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***Multicultural Competence & Ethical Decision-Making  
in School Counselors***

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**Abstract**

Until this study, research exploring the relationship between multicultural competence and ethical decision-making in school counselors had been lacking. Using data from a nationally representative sample of 160 school counselors, the present study found no correlation between these two variables. However, this result may have been due to the inherent limitations of a homogeneous sample population (i.e., all participants were members of American Counseling Association). Implications of the findings and suggestions for future research are discussed.

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It is unlikely school counselors will find clear concise responses to all of the ethical dilemmas that they face (Remley & Huey, 2002). Lambie (2005) concurs, "Rarely do ethical dilemmas confronting professional school counselors involve definitive 'correct' or 'incorrect' choices" (p.249). Although school counselors have access to two sets of ethical guidelines (i.e., American School Counseling Association (ASCA) code of ethics and American Counseling Association (ACA) code of ethics), both of these resources routinely fail to address many of the everyday challenges faced by practitioners in the field. The purpose of this article was to gain a greater understanding of the relationship between school counselors' multicultural competence and their capacity for ethical decision-making.

**Ethical Decision-Making and School Counselors**

Kottler & Brown (2000) point out that, "Ethical dilemmas do arise because of a conflict between what is best for the client and what is best for other people" (p.360). According to the ASCA Ethical Guidelines (2004) Section A.2.c., a professional school counselor has a duty to prevent harm to a student or other person, and this mandate even supersedes the obligations of confiden-

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tiality. Faced with such a serious conflict, the ASCA guidelines also recommend professional school counselors err on the side of caution by first consulting with their peers when uncertain about the proper course of action.

Over the past 20 years, ASCA has produced and refined a position statement (adopted 1988; revised 1993, 1999, 2004, 2009) emphasizing the importance of cultural diversity, stating professional school counselors promote the academic, career, and personal/social success for all students. In addition, they collaborate with stakeholders to create a school and community climate which embraces diversity (ASCA, 2009). Likewise, Sue, Arredondo, and McDavis (1992), argue, “[T]he need for multiculturalism in the counseling profession is urgent and necessary for ethical practice, an integral part of our professional work” (p.480). Detrimental consequences of a lack of multicultural competence in counseling could include improper case conceptualization for culturally diverse groups and lead to improper diagnosis (Sue & Sue, 2008).

Dominated by diverse and abstract theories and practices, effective counseling may be better classified as art form rather than a science (Gladding, 1992). In order to give the profession a more solid, objective and uniform foundation, ethical standards have been established. By endeavoring to understand and align themselves with these rules, professional counselors may enjoy a safe harbor, bolstered by legal precedents and be substantially protected from the threat of successful malpractice litigation (Remley & Herlihy, 2001). Thus, ethical practice requires professional school counselors to regularly review the ASCA Ethical Guidelines and maintain solid relationships with students, parents and faculty to ensure the availability of effective consultation (Bodenhorn, 2006). Ethical codes give direction to practitioners in that they are responsible for recognizing the needs of diverse clients. However, counselors are still lagging in their ability to recognize the association between cultural competence and ethical behavior (Watson, Herlihy, & Pierce, 2006).

### **Multicultural Competence**

A counselor may inadvertently violate the rights of a client if he/she does not have the proper training and skills to appropriately counsel diverse populations (Pedersen, Draguns, Lonner, & Trimble, 1996; Sue & Sue, 2008). For example, when cultural barriers exist in the counselor-client relationship, a client may not fully understand his or her rights about entering, continuing or terminating treatment (Pedersen et al., 1996). Furthermore, many persons of color place a high value on family relationships and cohesiveness. This being the case, Pedersen, et. al, (1996) asserts that exploring potential outcomes of treatment for clients families and their communities should also be a part of the counseling process.

Multicultural competence is defined as the counselor’s ability to have an awareness of cultural issues, the knowledge of various cultural groups and most importantly, the skills to apply the knowledge in effectively assisting clients of color (Sue & Sue, 2008). The Association of Multicultural Competence Division (AMCD) Multicultural Counseling Competencies developed by Arrendondo, Toporek, Brown, Jones, Locke, Sanchez & Stadler (1996) discusses multicultural competencies. The Competencies are divided into three domains: (I) Counselors awareness of own cultural values and biases, (II) Counselor aware-

ness of client's worldview, and (III) Culturally appropriate intervention strategies (Arrendondo, et al., 1996). Professional counselors are expected to uphold these competencies when working with clients.

Holcomb-McCoy (2005), states that "Many variables concerning the multicultural counseling competence of professional counselors have been debated and discussed throughout the recent history of the counseling profession" (p. 414). Additionally, Holcomb-McCoy & Myers (1999) found counselors who addressed multicultural counseling in their training programs had greater cultural competency than those who had not.

### **Purpose of Study**

This research study examined the relationship of perceived multicultural competence as it relates to school counselors' ethical decision-making abilities. Researchers explored the relationship between multicultural competence and ethical decision-making in school counselors. The authors identified the following research hypothesis for the study.

#### **Research Hypothesis.**

This research examined the following hypothesis: There will be a correlation between school counselors' self-reported level of multicultural competence (terminology, knowledge and awareness) and their ethical decision-making abilities.

Participant's level of multicultural competence will be measured by the overall score (as well as the sub-scores on knowledge, awareness and terminology) on the self-reporting Multicultural Competence Training Scale-Revised (MCCTS-R) and the participant's ethical decision making ability will be measured mainly by use of the Principal Index Score, as determined by the results from the Ethical Decision-Making Scale-Revised (EDMS-R).

#### **Variables.**

The independent variables examined in this research were the multicultural competence level of participants (as measured by looking at the terminology, knowledge and awareness) from the MCCTS-R. The dependent variable, the participant's ethical decision-making ability, was examined by evaluating the participant's Level Score and Principle Index Score (from EDMS-R).

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The sample of 160 participants for this study was drawn from the membership of the American Counseling Association who, according to ACA's records, classified themselves as practicing school counselors. At the time the research was conducted, there were approximately 40,600 members of ACA of whom 1,752 worked in an elementary, middle or high school setting in the role of a school counselor.

#### **Procedures**

Invitations, which included an explanatory e-mail detailing the study, an infor-

mation sheet (which served as the informed consent), a demographic survey, and the two survey instruments, were sent to 1,752 e-mail addresses provided on the ACA mailing list inviting them to participate in an online survey. The use of e-mail was the most cost-effective and time-efficient method available to gather data from ACA school counselor members from across the United States. It was expected this survey would have a response rate of at least 30% (expected standard return rate according to Shaughnessy, Zechmeister & Zechmeister, 2008), which equated to 525.6 responses. Participation in this study was strictly voluntary. Of the individuals who were e-mailed the study, 250 individuals responded, in full or in part, to the survey; the online survey tool (www.surveymonkey.com©) results database reported that 160 participants reached the end of the survey. It is important to note that not all 160 participants answered every question. The responses from 160 school counselors from across the United States, who reached the end of the survey were analyzed and reported for this study.

## **Instruments**

### **Multicultural Counseling Competence Training Scale-Revised, School Counselors Version (MCCTS-R).**

According to Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines (2004), "At this time, the MCCTS-R is the only instrument used to measure school counselors' perceived multicultural counseling competence specifically" (p.156). The MCCTS-R was scored by evaluating three areas (terminology, knowledge, and awareness) of a school counselor's multicultural competence level. This study examined the impact of school counselors' multicultural competence (and demographic data) on his or her ethical decision-making ability. The MCCTS-R was scored by assigning one, two, three, or four points, to the following categories: not competent, somewhat competent, competent, and extremely competent for each response, respectively (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005). The participant was then assigned an overall score and an individual score in three different areas: multicultural terminology, multicultural knowledge, and multicultural awareness.

Participants were given the MCCTS-R which asked them to rate a series of 32 self-reported multicultural competence statements. Three individual scores were evaluated for each participant, which were broken down into the three aspects of multicultural competence: terminology, knowledge and awareness. A total multicultural competence level score was then calculated for each participant, consisting of the sum total of all points across the three aspects. The overall multicultural competence level was measured on a scale of 32-128; the mean score for all the participants was 95.77, with a standard deviation of 15.70.

### **Ethical Decision-Making Scale-Revised (EDMS-R).**

The EDMS-R was, "...designed to assess a counselor's ethical decision-making abilities when faced with an ethical dilemma" (Dufrene & Glosoff, 2004, p.2). The EDMS-R determines "...a counselor's ethical decision-making abilities when faced with an ethical dilemma" (p.2). Upon completing the EDMS-R, two scores were calculated for each participant.

The first score is the EDMS-R Level Score, which describes “how an individual scores at each of the five levels of ethical orientation across the six dilemmas” (Dufrene & Glosoff, 2004, p.5). According to Dufrene (2000), the six dilemma descriptions are as follows: dilemma one is ‘couple relationships’, dilemma two is ‘suicidal, terminally-ill client’, dilemma three is ‘client with AIDS’, dilemma four is ‘colleague’s sexual relationship with client’, dilemma five is ‘counselor practicing in isolated area’, and dilemma six is ‘abuse of an adolescent’ (p.157). An explanation of the ethical orientation levels and Level Scores is as follows:

Similar to Kohlberg’s theory, the ethical orientation model (Van Hoose & Paradise, 1979) is based on the theory that counselor’s ethical reasoning progresses along a continuum of five qualitatively hierarchical levels of ethical orientation: (a) punishment, (b) institutional, (c) societal, (d) individual, and (e) principle. Level 1 (punishment) refers to a counselor’s decisions that are based on a strict adherence to prevailing rules because one will be punished for bad behavior and rewarded for good behavior. Level 2 (institutional) pertains to a counselor’s decisions that are based on a strict adherence to the policies of the agency in which the counselor is employed. Level 3 (societal) refers to a counselor’s decisions that are based on the maintenance of standards, the approval of others and the laws of society and the public. Level 4 (individual) pertains to a counselor’s decisions that are oriented to the needs of the individual (i.e., the client) while avoiding violation so of laws and rights of others. Finally, at Level 5 (principle), a counselor’s decisions are based on self-chosen principles of conscience and internal ethical formulation (Dufrene & Glosoff, 2004, p.3).

The Level Scores can be interpreted as, “Counselors functioning at lower levels (i.e. Levels 1 and 2) tend toward over simplifications, self-protectiveness, and authoritarianism in their ethical reasoning, whereas counselors functioning at higher levels (i.e., Levels 4 and 5) are more flexible, complex, and contextually sensitive to a situation” (Dufrene & Glosoff, 2004, p.5).

The second EDMS-R score is known as the Principle Index Score (P Index Score), which is “calculated by summing the scores of Level 5 (Principle Orientation) items across the six dilemmas and dividing by the base of the total 60 points” (Dufrene, 2000, p.62). “P Index Scores are interpreted as the degree to which a participant thinks principled considerations are important in making ethical decisions. Principle Index Scores are used to compare mean group differences” (Dufrene & Glosoff, 2004, p.6). Principle Index Scores range from 0 to 73. Higher scores are associated with greater knowledge of ethical decision making.

## **Participant Demographics**

The participants for this study were members of the ACA who designated they practice as school counselors. The participants ranged from 24-71 years old, with the mean age being 47. Participants in our study were in the 50-59 age range (N=43), which is 27.7% of the sample. Most participants were female (73.6%, N=117) while male participants made up 26.4% (N=42) of the sample.

With regard to the ethnicity, the majority of participants indicated identified as White, (77.3%, N=123). A single participant, (0.6%) indicated American Indian or Alaskan Native as his or her ethnicity. A single participant, (0.6%) indicated Asian as his or her ethnicity. Those participants who indicated their ethnicity was Black or African American were 10.7% (N=17) of the sample and 5.7% (N=9) reported Hispanic or Latino as their ethnicity. Participants had the option to select multiple ethnicity categories; 3.8% (N=6) of participants indicated they were from a mixed ethnic background. Finally, 1.3% (N=2) indicated the "other" category as their ethnic identification, and 0.6% (N=1) did not provide a response to the item regarding ethnicity.

Regarding their levels of experience as school counselors, most participants had been practicing 1-5 years, which was 31.2% (N=48) of the sample. With a close second and third being 11-15 years of experience at 22.1% (N=34) and 6-10 years of experience at 21.4% (N=33), respectively.

The most frequently reported education level was Master's Degree, which reflected 69.2% (N=110) of the sample. Most participants in the study practice as school counselors in the Southern United States (e.g., Alabama, Arkansas, Delaware, District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia, West Virginia), which was 42.5% (N=65) of the sample.

Most participants (84.2%, N=133) indicated they had taken courses in multicultural counseling and ethics, and 72.4% (N=113) of participants indicated they had taken a course in ethics.

## **Results**

### **Data Analysis**

Multiple regression analysis was run using SPSS 18.0 to determine if there was a statistically significant relationship between any of the independent variables and the dependent variable. The data analysis showed there were no significant relationships between any of the independent variables and the dependent variable. According to Hair, Black, Babin, Anderson, and Tatham (2006), the multiple regression model is the most commonly utilized variate when considering multivariate techniques. In this research, the dependent variable examined was a school counselors' ethical decision-making ability. The analyses did not show any significant predictive relationships among independent variables and the dependent variable.

### **Statistical Power Considerations**

Green (1991) provides an overview of the procedures used to determine regression sample sizes. Green (1991) suggests  $N > 104 + m$  (where  $m$  is the number of independent variables) for testing individual predictors (assuming a medium-sized effect). Although Green's (1991) formula is more comprehensive, there are two other formulas that could be used. With five or fewer predictors (this number would include correlations) a researcher can use Harris's (1985) formula for yielding the absolute minimum number of participants. Harris (1985) suggests that the number of participants should exceed the number of predic-

tors by at least 50 (i.e., total number of participants equals the number of predictor variables plus 50). For regression equations using six or more predictors, an absolute minimum of ten participants per predictor variable is appropriate, which is the case in this study. However, in an optimal scenario, and when circumstances allow, a researcher would have better power to detect a small effect size with approximately 30 participants per variable. In this study, there was a sample size of 160 participants. This was representative of 9.13% of the total population (N=1,752).

Table 1  
Regression Coefficients for the Dependent Variable, Ethical Decision-Making Ability (as analyzed by use of Principle Index Scores)

	B	Std. Error	Beta	T	Sig.
(Constant)	19.64	5.58	--	3.52	.001
Mean MC Terminology	1.28	1.76	.08	.73	.47
Mean MC Knowledge	-2.05	1.61	-.14	-1.27	.21
Mean MC Awareness	-.78	2.49	-.04	-.31	.75

## Discussion

Due to the lower than expected response rate, potentially low-power issues needed to be addressed. After running the multiple regressions with all variables, the researchers took each independent variable and ran single regression analysis to examine the potential relationship with the dependent variable, one at a time. There were still no statistically significant relationships among any of the variables.

There are several reasons the data may have produced no statistically significant results. The sample of participants (N=160) for this study was taken from a population (N=1,752) of the American Counseling Association members who identified themselves as school counselors. It is important to note that school counselors are not required to be members of the American Counseling Association. It is possible that school counselors who are members of ACA have a different level of reported multicultural competence or ethical decision-making abilities than non-ACA members. As members of the ACA, the participants in this study may regularly attend both ethical decision making and multicultural counseling workshops, thus indicating that they might understand the importance of both to their work as school counselors.

In addition, the use of the MCCTS-R may have produced a socially desirable respondent bias. The MCCTS-R measures a school counselor's perceived multicultural competence level utilizing a self-reporting technique. The participants may have responded to the statements relating to multicultural competence in a way that reflects a high level of multicultural competence because it is assumed counselors should have a high multicultural-competence level. "Given the possible presence of social desirability and the general biases



inherent in self-rated assessments, future research that utilizes other methods (e.g., observations, paired comparisons, etc.) of assessing the multicultural competence of school counselors is warranted” (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005, p.420). If respondent bias occurred, it could explain why the results did not show a relationship between multicultural competence and ethical-decision making ability. Holcomb-McCoy & Day-Vines (2004) concurred with the possibility of bias, indicating that participants in their study, which tested the MCCTS-R, “...could have been biased on their views regarding diversity and multiculturalism” (p.160).

This research results indicated that a majority of participants had completed both a course in multicultural counseling and in ethics, 84.2% (N=133) and 72.4% (N=113), respectively. Perhaps this sample of participants simply feels equipped to competently handle both ethical and cultural issues in school counseling situations.

It is assumed that additional and/or expanded multicultural coursework and ethical coursework would provide school counselors with the knowledge necessary to conduct themselves in an ethical manner. Continued training in this regard would also remind school counselors of the importance of consulting their professional codes when presented with an ethical dilemma. Holcomb-McCoy (2005) supports the notion that multicultural coursework should be continued and encouraged. The goal of the counseling profession is to improve profession. Improvement also includes the ability of school counselors to make wise and ethical decisions (Dufrene & Glosoff, 2004).

In addition, the vast majority of participants from this study were residents of the Southern United States. Perhaps, due to the nature of the training of school counselors in this region and exposure to various racial ethnic groups, the participants were more prepared to handle ethical dilemmas. A more diverse sample of school counselors from various regions in the United States may have produced different results.

### **Implications of Counselor/ Counselor Educators**

This study’s findings have implications for K-12 school counselors and counselor educators. School counselors primarily obtain information about legal and ethical issues and how to handle them through their counselor education training programs. Though our results were not significant, counselor education training programs must still create opportunities for students to receive experience dealing with legal and ethical issues that may arise in their work as school counselors. Faculty in counselor education training program may use face-to-face interaction, technology (DVD, video, etc.) and case vignettes in class to introduce students to legal and ethical issues that may arise in the school counseling profession. Counselor educators might also consider bringing in outside experts on legal and ethical issues to share their knowledge and experiences with students as well as answer any critical questions that students may have.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Understanding school counselors’ ethical decision making and the means by which school counselors base their decisions warrant continued research in the school counseling field. Future studies might employ longitudinal methods to explore ethical decision making in a specific group of school coun-

selors. This could be done by separating school counselors by grade level (high school, middle or elementary) or specific regions of the country. Viewing ethical decision making over time might assist in understanding the development of these crucial skills in school counselors. Longitudinal studies might also allow us to see other variables that tie into ethical decision making.

Further, this study has important implications for the exploration of variables relevant to ethical decision-making of school counselors. Although multicultural competence was not a predictor of ethical decision-making in school counselors in this study, perhaps other variables (e.g., age, gender, years of experience, etc.) are better predictors of ethical decision-making in school counselors.

### **Limitations**

Licensure requirements for school counselors vary by state. As a result, course requirements, especially those in multicultural counseling and ethics, are also highly varied. Hence, another limitation for this study may be the lack of uniformity in the training of school counselors. And, even though the Council for Accreditation of Counseling & Related Educational Programs (CACREP) exists, not all school counseling programs are CACREP approved.

The age, gender, ethnicity, level of experience, and region in the U.S. in which each participant practices as a school counselor may influence his or her ethical decision-making ability as well. In addition, whether a participant had the opportunity to take a course in multicultural counseling and ethics could impact his or her ethical decision-making ability. These variables should be further explored to determine their impact on ethical decision making in school counselors.

Finally, the ethnicity of the participants may have contributed to the lack of statistically significant results; the sample for this study was primarily Caucasian (77.3%). A necessary prerequisite to future research would be comprehensive investigation into the demographics of American school counselors. If the participants in this study were not fair representation of the ethnicity of school counselors, a similar study could be conducted again in the hopes of producing more compelling results. However, if this demographic data regarding ethnic/racial background is representative of school counselors in the United States, this reality may demand greater recruitment efforts be made at colleges and universities to encourage more ethnically, racially and culturally-diverse individuals to pursue a career in school counseling. While it is true that school counselors from any particular race or ethnicity would not be inherently more or less culturally competent, a diverse population of practitioners, each carrying a unique perspective, can only serve to facilitate effective peer consultation and the individual preferences of potential clients.

### **Practical Application**

School counselors may find several aspects of this study of practical significance in their practice:

- Perceived multicultural competence and/or ethical decision-making may not always be in line with ethical codes of school counselor's professional organizations. When in doubt, school counselors should consult

professional ethics and multicultural competence codes when faced with dilemmas.

- On-going multicultural and ethical training should be explored by practicing school counselors.
- For those counselors in training, it would be highly beneficial to take a graduate course in ethics and/or multicultural competence. If practicing school counselors have not previously had a course in one or both of these areas, one should be pursued.
- If available, school counselor should consider membership in local, state and national organizations, like the American Counseling Association, that offer guidance and support on the topic of ethical practice.

### Summary

Examining the relationships among school counselors' multicultural competence and capacity for ethical decision-making warrants more attention in professional literature and should be considered for further study. There is a rise in culturally diverse students entering schools. Thus, multicultural counseling competence in school counselors is a crucial area of exploration (Holcomb-McCoy, 2005).

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