

Ethical Issues in Counseling Supervision: A Comparison of University and Site Supervisors

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Abstract:

The purpose of this study was to examine how site and university supervisors differed on the interpretation of ethical dilemmas based on the ethical standards developed by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors (1993). A survey of ethical dilemmas based on salient ethical issues in counseling supervision (i.e., dual relationships, competence, informed consent, and due process) was used. The participants in this study included site supervisors of field-based practicum, internship students and university supervisors from counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). The results of the study indicated significant differences between university and site supervisors on the interpretation of ethical dilemmas based on relevant ethical standards. Although differences existed, there are no clear trends in the direction of these differences.

Keywords:

Counseling supervision, ethics, practicum, internship, site supervisor, university supervisor, ethical guidelines

Article:

Clinical supervision of counseling students and practitioners is a central component in the development of competent counselors (Bernard, 1979; Borders & Leddick, 1987). Therefore, competent supervisors are a key element in the preparation of counselors. Because supervisors are responsible for helping their supervisees address ethical dilemmas, part of the training of supervisors should involve training in ethics.

Increasingly, issues related to ethical dilemmas within the supervision process are being addressed in the professional literature (Bernard & Goodyear, 1992; Borders & Leddick, 1987; Borders & Cashwell, 1992; Borders, Cashwell, & Rotter, 1995; Bradley, 1989; Cormier & Bernard, 1982; Disney & Stephens, 1994; Dooley-Dickey, Housley, & Guest, 1993; Dye & Borders, 1990; Guest, 1995; Vasquez, 1992). However, empirical research on counseling supervision, and specifically on ethical practices in counseling supervision remains limited. Borders and Cashwell (1992) surveyed state counselor credentialing legislation boards and found that few state licensure boards have attempted to enact policies to address ethical dilemmas that supervisors may face. Borders et al. (1995) examined the supervision practices of those who supervise counselor licensure applicants. Results indicated that ethical issues were frequently discussed during supervision, often requiring the supervisor to seek consultation with other professionals. The authors also found that supervisors were concerned about their legal liability and responsibilities as supervisors.

Guest (1995) surveyed field-based clinical counseling supervisors to determine their levels of endorsement of the Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors developed by the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (ACES) (1993). Results suggested that field-based supervisors did endorse the guidelines, although many had limited knowledge of specific ethical issues in supervision.

A review of the literature found no research that compared university and site supervisors' interpretations of ethical standards. Many counselor preparation programs rely on the support of both site supervisors and university supervisors to provide individual and group supervision of students in their field-based experiences (i.e., practicum and internship). According to the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), a site supervisor is "a qualified individual within a setting who is responsible for supervising a student's work at that setting" (CACREP, 2001, p. 105). The university supervisor is typically a faculty member in the program who acts as a mentor/tutor during the student's field placement. Due to the reliance of counselor preparation programs on both supervisors, the purpose of this study was to investigate how site and university supervisors of practicum and internship students differ in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas. The primary research question in this exploratory study was: Do site supervisors and university supervisors of practicum and internship counseling students differ in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas based on the ACES (1993) *Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors*? Additional questions of interest included:

- a. Do site supervisors differ from university supervisors in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas involving dual relationships?
- b. Do site supervisors differ from university supervisors in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas involving competence of supervisors?
- c. Do site supervisors differ from university supervisors in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas involving informed consent?
- d. Do site supervisors differ from university supervisors in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas involving due process?

METHODS

Participants

To address the research questions, site supervisors of master's and doctoral level practicum and internship counseling students at a mid-sized southern university were surveyed, which included all site supervisors ($n = 155$) who provided supervision over a three-year time frame. University supervisors ($n = 228$) included faculty from CACREP accredited universities throughout the United States who supervised practicum and internship counseling students. Seventy (45%) site supervisors responded and 90 (40%) of university supervisors responded to the survey.

Instrumentation

The survey developed for this study consisted of vignettes based on ethical issues identified in the counseling supervision literature. These issues included

- a. dual relationships,
- b. competence,
- c. informed consent,
- d. due process.

After a review of the relevant counseling supervision literature, these ethical issues were selected for two reasons. First, these four issues are the most frequently cited and discussed issues by authors in the counseling supervision literature. Second, the ACES (1993) *Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors* have addressed specifically these four ethical issues related to the supervision process.

The survey consisted of 10 vignettes based on the above ethical issues in counseling supervision. Each vignette described a supervisor or a counselor facing such an ethical dilemma. Three vignettes were developed for each of the areas of dual relationships and competence, and two vignettes were developed for each of the areas of informed consent and due process. The vignettes then contained several responses (i.e., action) that might be taken by the supervisor or counselor. A four-point Likert-type scale (1 = highly unethical to 4 = highly ethical) was used to indicate the appropriateness of each response as considered by

the respondent. A panel of four experts in counseling supervision determined whether each response was consistent or inconsistent with the ACES (1993) *Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors*. Responses that were inconsistent with the ACES standards (i.e., unethical responses) on the supervision questionnaire were reverse scored, such that a higher score would represent responses that were consistent with the ethical standards. Responses that were consistent with the ACES standards were not reverse scored.

Procedures

A packet of information was sent to each site supervisor that included a personalized cover letter, a supervision survey and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return. Each survey contained an identification number for the purpose of follow-up mailings. Follow-up notices were mailed three weeks after the first mailing.

Distribution of the packets of information for the university supervisors was accomplished through a CACREP liaison for each university. Packets sent to each liaison contained a personalized cover letter to the liaison. The liaison cover letter requested assistance in distributing the individual packets to the university supervisors who supervised practicum and internship students. The individual packets contained information for the university supervisors. The individual university supervisor packets contained a personalized cover letter, a survey, and a self-addressed, stamped envelope for return.

DATA ANALYSIS

Data analysis for this study included both descriptive and inferential statistics. Descriptive statistics were used to describe the data collected from the two groups (site supervisors and university supervisors). The use of means, standard deviations, percentages, and frequency counts were used to summarize the raw data, allowing the data to be examined in a manageable form (Glass & Hopkins, 1984).

Inferential statistics were also calculated. An Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) was used to examine differences between the two groups (site supervisors and university supervisors) on overall interpretation of the ethical dilemmas. Further analysis included ANOVAs to examine differences between groups on the interpretation of ethical dilemmas on each of the four ethical issues (i.e., dual relationships, competence, due process, informed consent).

RESULTS

Respondent Characteristics

Among the participants, there were 66 men (41.3%) and 92 women (57.5%). The mean age of the respondents was 44.59 with a range of ages from 26 to 67 years. The mean age of site supervisors was 43.5 years, and the mean age of university supervisors was 45.3 years. The majority of respondents ($n = 136$; 85%) were Caucasian.

For site supervisors, more than half of the respondents ($n = 43$; 61%) had less than 15 years of counseling experience, with an average of 12.5 years ($M = 12.5$; $SD = 8.13$). More than half of site supervisors ($n = 42$; 60%) reported less than 5 years of supervision experience, with an average of 5.2 years ($M = 5.2$; $SD = 5.71$). For university supervisors, one-half of the respondents ($n = 44$; 50%) reported more than 15 years of experience in counseling, with an average of 16.4 years ($M = 16.4$; $SD = 9.03$). For university supervisors, the majority of respondents ($n = 65$; 72%) reported having more than 5 years of experience in counseling supervision, with an average of 11.5 years ($M = 11.5$; $SD = 9.11$).

Education level ranged from bachelor degrees to doctoral degrees. Specifically, the majority ($n = 47$; 67.2%) of site supervisors reported having a master's degree. For university supervisors, the majority of respondents ($n = 82$; 91.1%) reported having a doctorate degree. Among the total sample, 90 (56.3%) received degrees from CACREP accredited programs.

Respondents also were asked to indicate the field in which the highest academic degree was earned. For site supervisors, more than half of the respondents ($n = 43$; 61.4%) reported having degrees in counselor education. For university supervisors, the majority of respondents ($n = 66$; 73.3%) reported having a degree in counselor education, while counseling psychology was the second largest group ($n = 16$; 17.8%). The largest group of site supervisors ($n = 22$; 48.9%) reported having an emphasis in school counseling. The largest group of university supervisors ($n = 32$; 50.0%) reported having an emphasis in community counseling.

Respondents also were asked several demographic questions regarding counseling supervision. Of the 160 respondents, 110 (68.6%) indicated supervising practicum and internship counseling students currently with a median of three supervisees. The median number of reported supervisees to date was 20.

In the area of supervision training, 121 (75.6%) respondents indicated having some type of training in supervision. Sixty-two (51%) respondents indicated training through academic course work in supervision, 63 (52%) indicated training through professional seminars or workshops on supervision, 45 (37%) indicated training through in-service workshops on supervision provided by a job site, and 70 (58.8%) indicated training through supervised supervision experience.

Analysis of Research Questions

The primary research question in this study examined whether site supervisors and university supervisors of practicum and internship counseling students differed in their interpretation of ethical dilemmas based on ethical standards (ACES, 1993). A one-way ANOVA revealed a statistically significant difference between site and university supervisors $F(1,157) = 11.88, p < .05$. The mean total score for the combined groups on all ethical dilemmas was 93.17 ($M = 93.17$; $SD = 7.18$). The mean total score for site supervisors on all ethical dilemmas was 91.00 ($M = 91.00$; $SD = 6.68$). For university supervisors, the mean total score of the total scores on all ethical dilemmas was 94.83 ($M = 94.83$; $SD = 7.15$). Table 1 depicts the overall mean scores and the results of the ANOVA for the overall group and for each ethical issue. From Table 1, it is apparent that statistically significant differences emerged between the two groups. Also, it is noteworthy that while university supervisors had higher ratings on the dual relationships, competence, and informed consent vignettes, this was reversed for the due process vignettes as site supervisors had higher ratings.

DISCUSSION

It is important to consider these findings in the context of limitations of this study. First, generalization of results should be considered in the context of the sampling. University supervisors were drawn from all CACREP accredited counselor education programs, whereas site supervisors were drawn from various settings within one state. Second, it is unknown how survey nonrespondents may differ from respondents. Finally, how the use of vignettes transfers to actual situations (i.e., real life) is unknown.

TABLE 1. Descriptive Statistics and F-Values for Analysis of Variance

	Site Supervisors ($n = 70$)		University Supervisors ($n = 90$)		<i>F</i>
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	
Overall	91.00	6.68	94.83	7.15	11.88*
Dual Relationships	30.39	3.39	32.18	3.42	10.72*
Competence	24.58	3.38	26.28	3.38	9.84*
Informed Consent	16.94	2.52	18.21	2.39	10.52*
Due Process	19.09	2.54	18.17	2.47	5.28*

Note. * $p < .05$

Although it is apparent that differences exist between university and site supervisors on their interpretation of ethical dilemmas based on relevant ethical standards (ACES, 1993), it is evident that there are not clear trends in the direction of these differences. The results can be examined as to the conservative nature of the responses in relation to the ethical standards. Although there was a significant difference between site and university supervisors on the interpretation of all ethical dilemmas, university supervisors appeared to interpret ethical dilemmas involving dual relationships, competence, and informed consent more conservatively, while site supervisors interpreted ethical dilemmas involving due process more conservatively.

In interpreting the results of this study, it is important to recognize that the differences that exist should not be interpreted as “higher” or “better.” Differences, however, may be influenced by several factors. First, university supervisors reported having more counseling supervision experience than did site supervisors. Second, the majority of site supervisors reported having a master’s degree, while the majority of university supervisors reported having doctoral degrees (91.1%) in counselor education (73.3%). Due to the fact that CACREP requires supervision training at the doctoral level (CACREP, 1994), university supervisors may have more exposure to the ethical guidelines in counseling supervision. Third, the perspective of the supervisors dealing with ethical issues may be different. While university supervisors may have more knowledge of ethical guidelines in counseling supervision, site supervisors may deal with ethical issues in real clinical situations more frequently than university supervisors. The majority (85.8%) of site supervisors reported work settings that serve clients directly (i.e., schools, counseling centers, agencies, hospitals, private practice), while the majority (88.9%) of university supervisors reported work setting as college or university faculty. Fourth, supervisors were asked to respond to any form of training in counseling supervision. Although more than half of both site and university supervisors reported having training in supervision, the types of training addressed in the survey (i.e., academic course work in supervision, professional seminar or workshop, in-service workshop provided by job site, supervised supervision experience) may not have been specific enough for supervisors to accurately indicate their level of supervision training. Fifth, the majority of university supervisors reported membership in ACES (77.8%), while only 4.3% of site supervisors reported membership in ACES.

Although university supervisors responded more conservatively overall and on ethical dilemmas involving dual relationships, competence, and informed consent, site supervisors responded more conservatively on ethical dilemmas involving due process. Due process ethical dilemmas were based on the evaluation process in supervision. This difference may be due to the fact that site supervisors, working in clinical settings, may be more cognizant of legal and ethical issues related to the evaluation process. Many counselor education programs utilize site supervisors to direct the clinical experiences of counselor trainees in a practicum or internship placement, therefore relying on site supervisors to at least partially evaluate the progress of clinical training. Site supervisors appear to consider this an important responsibility to both the counselor education program as well as counselor trainees served, leading to the careful consideration of all issues involved in the evaluation process. A second factor to explain site supervisors’ conservative responses to ethical dilemmas involving due process may be that university supervisors ultimately decide the grade received by counselor trainees in field placements. Although the site supervisor typically evaluates the clinical component of the placement by having continuous on-site contact with the supervisee, the evaluation is ultimately submitted to the university supervisor. Site supervisors may perceive that the university supervisor will evaluate their evaluation of counselor trainees.

Implications and Recommendations

There are several implications that can be drawn from the results of the current study. First, differences between site and university supervisors on their interpretation of ethical dilemmas clearly demonstrate the need for consultation between multiple supervisors of counselor trainees during the supervision process. If differences exist between site and university supervisors on ethical issues, there may be inconsistency in directing the ethical practices of counselor trainees. Inexperienced counselor trainees may be confused when discrepancies arise between supervisors. Relatedly, in obtaining informed consent from supervisees, it may

be wise for both university and site supervisors to inform the supervisee that different and sometimes contradictory information may be provided from the two supervisors. In such a case, the supervisee should be encouraged to bring this to the attention of both supervisors, who can then discuss the discrepancy. Counselors-in-training may be hesitant to bring such matters to the attention of supervisors for fear of jeopardizing or compromising their field-based experience, or because of fear of a negative evaluation. However, by normalizing such discrepancies, it is more probable that the supervisee will bring such discrepancies to the attention of each supervisor.

Second, the results of the study revealed that 67% of site supervisors in this study had master's degrees. This has implications for counselor education programs. Typically, supervision courses are doctoral level courses. Counselor training programs need to consider some form of supervision training at the master's level. For example, counselor education programs may consider including a classroom component on supervision or offering a master's level supervision class as an elective for those students interested in supervising other counselor trainees after completing their degree. One alternative for counselor education programs would be consistent training through seminars or workshops for site supervisors. CACREP currently stipulates that counselor education programs offer workshops for site supervisors as a condition for obtaining or maintaining accreditation. Workshop participants may include supervisors currently serving the programs by supervising counselor trainees in a field-based placement or potential supervisors who are interested in supervising counselor trainees.

Because differences existed between university and site supervisors, more training may be necessary for all supervisors in the area of ethical standards and ethical practices. This additional training in ethics may allow supervisors to provide more consistent supervision for counselor trainees. For example, courses in supervision may need to include a component on dealing with ethical issues. The use of vignettes to describe supervisors in ethical dilemmas would help the supervisor-in-training develop an ability to apply ethical standards within counseling supervision prior to dealing with actual ethical situations.

Other recommendations based on the results of this study include:

- a. state associations, particularly those associations associated with counselor education and supervision, may consider offering workshops or
- b. seminars on supervision to interested supervisors conducting supervision in the state;
- c. a publication of an ethical case book pertaining to ethical issues in supervision to aid potential supervisors in developing the ability to deal with actual ethical situations in supervision;
- d. future research should be considered at the national level with random sampling on the ethical practices of site and university supervisors conducting supervision;
- e. future research should examine at the national level with random sampling the amount and type of supervision training for those conducting supervision, as well as the continuing education needs of practicing supervisors.

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