THE ETHICS OF PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELING: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF CHINESE CERTIFIED PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELORS AND AMERICAN PSYCHOLOGICAL COUNSELORS

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Abstract: The present study has been designed to investigate and to compare the attitudes and beliefs of a sample of Chinese and a sample of American psychological counselors toward ethicalness of a range of counseling behaviors. It is hoped that the obtained findings would (1) provide some guidance to the psychological counselors, both in China and in the U.S., as to how to behave when confronted with such behaviors, and (2) aid the Chinese Psychological Society and the Chinese psychological counselors specifically, in the revision and extension of the existing Chinese psychological counseling ethics codes. The study’s data were obtained from a sample of 402 Chinese certified psychological counselors currently practicing in China. Data from the American sample were obtained from the Gibson and Pope’s (1993) nationwide survey conducted in the United States. The study’s comparative results showed that there are significant differences between Chinese and American counselors in (1) the frequency of occurrence of ethical issues in their counseling practices, (2) their assessment of certain counseling behaviors as ethical or unethical, and (3) their confidence when assessing certain counseling behaviors as ethical or unethical. These findings are discussed in terms of the cultural and developmental differences between Chinese and American counselors.

Keywords: Attitudes and Beliefs, Chinese and American Psychological Counselors, the Ethics of Psychological Counseling

Introduction

The publication of the Psychologists National Occupational Standards on August 3rd 2001 not only marked the beginning of the psychological counseling profession in China, but also formally standardized psychologists’ behaviors as well as providing guidelines for adhering to professional ethics for the first time. However, the Chapter of Professional Ethics in the Psychologists National Occupational Standards (both 2001 and 2005) failed to develop sufficient ethical details to guide Chinese psychological counselors in their practice. The Chinese Psychological Society (CPS) has also developed a Code of Ethics for Counseling and Clinical Practice for its membership (Jan 2006 first draft, May 2006 second draft, Jan 2007 third draft). Although this CPS Code of Ethics for Counseling and Clinical Practice (January 2007) was developed 5 years later than the APA’s ethics code (2002), it does provide useful ethical practice guidelines for Chinese psychologists and continues to play an important role in guiding the ethical practice of Chinese Psychologists to this day. Gibson and Pope (1993) noted that there has been no national study of the degree to which counselors as a professional group believe that the APA’s ethics code is a valuable resource in guiding their conduct or their beliefs concerning whether a broad range of counseling behaviors are or are not ethical. The same situation exists in China where empirical research into the issue of ethics is rare.

There are a number of important reasons underlying the need to conduct research on Chinese psychological counselors’ attitudes and beliefs of the ethical issues in practice. First, the beliefs of psychological counselors would influence their compliance and performance in practice with the psychological counseling ethics codes. Second, a nationwide ethics code in China needs a nationwide consensus. The work of finding a nationwide consensus for professional ethics to govern the practice of Chinese psychologists is therefore urgent. Third, the designation of behaviors as either ethical or unethical should be based on Chinese traditional culture, as well as current professional conception of what is acceptable and what is unacceptable. Fourth, counseling situations that pose dilemmas should be clearly identified and incorporated in the ethics code. This would provide some guidance to the psychological counselors as to how to behave when confronted with such situations.

Method

Participants

The study’s sample was drawn from the population of Chinese certified psychological counselors who were registered with the Chinese Psychological Society and whose details are recorded with the National Labor Ministry. All participants were selected from hospitals, clinics, schools, and other places in major cities in China where professional counselors work.