

# Ethical Dilemmas Experienced by Psychological Counsellors Working at Different Institutions and their Attitudes and Behaviours as a Response to These Dilemmas

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## Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine the ethical dilemmas experiencing by the counsellors who work at different conditions and what they do to solve these dilemmas as well as the obstacles they have to deal with while resolving the dilemmas. This is a qualitative study in which multi-state pattern was used. For this research, 40 counsellors were chosen using maximum diversity sampling method. When the findings are examined, it can be seen that psychological counsellors working at universities, schools and private psychological counselling centres experience ethical dilemmas related to "teaching environments", "voluntarism" and "determination of service fee" respectively. The common ethical dilemmas experienced in all institutions were found out as "limitations to privacy", "entering into multiple relations", and "transfer of competences and values". It has been found out that they try to resolve these dilemmas by "taking ethical rules into consideration", "receiving help", "engaging the counsellor in the process", "conducting personal queries", or "trying to stay in legal process". The obstacles to resolution of dilemmas are determined as "political and institutional", "lack of competence in resolution of ethical dilemmas" and "personal reasons". These results have been discussed under the light of literature and suggestions have been provided.

## Key Words

Psychological Counsellor, Ethics, Ethical Dilemma, Ethical Behavior, Ethical Attitudes

During the walk of life, it functions as a compass for distinguishing between right and wrong in terms of value definition. In philosophical sense, it is approached as theoretical examination of practical ethics. When other definitions of ethics are addressed, it can be seen that there are some approaches which view it as "the activity of thinking about morals" or "the science of moral action". Some other approaches suggest that ethics is not about ultimate truth or unchanging principles and that it tells the relation of a person with him/herself, and that it is related to the extent to which he/

she takes others into consideration in the sense of a limited but meaningful function (Akarsu, 1998; Pieper, 1999; Şemin & Aras, 2004).

In the field of psychological counselling, it can be seen that the concepts of ethics, values, morals, law and professionalism are used interchangeably. Corey, Corey, and Callanan (1998) have defined and concretized these concepts (cited in Erdur-Barker & Çetinkaya, 2007). In a few words, how ethical standards will be turned into Professional behaviour is an essential topic in psychological counselling which deserves more elaboration (Gümüş & Gümüş, 2010; Taştan & Yalçın, 2007). Ethical dilemma is defined as "a situation which is caused by the chaos between two values in a decision-requiring circumstance" or "in circumstances when two or more options are encountered and there is a difficulty in deciding about which one is better; as

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a result of which the existing necessities cannot be met by present alternatives” (Lindsay & Clarkson, 1999; Nouredine, 2001).

In the literature, experiencing a conflict between suitable ethical standards is shown as the reason of an ethical dilemma during psychological counselling process. In addition, it is stated that psychological counsellors are suffering from ethical dilemmas due to such reasons as the complexity in application of idiosyncratic but tacit ethical standards, some conditions which prevent clear application of standards or situations that include a failure to distinguish between right and wrong and that involve an ethical problem (Ergene, 2004; Gümüş & Gümüş, 2010). In studies conducted abroad (Bodenhorn, 2006; Capuzzi, 2002; Davis & Mickelson, 2003; Hendrix, 1991; Herlihy & Corey, 2006; Knapp & Vandecreek, 2010; Lawrence & Kurpius, 2000; Lazovsky, 2008; Lindsay & Clarkson 1999; Pope & Vetter, 1992; Rae, Sullivan, Razo, & Alba, 2009) it is stated that the most common ethical dilemmas encountered in psychological counselling are privacy, blurriness of boundaries, fuzzy, multiple or conflicting relationships, academic environment, teaching dilemmas and education problems, and colleague behaviours. According to the conclusions of the only study in Turkey (Erdur-Barker & Çetinkaya, 2007), the ethical dilemmas most widely witnessed by school psychological counsellors are found as privacy, dual or multiple relations, voluntarism, Professional competence and expertise in field.

Psychological counsellors have to have good command of ethical standards and legal responsibilities of the profession, be aware of the developments in the literature, have a conscious which rests on an integration of personal ethics and Professional ethics, and constantly engage in self-questioning so that they can deal with ethical dilemmas (Ergene, 2004; Herlihy & Corey, 2006; Pope & Vasquez, 2007; Welfel, 2006). It is believed that the number of ethical violations will increase if ethical dilemmas are not solved. Studies conducted by Koocher and Keith-Spielgel (1998) and Korkut, Müderrisoğlu, and Tanık (2006) concluded that one of the most important reasons for ethical violations conducted by those who work in psychological counselling professions is lack of sufficient knowledge in ethical-related subjects. On the other hand, a report by American Counselling Association (ACA) state that ethical violations are related to privacy problems, responsibility for duty and injunction, supervision and licence competence (ACA, 2010).

Despite the importance of the concept of ethical dilemma in psychological counselling profession, when the studies in the field of psychological counselling conducted in Turkey and Turkish Republic

of Northern Cyprus (TRNC) are examined, it can be seen that the studies related to ethical dilemma and the methods followed in the topic of the structure of ethical violations are not sufficient. For this reason the purpose of this study is to determine the structure of the ethical dilemmas faced by psychological counsellors working at different institutions and to gain information about what they do to solve these dilemmas and the nature of the obstacles they face when solving these dilemmas. Within the framework of the conducted study, it is believed that a specific database will be developed for establishing the ethical standards in the field of psychological counselling and contribution related to ethics will be made to the field.

### Purpose

The purpose of this study is to determine the structure of the ethical dilemmas faced by psychological counsellors working at different institutions and to gain information about what they do to solve these dilemmas and the nature of the obstacles they face when solving these dilemmas.

### Method

#### Research Design

In this study multi-state pattern, which is a model of qualitative study, has been employed and various implementers of the field of psychological counselling (such as school psychological counsellors, academician psychological counsellors at universities, private psychological counsellors) are each accepted as an analysis unit.

#### Working Group

The participants in this study have been determined as per purposive and maximum diversity keys sampling, which is one of the purposive sampling methods. The 40 participants are chosen among the psychological counsellors registered at Cyprus Turkish psychological counselling and guidance association (KTPDR-DER). As most of these members work at schools, 65% of our sample consists of psychological counsellors who work at schools, 20% consist of those who work at private psychological counselling centres and 15% consist of psychological counsellors who work as academicians at universities. It has been established that 85% (n=34) of participants are females, 15% (n=6) are males, with an average age of 31.6 and an average “years in service” of 6.85 years. In addition, it has been determined that 35% of the participants have taken a course on

ethics during their studies whereas the remaining 65% have never taken such a course.

### Instrument

Data related to the research have been obtained by means of semi-structured interview technique. The interview consists of two parts. In the first part questions have been asked with the purpose of obtaining the demographic information of the participants. The following questions have been asked in the second part: (1) What kind of ethical dilemmas are you facing when working in the field? (2) What do you do about these ethical dilemmas that you face? (3) What do you think are the obstacles for solving these ethical dilemmas? Expert opinion has been sought for validation followed by a preliminary work. In this way the form was given its final shape.

### Data Collection Procedure

Research data were collected in spring semester of 2010-2011 academic year. Interviews were performed by the researcher on a face-to-face basis and each took 30-40 minutes. Permission was asked for audio recording and commitment to privacy was guaranteed.

### Analysing the Relevant Knowledge

Content analysis was employed for analysing data. First, the data of 10 of the 40 researchers were evaluated by an expert other than the researcher herself and the consistency of the two data processors was checked. As a result of the calculation 80% level of consistency was detected (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Categorical analysis was conducted in this research and, in addition to the relevant literature, concept that appeared in findings were also found to be effective while categories and codes were being determined.

### Findings

The findings of this research are submitted in three sections.

#### The Ethical Dilemmas Most Frequently Emphasised by Psychological Counsellors

As a result of content analysis, it was considered that it would be appropriate to handle the ethical dilemmas experienced by psychological counsellors under 7 headings – privacy, complex relations and roles, competence, transfer of values, voluntarism, teach-

ing environments and service fees. When the findings are examined, it was found out that the psychological counsellors working at universities mostly suffered from teaching environments, whereas those employed at schools experienced “voluntarism” and the psychological counsellors working at private psychological counselling centres had ethical dilemmas related to “determination of service fee”. The ethical dilemmas common in all institutions were found as boundaries of privacy, entering into complex relations, competence and transfer of values.

**Privacy:** It has been found out that dilemmas related to privacy ranked first for those working at schools and private psychological counselling centres while they ranked second for those who work at universities as academicians. University staff stated that the dilemma they face about boundaries of privacy are mostly related to the cases that involve clients with a tendency to hurt themselves. The dilemmas that university staff experience about boundaries of privacy were classified under seven categories, namely dangerous behaviours, emotional or health-related problems, students with insecure situations, illegal acts, discipline board reports, pressure from administration or faculty members and cases of guardianship. Psychological counsellors who work at private psychological counselling centres expressed that they experienced dilemmas related to boundaries of privacy in situations that involve self-harming such as suicide, drug abuse among adults or teenagers, dangerous situations such as extra-familial physical or sexual abuse or contagious diseases. In addition, they stated that they had difficulty in determining the boundaries of privacy in familial counselling.

**Multiple Relations and Roles:** When the structure of the dilemmas related to this category is evaluated as per the type of institution, it has been found out that it ranks second for those who work at schools and universities whereas it ranks last for those who work at private psychological counselling centres. Faculty members stated that they experienced dilemmas in their teaching environment due to presents given by students or pressures exerted by students or their close friends for receiving psychological help. In addition, as they lived in a small settlement, they suffered dilemma when they had to apply for the services that their clients provided. The participants who work as school psychological counsellors stated that they could be obliged to enter into multiple roles and relations due to the blurriness of their role definition or a lack of awareness in the management about the definitions of the profession. Or, they stated that in cases when they worked as psychological counsellors, they experienced dilemma when they had to see the children of people that they know. They claimed that the

obligation of lecturing courses which are outside their role definition and other tasks being assigned such as membership of disciplinary board, being on duty and exam supervisory required an authoritarian attitude to be assumed, therefore, caused dilemmas for them related to entering into multiple relations.

**Competence:** Faculty members stated that when they have to lecture in areas which are not their expertise, they experienced dilemmas due to the feeling of incompetence in ethics and lack of knowledge about legal procedures in the early years of their profession; those working at schools expressed the same feelings when managers and families interfered with every issue as if they could solve things in a split second. Those working at private psychological counselling centres stated that they experienced ethical dilemmas when the clients brought an issue which is not in their expertise as well as in cases related to boundaries of confidentiality and non-competence.

**Transferring Own Values:** Those working at schools stated that they could include their own values when giving ethical decisions in legal-procedure requiring cases when they have to inform police or social service institutions. Those working at psychological centres specified that when they encounter a situation which is not acceptable according to their own values, they have difficulty when they notice that they try to interfere with the problem via their own personal values.

**Voluntarism:** Those working in school are the only ones who mentioned about dilemmas related to the category "voluntarism". They stated that they felt dilemma as parents, teachers or the administration is not knowledgeable about engaging students with disciplinary problems in psychological counselling process without the will of those students.

**Fees and Payments:** In this category those working at psychological counselling centres stated that they experienced dilemmas related to the difficulty in determining appropriate fees for clients with economic problems.

**Teaching Environments:** In this category, faculty members stated that they experienced dilemmas related to not including practical education due to the class populations, graduating students with no competence and answering the requests by students for an increase in their scores.

#### Attitudes and Behaviours of Psychological Counsellors related to the Problems that They Encounter

When the answers given to the question "what do you do when you encounter an ethical dilemma?"

are examined, they stated that they tried to solve the dilemmas in 6 ways – taking into consideration ethical rules, receiving help, including the client into the process, making personal questioning, trying to stay within legal process and informing the management and teachers about ethical rules that apply for psychological counselling. Faculty members specified that they produced solutions by receiving help – reading books and seeing experienced professionals – and taking ethical rules into consideration. They also claimed that in the latter case, they considered such dimensions as being in advantage of the client and avoiding harm. In addition, they also stated that they informed the client about the dilemmas that they are going through and involve them in the process and engage in personal questioning. psychological counsellors who work at schools or private psychological counselling centres denoted that when they encounter an ethical dilemma they mostly discuss the situation with their colleagues followed by taking ethical rules into consideration so that the options which are less harmful for the student are considered. In addition, they also stated that they engaged clients into the process and performed personal questioning.

#### The Situations which are Seen as Obstacles by Psychological Counsellors for Solving Ethical Dilemmas

When the answers given to the question "what do you think are the obstacles for you in solving ethical problems?" are examined, the answers can be grouped under three categories: political - institutional, lack of competence in solving ethical dilemmas and personal reasons. Faculty members stated that personal reasons – cultural structures, personal awarenesses, concerns and inability to act independently – were obstacles for solving dilemmas. As for other categories, they associate political and institutional obstacles with the lack of supervisory agencies, and lack of competence in solving ethical dilemmas with the insufficiency of undergraduate programs and lack of knowledge about correctly analysing the dilemmas. School psychological counsellors indicated political and institutional factors as the most important obstacles for solving ethical dilemmas and associated it with the fact that they depend on school administration and are unable to perform their profession independently. In addition, they also denoted that insufficiency of such institutions as social services, which are necessary for guiding children; stand out as another obstacle in solving dilemmas. They claim that another obstacle for solving ethical dilemmas is undergraduate programs which do not provide

them with relevant competencies. In addition, parents unwilling to cooperate are indicated as another important obstacle for solution. Those who work at private psychological counselling centres ranked the obstacles as follows: (i) lack of competence in ethical dilemmas, (ii) personal reasons and (iii) political – institutional reasons.

### Discussion

In this study when the ethical dilemmas experienced by psychological counsellors working at different types of institutions are considered, it can be seen that the most common dilemmas are those related to the boundaries of confidentiality. This result is consistent with other studies in the literature (Bodenhorn, 2006; Cappuzzi, 2002; Erdur-Barker & Çetinkaya, 2007; Isaacs & Stone, 1999; Kitchener & Anderson, 2000; Lawrence & Kurpius, 2000; Pope & Vetter, 1992). It is essential that the privacy of clients is protected so that a relation based on trust can be founded during psychological counselling process and the entire process can be managed with success (ACA, 2005; American School Counselor Association [ASCA], 2010; Corey, 2005; TÜRK PDR-DER, 2007). In this study especially school psychological counsellors stated that they experienced with more various dilemmas related to the boundaries of privacy. In addition to the responsibility of minor students at school, psychological counsellors are also responsible to the parents of the students and school administration; it is observed that psychological counsellors are having difficulty in maintaining the balance related to the boundaries of privacy within this triple-relation. As a matter of fact, this conclusion is supported by the fact that they mentioned being dependent on school administration, parents who are not willing to cooperate and lack of competence in solving ethical dilemmas as the most important problems in solving ethical dilemmas. The following expression from Nugent and Jones (2005) perfectly emphasise the importance of maintaining a balance in boundaries of privacy when working with minors during psychological counselling process: *“when the client is a child, he/she is defenceless yet and as he/she does not know how the adults will use the information given about him/her, one must always remember that such information can turn into a weapon which can be sued against the child.”* (cited in Gümüş & Gümüş, 2010). psychological counsellors are aware of ethical dilemmas and the problem at large, but they do not feel themselves competent about how to maintain the balance within the triangle formed by client-parents-school administration or legal bodies. When studies conducted in this are in the

literature are reviewed, it can be seen that as the age of clients decrease, the boundaries of privacy becomes a bigger problem for psychological counsellors of schools (Isaacs & Stone, 1999). As a result, it is believed that providing psychological counsellors with on-the-job training related to the solution of ethical dilemmas and giving them the opportunity of receiving supervision from competent people can mitigate if not eliminate the obstacles for solving such problems.

One of the important findings of the study is that the second area of dilemma for psychological counsellors who work at schools and universities is being obliged to enter into multiple relations and roles. This finding is similar to the conclusion of previous studies in the literature (Erdur-Barker & Çetinkaya, 2007; Moleski & Kiselica, 2005; Pearson & Piazza, 1997). The study of Bodenhorn (2006) conducted on school psychological counsellors support this conclusion. In our study especially the psychological counsellors working at schools indicated two reasons related to this finding: (i) entering into multiple relations due to the roles assigned by school administration for institutional reasons, and (ii) random encounters due to living in a small settlement. Psychological counsellors working at university stated that they experienced dilemmas related to receiving presents given by students and random encounters. School psychological counsellors claimed that school principals gave some tasks which compensate respect for the integrity of students. This result is a good indicator of the importance of informing school administration and teachers about the roles and tasks of psychological counsellors working at schools. As regards random encounters, it is suggested that especially in small settlements psychological counsellors should be prepared for such incidents and question themselves about the advantageous party in this relation which is unavoidable (Knapp & Vandecreek, 2010). In all types of institutions where psychological counsellors are employed it can be observed that they experience dilemma when they are forced by authorities, parents or clients to work and serve in a field where they are not competent. In addition, as they were not given any courses related to ethics and practical education was neglected by the undergraduate programs from which they graduated, they stated that they felt incompetence about solution of ethical problems which, in turn, appears as an obstacle in solving these dilemmas. This finding of the study is similar to the findings of Erdur-Barker & Çetinkaya (2007).

It can be seen that psychological counsellors suffer less from other dilemmas other than these results

and that these ethical dilemmas vary depending on the type of their institution. This finding can mean that psychological counsellors working at different types of institutions can experience similar dilemmas related to the basic principles of the profession, but they can also have different dilemmas depending on the structure and nature of their institution.

When the answers given to the second problematic of the study "how you act when you encounter ethical dilemmas?" are examined, it can be seen that most of the psychological counsellors decide by considering ethical principles in particular. In the literature, it is emphasised that examining the impact of such principles as not harming, being fair, being advantageous, respecting autonomy, and being loyal on the dilemma is essential after displaying the situation related to the ethical dilemma (Erdur-Baker & Çetinkaya, 2007; Ergene, 2004; Gümüş & Gümüş, 2010; Herlihy & Corey, 2006; Pope & Vasquez, 2007; Welfel, 2006). In this study it can be observed that especially academician psychological counsellors have such an awareness. However, it is also stated that in addition to taking ethical principles into consideration in solving ethical dilemmas, reference should be made to different viewpoints, the specific circumstances of the client should be considered and legal process should be respected (Erdur-Baker & Çetinkaya; Ergene; Gümüş & Gümüş; Pope & Vasquez). When the findings of this study are considered, it can be seen that psychological counsellors working at different types of institutions make use of a variety of helping tools when they feel such dilemmas. However, it can be sent hat they do not provide much opinion about the legal aspects of these dilemmas. This can be associated with the fact that they are not knowledgeable in this area. In order to fill this gap, undergraduate curricula of universities should provide psychological counsellor candidates with opportunities to question their legal responsibilities. Voltan-Acar (2003) emphasised the importance of legal issues in psychological counselling.

When the answers given to the third problematic of the study "what do you think are the obstacles for solving ethical dilemmas?" are examined, psychological counsellors working at schools showed political and institutional reasons as the most important obstacles for solving ethical dilemmas. The study of Erdur-Barker and Çetinkaya (2007) also emphasises these underlying reasons. When it is remembered that one of the reasons for experiencing ethical dilemmas is the conflict between principles of the institution and principles of the profession (Gümüş & Gümüş, 2010), this is an expected result. When the constituents of political and insti-

tutional reasons are considered, it can be seen that the reason indicated by most of the psychological counsellors working at schools is that they develop role definitions which are in conflict with the ethical principles of the profession due to their lack of knowledge about the ethical principles of the psychological counselling profession. In TRNC, psychological counsellors are assigned as guiding teachers as per the law on national education and report to the school administration (Okul Rehberlik ve Psikolojik Danışmanlık Tüzüğü, 2005). No studies have been conducted so far in TRNC on the perception of school principals for the roles and functions of psychological counsellors; however, studies conducted in Turkey indicate some negative and positive results related to the perception of school principals for the roles and functions of psychological counsellors (Deniz, 1993; Güven, 2003; Korkut-Owen & Owen, 2008; Nazlı, 2007; Paskal, 2001). Some of these findings support the conclusion of this study and state that school managers do not have a full comprehension of psychological counselling services and assign psychological counsellors some tasks outside their role definition such as substituting other teachers, exam supervision etc. (Deniz; Nazlı; Paskal). This study only reflects the views of psychological counsellors related to school managers; further studies can concentrate on perceptions of school psychological counsellors, teachers and school managers about psychological counselling services. According to the results of such studies, psychological counselling can be provided to each group and on-the-job training activities can be organized on ethical responsibilities of psychological counsellors.

In addition, most psychological counsellors working at all three types of institutions indicated as another obstacle that they are not competent in solving the ethical problems. This result emphasises the importance of integrating into undergraduate curricula consideration, questioning and analysing activities about ethical dilemmas so that psychological counsellors can be more equipped in solving ethical dilemmas. These findings also clarify the fact that on-the-job training activities are essential for life-long development of psychological counsellors after graduation and supervisory bodies should be more common to facilitate self-questioning by psychological counsellors.

All these results show that culture-considerate ethical standards have to be established and legislation should be made urgently so that psychological counsellors in TRNC can solve ethical problems they experience before they are turned into ethical violation.

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## Teşekkür:

Çalışmanın veri toplama işlemlerindeki katkıları nedeniyle, Kıbrıs Türk PDR-DER yönetim kurulu üyelerine, nitel araştırma yöntemlerinin seçimi konusundaki katkısı nedeniyle Doç. Dr. Fatoş Silman'a, Türkçe metnin anlaşılabilirliği ve akıcılığını sağlama konusunda katkısından dolayı Yrd. Doç. Dr. Ahmet Güneşli'ye, mesleki bilgi ve deneyimi ile katkı sağlayan meslektaşım Dr. Yeliz Akıntuğ'a teşekkürlerimi sunarım.