

Ethical Transgressions of School Psychology Graduate Students: A Critical Incidents Survey

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This study examines ethical transgressions of school psychology graduate students using the critical incidents technique. Program directors of school psychology programs listed in the *Directory of School Psychology Graduate Programs* (Thomas, 1998) were asked to describe ethical violations committed by their students during the past 5 years. Violations dealt primarily with issues involving confidentiality, competence, and professional and academic honesty. Directors believed that the majority of students would not find most ethical issues problematic. Implications for training are discussed.

Key words: ethical violations, graduate students, graduate training

Psychology graduate programs provide ethics education for their students to ensure that these students will behave in an ethical manner to protect the people they serve (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998). However, knowledge of what is ethical behavior does not ensure that graduate students will always behave ethically. Studies by Bernard and Jara (1986); Betan and Stanton (1997); and Pope, Tabachnick, and Keith-Spiegel (1987) found that some students indicated that they would not report ethical violations of other graduate students. A survey of graduate students from 40 training programs in clinical psychology found that 95% of student respondents knew of peers who were so impaired as to affect their professional functioning, and 49% were aware of unethical behaviors by peers (Mearns & Allen, 1991). Only 42% confronted the impaired peers, and only 28% confronted peers behaving unethically.

More recently, a critical incidents survey of counseling and clinical psychology training directors from 75 American Psychological Association (APA)-accredited programs yielded 89 occurrences of ethical transgressions by their students (Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Lang, 1997). The highest percentages of violations reported involved confidentiality (25%), professional boundaries (20%), and plagiarism (15%). Fifty-four percent of graduate students committing ethical violations had taken an ethics course.

Thus far, research conducted on graduate student ethical conduct has focused on clinical and counseling psychology students. Because they often assess and treat children and adolescents in school settings, school psychologists might encounter ethical dilemmas that students working with other populations do not (Jacob-Timm & Hartshorne, 1998). This research sought to extend the critical incident technique used by Fly et al. (1997) to the study of ethical transgressions of school psychology graduate students. The critical incidents technique is used in exploratory studies to gather "extreme behaviors in defined situations" (p. 492). This technique was used in developing the original APA ethics code (Canter, Bennett, Jones, & Nagy, 1994) and studying ethical incidents in the supervision of student research (Goodyear, Crego, & Johnson, 1992) and relationships with former clients (Anderson & Kitchener, 1996), as well as to obtain information about ethically challenging circumstances experienced by school psychologists (Jacob-Timm, 1999). Documentation of critical incidents focuses attention on issues that might be addressed in training.

In addition to querying school psychology program directors about ethical transgressions of their graduate students, this study also asked the directors to indicate how problematic 10 ethical behaviors were for their graduate students. This was done to provide further information about ethical behaviors that might warrant special or increased emphasis during graduate training.

METHOD

Participants

Participants were directors of school psychology graduate programs listed in the *Directory of School Psychology Graduate Programs* (Thomas, 1998). Forty percent ($n = 85$) of a sample of 214 school psychology graduate program directors returned questionnaires. Five program directors returned noncompleted surveys. Of the 80 programs with completed questionnaires, 63% ($n = 50$) offered an ethics course. Of the 72 programs reporting accreditation status, 18 were accredited by both the National Association of School Psychologists (NASP) and the APA, 31 were accredited by NASP only, and 3 were APA accredited only. Of the 78 programs that reported degrees offered, 36 (46%) indicated that the doctorate was the highest degree offered, 27 (35%) stated that the specialist degree was the highest

degree offered, and 15 (19%) offered only a master's degree. Programs averaged 37 students ($SD = 21.40$) and 3.61 full-time equivalent faculty members ($SD = 2.16$).

Questionnaire

A three-part school psychology graduate student ethical transgression questionnaire was used in this study. Part 1 requested program description of degrees offered, accreditation, location of program, number of students, and number of full-time equivalent faculty. Like the Fly et al. (1997) questionnaire, Part 2 asked for descriptions of up to three graduate student incidents involving ethical violations or violations of departmental standards within the past 5 years. For each incident, the following information was requested: incident description, how it was brought to the program director's attention, whether the student had taken an ethics course, and outcome of incident. Part 3 asked program directors to rate how problematic they believe graduate students find the following situations: maintaining client confidentiality, maintaining professional boundaries, accurately representing credentials, obtaining consent for treatment, reporting colleagues' ethical violations, reporting data accurately, taking appropriate publication credit, providing appropriate citations of others' work, maintaining test security, and resisting pressure to cheat on exams. Participants were asked to respond to each item on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*not problematic*) to 5 (*extremely problematic*). Items were chosen to reflect standards from the APA (1992) ethical principles (including general standards) that were found to be problematic for graduate students in previous research (Bernard & Jara, 1986; Betan & Stanton, 1997; Fly et al., 1997; Pope et al., 1987).

Procedure

School psychology graduate student ethical transgression questionnaires were sent to directors of school psychology graduate programs listed in the *Directory of School Psychology Graduate Programs* (Thomas, 1998). Critical incidents from Part 2 of returned questionnaires were typed onto cards and given separately to three school psychology doctoral student judges, who were instructed to classify each incident according to APA ethical standards and assign incidents that did not appear to fit the standards to an "Other" category. Following procedures established by Hill (1993), agreement between two judges was accepted as the final categorization. If all three judges disagreed, the incident was reviewed by two doctoral-level clinical psychologists, who determined the final categorization. The doctoral-level judges reviewed incidents categorized as Other to confirm that the incidents belonged in this category. Also, similar incidents in the Other category were grouped together by these two judges.

Means and standard deviations for program directors' answers to the 10-item Part 3 were calculated.

RESULTS

Critical Ethical Incidents

Two of the three doctoral student judges agreed on categorization of 70 of the 77 incidents, representing a 91% agreement of at least two judges. Coefficient alphas for each pair of judges were .60 for Judge 1 and Judge 2, .50 for Judge 1 and Judge 3, and .61 for Judge 2 and Judge 3. Critical incidents were placed by the judges into six APA Ethics Code categories and an Other category. The percentage of incidents in each category along with examples are presented next.

General standards. The APA (1992) General Standards apply to all types of psychologists and address a variety of ethical issues. Occurrences in this category represented 32.5% ($n = 25$) of all reported incidents. Providing services outside boundaries of competence (APA Standard 1.04) received the highest tally of critical incidents ($n = 9$) of all of the general standards. Examples of this behavior included "Student tested elementary students during practicum without the knowledge of the field supervisor" and "Worked beyond competency in therapy case with sex abuse victim." The second most reported ($n = 4$) General Standards critical incident was sexual harassment (Standard 1.11). Incidents included "A female student was offended by notes from a male student" and "Two students drinking at conference—inappropriate behavior with female."

Other incidents. This category had the second highest percentage of incidents (22%, $n = 17$) and involved behaviors that, in the opinion of the judges, were not addressed by any of the APA Ethical Standards. Five incidents involved allegedly illegal activities such as "A student changed her grades in courses and also took money from the university" and "Student falsified (forged) a letter of recommendation used in entry/admissions process." Professional dishonesty ($n = 4$) involved the following: "Student was enrolled in assessment course. From protocols that were submitted, it was apparent that student had fabricated some assignment protocols" or "Student not attending field placement; fabricating hours." Incidents of cheating ($n = 4$) were also classified under the "Other" category (e.g., "Student cheated on prelims," "Student cheated on course examination").

Confidentiality. Incidents ($n = 13$; 17% of all transgressions) in this category involved failure to maintain the privacy and confidentiality of others (Section 5 of the APA Standards), as in the following examples involving APA Standards 5.04 (Maintenance of Records) and 5.05 (Disclosures): "Student transporting files for a

fellow student left the files in a public place and files were lost including confidential information,” and “A student in our clinic practicum was talking about the bizarre behavior of his child client. The boy’s mother overheard the negative comments and reported the incident to the school director.”

Research and publishing. Incidents ($n = 12$; 16% of all incidents) in this category involved failure to adhere to Section 6 of the APA Standards, which addresses teaching, training supervision, research, and publishing. Occurrences in this category primarily involved plagiarism (APA Standard 6.22): “Student plagiarized a number of pages of his dissertation,” “Student enrolled in a course as a nonmatriculated student and committed an egregious act of plagiarism. He lifted whole paragraphs from journal articles, never giving credit,” and “Student copied another student’s paper.”

Resolution of ethical issues. Five percent ($n = 4$) of incidents involved APA Standards Section 8, which deals with resolving ethical issues such as the following example (Standard 8.07: Improper Complaints):

A student reported that another student made up responses on a WISC [Wechsler Intelligence Scale for Children] and turned it in as a completed protocol. The student who was reported denied making up the responses and an investigation revealed that the child had been tested.

Public statements. An additional 5% ($n = 4$) of incidents involved public statements (APA Standards Section 3) such as the following false statement (Standard 3.03): “A student misrepresented herself as an intern when she wasn’t.”

Therapy. Finally, 3% ($n = 2$) of incidents entailed failure to obtain informed consent for therapy (APA Standard 4.02): “Counseled student without parent permission.”

Critical incidents were brought to the school psychology program director’s attention most often by other faculty ($n = 21$; 27%), followed by field supervisors ($n = 18$; 23%) or other students ($n = 16$; 21%). Assignment of corrective actions was the most common sanction for transgressions ($n = 34$; 44%), and in 13 cases (17%) the student was dismissed from the program, 10 students (13%) left the program voluntarily, and 5 (6%) were placed on probation. In 52 of the 77 cases (67.5%), the student who committed the transgression had taken an ethics course.

A chi-square analysis was performed to determine the relation between having taken or not having taken an ethics course and type of transgression. Because none

of the students who had not taken an ethics course committed violations of APA Standards Sections 3 (Public Statements) and 4 (Therapy), these categories were omitted from the analysis. No significant relation was found between having or not having an ethics course and type of transgression, $\chi^2(4, 71) = 6.46$.

Another analysis did not find a significant relation between the highest degree offered by the program and the type of ethical violation, $\chi^2(4, 59) = 4.89$. Because master's degree students were not represented in all violation categories, the analysis was done using students in programs in which the highest degree offered was either a doctorate or a specialist degree.

Rating Scale Results

Of the 77 directors, 75 rated the extent to which they believed that graduate students find 10 ethical issues problematic. Internal consistency alpha for the 10 items was .81. Fifteen directors completed the instrument twice, yielding a 1-week test-retest reliability coefficient of .93. Table 1 presents the means, standard deviations, and percentage of responding directors indicating that the listed ethical issues are not problematic or only slightly problematic. There were no significant differences in ratings based on the number of critical incidents reported, $F(30, 183) = 1.07$, avail-

TABLE 1
Means, Standard Deviations, and Percentage of School Psychology Program Directors
Reporting That Listed Ethical Issues Are Either Not or Slightly Problematic
for Graduate Students

<i>Ethical Issue</i>	<i>M^a</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>% of Directors Reporting Not or Slightly Problematic for Students^b</i>
Maintaining confidentiality	1.95	.88	74.7
Maintaining professional boundaries	2.04	.91	69.3
Accurately representing credentials	1.53	.78	85.3
Obtaining consent for assessment, treatment, and research	1.59	.81	85.3
Reporting ethical violations by other graduate students	2.65	1.13	40.0
Accurately reporting data	1.37	.63	94.7
Taking publication credit only for work performed	1.28	.58	96.0
When writing papers, giving appropriate citations	1.81	.82	80.0
Maintaining test security	1.85	.91	77.3
Resisting pressures to cheat on exams	1.71	.80	84.0

^aBased on 75 directors' ratings on 5-point scales where higher ratings indicate more problematic issues. ^bPercentage responding with a 1 or 2 rating.

ability of a specific course in ethics, $F(10, 59) = .70$, or departmental location (inside or outside a department of education), $F(20, 118) = 1.14$.

DISCUSSION

Results of this survey indicate that ethics education should place particular emphasis on issues of confidentiality, competence, and professional and academic honesty. Results are similar to those obtained by Fly et al. (1997) with clinical and counseling psychology graduate students. Other researchers (Haas, Malouf, & Mayerson, 1986; Jacob-Timm, 1999; Pope & Vetter, 1992) have found that practicing professionals encounter and have difficulties with similar issues.

Various authors (Nagle, 1987; Plante, 1995; Welfel, 1992) stressed the importance of an ethics education that emphasizes sensitivity to ethical issues and ethical reasoning. The majority of students committing ethical transgressions in this study had taken an ethics course and presumably were taught ethical reasoning. Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (1998) provided a 9-step ethical decision-making procedure. Some students and professionals have difficulty with the final step: implementing the ethical decision. As Welfel (1992) indicated, "Studies of ... ethical decision making point to substantial percentages of students and graduates who are not willing to carry out the ethical choice" (p. 188). A number of studies have found discrepancies between what students and professionals know they should do and what they actually would do (Bernard & Jara, 1986; Betan & Stanton, 1997; Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, Witley, & Washburn, 1998; Smith, McGuire, Abbott, & Blau, 1991). Personal preferences and practical considerations sometimes take precedence over ethical considerations. Unethical behavior sometimes has its own rewards, such as avoiding inconveniences or gaining some advantage. Ethics education can inform about correct actions, but it might not be able to reduce the rewards associated with some unethical behaviors. Surveillance and punishment of unethical behavior can counteract partially the motivation to behave unethically, but not all people who behave unethically are caught and sanctioned. Research must be conducted to determine the most effective ways to counter motivation to behave unethically.

Directors of school psychology programs in this study believed that most students do not find various ethical issues problematic, with the exception of reporting ethical violations by their colleagues. Similar findings were obtained by Welfel (1992), who surveyed internship directors. Thus, those who train psychology graduate students believe that most do not, and perhaps will not, have difficulty dealing with diverse ethical situations.

Results of this survey indicate that having students take a course in ethics does not ensure that they will behave ethically. It might be that ethical issues must be addressed in most courses across the curriculum, including practica and intern-

ships, so students learn that ethical decision making is an active, ongoing activity that applies to almost everything psychologists do. As Meara, Schmidt, and Day (1996) stated, "A specialized course in ethics allows in-depth consideration of issues, but its relative compartmentalization within the curriculum can lead to inert knowledge" (p. 66). Active, public ethical decision making must be modeled and taught broadly. Everyone who teaches a graduate psychology course should not only know the APA ethical standards but apply them in frequent discussions of ethical issues arising in his or her specialty area. On entering graduate study in psychology, students should be presented with a copy of the APA Ethical Principles and asked to sign a pledge indicating that they will abide by them. This would indicate to students that faculty members consider ethical behavior important and that they expect students to behave ethically. A formal ethics course should be offered early in the course of study to serve as a basis for the continual application of ethical principles in other courses and discussions with faculty. One goal of such a program would be to make ethical decision making almost automatic by immersing students in an environment where this behavior is practiced regularly.

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