Relationships and Client Protection Differences in the APA and ACA Ethical Codes

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Introduction
Ethical codes provide structure and consistency to an organization as well as ensure protection for those who are receiving services from an organization. In the counseling profession, ACA has designed its code of ethics to reflect the principles used in the medical model. (Kaplan, 2014).

The ACA ethical code was updated in 2014, partly in order to address rising issues such as technological communication. Teo (2015) argues that an update to the APA code of ethics could be beneficial because it is no longer sufficient to address the moral issues of our current culture.

Under the ACA ethical code, counselors must follow precise guidelines when interacting with others. Contrastingly, the APA ethical code has fewer broad guidelines for professionals which allow members more freedom in their decision-making.

Research Procedure
Line-by-line comparison of the APA and ACA ethical codes regarding competency and qualification requirements.

This was conducted by five separate researchers and the present reported findings represent the consensus among all research team members. Researchers compared notes and determined instances when the wording was different, but the meanings were essentially the same.

Differences in meaning were then coded based on the category of the information.

Findings
Out of 144 total differences in these ethical codes, 34 differences pertain specifically to the topics of relationships and client protection.

ACA has very extensive requirements and prohibitions relating to therapeutic relationships; APA is more general with a principle-driven approach.

• Relationship boundary changes
• Limited potential for multiple relationships

Supervisor/supervisee relationships
• ACA spells out guidelines in more detail
• APA is very general, sometimes silent

Results (continued)

Discussion Regarding Discrepancies
• APA indicates that a psychologist is not allowed to withhold a client’s records due to non-payment if there is an emergency situation. The ACA ethical code does not say this.

• According to APA, a psychologist must refrain from engaging in a sexual relationship with a past client for at least two years after the counseling relationship has ended. A counselor must refrain from engaging in a sexual and/or romantic relationship with a past client for at least five years.

• According to ACA, a counselor must disclose the purpose and nature of assessment. Contrastingly, the APA ethical code lists occasions when a psychologist does not have to do so. One of these occasions is when assessment is court-mandated.

Some Implications

Undergraduate students
• When choosing a career route, students must understand the ethical implications of their potential professions.

Psychologists supervising counselors
• Need to be aware of both counseling and psychology’s ethical codes in order to ensure that both are upheld.

Agencies who hire both licensed psychologists and licensed counselors
• Awareness of discrepancies is necessary for cohesion and agency agreement.

Clients
• There could be confusion for clients who have seen both psychologists and counselors, as the two professions have different expectations for client-practitioner relationships.

General confusion
• From the outside looking in, one might believe a psychologist is violating an ethical principle when, in reality, those specifications do not exist in their ethical code.