Original Article

From concept to practice: integrating ethical spirituality into philosophical counseling training

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Abstract

Philosophical counseling increasingly recognizes the role of spirituality and ethics within multicultural contexts. This paper aims to address a gap in counselor education regarding clear guidelines for integration of moral and spiritual concepts into counseling and proposes a conceptual-practical model. Methodologically, this study undertakes a comprehensive literature review, synthesizing professional publications on philosophical counseling, spirituality, and ethical principles from institutions such as the American Counseling Association (ACA) and the Psychology and Counseling Organization of Iran (PCOI). The paper conceptualizes an ethical framework for spirituality in philosophical counseling and advocates for the incorporation of competency, values, open-mindedness, client welfare, confidentiality, and moral rehabilitation into the curricula. This theoretical model, requiring future empirical validation, aims to enhance practitioners' spiritual literacy and ethical abilities. The study outcomes underscore the imperative for philosophical counselors to synchronize their approaches meticulously with the distinct values, requirements, priorities, and anticipations articulated by their clients. This alignment intrinsically validates the client's inherent autonomy and their capacity for self-determination in decision-making processes. Consequently, it is paramount that philosophical counselors exercise judicious caution to circumvent the inadvertent imposition of their personal values or religious convictions, as such actions would fundamentally contravene the ethical principle of client autonomy.

This alignment intrinsically validates the client's inherent autonomy and their capacity for self-determination in decision-making processes. Consequently, it is paramount that philosophical counselors exercise judicious caution to circumvent the inadvertent imposition of their personal values or religious convictions, as such actions would fundamentally contravene the ethical principle of client autonomy.

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Received: *14 Feb 2024*
Accepted: *11 Apr 2025*
Published:*20 Aug 2025*

Citation to this article:
Ganjvar M.
From concept to practice: integrating ethical spirituality into philosophical counseling training. J Med Ethics Hist Med. 2025; 18: 7.
https://doi.org/10.18502/jmehm.v18i7.19421

Keywords: *Philosophical counseling; Spirituality; Confidentiality; Welfare; Medical ethics.*

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Introduction

Philosophical counseling or "philosophy therapy" offers a unique approach to life's challenges and is rooted in ancient philosophical traditions. This applied philosophy helps individuals examine their worldview and underlying beliefs contributing to personal issues (1). It aims to move philosophy from abstract theory to a practical art of living wisely and well (2). It also enhances self-knowledge, helping clients recognize and prioritize their values through reflection and questioning rather than advice (3, 4).

Unlike medical counseling (diagnosing physical illness) or traditional psychology (addressing emotional problems), philosophical counseling tackles ontological, epistemological, ethical, and meaning-related dimensions of human issues. It employs critical thinking, logical analysis, and philosophical tools like Socratic questioning to help clients identify hidden assumptions, clarify values, and navigate existential dilemmas. The goal is self-awareness, inner coherence, and a fulfilling life philosophy. The key distinctions between philosophical counseling and traditional medical and psychological counseling can be summarized as follows:

Focus: Medical counseling targets physical health, psychology, and mental health. Philosophical counseling centers on thoughts, beliefs, values, and life's meaning.

Approach: Medicine uses an illness model, traditional psychology, and therapeutic interventions. Philosophical counseling is exploratory, analytical, and educational; empowering critical thinking rather than treating "mental illness" (5).

Nature of Issues: Medicine addresses physical ailments, psychology, and emotional/behavioral problems. Philosophical counseling concentrates on belief, value, meaning, ethical and existential challenges not stemming from illness.

Counselor's Role: Physicians are experts/therapists, and psychologists facilitate change. Philosophical counselors guide clients to independent insights.

Ultimate Goal: Medicine seeks physical health, psychology, and mental well-being. Philosophical counseling promotes wisdom, self-awareness, intellectual coherence, and meaning-making.

Philosophical counseling focuses on deeper aspects of human experience and complements other

approaches, aiding those seeking profound self-understanding.

Table 1. Differences between philosophical counseling and traditional psychotherapy

Feature	Philosophical Counseling	Traditional Psychotherapy
Focus	values, beliefs, meaning of life, thinking, convictions	diagnosis, treatment of mental illnesses, mental health, and emotions
Approach	inquiry, reflection, analysis, education, exploration, empowerment in thinking and problem-solving	medical model (diagnosis and treatment), therapeutic and interventional approaches for mental disorders
Aims/Goals	self-knowledge, resolution of ethical and existential issues, promotion of wisdom, self-awareness, intellectual coherence, finding meaning in life	symptom reduction, improvement of mental health, alleviation of emotional suffering
Target Audience	generally, well individuals facing life issues, existential challenges, or concerns about meanings and values	individuals with mental health problems, and emotional/behavioral disorders
Counselor Role	guide, companion in thinking, facilitator of self-understanding and client-generated solutions	expert, therapist, facilitator of change

Beyond its core distinctions, philosophical counseling increasingly integrates various spiritual components and emphasizes ethical training for counselors (6,7). Clients may wish to incorporate their spiritual beliefs into therapy, but while the American Counseling Association (ACA) mandates respect for diverse religious orientations (8), philosophical counselors often lack specific guidance in this area (9). The broader counseling profession has developed robust ethical and skill-based competencies to ensure client welfare, with clinical supervision playing a crucial role in maintaining these standards and fostering spiritual competency. Despite this, many philosophical counselors report feeling unprepared to address spiritual and ethical issues during consultations. This highlights the urgent need for best practices in

professional ethics and spiritual competencies within philosophical counseling education (10).

While attention to spiritual matters in supervision is growing, there is uncertainty about whether counselors are receiving adequate training. Studies consistently show that practitioners report insufficient ethics and spirituality training (11-13), underscoring the need for "additional content to help practitioners conform to the profession's ethical mandates" (14). The present article addresses this issue by examining essential ethical/spiritual strategies for philosophical counselors serving diverse religious backgrounds. Ethical dilemmas concerning spirituality in philosophical counseling are wide-ranging, from concerns about imposing personal values to navigating the separation of religion and politics in academic settings. These challenges can hinder effective integration of spirituality as a counseling skill (15). Given this necessity and research gap, a secondary goal of this article is to outline basic strategies for ethical orientation when philosophical counselors integrate spiritual and moral concepts into their practice. To achieve this, the article analyzes relevant literature on the ethical aspects of spirituality in philosophical counseling. It focuses on the following components from the ACA Code of Ethics (8) and the Ethical Codes of the Psychology and Counseling Organization of Iran (16): a) spiritual-professional competency; b) personal ideals & values; c) open-mindedness and respect for diversity; d) client welfare; e) confidentiality and privacy; f) practical commitment to the moral rehabilitation of the clients.

These ethical components are applicable to the nuanced integration of spirituality into philosophical counseling, covering everything from counselor qualification to resolving ethical conflicts. While the concept of integrating spirituality into counseling is not new, this article's novelty lies in connecting Western secular standards with Iran's religious and indigenous foundations of professional ethics in its analysis of spiritual ethics in philosophical counseling.

Potential Applications of Philosophical Counseling in Medical Ethics Dilemmas

Philosophical counseling offers a powerful approach to medical ethics dilemmas rooted in conflicting beliefs by clarifying values and fostering meaning. Integrating ethical spirituality from this field into medical education can significantly enhance professionals' understanding of the role of spirituality in patient

decisions, improve communication, facilitate ethical dialogue, and increase awareness of moral distress (17). Collaborative efforts by philosophers, counselors, and medical ethicists can offer holistic ethics training, and enriching existing health-care spirituality frameworks. This interdisciplinary intersection has crucial implications for patient-centered care. Philosophical counseling, with its focus on values and meaning, is invaluable for navigating complex terrains of medical ethics. It helps patients and families explore end-of-life values, deepens understanding of the ethical implications of informed consent, and aids in examining resource allocation principles (18). It also provides a space for health-care professionals to reflect on challenging ethical situations (19). Its non-medical and non-religious focus allows it to address ethical and spiritual aspects without imposing specific frameworks (20).

Philosophical counseling also connects to bioethics mediation and its application in organizational and medical ethics, suggesting unique perspectives on ethical conflicts (21). Its increasing use in fields such as nursing management and rehabilitation medicine highlights a growing appreciation for philosophical insights in medical ethics. While existing research touches on spirituality and ethics in general counseling (22, 23), spirituality in medical care (24, 25), and philosophical counseling in health-care ethics (26), more explicit research is needed on the subject. Specifically, we need to investigate how philosophical counseling education, particularly in terms of ethical spirituality, directly shapes ethical dilemma resolution in medical settings.

Table 2. Potential applications of philosophical counseling in medical ethics dilemmas

Medical Ethics Dilemma	Potential Relevance of Ethical Spirituality	Potential Role of Philosophical Counseling
End-of-life decision-making	Patient's spiritual values influence choices	Facilitating dialogue about values, elucidating spiritual frameworks
Informed consent conflicts	Patient's understanding of the meaning of benefit	Assisting the patient in assessing the benefits and drawbacks of treatment in light of their deeply held values

Moral distress in health-care professionals	Professional values contribute to moral distress	Providing a space for ethical reflection, examining the philosophical underpinnings of distress, developing coping strategies

Methods

This paper, being propositional and conceptual, does not directly assess the validity and reliability of its proposed methods. Such evaluation requires future research to operationalize the suggested framework and educational recommendations within training programs, and subsequently assess effectiveness using quantitative and qualitative methods. Therefore, the primary focus of this paper is to offer an initial framework and underscore the importance of ethical-spiritual considerations in philosophical counseling education.

The author followed the steps below to develop the conceptual-applied model and its educational recommendations:

Identification of Key Areas: This involved defining philosophical counseling (the principles, methods, and challenges), spirituality in counseling (its significance and multicultural aspects), and counseling ethics, with a focus on the American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics and the Ethical Codes of the Psychology and Counseling Organization of Iran (16).

Search of Information Sources: Relevant specialized databases, scholarly articles, books, and philosophical/ethics indexes were searched using applicable keywords.

Screening and Evaluation of Sources: A rigorous screening process provided relevant and credible sources from the initial search.

Synthesis and Organization of Professional Literature: Pertinent sources were synthesized and organized, referencing publications and resources from professional counseling and psychology organizations.

Results and Discussion

Ethical Components of Spirituality in Philosophical Counseling

In philosophical counseling, clients are viewed as moral agents and self-directed individuals deserving respect, not merely as "sick" persons (27). Thus, the moral function of spirituality extends beyond the counselor's duties to influence the client's character. Philosophical

practice aims to free clients from preconceived, prejudiced, and unconscious notions through self-reflective phenomenology (28). Spiritual development necessitates open-mindedness and freedom in choosing values and beliefs. Therefore, philosophical counselors are ethically bound to avoid imposing their personal opinions and maximize client decision-making freedom (1). Marinoff advocates a "do not interfere" approach to resist the urge to make decisions for clients (27). This maintains clients' moral responsibility for their decisions, which is crucial for spiritual self-direction and autonomy, and is a concept partly rooted in the philosophical premise that no single correct view of life exists (29). The remainder of this article will explore and analyze the fundamental moral and spiritual directions essential for effective client interaction through the epistemic and practical capabilities of philosophical counseling.

Spiritual competence as professional competency

Professional spiritual competence, defined as a cultural competency encompassing clients' spiritual worldviews, is a key ethical dimension in philosophical counseling (14). Introduced by Hodge (30) and expanded upon by Hodge and Bushfield (31), it is a dynamic process with three interconnected dimensions:

1) *Self-awareness:* Understanding one's own value-informed worldview, including biases.

2) *Empathetic understanding:* A strengths-based grasp of the client's spiritual worldview.

3) *Intervention capacity:* Ability to create relevant, appropriate, and sensitive strategies aligned with the client's spiritual worldview (30). The ACA Code of Ethics (2014) Standard C.2.a. reinforces this, stating "Counselors practice only within the boundaries of their competence, based on their education, training, supervised experience, state and national professional credentials, and appropriate professional experience. Counselors will demonstrate a commitment to gaining knowledge, personal awareness, sensitivity, and skills necessary for working with a diverse client population" (8). Extensive literature emphasizes spiritual preparation for counselors, especially in embracing diverse religious and spiritual expressions and applying spiritual domains to the therapeutic process (22, 32, 33). A clear approach to philosophical counseling also builds client confidence in this relatively new type of treatment (1). Counselors' commitment to a distinctive method demonstrates spiritual and

professional competence, enhancing client trust and fostering productive interaction. Some scholars even propose incorporating spiritual competency into counselor training as a developmental, life-span phenomenon, encouraging trainees to explore their own and diverse spiritual views (15). The necessity of spiritual competence is highlighted by the fact that counselors often neglect religious and spiritual aspects due to a lack of familiarity with the notions, not ethical or environmental limitations (34). Clients may feel misunderstood if counselors fail to recognize spiritual, ethical or religious issues, such as a sense of guilt over violating a religious tenet. Counselors should be prepared to discuss spirituality, but exercise caution in initiating such discussions before the client does. This preparation is part of the philosophical counselor's spiritual competence. In order to operationalize the research findings, I will attempt to formulate and present the component of spiritual competence in several ethical codes for philosophical counseling as follows:

- *Diverse Skills:* Philosophical counselors need awareness of various philosophical traditions, diverse moral/spiritual skills, critical thinking, empathy, and the ability to guide clients in discovering beliefs and values.
- *Preparedness and Caution:* Counselors should be fully prepared yet cautious when discussing spiritual and moral issues with clients.
- *Transparency and Competence Limits:* Counselors with rigid spiritual ideas must disclose their beliefs in informed consent statements (35). They should only provide services within their areas of competence (professional, research, and educational).
- *Accurate Credentials:* Counselors must use only earned degrees and scientific credentials from reputable institutions, refraining from using unearned academic titles.
- *Specialized Methods:* Counselors should only use therapeutic and counseling methods for which they are trained and experienced, avoiding unspecialized techniques.
- *Cultural Sensitivity:* Counselors should be attentive to the impact of cultural, ethnic, racial, gender, spiritual, and religious elements in their work.

Personal preferences and spiritual values

Individual views on spirituality and religion vary greatly, for both clients and counsellors. While deeply religious clients may desire to explore these aspects, others might feel uncomfortable

(36). A prudent philosophical counsellor acknowledges these differences and tailors engagement to client preferences and needs to reflect their "self-determination" (37, 38).

Ethical philosophical counselling treats both counsellor and client as "subjects" with inherent worth and autonomy (39). Recognizing clients' unique meanings, beliefs, and emotional needs related to religion and spirituality is crucial for a strong therapeutic alliance (40). This client-centred, spiritually sensitive approach respects client preferences. For instance, non-religious counsellors working with religious clients may honor requests for prayer, while religious counsellors should respect secular clients' choice to abstain (41). Client choice of a counsellor with shared beliefs can also boost motivation (42). However, caution is needed to prevent counsellors from imposing religious beliefs, which can impede client autonomy (43). On the other hand, avoiding spiritual discussions altogether due to concerns about imposing personal beliefs risks conveying a rigid, value-laden message. Research shows negative counsellor attitudes toward religion/spirituality can be detrimental, while positive, supportive beliefs are advantageous (44). Philosophical counsellors adhering to a single approach to spirituality may also inadvertently harm clients. Therefore, avoiding the interference of personal ideals and spiritual values is an ethical requirement in philosophical counselling. While it is unethical to impose spiritual or religious perspectives, both counsellor and client can explore spiritual aspects to help clients find meaning and make positive changes. The renewed focus on spirituality in counselling literature underscores the need on the part of the counsellor for self-awareness and critical examination of personal beliefs about religion and spirituality (22). Philosophical counsellors must distinguish between helping clients discover their own values versus motivating them to adopt the counsellor’s spiritual beliefs, thus ensuring personalized and holistic guidance.

Open-mindedness & respecting diversity

A core ethical aspect of spiritual direction in philosophical counseling is fostering intellectual independence as well as a willingness to re-evaluate beliefs. This involves maintaining openness to possibility and indeterminacy. Successful philosophical counseling demands that counselors respect client autonomy in thought and action. Sessions must create an environment where clients can freely address and

resolve religious problems that impact their spiritual development. Clients are encouraged to communicate and examine emotions and convictions, pursuing resolutions without apprehension. This will promote a logical, analytical mindset and encourage open-minded, thoughtful reflection devoid of biases. By means of emphasis on natural truth-seeking, this method cultivates free and independent thought in both counselor and client. It encourages exploring questions from multiple perspectives, supporting collaboration to clarify questions rather than forcing consensus.

Spirituality has been characterized as a diverse concept by many scholars (33, 44, 45). The 2014 ACA Code of Ethics (A.2.a.) prohibits discrimination based on religion, race, education, gender, or other factors, requiring counselors to understand various cultural backgrounds, beliefs, and values (8). Miller points out the ACA's dedication to broadening ethical standards concerning diversity (46). Acknowledging spiritual diversity in philosophical counseling is a fundamental professional responsibility, because it creates inclusive and supportive therapeutic environments that promote holistic well-being. The ACA Code's heightened focus on multiculturalism underscores the importance of valuing diverse individuals. Philosophical counselors must show empathy, understand the client's worldview, accept differences, and support client spiritual development regardless of their own beliefs (45). When addressing spiritual concerns, counselors must recognize that spiritual well-being varies across demographics. Counselors are not supposed to impose spiritual issues but are encouraged to introduce the topic if clients express interest. For complex moral values and spiritual beliefs, counselors must collaborate with clients to create an open, relaxed, and flexible environment for exploration. Counselors with rigid views on spirituality inadvertently risk imposing their beliefs on clients, and thus hindering their spiritual awakening and growth. In order to help clients make informed choices and receive appropriate referrals, information about counselors' spirituality must be disclosed at the time of obtaining informed consent.

In summary, philosophical counselors are ethically obligated to acknowledge the constraining aspect of professional disclosure if they rigidly refuse to address spiritual matters, even if due to fear of imposing personal values. This requires careful consideration.

Confidentiality and privacy

Confidentiality and privacy are foundational ethical principles in philosophical counseling, crucial for establishing client trust and an effective relationship. Privacy, although a "contested concept" (47), in this context encompasses thoughts, emotions, autonomy, and sensitive disclosures. Respecting privacy builds client trust, which is vital for therapeutic effectiveness as it enables clients to share private information for accurate diagnosis and problem-solving. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of the helping relationship and public trust in mental healthcare (4849). Client confidence in privacy allows for a "dialogue-therapy relationship." Counselors access sensitive data and are therefore required to avoid making unnecessary inquiries (16). Lack of trust hinders disclosure, diagnosis, and effective treatment, prolonging suffering. The core philosophy behind confidentiality is to build trust for open, safe consultation, and violations erode this trust (50). Confidentiality in philosophical counseling is lifelong, persisting beyond the relationship, client's death, or treatment completion, similar to medical ethics. However, it is not absolute. Legally justifiable exceptions include client consent, danger to life (suicide/homicide), child abuse, and legal mandates (16). These exceptions highlight the complex balance between privacy protection, safety, and legal compliance in therapy.

Practical commitment to the moral rehabilitation of clients

Another ethical aspect of spirituality in philosophical counseling is the counselor's commitment to rehabilitating vulnerable clients such as criminals or incarcerated individuals. Here, the counselor may shift from an equal conversational partner to a trainer or rehabilitation coach. This raises the question of whether philosophical counseling fundamentally includes education (1). While I contend that a philosophical counselor's role is not solely that of a teacher or therapist, and clients are not merely students or patients, some scholars hold different views. Fleming characterizes philosophical counseling as an "educational service," providing opportunities for learning and growth through dialogue and reflection (51). Lahav and Tillmanns also emphasizes the importance of equipping clients with "thinking tools" to assist them in their philosophical development (29). Feary offers a concrete training model, providing critical thinking skills to incarcerated individuals through philosophical counseling in the U.S.

Feary argues for a revival of the value of rehabilitation, suggesting philosophical counseling should be central to rehabilitative interventions, not ancillary (52). The philosophical counselor's key role is to improve offenders' worldviews and beliefs and actively engage in their rehabilitation. "Rehabilitation" as used here means fostering essential skills for moral responsibility and rational moral decision-making. This entails a series of skills that offending clients need to develop, including: the ability to identify and address issues hindering logical thought/behavior; enhanced critical thinking; acquired social, communication, and ethical interaction skills; effective emotion management and articulation; cultivated moral reasoning; established personal identity, realistic self-perception, and basic self-worth/esteem despite criticism (52). These objectives indicate an educational approach with moral-spiritual elements during philosophical counseling with vulnerable delinquent clients.

Gaps and implications for future research

This section outlines areas for further investigation and proposes future research based on this article's goals and results. Significant work is still needed to deeply understand the roles of ethics, religion, and spirituality within philosophical counseling, and comprehend how clients perceive their integration into therapy. Subsequent research could determine what spiritual and ethical elements would be the most relevant and beneficial for practical application and therapeutic encounters, as suggested by Sutton et al. (53). Further exploration is required into the methods of practicing philosophical counseling with an ethical-spiritual approach. Implications and suggestions include developing theoretical models that integrate ethics and spirituality to make philosophical counseling more effective. These suggestions collectively emphasize the need for spiritual education, ethical procedures, and transparent methodologies for effective implementation. We propose pedagogical recommendations and ethical considerations to improve the quality of philosophical counseling. The efficiency and effectiveness of spiritual interventions also demand deep research. More scientific precision could clarify the impact of spiritual self-disclosure in the philosophy-therapy paradigm and its potential to enhance client mental health.

Conclusion

Philosophical counseling views clients as autonomous moral agents deserving respect. The

spiritual impact on clients' character is central as it supports freedom from biases through self-reflective phenomenology. Literature review reveals a trend toward integrating spiritual components and ethical training in philosophical counseling, which highlights the need for ethical models and spiritual competencies. However, many practitioners lack adequate preparation in this area despite ethical guidelines emphasizing its importance.

The present article attempts to address this gap by conceptualizing an ethical framework for spirituality in philosophical counseling and offers suggestions for cultivating ethical-spiritual skills. This initial, theoretical framework awaits practical testing. The paper proposes integrating ethical and spiritual considerations including competence, values, open-mindedness, diversity, client welfare, confidentiality, and moral rehabilitation into philosophical counselor training to address current ethical code deficiencies. Furthermore, the non-clinical focus of philosophical counseling on values and meanings offers a significant approach to spiritual and ethical medical dilemmas, often stemming from conflicting beliefs. Integrating ethical spirituality into the training process of health-care professionals can deepen their understanding of patient values, enhance communication, and address moral distress. This interdisciplinary convergence underscores the unique ability of philosophical counseling to navigate ethical landscapes in healthcare, fostering person-centered care and value clarity. Nevertheless, further dedicated research is crucial to explicitly investigate how philosophical counseling education can effectively equip individuals to address ethical challenges in medical contexts. Research indicates philosophical counselors must align with client values, needs, and expectations, respect client autonomy, and avoid imposing personal values or faiths. This ethical orientation aligns with a multicultural understanding of spirituality. Counselors must practice open-mindedness and cultural humility, refrain from imposing beliefs, and explore topics attuned to clients' cultural values. This necessitates a strong foundation in ethical, religious, and spiritual knowledge, alongside self-awareness. When facing dilemmas, counselors can refer to professional conduct policies. The findings aim to expand practitioners' professional knowledge, and enable ethical, efficient service delivery to diverse religious backgrounds. Ultimately, this paper aims to enhance philosophical counselors'

spiritual literacy and provide guidelines to improve their professional abilities, encouraging self-reflection on personal biases and assumptions regarding spirituality in counseling.

Funding

The author of this paper has no financial or personal relationship with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the paper.

Acknowledgments

The author would like to express sincere gratitude to the editor, reviewers, and editorial team of Medical Ethics and History of Medicine for their valuable feedback and efforts in evaluating and improving this manuscript.

Authors' Contributions

The author conducted all aspects of this research independently, including conceptualization, methodology, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing—original draft preparation, and writing—review and editing.

Conflict of Interests

The author of this paper has no financial or personal relationship with other people or organizations that could inappropriately influence or bias the content of the paper.

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