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Supervision and the APA Ethical Code: Remediating an Oversight

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Introduction

The practice of clinical supervision is widely accepted in the profession of psychology, and is generally believed to be essential for clinical training. Despite this consensus, the American Psychological Association's *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (Code)* (APA, 2002) does not devote a section exclusively to supervision, although it addresses numerous other topics, including research and publication, education and training, assessment, and psychotherapy. Since supervision is an integral aspect of each clinician's training, it seems surprising that the *Code* provides little guidance for this endeavor separately or in the education and training section.

Several threads of evidence cast doubt upon the ethical appropriateness of clinical supervision as currently practiced. Participation in supervision is expensive, time-consuming, and often results in adverse experiences for trainees; it also exposes clients' private lives to another—often unknown—individual. Yet there is little evidence of benefit for trainees or clients. This is a troubling situation.

Currently, the *Code* addresses a few elements of clinical supervision but lacks the precision and scope necessary to effectively promote the ethical practice of clinical supervision. Without a comprehensive ethical standard for supervisory expectations, the procedures for training psychologists will undoubtedly vary too widely. Supervisees deserve uniform and standardized treatment in order to become competent and ethical psychologists - and future supervisors themselves.

Here we summarize the scattered portions of the current *Code* that address supervision. These are compared with supervision guidelines of Licensed Clinical Social Workers, Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists, Licensed Professional Counselors, and Psychiatrists.

We are sympathetic to the view that supervision works and is essential to training, but find ourselves appalled at the current state of affairs with regard to ethical guidelines and related outcome or effectiveness research. The recent growth in interest in supervision (e.g., Falendar & Schafranske, 2004; 2008; Ladany, Friedlander, & Nelson, 2005) is a welcome development. However, there remains a need for guidelines or an additional section of the *Code* that addresses supervision ethics more explicitly. Guidelines should include such aspects as supervisory contracts, supervision schedules, supervisor accessibility, supervisory approaches, therapeutic modalities, record-keeping, boundaries and confidentiality, compensation, goals, and approach to evaluation. In addition, we call for research on the outcomes of supervision for both supervisees and clients.

Data

	APA	APA Rx	LCSW	LMFT	LPC
	Psychologists (APA)	Psychiatrists (APA Rx)	Social Workers (NASW)	Marriage-Family (AAMFT)	Counselor (ACA)
Supervise Within the Area of Competence	N/A	Offer adequate time for explanation and comprehension (5.3)	Supervise within the area of competence (3.02a)	Supervise within the area of competence (4.4)	Must be trained in supervision methods and techniques (F.2)
Supervisee Evaluations	N/A	N/A	In a fair and respectful manner (3.03)	N/A	Must meet regularly with supervisee to monitor clinical performance and client welfare (F.1)
Supervisee Delegation	N/A	Make sure they are competent and capable, regarding acupuncture (3.2)	N/A	Make sure they are competent and capable (4.4)	N/A
Care of Lab Animals	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A
Providing Therapy to Supervisee	N/A	N/A	N/A	NOT ALLOWED	Must refer to other counselor (F.5.c)
Sex with Supervisees	N/A	NOT ALLOWED	N/A	NOT ALLOWED	NOT ALLOWED
Supervision Boundaries	N/A	N/A	Clear, appropriate, and culturally-sensitive (3.01b)	Respect, be professional, avoid exploitation (4.1)	N/A
Confidentiality	N/A	N/A	N/A	Need written authorization to disclose supervisee confidences (4.7)	Be clear about policies, informed consent required (F.4.a, F.1)
Dual Relationships with Supervisee	N/A	N/A	Ethical unless impairment or harm for supervisee, minimize (3.01c)	Ethical unless impairment or harm for supervisee, minimize (4.6)	Ethical unless impairment or harm for supervisee, minimize (F.3.a)
Termination of Relationship	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	Both have the right to terminate with adequate notice (F.4.d)
Required Continuing Education	N/A	N/A	Take reasonable steps in area, address emerging developments in ethics (3.08)	N/A	Regularly continue supervision education (F.2.a)

Table 1: This chart compares and contrasts the various ethical codes for the differing mental health professions to examine the requirements placed upon supervisors in their subjective fields.

Results & Discussion

Study of the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (Code)* provided by the American Psychological Association (APA) reveals that it discusses how psychologist supervisors must behave towards supervisees (i.e., 2.01e, 2.05, 3.04, 3.08, 7.04, 7.06, 7.07, 8.09c), but that there is no distinct section in which supervision is systematically addressed. Further, from a review of Table 1, it is apparent that the *Code* does not at all address many of the issue of supervision deemed important in the ethical codes of other mental health disciplines. The National Association of Social Workers (NASW), American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT), and American Counseling Association (ACA) all devote sections towards supervision (Section 3, Section 4, and Section F, respectively).

The APA *Code* was established in order to provide structure and guidance to both new and seasoned psychologists. If there is a need for the proper training of psychologist, it is important to look at the current state of the *Code*. Currently the *Code*, in regards to supervision, lacks both structure and guidance and does not provide an adequate foundation for the upbringing of competent psychologists and supervisors.

As part of ongoing research, it would be most beneficial to examine the ways in which proper supervision, in accordance with the separate supervision statements of the *Code*, provides better services to clients in a simulated and actual psychotherapy settings. This would supply further support to the idea of providing a separate section regarding supervision ethics in the *Code*.

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