



Vita Poštuvan

PSYCHOLOGY ETHICS IN SUPERVISION

The first codes of ethics related to psychology were developed after World War II, and these were produced to emphasize the principles and standards of ethical conduct which are important for humanity, as well as to offer a moral foundation for the profession (Sinclair, 2012). Key values which are promoted by such standards, principles, guidelines, and rules, are acting for the public good, ensuring the quality of professional work for service users, and informing the public about the competences of psychologists who adhere to the related codes of conduct. These guidelines are important for internalization of ethical principles, while rules and sanctions are necessary for establishing and maintaining ethical order (American Psychological Association, 1992).

The ethical conduct of psychologists is influenced by professional and ethical guidelines, codes of ethics, and rules, as well as (i) personal beliefs, values, and attitudes, (ii) the workplace (whether it is a larger or smaller organization with its own set of rules, or an independent business), and (iii) relationships with colleagues or other consulting bodies, and consultations with them in cases of complex and difficult situations and ethical dilemmas (Pettifor, McCarron, Schoepp, Stark, & Stewart, 2009). Moreover, several studies point out that ethical conduct depends on the characteristics of clients who a psychologist works with (Pomerantz & Pettibone, 2005).

Ethical Dilemmas in Psychological Practice

Ethical dilemmas occur when a psychologist is in an unclear situation with regard to different aspects of ethical conduct, when there are ethical conflicts between the

different actors involved, or when an individual's principles and the values of ethical conduct conflict with each other (Behnke, 2005).

In the 1990s researchers studied which areas of work psychologists were most concerned with. Their findings show that most frequent problems occur in the following areas of work: information confidentiality (18%); unclear, ambiguous, or conflicting relationships (17%); income, action plan, work setting and methods (14%); academic dilemmas or training (8%); and forensic psychology (5%) (Pope & Vetter, 1992).

Similar findings are obtained by Portuguese educational psychologists, who report that over a half of the cases of ethical dilemmas or worries are related to data protection and confidentiality (Mendes, Nascimento, & Abreu-Lima, 2015). It is interesting to note here that such worries do not match the contents of the complaints filed against psychologists at various ethics committees. Such complaints more often refer to psychologists' work-related competences or interpersonal relations. This difference in focus can be explained by the emphasis that psychologists tend to place on confidentiality, with professionals rarely breaking the related rules.

Ethics in Supervision

Ethical principles in supervisory and mentoring relationships have been covered by several guidelines and ethical codes. The most widely applied of these are those presented by the Canadian Psychological Association (Pettifor et al., 2009) and the American Psychological Association (2014). Ethical dilemmas in supervision are complex, and the related guidelines are not meant as a way of providing simple prescriptions for their resolution, but rather as approaches to achieve the most intellectually, morally, and personally mature solutions. The guidelines thus stimulate psychologists to reflect on their conduct.

Ethical dilemmas in the supervisory relationship are complex due to the fact that it is difficult to apply ethical principles in everyday supervision, as the relations among the supervisor, the supervisee, clients, and organizations are interwoven. Moreover, supervision is seldom regarded as an independent psychological professional activity which demands specific competences and ethical awareness (Pettifor, McCarron, Schoepp, Start, & Stewart, 2010), even though in practice this is the case. Several authors examine the historical and organizational introduction and evaluation of supervision, which is integral part of education in some orientations of psychology, while in others it is not (Ögren & Boethius, 2014). These differences affect the level of attention devoted to ethics by the supervisor and supervisee.

The nature of supervision is interactive, and so the accountability for ethical conduct in supervision is shared between the supervisor and supervisee, although the larger share of this responsibility is borne by the supervisor, due to the structure of the work, and his/her higher power, and greater professionalism. The supervisor is the

party who should ensure the appropriate nature of the relationship, because the supervisee is more vulnerable when difficulties occur. Nevertheless, in order to acquire a positive learning experience both the supervisor and supervisee have to both work to maintain a good relationship and the development of the related competences (Pettifor et al., 2009).

The supervisor and supervisee must adhere to ethical principles which are valid for the psychological profession, and are written in explicit codes of psychological ethics (e.g., Slovenian Psychologists' Association, 2002). Ethical conduct in supervision depends on supervisors, especially with regard to the following issues (Ögren & Boethius, 2014; Pettifor et al., 2009):

- The supervisor is a role model of ethical conduct and decision making in accord with ethical principles (and legislation) for the supervisee. As a role model, the supervisor facilitates the supervisee's acculturation into professional ethics and integration of ethical principles into everyday practice. This implementation in supervision includes reflection on processes and explicitly addresses the professional values which drive the supervisor's conduct.
- The supervisor is primarily responsible for the client's well-being, his/her secondary responsibility encompasses strengthening of the supervisee's competences and personal growth.
- Supervisors act as gatekeepers and assure that only competent professionals can enter the profession. They have to prevent those who have not developed the required competences or do not exhibit ethical awareness from performing in practice, and this builds up the integrity of psychology as a profession.
- Supervisors ensure clear information regarding the expectations and structure of the supervision process, evaluation methods, documentation, and other aspects of work.
- The supervisor keeps detailed documentation on the development and progress of the supervisee's professional growth.

A number of ethically sensitive situations and dilemmas can arise in supervision. When these happen the supervisor and supervisee reflect on which participant is most vulnerable: the client, supervisee, organization, supervisor, and so on. Worthington, Tan and Poulin (2002) list several ethically sensitive situations that can happen in relation to the supervisee's conduct, as follows:

- **Intentional concealment of important information** is one of most frequent ethically sensitive situations that occurs in supervision. This is when the supervisee hides from the supervisor information regarding mistakes at work, personal problems, negative reactions towards clients, counter-transference, and sexual attraction towards clients. These situations in themselves do not necessarily present a violation of ethical standards, but in the context of supervision it is important for the supervisee to recognize them, accept them, admit there are difficulties, and work to properly resolve them by means of reflection (and

other modalities). It is particularly important that the supervisee discloses information and dilemmas in supervision, and that the supervisor has the competences and attitude needed to resolve these. The Code of Professional Ethics of Psychologists requires that psychologists work fairly and sincerely in order to maintain their integrity, and the same holds true for the relationship between the supervisee and supervisor.

- **Poor documentation of cases** – including supervisory cases – can reduce the reliability and credibility of the work. This is why the complete, accurate, and regular recording of cases is essential for protecting all stakeholders in supervision. Awareness of the importance of keeping documentation is thus part of ethical awareness in the supervision process.
- **Inadequate level of performance**, especially when the supervisee performs work for which he/she is not qualified or has not developed competences, is a breach of ethical standards. Within the framework of supervision it may happen that the supervisee independently performs an intervention without his/her supervisor's consent, or that the supervisee intentionally mishears the supervisor's guidelines, or that the supervisee misleads the supervisor with regard to his/her qualifications, or that the supervisee does not seek sufficient support in acquiring skills. Further, ethical standards are violated when the supervisee does not introduce himself/herself to the client properly, i.e. as a novice psychologist with limited competences.
- Ethical standards are violated if the **supervisee does not address personal factors which can obstruct competent performance**. An awareness that the supervisee could be hiding such issues due to fear of a negative evaluation by the supervisor is thus important. In this context it is vital that the supervisor pays attention to different aspects of potential discrimination, enables open discussions and ensures that the supervisory relationship takes place within an appropriate framework that allows for disclosure of the supervisee's sensitive information.
- **Unsuitable managing of conflicts**. Conflicts are unavoidable in the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. Most frequently they arise due to the differences in theoretical orientations, expectations regarding the style of supervision, or personal preferences. Unresolved conflicts can cause a lot of stress, and the supervisee's reaction to these may include a reduction in his/her skills, and feeling psychological burden or doubt. Conflicts trigger resistance with regard to following the supervisor's instructions, devaluation of the supervisee by his- or herself, or his/her violation of rules. Some supervisees may thus seek alternative advice from other colleagues. While this is welcomed if it contributes to further development of the supervisory relationship between the supervisor and the supervisee, it can cause even more difficulties and obstacles in the relationship with the supervisor.
- **Insufficient engagement in required professional development**. During supervision it is often recommended that the supervisee study the related literature

and participate in meetings, workshops, and seminars. It can thus be ethically questionable if the supervisee does not work towards obtaining more opportunities for developing his/her competences in such ways.

The most frequent violations of ethical principles in supervision are related to the supervisee's insufficient understanding of his/her limited competences and knowledge, and, as a consequence, his/her scope of competent authority. When such situations arise the supervisor has to be able to recognize these ethical dilemmas, because he/she should work to support and teach the novice psychologist, while at the same time assessing his/her competence.

One difficulty in relation to the violation of ethical principles lies in the inadequacy of supervision in such cases. Despite the widely accepted assumption that it is unethical to perform professional work without adequate competences, there are occasions when this rule is not applied. Among the areas where supervision is rarely carried out is research work, especially with regard to adopting a professional approach to the participants in such efforts, and in relation to having adequate knowledge of appropriate research methods. These problems can be a result of the irresponsible conduct of either supervisors or supervisees (Goodyear, Crego, & Johnston, 1992).

Ethically questionable situations are those where supervision is not adequate with regard to its content, is ethically unsuitable, or does not address the supervisee's needs. Such cases occur when the supervisor does not exhibit sufficient supervisory competences, is not aware of ethical values, or violates an ethical principle, e.g. does not protect information, does not show respect to the supervisee, is in multiple relationships, lies, or otherwise abuses his/her power (Goodyear et al., 1992). Problems can also happen when the organizational framework is not in compliance with the related ethical standards, and these standards may also be different for the supervisor and supervisee.

In order to reduce organizational difficulties it is important to address ethical dilemmas in supervision, and the legal and regulatory aspects of psychologist performance. Legally regulated areas of psychological performance that need to be addressed include (Brulc, 2015):

- Record keeping.
- Care for protecting psychological data as sensitive personal information (information about psychological treatment, anamnesis, treatment results, results of tests, including psychological diagnoses and similar issues).
- Giving consent for forwarding personal data and the forwarding itself.
- Presenting the clients with their own personal data.

Ethical Awareness and Resolution of Ethical Dilemmas

Social norms are presented in the rules of expected or accepted conduct, thinking, and feeling, and relate to the social context. Psychological ethics are more specific,

because they relate to a certain context. It is thus of key importance that ethical awareness is cultivated among professional psychologists, and thus that we recognize the ethical aspects of everyday psychological work. Reflectivity is particularly crucial when the work is seen as settled, routine, and transferred from generation to generation, without any significant changes or evaluations. In this way common ethical norms are established and can persist for a very long time, and thus both good and bad practices can be transferred to novice psychologists.

When a psychologist encounters an ethical dilemma, he/she can try to solve it through increased awareness, with the most common methods of achieving this being taking the related ethical guidelines into consideration, accepting help, accepting advice in consultations, self-questioning, or making sure that his/her actions stay within the legal framework of conduct. Obstacles to effective resolution of ethical dilemmas are most often perceived in the political and institutional framework of work, insufficient competences with regard to solving dilemmas, and other personal reasons (Kolay Akfert, 2012). Consultations with colleagues and written ethical standards seem to be the most important resources for directing a person's conduct when ethical dilemmas occur, with, at least in the 1980s, national acts, research results, and local committees on ethics regarded as less useful (Pope, Tabachnick, & Keith-Spiegel, 1987).

The course of solving ethical dilemmas can be carried out in steps. The model proposed by Rest (1982) is based on empirical psychological studies and encompasses the following stages:

1. **Ethical sensitivity** (a psychologist interprets a work situation or performance itself as potentially harmful for a client).
2. Considering and formulating a morally **ideal course** of reactions with the integration of different aspects of a situation).
3. **Motivating** more ethical responses to a situation.
4. **Plan implementation**, which follows defined steps in order to achieve the set goals.

In the everyday professional work of a psychologist the distinction between deontological ethical principles, which are usually very abstract and universal, and situation-specific ethical virtues, which have to be sensitive to different contexts and personalities, is recognized (Korkut, 2010). In the process of supervision both the supervisor and supervisee reflect on abstract principles and actual virtues in individual situations or dilemmas, and in order to ensure the best outcomes it is necessary to follow clear steps to resolve any ethical dilemmas.

It is likely that the guidelines which are valid for the application of ethical principles in general practice could be applied for resolving those dilemmas which occur in the relationship between the supervisor and supervisee. In this context, Francis (2009) states that psychologists have to:

- Prevent harm;
- Maintain respect for the dignity of all people;
- Be open and sincere, except in situations when privacy and confidentiality are clear ethical imperatives;
- Through their behaviour maintain the equality of relationships.

Conclusion

Ethical behaviour may change over time, and more appropriate behaviour can be learned (Tubbs & Pomerantz, 2001), and a good supervisory role model and general professional attitude are thus important for transferring ethical awareness from the supervisor to supervisee.