

Trainee Psychological Counselors' Understanding of Ethics

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ABSTRACT: *The Personal values and professional ethical codes are primary resources for practicing psychological counselors. Ethical dilemmas occur when personal values and professional ethical rules are incompatible. We examined the trainee counselors' understanding of professional ethics. This qualitative study used vignette analysis with 68 undergraduate Turkish students. Using vignettes, the trainees indicated their approaches towards confidentiality, romantic relationships with former clients, curiosity, relationship boundaries, information sharing, self-disclosure, respect for privacy, and reports to third parties. Results revealed the need for ethics education and showed that many trainees would have difficulty with regard to identifying ethical dilemmas.*

Keywords: *Ethics, Counselor Trainees, Counselor Education, Dilemmas*

I. INTRODUCTION

Counseling undergraduate degree is a sufficient degree to be a counselor in Turkey [1]. Even though masters and doctoral levels of training are provided, counselors mostly have a bachelor's degree in Turkey [2]. Counseling programs are standardized by the Turkish Council of Higher Education (TCHE). In Turkey, even though counseling training programs are called Psychological Counseling and Guidance degree, mainly the curricula of these programs are created to train school counselors [1]. Turkish counselors mostly work in school settings [1]. Therefore, primarily work with students, school staff, and families, it is important to determine trainees' understanding of an optimal ethical perspective and behavior, as they experience various cases and clients of varying ages and backgrounds [3]. It is highly possible that problems occur if in ethical dilemmas, trainees' personal values and professional ethical standards are in conflict [4].

Actually, the main ethical concern in counseling is whether counselors' behaviors and attitudes adhere to moral values and norms [5,6, 7]. The trainee counselors develop personal values, phenomenological views, and beliefs about life, relationships, and professions, based on their cultural and religious perspectives and both counselors' and the clients' religious and spiritual beliefs may impact the process of counseling [8]. Counselors should have value systems about their professional applications in Turkey based on a common ground. Since conflicts in this regard stem from differences in values, professional ethical values are transformed into ethical codes, which include written rules that determine counselors' actions [9].

Regardless of the nature of organizations (e.g., schools, universities, and research centers), counselors are required to learn and adhere to these codes, which guide their actions and decision-making in Turkey [10]. However, Verges emphasize the importance of the nature of the context in which counselor works since the problems, dilemmas, decision making processes and behaviors may change due to context [11]. Indeed, Lambie and his colleagues indicate that ethical and legal knowledge decrease by age and school based experience, thus offer recertification process for school counselors to renovate their knowledge [3]. It is important for counselors and counselor candidates to know and adhere to professional standards, so that they can behave ethically [12]. However, counselor trainees' educational development with regard to ethics and understanding professional ethics remain open for study in Turkey [13]. This research could create awareness regarding trainee counselors' phenomenological constructions of ethics and ethical dilemmas and, by clarifying trainees' needs, provide important preventive information to counselors and educators.

Counseling professionals have difficulties perceiving the different social realities in Turkey, due to differences between traditional and modern belief systems [14]. Similar to global trends, professional ethical studies in counseling in Turkey are particularly important because of the conflicts caused by cultural differences [15]. Moreover, Bond mention "ethical mindfulness" in ethical decision-making is not simply knowing and applying standards, but it is more importantly internalizing them [6]. This study is aimed at determining trainee counselors' understanding of ethics. Similar to the functions of the American Counseling Association [16], American School Counselor Association [17], British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), and Australian Counselling Association; the Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Association [10] determines Turkey's ethical codes and has identified six main principles that members should adopt. These are competency, honesty, sensitivity and respectfulness, sensitivity to individual and cultural differences, social responsibility, and professional and scientific responsibility.

Sivis-Cetinkaya claimed that although Turkish psychological counseling education structure is equivalent to the structure in the United States [18], when we compare ACA and TPCGA, Turkish ethical codes seem to be more limited and vague. However, TPCGA ethical codes are one of the significant documents in Turkey [10, 16]. Therefore, these regulations are aimed at safeguarding clients' and counselors' rights and the relationship between these parties and ensuring a sense of responsibility and trust within this relationship. Counselors should be aware of the potential risks of their unethical behaviors towards clients [16,17, 7, 10].

Personal values and professional ethical codes are primary resources guiding psychological counselors' professional conduct [4]. However, trainee counselors may be unaware of or neglect the importance of the immediate and long-term impact of their actions [8, 3]. Ethical education as a separate course for psychological counselors in Turkey's higher education context began recently [19]. The Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs [20] and TCHE supported ethics courses [19]. Literature in the United States shows, offering a separated ethics course in addition to infused model of teaching ethics improve counselor candidates' ethical behavior [21].

Somehow, problematic ethical situations develop into dilemmas [22, 23]. Since ethical dilemmas occur when one wants to act in a self-serving manner [5], literature asserts that mere exposure to ethical dilemmas or studying thereof may constitute sufficient ethical training [24, 25, 13, 26, 27, 28]. Most professional approach ethics by focusing on ethical dilemmas and proposing a step-by-step response to deal with them [11]. The most important issue to acknowledge is that colleagues are the most frequently preferred resource for information which counselors need concerning ethics [27, 18]. This means that ethical and unethical approaches can be transmitted by consultation.

The purpose of this study was to determine the professional ethical understanding of trainee psychological counselors in Turkey through sampled ethical dilemmas and vignettes. Vignettes are scenarios that depict ethical challenges and stimulate critical thinking about dilemmas, ethical decision-making processes, competing ethical principles, and evaluation of alternative courses of action [29]. Vignettes illustrate certain ethical dilemmas or unethical behaviors that psychologists and counselors might encounter and enable suggestions on possible solutions [30].

Limitations to privacy, entering into multiple relations, and the transfer of competences and values are found as common ethical dilemmas experienced by Turkish counselors [27]. Studying ethical judgments for future research, especially dual relationships, multiculturalism, and confidentiality, was suggested [18]. In this study, we investigated how trainees identify professional ethics and their ability to identify ethical dilemmas and behavior in this regard.

II. METHODOLOGY

1. Participants

The participants were selected through purposive sampling, a technique enabling researchers to obtain rich information. With the university ethical committee approval, the study comprised 68 undergraduate students (20 male, 48 female) enrolled in a senior class in the Department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance (PCG) at Dokuz Eylul University, Turkey. The rationale of participants are: (a) PCG is the only official program to be a counselor, (b) undergraduate is sufficient degree to become counselors, and (c) senior students already took most of the courses including ethics. These trainee counselors were chosen after volunteering or because of their accessibility and interest in the values and professional ethics promoted by their field.

2. Data Collection

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the participants. These would help us enter each participant's inner world and understand ethic and ethical dilemmas from his/her perspective. Moreover, individuals' personal experiences and beliefs can be optimally understood and identified through their usage of language, interpretations, and explanations. Thus, the most private, hidden information can be obtained through interviews; they could also facilitate access to individuals' knowledge, views, experiences, interactions, interpretations, and feelings related to their social realities [31]

The interview schedule was related to six vignettes about "ethical dilemmas." The vignettes were established by analyzing Turkish ethical codes. Each represents an ethical dilemma including "two or more of the values found in the ethical principles relating to conflict" [32]. For example, the first vignette, which emphasizes confidentiality, includes the following scenario: "You individually counseled a student for a while in a school. At your school, a colleague (a teacher of that student) wants to obtain information about your client and your interviews. What do you do?" Vignettes may be based on actual events, with anonymous and/or fictional details, or situations that are entirely hypothetical [33]. Participants are presented with one or more scenarios to evaluate or formulate hypothetical responses. Descriptions of ethical dilemmas and examination of ethical vignettes constitute a form of generative analysis through which professionals can practically apply their own knowledge to the situation and construct their own solutions [34].

Working through examples of ethical dilemmas involves a shift away from passive absorption of knowledge towards active construction [35]. Vignettes emphasizing a client-counselor relationship in schools and other working environments. These environments were developed in consideration of general categories such as a specialization area, family counseling, rehabilitation counseling, and working as a probation officer with the categories of the ACA ethical code taken into account (i.e., confidentiality, romantic relationships with former clients, curiosity, sharing information with others, self-disclosure, relationship boundaries, respect for privacy, and reporting to third parties).

3. Materials

Initially, all demographic information and vignettes were used in Turkish. Vignettes were developed based on researcher teaching experiences in counseling programs more than decades, and TPCGA and ACA ethical codes. TPCGA ethical codes the main ethical sources for Turkish counselors [10]. Furthermore, we considered ACA ethical codes because Turkish counseling structure were highly influenced by United States.

The vignettes were multidimensional and reflected the complexities of real-world dilemmas. They were neutral to avoid invoking stereotypes (ethnicity and sexual orientation) and depicted diversity. Vignettes should give individuals opportunities to evaluate their beliefs and enable their competency in applying ethical principles and standards to realistic ethical dilemmas [36]. The vignettes used in this study were developed according to these principles.

4. Data Analysis

The data transcribed into textual information were analyzed through content analysis [37]. For content analysis of the textual information obtained from each vignette, first, the authors read the responses to the questions to gain an orientation to their contexts. Second, the responses were categorized. Third, related categories were combined into more general categories, based on the categories of the ACA: (a) confidentiality, (b) romantic relationship with current clients, (c) romantic relationships with former clients, (d) curiosity, receiving hand-made gifts, (e) receiving a gift with monetary value, (f) sharing information with others, (g) self-disclosure, (h) relationship boundaries, (i) non-professional interactions, (j) respect for privacy, and (k) reporting to third parties. Fourth, once the categories were determined, the rater re-read each form and classified the responses into the appropriate categories.

Researchers coded the trainees' responses into predetermined categories. After the data in each category were coded, frequencies and percentages were computed. Before the final coding, intra-rater reliability was checked. Responses were coded by the same researcher twice, one week apart. The results of both coding sets yielded 93.75% reliability. The data were presented in table form as frequencies and percentages. Each trainee's response was outlined indicating the ability to identify an ethical dilemma and corresponding behavior.

III. RESULTS

Results relating to whether trainees could identify ethical dilemmas and their resultant behavior are presented in Tables 1 – 3, comprising the relevant vignettes and trainees' hypothetical preferences and solutions. There are no total scores for each table because each participant could state more than one opinion, belief, or value; therefore, only categorical frequencies are presented. Counseling Trainees' Identification of Ethical Dilemmas and Corresponding Ethical Behavior Vignettes depicting ethical dilemmas used in the interviews are presented below. Each trainee's response is outlined, so as to highlight the ability to identify ethical dilemmas and corresponding ethical behavior.

Vignette 1. You individually counseled a student for some time in a school. A colleague at the school (the student's teacher) wants information about the client and your interviews. What do you do?

Table 1. Confidentiality

Categories	Statements	F	%
Identify the ethical dilemma about confidentiality and comply	I practice confidentiality.	50	73.52
	I don't share sensitive information but try to give general information.	9	13.23
	I inform my colleague about professional ethics in counseling.	8	11.76
	I share, if the client gives permission.	2	2.94
	I empathize with his/her curiosity, but I do not share the information.	2	2.94
Not identifying the ethical dilemma and not complying with ethical standard	I share my client's information.	5	7.35

Table 1 presents trainee counselors' identification of this ethical dilemma, which constitutes confidentiality, and their attitudes towards the situation. The categories in Table 1 reflect the participants' condensed statements.

Table 1 shows that 73.52% of the trainees understood the ethical dilemma and maintained the confidentiality of client information; the rest of them empathized with the teacher, informed him/her about ethics in counseling, or made an appropriate decision. Only five trainees (7.35%) indicated behaving unethically by sharing the information. Some excerpts are:

"There is an ethical dilemma in this case. Ordinarily, I would like to share the truth with my friend, but it would not be ethical, according to the confidentiality principle. So, I would explain this principle to my friend and explain what happens if I do not comply, then not share the information." (16, M, AK)

"Sharing with a friend or not is the problem. If there is useful information for my friend, relating to his/her safety or that of his/her class, then I would share, otherwise I would not; I would maintain confidentiality." (38, F, SFK)

As seen above, trainees consider confidentiality important, with most advocating maintenance thereof. According to the TPCGA's and ACA's ethical rules in demonstration of respect for confidentiality, most counselors do not share confidential information without clients' consent or sound legal or ethical justification [10, 16].

Vignette 2. You are individually counseling a mother who is concerned about her 13-year-old daughter who cannot sleep on her own, so they co-sleep. You wonder about her husband and whether they sleep together. What would you do?

Considering the above, think about yourself: While counseling a client with family problems, you find yourself asking some details about the client and his/her family because of curiosity. What do you do?

Considering the second vignette, most trainee counselors (73.52%) identified the ethical dilemma but did not clearly understand the required ethical disposition. Only five participants (7.35%) could not identify the ethical dilemma and would ask questions, to satisfy curiosity.

"I request information only to understand the client and the problem, so as to establish a serious and healthy therapeutic relationship." (67, F, AC)

"When I realize that I am asking out of curiosity, I try to stop because I have to remain professional." (2, F, NB). According to the TPCGA's and ACA's ethical rules, counselors' primary responsibility is to respect clients' dignity and promote their welfare [10, 16]. Therefore, counselors should not ask questions out of curiosity or to satisfy personal needs. Thus, trainees must learn to control their personal needs in professional practice.

Vignette 3. You meet your ex-client during vacation after your counselor-client relationship ended three years ago. Circumstances are now different; and you find him/her attractive. What do you do?

Considering the third vignette, most trainee counselors (91.18%) considered not starting a romantic relationship with former clients; only six participants (8.82%) would.

"I try to manage my feelings and still think of her as my client. Starting a relationship with her is unethical." (5, M, AT)

"I try to become aware of my feelings and seek supervision or consult a colleague. I never establish a romantic relationship." (63, F, TK)

According to the TPCGA's and ACA's ethical rules, sexual or romantic counselor-client interactions or relationships, and relationships with former clients' romantic partners or their family members are prohibited for five years following the last professional contact [10, 16].

Vignette 4. You have just started working as a school counselor, when a parent seeks counsel regarding his/her children and asks whether you are a parent. What do you do?

Table 2 presents trainee counselors' identification of this ethical dilemma, which constitutes self-disclosure and sharing information with others, and their attitudes towards the situation. The categories in Table 2 reflect the participants' statements. Trainee counselors (48.52%) indicated responding empathically to the underlying needs of the question; 21 (30.88%) indicated that they do not provide self-disclosure and 15 (22.05%) indicated that they would disclose.

Table 2. Self-Disclosure and Information-Sharing

Categories	F	%
I don't answer the question and give a relevant empathetic response to meet the underlying needs of this question.	33	48.52
I do not practice self-disclosure.	21	30.88
I practice self-disclosure.	15	22.05

“Sharing information with others is an ethical dilemma. Counselors do not have to share information about themselves.” (23, F, BRS)

“There is no ethical dilemma here. Privacy is an important issue for counselors. I do not answer the questions, but tell the client that I can help him/her.” (11, F, SA)

Trainee counselors’ views on information sharing and self-disclosure were classified under three main categories. Most trainees considered responding empathically to the underlying needs of the question. According to the TPCGA’s and ACA’s ethical rules, references to confidentiality, privileged communication, and privacy in emphasize counselors’ recognition that trust is the cornerstone of the counseling relationship [10, 16]. Counselors must aspire towards earning clients’ trust by creating an ongoing partnership, establishing and upholding appropriate boundaries, and maintaining confidentiality.

Counselors have already shared some information about themselves when the client consults. However, some clients, for some reasons, seek more information about counselors’ personal lives. Although it is suggested that surface information be given to meet this need, the counselor should consider the possible effects of self-disclosure and decide when and how much self-disclosure may help the clients’ development or treatment [7]. When the counselor answers accordingly and opens up to the client, more questions may follow, and this may harm the therapeutic relationship [7]. Such questions may indicate inappropriate client dependence. Understanding these underlying needs and empathy, rather than self-disclosure, would be better for the client’s welfare and protection of the professionalism in the therapeutic relationship [7].

Vignette 5. Your client has problems with a friend in a course out of school. He/she insists that you attend the course with him/her to solve the problem. What do you do?

This fifth vignette requires trainee counselors’ identification of this ethical dilemma, which relates to relationship boundaries, and their attitudes towards the situation. Most trainees (82.35%) would not assume the responsibility of solving the client’s problem.

“I do not attend the course to see the client’s friend. I tell the client, “you, not other persons, are important to me.” (35, F, SY)

“I think it is not useful to see the client’s friend, so I politely decline. There is no ethical dilemma here. First, I do not go with the client, but then if the client always talks about his/her friend, maybe I could go.” (36, F, KG)

According to the TPCGA’s and ACA’s ethical rules, counselors must avoid harming their clients, trainees, and research participants, and minimize or remedy unavoidable or unanticipated harm [10, 16]. Moreover, according to ACA’s ethical rules, counselors must be aware of their personal values, attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors and avoid espousing values that are inconsistent with counseling goals. Therefore, counselors should not act on behalf of or assume responsibility for clients, but must encourage clients to solve their own problems with third parties.

Table 3. Respect for Privacy and Reports to Third Parties

Categories	F	%
I act impartially.	35	51.47
I do not disclose my inclination.	18	26.47
I give my opinion about who is right.	7	10.29
I give a relevant, empathetic response to the underlying needs of this question.	4	5.88
I do what the client wants.	1	1.47
I seek supervision.	1	1.47

Vignette 6. An administrator sends you children who are in conflict with each other. He/she wants to know the outcome and the children ask your opinion about who is right. What do you do?

Table 3 presents the trainees’ identification of this ethical dilemma, which emphasizes respect for privacy and reports to third parties, and their attitudes towards the situation. The categories in Table 3 reflect the participants’ condensed statements.

As shown in Table 3, approximately half of the trainee counselors (51.47%) would act impartially. Eighteen (26.47%) would not disclose their inclinations, and seven (10.29%) would give their opinion about who is right. As shown above, some trainees have difficulties identifying this ethical dilemma.

“I relate the situation comprehensively. I say that I am not the one to point out who is wrong. There is an ethical dilemma here, because the administrators ask me to act unethically. I relate the situation to the administrator, but do not single out one of the students.” (12, M, EP)

“I make the clients aware of their problems. I treat them empathically.” (43, F, DA)

According to the TPCGA’s and ACA’s ethical rules, counselors must respect clients’ rights to privacy [10, 16]. Counselors solicit private information from clients only if it is beneficial to the counseling process. Moreover, according to ACA’s ethical rules, counselors must be accurate, honest, and objective in reporting

their professional activities and judgments to appropriate third parties, including courts, health insurance companies, recipients of evaluation reports, and others.

According to Section D in the ACA, adherence to ethical rules signifies counselors' relationships with other professionals; the quality of counselors' interactions with colleagues can influence the quality of their service provision to clients. They seek to be knowledgeable about colleagues within and outside the counseling field. Moreover, they develop positive working relationships and communication systems with colleagues, to enhance client service. Therefore, counselors must not give opinions or make decisions about students. They should provide administrators with the relevant information, but not participate in decision-making. Our results show that trainees require education on identifying this ethical dilemma and the required ethical behavior.

IV. CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

Hill states that counselors' references to ethics include references to codes, moral values, legal limitations, or ultimate goals, to reflect standards of a given profession [38]. The ACA and TPCGA, the CACREP defines professional ethical codes related to knowledge and skill acquisition, as well as related boundaries in congruency. This study considered both codes in relation to predominant problems in the field and sought to determine trainee counselors' understanding of professional ethics and their personal needs, based on the views and solutions expressed towards vignettes.

The study examined whether trainee counselors could identify ethical dilemmas and found that many would have difficulties doing so. Using vignettes, as Williams et al. conducted, the trainees indicated their approaches towards confidentiality, romantic relationships with former clients, curiosity, relationship boundaries, information sharing, self-disclosure, respect for privacy, and reports to third parties in present study [39]. Results are consistent with Starkdiscusses self-disclosure issues including relationship boundaries, information sharing, self-disclosure, respect for privacy, and reports to third parties in which trainees required education [40].

Results also appreciate similarly with Williams et al.'s study, which indicate that the students need to understand the rationale underlying the codes [39]. Since strengthening the professional identity of counselor and teaching ethical decision making in counselor preparation identified as the most important issue [41], results of present study reveals that trainees required ethics education. In parallel with Dailor and Jacob emphasizing handling the administrative pressure to engage in unethical actions and telling third parties about the child are seen as troublesome dilemmas [42]. Moreover, romantic relations with former clients and curiosity were also identified as the important areas in which trainees required education[24, 25, 13, 26, 28] consistently with literature. Limitations to privacy, entering into multiple relations, and the transfer of competences and values are found as common ethical dilemmas experienced by Turkish counselors [27] emphasized that counselors must learn and accept ethical codes [43]. Consequently, for effective ethical decision –making process, counselors should understand and appreciate professional ethical codes, the standards of practice [3].

Counselors' perceptions of ethical behaviors may be affected by their experiences of ethical dilemmas [44, 43] and school counselors need education since ethical practice within a school setting is often ambiguous. Lambie et al., and Neukrug and Milliken emphasized that ethics training should be ongoing, arguing that it may change due to developments in the profession and societal values [3, 44]. Counseling curricula should make students aware of their ethical obligations and legal responsibilities. Ethics courses typically aim towards this. Ethical codes and rules could aim at securing the client-counselor relationship and the parties' rights. Moreover, ethical mindfulness should be developed, with trainees acting ethically not only systematically, but also by personally assuming the responsibility to act ethically.

Ethics violations and sanctions should also be enshrined in law. Indeed, sanctions for violations should be proportional to the degree of harm caused [6]. However, in Turkey, the rules are specific, whereas sanctions are not well-defined to ensure that by-laws inform compatibility between ethical codes and professional sanctions [45]. Since morals, behaviors, laws and ethics are emphasized as the four quadrants of counselor ethic [44], Taşdan and Yalçın have suggested that application of ethical codes and related laws should be regulated by an organization with authority beyond TPCGA [43]. Therefore, efforts to address concerns and solutions regarding psychological counseling and guidance services in Turkey are continuing.

Ethics are regarded as a core issue in the counseling profession. Counseling education programs should make students aware of their ethical duties and legal responsibilities. Professional ethics education and personal experiences contribute towards trainee counselors' development, particularly in optimizing their personal values and understanding of professional ethics. Our study showed a need for undergraduate education to prioritize ethics education. Counseling educators should serve as models for trainees by emphasizing relevant ethical issues in the curriculum. For the purpose of this study, we preferred to choice purposeful sampling and to develop vignette questions in a format of qualitative study. Therefore, generalization of the results could have limitations. Further studies with random sampling and additional qualitative research background can give more ideas.

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