

2014

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Recommended Citation

Burkholder, D., & Burkholder, J. (2014). Reasons for Ethical Misconduct of Counseling Students: What do Faculty Think?. *The Journal of Counselor Preparation and Supervision*, 6(2). <http://dx.doi.org/10.7729/62.1063>

Reasons for Ethical Misconduct of Counseling Students: What do Faculty Think?

Abstract

The ethics training of students in the helping professions has been a frequent topic in the literature, yet students still commit ethics violations (Li, Lampe, Trusty, & Lin, 2009). No known research has examined the attributions faculty give for student ethics violations. This qualitative study used a conceptual framework of attribution theory and explored faculty attributions of counseling master's students' ethical misconduct. Emergent themes were grouped across two broad domains, attribution themes and prevention themes. Attribution themes include: (a) the person, (b) educational factors, and (d) performance. Prevention themes include (a) education and training, (b) gatekeeping and screening, (c) monitoring, (d) personal growth, and (e) support. Singular data for the ethics training of students in the helping professions is discussed.

Keywords

Ethics Violations, Counseling, Attribution Theory, Counselor Education, Ethics Violations, Ethical Misconduct

Author's Notes

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For an occupation to be considered a profession, certain signposts are required. It is generally accepted that these signposts include: (a) an association for members of the profession, (b) an ethics code and standards of practice, (c) rigorous educational requirements, (d) acknowledgment of the profession by the public, (e) a specified body of knowledge, (f) licensing and credentialing, and (g) accrediting bodies to operationalize curriculum (Gale & Austin, 2003; Ponton & Duba, 2009). The other element of a profession—and the most defining—is the nature of the relationship between the profession and society (Ponton & Duba, 2009). The ethics codes, more than any other definitional component of a profession, define and contextualize this relationship for the helping professions. As “the embodiment of values into guidelines for behavior,” (Strom-Gottfried, 2007, p. 1), ethics codes provide structure and boundaries that inform the relationship between members of the helping professions and the society within which they operate. This may (in part) account for the consistent and frequent presence of ethics issues within the research literature of helping professions. Two main areas of ethics serve as the foundation for this research: (a) defining and exploring ethics and ethics codes, and (b) the ethics training and development of students.

Defining and Exploring Ethics

The construct of ethics and the various codes of ethics are the topic of significant discourse in the literature, and different ethical issues are continually developing (Herlihy & Dufrene, 2011). Researchers have described ethics codes as statements of professional identity and covenants with society (Ponton & Duba, 2009), noting that some professionals have faith in codes of ethics while some are skeptical (Fine & Teram, 2009). Researchers have examined ethics within the frameworks of diagnosis (Dougherty, 2005; Kress, Hoffman, & Eriksen, 2010), testing and assessment (Naugle, 2009), spirituality (Steen, Engles, & Thweatt, 2006), therapeutic prayer (Weld & Eriksen, 2007), and computer-based supervision (Vaccaro & Lambie, 2007). The literature also contains examples of ethics decision-making models and recommendations to assist professionals in navigating the complexities of ethics dilemmas (Barnett, Behnke, Rosenthal, & Koocher, 2007; Burkholder, Toth, Feisthamel, & Britton, 2010; Calley, 2009; Freeman & Francis, 2006; Foster & Black, 2007; Glosoff, Herlihy, & Spence, 2000). Undoubtedly, a diversity of perspectives and attitudes exist within the helping professions concerning ethics, ethics codes, and how ethics apply within a variety of contexts.

Ethics Training and Development of Students

The other dimension of ethics significantly represented within the literature relates to the ethics training of students. Gray and Gibbons (2007) argued for students to receive ethics training that integrates knowledge, values, ethics, policy, and research to better recognize the moral consequences of clinical decisions and to develop a deeper understanding of ethics issues. Pullen-Sansfacon (2010) added to the recommendations of Gray and Gibbons,

advocating for students to receive ethics training through moral development and the promotion of virtue ethics.

Some research has focused on whether ethics training should permeate the curriculum of an entire graduate training program, or be delivered primarily through a specific course. Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2005) made the case for infusing ethics training early and throughout the entirety of student graduate education. Similar to Corey et al. (2005), Pack-Brown, Thomas, and Seymour (2008) argued for an infusion of ethics training across a graduate program with an emphasis on social justice. Sanders and Hoffman (2010) also examined ethics training, comparing two approaches to teaching ethics: (a) infusion of ethics, and (b) two types of mandatory discrete ethics courses (one teaching a mixed-model approach, another teaching a common morality model). Sanders and Hoffman (2010) found that teaching a common morality model resulted in students with greater moral judgment and ethics sensitivity. McGee (2005) encouraged ethics training that emphasized a proactive approach in identifying potential ethics problems, and for students to use vignettes to consider ethics issues within real-life applications. McCarron and Stewart (2011) also advocated the use of vignettes to promote the ethics training of students.

In addition to recommendations in the literature, accreditation bodies mandate that counseling students receive ethics training. Notably, the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), the flagship accreditation body for counseling programs, mandates that counseling students receive ethics training. Standard II.G.1.j states that counseling students must have an understanding of “ethical standards of professional organizations and credentialing bodies, and applications of ethical and legal considerations in professional counseling” (CACREP, 2009, p. 10).

The counseling profession has devoted considerable attention to ethics issues (see Barnett et al., 2007; Gale & Austin, 2003; Ponton & Duba, 2009; Sanders & Hoffman, 2010). This is directly linked to the previously discussed role that ethics plays in the relationship the helping professions have with the society in which they exist. The counseling profession is served best if society views counselors as ethically competent. Despite the sincere efforts of graduate programs to train students, and despite research aimed at assisting students and current clinicians to navigate ethics issues, ethics violations do still occur in graduate programs (Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997; Li, Lampe, Trusty, & Lin, 2009); Tryon, 2000) and therapeutic practice (Kocet & Freeman, 2005; Phelan, 2007; Strom-Gottfried, 2003). Ethics violations by graduate students are particularly important to examine, because graduate study is a time of development and learning when future clinicians are under supervision and receiving ethics training. Apparently, instruction and knowledge of what comprises ethical behavior does not ensure that graduate students will always behave ethically (Tryon, 2000).

The authors proposed that there is a rich common sense underlying the need to examine the perceptions of faculty members, foremost of which is that faculty members are charged with training students to conduct themselves in an ethical manner. This led to an important question to present to faculty: “Why do faculty think counseling students commit ethics violations?” As no research was found that examined the phenomenon of student ethics violations from the perspectives of faculty, the guiding research question of this exploratory study was: What attributions do faculty give to explain the ethics violations of counseling master’s students? The purpose of this research was to illuminate the reasons faculty give for the ethics violations of their students, resulting in increased understanding toward how to address this issue within graduate training programs in the helping professions.

Conceptual Framework: Attribution Theory

Attribution theory is the rational filter through which to study faculty attributions of student ethics violations. Originated by Heider (1958) within the field of social psychology, attribution theory essentially attempts to explain how individuals utilize information to formulate casual explanations for events (Fiske & Taylor, 1991). Fiske and Taylor stated, "Understanding what factors give rise to a certain outcome enables one to control the likelihood of that outcome, or at least to predict when it will happen" (1991, p. 23). Thus, an attribution is an attempt to explain why people do what they do. Weiner (2010) has also used attribution theory within the context of motivation and achievement, noting that within an attribution are three dimensions: (a) locus of control, (b) stability, and (c) controllability. Locus of control examines whether the behavior is caused by internal or external sources. Stability assesses if causes change over time, and controllability is defined as causes someone can control versus causes one cannot control.

Within the context of this research, illuminating the attributions faculty give for student ethics violations may provide information for understanding what underlies unethical student behavior and how to address it. If faculty attribute internal sources as the primary cause of student ethics violations, there is a distinct set of implications and conclusions to be drawn. However, if faculty attribute external sources as the source of student ethics violations, another set of implications exist. Internal sources (originating in the student) would likely lead faculty to examine issues related to gatekeeping (which students are admitted) and remediation (how concerning student behaviors are addressed). External sources (originating outside the student, such as the counseling program itself) would likely lead faculty to examine how ethics are addressed programmatically. Therefore, the theoretical structure of attribution theory has been used in the design and analysis of this research.

Pilot

In preparation for this study, the researchers conducted a pilot study. The purpose of this pilot study was to explore the viability of the research question and to enhance the questions to be utilized to produce data for this research. The pilot study included ten participants who were faculty members in four different counselor education programs. The ten faculty members who participated in the pilot study were either currently serving on a remediation committee at their university or had previously served on a remediation committee. In this context, a remediation committee refers to committees within graduate programs in the helping professions that serve to address problematic student behaviors, including ethics violations. Faculty members who had experience with serving on a remediation committee were chosen because of their experiences in working with students who had committed ethics violations.

The researchers sent emails to the participants including a link to an Internet research site (Survey Monkey) to complete the pilot study. The participants were instructed to answer the pilot study questions using the following criteria:

1. The student was a former master's counseling student in a counseling program in which you were part of the program faculty OR the student is a current or past master's counseling student in a program in which you are currently part of the program faculty.
2. The student's ethical misconduct resulted in the counseling program taking some sort of corrective action (such as the student being referred to remediation).

The above criteria were included to ensure that when participants were considering the questions, they were doing so within the context of master's students of whom they had specific and sufficient knowledge.

The questions in the pilot study that participants were asked included:

1. What do you perceive as the reasons for the student's ethics misconduct?
2. What do you perceive would have helped the student avoid committing the ethics misconduct?
3. Do the questions clearly and adequately address the following research question: What attributions do faculty give to explain the ethics violations of counseling master's students?
4. Are there any additional questions that would be helpful in addressing the research question?

The pilot study confirmed the viability of the research question. Participants provided answers that clearly articulated the reasons that they believed were informing the ethics violations of students. No participants stated that additional questions were necessary to address the research question. Participants in the pilot also confirmed that the second question was appropriate to ask, because, as one participant stated, "When you're describing what you think would prevent something from happening, you're indirectly saying what you think caused it." Another participant reported, "I think that question adds an extra dimension to understanding the reasons professors think students violate ethics codes." Data from the pilot study were not included in the results of this research.

Method

Qualitative methodology is appropriate when exploring participants' perspectives (Gay & Airasian, 2000), consistent with the researchers' understanding the perspectives faculty have concerning ethics violations of counseling master's students. Furthermore, a precedent exists in the counseling literature for large-scale qualitative studies that utilize an online data collection format (see Mellin, Hunt, & Nichols, 2011; Protivnak & Foss, 2009) as well as other disciplines (Adam, White, & Lacaille, 2007). Thus, a large-scale qualitative approach utilizing an online data collection process was chosen as the methodology to illuminate faculty attributions of student ethics violations. The authors believed "a relatively large number of participants" would "provide a rich accounting of experiences useful for exploration" (Protivnak & Foss, 2009, p. 242) while at the same time enable a diverse number of participant perspectives to be gathered. As in the Protivnak and Foss (2009) study, our large sample "permitted the development of themes that were repeated solidly throughout the data" (p. 242).

Sampling Procedure, Setting, and Sample

After obtaining IRB approval, participants were recruited for this research through an email sent to the counselor education and supervision mailing list (CESNET-L) and an email sent to the contact liaisons of counseling programs accredited by the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP). Contact liaisons were asked to forward the email to the entire faculty within their counseling department. Each email gave a brief description of the study and contained a web link to an Internet research site (Survey Monkey), where participants were presented with a brief list of demographic questions, including gender, age, race/ethnicity, and the CACREP region in which their university was.. Participants were presented with two questions: (a) "What do you perceive as the reasons for the student's ethics misconduct?" and (b) "What do you perceive would have helped the student avoid

committing the ethics misconduct?" As in the pilot study, participants were asked to consider each question with two criteria in mind: (a) The student was a former master's counseling student in a counseling program in which they were part of the program faculty OR the student is a current or past master's counseling student in a program in which they are currently part of the program faculty, and (b) The student's ethics misconduct resulted in the counseling program's taking some sort of corrective action (such as the student being referred to remediation). Participants were also asked for their email address to allow for a member check, which is an "important component in validation" by assessing "the accuracy with which a researcher has represented a participant's subjectivity" (Koelsch, 2013, p. 168).

A total of 72 individuals completed the questions, with 44 (61%) females and 28 (39%) males. Participants' ages ranged from 27 to 70, with an average age of 47. Fifty-one (71%) were of Caucasian or European descent, 9 (12.5%) were of African American/Afro-Caribbean/African descent, 5 (6.9%) were of Asian descent, 4 (5.6%) were of Hispanic/Latina/Latino descent, 1 (1.4%) was of Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander descent, and 1 (1.4%) was of American Indian or Alaska Native descent (percentages do not equal 100% due to rounding). Participants were requested to state in what CACREP region their university was located. Twenty-six (36.1%) were located in the Southern region, 15 (20.8%) were located in the North Atlantic region, 14 (19.4%) were located in the North Central region, 9 (12.5%) were located in the Rocky Mountain region, and 8 (11.1%) were located in the Western region.

Data Analysis Process

Because large-scale qualitative research is atypical, the authors took care to utilize a data analysis process consistent with previous large-scale qualitative research (Protivnak & Foss, 2009). The researchers applied the principle of constant comparison (Corbin & Strauss, 2008) throughout data analysis and utilized an analysis structure consistent with the Miles and Huberman (1994) approach. After the data was collected, the primary author entered each participant answer into a table in Microsoft Word, resulting in manageable units of data. The researchers independently read through the data line by line to produce distinct lists of potential codes to explain the data. The authors then compared and discussed the code lists until the researchers arrived at an agreement, producing a master code list. Each researcher independently utilized the master code list to group participant responses, which resulted in each researcher producing an independent list of themes. The researchers then collaboratively discussed and compared their theme lists until an agreement was reached on joint themes. Both researchers jointly labeled the comprehensive themes that had distinctly emerged from the data. As in the study by Protivnak and Foss (2009), "The data between participants demonstrated the overlap and repetition necessary for the development of meaningful themes" (p. 242).

Trustworthiness

Introduced by Lincoln and Guba (1985), the concept of trustworthiness and its mechanisms of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability were created for qualitative research to take the place of the quantitative concepts of reliability and validity (Kline, 2008). Credibility for this research was established through member checks and peer debriefing. Member checks identified by Lincoln and Guba (1985) as the most critical component for establishing credibility, were completed through email contact with the participants after the data analysis. Participants were emailed the themes that had emerged from

the coding of the data, and asked if the themes demonstrated fidelity to their responses. Participants confirmed that the themes represented the responses they had provided. Peer debriefing consisted of requesting a peer's feedback regarding the data analysis. The primary author met with the peer debriefer after completion of the data analysis, with the peer debriefer examining the researcher's biases and understandings of the data.

Transferability of the research findings was achieved by providing a substantial amount of participant data. This produced a broad description of the attributions faculty give for students' ethical misconduct, which is presented in the results section. Readers must make their own judgments of the transferability of this study to their own setting (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Finally, the use of an outside auditor "can be used to determine dependability and confirmability simultaneously" (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 318). The outside auditor for this study was a counseling faculty member who had access to the researchers' Microsoft Word table of participant responses, individual code lists, the master code list, individually coded responses, and classification of comprehensive themes. The auditor reviewed these materials and established the dependability and confirmability of this research.

Limitations

One possible limitation of this study is that differences may exist between the reason(s) students commit an ethical violation and the attributions faculty give for the misconduct. Requiring faculty to consider students whose ethics misconduct was formally addressed by the counseling program hopefully mitigated faculty using too much conjecture when providing attributions. Additionally, large-scale qualitative studies may be construed as restrictive in that they do not allow for interaction with participants and exploration of participant responses. Because of this, the authors acknowledge that multiple in person interviews may have produced more expansive answers and encouraged clarity of responses. The authors addressed this limitation by, (a) conducting a pilot study (to ensure the questions were clear and produced answers relevant to the research question), (b) conducting the member check (allowing participants to review the emergent themes and confirm that the themes were representative of their responses), and (c) having a relatively large sample size (producing a significant amount of participant data).

Results

Themes from participant responses are presented under two headings: attribution themes and prevention themes. Although the themes within each heading are in direct relation to the research question (as confirmed by the participants in the pilot study), presenting the themes within two headings serve to enhance the clarity of the presentation of the themes. Attribution themes include: (a) the person, (b) educational factors, and (d) performance. Prevention themes include (a) education and training, (b) gatekeeping and screening, (c) monitoring, (d) personal growth, and (e) support.

Attribution Themes

The person. Participant responses articulated a clear theme of attributions related to the characteristics and behaviors of the student. Some students believed that considering the code of ethics was optional for them. One participant remarked, "The student thought that what he did wasn't that bad and he could get by on a reprimand rather than a suspension, almost like the

ethics code didn't really apply for him." Other participants echoed this remark with statements including, "She did not believe the ethics code applied to her," "The student viewed themselves as 'above' the guidelines, or somehow exempt from following the guidelines," and "The student's unwillingness to see how the ethics code applied to him." A participant remarked,

Some students really feel like the ethics code is for people who are 'bad' or 'impaired.' They don't see the nuance and areas of grey that exist, which is why when they are confronted with something or in a situation where they are presented with their inappropriate conduct, it's like they can't even reconcile it...that they violated the code of ethics.

This was more strongly described by participants who discussed the role narcissism and self-centeredness played in ethics violations. A participant made this clear when recalling, "The egocentric presentation of this person was clear...I wondered how they were going to be able to work with people who were hurting and struggling. Sure enough, he got in practicum and was in trouble within three weeks." Another participant recalled a similar student, stating, "The student's level of arrogance was impeding her development of skills and appropriate use of counseling techniques...she couldn't look past herself, which led to the ethics violation." Other participants reported similar experiences with students, including one who described a student as "A twenty four year-old self-proclaimed narcissist, who does not understand that this is a problem and was leading to unethical behavior." A focus on the self was further described by participants with statements including, "They only cared about meeting their own needs," "Self-absorption," "A narcissistic focus on their own needs," and "selfish motives that were more important than the client."

A large number of participants commented that an impaired personality, mental health concerns, and substance abuse were the reasons for ethics violations. Participants described personality impairment in a variety of ways, including: "characterological disorder," "borderline traits," "underlying characterological traits that influences her judgment and values," "The student had a personality disorder," "personality issues," and "antisocial inclinations." Related to personality impairment were descriptions of students who were struggling with mental health concerns. One participant recalled, "I had a student who was suffering from mental illness and was not capable of helping others or behaving ethically." Another participant stated, "There was clear psychopathology present, perhaps depression," while other participants recalled students with "emotional problems," "emotional instability," and "mental health problems." Participants also stated that substance abuse was a present factor in many students' ethics violations. One participant noted, "I have probably witnessed at least five or six students with substance abuse issues that breached the code in some form or another. Chemical dependency is a real problem, especially in the context of counselors who are addicts."

The final remarks from participants within this theme highlighted that ethics violations can occur if students are careless, disorganized, or overwhelmed. One participant commented that a student was "rushing through field experience and focused on the 'hours' rather than the development of counseling skills. This led to several ethics issues." Another remarked, "Students in a rush to get through the program are so much more likely to get themselves in situations they shouldn't be in. They are careless, don't really listen, and basically phone it in during coursework, even field placement." Several participants recalled students who were "careless," "sloppy," "had poor management skills," and "not able to manage their own life, let alone exhibit ethics competence." The consequences of poor organization and time management were also expressed by participants who confronted students who "took on too much and did not

have time to complete the requirements of their internship.” This was also reflected by a participant who commented “He was completely overwhelmed that semester and he was taking shortcuts at his internship site. It eventually caught up to him.”

Educational factors. The second theme that emerged from the participant responses centered on educational mechanisms. The first cluster of responses within this theme focused on issues from within the counseling program. Participants noted that some students encountered this from faculty members themselves. One remarked, “Poor advisement from a faculty member that resulted in the student getting into trouble.” Two other participants stated similar reasons, stating, “Several students received misguidance from a senior faculty member and just a general lack of direction” and “Improper advisement from the student’s faculty advisor.” Other participants discussed students who experienced a general deficiency in preparation and training for confronting ethics issues. One participant voiced a concern that the reason for a student’s ethics misconduct resulted from the program’s neglect to instill “clarity and understanding about practicum policy and procedures.” Many other participants expressed similar concerns about the academic preparation students were receiving in the area of ethics such as: “There is a lack of preparation and education for students in this area,” “The lack of helpful training is very distressing,” “Students don’t get the preparation and training they really need,” and “Teaching students to be ready for ethics issues requires time.” One participant stated:

Students in our program take a course in ethics and that’s it. It’s probably on a few PowerPoint slides in various courses, but is that enough? One course and some slides? It’s unfortunate, because if faculty need to spend time on something, what more than ethics?

Participants also expressed deficiencies beyond the classroom. While not as frequently expressed as academic training issues, some participants did point to on site supervision as a reason for ethics missteps. A participant reported, “This student did not have quality on site supervision, and as a consequence, got in over their head.” Another participant confirmed this reason, stating “Some students I have observed not getting quality supervision, the professor did not check in about it, and this has led them to boundary issues with clients.” Another participant shared,

Site supervision is hard to account for because it’s so variable from one site to the next. Some students get great supervision, and then others either don’t get it at all or get a bad form of it. And some professors don’t really keep track of supervision on site, and things can happen.

Performance. The third and final attribution theme described the pressure and fear relating to performance that graduate students feel when entering field placement courses. One participant commented, “Students put great pressure on themselves to ‘do a good job.’ The expectations they have for themselves are skewed, and I have seen good students behave in blatantly unethical ways because they are operating from the incorrect perspective.” Several participants described this in terms of students allowing their enthusiasm to blur appropriate boundaries. A participant shared, “One student was overzealous with helping a client and crossed a boundary.” Another participant stated, “The student desired to be of help, but violated a boundary and it became a significant issue.” A third participant shared, “The student was trying to help the client, and was so focused on this aspect that they broke confidentiality by not getting a release of information signed.” The pressure to help clients was

also reflected in a participant who stated, “The student was afraid of not being helpful enough and losing the client. This led to ethics problems.”

Participants also provided evidence that students experience pressure to achieve academic success. Participants described these students as: “The students who are most focused on achieving a grade,” “afraid to fail the course and they want to pass, so they take shortcuts,” “they are trying to be perfect and are afraid to report difficulties they are having because they feel it will affect their grade,” and “Some students are just extremely fixated on grades and pressure themselves to try to get a ‘perfect’ grade, which can end badly.”

Prevention Themes

Education and training. This theme augments the attribution theme of “educational factors.” Participants frequently stated that education and training were very important elements to prevent students from committing ethics violations. Some of these recommendations were general in nature. A participant stated, “Ethics and more ethics...earlier and ongoing in the program,” and another noted, “Design curriculum to focus heavily on ethics skill development.” Another remarked, “Strong education with a focus on ethics,” and another participant noted, “More specific information regarding what is appropriate and expected of professional counselors.” Some participant statements were more specific and focused on training on boundary issues. A participant shared, “Students really need a better understanding based on more education about boundaries,” and another stated “Ethics training regarding boundaries earlier in training.”

Many of these statements called for increased exposure to ethics-decision making models and ethics case studies. One participant succinctly stated, “More training in ethics decision-making models,” while another participant stated, “more time with case analysis and discussion.” Other similar participants statements included, “more education related to ethics case studies,” “scenarios to activate Kohlbergian moral decision-making skills,” “additional coursework on case examples,” and “closer examination of cases.” One participant responded with a statement that provides a suitable summation regarding case studies:

I wonder if having more practice in ethics codes (e.g. ethics scenarios to role play in group supervision where the group members must identify the ethics codes being violated) might give students more background and foundation in what actually is an ethics violation.

Gatekeeping and screening.

A clear theme among participants was that preventing ethics violations may require that counseling faculty prevent inappropriate students from enrolling. This theme supplements the attribution theme of “the person.” The need for counseling programs to better screen students was apparent as a participant commented,

How do we filter who we admit into counseling programs? Administration wants high enrollment, times are tough, so how do you make an argument against admitting someone who may look great on paper but interviews horribly? So a group of students gets into these programs and graduates, but we as a faculty know they shouldn't be in this work.

A participant reinforced this statement, noting, “A lot of this could be avoided if we had better screening of students in the admissions process. But it's really hard to do.” This statement was echoed by a participant who stated, “If students could be examined relevant to their core values and fit for the counseling profession, much of this could be prevented,” and another who stated,

“Screen out applicants who are ill-suited to be counselors.” Other participants reported, “This student should never have been permitted to enroll in the first place,” “better screening,” “earlier screening,” “screened out of program,” and “Regarding student narcissism, is there anything you can do? Other than not admit them in the first place.”

Monitoring. Some participants believed preventing ethics violations required faculty to actively monitor students. This theme complements the attribution theme of “the person.” A participant shared, “Professors should be aware of the motivations, as much as they can be, of their students.” Another participant shared, “The student’s faculty advisor should have provided closer monitoring of this student.” One participant stated, “Early detection is required to ascertain whether students have learned the necessary information.” A participant shared:

We have a committee in our program, where a group of us faculty sit down and go over each student in our program, talking about our impressions of them, how we feel they’re doing...this has really allowed us to be more in touch with how students are doing and address things early.

Several participants stressed that faculty need to be firm with students in the area of ethics, stating “There needs to be strict regulations and rule enforcement,” “Rigorous monitoring,” “Greater monitoring on the part of the faculty,” and “Faculty members need to ‘stick to their guns’ more.” Participants also recommended “Constant review of students,” “Holding students accountable,” and “Students must be watched in a careful and coordinated way, not just giving them grades.”

Personal. Many participants indicated that there is a category of students who commit ethics violations that require personal work, enhancing the attribution theme of “the person.” Not surprisingly, participants described this in therapeutic terms. A participant shared, “Not all students who commit ethics violations are inappropriate for the profession. But they do need some personal development before continuing.” Several other participants expressed the same responses. One shared, “Personal counseling can help students be aware of their own issues and how they play into certain problematic situations.” Another participant stated, “Personal counseling would aid in understanding one’s reasons for wanting to be a counselor in the first place, perhaps shedding light on the student’s ‘blind spots.’” This response was shared by another participant who noted, “Some students need awareness of triggers of countertransference, and resolution therapy.” An additional 14 participants gave responses such as “personal counseling,” “therapeutic counseling,” “psychotherapy,” and “mental health counseling.”

Support. The last prevention theme indicated that some students need increased faculty support. This theme amplifies the attribution theme of “performance.” A participant shared, “Some students just need to feel they can discuss issues and possible ways to address things.” Another participant noted, “One student who committed an ethics violation probably would have been fine if they had expressed questions, doubts, and concerns about their therapeutic judgment prior to starting practicum.” Similarly, a participant noted the importance of addressing issues before beginning in the field, remarking “The student needed to process their anxiety with their advisor before internship began.” Another participant stated, “This student just needed to know that it was okay to fail and they didn’t have to be perfect.” Other participants shared responses such as “Open discussion,” “Expressing they felt in over their head,” and “Increased support

from faculty supervisor and advisor.” One participant expressed that faculty may want to consider support as a part of their job description:

My work with practicum students is helping them understand that a counseling career is hard work, and a journey...I try to alleviate some of the performance demands they put on themselves, because boundaries get blurry for students when they are trying too hard.

Discussion

These findings are a first glimpse into faculty perspectives of student ethics violations. This research revealed that faculty attribute student ethics violations across three primary dimensions: (a) the person, (b) educational factors, and (c) performance. Examining these themes through the lens of attribution theory, several salient elements present themselves relating to locus of control and controllability.

Counseling faculty described trainee ethics violations from both an internal locus and an external locus. Internal included the theme of “the person” and “performance.” Participants described students who committed ethics violations because of deficits in personality and a desire to be perfect. The example of external locus was present in the theme “educational factors,” with participants noting that students sometimes received inadequate advisement and training concerning ethics behavior. When looking at the element of controllability, there appear to be causes within a student’s control, and causes that may not be. Although internal in locus of control, personality deficits could be considered within a student’s control or not, depending on what one believes regarding freedom vs. determinism, proactivity vs. reactivity, homeostasis vs. heterostasis, and most notably, changeability vs. unchangeability (Granello & Young, 2012). For example, some faculty may feel that students with personality or characterological impairment are essentially fixed in the ways in which they think and behave, while others may believe that these students have great potential for change. It bears noting that all participants in this research stated that personality and characterological impairment are best addressed if screening and gatekeeping measures could prevent the enrollment of these students. Causes that would be within a student’s control would be examples given within the theme of “performance.” Unless other extenuating factors were present, a student with a focus on perfect grades could work on controlling this within the context of a field placement course, where the focus is more on developing as a future clinician.

The theme of “educational factors” was external in locus of control, illustrating that students do encounter elements within their academic environments that may hinder ethical behavior. Examples from participants included poor advisement from faculty and a lack of focused and comprehensive ethics training. These examples are largely not within a student’s control; as is the case within almost any program in higher education, students are, in many ways, at the mercy of their professors.

The prevention themes served to both supplement the attribution themes and provide clear pedagogical implications for faculty to consider. From the perspective of controllability, faculty can both control and not control the possible causes of student ethics violations. Within the control of faculty are the elements of the educational program. The participants in this research echoed recommendations in the literature that faculty should begin ethics training early and infuse it throughout an academic program (Corey, Corey, & Callahan, 2005). The authors are in agreement with the participants of this research that ethics training distilled into a single ethics course is not adequate for preparing students. In addition to ethics courses, faculty should

stress ethical decision-making (Calley, 2009) and case studies that emphasize ethical decision-making. (McCarron & Stewart, 2011; McGee, 2005) with students as frequently as possible across the academic program. Although the authors realize that there are challenges to adding content to course curricula, the challenging nature of ethics combined with the importance of ethical competence are compelling reasons to try. Students who are required to consistently think through ethics dilemmas in the context of ethics codes are preparing for field placement courses and the experiences they will encounter as clinicians. Faculty should also make clear to students that anyone is capable of violating ethics codes, not just “bad” or “impaired” people, particularly because situations involving ethics often are unclear and involve nuance and context.

This research has demonstrated that some students may require more than education in order to move toward ethics competence. As such, faculty should intentionally review the progress of students as they progress through coursework and toward field placement. As is the case in many programs, student progress committees are one method to having a mechanism in place that allows faculty to review and discuss students. This degree of review would also assist faculty in being aware of students experiencing personal struggles. Faculty could then encourage students to address these concerns sooner rather than later, possibly preventing the student from entering into ethically problematic situations. In addition, this research has demonstrated that faculty should consider the interpersonal dimension of supporting students. Participants in this study expressed that many students enter field placement courses with anxiety, insecurity, and misplaced motivations. Beyond teaching students technique, theory, and case conceptualization, faculty must encourage students to give voice to their concerns, and communicate to students that their focus should be on developing as a clinician, not the achievement of a perfect grade.

Faculty should not only monitor students’ progress, they should also keep clear lines of communications open with students’ site supervisors. Several participants in this research emphasized the importance of on site supervision and the risks of faculty not remaining vigilant in this area. Site supervision is a critical component of any trainee’s development as a clinician, and faculty who are teaching field placement courses should make concerted efforts to reach out to supervisors. Faculty should also regularly check in with students to determine how the student perceives the supervision they are receiving.

The authors recognize, like the participants of this research, that personality or characterological challenges may result in students having great difficulty in doing the interpersonal work of a counselor. Personality deficits and characterological impairment will always be present to some degree within the students of an academic program, and faculty must determine how to navigate these challenges in the context of what is best for the profession and the student. According to participants of this research, the best practice is to try to prevent such students from enrolling, meaning controllability for faculty exists at the admissions stage. While not certain, faculty can exert some control over who enters the academic program, and the literature offers guidelines and recommendations on ways to do this (e.g. Ziomek-Daigle & Christensen, 2010). Faculty who are aware and informed of the students in their program from the beginning of the admissions process are more likely to be in tune with the students in their program and able to intervene before an ethical violation has occurred (Gaubatz & Vera, 2002).

Future Research

The authors believe that this exploratory research illuminates many areas for future study, including replicating this research with a broader sample of faculty from different helping professions. Another concentration for future research could include examining ethics violations from the student perspective, allowing an understanding of the viewpoint of students who commit ethics violations. Other directions for future research could examine the number and types of ethics violations occurring across graduate programs such as counseling, psychology, social work, and marriage and family therapy, similar to the study by Tryon (2000). Current research in this area could give a clearer and more current picture of what is happening within the training programs of the helping professions. A final area for future research should examine attributions given for specific types of ethics violations (e.g. sexual misconduct, breaking confidentiality) to investigate any relationships that may exist between type of ethics violation and reasons given.

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