

## Chapter 99

# Sexual Boundary Violations in Counselor Training and Supervision

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### ABSTRACT

*Professional boundaries represent the sets of behaviors and interactions that are considered appropriate and ethical between people in professional relationships. These can be defined by considering the roles of the people involved, the scheduled times for these interactions, and the designated places for them. Boundary violations happen when interactions deviate markedly from the social conventions of professional relationships. Sexual boundary violations happen when sexual behavior is introduced into the training relationship. Because of the inherent power differential, sex in trainer-trainee relationships is considered unethical and harmful. This chapter will discuss sexual boundary violations in counselor training including incidence rates, perceptions of trainers and trainees, ethical and legal implications, how sexual boundary violations begin, solutions and recommendations, and suggestions for future research.*

### INTRODUCTION

Counselor training is different from other professional disciplines as it revolves around interpersonal relationships, deals with sensitive personal information, and involves self-reflection and self-exploration. Consequently, counseling trainers are likely to find themselves with deeply personal knowledge of their trainees. In addition to coursework, counseling trainees are required to complete a practicum and an internship where they develop their counseling skills in a clinical environment with clients under the direct supervision of an experienced trainer. Clinical supervision focuses on the development of the

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trainee's clinical skills while at the same time ensuring the safety and wellbeing of the client (Goodyear & Bernard, 1998; Kozlowski, Pruitt, DeWalt, & Knox, 2014). In clinical supervision, the trainer meets with the trainee to discuss their work with their clients as well as their own issues in working with these clients. Similar to other aspects of counselor training, clinical supervision can become quite personal as the trainee deals with their own personal and professional development. Indeed, some have suggested that the clinical supervisory relationship shares many similarities with the counselor-client relationship (Bartell & Rubin, 1990) or even the parent child relationship (Friedlander, Dye, Costello, & Kobos, 1984).

The purpose of this chapter is to describe the problem of sexual boundary violations in counselor training, to discuss risk factors and barriers, to provide tools to assist in decision-making, and to offer suggestions for further research. By the end of this chapter, the reader should be able to define professional boundaries and, specifically, sexual boundary violations. More importantly, however, the reader should have tools that can be used to aid in effective decision making about whether and when a specific situation constitutes a threat to the integrity of the professional relationship in counselor training.

## **BACKGROUND**

Counselor educators and counseling supervisors as trainers have a great deal of power over their trainees. Power has been defined as “the ability to get one’s way in a social situation” (W. French & Bell, 1995, p. 303). Trainers are granted special privileges as members of the community place their faith in the trainer’s distinctive skill, knowledge, and experience. Trainees need the trainer, which gives the trainer power over trainees (Peterson, 1992). Five types of power have been identified (P. French & Raven, 1959): (a) reward power (trainers provide something that is valued by the trainee); (b) coercive power (trainers can inflict punishment on the trainee); (c) legitimate power (trainer gets their power from their title and credential); (d) referent power (trainee holds the trainer with high regard); and expert power (trainee thinks they need the trainer’s information or expertise).

Thus, trainees are vulnerable to potential abuses of power by trainers through dual-role relationships and boundary crossings, which can eventually lead to sexual boundary violations. Dual-role relationships are defined as occurring when “one person simultaneously or sequentially plays two or more roles with another person” (Kitchener, 1988, p.207). Unlike counselor-client relationships, trainer-trainee relationships often include inevitable overlapping roles that are necessary for trainee development (Kitchener, 1988). Therefore, trainers need to evaluate power differentials and establish boundaries in the dual-role relationships undertaken during the course of training.

Establishing boundaries better ensures autonomy for those with diminished power in the relationship and mitigates harm (Austin, Bergum, Nuttgens, & Peternelj-Taylor, 2006). Professional boundaries are defined as “the parameters that describe the limits of a fiduciary relationship” (Gabbard & Nadelson, 1995, p. 1,445) and provide a framework for understanding appropriate versus inappropriate behaviors. Professional boundaries distinguish “the ‘edge’ of appropriate behavior” (Gutheil & Gabbard, 1998, p. 410) with one side deemed appropriate and the other side deemed inappropriate.

Boundary crossings are unusual and diverge from common practice. They can be benevolent, limited, and acceptable departures from common practice, but always have the potential to turn ego-centric, extended and unacceptable. Boundary crossings attempted by trainers and trainees should be considered against motivations, contexts, and intents for departing from common practice (Glass, 2003). Boundary violations “reflect exploitation of the supervisee, a supervisor’s loss of objectivity, disruption of the

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