

In The Field

The author discusses professional disclosure as a method for protecting consumers of counseling services, as well as a way to enhance the image of the profession. The article describes the components of the professional disclosure statement, poses a set of questions to facilitate the writing of the philosophy part of the statement, and presents three examples.

Professional Disclosure and Consumer Protection in Counseling

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Professional counselors have entered the age of credentials. We can register our names, certify our preparation, or in some states license our activities (American Personnel and Guidance Association, 1980). These different types of credentials represent an attempt by counselors to gain public recognition for their competencies and for the contribution that counselors make to society. Also, counselors want to provide protection to consumers who must select from agencies and individuals who have varying degrees of expertise. The profession hopes that the credibility provided by selectively credentialing counselors will help consumers make better decisions when seeking

professional help and, in the case of licensing, will restrict unqualified individuals from offering their services to consumers. Even the American Psychological Association (APA), which has promoted the establishment of psychology licensing boards in every state, has expressed an "official position that counselor licensure is in the best interest of APA's state affiliates" (APGA Licensure Committee, 1981).

Are these forms of credentialing the answer to public recognition and consumer protection? Gross (1978) has argued that licensing of a profession does not guarantee quality or responsible behavior. He cites examples from the medical and legal professions to support his argument. Although doctors and lawyers are highly visible groups whose transgressions have been exploited by the media, human services in general do not have an impressive history of self-policing. It is not clear that credentialing by itself provides the information necessary to ensure discriminating consumer behavior. Registration, certification, and licensing may improve the profession's ability to police itself, but these processes are confusing and possibly meaningless to the general public. Most people do not know the difference between a licensed psychologist, a certified social worker, a certified rehabilitation counselor, a certified mental health counselor, a registered health care provider, or someone who simply calls him- or herself a counselor. Also, the proliferation of therapeutic labels are bewildering to most consumers (Winborn, 1977). This problem is expressed in Winborn's question:

How does a person in need of counseling decide whether to see a nondirective counselor, a behavioral counselor, a primal therapist, a Gestalt therapist or some person who practices one of the other 40 or so brands of counseling and therapy? (Winborn, 1977, p. 206)

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Although some potential clients may not know what questions to ask, and some may feel inhibited from asking questions about counseling when the opportunity is offered to them, current forms of credentialing provide little information to those who do have questions. These credentials lack a mechanism for providing the information necessary to make an informed judgment. Under these circumstances the consumer is a potential victim of inappropriate, ineffective, or harmful services.

Counselors need an approach that will bring clarity to the profession. Are we shrinks, faith healers, or gurus whose mystical understandings of the universe magically transform problems into solutions? Or, are we trained specialists who utilize a set of skills and a body of knowledge to help people cope with normal life problems? If we are the latter, we should be able to describe who we are and what we do.

Professional disclosure is a process that is beginning to take shape as one response to the consumer movement. Disclosure can take many different forms, but essentially it is a process of informing a prospective client about the qualifications of a counselor and the nature of the counseling process so that the client can make an intelligent decision regarding use of that particular counselor's services. This decision might be for reasons of competency or compatibility.

PROFESSIONAL DISCLOSURE STATEMENT

Gross (1977) and Witmer (1978) have recommended that professional counselors inform clients about themselves and about the counseling process through the use of a professional disclosure statement. Such a statement would be made available to potential clients prior to an initial interview either by handing the statement to the person or displaying it in a conspicuous place. The statement might stimulate clarifying questions from the client about the counseling process. The client would then use the information to make a decision regarding use of the individual counselor's services. Gross believes the professional disclosure statement can be an effective alternative to licensing and certification. Witmer believes the statement should be made a requirement for licensing. Both see professional disclosure as something to be legally mandated by the states.

The American Personnel and Guidance Association (APGA) (1980), in its suggested guidelines for the state divisions, has recommended that proposed licensing legislation include a section requiring all counselors to make a professional disclosure statement available to clients. APGA proposes that the required statement include:

The counselor's name, business address and telephone number, philosophy of counseling, formal education and training, competency areas, continuing education, fee schedule and the name, address, and telephone number of the state government agency regulating the practice of counseling. (p. 28)

The licensure bills being proposed in Michigan and Ohio include similar language and, in addition, they would require counselors to display the statement in a conspicuous place.

Another form of professional disclosure has been suggested by Morrison (1979). He recommends that therapists and clients develop written contracts. The contract would state appointment times, fees, type of therapy, rationale for therapy being used, effectiveness of the approach, and potential risks of the therapy. Morrison believes that this kind of contract would enlist the commitment and cooperation of the client early in the process; it would help prevent unreasonable charges of malpractice against the therapist; it could serve as a starting point for therapeutic interaction; and it could be used to gain the cooperation of significant others in the client's life. Although the idea of a written contract is not new to the field of counseling, the use of the contract as a way of informing

and protecting the client is a new approach to consumerism in counseling.

Winborn (1977) has borrowed the concept of "honest labeling" from the consumer movement in his approach to professional disclosure. By "honest labeling" he means describing counseling services in such a way that clients will be able to make informed decisions throughout the process. Counselors can be held accountable for what they do, and other interested parties such as the client's relatives and referral sources will know what to expect. Winborn (1977) developed a written statement that includes most of the elements of the professional disclosure statement recommended by APGA. He gives this statement to his clients and also provides an opportunity to discuss related questions which the client may have during the initial interview. Winborn's statement is quite extensive, which may pose comprehension problems for some clients and raise the anxiety level of others who are already feeling stressed. It has value, however, as an example of one counselor's approach to professional disclosure.

Swanson (1979) proposed an approach to professional disclosure that is an alternative to, or is complementary to, the counselor provided statement. He suggested that a directory be prepared in local communities that would provide professional disclosure information from counselors and agencies in that area. In addition, to help consumers make judgments about those services in relation to their own needs, an evaluation guide could be made available. The guide could provide questions and answers about counseling services for people who do not know the best questions to ask and who do not know what they should expect from a counselor. Swanson reported success with these types of resources in one Oregon county. The outline that the county used for the counselor entries is a comprehensive list of consumer information categories. The requested information ranges from educational degrees, to types of clients with which the counselor has most experience, to whether or not the counselor makes home visits. The major difference between the directory entries and the professional disclosure statement suggested by Gross (1977), Winborn (1977), and Witmer (1978) is that the personal philosophy of counseling appears to be deemphasized in the directory in favor of more concise information.

Whether a counselor uses a government regulated form, a counselor-client contract, an extensive description of philosophy and expectations, or a directory of local services, the essential component of professional disclosure is the same: a clear description of oneself for the public. This is not easy for most counselors. The task requires an ability to communicate what the counselor believes, what the counselor expects from the client, and what the counselor can and cannot do for the client. Because the mystique of the counseling process has sheltered the profession from this responsibility in the past, counselors have not felt pressure to describe themselves on an individual basis. The literature in the field is saturated with descriptions of "good" counseling. Yet although there are similarities among counselors, each counselor is unique in beliefs, style, and skills. Counselor disclosure must reflect the distinctive characteristics of the individual.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT BENEFITS

As an obligation, professional disclosure has important professional development benefits (Gill, 1980). Both for counselors in the field and counselors in training, the creation of a statement that clarifies one's professional identity is a valuable self-assessment experience. Personal beliefs, values, strengths and weaknesses, and goals regarding the client relationship must be examined. Counselors will not be able to describe themselves clearly to others unless they are aware of their own beliefs, values, and behavior. This self-examination process contributes, to the genuineness and congruence necessary for an effective helping relationship.

Another professional development benefit of disclosure is the formation of a professional identity. By learning to state clearly who they are and what they are trained to do, counselors begin to define for themselves a set of competencies and an approach to counseling that makes counseling unique as a profession. The profession has had an identity problem since the beginning of this century when the first organized counseling services were offered. The lack of a clear distinction between the work of a counselor and the work of other professionals, such as social workers and psychologist, has led to "counterproductive disagreements regarding territoriality, prestige, and professional competence" (Miller, Fruehling, & Lewis, 1978, p. 93). Widespread clarification of the role of counselors through professional disclosure would contribute to recognition of a profession based on competencies rather than setting and title.

WRITING THE STATEMENT

My experience with the professional disclosure statement as an assignment for students in a counseling practicum and as an activity for counselors in professional development workshops confirms my belief that the writing of a professional disclosure statement is a valuable learning experience for counselors in training and counselors in the field. People report that the task is difficult and demanding, but that the process of describing one's professional beliefs and behavior in a way that can be comprehended by the general public is personally rewarding.

Writing the counseling philosophy portion of the statement is a particularly demanding experience. As a way of facilitating the preparation of this part, I have synthesized the following set of questions from the recommendations of Gross (1977), Witmer (1978), and Swanson (1979):

- 1 What do you believe is the purpose of counseling?
- 2 What do you believe helps people lead more satisfying lives?
- 3 What should your client expect as a result of counseling?
- 4 What is your responsibility during counseling?
- 5 What is the responsibility of your client during counseling?
- 6 What are the usual methods, strategies, and techniques that you, use?
- 7 For which people, problems, or concerns are you most helpful?
- 8 Under what circumstances should your client expect referral to another counselor or agency?
- 9 How do you handle the confidential nature of the counseling relationship?

EXAMPLES OF PROFESSIONAL DISCLOSURE STATEMENTS

Counselors in training who are being supervised in the University of Michigan, School of Education, Guidance and Counseling Center are required to use these questions as a guide to writing their own professional disclosure statements. They are encouraged to refrain from using professional jargon and to make the statements concise. Examples of the philosophy portion from three of these statements are presented below. Each statement was written for a different work setting.

High School Counselor

High school provides students with many new opportunities and choices, both academic and social. Often this freedom to choose leads to uncertainty and confusion. I believe that my role as guidance counselor is to work with you to clarify the confusion and, in the process, to help you better understand yourself and your world.

I will not give you "advice" and I cannot solve your problems for you. What I hope to do is to: provide you with

appropriate information, resources, and/or referrals; listen to your thoughts and feelings without being critical; give you feedback, reflecting what you say and do and how you say and do it; help you explore options and their possible consequences; and finally, encourage you to look at your own behaviors, evaluate them realistically and accept responsibility for them.

I would like to provide an environment where you are comfortable enough first to tell me who you are and then to examine yourself honestly. My role is to provide the support and the skills necessary for self-exploration and decision-making, but you are the only one who can make decisions about your life. I hope that together we can set and work toward achieving your goals for yourself whether they are academic, career-oriented, or personal.

This counselor attempts to take away the stigma of counseling by suggesting that the typical pressures of high school are reason enough to seek the help of a counselor. She emphasized that she does not give advice and that the responsibility for problem-solving rests with the client. The statement is an invitation for a cooperative effort to satisfy the client's needs. Even though there is some jargon (*feedback*, *reflecting*, and *self-exploration*), the roles of counselor and client seem clear.

College Counselor

Through counseling, I will help you to develop attitudes and skills which you will need in order to deal more effectively with your environment. We will look at your ways of thinking and behaving and will decide if they are really helpful to you. If they are not, we will work together to change them.

Together we will develop goals, both short term and long term, which are realistic and worthwhile for you. You will be expected to share equally in the responsibilities of counseling. If you actively participate in our relationship, the outcome will be much more helpful for you. You will be encouraged to tell me how you feel our sessions are going. Your best interests will always be the most important consideration.

Everything which is said in our counseling session will be kept strictly confidential. At no time will anything you tell me be discussed outside of our time together. When you and I feel that you have either reached your counseling goal or have made significant progress toward this goal, I will end our relationship on a positive note. This termination is a sign of *your* commitment and growth. Together we will summarize what has happened in our sessions. We will discuss where you were at the beginning of counseling and where you are now. We will also talk about where you feel you would like to go from here.

My professional training has prepared me to help you with career planning decision making, exploration and interpretation of interests, values clarification, and interpersonal communications and problem-solving skills development. I do not feel that I can help you adequately with serious personality problems which require psychiatric treatment. My training has also not prepared me to deal with problems requiring marital and family therapy; you would benefit from seeing a counselor specifically trained in these areas. I can refer you to other agencies or individuals, however, who may be able to help you with these types of problems.

This counselor begins her statement by reinforcing a collaborative relationship. Both overt and covert behavior are made appropriate targets for counseling. She emphasizes the confidential nature of the relationship, but makes a claim for confidentiality that is probably unrealistic. A special effort is made to prepare the client for termination, implying a short-term, goal-focused approach to counseling. Her list of skills

includes professional terminology, but most college students would have some familiarity with these words. Finally, she attempts to be clear about the kinds of problems for which she is not prepared but offers her help in achieving an appropriate referral.

Community Agency Counselor

My belief is that counseling is to help others to help themselves. My personal emphasis in counseling is in career planning and development. This would include changing careers, relocation, back-to-school, women entering the workforce, moving up in a career.

I view counseling to be a way in which a client can acquire an understanding of his or her abilities, interests, and career opportunities; and can also acquire an understanding of the emotions and attitudes that shape, direct and influence these career choices.

My professional training and development allow me to help the client think, organize, consider options, and set priorities based on self knowledge. He or she will also be assisted to put needs in perspective, seek out alternatives and explore new directions.

I will attempt to create for all clients a caring, trusting and threat-free atmosphere in which to consider these career decisions and also to explore any personal issues or concerns that may be part of these decisions.

Should the client and/or I feel that a referral would be appropriate, I will assume the responsibility of identifying such services, and a referral will be made on a professional basis. Referrals should be expected in matters involving severe emotional distress and any areas requiring medical attention.

The career planning purpose of this counselor's services is stated clearly from the beginning. She wants to help clients who feel a need to make a change in their career. The responsibilities of the client in career planning are identified. This prepares her client for what will have to be done in order to achieve self-understanding. The kind of helping relationship is described in order to gain the trust and confidence of the client.

Each of these counselors views the counseling process from a different perspective. There is variation in the role of the counselor, role of the client, and intended outcomes. This diversity is due to the background and training of the counselor and to the setting of the counselor-client contact. Counselors with more experience would probably write a disclosure statement with greater diversity, particularly in terms of meth-

ods, strategies, and techniques. It is the idiosyncratic quality of the statement that assists consumers in choosing a service, but it is the commonality of purpose that contributes to a collective professional identity.

NEED FOR RESEARCH

Empirical validation of the professional disclosure statement as a tool in consumer protection and counseling is quite limited. There do not appear to be any studies that have addressed the issue directly. Berger (1978) reviewed studies that investigated the effects of "role induction"—the process prepares clients for self-disclosure and self-understanding. Although this process prepares clients for their responsibility in counseling, role induction does not provide the kind of consumer information contained in a professional disclosure statement. Berger did find, however, that detailed instructions for clients prior to a first session has a positive effect on problem solving behavior and on client interest in counseling. Role induction studies seem to support the notion that giving information about counseling to clients prior to the first session can have a beneficial impact on the counseling process. At least one purpose of the professional disclosure statement has been supported. Additional research is needed to test the effects of the statement on consumer protection, public recognition, and professional development.

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Re:Views

Women in Science

Alice Fins

Skokie, Ill.: National Textbook Co., 1979;
154 pp.

This paperback is one of a number of books in the VGM Career Horizons Series. The book presents the life stories of ten women who work in various science fields. Seven of the nine chapters include stories based on interviews with each of the women. The

remainder of this book includes chapters on education and financial aid, getting a good job, and an appendix on scientific associations and committees.

The author's thesis is that women need to be stimulated to pursue careers in science. All of the women portrayed are married. Most currently are raising their children while pursuing their careers. The women therefore represent realistic models for readers who are planning for both a career and marriage.

Each of the women scientists has had her share of job discrimination and each story

portrays a model of courage and determination. Other common themes include educational discrimination, dedication to hard work, and a lifelong sense of curiosity and service to mankind.

The fields of Biology, Chemistry, Geology, Astronomy, Physics, Mathematics, and Computer Science are represented. Each field is prefaced by a general introduction covering definitions, employment statistics, employment opportunities, earnings, and educational requirements. Most of the data presented are up-to-date.

The book is written in a nontechnical