Asian Journal of Counselling, 2003, Vol. 10 No. 1, 1–10
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The Ethical Practice of Counseling in Asia: An Introduction to the Special Issue of *Asian Journal of Counselling*

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Counseling is a professional practice. As such, ethical standards have been delineated to describe the best practices of professionals and to ensure high quality of practice (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2003). In countries where counseling has existed as a formal profession for some time, such as the United States (U.S.) and the United Kingdom, codes of ethics have been developed and periodically revised to guide ethical decision-making and regulate counselor behaviors. In the U.S., for example, codes of ethics have been established for the respective counseling professions, including counseling/clinical/school psychology (American Psychological Association, 2002), marriage and family therapy (American Association for Marriage & Family Therapy, 2001), school counseling (American School Counselor Association, 1998) and mental health counseling (American Mental Health Counselors Association, 2000), and social work (National Association of Social Workers, 1999). Codes of ethics are often enforced by law. All of the codes of ethics in the U.S., for example, explicitly prohibit sexual intimacy with clients during the course of counseling. Many states in the U.S. (e.g., Colorado, Florida, Minnesota, Texas) consider such conduct a felony and hold therapists legally liable for such a violation. As Herlihy and Corey (1996) noted, codes of ethics serve (1) to educate professionals about sound ethical conduct, (2) to

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provide a mechanism for professional accountability, and (3) as catalysts for improving practice. What is most important, however, is that codes of ethics serve to safeguard the welfare of clients and the public by providing the best services in the consumers' best interest.

Ethical standards and codes developed by counseling associations, such as the American Psychological Association and the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association, reflect basic ethical principles notably elaborated by Kitchener (1984) and Meara, Schmidt, and Day (1996). These principles are autonomy, nonmaleficence, beneficence, justice, fidelity, and veracity, as summarized by Corey et al. (2003, p. 16).

Autonomy refers to counselors acknowledging the right of clients to choose and act in accordance with their own wishes, and behaving in such a way that enables this right of clients. For example, one guideline in the American Counseling Association's (1995) *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* states that "Counselors encourage client growth and development in ways that foster the clients' interest and welfare; counselors avoid fostering dependent counseling relationships" (para. A.1.b.).

Nonmaleficence refers to professionals' responsibility to avoid engaging in practices that cause harm or have the potential to result in harm to clients. For example, one guideline in the *Code of Conduct* of the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association (n.d.) states that counselors "shall not exploit relationships with clients for personal advantage or shall avoid relationship or commitments that conflict with their interests and under no circumstances engage in sexual activities with clients" (para. 3.3).

Beneficence refers to promoting good and contributing to the growth

and development of clients within their cultural context. For example, one guideline in the *Code of Professional Conduct* of the Hong Kong Psychological Society (1998) states that "Taking account of their obligations under the law, Members shall hold the interest and welfare of those in receipt of their services to be paramount at all times" (para. 1.9d).

Justice refers to providing treatment to all people regardless of such demographics as age, gender, race, cultural background, disability, socioeconomic status, religious background, or sexual orientation. For example, according to the *Code of conduct, ethical principles & guidelines* of the British Psychological Society (2000), psychologists shall "not allow their professional responsibilities or standards of practice to be diminished by considerations of religion, sex, race, age, nationality, party politics, social standing, class, self-interest or other extraneous factors" (para. 5.4).

Fidelity refers to making honest promises and honoring commitments to clients. For example, one guideline in the *Code of Professional Conduct* of the Hong Kong Psychological Society (1998) states that "Members shall take all reasonable steps to preserve the confidentiality of information acquired through their professional practice and to protect the privacy and rights of individuals or organizations about whom information is collected or held" (para. 2.3).

Veracity refers to being truthful with clients. For example, one guideline in the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* of the American Psychological Association (2002) states that "Psychologists do not make false, deceptive, or fraudulent statements concerning (1) their training, experience, or competence; (2) their academic degrees; (3) their credentials; (4) their institutional or association affiliations; (5) their services …" (para. 5.01b).

Counselor's integrity is of paramount importance. Whereas principle ethics provide a set of obligations and methods to solve ethical dilemmas and establish a conceptual framework to guide ethical decision-making, it is the development of virtue ethics that compels the professionals to always question if they are doing what is best for clients (Meara et al., 1996). Virtue ethics reflect character traits and nonobligatory ideals to which counselors aspire. The ability to do good (i.e., beneficence) and cause no harm (i.e., nonmaleficence) to clients require counselors to be aware of how their own needs and personal conflicts may interfere in their counseling work. As such, counselors have a personal responsibility to be aware of their own issues so they will not shift the focus from promoting client growth to serving the counselor's own needs (Corey et al., 2003, p. 36).

As counseling continues to develop and mature as a profession, the ethical status of its practice has received increasing attention by counseling professionals in Asian countries. In this issue of the *Asian Journal of Counselling*, an overview of various ethical issues in counseling Asians in Hong Kong (Leung, Leung, & Chan, 2003), Korea (Gong, 2003), Singapore (Chong & Ow, 2003), Taiwan (Chen, 2003), and in the context of multiple/dual relationships (Mok, 2003) is presented. Specifically, the authors seek to: (1) evaluate the applicability of Western models of ethical codes in Chinese societies (Chen); (2) explore licensure and legislation system to regulate ethical practice in Singapore (Chong & Ow); (3) call for development of professional standards to train competent counselors in Korea (Gong); (4) assess the awareness and knowledge of code of ethics among teacher-counselors-in-training (Leung et al.); and (5) review and apply multiple/dual relationships guidelines in Asian counseling context (Mok). These issues are discussed from the perspectives of several allied helping professions, including counseling psychology (Chen; Gong; Leung et al.), clinical psychology (Mok), and social work and marriage and family therapy (Chong & Ow).

In light of a case in which a noted university lecturer molested teenage boys in a youth camp, Chong and Ow (2003) discussed the need for the legal mandate of professional codes of ethics to regulate counselor behaviors and to restore public faith in the counseling profession. While reviewing the historical development of counseling in Singapore, Chong and Ow noted that the public often considers counseling a voluntary social service that is offered free by the government. Consequently, counseling services may be viewed as acts of kindness rather than rights or entitlement, and unethical counselor practice may thereby be unreported or under-reported. Chong and Ow contends that a formal licensure system would help consolidate the professional identity of counselors, and to increase awareness as well as to integrate knowledge of their ethical obligations into practice.

Counselor competence affects the quality of services provided to clients. Counselors who are not properly trained may incur psychological harm to clients, thus violating the beneficence (i.e., do good) and nonmaleficence (i.e., do no harm) ethical principles of counseling. Gong (2003) addresses the issue of counselor competence in Korea, particularly in the academic preparation and professional training in counseling ethics. Despite the proliferation of counseling training programs in Korea, a survey of curricula indicated that counseling ethics was often introduced as part of a course, rather than taught as a separate course. In addition, there is a lack of training in the application of ethical decision-making models to resolve ethical dilemmas in counseling. Gong suggests that counselor awareness of ethical dilemma in counseling situations be assessed, specific guidelines for applying code of ethics be developed, and counselor impairment issues be examined. The implications for professional preparation and certification are discussed.

Leung et al. (2003) examined attitudes, awareness, and behavior toward three areas of counselor ethics — competence, relationships

with clients, and professional relationship — among counseling teachers in training in Hong Kong. In the counselor "competence" domain, most participants were aware of their limitations and would operate within their self-perceived level of competence. In the "relationships with clients" domain, participants recognized the need to maintain confidentiality; yet, they often failed to explain to students the nature and limits of confidentiality. In the "professional relationship" domain, despite being aware of ethical guidelines, participants could not cite specific code of ethics that they could follow in school counseling situations. Some recommendations for the practice of counseling and application of counseling ethics in Hong Kong secondary schools were offered.

Multiple/dual relationships in counseling refer to any association between the counselor and client outside the professional counselor-client relationship. It occurs when counselors assume two or more roles at the same time or sequentially with a client (Corey et al., 2003). For example, multiple/dual relationships exist when counseling is offered to a friend or relative, or when the counselor engages in a romantic or sexual relationship with a client when counseling is terminated. Multiple/dual relationships potentially impair a counselor's objectivity. The power differential inherent in the professional relationship may also place a client at risk of counselor exploitation. Mok (2003) reviewed guidelines for managing multiple/dual relationships as discussed in the codes of ethics of counseling professions in Asia, Europe, and North America. Mok observed that there is a consensus among all professional codes that sexual intimacies with clients are inappropriate and damaging. Whereas some professional codes advised counselors to avoid nonsexual multiple/dual relationships, codes of ethics of the Singapore Psychological Society, the Hong Kong Psychological Society, and the Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association do not specifically address nonsexual multiple/dual relationship issues. Applications of multiple/dual relationships guidelines in the Asian context

are discussed in light of the collectivistic and interdependent cultural orientation. Two cases were provided for illustration.

As reported by the authors in this issue, code of ethics have been developed by counseling professions in Hong Kong, Korea, Singapore, and Taiwan. Most of these ethical codes and standards were based on or adapted from those of the U.S. Chen (2003) provided a critical evaluation of the cross-cultural applicability of Western codes of ethics to Taiwanese/ Chinese societies. Chen argues that code of ethics cannot be separated from a society's cultural infrastructure. Chen comments that Western code of ethics is grounded in the value of individualism, and contends that the heavy emphasis on autonomy and self-determination may not be appropriate for Chinese societies, where personal development is nested within a social-relational orientation. For example, Chen questions whether Chinese clients can really make decisions only by and for themselves without considering their relationship responsibility and impact. In light of the rapid Westernization of Chinese societies, Chen notes that Chinese self evolves around the ability to compromise the demands for personal development and social relations. Thus, when (re)constructing code of ethics in the Taiwanese/Chinese cultures, the counseling profession needs to re-establish the fundamental assumption, which should reflect the process of seeking compromise or harmony between the concurrent emphases on personal development and social relations. A conceptual model was proposed to re-establish the foundation of code of ethics in Taiwanese/Chinese societies (see Table 1).

The issues discussed in this set of articles reflect various aspects of the basic ethical principles of nonmaleficence, beneficence, autonomy, fidelity, justice, and veracity (Kitchener, 1984; Meara et al., 1996). Although each article focuses on a different concern that confronts the development of the profession in the respective country, collectively, these authors speak for the moral obligations of counselors to the psychological

Table 1 Self-Other Relationships and Psychosocial Adjustment According to "Personal-Development" and "Social-Relations" Value Orientations

<table>
<tr><td colspan="2" rowspan="2"></td><td colspan="2">Social relations as value orientation</td></tr>
<tr><td>Strong</td><td>Weak</td></tr>
<tr><td rowspan="2">Personal development as value orientation</td><td>Strong</td><td>a. Respond according to needs of the self and social relations; achieve self-other harmony as behavioral goal
b. Value individual self and social relations
c. Consider social and personal adjustment; appropriate to societies that focus on individualism and relationalism
d. Assist individual compromise the conflict arisen from seeking personal development and social harmony, and to attain balance as goal</td><td>a. Respond according to personal needs and self-actualization
b. Value individual self
c. Emphasize personal over social adjustment; appropriate to Western societies that focus on individualism
d. Assist individual to develop and actualize one's self</td></tr>
<tr><td>Weak</td><td>a. Respond according to social relations and ethical rules; conform to social appropriateness as behavioral goal
b. Value social relations
c. Emphasize social over personal adjustment; appropriate to societies that focus on relationalism
d. Assist individual to adjust according to societal needs</td><td>a. Lack the use of self or society as behavior guidance
b. Not value individual self and social relations
c. Lack appropriate self and social adjustment; cannot adjust to any types of society
d. Assist individual to develop self and social identity</td></tr>
</table>

Note: a. Behavioral goal; b. Value orientation; c. Psychosocial adjustment; d. Counseling goal

Source: Chen, 2003.

welfare of clients and trust of the public. Integrating the ideas discussed by contributors in this issue, a reaction paper (Kwan, 2003) is written in the form of a message Asian clients ought to know regarding the ethical practice of counseling. It is hoped that this issue of *Asian Journal of Counselling* contributes to the continuing professionalization of counseling in Asian societies, and reinforce our ethical obligations to those we serve.

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