

Gender Differences in Secondary School Teacher Counsellors Perception of Ethical Standards in Counselling in Kiambu County, Kenya

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Abstract

Ethical standards are at the core of counselling practice and are aimed at ensuring the welfare of the client and the counsellor are safeguarded. Counselling, like any other profession is governed by ethical standards and unless it's provided on ethical basis, it may cease to serve its intended purpose. Despite the critical role of ethical standards in a counselling relationship, the extent to which a counsellor will adhere to these standards may be dependent on the way he/she perceives these standards. This study presumed that perception of ethical standards may be contingent on ones gender. This is the assumption that motivated this study with a desire to validate whether gender influences perceptions of ethical standards among teacher counsellors in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. The study was guided by the moral development theory and adopted the mixed method research design. The target population was the 281 heads of guidance and counselling departments of secondary schools in Kiambu County and the five officials of guidance and counselling association in the county. The sample was 170 participants who comprised 165 heads of guidance and counselling departments and five officials of the guidance and counselling association in the County. The study utilized stratified and purposeful sampling methods. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires and focused group discussion. The instruments were validated by subjecting them to expert's scrutiny. The instrument's reliability coefficient was 0.80 which was accepted. Data accruing from the focus group discussion was transcribed for ease of analysis while responses to the questionnaire were analysed through independent sample test. Five areas were focused by the study. These included ethical standards relating to counsellor-client relationship, counsellor integrity, clients informed consent, clients confidentiality and putting clients first. Accruing findings demonstrated that teacher counsellor's had an unfavourable perception of ethical standards (mean =2.84). and that gender had a statistically significant influence on the perception of ethical standards among teacher counsellor's in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya ($p=0.000$, $t=-2.276$). The study recommends that gender be an important factor for guiding the appointment of teacher counsellor's and capacity building targeting male counsellors be initiated. Additionally, the study recommends that further research be carried out to establish whether there will be gender differences in perception of ethical standards and psychological gender. The study contributes to the body of knowledge as it provides a model of predicting the perception of ethical standards given the gender of teacher counsellors.

Keywords: Gender, Teacher Counselor, Perception, Ethical Standards, Secondary Schools

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1.1 Back Ground of the Study

Guidance and counselling is an important component of the school system. The primary goal of school guidance and counselling services is to enhance and promote student learning. School counselling services provide students with opportunities to develop knowledge and appreciation of themselves and others and to develop relationship skills and a sense of responsibility. Guidance and counselling services also helps students to acquire skills and attitudes necessary to develop educational goals which are suited to their needs, interests, and abilities including efforts to enhance their ability to make decisions about life and career opportunities. Added to this is the fact that guidance and counselling address health related issues among learners (Mwamwenda, 1995). School guidance and counselling is expected to address the holistic developmental needs of all students (UNESCO, 2002). This has the implication that counselling teachers need to develop and articulate comprehensive guidance and counselling programmes in their schools.

Guidance and counselling services in Kenya face a number of challenges. For instance, role ambiguity is one of the main challenges as there is confusion as to whether the teacher counsellor is a teacher or counsellor first. The role of the teacher counsellor is not clearly defined and therefore different educational stakeholders have different interpretations and expectations of the teacher counsellor (Wambu & Fisher, 2005). Moreover, a study done by Wambui (2015) found that the time allocated for guidance and counselling was too short which affected the effective delivery of the service to students. More so, school counselling is yet to be recognized as a profession in its own right, rather than a service ancillary to other educational programmes (Wambu & Wickman, 2011).

A study by Kamore and Tiego (2013) observed that inadequate support by school managers and resource input were some of the challenges impacting negatively on guidance and counselling in schools. This finding concurs with the findings of studies by Nyamwange *et al.*, (2012), Mbongo, *et al.*, (2016), Boit (2016) and Nkala (2014) that found lack of relevant resources and facilities a major factor impacting on the successful implementation of school guidance and counselling services. According to Wambu and Fisher (2015) there is no unified ethical code for school counsellors' in Kenya. Lack of organizational structure detailing how school counselling should be conducted and a specific code for teacher counsellors has led to inconsistencies and variations in how guidance and counselling is conducted in different schools (Wambu & Fisher, 2015).

Violation of ethical standards by teacher counsellors in practice has been a major hindrance to students seeking guidance and counselling services. Bitu (2015) found that some students did not seek counselling services because of their perception that teacher counsellors were not confidential. This concurs with the findings of Momanyi (2013) that students were not ready to seek guidance and counselling services on personal issues and gave lack of confidentiality of the teacher counsellor as the reason why they did not seek guidance and counselling services. Sixty percent (60%) of the students and twenty-one (21%) of the teachers who participated in the study had a perception that teacher counsellors don't keep information confidential. The challenges teacher counsellors' encounter and the school environment they work in may influence their perceptions.

All professions are guided by ethics and counselling is not an exception. However, what makes counselling unique is that it is the application of ethics. According to Bond (2009), counselling is ethics-in-action. The public image of the usefulness of counselling depends on how counsellors maintain satisfactory standards of practice. Clients seek counselling at a time they are troubled and vulnerable which gives the counsellor considerable power over them for good or harm. The client vulnerability therefore creates a corresponding obligation on the counsellor to be ethical in their exercise of power and professional expertise. Therefore, the counselling process and relationship needs to be ethical in nature.

A counsellor's ethical practice is associated with effectiveness of counselling (Ivey *et al.*, 2010). Studies by Bahari *et al.*, (2014), and Kerby (2009), found a relationship between counsellors' ethical practice and counselling outcomes. The ethical standard of informed consent was associated with the client's motivation to participate in the treatment plan, a positive counsellor-client therapeutic relationship, improved counselling outcomes and open communication. A similar finding was reported in a study by Kwon and Jo (2012) which found a significant relationship between confidentiality and the counselling outcomes. A study done by Ngumi (2005) found confidentiality to be necessary in establishing trust. This is in agreement with the findings of Affum *et al.*, (2019) who conducted a study in Ghana and found that counsellor confidentiality increased client's confidence to the counselling process and outcomes. The study findings further indicated that guidance and counselling services in Ghana were not effective due to client's lack of trust on the counsellor.

According to Corey (2013) some aspects of the informed consent process include the general goals of counselling, the responsibilities of the counsellor toward the client, the responsibilities of clients, limitations of and exceptions to confidentiality, legal and ethical parameters that could define the relationship, the qualifications and background of the practitioner, the fees involved, the services the client expect, the approximate length of the therapeutic process, benefits and risks of counselling involved, and the possibility that the client's case will be discussed with the therapist's colleagues or supervisors.

Confidentiality is an essential ethical standard in counselling practice. Confidentiality can be defined as the fundamental intent to protect a client's right to privacy by ensuring that matters disclosed to the counsellor are not disclosed to third parties without the informed consent of the client (Corey, 2013). According to Bond (2009), confidentiality of the counsellor helps in developing a trusting and productive therapeutic relationship. In counselling practice, counsellors have an ethical and legal responsibility to discuss the nature and purpose of confidentiality with their clients early in the counselling process (Corey, 2013). Confidentiality is considered as a major factor in the effectiveness and delivery of counselling services. Studies done by Azfredrick (2015), Chan and Quinn, (2012), Jenkins (2010), Wu, *et al* (2012), Kamunyu, *et al.*, (2015), Mushaandja *et al.*, and Momanyi, (2013), found that lack of confidentiality was one of the major factors inhibiting the use of counselling services by students.

Non adherence to ethical standards during counselling practice could cause damage to clients. A practitioner's good intentions are insufficient in counselling and are dangerous unless the counsellor is competent and works at a satisfactory level of standards and ethics. According Lambie *et al.*, (2012) contends that knowing ethical codes differs greatly from applying the ethical code. Therefore, though statutory regulation increases control of therapeutic practice, it does not give total control nor does it provide guaranteed protection to the public. Therefore, the person of the counsellor and his or her perception of ethical standards may determine level of adherence to these standards and the effectiveness of counselling services he or she offers to clients. An unfavourable perception of ethical standards may lead to a lower level of adherence to ethical standards and vice versa.

Ali and Rahman (2014) define perception as the process by which people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulations into meaningful information about a phenomenon. Thus, perception can be described as the cognitive and psychological process by which sensory information is simplified, organized and interpreted. In the context of this study, the term perception refers to the way in which a teacher counsellor views and interprets the ethical standards in the counselling profession. Perceptions have been linked to therapeutic outcomes. Perceptions have also been identified as a potential barrier to treatment. According to Coleman (2019), mental health practitioners' perceptions assist in their ability to maintain ethical compliance. A teacher counsellor's favourable perception and compliance with ethical standards will transform counselling practice into an effective process where the interests and dignity of the clients are protected and vice versa. A study by Woldeab and Sapo (2020) in Ethiopia revealed that teacher's professionalism was found to be significantly affected by their perception.

According to Ali and Rahman (2014) people differ in terms of physical features, personality traits and experience which help in the formation of ones perceptions. The individuality of each person therefore distinguishes him/her from the others of the same kind. The way a teacher counsellor perceives ethical standards in a profession may not necessarily cut across all counsellors. This is because there is heterogeneity in terms of age, gender, level of training and length of service. This study therefore seeks to establish whether there are gender differences in perception of ethical standards among teacher counsellors in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Like other professions, counselling has its own ethical guidelines which counsellors are obligated to adhere to in order to safeguard the welfare and interests of the client and the counsellor. For example, the counsellor is expected to obtain informed consent from their clients, ensure confidentiality and also put client's welfare first and ensure his/her integrity and that of the profession. This has the implication that counsellors must subscribe to these guidelines failure to which the expected counselling outcomes may not be realized. The extent to which a teacher counsellor may adhere to ethical standards may be dependent on how he/she values or perceives these standards. However, there is paucity of research in Kenya on how secondary school teacher counsellors perceive the ethical standards in the profession yet it has a bearing on the quality of services they offer to their clients. This is what motivated this study with a desire to establish whether there are gender differences in secondary school teacher's counsellor's perceptions of ethical standards in the profession in Kiambu County, Kenya.

1.3 Literature Review

Gender has been reported as a personal attribute that can also influence ethical perceptions. For example, a study conducted by Hursen (2012) on the attitudes of teachers towards professional activities among high school teachers in Turkey found that gender had a significant influence on teacher's attitudes towards professional activities. The study showed that women had more positive attitudes towards professional activities. Similarly, a study conducted by Guffey and McCartney (2008) found significant differences between gender and perceived importance of ethical issues. Female participants had significant higher scores on ethical judgements and behavior intention than their male counterparts. Sarkozy (2010) found significant differences between gender and attitudes and practices towards informed consent in psychotherapy. Licensed female psychologists were found to start the discussion earlier than male registered psychologists.

Similar findings has been reported by a study conducted by Perryer and Leighton (2002) on the influence of gender, age, culture and other factors on ethical beliefs in Australia and Singapore. The findings showed that gender was a significant predictor of ethical behavior. Alleyne and Persaud (2012) in their study in Barbados also found that females displayed higher ethical values compared to males. The study reported that females held higher ethical perceptions than their male counterparts regardless of their academic major and religiosity. This finding is in concurrence with the findings of Obasi (2016) in Benin that found women to be more ethically disposed than their male counterparts.

These findings however, are contradicted by the findings of a study conducted by Musbah *et al.*, (2016) in Libya that indicated that male accountants displayed more ethical behaviour than their female counterparts. A study by Ramesh and Goel (2014) in India however established that there were no significant differences in attitudes of males and females towards ethics. A study by Kiarie (2016) in Kenya had also recommended that future research should explore the link between gender and perceived benefits of counselling supervision. The study further recommended that a survey of a wide range of counsellors especially those not accredited by professional associations but involved in some form of counselling be carried out.

1.4 Methodology

The research design that guided this study was the mixed method design. The target population was the 281 heads of guidance and counselling departments of public secondary schools in Kiambu County and the five

officials of guidance and counselling association in the county. The sample was 170 participants who comprised 165 heads of counselling departments and five officials of the guidance and counselling association in the county. The sampling methods utilized were stratified sampling, simple random sampling and purposeful sampling methods. Data was collected through self-administered questionnaires and focused group discussion. A pilot study was carried out in 17 randomly selected schools in the neighboring Murang'a County. The instruments were validated by subjecting them to expert's scrutiny. The instruments reliability coefficient was 0.80 which was accepted. Data from the focused group discussion was organized in themes for ease of identifying emerging patterns of responses while data from the questionnaires was analysed by use of independent sample t-test.

1.5 Findings of the Study

The study sought to determine whether there are gender differences in secondary school teacher counsellor's perception of ethical standards in the counselling profession in Kiambu County, Kenya. In order to achieve this objective, the analysis involved calculating the means of the teacher counsellors of their perceptions of the various domains of ethical standards. The result of the analysis of the perception of the five ethical standards is summarized in Table 1.

Table 1: Teacher Counsellors Mean Perception Scores on Ethical Standards

Ethical Standard	Mean
1. Clients informed consent	2.23
2. Clients confidentiality	2.67
3. Counsellor integrity	3.09
4. Counsellor-client relationship	3.35
5. Putting clients first	2.84
Mean of means	2.84

Source: Field Data, 2022

The research found out that overall, the teacher counsellor's perception of ethical standards mean was 2.84. This can be interpreted to mean that teacher counsellors had an unfavourable perception of ethical standards. This finding is in agreement with the findings of earlier studies by Cant (2012), Blease *et al.*, (2020) and Croarkin *et al.*, (2003). Specifically, the study found that teacher counsellors had unfavourable perceptions on the ethical standards of clients informed consent (mean=2.23), clients confidentiality (mean=2.67), and putting clients first (mean=2.84). However, the teacher counsellors had favourable perceptions on the ethical standards of counsellor-client relationship (mean=3.35) and counsellor integrity (mean=3.09).

Data from the focus group discussion seems to augment this finding as they indicated different perceptions on the ethical standards. For instance, one of the respondents stated his views on confidentiality as follows:

"I don't think some details are necessary for a student. For instance, discussing with a client how and to whom I can disclose information to is not necessary. That can be done at the point that calls for disclosure of client's information to a third party. Similarly, discussing the instances when confidentiality can be broken at the commencement of the counselling process and that I need the clients consent may not be necessary".

Another participant put his opinion as follows:

"I think sharing some information at the contracting stage may make some clients to shut off and refuse to share information. I am thinking of a client who has been a victim of abuse. If you inform them that you will report cases of abuse to the relevant authorities, such a client may never open up on that issue especially if the perpetrator is a significant other".

On the ethical standard of client's informed consent, one participant stated as follows:

"I think in my opinion some details on informed consent are not necessary. For instance, telling the client about the benefits and risks of counselling, the likely outcomes of the counselling process, the treatment goals and techniques are details that the client may not require. To me it's not relevant though good to know".

Another participant indicated the following:

"For me some details are not relevant. For example, my educational background and professional training are not relevant to a student? It adds no therapeutic value. What value does it add when I tell a client that I go for supervision?"

On the ethical standard of putting clients first, one respondent stated as follows:

"Putting clients first is almost impossible in a school context where the performance of students comes first. The school administration is interested more on the mean standard score compared to counselling. Therefore, teaching responsibility comes first and counselling second".

Another participant concurred and stated as follows:

"Counselling in a school set up is aimed at assisting the school to achieve its academic endeavours which is

academic performance. Our school system is exam oriented and therefore academic performance is the most important indicator of a school success. Therefore, if we have to change this trend, then the teacher counsellor should have a lesser teaching load or no load at all so that he/she can focus on offering counselling services to students”.

On counsellor integrity, one participant stated his views as follows:

“Counsellors must spare no effort in ensuring that they uphold their integrity and that of the counselling profession. If clients don’t have confidence in us as therapists, then they will shy away from seeking help”

Another participant agreed and stated the following:

“I totally agree that we must safeguard ourselves and the profession. Remember we are dealing with vulnerable people and we are practicing behind closed doors. Therefore, we must be people of impeccable values and character. Anything short of that will be the death nail of us as professionals and our profession”.

The favourable perception of the ethical standard of strengthening the counsellor-client relationship seems to be augmented by data that was collected from the guidance and counselling officials in the focused group discussion. For instance one of the participants stated:

“No counselling can take place without a therapeutic relationship. Actually a counselling relationship is at the core of the counselling outcomes”

Another participant concurred and observed the following:

“To utilize counselling services, clients must feel safe. Therefore, as counsellors we must provide a safe, caring and warm environment for the clients to feel free and comfortable to open up”

Further agreement on the need to strengthen the counsellor –client relationship was noted with by another participant who stated as follows:

“We must accept our clients unconditionally in a therapeutic context. This is only possible if there is a relationship. We must always provide the core conditions of empathy, genuineness and unconditional positive regard as therapists to our clients so that they can be able to confront themselves and their issues. This is only possible if they feel safe”.

The study aimed to establish whether there were gender differences in perception of ethical standards by teacher counsellor’s in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. Gender of the respondent was measured in categorical scale in terms of being male or female. The distribution of the teacher counsellor’s summary in terms of gender indicated that majority of the study participants were female. In total female respondents were 90 accounting for 59% while male teacher counsellors’ were 63 accounting for 41% of the respondents. This gives an impression that female teachers were dominant as head of guidance and counselling departments in public secondary schools in Kiambu County at the time of data collection.

The output of mean perception scores by gender is as presented in Table 2.

Table 2: Respondents Mean Perception Scores on Ethical Standards by Gender

Gender	Frequency	Mean Perception	Standard deviation
Male	63	2.73	.414
Female	90	2.90	.534
Total	153	2.87	.

Source: Field Data, 2022

The data presented in Table 2 shows that male respondents mean score was (mean= 2.73) while the female mean score was (mean= 2.90). This can be interpreted to mean that female teacher counsellors had a more favourable perception of ethical standards in counselling compared with their male counterparts. The female mean perception of ethical standards was slightly higher than the male mean perception. However, it was important to establish whether these differences in perception of ethical standards were statistically significant or not. This was necessary so as to test the hypothesis that: Gender has no statistically significant influence on perceptions of ethical standards by teacher counsellors in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya.

The hypothesis presumed that perception of ethical standards would not differ significantly between male and female respondents. In order to establish whether gender had any statistically significant influence on perception of ethical standards, an independent sample t-test was applied to determine the influence of gender on perception of ethical standards among teacher counsellor’s in public secondary schools in Kiambu County. The output is as shown in Table 3.

Table 3:Independent Sample Test on Teacher Counsellor’s Perception of Ethical Standards by Gender

		Levene's Test for Equality of Variances		t-test for Equality of Means						
		F	Sig.	T	Df	Sig. (2-tailed)	Mean Difference	Std. Error Difference	95% Confidence Interval of the Difference	
									Lower	Upper
Teacher counsellor’s perception of Ethical standards	Equal variances Assumed	17.272	.000	-2.178	151	.031	-.17466	.08021	-	-
	Equal variances not assumed			-	149.323	.024	-.17466	.07675	.3313	.01619
				2.276					.32632	.02300

Source: Field Data, 2022

The data presented in table 3 shows that p value was computed to establish whether the noted mean difference in perception of ethical standards was statistically significant. An examination of data captured in Table 3 shows that the noted difference in male and female mean scores on perception of ethical standards was statistically significant ($p=0.000$, $t=2.276$). The p value is less than 0.05. In this regard, the hypothesis was rejected and conclusion was made that gender had a statistically significant influence on perception of ethical standards among teacher counsellors in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya.

This finding is in agreement with the findings of a study by You *et al.*, (2011), Ackman (2011), Ermasova and Ermasova (2021), Alleyne and Persaud (2012), Obasi (2016), Perryer and Leighton (2002). These studies reported a relationship between gender and ethical perceptions and that female were more ethically disposed than males. However, this is contradicted by the findings of a study Woedeab and Sapu (2020), Oghounu and Enakpoya (2020), Khalizani *et al.*, (2011), Nugroho and Indradi (2020), Naaz (2015), Ramesh and Goel (2014), Lockman *et al.*, (2018) and Sabir (2021) who found no significant differences between gender and ethical perceptions.

1.6 Conclusion and Recommendations

The research objective of this study was to establish whether there are gender differences on perception of ethical standards by teacher counsellor’s in secondary school in Kiambu County, Kenya. The study established that teacher counsellors had an unfavourable perception of ethical standards and that gender had a statistically significant influence on the teacher counsellors perception of ethical standards ($p=0,000$, $t= -2.276$). Therefore, the study recommends that gender be an important consideration in the appointment of teacher counsellors. The stakeholders in the counselling profession including the Ministry of Education, the Teachers Service Commission, training institutions and professional associations should initiate capacity building programmes aimed at enhancing favourable perceptions of ethical standards among counselling practitioners. Such programmes should put a special focus on the ethical standards of informed consent, confidentiality and putting clients first which teacher counsellors had unfavourable perceptions. Further, special attention should focus on men, who reported a more unfavourable perception of ethical standards as compared to women. Additionally, further research should be carried out on whether there are differences between psychological gender and perception of ethical standards.

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