

Why social justice is a counseling concern

By Hugh C. Crethar and Manivong J. Ratts

In Brian Canfield's presidential column in the April 2008 issue of *Counseling Today*, he asserted that the American Counseling Association "has occasionally become distracted by partisan and divisive social and political agendas," and that ACA should, as an association, maintain "a neutral and centrist position." The supposition underlying this statement appears to be that counseling is a "value-free process" and that neutrality is apolitical. Patricia Arredondo, past president of ACA and coauthor of the multicultural counseling competencies, recently argued that "All counseling is political. All theory is political." This argument is based on an understanding that any action or lack thereof in regard to a given issue is inherently political in nature. A stand for "neutrality" is inherently a vote for the status quo and a statement that all things are how they should be.

President Canfield also stated that, as counselors, "we engage in the work we do so that we might better meet the needs of our clients and create a healthier society." We could not agree more with this statement, although we may differ in how we define both our clients' needs and a healthier society. There is a clear relationship between social injustice and the mental health of groups upon which the injustices are perpetrated. The 2001 U.S. Surgeon General's report highlighted the relationship between mental health and discrimination, oppression and poverty. Issues of social justice are integral to counseling because our clients do not exist as individuals independent of society, culture and context. The 2005 ACA Code of Ethics clarifies this as well. Standard E.5.c. ("Historical and Social Prejudices in the Diagnosis of Pathology") directs counselors to "recognize historical and social prejudices in the misdiagnosis and pathologizing of certain individuals and groups and the role of mental health professionals in perpetuating these prejudices through diagnosis and treatment."

Returning to our roots

Unbeknownst to some, operating from a social justice perspective and taking a political stance on social issues has been a part of our profession since its inception. The historical foundation of social justice advocacy and the importance of being political were articulated by Mark Kiselica and Michelle Robinson (2001) **Their article** referenced notable figures and events that helped to advance the social justice counseling perspective in the field and demonstrated that being political can help to alleviate the mental health issues many clients experience as a result of living in an oppressive society. Examples include the work of Frank Parsons, Clifford Beers, Carl Rogers and so forth.

The resurgence of calls for counselors to incorporate a social justice perspective into **our** work is really about acknowledging the fact that oppression exists, that it negatively contributes to the mental health of our clientele and that we need to balance both individual counseling and advocacy in our work with clients. The criticism of social justice in counseling by Brian Canfield and Robert Hunsaker ("Social justice: An inconvenient irony," April 2008) ignores this history as well as the larger sociopolitical context that helping professions such as the American Psychological Association and the National Association of Social Workers have recognized for some time. These organizations acknowledge that social justice is political, inasmuch as social injustice is also political. This sentiment is rooted in Howard Zinn's argument that we can't be neutral on a moving train. In other words, as counselors and counselor educators, we are in positions of power and privilege to be a voice for those who historically have been marginalized and oppressed. This requires counselors who believe in the possibility of an enlightened and healthier world to speak up! From this vantage point, the ability to effectively practice counseling may not be for everyone, because it requires an allocentric (other-centered) perspective coupled with skills to make things better.

What is social justice in terms of counseling?

Social justice in counseling represents a multifaceted approach in which counselors strive to simultaneously promote human development and the common good through addressing challenges related to both individual and distributive justice. This approach includes empowerment of individuals and groups as well as active confrontation of injustice and inequality in society, both as they impact clientele and in their systemic contexts. In doing so, counselors direct attention to four critical principles that guide their work: equity, access, participation and harmony.

- From this perspective, **equity** is the fair distribution of resources, rights and responsibilities to all members of society.
- **Access** is key to a socially just world. It includes notions of fairness for both the individual and the common good based on the ability of all people to access the resources, services, power, information and

understanding crucial to realizing a standard of living that allows for self-determination and human development.

- **Participation** is also crucial to a socially just world. This principle describes the right of every person in society to partake in and be consulted on decisions that impact their lives as well as the lives of other people in their contexts and systems.
- The final element of our definition of social justice is **harmony**. This is a principle of social adjustment wherein the actions revolving around the self-interests of any individual or group ultimately produces results that afford the best possible outcomes for the community as a whole.

What is the definition of ‘counseling-related’?

A common criticism of the social justice counseling movement is that it isn't “counseling-related” or that advocacy is not a part of what counselors do. These statements can be attributed to the ever-growing managed care industries and much of the profession's continued reliance on the medical model to resolve issues ultimately rooted in the environment. In other words, external forces, rather than clients' needs, are largely shaping the role and function of the counseling profession.

For example, many interventions that mental health counselors employ are based on what managed care industries deem to be “appropriate” in order to be reimbursed for services rendered. To challenge this system would mean risking one's employment. Similarly, school counselors are sometimes hesitant to challenge an oppressive educational system for fear of being ostracized by their peers or losing their jobs. These erroneous beliefs lead counselor educators to teach many students that they need to withhold their values and refrain from giving advice and being “political” in counseling sessions or as counselors.

The medical model approach to client problems has also contributed to misperceptions about social justice. This model is based on assumptions that the problems clients encounter are internal phenomena. Thus, any change needs to reside within the client. This intrapsychic focus is further exasperated by predominant counseling theories that focus solely on changing client's thoughts, feelings and behaviors without attention to the social context. In *The Morals and Politics of Psychology* (1994), Isaac Prilleltensky adds that the problem with perpetuating the myth that client issues are internally driven is that it maintains a status quo that does not lead to the types of long-term changes clients need. When looking at the role of social justice in counseling through this lens, it becomes clear why many would argue that it isn't counseling.

Is ‘political neutrality’ a possibility?

It has long been documented that European American (White) culture functions as a foundation of counseling practice, research and theory (Judith Katz, 1985). Ultimately, the paradigms under which the grand majority of counseling is rooted are Eurocentric as well as androcentric (male centered) in orientation. The theories under which many of us practice were developed with a bent toward the perspectives and needs of white men.

Political neutrality is *virtually impossible* within the work of counselors. We find it troubling that almost anytime someone speaks out for or with people who are not well served by these Eurocentric and androcentric perspectives; the advocate is immediately labeled as “political” and “divisive.” These labels are seemingly built upon the presumption that things are as they should be in the world. We believe that a stand for the status quo is every bit as political as one that calls for change. It is quite ironic to label only views with which one disagrees as “political” while considering one's own views to be normative.

We believe that the social justice perspective, the Fifth Force in counseling, does not diminish multicultural competence in any way. Instead, we believe that multiculturalism and social justice are two sides of the same coin. Culturally competent counselors have awareness, knowledge and skills with which they empower and advocate. The constructs of multiculturalism and social justice cannot be parsed nor pitted against each other, as they are ultimately intertwined. Competent counselors approach their clients as cultural beings who exist within systems and contexts. Finally, we believe that counselors of all political persuasions want the best for clients and thus understand the importance of equity, access, participation and harmony in their lives. These values are neither partisan nor divisive, but rather the values of a “healthier society.”

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