

## Dilemmas in Psychological Counseling: Experience from Slovakia

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### Abstract

This study is a contribution to the discussion about current discourses in psychological counseling with respect to experiencing helplessness in the work with clients, which appears in the dilemma situations. The aim of the study was to identify the nature of the ethical dilemmas, the way of their solving and the obstacles that prevent to solve them. It was realized qualitative research by applying semi-structured interview in counselors (N=40) offering psychological services in three different areas (school, private practice, university). To understand the ethical dilemma, to analyze it correctly and find the adequate way to solve it effectively help protect not only client, but also the psychologist.

**Keywords:** Ethical dilemma, Psychological counseling, Semi-structured interview

## Introduction

*“Nihil est ab omni parte beatum.” Horatius*

Application of ethical standards, principles and rules on the professional conduct represents a key topic for assisting professionals and as such, it deserves deeper and more detail study. In the area of professional ethics, ethical considerations are especially important in supporting professions, being associated with the fact that other societal groups need them and often depend on them in this or that way (Pettifor, 2004). Psychologists represent one of these professions; their work represents a complex of various help to individuals in the need. It is obvious that relationship between a client and psychologist is not symmetrical but is expressed with the client's dependency and apparent position of the professional as an expert. Psychologists are often confronted with tasks whose solution could have and has major effects on the client. Accordingly, ethical awareness in the psychological praxis is essential. Ethical awareness refers to the fact that every professional act includes decision inevitably associated with responsibility. Ethical awareness helps identify ethical problems or dilemmas in various situations and contexts. The praxis has showed that psychologists should definitely be able to identify ethical dilemmas they face on daily basis. Complicated and complex nature of the psychologist's work requires high demand on his or her personal, ethical and moral profile. Constituting the first ethical codex APA, the American psychologist Hall (in Lindsay et al., 2008) suggested that no written codex should be created since ethical conduct must be a basic precondition of all psychologists' work. “Decent and mature people do not need anybody to tell them how to behave.” In the analyzed context, Van Hoose (1980) concisely added that an advisor's conduct towards his client is most likely ethically responsible, maintaining professional honesty along with efforts of working in the best way in the client's interest regardless his personal profit; and acting in compliance with ethical principles applicable to his profession.

Ethical dilemmas are perceived as situations in which an individual chooses between two or more methods of acting, which do not correspond to the hierarchy of values confessed by those whom the decision making results apply to (Lindsay et al., 2008). Thus, ethical dilemma should be understood as a situation without identified correct process that does not include single solution. There is not a single solution or apparently optimal solution (Bowers, Pipes, 2000). There are two or more contradictory ethical principles but preferring one to another will not result in satisfaction of the decision made (Knapp et al., 2007; Bersoff, 2003). Since no one of available solutions can be attached with the attribute “good”, selection is

incongruent and final decision should represent “weaker bad” or “smaller misery”. Taking in account the stated context, it is apparent that counselors are unable to resolve some ethical dilemmas in a simple or fully satisfactory way, despite of consistent dilemma analysis.

The praxis offers unique challenges to counselors who make efforts to provide optimum care. They are often required to provide efficient services to a broad spectrum of clients in a creative and flexible manner. These unique challenges often pose psychologists in a situational dilemma with emerging question “What should I do?”

The study is aimed at examining ethical dilemmas experienced by psychological counselors during their praxis. It is focused on the description of ethical dilemmas of counselors during their work with clients; seeking answer to the question of what dilemmas do the psychologists face when working with clients.

The study goal is to (1) determine the nature of ethical dilemmas that counselors encounter, (2) obtain information on dilemma solving methods, and to (3) identify obstacles that prevent from finding the dilemma solution.

## Method

### *Research Design*

In compliance with the set forth goal nature, quantitative research strategy has been chosen. Content analysis was applied for the research purposes. Data were collected in three areas of psychological counseling – school psychological counseling, university psychological counseling and private psychological counseling; each area represented an individual segment of the analysis.

### *Participants*

Research participants were chosen according to their performance in the area of psychological counseling to cover all the areas, referring to an efficient tool of the research compilation in the terms of the set forth study goal.

A total of 40 participants were recruited for the study: thereof 65% referred to school counselors working at schools, private counselors covered 20% and 15% referred to psychologists offering psychological counseling at the universities. With regard to gender, women dominated with 85% (n= 34) vs 15% men (n= 6); average age represented 32.6 years and average experience in the specialization referred to 7.85 years. As a relevant factor, it

should state that 35% of the respondents passed the course of ethics and conflict solving during the study and 65% of participants did not attend any similar course.

### *Instrument*

The data were obtained via semi-structured interview that is frequently used within the quality research in order to eliminate structured and non-structured interview deficiencies. Semi-structured interview consisted of two consecutive battery of questions. The first battery was focused on demographical information on the respondents (gender, age, duration of counseling praxis), and the second battery comprised of three main research questions prepared in advance and inducing the data interpretation: (1) What ethical dilemmas do you encounter most frequently during work with your clients? (2) How do you solve the dilemmas? (3) What are the obstacles of ethical dilemma solving during work with your clients?

### *Data Collection*

Data were systematically collected during period from March to May 2015 through partly controlled face-to-face interview taking approx. 40 minutes. Analysis of the statements obtained during interviews was applied to the previously analysed data.

## Results

Obtained results were divided in three corresponding areas in the terms of the set forth study goal.

### *(1.) Most frequent dilemmas*

Four categories were identified from the obtained data content analysis, which represent ethically demanding situations for counselors – (i.) boundaries of client's privacy protection, (ii.) relations and roles of counsellors, (iii.) professional competences, and (iv.) fees and charges for services provided. While the counselors performing at the universities are most frequently confronted with academic environment, school counselors named the most frequent dilemma and private counsellors most frequently face dilemma when determining the prices of services offered. Ethical problems related to boundaries of client's privacy protection, complex of relations and roles and related responsibility, competences and values, were present in all three groups of counselors.

*(i.) Boundaries of client's privacy protection*

Results showed that school counselors are those most often facing the dilemma related to the boundaries of client's privacy protection, balancing between the students' rights for confidentiality and the parents' rights for information. University counselors face the same ethical contradiction. Data obtained in this area were classified in a few categories: behavioral disorders, behavioral problems, emotional, and health problems.

Private counselors stated that they solve the client's privacy protection dilemma mainly with clients with suicidal tendency, self-destroying attempts, and sexually abused clients. They established a separate form of family consultations where they have to confront them with the dilemma of similar nature.

*(ii.) Relations and roles of counselors*

Dilemmas focused on relationships and roles most frequently occur at school counselors and counselors working at universities, compared to private counselors. School and university counselors often find themselves in a double relationship as a result of intersected professional and private roles. Obligation to conduct courses ending with exams or fulfilment of assigned tasks – for example membership in disciplinary board, requires more authoritative approach. It is possible to presume that entering more relationships and associated roles causes dilemmas to counselors at their workplaces.

*(iii.) Professional competences*

Counselors working at universities experience dilemma resulting from the feeling of incapability and lack of knowledge when they had to lead lectures on the topics exceeding their area of experience. School counselors expressed similar feelings when teachers/director or student's parents intervened in all issues, suggesting problem-solving methods. Private counselors had to face ethical dilemma of such nature as well, especially in cases when a client contacted them with the issue out of the area of their performance.

*(iv.) Fees and charges for services provided*

Counselors offering their services on private basis were the only ones who admitted dilemma associated with smaller or bigger problems when determining the prices of the services for clients facing complicated social situation (which is reasonable, considering the private psychological practice).

*(2.) Method of dilemma solving*

In relation to dilemmas that counselors face in their praxis, the aim was to find out the way they try to solve such complicated situations.

Based on obtained answers during the interviews conducted with counselors, it was created four methods of dilemma solving, namely: (i.) observance of ethical standards and principles, (ii.) acceptance of assistance, including engagement of client in the process, (iii.) supervision of the case, and (iv.) information provided to the school management/teachers on the ethical codex of psychological activity.

Counselors at universities admitted they had to draw information from the literature when solving any dilemma, or were inspired by older colleagues/other experts' experiences. They also stated that they informed the client on facing a dilemma and engaged him in the solution-seeking process.

School and private counselors said that when facing a dilemma, they usually discuss it with colleagues, taking in account ethical principles in order to avoid damage to their clients.

### *(3.) Obstacles at dilemma solving*

Analyzing the answers to the last question "What are the obstacles at solving ethical dilemmas at your work with client?", it was created three categories of obstacles: (i.) institutional obstacles, (ii.) insufficient competences to solve ethical dilemmas, and (iii.) personal reasons.

Counselors working at universities identified the following obstacles at dilemma solving: lack of knowledge, insufficient competence to correctly analyze dilemmas, excessive fear and inability to act independently on involved persons. School counselors are prevented from successful solution of dilemmas mainly by institutional factors – the fact that they depend on top management of the school they perform in. Moreover, they said that often the parents are an obstacle, unwilling to cooperate and representing an inhibiting factor in the solution process. The answers indicate that obtained degree in psychology did not provide them with sufficient competences for management and successful solution of ethical dilemmas that they encounter during their praxis. Private counselors claimed lack of competences as the major obstacle at dilemma solving, followed by personal reasons and institutional obstacles.

## Discussion

Results obtained for purpose of identification of ethical dilemma that the counselors are confronted with in various institution types indicate that dilemmas related to client's privacy protection boundaries are those most frequent. Joint ethical dilemma of experienced psychologists includes decision whether or not the secrecy should be broken in certain situations. Dalen (2006) studied ethically demanding situations that psychologists face in their

praxis on daily basis. His results also confirmed that confidentiality and professional secrecy dilemmas are those most frequent. In their study, Sullivan et al. (2002) stated that decision making in the area of keeping matters secret represents most frequently occurring serious ethical dilemmas the psychologists must face. This conclusion conforms to the research results of other empiric studies (Bodenhorn, 2006; Cappuzzi, 2002; Kitchener, Anderson, 2000; Lawrence, Kurpius, 2000). It is necessary to protect the client's privacy: "psychologists must adopt all available solutions to ensure protection of information obtained during psychological praxis and protect confidentiality of such obtained and kept data about individuals ..." (APA Ethics Code, 2010).

In this study, mostly school counselors said that they have to face dilemma at work, related to keeping facts confidential. According to Phillips (2007), a school counselor works in dynamic environment and has to constantly fight with and manage tension resulting from the dilemma of confidentiality or legal entitlement of the others/parents to know. This opinion was confirmed in the Slovak conditions by Kopčanová (2007) who described ethical dilemmas that school counselors mostly encounter. Since they establish relations with students, their parents and lectures, it was found out that school counselors only hardly maintain balance in relation to the privacy within the tripartite relationship. This conclusion has been supported by the fact confirmed in praxis; namely that students' parents are often not willing to cooperate. This is the major dilemma-solving related problem along with lack of competence to easily and satisfactorily manage the dilemma situations. Increase of teachers' and parents' awareness of the importance of confidentiality between school counselor and student represents an efficient way of reducing likelihood of complicated situations that include also ethical dilemmas of this nature (Huss et al., 2008; Bodenhorn, 2006; Glossoff, Pate, 2002).

Working with an under-aged child, one should always bear in mind that any information mediated about the child could convert to a weapon that can be used against the child (Nugent, Jones, 2008). Despite of school counselors reflecting ethical dilemmas of this kind and being able to perceive the problem in broader aspects, they feel insufficient competence within the triangle which they appeared in. Conclusions of the studies elaborated in this area showed that the lower the client's age, the bigger is the problem with privacy protection for school counselors (Isaacs, Stone, 1999). Opportunity for counselors (not only those working at schools) to pass courses focused on effective dilemma solving methods and thereby gaining ability to develop required competences in this area seems an acceptable solution.

Another conclusion is the fact that counselors working at schools and universities have no other option but enter multiple relationships and roles. Our findings are supported also by the results of previous research studies (Aducci, Cole, 2011; Bodenhorn, 2006; Moleski, Kiselica, 2005). Accordingly, they are first of all school psychologists who face the problem; since, as they stated, multiple relationships and roles were established just because of the institution they work at (school is a huge network of relations that is hard to get out of); and the fact that they work in small towns where anonymity cannot be maintained like in big cities.

Last but not least important aspect refers also to unawareness of school top management of the school psychologists' work. According to our findings, the school counselors are often assigned with various tasks that have nothing to do with their area of performance at school. This observation indicates the importance of contacting the school top management on the role and competences of a school counselor.

It can observe dilemmas of counselors in all areas of their work, being forced to provide services in the areas out of their competence by the school top management, parents or clients. Moreover, they identified reserves in practical dilemma solving methods, substantiating it with absent courses of ethics or psychology of morale during pre-graduation studies curriculum.

Based on the results obtained, it can state that the nature of ethical dilemmas differs depending on the environment type – counselors working at various institutions can encounter similar dilemmas related to fundamental principles of psychology as a profession, but also experience completely different dilemmas that depend on the structure and type of the institution they perform in.

Examining the answers to the second question related to methods of dilemma solving, it is obvious that majority of monitored counselors make decision taking in account ethical principles of their work, namely protect the client's interests, remain independent, impartial, confidential, and respect client's individuality – all this helps effectively solve ethical dilemmas (Welfel, 2006).

Consultations with other experts and supervision were named as another important factor supporting successful management of dilemma situations, as referred in the previous research observations (Cottone et al. 2007; Remley, Herlihy, 2007; Froeschle, Moyer, 2004). Consultations with other parties involved can be an essential aid when solving an ethical dilemma.

Results indicate that counselors working in different areas apply different tools to dilemmas to be solved. Various solving methods can be associated with insufficient knowledge in this area. Pre-graduation preparation of future psychologists could fill in the missing knowledge gap, incorporating practical courses of ethical dilemma solving and courses focused on the development of law awareness whose importance in the area of psychological consultations has been, among others, stressed out by Stone (2005).

The last area of our survey was dedicated to identification of obstacles that psychologists face when solving ethical dilemmas. Institutional obstacles were named by school counselors as the most serious ones. In this context, it should mention that conflict between the principles highlighted by the institution and ethical principles of psychology as a profession represents one of the reasons of ethical dilemma occurrence. Zapletalová (2001) considers it a critical point of the school psychologist's profession. This finding has been associated with our observation, namely that directors do not fully accept counseling provided by a school psychologist and they often assign such professional with tasks out of the area of his performance. It should examine perception of school counselors by the school top management, pedagogical staff, and their interest in the psychological service provision at school (Stone, 2005).

Moreover, all three categories of counselors consider their incompetence in this area as another obstacle at ethical dilemma solving. The result also indicates how important it is to include ethical dilemma solving courses in pre-graduate education of the students of psychology, which could prepare them for the praxis in this area.

Having analyzed and interpreted the data obtained, it is necessary to recognize the limits of conducted survey. Obtained results could be less or more affected by deliberate distortion of information by consultation psychologists, mainly as a result of their efforts to perform "more professionally" in the area of survey. Another limit refers to non-representative, partly differentiated and small research file that is not sufficient enough to make generalizations in the area of survey. Last but not least, further limitations to research result from selection of applied methodology; since the data were obtained only via semi-structured interview. In this way, some information and conclusions could have been distorted. More impartial evaluation of ethical dilemmas occurring at work of counselors would require extensive research examination, including quantity survey having its reasonable place therein.

## Conclusion

Psychologists are enormously responsible as a result of huge network of professional and personal relations they are incorporated in. Obligations towards every group of relations differ or sometimes even contradict each other, as showed in the study. Anyway, responsibility for client and for acting in his best interest should remain a priority within the counseling goals.

Presented process of analysis of critical incidents occurring at counselors' work can be useful at determination of ethical principles dealing with realistically emerging dilemmas that appear in day-to-day work of a counselor. On the other hand, ethical codex can provide only a guideline, because of a wide palette of complexity and complicated nature of various dilemmas occurring. There is rarely only one correct answer to complicated ethical situations emerging in the counseling praxis. Some situations are even such subtle that they could fall through the ethical codex sieve. In this light, counselors taking care of their professional ethical conduct must rely upon their ability to correctly identify and analyze ethical dilemmas they are about to face in their praxis. In this context, the importance of ethical awareness of counselors is even more highlighted, since it seems to be of essential nature during the confrontation of counselor with ethical dilemmas. Importance of ethical awareness at counselors was discussed by many experts on international forums. Considering the outcomes of the presented study, it would be beneficial to continue in the indication survey. For example, it would be interesting to find out whether the students of psychology have sufficient professional preparation required for development of the mentioned skills. In compliance with ethical awareness accentuation, presented analysis of ethical dilemmas could be useful as a basis of discussion during pre-graduation preparation of the future psychologists, but mainly in post-graduate courses, workshops and further self-study and training of counselors, in which the ethics represents a focus of formal and informal education.

It could presume that increase of general ethical awareness level corresponds to gradual achievement of ethical decision-making in ethically demanding situations. Last but not least, it would strengthen perception of counselors as responsible, reliable and competent professionals.

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