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Counselors, Communities, and Spirituality: Ethical and Multicultural Considerations

The ethical implications of spiritual diversity for school counseling in rural and small world communities are explored in this article. Multicultural competencies are proposed as a framework for conceptualizing and responding to these professional challenges. Specific recommendations for school counselors and counselor educators are provided.

Much attention has been focused on the important role school counselors play in the establishment and maintenance of a positive school environment (e.g., Lapan, 2001). By design, members of the counseling profession assist students and clients in the important process of identity development, of which spiritual identity is one important aspect (e.g., King, 2003; Maples, 2001; Poll & Smith, 2003; Richards & Bergin, 1997). Consequently, we propose that school counselors must be able to work with their colleagues to create a school climate in which people of differing spiritual traditions feel welcome.

Counselors as individuals may be on their own spiritual journeys; however, as school professionals, their challenge is to find ways to live out their own spiritual traditions and beliefs while carrying out their important responsibilities to a school community that likely enjoys tremendous spiritual and religious diversity. In our thinking about school counseling and spiritual diversity, we find ourselves drawn to an exploration of the counseling profession's ethical standards and multicultural competencies for guidance, particularly as we consider the challenges associated with working as highly visible counselors in either rural communities or urban "small world" communities. When using the term *small world communities,* we are referring to relatively small, self-identified groups (e.g., ethnic or religious communities) that often exist "within the supposed anonymity" (Schank, 1998) of highly populated urban or suburban settings. Counselors who belong to these small world communities are often highly visible and may experience professional challenges (e.g., dual relationships) not unlike their counterparts in rural settings.

It is interesting to note that there is a well-developed and growing body of literature addressing ethical and multicultural issues in school counseling (e.g., Herring, 1997; Tyson & Pedersen, 2000), yet there is relatively little discussion of the challenges associated with rural school counseling practice. In fact, comparatively few articles address ethical issues in rural practice, regardless of professional specialty, and most rely on clinical experience rather than empirical data. However, several general themes have emerged from what literature exists in this area (e.g., Barnett & Yutrzenka, 2002; Schank, 1998; Schank & Skovholt, 1997). The themes particularly germane to school counseling practice include: (a) professional challenges associated with the high visibility of the practitioner's personal life; (b) the potential for unavoidable nonsexual dual relationships with clients or patients; (c) confidentiality-related concerns; (d) questions concerning boundaries of competence; (e) community values and expectations; and (f) practitioners' personal needs and self care.

We suggest that the unique professional challenges encountered by rural school counselors are especially salient when issues of spiritual and religious diversity emerge. How school counselors might best address, or even encourage, the spiritual well-being of students is clearly controversial, particularly given the legal issues associated with the separation of church and state (e.g., Fischer & Sorenson, 1991; Staver, 1998). We believe this becomes even more problematic in rural and small world communities, where the counselor's own spiritual orientation may be known to students, parents, and staff. This visibility may both invite and prevent conversations about spiritual diversity in the school setting. Although not focused specifically on rural issues or the school counseling profession, Richards and Bergin (1997) provided a very thoughtful discussion of ethical issues related to counseling and spirituality.

The purpose of this article is to assist counselors and counselor educators in thinking about the vari-

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ety of issues encountered by school counseling professionals as they express their spiritual identities in the communities in which they live. In addition, we hope to illuminate the discussion of spirituality through the framework of multicultural counseling competencies. Finally, we provide some practical suggestions for school counselors working in rural and small world communities as well as for counselor educators preparing the next generation of school counselors. In doing so, we rely on a very broad and inclusive definition of spirituality. (See Sink & Richmond in this issue.)

We believe it to be good practice to indicate the authors' motivation for exploring these themes, as this transparency may help readers evaluate our observations and suggestions more effectively. As counselor educators and parents of school-age children from different spiritual traditions living in a rural community, we have heard about or observed a number of conversations about spirituality in our local schools. These incidents have both fostered exclusion of children from non-dominant spiritual traditions and provided opportunities for greater understanding. Such experiences were, in part, the impetus for us to consider more carefully the ethical and multicultural issues described in this article.

SPIRITUALITY AS AN ETHICAL ISSUE IN RURAL AND SMALL WORLD COMMUNITIES

One of the most frequently discussed ethical issues in counseling concerns the problem of multiple relationships. More specifically, counselors are cautioned to maintain clear boundaries between their personal and professional lives when working with clients and to avoid multiple relationships (American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 1998; Herlihy & Corey, 1997). Clearly, this recommendation poses particular problems for those counselors working in rural or small world communities, wherein the counselor may enjoy much less personal privacy than those working in urban and suburban communities (Jennings, 1992; Schank, 1998; Schank & Skovholt, 1997). One area of the counselor's life that may be particularly open to inspection is his or her participation, or lack thereof, in religious or spiritual activities in the local community. Consequently, community members form impressions about the counselor's value system based on these observations. This may be particularly problematic when the counselor's behaviors or values are perceived as incongruent with dominant community norms. Counselors may also find themselves in overlapping social relationships (e.g., club member, parishioner, patient) with students and their caregivers. Rural counselors should expect that they cannot completely avoid dual relationships; however, there are many ways in which such relationships might be anticipated and managed.

Inadvertent threats to students' confidentiality should be expected in rural and small communities. For example, a counselor who also sees students at a religious ceremony or activity may be tempted to use that encounter to follow-up on conversations begun at school, unaware that family and friends may not know about a particular problem or concern. Similarly, parents who become acquainted with the counselor through social and spiritual gatherings may use the familiarity of this relationship to inquire about their child's well-being. When these professional and personal roles overlap, the burden is on counselors to keep confidential the content of conversations with students except where otherwise permitted by ethics or law (Glosoff & Pate, 2002).

Rural practitioners often experience pressures related to the boundaries of their professional competence (Roberts, Battaglia, & Epstein, 1999; Schank, 1998). In some rural communities, the school counselor may be the only counseling professional in the area, and as such, might be called upon to consult more broadly about mental health and psychosocial issues. Thrust into this expert role and lacking sufficient referral resources, school counselors may fail to question their professional and multicultural competence.

One area of the counselor's life that may be particularly open to inspection is participation, or lack thereof, in religious or spiritual activities in the local community.

SPIRITUALITY AS A MULTICULTURAL ISSUE

Within the abundant literature on the implementation of multicultural counseling (e.g., Atkinson, 2004; Helms & Cook, 1999; Smith, 2004; Sue & Sue, 1999), multicultural competencies are generally organized around three dimensions (self, client, and strategies) and three areas of practice (attitudes, knowledge, and skills). The competencies are presented schematically here (see Table 1), since a lengthy discussion of them is beyond the bounds of the present article. It is important to note that the items given in the cells of the table are simply examples, rather than a comprehensive listing.

Although some authors have included spiritual diversity as an application of multicultural competencies (e.g., Richards, Keller, & Smith, 2004; Sue et al., 1998), the particular challenges of working on questions of meaning across disparate spiritualities has yet to be fully explored within the framework of the specific competencies. Yet, use of the competencies in work across spiritual differences could ensure the provision of ethical counseling services.

Much of the literature on working with diversity has identified the concept of worldview as a central component (e.g., Ibrahim, 1985; Smith, Richards,

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Table 1. Multicultural Competencies

	Awareness of Self	Awareness of Client	Appropriate Strategies
Attitudes and Beliefs	Assumptions, biases and values	Understand the worldview of clients	Respect religious beliefs and values
	Religious and cultural traditions	Accept this as legitimate perspective	Value culture specific help-giving networks
	Limits of expertise	Awareness of stereotypes held	
Knowledge	Understanding of the impact of discrimination and oppression, particularly of dominant discourse	Possess specific knowledge of groups worked with	Awareness of institutional barriers to effective help-seeking
		Understand impact of culture on identity development	Know family structures and community characteristics
	Ways the counselor has benefited from their tradition and orientation	Appreciate impact of sociopolitical influence on clients	Understand relevant practices that may adversely impact clients
Skills	Seek out training, consultation and education for working with diverse others	Actively seek experiences that broaden understanding and appreciation of others	Ability to implement approaches appropriate to diverse clients
	Constantly seek to understand self as cultural being	Be familiar with literature on impact of culture on mental health of group	Ability to intervene institutionally for clients
			Willingness to consult appropriate religious leaders

Note. This table is based on Sue et al. (1998), simplified for format.

MacGranley, & Obiakor, 2004). Generally, a worldview is seen as an individual's explanation for how and why reality behaves as it does. Certain components of human experience are understood to contribute in powerful ways to the construction of a worldview, including spiritual traditions in shared cultural and unique family environments (e.g., Thompson, 2004).

We have chosen to indicate one proposal for developing competence in working with diversity that places worldview at the center of the model. Jane Treviño (1996) suggested that worldview is a useful construct for understanding therapeutic change. Effective counseling is possible, she posited, when counselor and client are able to achieve congruence at the general level of worldview, with discrepancy at the specific level. The general worldview refers to global explanations, such as "humans are basically good," while the specific level refers to individual elaborations of the global level, such as "therefore, I can change the school environment by just being reasonable." Discrepancy at the specific level can provide traction for positive psychological change, while respecting and leaving intact the general level explanations.

It should be noted that achieving congruence at the general level is possible through either matching (provision of services to members of one's own group), or through the use of an 'ethnographic' approach, in which the counselor attempts to understand the *client's* worldview from the client's perspective. Given the under representation of many groups, and the organization of school counseling services, particularly in rural and small world environments, the 'ethnographic' approach may be the best option available.

When considering the belief that spirituality reflects a revelation of truth, it is not surprising that the ability to provide congruence across faith traditions, particularly in terms of "valuing other's perspectives as valid," is challenging for counselors. However, multiculturalism in no sense requires a repudiation of one's own culture. On the contrary, a full understanding and appreciation of one's own worldview is obligatory (e.g., Helms & Cook, 1999; Smith et al., 2004; Sue & Sue, 1999).

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This, then, is one area where the value of Treviño's (1996) model becomes clear. If the task of the counselor is to provide congruence, rather than matching, there is no requirement to either deny or hide one's own spirituality. Counselors, however, must make clear that their spiritual commitment does not interfere with their ability to hold the client's independence as a guiding ethical principal. Further, counselors must be able to accurately anticipate the impact on potential clients of a specific display of affiliation or belief. Thus, an implication of multicultural competence may be a choice to moderate such displays when it is clear that they may limit equal access to the school counselor's professional services.

In order to provide services to all members of the community, the school counselor needs to have both underlying knowledge of the spiritual values of those in the school community and an understanding of how to access appropriate, specific resources (such as spiritual leaders from other faiths) in order to develop effective environments for working with those from other faith traditions.

CASE VIGNETTES AND ANALYSIS

We have constructed two fictitious case vignettes to illustrate the ethical considerations we have raised, and how multicultural competencies may provide guidance in responding to them, especially in the context of rural and small world school counseling practice.

Vignette 1: Christine

Christine is an experienced school counselor in a well-to-do private academy located in a large Southwestern city. Although non-sectarian, the academy has a large concentration of Anglican teachers, parents, and students. Christine is also Anglican, and participates in a prayer breakfast with many others in the school cafeteria once a week. She wears a discreet gold cross on a necklace every day. One day Bahira calls Christine about Abdullah, her 14-year-old son. Christine had earlier recruited Bahira to sit on a parent advisory council for the school that Christine convenes monthly. Bahira reports that Abdullah has become unusually withdrawn at home, reluctant to talk with either of his parents and somewhat surly. She further notes that when she approached him, he said he was 'fed up' with a "Christian student" who, in the course of an argument, addressed him with a racial epithet. Christine reflects that Abdullah has been an outstanding student who seemed to get along well with his peers, and begins to plan how she might invite him to talk, only to be surprised when Bahira asks for a referral to "someone who would be able to work with him," since she expects that Christine will be unable to work with him because he is Moslem.

This vignette raises a number of important ethical questions relevant to Christine's role as school counselor. First, her spiritual views are likely communicated to students, parents, and staff through her jewelry and participation in prayer breakfasts held on the school grounds. Although expression of her freedom of religion may be normative for staff in the private academy, the school serves students from other faith traditions (e.g., Moslem). As a school counselor, Christine has a responsibility to proactively communicate to students and families her respect for diverse spiritual and religious traditions, especially given her ethical obligation to provide services without discrimination.

The importance of being well-informed about spiritual perspectives within the community is key here. Christine holds central responsibility for fostering a school climate of respect for diversity, and it is difficult to imagine how she might accomplish this without actively seeking out information about the actual values and attitudes held by members of the school community (Carey & Boscardin, 2003). It is clear that developing an environment in which diversity is valued requires a broad distribution of multicultural competencies, implying that Christine should work to provide opportunities for students, staff, and parents to develop their own competence in living in a multicultural environment.

As Bahira clearly understands, within the school community the counselor plays an important role in identifying and developing psychosocial referral resources. Therefore, the question of how well Christine has become acquainted with referral resources in the local community arises. Has she established any contacts with Moslem professionals or imams in this city? Should Bahira insist on it, would she be able to facilitate an appropriate referral? In this context, it is helpful to think of an appropriate role for counselors, that of facilitator of indigenous support systems (Atkinson, 2004).

Effective counseling is possible, Treviño (1996) posited, when counselor and client achieve congruence at the general level of worldview, with discrepancy at the specific level.

Vignette 2: Nathaniel

Nathaniel is a newly certified school counselor who is midway through his first year as the only counselor in the local high school of 350 students. As the new counselor in town, Nathaniel is frequently asked to give talks to local community organizations. Sometimes the speaking requests are for counseling-related topics; at other times, Nathaniel is encouraged to talk about whatever is of interest to him. Since moving to this small, rural community, Nathaniel has found himself frustrated by the seeming "lack of religious diversity" and decides that his next talk will be titled, "Alternatives to Organized Religion: Best Practices for Identifying the Spiritual

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Table 2. Application of the ASCA Ethical Standards to the Case Vignettes.

ASCA Ethical Standard		Christine	Nathaniel
Preamble	Each person has the right to respect and dignity as a human being and to counseling services without prejudice as to person, character, belief, or practice regardless of age, color, disability, ethnic group, gender, race, religion, sexual orientation, marital status, or socioeconomic status.	✓	✓
A-1a	*Responsibilities to Students* The professional school counselor (PSC) has a primary obligation to the counselee who is to be treated with respect as a unique individual.	✓	✓
A-1c	The PSC refrains from consciously encouraging the counselee's acceptance of values, lifestyles, plans, decisions, and beliefs that represent the counselor's personal orientation.	✓	✓
A-4	*Dual Relationships* The PSC avoids dual relationships which might impair her or his objectivity and increase the risk of harm to the client…If a dual relationship is unavoidable, the counselor is responsible for taking action to eliminate or reduce the potential for harm.	✓ (direct)	✓ (indirect)
B-1c	*Parent Rights and Responsibilities* The PSC is sensitive to cultural and social diversity among families and recognizes that all parents, custodial and noncustodial, are vested with certain rights and responsibilities for the welfare of their children by virtue of their role and according to law.	✓	✓
C-1b	*Professional Relationships* The PSC treats colleagues with professional respect, courtesy, and fairness.	✓	✓ (indirect)
C-1c	The PSC is aware of and optimally utilizes related professions and organizations to whom the counselee may be referred.	✓	✓
D-1b	*Responsibilities to the School* The PSC informs appropriate officials of conditions that may be potentially disruptive or damaging to the school's mission, personnel, and property while honoring the confidentiality between counselee and counselor.	✓	✓
D-1e	The PSC assists in developing: (1) curricular and environmental conditions appropriate for the school and community	✓	✓
D-2	The PSC collaborates with agencies, organizations, and individuals in the school and the community in the best interests of counselees and without regard to personal reward and remuneration.	✓	✓
E-1b	*Responsibilities to Self: Professional Competence* The PSC monitors personal functioning and effectiveness and does not participate in any activity which may lead to inadequate professional services or harm to a client.	✓	✓
E-2	*Responsibilities to Self: Multicultural Skills* The PSC understands the diverse cultural backgrounds of the counselees with whom he/she works. This includes, but is not limited to, learning how the school counselors own cultural/ethnic/racial identity impacts her or his values and beliefs about the counseling process.	✓	✓

Note. The ✓ suggests the ASCA standard should be considered for this vignette.

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in Everyday Living." After giving what he thought was a successful and intellectually stimulating presentation to a local civics group, Nathaniel is surprised to find himself the target of letters—both supportive and critical—to the newspaper editor. After receiving a number of calls from concerned parents, Nathaniel's principal has also asked to meet with him to learn more about what has provoked such a controversy.

First, from a legal standpoint we must recognize Nathaniel's rights to freedom of religion and speech. However, as we consider the case of Nathaniel and the ASCA (1998) ethical standards, more questions than answers come to mind. First, as a newly certified school counselor, was Nathaniel adequately prepared for the unique experience of working in a rural community? Second, what was Nathaniel's motivation for giving this particular talk? Is Nathaniel feeling isolated in the community and hoping to identify community members with whom to establish personal relationships? Third, when preparing his speech to the local group, did Nathaniel consider the potential impact of his visibility and alternative views on the perceptions of local community members, and in turn, his ability to function effectively as a counselor to all students in his school? Fourth, did Nathaniel consult with any of his school colleagues or members of the local community in an effort to gauge, in advance, how his views might be received? Fifth, the title of Nathaniel's speech raises questions about his personal attitudes toward organized religion. Does Nathaniel have particular negative beliefs about organized religion; were those beliefs communicated to his audience in a way that might have been construed as disrespectful? How then, might these attitudes also be communicated to members of the school community as he interacts with them on a daily basis? Sixth, what challenges might Nathaniel face now given the highly charged public debate his talk has generated? How will he be perceived by students and parents? How will he go about restoring effective working relationships with those whom may be offended by his spiritual views? Finally, what, if anything, will Nathaniel learn from this highly visible experience about: (a) his role as school counselor in a rural community, including his impact on school climate; (b) his own spiritual identity development; (c) his professional competence; (d) the quality of his personal life (i.e., self-care) within this particular rural community; and (e) his need for ongoing professional training and consultation? Table 2 provides a summary of ASCA ethical considerations for both the "Christine" and "Nathaniel" vignettes.

SUMMARY AND RECOMMENDATIONS

In this article we suggest that there are a myriad of ethical and multicultural issues embedded in the question of how counselors address spiritual issues when working in rural or small world communities. Although we recognize the many positive aspects of living and working in such communities, there are also some particular professional challenges. Perhaps most notable is the counselor's struggle to balance his or her personal and professional lives in light of one's greater visibility in these settings and to develop multicultural competence.

In closing, we offer school counselors and counselor educators a number of specific recommendations. First, school counselors in rural or other small communities should anticipate the ethical challenges associated with their highly visible lives. Second, counselors should identify and be prepared to use an ethical decision-making model (e.g., Forester-Miller & Davis, 1996) when confronted with questions about multiple relationships, confidentiality, or boundaries of competence. Third, counselors must become familiar with community norms and values so that they may thoughtfully consider the impact of their personal and professional behavior on the school community as well as the lives of their current and future clients. Fourth, ethical school counseling requires an understanding of one's own worldview, including spirituality, as well as an awareness of the diverse worldviews existing within one's rural or small community. Fifth, in light of their important role in promoting school climate, school counselors should advocate for multicultural competence in all members of the school community (Carey & Boscardin, 2003). Finally, we recommend that counselor educators prepare students more explicitly for practice in small world communities and extend discussions of multicultural competence to include spirituality. More specific recommendations are provided in Table 3. Clearly, the process of living one's own spiritual values and traditions while responding ethically to students with diverse spiritualities is a complex one; thus, we hope that these recommendations will provide a useful springboard for further discussion among professional school counselors and counselor educators. ▮

Multiculturalism in no sense requires a repudiation of one's own culture. On the contrary, a full understanding and appreciation of one's own worldview is obligatory.

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Table 3. Recommendations for School Counselors Working with Religious and Spiritual Issues

Ethical/ Multicultural Issue	Recommendation
Respect	*School counselors should:* • respect students' rights to hold spiritual and religious beliefs different from their own[a]; • not proselytize or attempt to convert students to their own religious perspective or denomination[a]; • demonstrate respect for students' spiritual leaders and avoid making demeaning or critical remarks about them[a]; • in public school settings, use great caution in pursuing spiritual goals in counseling; doing so only when students have explicitly expressed a desire to do so and when appropriate written consent has been obtained[a]; • avoid direct spiritual interventions (e.g., praying with clients, quoting Scriptures) with students, given issues concerning the separation of church and state.
Informed Consent	Where appropriate and when written informed consent is obtained, school counselors may find it helpful to consult and collaborate with the counselee's spiritual leaders.
Multiple Relationships	School counselors should: • where possible, avoid counselor-religious leader and counselor-religious associate dual relationships[a]; • consult frequently with professional colleagues when dual relationships exist.
Confidentiality	When school counselors encounter students and families in community settings (e.g., houses of worship) beyond the school, particular care should be taken to avoid inadvertent breaches of confidentiality.
Professional Competence	In order to be proactive, school counselors new to the rural community practice setting should inform themselves through independent reading, consultation, and training about the unique challenges often encountered by rural practitioners.
Multicultural Competence	School counselors should: • when working in rural settings, become informed about the variety of worldviews both within the school setting and the larger community. • consult with colleagues or spiritual leaders when working with clients from religious or spiritual traditions about which the counselor is not well informed.
Self-awareness	School counselors should: • recognize the values embedded within their own spiritual traditions and beliefs and be thoughtful about ways to manage these values when counseling diverse groups of students and families; • be proactive in addressing potential conflicts between their spiritual values or activities and their professional role; • recognize the impact of their role in creating and managing a healthy school climate that contributes to student learning, growth, and development.
Training and Supervision	School counselor educators should: • provide opportunities for candidates to become informed about ethical issues in rural school counseling practice; • ensure that issues of spiritual and religious diversity are addressed as part of candidates' training in multicultural counseling.

[a]Adapted from Richards & Bergin (1997)

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