

## **Licensure and the Ethical Practice of Counseling in Singapore**

Li-Hwa Chong

Purdue University

Rosaleen Ow

National University of Singapore

This article examines the issue of ethical counseling practice in Singapore. The term “counseling” in Singapore is a loosely shared term among those involved in the provision of social services regardless of whether they had received any formal training in counseling due to the lack of proper professional licensure. Without a formal licensure system, no professional body will have the legal mandate to enforce the quality of counseling services as well as the accountability of counselors’ behaviors. The article raises the question of ethical concerns regarding counseling practice in Singapore and discusses implications for professional licensure in the context of Singapore.

A warrant of arrest is sent out for a senior National University of Singapore lecturer ..., who is accused of molesting nine 13-year-old boys. He allegedly molested some of the boys in a youth camp on June 29 while pretending to massage them. However, his whereabouts are unknown. The police are investigating. (*The Straits Times*, December 1, 1999)

The case mentioned above is uncommonly reported in the counseling profession; yet, it has undoubtedly raised the critical issue that helping

professions need to be regulated by professional codes of ethics and even laws to safeguard the welfare of the public. Codes of ethics are important guidelines that inform and, sometimes, adjudicate professional behaviors and responsibilities in the interest of the clients and society. In Singapore, where counseling services are provided mostly under the umbrella of social services and shared among social workers, psychologists, teachers, and volunteers, counseling has not yet been a licensed profession. As membership in professional bodies is largely voluntary, it raises the concern about whether those who provide counseling services to the public are aware of the counselor's code of ethics.

In this article, the issue of ethical counseling practice in Singapore will be examined. The history of counseling services in Singapore will first be reviewed. Issues related to training and practice of ethics in counseling profession will be discussed, and implications for professional licensure will be delineated.

### **Counseling Services in Singapore: A Historical Overview**

In Singapore, counseling was first introduced in 1964 when a group of concerned doctors, pastors, and missionaries proposed the establishment of the Churches' Counselling Centre to help those with emotional distress (Sim, 1999). Subsequently, there was a steady growth in the introduction of counseling services that were concurrent with the development of social services. The establishment of social services in Singapore has continuously been influenced by the government's philosophy of "many helping hands" that the goal is to enhance the cohesiveness of society and facilitate nation-building (Ow, 1999). In particular, the government encourages her citizens to participate in voluntary services and extend a hand to help those who are in greater need, such as the homeless, the disabled, the poor and disadvantaged.

Consequently, a wide range of services were initiated and maintained

by partnerships among the state, the community (such as churches), and corporate sponsors. The state provides the blueprint and infrastructure for the development of a particular service, while the community groups manage and provide direct service (Ow, 1999; Vasoo, 1994). Many social agencies rely heavily on the help of volunteers to organize social activities for children, youth, and the elderly, and to provide telephone counseling to the public. "Counseling," therefore, becomes a loose term that is shared among social workers, psychologists, counselors, family therapists, teachers, clergy, and other volunteers. Whether they had received formal training in counseling or not, these helping "hands" are involved in the provision of social services. Although such efforts had greatly encouraged the participation of the community, this loose definition of counseling has hindered the development of counseling as a profession (Shek, 1999), and has made the regulation of counselors' behaviors and counseling practice difficult.

### ***Counseling Training Programs in Singapore***

The Department of Social Work and Psychology at the National University of Singapore has been the key training provider of undergraduate and postgraduate programs in social work and psychology (Sim, 1999). Training in awareness of ethical counseling practice, however, has been constrained by the curriculum and students' development stage. At the curriculum level, the department did not offer specialized training in counseling due to its emphasis on generic training for students who could choose other careers (such as human resource management, teaching) after graduation (Sim, 1999, p. 58). Although ethical issues are discussed in classes when these concerns arise, there is no separate module that focuses exclusively on the issue of ethics in the counseling profession. In addition, students in the training program often have limited in vivo exposure to ethical dilemmas in counseling given their development stage (the typical age of students is between 18 to 21), and they may not possess the experiential backdrop for integrating the

full spectrum of reasons behind the code of ethics and applying them effectively in counseling practice. Therefore, students may not develop much awareness of the existing professional code of ethics when they enter the field as practitioners.

### ***Professional Counseling Organizations in Singapore***

Professional bodies play an important role in promoting and regulating ethical practices of their members through their code of ethics. One of the earliest established professional bodies is the Singapore Association of Social Workers (SASW), which officially registered in Singapore in February 1971 and remains the largest helping professional association in Singapore. Other professional bodies were subsequently established: Singapore Psychological Society (SPS) in 1979, Singapore Psychiatric Association (SPA) in 1980, Singapore Association for Counselling (SAC) in 1983, Singapore Transactional Analysis Association (STAA) in 1989, and Singapore Marriage and Family Therapy Association (SMFT) in 1999. Each of these professional bodies has developed their own code of ethics to guide their members' professional activities.

In 2001, SASW published a booklet on guidelines on video/audio recordings in counseling sessions (Singapore Association of Social Workers, 2001), which delineates and elaborates on the ethical responsibility of using recordings of counseling sessions for training and case discussions. The guidelines include procedures for obtaining consent for recording and subsequent usage of the recordings, and recommendations for safekeeping and eventual eradication of the tapes. Although explicit guidelines exist and SASW members strongly encourage their implementation, without a formal licensure system, SASW or any professional body will not have the legal mandate to enforce compliance at this point of time.

When developing their own codes of ethics, the above professional

bodies often consulted and adapted the existing codes of ethics developed by various professional organizations in the United States and the United Kingdom. For example, SASW initially derived its code of ethics from the National Association of Social Workers in 1972 (Ow, personal communication, May 24, 2001), although the present SASW code of ethics is quite different from its origin because yearly revision was conducted to respond to the changing needs in the Singaporean context. Similarly, SMFT is using the existing code of ethics of the American Association of Marriage and Family Therapy (Yeo, personal communication, June 20, 2001), and the chairman of SMFT has indicated that SMFT has yet to establish their own code of ethics (Yeo, personal communication, June 20, 2001).

In the light of the culture-bound characteristics of code of ethics developed within a cultural context, it would be important for the professional bodies in Singapore to adapt Western codes of ethics with caution. As Corey, Corey, and Callanan (1998) stated, conduct considered ethical in one society might not be so perceived by counselors and clients in another culture. For example, Pedersen (1997) noted that counselors (or clients) from an individualistic culture will interpret ethical guidelines about freedom and responsibility through different behaviors compared to counselors (or clients) from a collectivistic culture. In an individualistic culture, personal space and personal time are highly valued as an individual's rights, and any infringement of those boundaries is considered a violation of the rights. However, in cultural contexts that are more collectivistic, the notion of personal privacy is less emphasized and may even be perceived as selfish or self-centered ways that are destructive to the welfare of the community (Kim, Triandis, Kagitcibasi, Choi, & Yoon, 1994). Therefore, Pedersen (1997) emphasized the importance of revising existing codes of ethics of professional associations to provide meaningful guidelines for counselors in a specific cultural context.

## **Counseling Malpractice in Singapore**

Between May to June 2001, the first author of this article conducted a series of brief interviews with the directors of SASW (Ow, personal communication, May 24, 2001), SPS (Lim, personal communication, June 5, 2001), and SMFT (Yeo, personal communication, June 20, 2001). The results showed that malpractice complaints were infrequent. One reason that might account for this is that clients in Singapore were not as educated about the existence of professional standards and codes of ethics as Western clients. Clients often do not have the knowledge or experience to choose among practitioners, and they often rely on referrals from state regulatory boards, professional associations, or social agencies. In the event that clients were dissatisfied with their counselors, they would most likely complain to the managers of social agencies rather than professional bodies. Sometimes, clients would turn to another agency for help if they feel uncomfortable with existing counselors. Up to the present, help providers in the counseling profession were rarely sued for malpractice, which may be related to the different help-seeking perception in Chinese and Western cultures (Chow, 1987).

According to Chow (1987), help-seeking or counseling utilization in Western countries is viewed less as an expression of weakness or an act to seek sympathy from the kindhearted, but more as an exercise of one's right as a member of the society to which one belongs and contributes. What is central to the Western idea of social welfare is the focus on the actualization of individuals. Social welfare systems, therefore, are so designed that individuals are given the widest choice to pursue their own well-being. However, the Chinese "social welfare system" has traditionally been built upon a network of family relationships. Any assistance from the state is thus considered as an act of kindness rather than as the rights or entitlement of individuals. Chow also noted that the Western concept of individual rights embedded in social welfare service stresses a contractual relationship between the service provider and the

receiver, which leads to a client and counselor relationship resembling very much a legal transaction rather than an expression of compassion. In contrast, the Chinese concept of social welfare is largely rooted on humanistic ground, which retains the traditional notion of mutual support and benevolence, and makes the helping relationship less structured and informal.

Chow's (1987) ideas offer some culture-specific and relevant perspectives to understanding Asians' help-seeking attitudes and behaviors. Since counseling services in Singapore's social agencies are heavily funded by the government, clients usually need to pay only a nominal fee or even none at all when seeking counseling at social service agencies. Under such a service modality, counseling services are often viewed as "compassionate help" offered by a benevolent government. Hence, clients, receiving "free" counseling services, may feel more constrained or reluctant to complain about their counselors. In addition, cultural expectations regarding social etiquette would encourage a quiet withdrawal from the service rather than filing a formal complaint. Therefore, clients might have lower expectation toward their counselors than those clients who pay much higher fees for counseling services. In addition, Asian clients are likely to view their counselors as experts and authority figures; such conception may likely make it more difficult to regulate professional misconduct because even if malpractice occurs, these cases would mostly be unreported or under-reported. In sum, how clients perceive counseling services and counselor roles would affect their expectations about counseling and the counseling process.

### ***Client and Counselor Relationship in Singapore Context***

Some studies have indicated that Asian clients are more likely to view their counselors in authoritative position as high as their fathers/teachers because clients from collectivistic societies stress the importance of hierarchical human relationships (Cheng, O'Leary, & Page, 1995; Yue,

1992). Clients tend to put more emphasis on the concept of “place,” which refers to the position given to an individual within a social group or interpersonal relationship. The “place” or “status” of an individual is usually associated with age and gender; for example, parents have a superior status vis-à-vis that of children by virtue of more life experiences and accumulated wisdom. The same reasoning applies to the Asian deference of the female to the male members of the family such as the expectation that the wife should obey the husband.

In addition, “place” is often formalized by the “names of relationship.” Older male relatives are referred to according to age in the family hierarchy such as first uncle or second brother and not simply as uncle or brother. These titles carry with them a distinctive range of duties and responsibilities that include providing assistance and advice to younger family members. Counseling must therefore take into account the collective views of older family members in addition to the individualistic wishes of the counselee. Likewise the counselor must also work within the framework of this social group; for example, an elderly male client may find it hard to heed advices from a young female counselor.

In a counseling relationship clients may view counselors as someone with formal authority by virtue of their “place” in the social service agency. Studies of the client-helper relationship have suggested that Singapore clients, particularly those with little formal education, preferred the helper to be more directive and perceived social workers as authority figures and active “rescuers” in a problematic situation (Ow, 1990, 1993). This was the characteristic of both Chinese respondents and minority clients from Hindu-Indian and Malay-Muslim communities. In situations where the belief systems, formal religions of clients and social variables play a crucial role in the formation of a working relationship and in managing distress (Kasmani & Ow, 2001; Ow & Katz, 1999), the relationship between the counselor and the counselee may become blurred



and may open the way for an undue imposition of values, consciously or otherwise. A code of ethics helps articulate the issues related to power and boundary in relationships and protect clients who seek help. To enhance the relevance and practicality of the code of ethics, it is important to specify the cultural context (e.g., Asian or Western) where counseling takes place; the nature of counseling relationships (e.g., collaborative or hierarchical) also needs to be clearly delineated whenever possible.

### **Professional Counseling Licensure in Singapore**

To help safeguard the interests of the public, licensure is a common form of legislative regulation of professional practice as it assures the public that practitioners have completed the minimally required educational programs and are able to perform certain professional services adequately (Corey et al., 1998). However, the issue of professional counselor regulation is widely debated. The arguments for licensure revolve around whether the consumer's welfare will really be better with legal regulation (Corey et al., 1998). Those who challenge the assumption that it will get better often consider that licensing creates a rigid bureaucracy and devises a self-serving measure for mental health professions rather than protecting the welfare of the public (Davis, 1981).

It is imperative that counselors and professional bodies are aware of the potential consequences of licensure. Alberding, Lauer, and Patnoe (1993) have identified five benefits in relation to licensure, including: (1) protection of the public and therefore increased public faith, trust, and use of the profession; (2) protection of counselors' right to professional status; (3) increased likelihood of counselors' eligibility for third-party payment; (4) enhanced professional power and prestige, and (5) the enhancement of the rights of the clients.

However, there may also be some unintended and undesirable consequences for both the professionals and the public. Alberding, Lauer,

and Patnoe (1993) identified five potential liabilities: (1) increased consumer vulnerability because regulation does not always protect the public as it promises to do; (2) discrimination against some competent practitioners who do not fulfill the certification; (3) increased costs of services; (4) loss of public power and control as the state government no longer exerts control over the professions and regulates the quality of services provided; and (5) professional stagnation as licensure makes it harder for counselors to stay in the counseling field, thus causing them to leave the profession. More specifically, the main argument is that the counseling profession's desire to becoming a legitimate profession is not only highly questionable, it also constitutes a self-serving and ethically questionable ideology (House, 1999).

Licensure, therefore, should not be perceived as the ultimate "solution" to ensure the full protection of the public welfare in view of the above negative consequences. Any attempt to seek licensure from a professional body should take into account of these consequences before making a decision. Past empirical research indicated that there were no demonstrable and statistically significant differences in therapeutic outcome between the help offered by highly trained "professionals" and very lightly trained "paraprofessionals" (Bohart & Tallman, 1996). Of course, any "professional" is likely to, defensively, even desperately, resist such uncomfortable possibilities (House, 1999), because it would immediately raise doubts on the legitimacy of counseling and whether counseling can be considered as a profession after all.

### ***Identity and Development of Counseling Profession in Singapore***

It is important that the counseling discipline, if it wants to develop into a professional discipline, needs to strive for establishing a set of professional and scientific knowledge by carrying out more research studies in its own cultural context. This is especially important as the need for licensure for the counseling profession is not stressed by the

Singapore government, where the emphasis is on volunteer development as part of nation-building. For counselors to achieve professional identity, it is essential to build up a set of theoretical framework and provide empirical evidence to convince the state, welfare agencies and the public that the counseling profession is indeed a profession.

Professional bodies also need to confront the challenges of self-regulating and self-sufficiency. If counseling leaves the umbrella of social services, can it survive as a profession in private practice? Consumers in Singapore may not be ready to pay a high amount of fees for professional counseling since many of those who seek this service come from the lower-income group. However, in the future this scenario may change as the population becomes more literate and economically more capable. The stresses of modernization, urbanization, and globalization may surface other psychosocial needs of individuals and families, which are quite unlike the “bread and butter” issues of the early years of state independence (Ang, 1999). With increasing exposure of the public to the range of services available for mental health and the holistic approach to well-being, the counseling profession may have a viable market in the future. As society develops and individuals seek counseling for self-awareness, interpersonal effectiveness and managing interpersonal stress, the issue of licensure of the counseling profession becomes more imperative.

In the 1990s, several professional bodies such as SASW, SPS and SAC have begun to consider licensing their practice (Sim, 1999). They have already approached relevant authorities on the issue of registering and licensing, which is now under consideration.

An anonymous interview with a representative of social services division from the Ministry of Community Development (personal communication, May, 2001) indicated several concerns about prematurely

licensing the counseling profession in Singapore. These reservations include the serious lack of trained counselors in the field of social services, the possible increase and oversupply of private counseling services, and the infancy stage of development in the field of counseling. These are possible reasons for the slow progress made by professional bodies in the attempts to license their practices. However, these barriers should not prevent professional bodies from actively creating the code of ethics and encouraging employing bodies to view the code of ethics seriously as a guide for practice and a tool for adjudication in alleged violation.

The government and statutory boards in Singapore need to recognize the desires of those involved in the helping professions to be eventually licensed and recognized as professionals. The high turnover rate in the helping professions may be indicative of the need for support in dealing with the day-to-day stresses and frustrations of being unrecognized as professionals with limited career prospects. More resources are needed to conduct research studies and training programs, and to improve career prospects for counselors. As the counseling discipline matures, it will eventually move toward professionalization and licensure. Both professional bodies and the state inevitably need to confront the issue of professional development and work together to address the issue accordingly.

### **Strategies to Integrate the Code of Ethics in Counseling Practice**

A study conducted by Zibert, Engels, Kern, and Durodoye (1998) to examine the ethical knowledge of counselors suggested that ethical knowledge is not significantly related to membership division, age, years of formal education, degree level, years of counseling experience, formal course work in ethics, theory of counseling, or earned credentials. The findings of the study also showed that counselors who have had a course in ethics were no different in their level of ethical knowledge from those who have not attended the course. This posed a question about the kind of

strategies that would be helpful in increasing the ethical knowledge among counselors. It seems insufficient to provide counselors with ethical knowledge without helping them to actively implement ethical guidelines into their practice. To increase the level of ethical awareness among counselors, opportunities for ethical discussion and active implementation of ethical guidelines are needed. This will help counselors integrate the code of ethics into daily practices. To facilitate this, collaborative efforts from social agencies, professional bodies and National Council of Social Services (NCSS) would be essential.

Social agencies can encourage casework supervisors to actively discuss the ethical dilemmas counselors face in counseling sessions and how they can use appropriate ethical guidelines to deal with these situations. Though it is not uncommon for casework supervisors to participate in such a kind of discussions with the counselors, the emphasis here is to make the application of the code of ethics more explicit so as to increase the awareness of existing ethical guidelines among counselors. Social service agencies can also strongly encourage their counselors to join professional bodies as part of their professional development and participate actively in professional activities. This will also enhance their awareness and increase their sense of professional identity.

In developing the codes of ethics, professional bodies need to examine the implicit cultural bias embedded in the existing codes of ethics from Western countries. The codes of ethics adopted by professional bodies in Singapore have to be sensitive to the cultural differences and the types of relationship between counselors and clients in the multicultural context of the country. Professional bodies should also play a more active role in increasing the awareness of the codes of ethics among their members by providing platforms for experience sharing and discussion of ethical dilemmas in practice. For example, SASW have recently attempted to increase the awareness of the association's code of ethics through

publication and training. What needs to be borne in mind is: to sustain the increased level of awareness and integrate ethical guidelines into daily practice may require a longer-term strategy such as more comprehensive training, intensive clinical supervision, and regulatory action in regard to adherence to codes of ethics.

Counselors need to appreciate the strengths and limitations of the ethical codes of practice so that the counseling profession can provide their services wisely and responsibly (Mabe & Rollin, 1986). An organization is true to its ethical principles when all participants in the community know the principles that govern their actions. This means all the stakeholders know and appreciate that their interests are accounted for; the society is aware that benefits and burdens are not arbitrary but fairly distributed; and stakeholders desire to support the organization because the support optimizes the mutual advantages of the communal endeavor.

## **Conclusion**

The code of ethics is crucial for the counseling profession as it represents more than a set of guidelines to regulate professional conducts; it also signifies the counseling profession's identity and maturity. Even though the counseling profession in Singapore is strongly influenced by sociopolitical policy and still in a process of searching for professional identity, it has nevertheless undergone significant milestones to achieve its current status.

In this article, issues regarding the level of awareness of the code of ethics among counselors, regulation of counseling practice, and licensure of the profession were explored and discussed. Although a licensure system to regulate the counseling profession has not yet been in place in Singapore, counselors should not be uninformed of ethical standards and the responsibilities of practice. In fact, every opportunity should be sought to

increase the quality of practice through delineation and articulation of ethical standards to further establish the identity and credibility of the counseling profession.

## **References**

- Alberding, B., Lauer, P., & Patnoe, J. (1993). Counselor awareness of the consequences of certification and licensure. *Journal of Counseling and Development, 72*(1), 33–38.
- Ang, B. L. (1999, November). *Key social challenges facing Singapore*. Paper presented at the First Joint MCD-NCSS-NUS-SASW Research Symposium, Singapore.
- Bohart, A. C., & Tallman, K. (1996). The active client: Therapy as self-help. *Journal of Humanistic Psychology, 36*(3), 7–30.
- Cheng, H. P., O’Leary, E., & Page, R. C. (1995). A cross-cultural comparison of the worldviews of American, Chinese (from Taiwan), and Irish graduate counseling students and implications for counseling. *Counseling and Values, 40*(1), 45–54.
- Chow, N. W. S. (1987). Western and Chinese ideas of social welfare. *International Social Work, 30*(1), 31–41.
- Corey, G., Corey, M. S., & Callanan, P. (1998). *Issues and ethics in the helping professions* (5th ed.). Pacific Grove, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Davis, J. W. (1981). Counselor licensure: Overkill? *Personnel and Guidance Journal, 60*(2), 83–85.
- House, R. (1999). Limits to therapy and counselling: Deconstructing a professional ideology. *British Journal of Guidance and Counselling, 27*(3), 377–392.
- Kasmani, S. S., & Ow, R. (2001). Worldviews and resilience in children of divorced families. *Asia Pacific Journal of Social Work, 11*, 39–50.
- Kim, U., Triandis, H. C., Kagitcibasi, C., Choi, S. C., & Yoon, G. (1994). *Individualism and collectivism: Theory, method, and applications*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

- Mabe, A. R., & Rollin, S. A. (1986). The role of a code of ethical standards in counseling. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 64(5), 294–297.
- Ow, R. (1990). Social behaviour in an Asian cultural setting. In M. Clare & L. Jayasuriya (Eds.), *Issues of cross-cultural practice* (pp. 69–83). Crawley, Western Australia: University of Western Australia, Department of Social Work and Social Administration.
- Ow, R. (1993). Asian behavioural concepts in counselling. In V. Pearson, N. Rhind, L. Barker, J. Bacon-Shone, & M. Phillips (Eds.), *Psychiatric rehabilitation: The Asian experience* (pp. 246–262). Hong Kong: University of Hong Kong, Social Sciences Research Centre.
- Ow, R. (1999). Social work in a multicultural context. *International Social Work*, 42(1), 7–14.
- Ow, R., & Katz, D. (1999). Family secrets and the disclosure of distressful information in Chinese families. *Families in Society*, 80(6), 620–628.
- Pedersen, P. B. (1997). The cultural context of the American Counseling Association code of ethics. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 76(1), 23–28.
- Shek, D. T. L. (1999). The development of counselling in four Chinese communities: A critical review of the review papers. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 6(2), 97–114.
- Sim, T. (1999). Development of counselling service in Singapore. *Asian Journal of Counselling*, 6(2), 49–75.
- Singapore Association of Social Workers. (2001). *Guidelines on video/audio recordings in counseling sessions*. Singapore: Singapore press.
- Vasoo, S. (1994). *Neighbourhood leaders' participation in community development*. Singapore: Times Academic Press.
- Yue, X. D. (1992, March). *Conflicts and adaptations: A discussion of individualism-oriented therapeutic counseling and its implications for Chinese college counselors*. Paper presented at the annual convention of the American Association for Counseling and Development, Baltimore, Maryland, U.S.



Zibert, J., Engels, D. W., Kern, C. W., & Durodoye, B. A. (1998). Ethical knowledge of counselors. *Counseling and Values*, 43(1), 34–48.

### **新加坡心理諮商的道德問題：執照制度的重要性**

本文探討新加坡心理諮商的道德問題。在新加坡，由於缺乏心理諮商執照制度的規管與約束，「心理諮商」一詞雖然在輔導及相關領域廣為使用，但是它卻沒有明確的定義。亦由於缺乏執照制度，心理諮商的專業質素參差不齊，對心理諮商師的行為也無法監管。基於以上的考慮，本文討論目前新加坡心理諮商的實踐情況，並提出設立心理諮商專業執照制度的重要性。