



# The Role of Counseling Psychologists in Ethical Social Justice and Advocacy

Jasmine T. Razo

Ph.D. Program in Counseling Psychology

## Introduction

- There has been an increased desire from individuals and divisions within the American Psychological Association (APA) to be involved in social justice and advocacy work.
- Interest in social justice and advocacy work was ignited following a speech by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. in 1967 which called on psychologists to not encourage adjustment to an oppressive society.
- The interest in assuming a greater responsibility to society influenced the creation of the Board of Social/Ethical Responsibility and Board of Ethnic Minority affairs in the 1970s.
  - The APA developed criteria in 1973 to determine when a response would be issued on a societal issue. This criteria prioritizes empirical information (DeBlaere et al., 2019).
- Division 17: Society for Counseling Psychology has incorporated social justice as one of their core values (SCP, 2021); however, there are limited ethical guidelines related to social justice and advocacy from the larger organization of APA.
- As current social injustices and inequities rise, it will become a moral imperative for the field to respond (Walsh et al., 2015), and as we respond, counseling psychologists must be mindful of ethical considerations (Liang et al., 2017)

## 2017 APA Ethics Code

- The APA ethics code is applicable only to the professional role of psychologists. However; as this relates to social justice, the lines between professional and personal are blurred.
- Haeny (2014) details the ethical principles and standards that may relate to social justice work.
  - Principle A: Beneficence and Nonmaleficence
  - Principle B: Fidelity and Responsibility
  - Principle C: Integrity
  - Principle E: Respect for People's Rights and Dignity
  - Standards: 3.04 (Avoiding Harm), 3.05 (Multiple Relationships), 5.01 (Avoiding false statements), 5.04 (Media presence)
- Psychologists need to be mindful of using their professional identity in a way that may have the potential to create harm. They must be aware of professional responsibilities and standards of conduct, they must take care not to intentionally misrepresent information, and they protect and respect individuals regardless of any identifies they may hold (Haeny, 2014).
- With limited explicit guidance from the APA ethics code, authors have proposed models that psychologists can use to engage ethically in social justice work.

## Models for Social Justice Work and Advocacy

- DeBlaere et al. (2019) propose a model for social justice work
  - We should prioritize the perspective of the community
  - Consider advocacy at multiple levels (i.e., community vs. international)
    - For example, rural professionals may need to be extra cautious regarding multiple role relationships (Bradley et al., 2012)
  - Consider how to effectively distribute information to the public
  - Learn interventions to influence societal change
  - Consider application for early and established professionals
- Hargons et al. (2017) asserts that the Society of Counseling Psychology can learn from the Leaderful Black Lives Matter leadership model to increase responsiveness to societal issues.
- Liang et al. (2017) provides an ethical decision-making model
  - Nine steps: (1) Identify the client and concern, (2) assess competence, (3) review ethical and legal standards, (4) consult literature, (5) consider biases, (6) consider diversity, (7) seek consultation, (8) think of alternatives, (9) accept responsibility

## Determining Competency to Engage in Social Justice and Advocacy Work

- APA Ethics Code Standard 2.01: Psychologists protect against potential for harm by ensuring competence even when there are no established standards (American Psychological Association, 2017).
- Flores et al. (2014), present a method for assessing competencies
  - The model highlights the skills of self-awareness, valuing others, understanding of social inequality, and skills working with diversity and skills related to building equity
- Lewis et al. (2002), as cited in Baranowski et al. (2016), developed advocacy competencies for the American Counseling Association . See below:

### Level 1: Client/Professional

- Acting with clients to identify barriers and become their own advocates
- Acting on behalf of clients to connect them resources

### Level 2: Community Level

- Collaborate with the community
- Leverage position as a professional to engage in systems level advocacy

### Level 3: Public Level

- Increase public awareness of systemic barriers
- Political advocacy such as lobbying or becoming members of advocacy groups

## Implications for Training and Future Practice

- Adjustments will need to be made to training programs to prepare graduate students to engage in social justice and advocacy work.
  - CP faculty will need to incorporate theory into curriculum that addresses macrosystemic levels of change (DeBlaere, 2019).
  - Graduate programs need to prepare students to disseminate information to the public (Baranowski et al., 2016).
  - Faculty will need to consider how to recruit and retain students who are interested in engaging in social justice and advocacy work.
    - Faculty can provide further training opportunities and guidance to students by modeling engagement in social justice work and advocacy (Hargons et al., 2017)
- Meaningful engagement in social justice work may require professionals to rethink aspects of the field.
  - Speight & Vera (2004) detail that psychologists may need to prepare for criticism regarding the credibility of the profession as we commit to making contributions toward a more just society.
  - Professionals may need to transition from relying purely on empirical knowledge towards valuing emancipatory knowledge
    - Social justice and advocacy work requires the professional to consult and prioritize the voices of communities (Hargons et al., 2017) which are not reflected in the published literature.
    - The criteria set by the APA which details when they will issue a response to societal issues limits the spontaneity that is necessary to respond to the most critical areas of social justice concern at the time (Vasquez, et al., 2012).
  - The same change principles that are used in therapy session can be adapted to promote systems level change (Olle, 2018).
  - While advocacy can be used to heal from systems of oppression, advocacy may also be psychologically wearing (DeBlaere et al., 2019). There is more research required to determine how to best respond to this challenge.
- Psychologists will need to engage in social justice more actively, counseling graduate trainees desire more training related to social justice work, and psychologists need to critically reflect on what social justice means for the field (Walsh et al., 2015).

References Available Upon Request:  
razo6896@bears.unco.edu