



# Ethics, Supervision and the Power Differential: Impact on Supervisors & Supervisees

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Clinical supervision is:

“a distinct professional activity in which education and training aimed at developing science-informed practice are facilitated through a *collaborative interpersonal process*... By building on the recognition of strengths and talents of the supervisee, supervision encourages self-efficacy. Supervision...is conducted in a competent manner in which ethical standards, legal prescriptions, and professional practices are used to promote and protect the welfare of the client, the profession, and society at large” (Falender & Shafranske, 2004, p.3).

With this definition in mind, this article provides readers with suggestions on how to engage in effective ethical supervision practices while being mindful of the power differential that exists in the supervisory relationship. It also offers supervisees recommendations on how to respond to supervisors' unethical behavior.

**1. Supervisee Dilemma:** Supervisees concerned about a supervisor's behavior or are asked by their supervisor to engage in behavior that might be unethical face significant issues. Their reputation and professional development often depends on how well they perform in supervision and interact with the supervisor. Supervisees have to consider whether to confront and/or report their supervisors' behavior or do nothing. Since there is a power differential within the supervisor-supervisee relationship where supervisees are in the subordinate role, supervisees may not be aware of and/or feel confident about how to effectively respond to a supervisor's unethical behavior. Supervisees can be tremendously effected by supervisors' unethical practices and report some the following: experience a lack of support; feel powerless, manipulated, unsafe, boundaries had been violated, skills or differences are not valued; lose trust in the supervisor; develop self-doubts; develop health problems, and experience fears of not succeeding and finishing their training program (Nelson and Friedlander, 2001).

**2. Ethical Standards and Code:** Supervisees should be aware of and consider the American Psychological Association Ethical Principles and Ethics Code of Conduct (APA, 2002). Although the language of the Ethics Code typically refers to psychologists, the Principles and Standards apply to licensed psychologists as well as supervisees. According to the Ethics Code, “membership in the American Psychological Association commits members and student affiliates to comply with the standards of the APA Ethics Code and to the rules and procedures used to enforce them. Lack of awareness

or misunderstanding of an Ethical Standard is not itself a defense to a charge of unethical conduct (p. 2).” In addition, the California Board of Psychology has adopted the APA Ethics Code as the basis for determining unprofessional conduct of all persons under the jurisdiction of the BOP.

**3. Competency Based Supervision – Proactive Practices:** Falender and Shafranske (2007) encourage supervisors to engage in practices that ensure competency based supervision. The authors gave some of the following recommendations: acknowledge power differentials, facilitate the development of a working alliance, and recognize mistakes, limitations and personal issues that may impede supervision; at the outset of supervision, openly discuss with supervisees possible conflicts and steps that may be taken to resolve conflicts, provide ongoing feedback; encourage and accept feedback

from supervisees, delineate supervision expectations (i.e., obtain informed consent) and consult with peers; engage in self-assessment, keep records of supervision and regularly seek continuing education.

**4. Supervisee Recommendations:** Supervisees should also inform themselves of their rights and the administrative rules at their respective training sites and school programs. They should also become familiar with the APA Ethics Code, state board rules and regulations and carry a copy with them in their training binders. It is also important that they seek support from appropriate 3<sup>rd</sup> parties and learn to assert themselves and act in their own best interest. If or when supervisees are asked to engage in unethical and possibly harmful behaviors, they should know that they have the right to say “no,” and not engage in the behaviors, even if they feel pressured by the supervisor, who is an authority figure and in their eyes, someone with a lot of influence and power.

**5. Supervisee Steps When Facing Ethical Dilemma Regarding Supervisor’s Ethical Behavior:**

1. Seek consultation and support.
2. Consult with school clinic director.
3. Consult with practicum site’s training director.
4. Consult with a law and ethics expert.
5. Consult with peers; talk to own therapist if possible.
6. Read ethics code.
7. Attempt informal resolution if appropriate.
8. If not appropriate or successful, report supervisor’s behavior to appropriate authorities (for e.g., training director, BOP, institution).
9. Document all steps and rationale. 

**References**

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