Ethical Code for the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors
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What is This?
Ethical Code for the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors

Bret Hendricks¹, Loretta J. Bradley¹, Stephen Southern², Marvarene Oliver³, and Bobbie Birdsall⁴

Abstract
The Board of Directors of the International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC) requested the IAMFC Ethics Committee to revise the IAMFC Ethical Code (2006). The revised Ethical Code of the IAMFC focuses on current issues in marriage and family counseling. The Ethical Code of IAMFC (2011), which appears in the following article, has been approved by the Board of Directors of IAMFC and the American Counseling Association and is consistent with the current Code of Ethics of the American Counseling Association (2005).

Keywords
ethical code, ethics, couples and family counseling, marriage and family counseling, counseling relationship

Preamble
The International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (IAMFC) is an organization dedicated to advancing practice, training, and research in couple and family counseling. Members may specialize in areas such as premarital counseling, couple counseling, family counseling, sex counseling, intergenerational counseling, separation and divorce counseling, relocation counseling, custody evaluation, and parenting training. Couple and family counselors may work with special populations, including stepfamilies, nontraditional couples and family systems, multicultural couples and families, disadvantaged families, and dual-career couples. In conducting their professional activities, members commit themselves to protect family relationships and advocate for the healthy growth and development of the family as a whole and each member's unique needs, while advocating for the counseling profession and the professionalism of counselors. IAMFC members recognize that the relationship between the provider and consumer of services is characterized as professional. However, IAMFC members should remain informed of social and cultural trends as well as scientific and technological changes affecting the foundation of the professional counseling relationship.

This code of ethics provides a framework for ethical practices by IAMFC members and other professionals engaged in couple and family counseling. It is divided into the following nine sections: the counseling relationship and client well-being, confidentiality and privacy, competence and professional responsibilities, collaboration and professional relationships, assessment and evaluation, counselor education and supervision, research and publication, ethical decision making and resolution, and diversity. The observations and recommendations presented within these nine areas above are meant to supplement the current ethical standards of the American Counseling Association. Although an ethical code cannot anticipate every possible situation or dilemma, the IAMFC ethical guidelines can assist members in insuring the welfare and dignity of the couples and families who seek services.

The ethical code of the IAMFC incorporates the ethics of principles and virtues. The IAMFC Ethical code articulates some specific principles and guidelines which protect consumers from potentially harmful practices, thereby empowering professionals to maintain high standards for effective practice.

The IAMFC Ethical Code also addresses the character of the professional couple and family counselor. Ethics of character or virtue contribute to professional aspirations and values. Each of the nine sections includes aspirations and principles.

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Section A: The Counseling Relationship and Client Well-Being

Couple and family counselors contribute to the healthy development and evolution of family systems. They are committed to understanding problems and learning needs from multiple contexts. Couple and family counselors, in particular, embrace models of practice based on family dynamics and systems. Professional counselors realize that their perspectives influence the conceptualization of problems, identification of clients, and implementation of possible solutions. Couple and family counselors examine personal biases and values. They actively attempt to understand and serve couples and families from diverse cultural backgrounds. Professional couple and family counselors are willing to remove barriers to the counseling relationship, act as responsible public servants, and become involved in advocacy in the best interests of couples and families.

1. Couple and family counselors demonstrate caring, empathy, and respect for client well-being. They promote safety, security, and sense of community for couples and families. Due to potential risks involved, couple and family counselors should not use intrusive interventions without sound theoretical rationale, research support, and clinical consultation or supervision.

2. Couple and family counselors recognize that each family is unique. Couple and family counselors do not promote bias and stereotyping regarding family roles and functions.

3. Couple and family counselors respect the autonomy of the families with whom they work. They do not make decisions that rightfully belong to family members. When indicated and possible, couple and family counselors share client’s clinical impressions and recommendations, decision-making processes, problem-solving strategies, and intervention outcomes with clients.

4. Couple and family counselors respect cultural diversity. They do not discriminate or condone discrimination on the basis of race, gender, disability, religion, age, sexual orientation, cultural background, national origin, marital status, political affiliation, or socioeconomic status.

5. Couple and family counselors promote open, honest, and direct relationships with consumers of professional services. Couple and family counselors inform clients about the goals of counseling, qualifications of the counselor(s), limits of confidentiality, potential risks, and benefits associated with specific techniques, duration of treatment, costs of services, appropriate alternatives to couple and family counseling, and reasonable expectations for outcomes.

6. Couple and family counselors promote primary prevention. They advocate for the development of clients’ cognitive, moral, social, emotional, spiritual, physical, educational, relational, and vocational skills. Couple and family counselors promote effective couple and family communication and facilitate problem-solving skills needed to prevent future problems.

7. Couple and family counselors have an obligation to determine and inform counseling participants who are identified as the primary client. The couple and family counselor should make clear to clients if they have any obligations to an individual, a couple, a family, a third party, or an institution.

8. Couple and family counselors who are IAMFC members have a professional duty to monitor their places of employment, making recommendations so that the environment is conducive to the positive growth and development of clients. When there is a conflict of interest between the needs of the client and counselor’s employing institution, the IAMFC member works to clarify his or her commitment to all parties. IAMFC members recognize that the acceptance of employment implies agreement with the policies and practices of the agency or institution.

9. Couple and family counselors do not harass, exploit, coerce, or manipulate clients for personal gain. Couple and family counselors avoid, whenever possible, multiple relationships such as business, social, or sexual contacts with any current clients or their family members. Couple and family counselors should refrain generally from non-professional relationships with former clients and their family members because termination of counseling is a complex process.

10. Couple and family counselors are responsible for demonstrating there is no harm from any relationship with a client or family member. The key element in this ethical principle is the avoidance of exploitation of vulnerable clients.

11. Couple and family counselors have an obligation to withdraw from a counseling relationship if the continuation of services would not be in the best interest of the client or would result in a violation of ethical standards. If the counseling relationship is no longer helpful or productive, couple and family counselors have an obligation to assist in locating alternative services and making referrals as needed.

12. Couple and family counselors do not abandon clients. They arrange for appropriate termination of counseling relationships and transfer of services as indicated.

13. Couple and family counselors maintain accurate and up-to-date records. They make all file information available to clients unless there is compelling evidence that such access would be harmful to the client. In situations involving multiple clients, couple and family counselors provide individual clients with parts of records related directly to them, protecting confidential information related to other clients who have not authorized release. Couple and family counselors include sufficient and timely documentation in client records to facilitate delivery of services and referral to other professionals as needed.

14. Couple and family counselors establish fees that are reasonable and customary depending upon the scope and location of their practices. Couple and family counselors...
in community agencies, schools, and other public settings do not solicit gifts or charge fees for services that are available in the counselor’s employing agency or institution.

15. Culturally sensitive couple and family counselors recognize that gifts are tokens of respect and gratitude in some cultures. Couple and family counselors may receive gifts or participate in family rituals that promote healthy interaction and do not exploit clients.

16. Couple and family counselors maintain ethical and effective practices as they address the benefits and limitations of technological innovations and cultural changes. Counseling may be conducted or assisted by telephones, computer hardware and software, and other communication technologies. Technology-assisted distance counseling services may expand the scope and influence of couple and family counseling. However, counselors are responsible for developing competencies in the use of new technologies and safeguarding private and confidential information.

17. When a conflict of values arises which inhibits the couples and family counselor’s professionalism and/or objectivity in the counseling relationship, the couples and family counselor should refer the couple or family being served to another qualified counselor. Additionally, it is recommended that the counselor obtain supervision or counseling to address any issue that may inhibit the counselor’s effective practice.

Section B: Confidentiality and Privacy

Couple and family counselors recognize that trust is the foundation of an effective counseling relationship. Professional counselors maintain appropriate boundaries so that clients reasonably expect that information shared will not be disclosed to others without prior written consent. Due to the nature of couple and family counseling, safeguards must be established in the counseling process to insure privacy of client disclosures without contributing to dysfunctional family secrets. Clients have the right to know the limits of confidentiality, privacy, and privileged communication, including the fact that family members may themselves disclose counseling-related information outside counseling. Thus, couples and family counselors should inform clients that while confidentiality may be maintained by the counselor, the counselor has no control over information that family members may share with one another. Therefore, in these instances, confidentiality, while desired, may not be guaranteed.

1. Couple and family counselors may disclose private information to others under specific circumstances known to the individual client or client family members. Ideally, the client consents to disclosure by signing an authorization to release information. Each person receiving counseling who is legally competent to sign a waiver of right to confidentiality should execute an authorization. The authorization should be time limited, consistent with legal statutes, and limited to the scope agreed to by the counselor and client. The client may rescind or withdraw the authorization.

2. Couple and family counselors inform parents and legal guardians about the confidential nature of the counseling relationship. When working with minor or juvenile clients, as well as adult clients who lack the capacity to authorize release of confidential information, couple and family counselors seek consent from the appropriate custodial parent or guardian to disclose information.

3. Couple and family counselors inform clients of exceptions to the general principle that information will be kept confidential or released only upon written client authorization. Disclosure of private information may be mandated by state law. For example, states require reporting of suspected abuse of children or other vulnerable populations. Couple and family counselors may have sound legal or ethical justification for disclosing information if someone is in imminent danger. A court may have jurisdiction to order release of confidential information without a client’s permission. However, all releases of information not authorized by clients should be minimal or narrow as possible to limit potential harm to the counseling relationship.

4. Couple and family counselors inform clients who may have access to their counseling records, as well as any information that may be released for third-party payment or insurance reimbursement. State and federal laws may affect record keeping and release of information from client records.

5. Couple and family counselors store records in a way that protects confidentiality. Written records should be kept in a locked file drawer or cabinet and computerized record systems should have appropriate passwords and safeguards to prevent unauthorized entry.

6. Couple and family counselors inform clients if sessions are to be recorded on tape or digital media and obtain written consent authorizing recording for particular purposes. When more than one person is receiving counseling, all persons who are legally competent must give informed consent in writing for the recording.

Couple and family counselors inform clients that statements made by a family member to the counselor during an individual counseling, consultation, or collateral contact are to be treated as confidential. Such statements are not disclosed to other family members without the individual’s permission. However, the couple and family counselor should clearly identify the client of counseling, which may be the couple or family system, and inform clients in writing who the identified client is. Couple and family counselors should inform clients that they do not maintain family secrets, collude with some family members against others, or otherwise contribute to dysfunctional family system dynamics. If a client’s refusal to share information from individual contacts interferes with the agreed goals of counseling, the counselor may terminate treatment and refer the clients to
another counselor. Some couple and family counselors choose to not meet with individuals, preferring to serve family systems.

1. Couple and family counselors provide reasonable access to counseling records when requested by competent clients. In situations involving multiple clients, counselors provide only the records directly related to a particular individual, protecting confidential information related to any other client.

2. Couple and family counselors provide reasonable access to counseling records of minor children when requested by parents or guardians having legal rights to custody and health decision making. However, counselors do not become embroiled in custody disputes or parent and child conflicts occasioned by records release. Professional counselors attempt to protect the counseling relationship with children by suggesting limits to disclosure appropriate to the particular situation.

3. Couples and family counselors keep counseling records following the termination of counseling services so that there is reasonable access to the records in the future, maintaining the records in accordance with state and federal statutes and applicable accreditation standards. Couples and family counselors should also follow the recommended procedures for records access and retention outlined by the American Counseling Association Code of Ethics.

4. Couples and family counselors take reasonable precautions to ensure clients’ access to records and client confidentiality in the event of a counselor’s death or incapacitation. Additionally, couples and family counselors are encouraged to have a written plan, such as a professional will, specifying individuals who take charge of client records if the couples and family counselor terminates his/her practice for any reason.

5. Couple and family counselors maintain privacy and confidentiality in research, publication, case consultation, teaching, supervision, and other professional activities. Ideally, counselors secure informed consent and authorization to release information in all professional activities.

Section C: Competence and Professional Responsibilities

Couple and family counselors aspire to maintain competency through initial training, ongoing supervision and consultation, and continuing education. They have responsibilities to abide by this ethical code as well as other professional codes related to professional identity and group membership. In particular, couple and family counselors should become active in professional associations such as the IAMFC and the American Counseling Association and encourage beneficial changes in professionals and the counseling profession.

1. Couple and family counselors have the responsibility to develop and maintain basic skills in couple and family counseling through graduate training, supervision, and consultation. An outline of these skills is provided by the current Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP) Standards for Marital, Couple, and Family Counseling.

2. Couple and family counselors recognize the need for familiarizing themselves with new developments in the field of couple and family counseling. They pursue continuing education afforded by books, journals, courses, workshops, conferences, and conventions.

3. Couple and family counselors accurately represent their education, expertise, training, and experience. Professional counselors objectively represent their professional qualifications, skills, and specialties to the public. Membership in a professional organization, including IAMFC, is not used to suggest competency.

4. Couple and family counselors insure that announcements or advertisements of professional services focus on objective information that enables the client to make informed decisions. Providing information, such as highest relevant academic degree, licenses or certifications, office hours, types of services offered, fee structure, and languages spoken, can help clients select couple and family counselors.

5. Couple and family counselors do not attempt to diagnose or treat problems beyond the scope of their training and abilities. They do not engage in specialized counseling interventions or techniques unless they have received appropriate training and preparation in the methods.

6. Couple and family counselors do not undertake any professional activity in which their personal problems might adversely affect their performance. Instead, they focus on obtaining appropriate professional assistance to help them resolve the problem.

7. Couple and family counselors do not engage in actions that violate the legal standards of their community. They do not encourage clients or others to engage in unlawful activities.

8. Couple and family counselors have the responsibility to provide public information that enhances couple and family life. Such statements should be based on sound, scientifically acceptable theories, techniques, and approaches. Due to the inability to complete a comprehensive assessment and provide follow-up, members should not give specific advice to an individual through the media.

9. Couple and family counselors produce advertisements about workshops or seminars that contain descriptions of the audiences for which the programs are intended. Due to their subjective nature, statements either from clients or from the counselor about the uniqueness, effectiveness, or efficiency of services should be avoided. Announcements and advertisements should never contain false, misleading, or fraudulent statements.

10. Couple and family counselors promoting tapes, books, or other products for commercial sale make every effort to insure that announcements and advertisements are presented in a professional and factual manner.
Section D: Collaboration and Professional Relationships

Couple and family counselors work to maintain good relationships with professional peers within and outside the field of counseling. Consultation and collaboration represent means by which couple and family counselors can remove barriers to underserved populations. Interdisciplinary teamwork may be required to best serve clients.

Couple and family counselors aspire to maintain competency through initial training, ongoing supervision and consultation, and continuing education. They have responsibilities to abide by this ethical code as well as other professional codes related to professional identity and group membership. In particular, couple and family counselors should become active in professional associations such as the IAMFC and the American Counseling Association.

1. Couple and family counselors are knowledgeable about the roles and functions of other disciplines, especially in the helping professions such as psychiatry, psychology, social work, and mental health counseling. Counselors work to strengthen interdisciplinary relations with colleagues.

2. Couple and family counselors enter into professional partnerships in which each partner adheres to the ethical standards of their professions. Couple and family counselors should not charge a fee for offering or accepting referrals.

3. Couple and family counselors do not engage in harmful relationships with individuals over whom they have supervisory, evaluative, or instructional control. They do not engage in harassment or other abuses of power or authority.

4. Couple and family counselors work to ensure the ethical delivery of effective services in any agency or institution in which they are employed. Couple and family counselors engaging in consultation and collaboration take responsibility for the well-being and ethical treatment of clients. Counselors alert administrators about inappropriate policies and practices in institutions they serve.

5. Couple and family counselors working as subcontractors of counseling services for a third party have a duty to inform clients of limitations that the organization may place on the counseling or consulting relationship.

6. Couple and family counselors maintain good working relationships with team members and collaborators. They promote healthy boundaries and organizational climate. Couple and family counselors refrain from becoming involved in splitting, triangulation, and indirect forms of communication that could be harmful to colleagues or the organization they share.

7. Couple and family counselors do not offer services to clients served by other professionals without securing a referral or release. The counselor should be authorized by the client to contact the other professional to coordinate or transfer care. There may be special considerations regarding transfer of care in the termination of an abusive counseling relationship.

Section E: Assessment and Evaluation

Couple and family counselors are highly skilled in relational and interpersonal assessment. They recognize the potential values to clients from appropriate educational, psychological, and vocational evaluation. However, couple and family counselors are sensitive to misuse and abuse of assessment results. Counselors avoid, whenever possible, evaluation, assessment, or diagnosis that restricts the overall development and freedom of choice of individuals, couples, and families.

Recognizing the origins of couple and family counseling in systems thinking, they avoid, whenever possible, assigning problems to individuals. Instead, professional counselors aspire to identify solutions that promote the well-being of family systems.

1. Couple and family counselors use assessment procedures to promote the best interests and well-being of the client in clarifying concerns, establishing treatment goals, evaluating therapeutic progress, and promoting objective decision making.

2. Couple and family counselors recognize that clients have the right to know the results, interpretations, and conclusions drawn from assessment interviews and instruments, as well as how this information will be used. Couple and family counselors safeguard assessment data and maintain the confidentiality of evaluation records and reports.

3. Couple and family counselors use assessment methods that are reliable, valid, and relevant to the goals of the client. Couple and family counselors using tests or inventories should have a thorough understanding of measurement concepts, including relevant psychometric and normative data. When using computer-assisted scoring, counselors obtain empirical evidence for the reliability and validity of the methods and procedures.

4. Couple and family counselors do not use inventories and tests that have outdated items or normative data. They refrain from using assessment instruments and techniques likely to be biased or prejudiced.

5. Couple and family counselors do not use assessment methods that are outside the scope of their qualifications, training, or statutory limitations. They consult with psychologists, mental health counselors, or other professional colleagues in interpreting and understanding particular test results.

6. Couple and family counselors conducting custody evaluations recognize the potential impact that their reports can have on family members. They are committed to a thorough assessment of both parents. Therefore, custody recommendations should not be made on the basis of information from only one parent. Couple and family counselors only use instruments that have demonstrated reliability, validity, and utility in custody evaluations. They do not make recommendations based solely on test and inventory scores.

7. Couple and family counselors clarify the differences between forensic examination and counseling. When
couples and family counselors are conducting forensic examination, they inform clients who may have access to the results of the examination and the circumstances under which information may be released.


Section F: Counselor Education and Supervision

Couple and family counselors are likely to engage in some training and supervision activities, including peer consultation and supervision. Couple and family counselors recognize potential power imbalances in teacher and student, supervisor and supervisee, and consultant and consultee relationships. They do not abuse power or influence and instead, work to protect students, supervisees, and consultees from exploitation. Couple and family counselors maintain appropriate boundaries that promote growth and development for all parties. They recognize and respect cultural differences, adjusting their professional efforts to fit the learning needs of trainees.

1. Couple and family counselors who provide supervision acquire and maintain skills pertaining to the supervision process. They are able to demonstrate for supervisees the application of counseling theory and process to client issues. Supervisors are knowledgeable about different methods and conceptual approaches to supervision.

2. Couple and family counselors who provide supervision respect the inherent imbalance of power in the supervisory relationship. They do not use their potentially influential positions to exploit students, supervisees, or employees. Supervisors do not ask supervisees to engage in behaviors not directly related to the supervision process, and they clearly separate supervision and evaluation. Supervisors also avoid multiple relationships that might impair their professional judgment or increase the possibility of exploitation.

3. Sexual intimacy with students or supervisees is prohibited.

4. Couple and family counselors who provide supervision are responsible for both the promotion of supervisee learning and development and the advancement of couple and family counseling. Supervisors recruit students into professional organizations, educate students about professional ethics and standards, provide service to professional organizations, strive to educate new professionals, and work to improve professional practices.

5. Couple and family counselors who provide supervision have the responsibility to inform students of the specific expectations regarding skill building, knowledge acquisition, and development of competencies. Supervisors also provide ongoing and timely feedback to their supervisees.

6. Couple and family counselors who provide supervision are responsible for protecting the rights and well-being of their supervisees’ clients. They monitor their supervisees’ counseling on an ongoing basis and maintain policies and procedures to protect the confidentiality of clients whose sessions have been electronically recorded.

7. Couple and family counselors who provide supervision maintain ethical standards for counselor supervision. Counselor educators and supervisors may consult publications of the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision to clarify ethical issues in supervisory relationships.

8. Couple and family counselors serving as supervisors utilize sound supervision and counseling theory in supervision practice. Additionally, couple and family counselors infuse their supervision with the Advocacy Competencies and the Multicultural Counseling Competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association.

9. Couple and family counselors who are counselor educators encourage their programs to maintain the current guidelines provided in the CACREP Standards for Marital, Couple, and Family Counseling. They also encourage training programs to offer coursework and supervision indicated by particular accreditation boards.

10. Couple and family counselors involved in training and supervision, especially educators and students, should encourage, teach, and implement advocacy awareness for supervisees, as well as explore ethical principles and aspirational goals. Counselor educators must infuse ethical studies throughout the curriculum.

11. Couples and family counselors who serve as supervisors must promote ethical practice throughout their supervision.

12. Couple and family counselors refer to the current American Counseling Association Code of Ethics and ACES Code of Ethics as sources document or training and supervision in professional counseling.

Section G: Research and Publication

Couple and family counselors should engage in research and publication that advances the profession of couple and family counseling. They act to proactively prevent harm to research participants and produce results that are beneficial to couples and families. Couple and family counselors maintain high ethical standards of informed consent and protection of confidentiality when conducting research projects or producing publications. They solicit input from peers, institutional review boards, and other stakeholders to minimize risks and enhance outcomes.

1. Couple and family counselors shall be fully responsible for their choice of research topics and the methods used for
investigation, analysis, and reporting. They must be particularly careful that findings do not appear misleading, that the research is planned to allow for the inclusion of alternative hypotheses, and that provision is made for discussion of the limitations of the study.

2. Couple and family counselors safeguard the privacy of their research participants. Data about individual participants are not released unless the individual is informed about the exact nature of the information to be released and gives written permission for disclosure.

3. Couple and family counselors protect the safety of their research participants. Researchers follow guidelines of a peer review committee or institutional research board. Prospective participants are informed in writing about any potential risk associated with a study and are notified before and during any study that they can withdraw at any time.

4. Couple and family counselors make their original data available to other researchers. They contribute to the advancement of the field by encouraging the research and publication efforts of colleagues.

5. Couple and family counselors only take credit for research in which they make a substantial contribution and give credit to all contributors. Authors are listed from greatest to least amount of contribution.

6. Couple and family counselors do not plagiarize. Ideas or data that did not originate with the author and are not common knowledge are clearly credited to the original source.

7. Couple and family counselors are aware of their obligation to be role models for graduate students and other future researchers. Thus, they act in accordance with the highest standards possible while engaged in research and publication.

8. Couple and family counselors review materials submitted for research, publication, and other scholarly purposes. They respect the confidentiality and proprietary rights of those who submit their products for review. Counselors engaged in reviews of manuscripts and presentation proposals use valid and defensible standards, act within the limits of their competencies, and refrain from personal biases. In this manner, authors and researchers are supported and the field of couple and family counseling is advanced.

Section I: Diversity

Couples and family counselors respect the dignity, potential and uniqueness of couples and families within their cultural context. They infuse their counseling and supervision with advocacy strategies which facilitate client wellness. Furthermore, couples and family counselors advocate systems which facilitate wellness and positive human growth. They actively seek to eliminate oppression of human rights, understanding that advocacy enables client empowerment.

1. Couple and family counselors perform advocacy at multiple levels, including advocacy for clients, communities, and social systems. Further, couples and family counselors make efforts to remove barriers that oppress clients at all levels. Couples and family counselors must be aware and understand how to implement the Advocacy Competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association.

2. Couples and family counselors recognize diversity and its influence on themselves and their clients. Couples and family counselors are cognizant of the impact of world views, values, and cultural influences. Couples and family
counselors must be aware of and understand how to implement the Multicultural Counseling Competencies endorsed by the American Counseling Association.

The members of the Ethics committee who completed the revision of the Ethical Code are the following:

Bret Hendricks, Chair of the Ethics Committee, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership, Texas Tech University.

Loretta J. Bradley, Department of Educational Psychology and Leadership, Texas Tech University.

Stephen Southern, Department of Counseling and Psychology, Mississippi College

Marvarene Oliver, Department of Counseling and Educational Psychology, Texas A & M University–Corpus Christi.

Bobbie Birdsall, Counselor Education Department, Boise State University.

Authors' Note

The 2010 Ethical Code of the International Association of Couple and Family Counselors (IAMFC) was written by members of the Ethics Committee and approved by the Board of IAMFC.