

# Educators' and Trainers' Responsibilities When Trainees' Personal Beliefs Collide With Competent Practice

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Complex tensions arise when psychology trainees see clients whose beliefs and values challenge trainees' worldviews. This is a common occurrence for students training to become psychologists and thus, educators and trainers regularly deal with this issue. Usually trainers take a developmental approach by engaging students in self-reflection about the effects of their personal values/beliefs on the clients they serve, raising questions about potential benefits and harm to clients, and offering ways to work with those different from self. Most often these tensions and challenges result in trainees making gradual process toward a growing understanding of the complexity of becoming a psychologist and what is required to be able to offer competent services to a wide variety of clients whose values and beliefs differ from theirs. In most cases, trainees successfully navigate the process of integrating their personal values with professional standards. Occasionally, the process unfolds in a less successful way.

In rare cases the normal developmental process that involves coming to terms with how to integrate personal values with professional standards may be hampered, stalled or halted. Although the value, belief or worldview conflicts experienced by trainees when seeing clients can span the spectrum, recent attention has focused on students with strongly held religious beliefs. The conflict arises for these students because they believe they will be required to affirm certain sexual orientations or behaviors that contradict their religious teachings. Two recent court cases (*Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley*, 2011; *Ward v. Wilbanks*, 2010) have been brought by students dismissed from master's counseling programs for refusing to see a gay client and/or engage in a remediation plan developed to assure their compliance with ethical standards and improve their professional competence to serve a diverse clientele. These students and the lawyers representing them have argued that the program's remediation and dismissal decisions violated the students' First Amendment rights to freedom of religion and speech.

Many within psychology (APA Committee on Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgendered Concerns, APA Division 44 Public

Policy Committee, APA Ethics Committee, Forrest & Campbell, 2012) have been watching and studying carefully these court rulings, as well as the so called "conscience clause" bills being introduced (Michigan and Nebraska) and signed into law (Arizona) that limit faculty options and actions if a student refuses to see a client whose goals conflict with their sincerely held religious beliefs or moral convictions. Personally, I began following these court and legislative developments, while serving as chair of the APA Ethics Committee. Discussions during Ethics Committee meetings about the court rulings and legislative actions uncovered complex ethical dilemmas involving several ethical standards (competence, personal problems and conflicts, unfair discrimination, avoiding harm, interruption of service, assessing student performance, and terminating therapy). Hoping to raise awareness about the court rulings and legislative actions, identify the ethical concerns, and provide some initial guidance, the APA Ethics Committee sponsored an APA convention symposium, *Negotiating Diversity: Religion and Sexual Orientation* (Forrest, 2011). The combination of the Ethics Committee discussions and symposium created for me growing concerns about the ethical dilemmas the court cases and legislative actions posed for faculty and other trainers responsible for professional psychology training programs. Conversations with Cythnia Belar, executive director, APA Education Directorate, about these concerns resulted in the APA Board of Educational Affairs (BEA) appointing the Working Group on Restrictions Affecting Diversity Training in Graduate Education. The working group consists of a diverse group of psychologists with expertise in ethics, sexual orientation, religion, accreditation, advocacy and public policy. The work group's goal is to develop a pedagogical statement and educational resources for training programs as well as advocacy materials for state psychological associations that will be useful in the legislative debates, if and when similar legislation is introduced in other states.

The articles in this special section emerged from the APA Ethics Committee's symposium described above. The first article in the special section, "Constitutional claims in the context of mental health training: Religion, sexual orientation, and tensions between the first amendment and professional ethics," authored by Stephen Behnke (this issue, pp. 189–195), Director of the APA Ethics Office, provides an analysis of the judges' rulings associated with the two court cases (*Keeton v. Anderson-Wiley*, 2011; *Ward v. Wilbanks*, 2010) and one appeal (*Ward v. Polite*, 2012) from the perspective of both a psychologist and lawyer. His careful description and analysis provide educators with insights into the complex intersection between students' First Amendment rights that protect their religious freedoms, and educators' responsibilities for evaluating trainees' ability to provide competent, noninjurious services

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to all types of clients and uphold the ethical standards of the profession. As gatekeepers of the profession, faculty and supervisors associated with professional psychology training programs will find this article especially helpful when working with students whose strongly held religious beliefs conflict with providing competent care to specific subgroups of the population.

The second article, "Counseling psychology model training values statement addressing diversity: History, current use, and future directions," authored by Kathy Bieschke and Laurie Mintz (this issue, pp. 196–203), provides a rationale for why trainees need to develop the skills necessary to deliver competent care to clients who challenge their belief systems. It is important to note that, although they are deeply concerned about trainees whose strongly held religious beliefs might result in harm to certain clients, Bieschke and Mintz are clear that the expectations apply beyond students with strong religious convictions to all trainees and trainers who must be prepared to work effectively and competently with a wide variety of clients and students. From the perspective of students reluctant or refusing to see certain kinds of clients, Bieschke and Mintz carefully review our current ethical standards (APA, 2002) on competence, discrimination, termination, and referral. Like many, these authors are concerned that professional psychology may be "in danger of losing its professional autonomy for setting the standards for the profession and the academic freedom to determine appropriate training" (p. 196). Their article concludes with a clarion call to professional psychology to clarify conflicting ethical mandates for working with diverse clients, but perhaps more important, they call for development and adoption of a uniform training statement that applies to the breadth of training in professional psychology.

At the heart of both of these articles (Behnke, this issue; Bieschke & Mintz, this issue) is an analysis of whether referrals based on therapist values are allowed, especially during the course of training in professional psychology. Both examine questions of whether referral standards exist and whether allowing or not allowing such referrals involves discrimination (Shiles, 2009). Both authors describe concerns about the potential for discrimination in referral policies and practices, although from different perspectives. As described by Behnke, the appeals court in the *Ward* case is most concerned about whether or not the university policy of allowing trainees to refer clients was applied in a neutral and consistent way to all students. If not, the potential for discriminatory practices by trainers based on *Ward's* religious beliefs becomes a stronger argument. Bieschke and Mintz build an equally compelling argument about discrimination: Trainees cannot opt out of working with clients based on a conflict with their personal values because such action raises concerns about a different type of discrimination, one that avoids serving a class of clients based

on the client's group membership. Both authors make clear that educators and trainers need to think carefully about their referral policies and practices that apply during training, as well as how to help students anticipate the reasons they will use referral in their future professional practice with the goal of avoiding discriminatory actions.

Together these two articles provide educators and trainers with a thorough grounding in the complicated and complex nature of the intersections of our ethical standards, professional competencies for serving demographically diverse populations, advance notice to trainees and the public about these standards and competencies, nondiscrimination standards, court rulings, and in some states, new legal requirements. The authors provide excellent advice to the profession and especially those responsible for the professional psychology education and training. I hope after reading these articles, you agree with Bieschke and Mintz' (this issue) assertion that "we are at a high-stakes crossroads for the training of professional psychology" (p. 202) and heed their call for immediate attention and action.

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