

ACA Advocacy Competencies: Social Justice Advocacy at the Client/Student Level

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There is a rise in calls for counselors to be advocates for social justice. Counselors can meet the growing need to expand their roles to include advocacy by using the ACA (American Counseling Association) Advocacy Competencies (J. A. Lewis, M. S. Arnold, R. House, & R. L. Toporek, 2002). This article operationalizes the client/student level of the competencies and explores implications for the profession.

There is a growing movement calling on counselors to implement social justice advocacy strategies and interventions into counseling practices (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Ratts, D'Andrea, & Arredondo, 2004; Toporek, Gerstein, Fouad, Roysircar, & Israel, 2006). Calls for counseling professionals to be change agents and advocates for social justice are reflected in the school counseling (Bemak & Chung, 2005; House, 2004; Stone & Dahir, 2006), critical psychology (Fox & Prilleltensky, 1997; Prilleltensky & Nelson, 1997; Prilleltensky & Prilleltensky, 2003), and feminist and multicultural counseling literature (Goodman et al., 2004). The need to make social justice advocacy a clearer presence in the field, and reconnect the profession with its roots, is primarily fueled by a desire to more adequately address systems of oppression that negatively affect client/student development (Lee, 2007). The belief is that helping professionals can no longer operate solely from the comfort of their offices if they wish to better serve their constituencies. This perspective is echoed by Goodman et al. (2004), who added that "unless fundamental change occurs within our neighborhoods, schools, media, culture, and religious, political, and social institutions, our work with individuals is destined to be, at best, only partially successful" (p. 797). For this reason, counselors need to expand their roles to include social justice advocacy (Lee & Walz, 1998). This may be accomplished by using the ACA (American Counseling Association) Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2002) as a framework for executing social justice advocacy strategies (Ratts, DeKruyf, & Chen-Hayes, 2007).

As part of this special section, this article provides a conceptual framework for how the client/student level of the Advocacy Competencies can meet the growing demand for counselors to be change agents and advocates for "a just and humane world" (Seattle University, n.d., para. 1). Specifically, this article illustrates the importance of the Advocacy Competencies, provides an overview of the three levels inherent within the Advocacy Competencies, and demonstrates how to operationalize the client/student level of the Advocacy Competencies. Implications for the profession are also discussed.

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■ Rationale

Several reasons exist regarding the need to infuse the Advocacy Competencies into counseling practice. One reason is related to the prevalence of oppression in society and the negative impact it has on human development. To illustrate, Jacobs (1994) asserted that environmental factors such as generational poverty can often lead to increased depression, low self-esteem, and a lack of educational and career opportunities. Similarly, House and Martin (1998) have attributed oppressive social, political, and economic conditions to poor academic achievement for students of color and students from low-income families in K-12 schools. These kinds of inequities signify the need for counseling professionals to make a more concerted effort at addressing environmental factors that serve as barriers to academic, career, and personal/social development.

Second, use of the Advocacy Competencies seems critical given Prilleltensky's (1994) argument that the counseling profession has a tendency to "attribute excessive weight to individual factors, such as genetic or psychological constitution, in explaining individual and/or social behavior" (p. 39). Relying solely on direct counseling to address client/student problems, while minimizing the influence of the social milieu, may be limiting at best. The rationale is that sometimes it is the system that needs to change and not the individual (Goodman et al., 2004). The need for counseling professionals to include advocacy in their work is especially important in light of Hardiman and Jackson's (1982) assertion that oppression manifests itself at the individual (e.g., stereotypes, prejudice, and discrimination), social/cultural (e.g., societal norms and values), and institutional levels (e.g., rules and policies). The Advocacy Competencies speak to this concern because they encourage counselors to use counseling interventions and strategies that take place on multiple levels (Rubel & Ratts, 2007).

Third, despite the need for counselors to operate from a social justice advocacy paradigm, the counseling profession has failed to bring clarity on how to put social justice into practice (Field & Baker, 2004; Nilsson & Schmidt, 2005).

Up to this point, social justice has been a rather abstract, philosophical, and theoretical concept in the counseling literature. The Advocacy Competencies have been instrumental in moving the social justice advocacy movement forward (Ratts, 2006). Development of the Advocacy Competencies is timely because they offer counselors a tangible framework to implement social justice advocacy strategies. Moreover, the Advocacy Competencies offer counselors a means for determining when certain situations call for direct interventions, advocacy *with* or *on behalf* of an individual, and when interventions call for microlevel and macrolevel approaches. Interventions that focus on both direct and indirect care are important because they acknowledge the complex interplay between individuals and their environment.

■ The Advocacy Competencies

The Advocacy Competencies include three levels of advocacy: client/student, school/community, and public arena (Lewis et al., 2002). Each level of advocacy contains two domains that emphasize advocacy with and advocacy on behalf of an individual. The client/student level of advocacy involves using direct counseling to empower individuals and providing advocacy at the individual level. The school/community level of advocacy emphasizes community collaboration and systems advocacy. The public arena level of advocacy is concerned with informing the public about systemic barriers that affect human development and how helping professionals can shape public policy. It is also important to mention that working within one level of the Advocacy Competencies will often require counselors to engage in other levels of advocacy.

■ Client/Student Level of Advocacy

The client/student advocacy level occurs on an individual scale. This level of advocacy includes the client/student empowerment and client/student advocacy domains. At this level, counselors recognize when sociopolitical forces negatively affect human development and act accordingly. Within direct counseling, counselors use empowerment strategies to help people understand their lives in context. Counselors also serve as advocates who help remove barriers that contribute to psychological stress and disorders. Advocacy can occur with the individual and/or on behalf of the individual.

Client/Student Empowerment: Advocacy With

The client/student empowerment domain involves advocacy with the individual. Within this domain, advocacy efforts are focused on empowering those who are marginalized in society. Empowerment may include the following: identifying client/student strengths, recognizing the impact sociopolitical forces have on human development, assessing for internalized oppression, helping individuals understand their lives in context, facilitating the development of self-advocacy skills, and collaborating with individuals to develop and implement a self-advocacy plan of action (Lewis et al., 2002). These empowerment strategies allow

individuals to find their voice, which, in turn, creates a new sense of awareness (Worell & Remer, 2003). Friere (1993) referred to this process as *conscientizacao*, or critical consciousness. Individuals from marginalized communities who recognize their lives in context begin to understand how their plight is largely rooted in social, political, and economic conditions. Problems, which may have initially been internalized, are now viewed as being a result of living in an oppressive society. This realization forms the foundation for self-advocacy (Adams, Bell, & Griffin, 2007; Goodman et al., 2004; Ivey & Collins, 2003).

The process of empowering individuals can also move them to a place of action (Vera & Speight, 2003). For this reason, it is important to assess whether clients/students possess the self-advocacy skills necessary to successfully navigate their environment. For instance, school counselors can empower students by providing guidance lessons on conflict management skills. Similarly, mental health practitioners can help victims of domestic violence develop skills that will empower them to break the cycle of abuse.

Client/Student Advocacy: Advocacy on Behalf

Advocating on behalf of individuals is also part of advocacy at the client/student level. Counselors are in ideal positions to advocate on behalf of those they serve because of their training. Specifically, counselors are trained to understand life span development issues, to demonstrate multicultural and social justice competence, and to be systems change agents; they also possess the technology and research skills required to effect change (House & Sears, 2002; Kiselica & Robinson, 2001; Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992). These advocacy skills are necessary to promote the social, psychological, and physical well-being of individuals, families, communities, and organizations.

Counselors who advocate on behalf of those they serve are often in the role of a consultant (Dinkmeyer & Carlson, 2006). As consultants, counselors are called on to move beyond office-bound interventions to advocate for such resources as education, health care, and employment opportunities. The need to advocate on behalf of others seems especially important for individuals who lack access to needed services or resources. Advocacy on behalf of individuals may take the shape of negotiating for relevant services, helping individuals gain access to resources, identifying barriers, initiating a plan to confront these barriers, recognizing potential allies, and carrying out the plan of action (Lewis et al., 2002). For school counselors, such advocacy could involve consulting with a teacher on how to address homophobic comments made by students in a class. Having a school counselor as an ally in this situation creates a safe learning environment, prevents mental health problems, and contributes to the academic success of all students (Kosciw & Diaz, 2006).

■ Operationalizing the Client/Student Level of Advocacy

This section provides a case study demonstrating how counselors might operationalize the client/student level of the

Advocacy Competencies. The interventions and strategies offered are drawn from our experiences as well as those of other counselors and counseling interns.

The Guerreros are a fictional family of five who live in Tucson, Arizona. Anna and Javier, the parents, immigrated illegally to the United States from Mexico. They do not speak English. They have three children who were born in the United States and are fluent in both Spanish and English. Cisco, their eldest child, is a 16-year-old male sophomore at an underfunded public high school. Their other two children, Maria and Lisette, are young girls in the first and third grades, respectively. Since arriving in the United States, both parents have been working for minimum wage. Their employers, however, do not provide health insurance or retirement benefits. The income they earn is barely enough to support the family as well as other family members in Mexico. They had been a relatively happy family until Javier was laid off from work. To make ends meet, the family moved in with Anna's cousins. It has been difficult for Javier to find employment because he is not a U.S. citizen. Nor does he possess a green card or work visa. As a result, he has begun to develop symptoms of depression because he cannot financially support his family. In turn, this situation has led Javier to begin drinking heavily and become abusive toward his wife and children. As the primary breadwinner, Anna has struggled to balance work and family obligations. She works two jobs and is also responsible for the household chores. Anna finds herself constantly tired, lacking sleep, developing ulcer-like symptoms, and experiencing feelings of guilt for not being able to spend more time with her children. The gender role reversal has caused tension in the relationship between Anna and Javier. As the husband, Javier feels inadequate because he has been unable to provide for the family. In addition, Cisco, their eldest child, has taken a job working full time at the local mall after school. As a consequence, his grades have slipped. He has missed assignments, is often absent from school, and has become easily agitated at home and school. Cisco is in danger of failing his sophomore year. To further complicate matters, Cisco has failed his first attempt at a statewide test that is required for high school graduation. Previously, he had been a B-average student. He even played on the school's baseball team. Nonetheless, Cisco's baseball coach kicked him off the team because he missed too many practices. Cisco had originally hoped that baseball would be his "ticket" to college and out of poverty. His teachers have tried to be supportive by giving him extensions. Cisco has been unable, however, to complete his assignments because of a lack of time and motivation. His English teacher also reports that Cisco has begun to become withdrawn in classes when he is in attendance. As a result, she refers him to the high school counselor. Cisco's younger sisters are holding their own academically but are having difficulty in social situations and have been referred for counseling. To further complicate matters, Arizona has a state law making it difficult for counselors to provide services for individuals who do not speak English and/or who are considered undocumented immigrants by the federal government.

The aforementioned case study illustrates the complexity of the immigrant experience for Mexican Americans in the United States. In particular, it demonstrates how sociopolitical factors such as poverty, racism, sexism, and oppressive immigration policies can be barriers to academic, career, and personal/social development. Moreover, this case illustration speaks to the need for counselors to focus their interventions on empowerment and individual advocacy. What follows are examples of how the 13 competency areas inherent within the client/student level of the Advocacy Competencies can be used as a guide to empower the Guerrero family.

Client/Student Empowerment

Identify strengths and resources of clients and students. According to Goodman et al. (2004), one of the primary goals of social justice counseling is to "identify client's strengths, skills, and talents and to help them recognize themselves as competent, powerful individuals with the capacity to enact solutions to problems" (pp. 805–806). Acknowledging people's strengths and capacity to deal with adversity is a central tenet of feminist therapy and multicultural counseling (Goodman et al., 2004). With this in mind, it is important to call attention to the Guerrero family's resilience, courage, and ability to survive in a country that tends to marginalize Mexican immigrants. Recognizing the children's ability to successfully acculturate to the United States also acknowledges their strengths and speaks to their ability to learn a new culture. Collaborating with teachers, extended family, and Latino/a-based agencies and community leaders can also offer additional sources of support for the Guerrero family.

Identify the social, political, economic, and cultural factors that affect the client/student. Helping people understand their lives in the context of living in an oppressive society is an important advocacy skill. The belief is that mental health problems are sometimes rooted in the environment (Lewis, Lewis, Daniels, & D'Andrea, 2003). This possibility is particularly true for those from marginalized communities who are apt to internalize their oppression and blame themselves for their plight (Hardiman, Jackson, & Griffin, 2007; Ivey & Collins, 2003). For this reason, it is important to demonstrate how discriminatory immigration laws reinforce bias and create barriers for the Guerrero family in employment, housing, education, and health care services. Helping the Guerrero family understand their lives in context also allows them to externalize their problems.

Recognize the signs indicating that an individual's behaviors and concerns reflect responses to systemic or internalized oppression. Oppression is an external phenomenon that has negative internal effects on the human psyche (Fanon, 1968; Miller, 1976). Individuals from marginalized communities can sometimes internalize the oppression they experience to the point where they begin to believe that they are the problem (Adams et al., 2007). Internalized oppression can lead to low self-esteem, drug and alcohol abuse, relationship problems, and unemployment (Harro, 2000). For example,

Javier's changing moods and behavior may be a result of the inequities in employment conditions often experienced by individuals from working-class backgrounds. Not being the primary breadwinner may also contribute to Javier's depression and abusive behaviors. Likewise, Anna's role as head of household may present additional stress and contribute to medical problems. The children also seem to display symptoms of internalized oppression. Cisco is failing academically and does not seem to be motivated in school. His sisters have developed symptoms of low self-esteem. All these problems can be attributed to systemic and internalized oppression. In this situation, using narrative therapy may be helpful. Narrative therapy can be empowering in that it allows individual family members to reconstruct their stories and reshape their lives (Morgan, 2000; Winslade & Monk, 1998).

At an appropriate development level, help the individual identify the external barriers that affect his or her development. According to Lundy (2004), "there is a direct connection between people's economic and social position in society and their emotional and physical health" (p. 131). In other words, academic, career, and personal/social problems cannot always be understood by examining the inner world of the individual. External variables such as oppression can create barriers in people's lives (Adams et al., 2000). It is essential that counselors help clients/students connect the personal with the structural. This connection allows clients/students to better understand their situation, and it also prevents them from blaming themselves for their predicament (Friere, 1993). To demonstrate, using cognitive restructuring techniques can help members of the Guerrero family reframe their problems and recognize how their problems may be rooted in the environment. For Javier, connecting the personal with the structural means helping him understand how discriminatory immigration policies affect his mental health. With Anna, it could mean helping her understand the dynamics of racism, sexism, and classism and their impact on her psychological state of mind.

Train students and clients in self-advocacy skills. Simply helping individuals understand their lives in context may not be enough. A critical aspect of counseling involves assessing whether individuals possess the skills necessary to advocate for themselves (Goodman et al., 2004). Helping individuals develop self-advocacy skills is accomplished through a mutually collaborative process that is informed by the Multicultural Counseling Competencies developed by Sue et al. (1992). For instance, Javier and Anna can be taught culturally congruent conflict resolution and decision-making skills. Encouraging them to learn English through the local community college or other community-based programs, suggesting that they participate in church and community organizations that work for the rights of undocumented immigrants, and helping them become U.S. citizens will also lead to opportunities in the future. Developing psychoeducational programs and enrolling the children in age-appropriate

support groups, which focus on building self-esteem and understanding differences, would also be relevant.

Help students and clients develop self-advocacy action plans. Counselors also need to be involved in the facilitation and design of a plan of action. These plans need to be realistic, culturally appropriate, and meaningful for the client/student. Counselors can collaborate with the Guerrero family in developing priorities and action plans for resolving conflict. Such a plan may include helping the family move out of generational poverty. For example, counselors can assist Javier in developing a realistic action plan to find employment. In addition, using the Gestalt empty chair technique with Cisco might also be a good way for him to practice how he might communicate with his teachers. Practicing ways to talk with his teachers can lead to the development of a plan of action. Exploring ways Maria and Lisette can develop friends at school and laying out how this action plan can come to fruition are also important.

Assist students and clients in carrying out action plans. Individual advocacy also entails providing clients/students with guidance and support as they carry out a plan of action. Such advocacy involves providing encouragement and hope and helping clients/students develop realistic, attainable, and measurable goals. It is important to also check in with clients/students on a regular basis to explore their progress toward mutually identified objectives. As an example, Javier may need help in identifying an appropriate substance abuse program. Assisting Anna with balancing work and family constraints and connecting the children with community-based activities that bolster their sense of identity are also crucial.

Client/Student Advocacy

Negotiate relevant services and education systems on behalf of clients and students. Advocacy at the individual level also involves using one's position to negotiate for relevant services on behalf of clients/students. The need to advocate on behalf of clients/students is especially important when individuals lack access to needed resources or when they are not in a position where they can advocate for themselves (Lee, 1998). In this role, the counselor serves as a consultant who helps to facilitate change. Effectively advocating on behalf of client/students requires patience, an understanding of established systems and resources, and the ability to use relationship-building skills when consulting with community members (Ponzo, 1974). As consultants, counselors can connect the Guerrero family with community groups that provide support for immigrant families. If there are no such groups available, counselors, with the assistance of community decision makers, should initiate such groups. An example could be working with the 12-step community to ensure that Spanish-speaking groups exist within the area. Advocating for the children can also be accomplished by collaborating with their teachers, coaches, and employers to ensure that appropriate services and support are being met.

Help clients and students gain access to needed resources. Often, counselors work in interdisciplinary teams and with other human service professionals. The networking and relationships developed through these partnerships put counselors in the know about vital community resources. This knowledge allows counselors to help individuals gain access to appropriate services when needed. Counselors can use their connections with other human service professionals to assist members of the Guerrero family with gaining access to vital resources. These include career placement specialists, English as a second language (ESL) programs, health care professionals, teachers, and other pertinent school personnel.

Identify barriers to the well-being of individuals and vulnerable groups. When individuals begin to understand their lives in context and develop a plan to address their oppression, they are likely to experience ridicule, resistance, and systemic barriers (Harro, 2000). This resistance can discourage people from making the type of necessary changes that need to ensue. Helping professionals can lessen the harm by identifying potential obstacles that may arise and by exploring ways to address these barriers. For the Guerrero family, a helping professional may choose to discuss how institutions can intentionally and unintentionally obstruct one's progress. For example, Anna and Javier may experience barriers if they try to enroll in an ESL course because they are not U.S. citizens. In addition, it may be difficult to apply for U.S. citizenship post-9/11. Discussing these potential barriers can help in the development of a holistic plan that addresses these concerns and potential pitfalls.

Develop an initial plan of action for confronting these barriers. Collaborating with individuals to develop a plan to deal with obstacles is also important because it allows one to assess for potential roadblocks, thereby minimizing risks (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). For instance, as undocumented immigrants, the Guerrero family may not be eligible to access many social services. This barrier, coupled with the family's fear of being deported, can make for a complex situation. As change agents, counselors can address this concern by collaborating with the Guerrero family to identify Latino/a-based agencies and community leaders who can help eliminate this barrier. In addition, this plan may involve exploring ways to work with the children's classroom teachers, laying out the process involved for the parents to become legal U.S. citizens, developing better time management strategies for Cisco, and discussing with Javier the idea of enrolling in a vocational training program at the local community college.

Identify potential allies for confronting the barriers. It is difficult to carry out social justice advocacy efforts alone (Adams et al., 2000). Challenging dominant systems of oppression can be tiring work; causes burnout; and leads to feelings of isolation from family, friends, and colleagues (Kiselica & Robinson, 2001). Identifying allies and finding community resources that share similar visions, goals, and beliefs can alleviate some of these hardships. Counselors who

have a belief in the possibility of an enlightened world need to have a grasp of which church groups, volunteer organizations, teachers, and community leaders they consider as possible allies. Developing partnerships with other organizations is important to form alliances, coalitions, rallies, and protests. To illustrate, professional school counselors can form alliances with other school personnel in Cisco's school by helping him to identify teachers who are culturally competent and understand the unique educational challenges experienced by children of immigrant parents. These alliances would allow Cisco to build confidence in the education system. Likewise, Anna and Javier can benefit by having an ally in the immigration office who can help with filling out the paperwork to receive U.S. citizenship.

Carry out the plan of action. Implementing the agreed-on plan is an important aspect of advocacy at the individual level. It requires a commitment to change and being open to reevaluating the plan of action. Carrying out an action plan also ensures that individuals are headed in a creative path. For instance, counselors can help the Guerrero family execute a plan that will allow them to move from a place of helplessness to a place of security and independence. This plan may involve helping Javier fill out an application for vocational skills training, providing psychoeducational materials on interpersonal communication and parenting skills, discussing the need for the parents to enroll in ESL courses, applying for health care services, and filling out the required paperwork to become U.S. citizens.

Summary of Case Study

Although the focus of this article is on advocacy at the individual level, it is important to mention that advocacy efforts at one level can often lead counselors to intervene at other levels of the Advocacy Competencies. For example, hearing a teacher referring to Cisco as a "lazy student" could lead to responses at all levels. At the client/student level, it may entail helping Cisco realize that his poor academic performance may not necessarily be due to a lack of motivation. Rather, it may be a function of working full time and the stressors that come with living in poverty. Working with Cisco's teachers to notice and speak out on exceptions to the "lazy student" comment is a way of advocating on behalf of the student. Coordinating in-service training on the immigrant experience is an advocacy intervention at the school/community level. Including families, school board members, and community leaders in this in-service training can also broaden its impact. Equipping board members with a better understanding of what is involved in combating oppressive barriers can positively affect their budget decisions. Recruiting school board and other community members to mentor economically disadvantaged students is yet another way of advocating at the school/community level. Electing school board members as well as city, county, state, and national officials who understand, care, and are willing to take action against oppressive immigration policies is advocat-

ing at the public arena level. Furthermore, joining, supporting, and working with state and national counseling associations is another way to broaden and strengthen this public arena level of advocacy.

■ Implications

The use of the client/student level of the Advocacy Competencies has implications for counselors and counselor educators alike. For counselors, it means moving beyond a paradigm in which counselors are helpers/responders who fix clients/students to a paradigm that is proactive in scope, that is preventive in design, and that addresses sociopolitical forces that impede human development (House, Martin, & Ward, 2002). This framework puts counselors in a position in which they need to become social-advocacy-oriented critical thinkers. Social-advocacy-minded counselors are leaders and systems change agents who understand the importance of speaking out. Operating from a social justice counseling paradigm is necessary to truly empower individuals, families, and their community.

For counselor educators, the Advocacy Competencies can influence one's teaching and scholarship. Regarding teaching, the Advocacy Competencies can be infused in various courses offered in a program. Infusing the Advocacy Competencies into counselor training allows students an opportunity to practice implementing both microlevel and macrolevel advocacy strategies. For instance, students in beginning theories of counseling courses can learn how to incorporate the Advocacy Competencies with different counseling theories. Students can then put the Advocacy Competencies to practice in their practicum and internship classes by learning how to intervene at the client/student, school/community, and public arena levels. Introducing the Advocacy Competencies in counselor education helps to ensure that students graduate with the understanding that counseling involves both microlevel and macrolevel interventions.

Scholarly research also needs to be conducted on the Advocacy Competencies. To date, there are no empirical studies on the Advocacy Competencies. Conducting research on the Advocacy Competencies can help to increase their validity and reliability and bring advocacy to the forefront of the profession. Specifically, research on the Advocacy Competencies would help to inform best practice because interventions would be supported by relevant data. Evidence-based and data-driven counseling services are critical in the era of accountability (Dimmitt, Carey, & Hatch, 2007). Counselor educators can aid in this effort by using research to determine how the Advocacy Competencies can best be used.

■ Conclusion

The development and recent endorsement of the Advocacy Competencies by ACA comes at an important juncture in the counseling profession. Calls for counseling professionals to

address issues of oppression, to move beyond the comfort of their offices, and to return to their social justice roots are rising. These calls have been a result of the profession's inability to adequately address the harmful impact oppression has on people's lives. These concerns can effectively be addressed by incorporating the Advocacy Competencies into counselor training programs and the work that counselors do. The belief is that through the Advocacy Competencies, the counseling profession will be transformed, which will be liberating not only for clients/students but also for the profession itself.

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