

## **Ethical Counseling Practice: A Survey of Counseling Teachers in Hong Kong Secondary Schools**

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This research study examined the attitudes, awareness, and behavior intentions of 114 counseling teachers in three domains related to ethics in counseling: competence, relationship with clients, and professional relationship. Results show that most counseling teachers were aware of their professional limits, and were willing to seek ways to improve their competence. Many teachers were aware of the centrality of issues such as informed consent and confidentiality in a counseling relationship, but they seldom translated their awareness into written policies and standard procedures. Whereas avoidance of dual or multiple relationships is one of the key elements in counseling ethics, a majority of counseling teachers felt that dual relationships were unavoidable in school settings. In terms of professional standing, most counseling teachers did not perceive themselves as professional counselors as they interacted with other helping professionals. The

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implications of findings for counseling practice in secondary schools, as well as for the development of ethical guidelines in school settings in Hong Kong were discussed.

The integrity of counseling profession is guided by ethical standards of practice. In fact, the existence and continuing development of ethical guidelines mark an important benchmark and reflect the maturity of an established mental health profession. According to Herlihy and Corey (1996), professional code of ethics in helping professions is designed to serve three major functions. First, ethical guidelines raise awareness about ethical concerns that might arise in different professional roles and practices, so counseling professionals can engage in sound ethical decision-making and conduct. Second, ethical guidelines provide references and standards for professional accountability and inform the public of acceptable and unacceptable professional behaviors. Third, ethical guidelines serve as catalysts for the continual growth of the profession, as codes of practice are working documents that are constantly revised to respond to emerging needs of society. For example, in the United States, professional organizations such as American Psychological Association (APA), American Counseling Association (ACA), American School Counselor Association (ASCA), and National Association of Social Workers have all developed their respective code of ethics. These ethical guidelines have continued to evolve as the various professional organizations matured over time.

In the past decade, there has been a proliferation of training programs in counseling in Hong Kong. Postgraduate degree programs in counseling are currently being offered in a number of tertiary institutions, including The Chinese University of Hong Kong (Master of Education in Counselling, Department of Educational Psychology), the University of Hong Kong (Master of Social Sciences in Counselling, Department of Social Work and Social Administration), Hong Kong Baptist University

(Master of Social Science in Counselling, School of Continuing Education of Hong Kong Baptist University in collaboration with University of South Australia), and Hong Kong Polytechnic University (Master of Arts in School Guidance and Counselling, Department of Applied Social Sciences). Graduates of these programs often work in such professional settings as primary and secondary schools, social service agencies, hospitals, or higher educational institutions. It is imperative that counseling students and professionals have working knowledge of the application of ethical decision-making models, as well as ethical codes and guidelines developed for the local context. These codes of practice include the *Code of Professional Conduct* (Hong Kong Psychological Society [HKPS], 1998), the *Code of Conduct* (The Hong Kong Professional Counselling Association [HKPCA], 1996), and the *Code of Practice for Registered Social Workers* (Social Workers Registration Board, 1998), which were developed for members of the respective professional groups to observe so that they could practice in a manner consistent with the ethical standards of the professions.

Despite the intended purpose of these codes of ethics being consolidating the integrity of the counseling professions, few studies have been conducted to assess counselors' awareness of, attitude toward, and adherence to ethical guidelines. How much do counseling professionals know and understand codes of ethics? To what extent do counseling professionals view ethical guidelines as relevant to their practice? To what extent do counseling professionals adhere to ethical guidelines in their practice? These three questions are addressed in this research study.

The counseling professionals chosen for this study were counseling teachers in secondary schools. This sample was chosen and studied for two reasons. First, whereas many counseling teachers in secondary schools have received some training in counseling practice through a range of certificate level courses (Leung, 1999), it is unlikely that these training

provided them with adequate exposure to complex ethical situations and guidelines. Second, school is a setting where many teaching and helping professionals (e.g., counselors, social workers, educational psychologists, and clinical psychologists) interact and collide, and it would be interesting to examine the attitudes, awareness, and behavior of counseling teachers as they work with secondary students along with other educational and helping professionals.

### **Professional and Ethical Guidelines in Helping Professions: Major Domains**

Codes of ethics of helping professions are documents developed to reinforce ethical counseling practice. With periodic revisions to respond to society's emerging issues and needs, these documents become more extensive and explicit over time (Herlihy & Remley, 1995). In their survey of ethical guidelines developed by various counseling and related professions, Corey, Corey, and Callanan (2003) noted that these ethical guidelines covered some similar domains, but there were also variations in foci and specificity. For example, the APA's (2002) Ethics Code moved from general principles to specific standards, but the ACA's (1995) *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* did not differentiate between general principles and specific guidelines.

In the Hong Kong context, there are several core ethical domains that were commonly covered. In Table 1, the major domains of the HKPCA's (1996) *Code of Conduct* and the HKPS's (1998) *Code of Professional Conduct* are summarized. Three observations could be delineated. First, the HKPS's *Code of Professional Conduct* covers more areas in more detail, and it is more comprehensive than the HKPCA's *Code of Conduct* (e.g., the HKPS Code has more extensive coverage on issues related to assessment and research than the HKPCA Code). Second, the HKPCA guidelines seem to address more exclusively with issues related to the counselor-client relationship and counseling practice, whereas the HKPS

**Table 1 Major Domains of Ethical Guidelines of the HKPCA and the HKPS**

Domains	HKPCA	HKPS
Competence	✓	Selected issues related to competence are addressed in the “Professional Relationship” section
Relationship with clients	✓	✓
• Rights of clients	✓	✓
• Confidentiality	✓	✓
• Obtaining consent	✓	✓
• Maintenance and access to records	✓	✓
Professional relationship	—	✓
• Other disciplines, joint practice	—	✓
• Making/receiving referrals	—	✓
Remuneration for services	✓	—
Consulting	✓	—
Employment in organization	—	✓
Teaching and training	—	✓
Testing and assessment	—	✓
Communication of information on clients	—	✓
Research	✓	✓
Writing and publishing	✓	✓
Matters legal	—	✓
Public statements	—	✓
Complaint against members	—	✓
Dual relationships	Issues related to client exploitation is addressed in statement 3.3 under the “Relationship with Client” section	Addressed extensively in an additional “Guidelines for Avoiding Harm, Harassment, and Exploitation with Clients”

guidelines focus on testing, assessment, legal matters, and other issues that are more pertinent to psychologists than counselors. Third, whereas issues of dual/multiple relationships were extensively discussed in codes of ethics in the United States (e.g., Sections 10.06 to 10.10 of the APA Code and Sections A6 to A7 of the ACA Code; see Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Pope, Sonne, & Holroyd, 1993), the severity of this ethical concern is less clear in HKPS's and HKPCA's ethical guidelines. Finally, the HKPS has a set of guidelines on boundary issues, such as dual relationships, client exploitation, and sexual relationship with clients. The HKPCA's ethical guidelines have only a brief statement against exploitative relationships, including sexual relationship with client.

In the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* of the APA (2002), five general principles and ten domains of ethical standards were covered. The five principles were: beneficence and nonmaleficence; fidelity and responsibility; integrity; justice; and respect for people's rights and dignity. The ten domains of ethical standards were: (1) resolving ethical issues; (2) competence; (3) human relations; (4) privacy and confidentiality; (5) advertising and other public statements; (6) maintenance, dissemination, and disposal of confidential records of professional and scientific work; (7) education and training; (8) research and publication; (9) assessment; and (10) therapy. Eight similar domains of ethical standards were covered in the *Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* of the ACA (1995). The eight domains are: (1) the counseling relationship; (2) confidentiality; (3) professional responsibility; (4) relationship with other professionals; (5) evaluation, assessment and interpretation; (6) teaching, training, and supervision; (7) research and publication; and (8) resolving ethical issues.

Beyond general counseling principles, guidelines were also delineated for respective counseling specialty areas. For example, the *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* of the ASCA (1996) was developed

specifically for the practice of school counseling. Seven domains were addressed: (1) responsibility to students; (2) responsibility to parents; (3) responsibilities to colleagues and professional associates; (4) responsibilities to the school and professional community; (5) responsibility to self; (6) responsibilities to the profession; and (7) maintenance of standards. Overall, specialty guidelines address concerns and issues that are more salient and relevant to members of the respective counseling disciplines.

Although the content, coverage, and expressed values (i.e., the values behind what is acceptable and unacceptable professional conduct) of the HKPS and HKPCA guidelines are influenced by the counseling professionals in the West, notably the United States, the Hong Kong guidelines are far less comprehensive in scope and depth. The relative generality and brevity of the Hong Kong ethical guidelines probably reflects the developmental nature of the counseling profession

### **Purpose of the Study**

There is no specialty professional guideline for counseling teachers in school settings in Hong Kong (Hui & Lo, 1997), who could best be characterized as teacher-counselors. In most secondary schools, counseling services are coordinated through a counseling team headed by a senior teacher under the official title of counseling master/mistress (Hui, 2000). The counseling team members (usually consisted of about three to four teachers) have the additional responsibilities to work with the school social worker on counseling cases, and to coordinate school counseling programs (in addition to their regular teaching responsibility). It should be noted that all secondary teachers have to assume some non-teaching responsibilities, such as assisting in school administration or coordinating student activities and affairs (e.g., extra-curricula activities, student discipline, student counseling). Counseling teachers could enroll in a certificate course (a 120-hour general training program in counseling) in

student guidance and counseling organized by the Hong Kong Department of Education [now merged with the Education and Manpower Bureau] that are offered through several tertiary institutions (Leung, 1999). However, many counseling teachers are not able to enroll in this program until they are already serving in the counseling team (e.g., the certificate program has only limited space annually). Given their limited training, counseling teachers in secondary schools might not have sufficient exposure to ethical guidelines in counseling, and they might not be prepared for complex situations involving ethical dilemmas. In this research study, we would like to examine the attitudes, awareness, and in some cases, behavioral intention of counseling teachers in secondary schools in a number of domains related to professional ethics (e.g., HKPCA, 1996; HKPS, 1998). Based on our survey of the major domains of professional and ethical guidelines in this section, three general domains seemed most relevant to counseling practice in school settings, namely competence, relationship with clients, and professional relationship. Other domains, such as remuneration for services, consulting, testing and assessment, research and publications, and legal matters are likely to be less salient for counseling teachers, and so they are not covered in this research study.

## **Method**

### ***Participants***

Participants were 114 secondary school teachers (72 females and 38 males, 4 participants did not indicate gender). They were given the option to write down the name of the school they were serving. About 80% ( $n = 91$ ) of the participants reported the name of their schools. A review of school names suggested that at least 89 schools were represented. Participants have been involved in the counseling team of their schools for an average of 4.32 years ( $SD = 3.0$ ). A total of 21% ( $n = 24$ ) of the participants were heads of the counseling team in their schools, and the



rest were affiliated with the counseling team as counseling teachers. Participants were mostly in the early career stages as teachers with an average of 9 years of teaching experience ( $SD = 4.91$ ).

### ***Procedure***

School teachers were recruited through two counseling training programs (i.e., a postgraduate certificate program and a master of education program) offered by a university in Hong Kong. Secondary school teachers who were counseling teachers were invited to participate. Participants were informed about the purposes and objectives of the research, and about the anonymous and voluntary nature of their participation by the course instructors.

### ***Instrument***

The survey questionnaire was developed by the researchers of this study to examine the attitudes, awareness, and behavior of counseling teachers toward counseling ethics. The authors surveyed several professional guidelines developed by the HKPCA, HKPS, ACA, and ASCA. These guidelines were chosen because they represented major guidelines for counseling professionals in Hong Kong and in the United States. Three general domains of ethical practice mentioned in these guidelines were considered relevant in a school setting. These general domains were: competence; relationship with clients; and professional relationship. Items reflecting these domains were then developed. In most cases, participants were asked to indicate their intended actions (e.g., how they would respond to inquiries from the school principal about specific student information disclosed during counseling), or their beliefs and attitudes in counseling situations that have ethical implications (e.g., whether dual/multiple relationships are potentially harmful). A small-scale pilot study was conducted in which several counselors were asked to comment on the relevance and clarity of items. These feedbacks were

considered and then incorporated into the survey items, which were reported in the Results section.

## **Results**

### ***Competence***

Items related to competence in counseling were developed in three sub-areas: (1) Awareness and monitoring of competence and limitations; (2) efforts to improve competence; and (3) awareness of professional standards and guidelines. These items were rated on a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree), and the means and standard deviations are presented in Table 2.

Four observations could be derived from the findings. First, most participants agreed that they would handle cases within their self-perceived level of competence (see Table 2, Items A to F), suggesting a relatively high level of awareness and monitoring on their competence as counseling teachers. For example, most participants reported a high desire to improve their competence and effectiveness, and many would seek referral (e.g., Table 2, Item A, 95% of the participants rated either “agree” or “strongly agree,” that is, “4” or “5” in the 5-point rating scale) and supervision (e.g., Table 2, Item I, 54.4% rated either “agree” or “strongly agree”) to deal with cases that they might not have the necessary competence to handle.

Second, about 60% of the participants ( $n = 68$ ) reported that counseling teams have regular case conferences in their schools (mean = 4.41 case conferences per year,  $SD = 4.45$ ). Whereas the effectiveness of these case conferences was not clear, it provided a forum for peer supervision to enhance competence.

Third, participants were positive about their understanding (Table 2, Item L, 50.8% rated either “agree” or “strongly agree”) and adherence

**Table 2 Counseling Teachers' Attitudes Related to Professional Competence**

Sub-categories	Item *	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
Awareness and monitoring of competence	A If the needs of students did not fall within my area of competence, I will try to refer them to someone who could provide appropriate service.	4.43	0.69
	B I try to elevate my awareness and sensitivity.	4.40	0.70
	C When I experience personal and emotional disturbances that might interfere with my counseling work with clients, I would immediately limit or stop my counseling responsibilities.	4.40	0.89
	D When I encounter issues related to professional ethics, I would consult with others (e.g., other counseling teachers or the head counseling teacher).	4.25	0.77
	E I would monitor to make sure that my counseling practice does not exceed my area of competence.	3.96	0.71
	F I am knowledgeable about referral resources and alternatives.	2.77	0.74
Improving competence	G I try to pursue continuing education to enhance my counseling knowledge and skills.	4.38	0.75
	H When I employ a new technique or take on a case representing an unfamiliar specialty area, I would make sure that I receive sufficient training and supervision.	3.66	0.85
	I I participated in professional supervision or peer supervision to strengthen my counseling effectiveness.	3.42	1.32
	J I am actively involved in local professional counseling organizations to promote and improve counseling practice.	2.83	1.18
Understanding ethical guidelines	K I adhere to the ethical guidelines for counselors.	3.69	0.75
	L I have a clear understanding of the ethical guidelines for counselors.	3.35	0.92

\* Based on responses to a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The higher the number, the more the respondents agreed with the statement.

(Table 2, Item K, 70.2% rated “agree” or “strongly agree”) of professional and ethical guidelines. Although counseling teachers might have access to a set of ethical guidelines on their own, only a minority of the participants (26.3%,  $n = 30$ ) reported that their schools had adopted a specific code of ethics for counseling teachers.

Fourth, when encountering students whose concerns were beyond their level of competence, many counseling teachers felt that their knowledge about referral resources and alternatives were inadequate (Table 2, Item F, only 14% “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that they had adequate knowledge of referral sources).

### ***Relationship with Clients***

Several sub-categories were identified in this domain: (1) respect of client’s rights; (2) confidentiality; (3) record keeping; and (4) dual or multiple relationships in counseling. In most ethical guidelines of counseling, the importance of respecting the choices of a client in all stages of counseling is emphasized (e.g., Corey et al., 2003). Accordingly, a cluster of eight items was developed in the survey questionnaire to measure participants’ general attitudes toward clients and their involvement in a counseling relationship. Participants were asked to indicate how much they disagreed or agreed to each of the statements using a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The findings are summarized in Table 3. Overall, most counselors endorsed issues such as the primacy of client welfare, informed consent, freedom of choice, respect of differences and cultural diversity, and the importance of involving clients in all the stages of counseling. The item that had the lowest mean was related to termination (“I make decisions with my client when terminating a counseling relationship”,  $M = 3.39$ ,  $SD = 0.87$ ). Some counseling teachers might have difficulties managing the ending of counseling relationships with students, possibly due to reasons such as the end of a school year or their multiple relations with students.

**Table 3 Counseling Teachers' Attitudes Related to Counselor-Client Relationship**

Item *	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
I believe that the primary goal for counselors is to promote the welfare of clients.	4.46	1.30
I respect the diverse cultural backgrounds of my clients.	4.38	0.71
I allow clients to choose whether to enter a counseling relationship from me.	4.17	0.76
I am aware of my personal values, attitudes, and behavior and I try not to impose them on my clients.	3.97	0.83
I try to avoid fostering dependence in a counseling relationship.	3.93	0.82
I work together with clients for counseling plans and have them reviewed regularly to ensure effectiveness.	3.80	0.89
I make decisions with my client when terminating a counseling relationship.	3.39	0.87

\* Based on responses to a 5-point scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The higher the number, the more the respondents agreed with the statement.

Participants were asked a number of questions related to how confidentiality in counseling was practiced in their schools. Slightly less than half of the participants indicated that they only occasionally ( $n = 35$  or 30.7%) or seldom ( $n = 16$  or 14.0%) clarified with students on policies regarding confidentiality while a majority of the participants indicated that they only occasionally ( $n = 31$  or 27.2%) or seldom ( $n = 41$  or 36.0%) informed students regarding disclosure of information obtained in counseling at the onset of a counseling relationship.

Participants were asked to indicate how they would respond to inquiries made by parents, teachers, or their school principal about student progress in counseling. Results are summarized in Table 4. When inquired by their school principal, the most likely used strategy was to provide what the principal wanted to know ( $n = 50$ , 43.9%). When inquired by teachers or parents, the most likely used strategy was to obtain verbal consent from students before responding. In all cases, written consent was rarely used in the process.

**Table 4 Counseling Teachers' Response to Inquiries from a Parent, Class Teacher, or School Principal About Progress Made in Counseling \***

Strategy	Source of Request		
	Parent <i>n</i> (%)	Class teacher <i>n</i> (%)	Principal <i>n</i> (%)
I would need to have verbal consent from students before responding.	69 (60.5%)	45 (39.5%)	27 (23.7%)
I would need to have written consent from students before responding.	1 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)	1 (0.9%)
I would tell him/her what he/she wanted to know.	4 (3.5%)	20 (17.5%)	50 (43.9%)
I would tell him/her to ask the student directly.	13 (11.4%)	14 (12.3%)	5 (4.4%)
Other strategies	22 (19.3%)	30 (26.3%)	30 (26.3%)

\* The actual item is "The parent/teacher/principal of a student you are counseling contacted you and wanted to know what was discussed in counseling and progress made with that student, how would you deal with this request?"

Note: Due to missing data, the total number of participants responding to each item might not add up to 114. The percentages, however, were calculated based on the total number of participants ( $N = 114$ ).

A related component of confidentiality is record keeping. A majority of the participants of this study ( $n = 81, 71.1\%$ ) reported that counseling case recordings were kept in a location within the school administrative office where counseling teachers, school social workers, or school staff with special permission could review as needed. About half of the counseling teachers ( $n = 56, 49.1\%$ ) reported that counseling records and case recordings were stored in a secured and locked location (e.g., in the school administrative office or other locations). A substantial number of teachers ( $n = 44, 38.6\%$ ) reported that there was no set policy in their schools on how long counseling records should be kept. Among those schools with a set policy, 25 participants (22%) indicated that records

were kept for one to four years, and 30 respondents (26.3%) indicated that records were kept for five years or longer.

About 72% of the participants reported that they had never or seldom experienced conflicts as a result of taking the roles of teachers and counselors (see Table 5). A majority ( $n = 63$ , 55.3%) felt that it was not necessary for counseling teachers to avoid taking on multiple relationships. Most of them felt that a dual relationship might adversely influence the counseling process, but not the process of teaching.

**Table 5 Counseling Teachers' Attitudes Toward Having Dual Relationships With Clients**

Item	(a)*	(b)	(c)	(d)
	$n$ (%)**	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)	$n$ (%)
In counseling your students, have you experienced conflicts as a result of having a dual role as "counselor" and "teacher"?	5 (4.4%)	26 (22.8%)	67 (58.8%)	16 (14.0%)
Do you think that a counseling teacher should avoid having dual relationships with students?	3 (2.6%)	47 (41.2%)	62 (54.4%)	1 (0.9%)
Do you think that having dual relationships with students would adversely influence the counseling process?	3 (2.6%)	69 (60.5%)	41 (36.0%)	1 (0.9%)
Do you think that having dual relationships with students would adversely influence the process of teaching?	2 (1.8%)	38 (33.3%)	68 (59.6%)	5 (4.4%)

\* (a) = very often/strongly agree; (b) = often/agree; (c) = seldom/disagree; (d) = never/strongly disagree

\*\* The size of the total sample was 114. The total percentages might not add up to exactly 100% because of mathematical rounding and missing data.

### ***Professional Relationships***

Most counseling teachers have experience working with other counseling-related professionals (e.g., psychologists, social workers, special education specialists) in managing cases. The most often cited reason for these inter-professional contacts was for the purpose of making

a referral (88.6%). Other reasons included exchange of information (50%), seek advice on case management (79.8%), and case collaboration (i.e., working with the same client; 61.4%).

When asked how the competence level of counseling teachers was perceived by other professionals in educational settings, many participants ( $n = 59$ , 51.8%) felt that they were perceived as “non-professional counselors”. Some ( $n = 49$ , 43.0%) felt that they were perceived as “para-professionals.” Only a small number of participants ( $n = 3$ , 2.6%) felt that they were perceived as “professional counselors.” This might be a sign that many counseling teachers were very tentative of their own professional standing as they worked with other counseling-related professionals.

## **Discussion**

Results of this study can be discussed in light of three general themes in professional counseling ethics: (1) competence and professional identity of counseling teachers; (2) counseling practice in secondary schools; and (3) the role of professional organizations in promoting ethical counseling practice. Along with each of the above themes, recommendations for practice will be discussed.

### ***Competence and Professional Identity***

In the area of professional competence, results indicate that counseling teachers in the sample were aware of their limitations and that they tended to operate within their self-perceived level of competence. Although some counseling teachers were generally unsure of their professional status, more than half perceived themselves as “non-professionals.” Since counseling teachers were involved in providing counseling services, there is a need to enhance their skill competencies and their counselor self-efficacy. Based on our findings, we would like to recommend two measures to facilitate counseling teachers’ competence and efficacy development.



First and foremost, it is necessary to encourage counseling teachers to seek formal counseling training. In the past decade, many counseling teachers are required to enroll in a government-sponsored program of study in counseling (a 120-hour program; see Leung, 1999) offered by several Hong Kong tertiary institutions (e.g., The Chinese University of Hong Kong), in which a “certificate” is granted upon completion. Yet, we believe that such training is necessary but insufficient. Systematic training at the postgraduate level (e.g., master’s degree level) in counseling theories, skills, as well as professional and personal development would facilitate the development of competence and efficacy among counseling teachers.

Second, schools ought to provide more support to enhance competence development of counseling teachers through assisting counseling teachers to seek professional supervision. Many participants in our sample were not involved in any form of case conference; neither did they receive any form of formal supervision. We believe that on-going counseling supervision, either through peer case conferences, peer supervision, or a more formal process of individual supervision offered by an experienced counselor (e.g., through contracting an experienced counselor to conduct counseling supervision) are necessary and important components in developing counselor competence and self-efficacy (e.g., Bernard & Goodyear, 1998).

### ***Counseling Practice in Secondary Schools***

Two clusters of issues related to counseling practice in secondary schools were examined in this study, which was the practice of informing clients about confidentiality in the counseling process, and the existence of dual or multiple relationships between counselor and clients.

In relation to informing clients about confidentiality, results of this study suggest that counseling teachers often failed to explain to students

about the nature and limits of confidentiality in counseling practice in an initial counseling session. Relatedly, whereas counseling teachers recognized the need to maintain confidentiality as a way to protect the welfare of clients, many counseling teachers might not have clear ideas on how to implement confidentiality in practice within the realities of their schools (e.g., disclosure of confidential information obtained in counseling to other teachers, school principals, and parents when being asked). Given that informed consent is a mechanism by which clients are informed about the counseling process and their rights (including guidelines concerning confidentiality) so that they could make autonomous and informed decisions regarding participation (Corey et al., 2003), it is important that guidelines regarding informed consent be developed, implemented, and observed.

We would like to make three practice recommendations regarding informed consent and confidentiality. First, there is a need for secondary schools to develop an explicit set of guidelines (e.g., a set of written guidelines) regarding informed consent and confidentiality that is consistent with the current legal and professional standards. These written guidelines should describe the legal and ethical rationales for maintaining confidentiality in counseling, how confidentiality is practiced in a school setting, as well as conditions or situations when disclosures are permitted or called for. Given that most secondary students are legally minors, the rights of parents in relation to confidential materials disclosed in the counseling process should also be clearly stated in the guidelines. Second, there should be a mechanism to inform students of the nature and limits of confidentiality. Ideally, students should be given a set of written guidelines regarding their rights, including policies and practice on confidentiality. The guidelines should be written at a level that students could comprehend (in contrast to school-level guidelines that are more likely to be detailed and comprehensive). Third, it is important for counseling teachers and school social workers to educate other teachers,

their school principals, as well as parents, on the meaning of confidentiality, in the context of clients' rights as well as the development of a counseling alliance. Teachers and school administrators might not clearly understand why informed consent and confidentiality are so important in professional counseling. Once they understand the rationales behind, they would most likely become an alliance in the implementation of policies regarding informed consent and confidentiality.

Counseling teachers' attitudes toward having dual or multiple relations with clients was explored. Most participants reported that they had never or seldom experienced conflicts as a result of taking the dual roles of being a teacher and a counselor in school, suggesting that such dual roles were acceptable from the perspective of counseling teachers. This finding could be a function of the diverse roles that teachers are expected to play. Teachers in Hong Kong are expected to teach as well as to guide their students. Since 1990, the Hong Kong government has implemented a so-called "Whole School Approach to Guidance" in schools (Education Commission, 1990; Hui, 2000), which mandated that all staff within a school should participate in guiding the personal development of students. In essence, this approach required all teachers to take on a teaching as well as guidance role in their daily interaction with students (not in terms of conducting counseling case work, but in terms of participation in comprehensive developmental programs involving all students; see Hui & Lo, 1997). On top of this, similar to their colleagues in schools, teaching in classrooms constitutes a majority of the working time of counseling teachers. Given these scenarios, having a dual relationship with students (as their teacher and counselor) seems to be an unavoidable reality in secondary schools in an Asian context such as Hong Kong (e.g., Pedersen, 1995).

However, the potential harmful effects resulting from dual and multiple relationships in counseling has been covered extensively in ethics code in

the United States. Multiple relationships could lead to a number of negative consequences, including misuse of powers in meeting counselors' own financial, social, or emotional needs, impairment of counselor's judgment, conflicts of interest, exploitation of clients, and blurred boundaries that distort the professional nature of the therapeutic relationship (see Herlihy & Corey, 1997; Pope & Vasquez, 1998). We recognize that resolving the ethical issue of multiple roles is not an easy task, but to begin with, we would like to make three practice recommendations. First, it might be necessary for counseling-related professions to enter into a dialogue regarding the benefits as well as the potential negative consequences of multiple relations in counseling. Through exchanges of ideas and experience, as well as considering the experiences in other countries such as the United States, professionals should become more aware of how multiple relations might impact a client and counseling relation positively and negatively. Second, in settings where dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, such as in secondary school settings, it would be important for the counselors to maintain a high level of self-awareness on their own motivations, so that they could manage such relationships with clients without causing harm. Third, ethical standards and guidelines, including the effects of multiple relationships in counseling, should be an important component in a counselor training programs. Counseling trainees should be sensitized on how the blurring of personal and professional boundaries might impact clients negatively.

### ***Professional Organizations***

Participants in this study reported that they had a clear understanding of the ethical guidelines and that they adhered to those guidelines. However, most of them could not cite specific ethical guidelines that they could follow in their schools. Such findings seemed contradictory. Although results did not provide more information regarding the extent to which counseling teachers understood counseling ethical guidelines, the lack of an explicit set of guidelines for counseling teachers in secondary schools

is clear. We would like to make three practice recommendations. First, professional counseling associations in Hong Kong should take an active role to raise awareness of and to enforce adherence to existing guidelines (e.g., the HKPCA's *Code of Conduct*). When applied to school settings, it is imperative for related professional organizations such as the HKPCA to help counseling teachers and school administrators to become familiar with its code of practice, as well as its implementation in their settings. Second, various counseling and mental health organizations need to do more (e.g., through periodic newsletter or professional conferences) to cultivate a sense of membership identity among different categories of members in different work settings, including counseling teachers. Once counseling teachers are able to develop an identity within a professional organization, they might be more likely to make an effort to understand its ethical guidelines as well as to practice within these guidelines. Lastly, it might be necessary to explore with counseling professionals who practice in school settings if a specific code of practice for school counseling should be developed. If existing ethical codes are not able to cover circumstances unique to school settings, expanding the current codes, or developing a separate set of code, might be called for.

### ***Limitations***

This research study has several limitations. First, only counseling teachers in secondary schools were recruited. Future studies should also include other counseling and helping professionals, such as social workers, psychologists, and primary school counselors. Findings from these studies would yield useful information about how different counseling and helping professionals view and adhere to ethical guidelines in counseling. Second, the participants of this study were chosen from those who attended certificate courses in counseling at a university in Hong Kong, and the self-selection of participants might reduce the generalizability of findings because their views and attitudes might be different from those who were not attending classes. Lastly, the survey questionnaire used in this study

covered only three major domains of attitudes and behavior intentions related to counseling ethics. Future studies could also include a larger number of domains in counseling ethics (e.g., domains listed in Table 1 that were not examined in this study). Researchers should also consider other research methods (e.g., qualitative methodology) so that rich and diverse data could be obtained on how counseling professionals deal with ethical issues and dilemmas in their daily practice, and their views on how ethical counseling practice could be enhanced in Hong Kong.

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## 切合倫理的輔導實踐：香港中學輔導老師的調查研究

本研究調查了 114 位輔導老師對輔導道德操守中三個領域的態度、覺知和行為傾向。這三個領域是：能力，與當事人的關係，和專業關係。研究發現，大部分輔導老師都覺察到本身能力的限制，並願意提升自己的專業能力。老師大都認識到知情權和保密對輔導關係的重要性，但卻少有把這種認識轉化為守則文件和標準程序。雖然避免雙重／多重關係是輔導員操守中的主要元素之一，但大部分輔導老師均認為，在學校環境中雙重關係難以避免。至於專業地位方面，與其他助人專業人員相比，他們大都不認同自己是專業輔導人員。最後，本文探討了研究結果對在中學實踐輔導和建立輔導工作守則的啟示。