limitations, specific values, expectations, and risks involved with group therapy. By having these clearly established and explained to potential group members, it will lessen fears, allow for like-minded purpose among members, and limit liability and misunderstanding (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 163).

The right to equitable treatment is another important ethical consideration. Group members have the right to expect equal or close to equal time-sharing and involvement within the group experience. Much of this responsibility will lie with the group leader to ensure these practices are followed by conducting the group professionally and efficiently (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 166). Confidentiality, privileged communication, and privacy are essential to an effective therapy group. Each member should know their rights and limitations regarding these, and how important their place is to the success, trust, and relationship of the group members (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 167).

Choosing the Right Therapy Option

In examining the benefits and limitations of both individual and group therapy, it is clear that there is not one emerging method more effective than the other, rather; each is unique and beneficial in its own right. If anything, each counseling method works collectively and often-times cohesively to bring greater awareness and a greater scope of care to the clients involved. In the end, both the client and the counselor must decide which discipline, if not both should be utilized based upon their unique needs, diagnosis, and plan of action toward their treatment goals.

### Support for Individual Counseling

There are many reasons why a therapist might choose individual counseling as opposed to group counseling. Some of the advantages of individual therapy are as follows: 1. There exists the possibility for verbal abuse or negativity within a group setting. This is limited and should not occur in individual therapy however (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 162). 2. Confidentiality can be guaranteed between the counselor and client, whereas in group therapy, there is a higher risk of breach of confidentiality (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 162). 3. There is currently no certification required for group counseling and the counselor may have limited experience and effectiveness. Individual counseling however, requires a higher specialized degree of training (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 162). 4. The counselor has a higher degree of control in directing and influencing individual counseling. The nature of group counseling does not offer a high degree of control, as the group members and their individual motives come into play (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 162).

## Support for Group Counseling

There are many reasons why a therapist might decide in favor of group counseling as a better alternative to individualized counseling. Some of the advantages of group therapy are as follows: 1. Group therapy can allow for a greater range of influence and positive affirmation than individual counseling. (Corey, et al. 1995. pg. 163).

## Conclusion

“ A recent study by McMinn and Meek concluded that the majority of Christian mental health professionals do identify themselves as having received meaningful graduate training in professional ethical issues” (Schneller; Swenson III, 2010. pg. 345). As the counseling field continues to change with an ever-evolving world culture, one thing is clear regarding the future of the counseling profession. Counseling educators will need to better prepare those currently practicing within the field, as well as those who are studying to soon venture into a therapy career. Ethical issues are only increasing, and it is important to have well-defined and continued ethical development for counseling professions. “ It is incumbent upon all professionals who provide counseling, therapy, or mental health services to offer quality care and to work within the bounds of their professional ethical guidelines” (Schneller, et al. 2010. pg. 343). By enacting better training and adhering to ethical guidelines, this will ensure a greater scope of practice, ensure that best practices are implemented and applied; and equip counselors with the most current and effective models available in combating ethical dilemmas (Herlihy, et al. 2001, pg. 23).

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