

Ethical Implications of White Fragility in Counseling

by AMCD 2019-2020 Ethics Committee Members:

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Counselors are ethically mandated to develop multicultural and social justice competence concerning all professional endeavors (Ratts et al., 2015). When white fragility is encountered in professional environments it may present a barrier to multicultural practice. DiAngelo (2011) defined white fragility as a state of low tolerance to racial stress, producing defensive responses that restore underlying white power within the threatened environment (Anderson, 2019). These responses include objections to affirmative action (Hall, 2016) and application of negative labels in situations of perceived racial and gender norm challenges (Jones & Norwood, 2017). This article presents narratives of how white fragility may compromise ethical professional behavior and offers guidelines to address such challenges.

Narratives

Advocacy, as a professional responsibility must work towards transforming oppressive environments (Reynold & Hammoud-Beckett, 2018). White fragility counters these efforts. One author personally encountered white fragility in the responses to protests in Ferguson, Missouri. Unfortunately, the assertion and rally cry “*Black Lives Matter*” was denied or diluted by many unconcerned with structural racism (see, ACA, 2014; Section A.7.a).

Another author experienced white fragility with a White woman therapist and a Black male adolescent client. The client's family reported no progress and thus requested a transfer to a Black male's care. The White therapist was furious and threatened to end services for the client in an attempt to make the transfer difficult. Ethical practice necessitates the establishment of respectful and collaborative professional relationships (ACA, 2014; Section D), and consideration of cultural and social advocacy needs of clients (ACA, 2014; Section A.7.a). Another example occurred when a White female supervisee treated her Black female supervisor appreciably different than other White authority figures in the department. Throughout the supervisory relationship, the White supervisee discussed her issues and concerns with White supervisors on other teams. The literature suggests this type of white fragility is caused by a perceived challenge to white authority when a White person encounters a person of color (POC) in a leadership position (DiAngelo, 2011). The *ACA Code of Ethics* (2014) Sections F.2.b and F.5.a would apply to such instances of white fragility in the work environment.

Education programs are not exempt. Racially marginalized students challenging an injustice or microaggression are often asked to educate White peers, but the harm experienced is rarely addressed. Consequently, a White student's discomfort supersedes the harms done to the marginalized student. This reinforces existing power dynamics, privileging the White student's comfort over the needs of the marginalized student, resulting in limited multicultural awareness or learning (Chan et al. (2018); see, ACA, 2014; Section C.2.a).

Guidelines

With the preceding personal narratives in mind, the authors offer the following guidelines to consider when counselors encounter white fragility:

1. Examine circumstances and relationships from the lens of power and privilege including intentional consideration of the Multicultural Counseling and Social Justice Counseling Competencies (Ratts et al., 2015).
2. Utilize an ethical decision-making framework that explicitly addresses cultural and power differentials (Trahan & Lemberger, 2014).
3. White counselors should pursue opportunities to engage in anti-racist work, face internalized racist assumptions, use implicit association tests to uncover hidden bias, and pursue counter-narratives, thus developing ethical sensitivity for the impact of whiteness (Moffett et al., 2014; Sirin et al., 2003).

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