

Examining Student-Professor Confidentiality: What are the Expectations for Psychology Professors

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ABSTRACT

The current paper explores confidentiality between professors and students, as well as psychologists and clients, while bringing particular attention to professors teaching psychology and also holding registration as psychologists. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of applied psychology, yet confidentiality may have different meanings in the day to day realities of professors of psychology compared with registered psychologists. In addition, student perceptions and expectations of confidentiality between themselves and psychology professors further complicate confidentiality expectations in the post-secondary context. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

University professors often engage in multiple roles in pursuit of job success and satisfaction. Often these roles mesh well; however, there is potential for such roles to become tangled and for ethical conflicts surrounding dual roles to become a concern for professors of psychology who are also registered psychologists. Confidentiality is a cornerstone of applied psychology, yet confidentiality may have different meanings in the day to day realities of professors of psychology compared with registered psychologists. When these roles intersect, the potential for blurred boundaries intensifies.

The current paper examines confidentiality between professors and students, as well as psychologists and clients, while bringing particular attention to professors teaching psychology and also holding registration as psychologists¹. The importance of student perceptions of confidentiality will be outlined and the role of informed consent will be discussed. The paper concludes by making recommendations for practice, as well as proposing the first author's thesis topic: a study exploring student perceptions of student-professor confidentiality when instructed by a psychology professor versus a non-psychology professor.

¹ For readability purposes, the authors will refer to professors of psychology who are also registered psychologists as 'psychology professors', unless otherwise noted in the paper. However, it is important for the reader to know that there are differences between registered psychologists (i.e., people who have sought registration with a registration body and due to their training, supervised practice, and completion of an examination, have the legal right to use the title registered psychologist) and professors of psychology (i.e., typically people who teach in a psychology program and hold a doctoral degree in psychology), although many people hold both titles. It is also important to note that psychology programs often exist in various faculties, including Education.

Method

Several sources of data were collected in preparing the current manuscript. Information pertaining to the topic of confidentiality was gathered from the Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act (FIPPA) (1996), the Canadian Psychological Association (CPA)'s Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000), Practice Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services (2001), the Newfoundland and Labrador Psychology Board's Standards of Professional Conduct (2005), and the Access to Information and Protection of Privacy Act (ATIPPA) (2002). Information was also collected from various post-secondary institutions' calendars or policy statements accessed via the Internet². A literature search of the terms 'confidentiality', 'student perception', 'psychologist', 'professor', and 'university' (i.e., individually and by using several combinations of terms) was conducted using PsychINFO and ERIC databases.

Although information was readily available on confidentiality within post-secondary education and for the profession of psychology as separate entities, less information was available specifically relating to psychologists who were also professors and the perceptions of their students. In 1991, Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope claimed that the beliefs and behaviours of psychologists who were also teaching had been neglected. Hogan and Kimmel (1992) voiced the same concern, stating that ethical obligations of academic psychologists had been seriously overlooked in the literature. The focus of both of these studies was only on the attitudes and behaviours of psychology professors, with the perceptions of students not being explored. Owing to a dearth of research investigating the obligations surrounding confidentiality for psychology professors, as well as their students' perceptions, the current paper seeks to more clearly delineate this topic and lay the foundation for empirical investigation.

Multiple Roles of Psychologists

Psychologists often assume multiple roles. In fact, the CPA's Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000) and Practice Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services (2001) and the Newfoundland and Labrador Psychology Board's Standards of Professional Conduct (2005) each highlight a range of potential roles for psychologists. Many professors of psychology do hold registration as psychologists in their respective jurisdictions. In fact, psychology registration boards often require a subset of professors within applied psychology programs to be registered psychologists in order for a degree to be acceptable as psychological (i.e., in order for graduates of the program to be able to become registered psychologists). In addition, many professors of psychology adopt the title 'psychologist', even if they are not registered psychologists³. This designation

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We are grateful to Ms. Amy Evans (MUCEP student) for her literature search on post-secondary educational policies regarding privacy and confidentiality issues.

³ Under the Psychology Act, professors of psychology are able to use the title 'psychologist' in their role as professor of psychology.

of 'psychologist' may influence student expectations. Research states that psychology students may believe that professors teaching psychology courses have clinical training and trust that their professors can rely on this training to help their students deal with personal problems (Haney, 2004; Hogan & Kimmel, 1992; Tantleff-Dunn, Dunn & Gokee, 2002). This suggests that student perception, as well as the dual title of professor and psychologist, has the potential to lead to a dual role situation with ethical implications, most notably those involving confidentiality issues.

Confidentiality

University Professors and Confidentiality

University professors have a mandate to help students realize their potential and create life avenues. Not only are professors responsible to deliver curriculum; they are also serving as models for the students they instruct (Belvins-Knabe, 1992; Goodstein, 1981). Furthermore, students often want professors who are knowledgeable and demonstrate caring and concern (Strage, 2008). Belvins-Knabe suggests that trustworthiness is a key characteristic of the effective professor. To instill a sense of student trust and safety, both in and out of the classroom, some degree of confidentiality should ideally be in place. Students often reveal very personal information about themselves, whether through their writing for a course assignment, or through verbal communication with their professors. They do so, trusting that their professors will not share this information with others. It is the current authors' perspective that maintaining confidentiality of students' personal information, such as grades, term papers, and private communications, may facilitate student learning and be conducive to pro-social student behaviour (e.g., attending classes, confiding in the professor as a confidant). Some notable authors (e.g., Carl Rogers) have highlighted that this type of relationship, whether in a clinical or educational context, can facilitate learning, growth, and human change. In the Ethical Guidelines for Supervision in Psychology (2009), the CPA notes that the "application of ethical principles" can result in positive learning environments which may, in turn, enhance learning (p. 2).

Post-secondary institutions across Canada have been placing importance on the protection of students' personal information. The majority of Canadian post-secondary institutions follow the FIPPA (1996). The FIPPA was designed to make public bodies such as colleges and universities more accountable to the public. Its goal is the protection of personal privacy. At the post-secondary level, FIPPA policies give individuals the right to access their own personal records, while at the same time protecting the unauthorized disclosure of those records and other personal information. According to the Act, personal information is defined as any recorded information about an individual whereby that individual can be identified. Other Canadian post-secondary institutions⁴ have adopted similar policies and standards. In 2002, the Newfoundland

⁴ (e.g., Concordia University, Memorial University, Quest University Canada, Trinity Western University).

and Labrador government assented to the ATIPPA. Memorial University, College of the North Atlantic, Centre for Nursing Studies, and the Western Regional School of Nursing all abide by the rules and policies put forth in the ATIPPA. While the goal of the ATIPPA is much the same as that of the FIPPA, in the ATIPPA, personal information is described in depth to include such details as demographic information about an individual, an identifying number (e.g., student number), information about an individual's educational status or history, and the opinions of others about the particular person, as well as the individual's own personal views and opinions.

A noticeable difference between the concept of confidentiality for psychology professionals and education professionals is that many of the policies from these Canadian post-secondary institutions (i.e., those that follow FIPPA guidelines and those who implement similar policies) place only minimal emphasis on the confidentiality of private communication and much more importance on keeping student records confidential. Furthermore, there is no clarification in the institutional policies as to what would constitute private communication. For example, Simon Fraser University's policy states that all information gained about students' academic progress, their political or religious views, or information about their personal life should be kept in confidence. The policy fails to expand on whether there are specific methods of gaining information that would qualify that information to be kept in confidence or whether any means would be enough for the information to be treated as confidential. For example, would speaking to a professor in the hallway outside of the classroom, in his/her office, or during a chance meeting on university grounds all be considered confidential communications? Also, one must consider how the information was obtained, either through direct communication, a third party, or personal records, and whether that would affect confidentiality requirements.

There appears to be little consensus regarding the onus of responsibility with regard to the expectations of confidentiality within post-secondary educational settings. It is unclear whether the obligation to know, and implement, the guidelines falls on the faculty members, the students, or both. Some school guidelines suggest that it is the university faculty members who are accountable (e.g., University of Victoria, Memorial University, Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, University of Lethbridge, Simon Fraser University). The policy of Memorial University is that all employees are responsible to maintain the privacy of students, as well as research participants. On the other hand, the policies of the University of Alberta and Kwantlen University College state that it is the students' responsibility to become aware of the rules and regulations of the university, which include confidentiality, outlined in the university calendar. The University of the Fraser Valley declares that students should expect their personal information to be kept confidential and students should recognize that consent is needed for this information to be shared. It appears as though the concepts of privacy and confidentiality within the post-secondary setting have grey areas, which leaves room for miscommunication and potential harm to either the student or the professor. Both students and professors need to be clear on the rules and guidelines of their institutions. Equally important, each party must be aware of the other's views of

confidentiality in order to address underlying expectations and any discrepancies that may exist. This may present a challenge for those professors who are also psychologists, as the expectations of their students may differ from those of a professor who is not a psychologist.

Psychologists and Confidentiality

Much of the literature concerning ethical standards for psychologists applies to clinical work and research (Hogan & Kimmel, 1992). Confidentiality plays an important role in the relationship between a psychologist and his or her client(s) in a clinical setting. Researchers (e.g., Faber, Berano, & Capobianco, 2004) have suggested that in order for therapy to be beneficial, a relationship between the client and the psychologist must be established. In order to develop a positive therapeutic relationship, it may be helpful for the client to have a sense of privacy and to understand how information which is disclosed to the psychologist will be kept confidential. During the initial session, and throughout the therapeutic process, psychologists discuss the nature of confidentiality between themselves and their clients and ensure clients' understanding and consent⁵. Without confidentiality, Donner, VandeCreek, Gonsiorek, and Fisher (2008) assert that psychologists cannot be effective. Clients may not reveal thoughts or feelings that are of a personal nature, without the sense of security which may be fostered by an understanding of confidentiality (Donner et al., 2008; Younggren & Harris, 2008).

Research suggests that psychologists take confidentiality seriously. Tabachnick et al. (1991) asked psychologists, the majority of whom had teaching responsibilities, to rate various behaviour in terms of their involvement in the behaviour and how ethical they judged the behaviour to be. The majority of psychologists reported that discussing confidential information relayed by students was either 'unquestionably unethical' or 'ethical only under rare circumstances' (See Tabachnick et al. for a complete list of behaviour and subsequent ratings). Importantly, the inappropriate breach of confidentiality by a psychologist could result in serious consequences for the psychologist and the service recipient. Thus, there is a need for clarification regarding students' expectations and understanding regarding confidentiality of information shared with psychology professors.

To examine the ethical principles applicable to the psychology profession in Canada, one must turn to the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (CPA, 2000). The ethical standards set forth in the code are proposed to help *guide* psychologists' behaviour (Cram & Dobson, 1993). The Code summarizes an "ethical decision-making process" that psychologists should turn to when faced with ethical dilemmas in any aspect of their work (CPA, 2000, p. 2). The principles outlined characterize the ideals to which psychologists aspire in their practices (CPA). At different points throughout the Code, reference is made to students and teaching. One such example from the Code

⁵ It is important to note that there are some limitations to psychologist-client confidentiality (see the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists, 2000, for a review).

occurs under Principle 1: Respect for the Dignity of Persons. It states that psychologists....

...be careful not to relay information about colleagues, colleagues' clients, research participants, employees, supervisees, students, trainees, and members of organizations, gained in the process of their activities as psychologists, that the psychologist has reason to believe is considered confidential by those persons, except as required or justified by law (p.13).

The above ethical standard raises at least two important points relevant to the current discussion. The first point relates to activities engaged in as psychologists and whether teaching would be included in these activities. The CPA's recent publication, *Ethical Guidelines for Supervision in Psychology* (2009), claims that ethical principles apply to "all psychologists in all of their activities" (p. 1). By referencing students in Principle 1, one would presume the Code has included teaching as one of many activities psychologists engage in as psychologists. The *Practice Guidelines for Providers of Psychological Services* (CPA, 2001), however, does not categorize teaching as a psychological service. Psychological services in the *Practice Guidelines* involve such activities as evaluation, diagnosis, assessment, and consultation relating to assessment, interventions, program development, and supervision of the above services. Herein lies a challenge for psychology professors. If one's teaching employment is dependent on being a psychologist and one is teaching as an identified psychologist, it may be reasonable to assume that one is perceived as 'being a psychologist' when one is teaching. If this is the case, the psychology professor's ethical obligation of confidentiality toward information shared by his/her students may come into question.

The second point has to do with the possibility that students may believe that there is an assumption of confidentiality between the psychology professor and his/her students. Tantleff-Dunn et al. (2002) state that students enrolled in psychology classes may have preconceived expectations of their professors based on their limited knowledge of the psychology profession. This suggests that it may be reasonable for a psychology professor to consider that some students may expect confidentiality in their relationships with their psychology professors, in a similar way that clients would expect confidentiality in their relationships with their psychologists. It may, therefore, be appropriate for the psychology professor to explicitly discuss the issue of confidentiality with his/her students.

Discussion

Importance of Student Perceptions

Research focusing on student perceptions of confidentiality within the student-professor relationship is limited. Two studies on this topic were found in the literature search. Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, and Allen (1993) asked student participants to give their views on the ethical behaviour of their professors. Four hundred and eighty-two undergraduate students attending universities across the United States were given questionnaires and asked to rate the behaviour of their professors. The list of behaviour was compiled, in part, from student responses to an earlier request that they provide examples of ethical problems that they had experienced with their professors in the past. The results of the questionnaire revealed that requiring students to expose highly personal information in a group discussion during class was thought to be one of the most unethical behaviours performed by professors. In a similar study, Kuther (2003) examined college student perceptions of the ethical responsibilities of faculty members. Approximately 250 undergraduate students taking introductory and advanced psychology courses were asked to rate 25 “actions in which professors might engage” (p.154). Ninety-six percent of students agreed that it was never ethical, or ethical only under rare circumstances, for a professor to tell a colleague about confidential disclosures made by students. Seventy-eight percent rated telling the class about confidential disclosures, without revealing the student’s identity, the same. Clearly, in these studies, students perceived confidentiality as a highly important factor. It appears as though students are sensitive about the information they share in the classroom, as well as who has access to that information. It is important that psychology professors understand students’ perceptions of confidentiality in order to better recognize what students are expecting of them, as well as to examine whether or not they are prepared and able to meet those expectations.

Informed Consent

A potentially interesting idea generated from the current paper is the notion of informed consent in the classroom context. Informed consent involves providing the service recipient with enough information to make an informed choice regarding accessing the service. One possibility is for psychology professors to explicitly discuss the idea of confidentiality with their students, so students are given the opportunity to grasp the reality of confidentiality in the teaching context. This upfront disclosure is in line with appropriate informed consent practices. Informed consent is a dominant theme in counselling and other psychological practices (Pomerantz, Santanello, & Kirn, 2006). The Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000) highlights the procedure of obtaining informed consent, adding that psychologists must ensure their clients understand the nature of the activities they are involved in as well as the psychologist’s

responsibilities⁶. Bodenhorn (2006) advises that professional school counsellors continue to remind students and other faculty about their professional responsibilities, especially regarding confidentiality. This advice can be extended to professors at universities and colleges. Tantleff-Dunn et al.'s 2002 study stands as a testament to the benefit of informed consent. In an attempt to help professors understand and prevent conflict, psychology students were asked which behaviour they thought precipitated conflict in the classroom. One of the outcomes of the study was the suggestion that professors explain the rules and policies early in the course to minimize confusion and future conflict. At present, several universities specify minimum requirements for course outlines (e.g., required texts, policies governing academic dishonesty). One possible option for professors to consider could be to include information on confidentiality in the course outline. Perhaps a formal policy could be added to university guidelines to include informed consent practices in the classroom and outside of the classroom. An open discussion of confidentiality could provide students and professors the opportunity to compare perspectives and reduce or avoid misunderstandings regarding confidentiality and its limits. This could also help foster positive working relationships and prevent unethical behaviour.

Future Directions

More research is needed on this very important topic. The first author has chosen to focus her master's thesis on the issue of student perceptions regarding confidentiality between students and professors. It is hoped that by more clearly understanding the perceptions of students regarding this issue, psychology professors, as well as professors from other disciplines, will be better able to ensure clarity around the issue of confidentiality in this context.

Concluding Thoughts

Confidentiality expectations present a potential ethical dilemma to those professionals who are both psychologists and professors. To clarify the role of confidentiality for these professionals, student perceptions need to be examined. Future research devised by the first author will attempt to uncover student perceptions of confidentiality. With this knowledge, students and psychology professors will be more informed and misperceptions may be avoided.

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⁶ For a more complete discussion on informed consent in a clinical context, please refer to the Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists (2000).

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