Ethical Issues in Supervising Psychology Trainees: A Scoping Review

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Abstract— Supervision is an essential component in the training of psychology students, where trainees become skilled at attending to ethical considerations. Through ongoing mentoring and timely feedback, trainees develop a deep understanding of ethical principles, fostering a commitment to professional integrity and clients' well-being. At the same time, ineffective and unethical supervision practices may not only negatively affect the professional development of trainees but also the delivery of client outcomes. This scoping review examines the ethical issues encountered in the supervision of psychology trainees using Kitchener's (1984) five ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and fidelity. Using the Arksey and O'Malley framework, this review identifies and categorizes key ethical dilemmas experienced by trainees and supervisors. Issues related to autonomy were finding the right balance between independence and guidance. Concerns about beneficence are related to organizational or systemic challenges. Nonmaleficence issues are mostly about direct experiences that cause harm such as harassment, microaggressions, and even sexual misconduct. Justice-related challenges include fair and equitable treatment practices including multicultural awareness and sensitivity. Issues on fidelity are typically related to the supervisor's inability to honor commitments which erodes the foundation of trust in the supervisory relationship. This review emphasizes the importance of intentional ethics training programs in supervisory practice. This research would contribute to the ongoing discussions on addressing ethical issues in supervision and improving training programs.

Keywords— ethical issues, psychology trainees, scoping review, supervision.

I. INTRODUCTION

Supervision defined

Clinical supervision is a formal and structured service provided by a senior or qualified mental health practitioner to develop competencies and enhance the problem-solving abilities of the supervisees (Barnett, 2017; Milne, 2007; Pakdaman et al., 2014). Being supervised is an integral part of the training of future psychologists (Barnett, 2017; Ferreira-Correia, 2016; Pakdaman et al., 2014) where a safe space is provided for reflection and skill development, allowing identification and resolution of ethical dilemmas, and promoting professional growth and self-care (Harrar et al., 1990; Falender et al., 2004). Effective training outcomes lead to increased awareness of ethical considerations, familiarity with professional standards of care, and better preparation for identification and addressing possible ethical challenges (Tsai, 2013). Ultimately, by being keen on ethical considerations, the client's welfare will be protected. Adherence to the code of ethics ensures that supervisors are aware of the potential ethical and legal concerns that may arise during the supervisory process. It likewise guarantees that supervision

is practiced ethically. Unethical supervisory practices can have significant consequences for the trainee and the clients under their care (January et al., 2014).

The fundamental ethical principles

The fundamental ethical principles that underpin supervision are rooted in the core ethical principles of the profession. Kitchener's (1984) ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice, and fidelity provide a foundation for ethical practice in supervision by guiding how supervisors can support the professional growth and ethical development of trainees. Autonomy underscores the importance of promoting the supervisee's rights to make informed and voluntary decisions which promotes their ability to handle ethical dilemmas independently. Beneficence requires supervisors to act in the best interest of their trainees by providing constructive feedback and safeguarding the physical and psychological well-being of trainees. Nonmaleficence is avoiding any actions that might cause harm to trainees, may it be physical or psychological harm by protecting the trainees from situations that may go beyond their current abilities or be exposed to distressing situations without adequate support. Justice ensures that trainees are treated fairly and receive equal treatment and resources regardless of background or personal characteristics. Fidelity highlights the importance of trust and loyalty in the supervisory relationship. Supervisors are expected to be reliable and consistent while maintaining confidentiality, fulfilling promises, and upholding the profession's standards.

Using this model helps frame the ethical challenges in supervision work and provides a structured approach to mitigating ethical risks while enhancing the professional development of trainees. By integrating these ethical principles, supervisors can create a learning environment that upholds professional integrity, fosters ethical competence, and ensures high-quality training experiences for future psychologists.

However, despite these principles and proposed operationalizations, certain supervisory practices continue to face ethical dilemmas. These dilemmas or issues may arise when these principles conflict with other considerations or are difficult to uphold in practice, which becomes a challenge in these professional relationships.

Ethical Issues in Supervision

Previous studies have identified and discussed common ethical challenges in supervision that can have an impact on the quality of training and professional development of students training in the field of psychology. These challenges would not only have an effect on the learning outcomes of the trainees but also professional development and ethical conduct of trainees.

Inadequate evaluation feedback and monitoring of supervisees is a frequently reported ethical issue in the supervision of psychology trainees. Studies indicate that 51% of supervisees report experiencing at least one ethical violation by their supervisors, with inadequate evaluation and monitoring (January et al., 2014). There is a lack of feedback and sessions are prematurely terminated when there is no pressing concern (Hansell, 2017). Roles and responsibilities are not clear at the onset of supervision creating confusion and mismatched expectations in the supervisory relationship (Powers, 2016; Özyiğit, 2022).

Establishing professional boundaries and managing complex multiple relationships can be very challenging in doing supervision work. This is particularly problematic at the postdoctoral level, where fellows function similarly to junior colleagues (Self et al., 2018). Poor professional boundaries compromise supervisory relationships, decrease supervisee confidence, and degrade feedback quality (Powers, 2016)

Confidentiality is the cornerstone of an ethical supervision practice; however, various concerns remain to challenge its implementation. Supervisors should strike a balance between protecting client confidentiality and discussing the supervisee's clinical work for the purpose of training and development. Supervisors must obtain informed consent from clients to disclose information. Privacy of supervision sessions can also be compromised when the physical conditions of the counseling room are susceptible to being overheard by others (Özyiğit, 2022). This becomes a complex issue for conducting supervision in nontraditional settings such as doing home based counseling, where boundaries tend to be less defined (Dobson, 2019). Given its important role in establishing professional trust, the erosion of confidentiality can negatively impact both the supervisory relationship and the overall quality of training and service delivery.

Another ethical issue in the supervision of psychology trainees, which is particularly relevant in today's diverse and multicultural society, is handling multicultural concerns effectively. This competency is crucial in supervisors handling trainees working in nontraditional settings such as homebased counseling and trainees from marginalized groups such as black or LGBT individuals who have experienced microaggression and homophobia (Bautista-Biddle et al., 2021; Dobson, 2019)

Supervisors must ensure they have the competence to provide appropriate guidance to the supervisee. Ethical issues may arise when the supervisor lacks the skills or knowledge to effectively mentor the supervisee. In a study by Hansell (2017), it was reported by psychologists with supervision experience that the common concern is the lack of direct observation with clinical work and monitoring of client progress, treatments and supervision contracts. Likewise, supervisors have difficulty managing their time between counseling students and supervision duties (Ellis et al., 2014; Özyiğit 2022). Supervisors may also engage in premature supervision practices while lacking in training, competence, and experience (Hendricks et al., 2021).

When trainees are exposed to situations that may cause harm such as microaggressions or harassment without providing multiculturally competent supervision and support can not only affect the supervisory relationship but also the wellbeing of trainees (Bautista-Biddle et al., , 2021).

Another ethical issue is the formation of the supervisory relationship in the supervision process. Cultural differences, power imbalance, or other aspects that may have an impact on the establishment of a trusting and safe supervisory relationship may also pose ethical challenges. Being treated respectfully, harassment of students, and asking for personal information regarding the supervisee's treatment are also reported (January et al., 2014). Threats to well-being can also happen in the context of supervision, such as due to abandonment and a lack of

emotional support from the supervisor. Being exploited or treated unethically can also cause distress to the supervisees (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014)

There are a number of reasons why ethical issues or dilemmas could happen in the context of supervision. Copeland (2002) identified organizational context as a possible source of ethical concerns where impositions from the environment could get in conflict with professional responsibilities. Given that the organization has decision-making capabilities over organizational processes and policies which may be different from the standards of practice. Rodriguez (2017) had a similar finding where conflicts between legal, ethical and organizational principles can occur. Additionally, Özyiğit (2022) identified deficiency in supervisee skills and supervisor workload as factors affecting ethical decision-making in the supervision process.

Clinical supervision involves the relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee that calls for a strong ethical foundation. However, the complex nature of the supervisor-supervisee dynamic poses various ethical challenges that need to be addressed. Ineffective supervision may potentially cause harm to supervisees and their respective clients. Despite the reality that ethical challenges and dilemmas are happening in the context of supervision, studies focusing on this specific aspect are quite limited, particularly empirical studies. Most of the studies are conceptual in nature.

Contextualizing this study in the current situation in the Philippines, supervision is still taking the back seat when it comes to the continuing professional development programs of mental health professionals which could have a negative effect not just on the quality of services delivered but also on their growth as professionals which could likewise imply that certain ethical challenges are left unattended. This study aims to synthesize the current literature on the ethical issues that arise in the clinical supervision of psychology trainees by gathering data to answer the research question '"What are the ethical issues or dilemmas encountered in supervision?" By answering this question, current gaps in existing research on this topic will be identified, which could potentially determine potential areas for policy initiatives.

II. METHODOLOGY

To systematically address the research question, the Arksey and O'Malley framework was used to look into the scope of ethical issues in clinical supervision. Likewise, this framework helps identify, categorize, and synthesize themes. Together, these methodologies provided the foundation for the scoping review, ensuring a systematic and robust analysis.

Data search strategy

A comprehensive search strategy was conducted to identify relevant studies. The following databases were searched: APA, EBSCO, Google Scholar, and Proquest. The search string includes "ethics OR (unethical) OR (ethical dilemma) OR (ethical issues) OR (unethical) AND (clinical supervision) OR (supervision) OR (training) AND (psychology students) OR (psychology trainees)"

Data screening

In the initial data search, the titles and abstracts were screened according to relevance to the identified topic. The inclusion criteria from the studies were: articles that are available in English, in full text, published between January 2014 and August 2024. The exclusion criteria that were applied in the search were: studies published in languages other than English, not available in full text, and studies that were published before January 2014 and after August 2024. Additionally, studies that did not mention ethical issues or dilemmas related to the supervision of psychology students were excluded. Books were also excluded.

Data analysis

To analyze the data, the researchers independently reviewed the extracted data and identified possible violations using Kitchener's (1984) framework. To assess the quality of the studies included and avoid potential biases, external validators were enlisted to evaluate the methodological rigor, ensuring an unbiased and thorough data assessment. Discrepancies were discussed and resolved to refine the coding scheme. Issues that overlap with other ethical principles are classified under the principle that appears to be most central to the issues.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents the scoping review to explore the literature on the ethical issues or dilemmas encountered in the supervision of psychology students or trainees. The identification of studies followed an iterative process.

Ten studies were included in this review. Four articles used the survey and quantitative design, three qualitative studies, one explanatory sequential mixed methods research design, one case vignette and one article. Most of the authors who conducted the studies are based in the USA, one from Turkey and one from South Africa. Most of the research examines supervisee experiences, with only two studies specifically investigating supervisor perspectives. Participants range from graduate students to postdoctoral fellows. Publication timeframe indicates emerging scholarly attention to supervision ethics suggesting gaps in study locale and methodologies.

The ethical issues or dilemmas in supervising psychology students were categorized based on Kitchener's (1984) ethical principles.

Table 1: Ethical issues/dilemmas in supervising psychology trainees

Ethical Principle	Ethical Issue
AUTONOMY	Supervisees take responsibility for their supervision (Dobson, 2019)
	Supervisee nondisclosure of ethical issues or safety concerns (Dobson, 2019)
	Lack of supervision contract including multiple roles of supervisor (Hansell, 2017)
	Feels invalidated by supervisor when sought supervision (Rodriguez, 2017)
	Dual role (Powers, 2016)
	Navigating the dual role of evaluator and mentor or being supervisee and supervisor at the same time (Self et al., 2018)

	Navigating role boundaries such as mentorship, collaboration and acquaintance (Self et al., 2018)
BENEFICENCE	Lack of direct observation of clinical work and monitoring of patient progress (Hansell, 2017)
	Lack of orientation on evaluation process and feedback (Hansell, 2017)
	Refusing to use evidence-based treatments (January et al., 2014)
	Not giving feedback about grades (January et al., 2014)
	Not adequate and not timely supervision and training (January et al., 2014)
	Dealing with emergencies (Özyiğit, 2022)
	Addressing unprofessional behaviors of supervisees (Özyiğit, 2022)
	Lack of needed moral support (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014)
	Deficits in competencies (Powers, 2016)
	Providing honest and constructive feedback while maintaining professional boundaries (Self et al., 2018)
NONMALEFICENCE	Experiences of microaggression, such as homophobic remarks (Bautista-Biddle et al., 2021)
	Threat to physical and emotional safety such as harassment (Bautista-Biddle et al., 2021)
	Dismissive approach of supervisors (Bautista-Biddle et al., 2021)
	Boundary issues and safety concerns (Dobson, 2019)
	Premature engagement in supervision work (Hendricks et al., 2021)
	Handling multiple relationships (Özyiğit, 2022)
	Maintaining professional and supportive supervisory relationships without overstepping boundaries (Özyiğit, 2022)
	Experiences of exploitation (Löfström & Pyhältö, 2014)
	Sexual harassment and relationships (Powers, 2016)
	Poor professional boundaries (Powers, 2016)
JUSTICE	Not giving feedback about grades (January et al., 2014)
	Evaluating supervisees that would focus on their strengths and areas of improvement without prejudice (Özyiğit, 2022)
	Multicultural awareness and competence (Powers, 2016)
	Managing power dynamics in their supervisory relationships (Self et al., 2018)
FIDELITY	Negative supervisory relationship needing supervision replacement (Dobson, 2019)
	No live or recorded supervision relies heavily on supervisee disclosure (Dobson, 2019)
	Feeling disconnected or inattentive (Dobson, 2019)
	Miscommunication and conflict over ethical concerns (Dobson, 2019)
	Limited supervision times (Hansell, 2017)

	Lack of compliance with regulatory and professional practice guidelines (Hendricks et al., 2021)
	Confidentiality and privacy (Özyiğit, 2022)
	Managing ethical issues in using technology (Özyiğit, 2022)

Note: Some ethical issues may overlap multiple principles but have been categorized under the principle that appears most central to the issue.

The issues were categorized into themes using the lens of the five ethical principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice and fidelity. Issues on autonomy were about striking a balance between respecting supervisee's independence while providing necessary guidance such as attending to dual roles which creates boundary challenges when trainees simultaneously function as supervisor and mentor. Issues related to beneficence include systemic deficiencies with various studies identifying issues on insufficient observation of clinical work, inadequate feedback mechanisms and failure to provide timely supervision. Issues on nonmaleficence include trainees exposure to harassment, microaggressions, exploitations, sexual misconduct, poor professional boundaries. Issues on justice include biased evaluation practices, insufficient multicultural awareness and problematic power dynamics. There are fewer identified issues on justice which could indicate that less attention on this particular principle suggesting a gap in literature. Issues on fidelity include supervisor's inability to honor commitments because of unavailability, inattentiveness during supervision, abandonment of supervisees and breaches in confidentiality. Some ethical issues overlap reflecting the complex nature of supervisory relationships and responsibilities.

Organizing these issues using the five ethical principles provides for understanding and addressing the concerns of supervising psychology trainees suggesting the need for reforms in supervisor training, implementation of contracts, and improved multicultural competence to create a more effective and ethical supervisory practice.

IV. CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This study presents the ethical issues or dilemmas in supervising psychology trainees through the analytical lens of Kitchener's (1984) five ethical principles. The findings highlight the need for a more intentional supervisory practice that upholds the principles of autonomy, beneficence, nonmaleficence, justice and fidelity. Likewise, the analysis reveals that the principles of autonomy and nonmaleficence are frequently more common discussions in literature but justice receives less attention. This uneven focus suggests potential areas for further research.

It is therefore recommended that training in supervision programs must emphasize the need for a thorough discussion on ethical principles. Contracts are important in clarifying roles, responsibilities and boundaries. Likewise, training in multicultural competence would be helpful in preventing harm to the trainees. Regular audits of supervisory practices to ensure alignment of ethical standards increases not just compliance but adherence.

A general limitation of this study is the lack of empirical studies conducted and the lack of local literature focusing on the Philippine setting that looks into the supervision process and ethical practices of supervisors. It is

recommended that additional empirical studies be conducted to specifically locate and identify ethical issues and challenges in supervision. Additionally, looking into external factors that could potentially impede the decision-making process in supervision is suggested.

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