

Dual Relationships in Counselling: A Survey of British Columbian Counsellors

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ABSTRACT

The British Columbian members of the Canadian Counselling Association were surveyed in order to explore their attitudes and experiences regarding dual relationships. Of 529 deliverable surveys, 206 usable returns yielded a response rate of 39%. The survey instrument collected data regarding respondents' characteristics and ethicality ratings of 39 dual relationship activity items. A number of significant relationships were found between respondents' characteristics and their ethicality ratings of the 39 dual relationship activity items. Nine matched pairs of dual relationship activity items were analyzed for significant differences in counsellor's ratings. The results are compared with previously conducted research, and the implications of the results are discussed in regards to future practice and research.

RESUME

Une enquête a été menée auprès des membres en Colombie-Britannique de l'Association canadienne de counseling, afin d'étudier leurs attitudes et leurs expériences concernant la dualité en relation d'aide dans la pratique du counseling. Parmi les 529 questionnaires distribués, 206 déclarations utilisables ont été recueillies, ce qui constitue un taux de réponse de 39%. L'instrument d'enquête a permis de recueillir des données sur les répondants et répondantes, y compris leurs caractéristiques personnelles et leur évaluation du caractère éthique de 39 situations de dualité en relation d'aide. Plusieurs relations importantes entre ces caractéristiques personnelles et la notation du caractère éthique des situations de dualité ont été mises en lumière. De plus, neuf paires appariées de situations de dualité en relation d'aide ont été analysées afin d'évaluer les différences dans la notation effectuée par les conseillers et conseillères. Les résultats ont été comparés à ceux d'études antérieures et les implications des résultats pour les pratiques et les recherches futures ont été discutées.

The topic of dual relationships in counselling has received increasing attention over the last decade (Borys & Pope, 1989; Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998). Dual relationships "exist whenever clients and therapists have a relationship outside the therapy hour" (Nerison, 1992, p. 1). There are many types of dual relationships including business, sexual, familial, social, and professional. Examples of these relationships include counsellors providing professional services to their accountant, friend, cousin, or clinical supervisee. The current study was intended to expand our understanding of counsellors' attitudes toward dual relationships in several ways, including the study of a Canadian population. Further, the current research involved much more detailed exploration of various types of dual relationships than has previously been conducted.

The relevance of this issue to counselling practice was highlighted when Pope and Vetter (1992) sampled more than 1,300 psychologists and identified dual relationships as the second most frequently reported ethical dilemma. In addition to this high prevalence, the potentially harmful effects of dual relationships are often cited as cause for professional attention (Kitchener, 1988; Nerison, 1992; Pope & Vasquez, 1998). These effects include erosion of the therapeutic relationship, conflict of interest, and limiting the benefits of therapy after termination (Borys, 1994; Pope & Vasquez). Given these potentials, avoidance of dual relationships by counsellors is a logical ethical course of action. However, dual relationships are complicated in that they are not always considered harmful by counsellors and clients, and the degree of harm may vary widely (Gabbard, 1994; Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Lazarus, 1994).

Dual relationships can be difficult to address in practice, hence their frequent identification as ethical dilemmas. This difficulty is often related to various complicating elements that underlie dual relationships (Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Koocher & Keith-Spiegel, 1998). Such elements include monetary amounts, temporal duration, role discrepancies, and limited alternatives. For example, with regard to monetary amounts, is it more ethical to accept a small inexpensive gift from a client such as a thank-you card, compared to a \$50 piece of jewelry? With regard to temporal duration, is it more ethical to begin a friendship with a client two years after termination as compared to six months? With regard to role discrepancies, is there a difference between counselling an employee or a colleague? With regard to the element of limited alternative, in some situations, such as rural communities, there are often few options for the provision of counselling services. Denying a client counselling to avoid a dual relationship may mean that the client receives no counselling at all. These monetary, temporal, role discrepancy, and limited alternative considerations are identified in the professional literature as some of the many elements of dual relationships that are germane to ethical decision-making (Anderson & Kitchener, 1996; Coleman

Schaefer, 1986; Sell, Gottlieb, & Schoenfeld, 1986).

Components of social role theory have been used to describe dual relationships (Kitchener, 1988; Kitchener & Harding, 1990) and identify three guidelines that "differentiate between relationships that have a high probability of leading to harm and those that do not" (Kitchener, 1988, p. 217). First, as the incompatibility of the expectations of the roles increases, so does the potential for harm. For example, if a counsellor acts as therapist and employer for Jane, Jane may find the evaluation in the employment relationship to be incompatible with the objectivity of the therapeutic relationship. This example also illustrates the second guideline, that as the obligations of different roles diverge, there is a potential for loss of objectivity. For instance, the counsellor may lose objectivity toward Jane due to difficulties within their employment relationship. The third guideline relates to the potential for exploitation as the power and prestige differs between the counsellor and client as indicated by their respective roles. "Because such relationships are asymmetrical, consumers may not be in a position to protect