



Social Justice: A Moral Imperative for Counselors

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Does social justice have a place in counseling? This intriguing question lies at the essence of the theory and practice of counseling in contemporary society. Improving society by challenging systemic inequities has always been a major objective of the counseling profession. This digest provides counselors with a contextual overview for becoming agents of social justice who intervene not only in the lives of their clients, but in the world around them as well.

In reviewing the social landscape of the early 21st century, it seems crucial that counselors commit themselves to social justice and a quest for equity. The increasing economic divisions between the social classes, the achievement gap in education, and the struggle for equal rights for same-sex couples are prime examples of social inequities. Professional counselors have both a professional and personal stake in actively participating in the struggle to ameliorate such social inequities. It is their ethical and moral obligation as helpers to actively participate in social justice initiatives and in the process promote the development of a more equitable society that promotes access for all people.

Defining Social Justice

Social justice is at once easy to define and yet an extremely difficult concept to explain. A review of the literature (Bell, 1997; Hartnett, 2001; Lee & Hipolito - Delgado, 2007; Miller, 1999; Rawls, 1971) would suggest that social justice involves promoting access and equity to ensure full participation in the life of a society, particularly for those who have been systematically excluded on the basis of race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical or mental disability, education, sexual orientation, socioeconomic status, or other characteristics of background or group membership. Social justice is based on a belief that all people have a right to equitable treatment, support for their human rights and a fair allocation of societal resources.

What the Concept of Social Justice Means for Counselors

Social justice places a focus on issues of oppression, privilege and social inequities. For counselors, social justice implies personal and professional conduct that opposes all forms of discrimination and oppression. In addition to working at the interpersonal level with clients or students, a counselor must also be able to accurately perceive environmental influences on human development and possess skills to intervene at a system-wide level to challenge environmental barriers that stifle potential and block opportunities (Lewis, Arnold, House & Toporek, 2003; Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 1998).

Translating Social Justice into Counseling Action

What does social justice counseling look like in action? The following are examples of social justice counseling initiatives:

- School counselors adopting roles as leaders, advocates, and collaborators within school systems to actively challenge the achievement gap that prevents students of color and/or poor students from achieving to their fullest academic potential.
- Counselors acting as advocates in their communities for those who are economically disadvantaged. Effectively using the media, the internet, community education, and special trainings and presentations to raise awareness and increase understanding about how poverty can adversely affect a community. Becoming politically active by engaging in peaceful protests, writing to elected officials and policy makers, and signing or circulating petitions regarding the social injustices of poverty.
- Counselors engaging politicians and other officials about gay and lesbian issues and becoming advocates for human rights for all persons, regardless of sexual orientation. Encouraging school boards to include issues of sexual orientation in human sexuality training and in health education curricula. Writing letters to members of state legislatures or Congress in support of domestic rights for same-sex couples.
- Counselors working with policy makers and legislators to combat societal ageism. Supporting legislation and policies that enhance the rights of older persons and help to defeat or replace policies that limit the rights of older persons.

Social Justice: A Personal Commitment

Counseling for social justice is more than a professional obligation; it is about living one's life in a manner that is dedicated to promoting access and equity. The following are specific personal action steps that will help counselors live a life that is committed to social justice:

1. Explore Life Meaning and Commitment

Begin by asking yourself some existential questions: What do I do and why do I do it? How do I do it? Who do I do it for? What do I believe about my students/clients? What do I believe about myself? What are the results of my efforts? Am I committed to fostering and supporting a society that is more enlightened, just and humane through my life and work?

2. Explore Personal Privilege

Explore the nature of your personal cultural privilege. In other words, evaluate the unearned privilege you enjoy in society by virtue of your skin color, gender, socioeconomic status, or any other demographic or cultural characteristic. This exploration must begin with a personal acknowledgement of such privilege and the how it contributes to societal inequities. Challenge yourself to find ways to exploit your cultural privilege in any venue that will promote equity, human rights, and a fair allocation of societal resources.

3. Explore the Nature of Oppression

Counseling for social justice must be based on an understanding of the nature of oppression. Whenever people are denied access and equity that ensure full participation in the life of a society they experience oppression. It is important, therefore, to consider the impact of oppression on your life and work. Ask yourself: How have I been a victim of oppression? How have I contributed to the perpetuation of oppression? Have I used personal or professional authority or power in unjust ways?

4. Work to Become Multiculturally Literate

Become committed to living cultural diversity as a reality rather than experiencing it as an abstraction. Embrace a lifestyle that will help you to become multiculturally literate. To be multiculturally literate is to possess basic information needed to negotiate the diverse interconnected global society of the 21st century. Multicultural literacy goes beyond mere competency to embracing a way of life that encourages maximum exposure to and understanding of the many-faceted realities of multiculturalism. Ways to promote your multicultural literacy might include: gaining knowledge of ethnic variations in history, traveling (both nationally and internationally), reading a variety of newspapers and other periodicals from diverse cultural groups, being open to new cultural experiences, reading literature from diverse cultures, working toward religious/spiritual tolerance, and possibly learning a new language.

5. Establish a Personal Social Justice Compass

Develop a set of personal principles and ideals to direct your commitment to social justice. These principles and ideals should provide a moral compass to guide both your life and work. Several important documents are suggested that may influence your thinking about such a compass. Collectively, these documents embody the essence of social justice ideals and principles.

The first of these documents is the Universal Declaration of Human Rights adopted by the United Nations (United Nations, 1948). This historic and landmark document, in its preamble and 30 articles, establishes a set of universal principles that were conceived as the foundation of global freedom, justice and peace. Any counselor committed to social justice should be familiar with this document and its enlightened ideas about the possibility of a better world.

The second major document is the ACA Code of Ethics (2005). All counseling should be predicated on ethical practice. A social justice perspective on counseling, in particular, rests on understanding and adhering to those recently added sections of the code which state that counselors have an ethical responsibility to engage in advocacy initiatives, both with and on behalf of their clients, which challenge systemic barriers to psychosocial development.

The advocacy competencies developed by the Counselors for Social Justice division of ACA (Lewis, Arnold, House &

Toporek, 2003) represent the third significant document to consider in establishing a personal compass. From the student/client level to the public arena, these competencies prescribe best practice in advancing advocacy on behalf of those individuals with whom counselors work. Social justice in counseling is predicated on advocacy so this document is a manifesto for social action.

The last of these suggested documents is the multicultural counseling competencies developed by the Association for Multicultural Counseling and Development of ACA (Sue, Arredondo & McDavis, 1992). This document provides important competencies to guide cross-cultural counseling interactions.

Conclusion

Social justice does have a place in counseling. Professional counselors have both an ethical and moral obligation to be competent as agents of social justice at both the individual level and in the public arena. Counselors should employ their diverse expertise to both help individuals and to challenge the profound social, cultural and economic inequities that the plague the quality of life for scores of people.

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