What's the Harm? Looking at the Effects of Psychology Doctoral Student-Educator Sexual Relationships

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What's the Harm? Looking at the Effects of Psychology Doctoral Student-Educator Sexual Relationships

Abstract
In 1979 Pope, Levenson, and Schover drew attention to student-educator sexual relationships. Since that time, there have been concerns raised by research and authors regarding the consequences of sexual contact. In the most recent version of the APA ethical code of conduct (American Psychologist, 2002) two sections address the issue of sexual conduct between psychologists and students: section 3.08 Exploitive Relationships and 7.07 Sexual Relationships with students and supervisees (American Psychologist, 2002) stating that psychologists do not engage in sexual relationships with students or supervisees. The purpose of this review was to first identify what, if any, harm occurs as a result of sexual contact between a doctorate level psychology student and a psychology educator? Secondly, to investigate what is the nature of the harm? Thirdly, to investigate who is harmed? And lastly, does the research suggest appropriated interventions once harm has occurred? The results of the review suggest that there can be harm, however, the nature of the harm and who is harmed are still inconclusive. Research investigating appropriate interventions once harm has occurred has not been conducted. Directions for further research are discussed.

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WHAT’S THE HARM?
LOOKING AT THE EFFECTS OF PSYCHOLOGY DOCTORAL STUDENT-EDUCATOR SEXUAL RELATIONSHIPS

A THESIS
SUBMITTED TO THE FACULTY
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ABSTRACT
In 1979 Pope, Levenson, and Schover drew attention to student-educator sexual relationships. Since that time, there have been concerns raised by research and authors regarding the consequences of sexual contact. In the most recent version of the APA ethical code of conduct (American Psychologist, 2002) two sections address the issue of sexual conduct between psychologists and students: section 3.08 Exploitive Relationships and 7.07 Sexual Relationships with students and supervisees (American Psychologist, 2002) stating that psychologists do not engage in sexual relationships with students or supervisees. The purpose of this review was to first identify what, if any, harm occurs as a result of sexual contact between a doctorate level psychology student and a psychology educator? Secondly, to investigate what is the nature of the harm? Thirdly, to investigate who is harmed? And lastly, does the research suggest appropriated interventions once harm has occurred? The results of the review suggest that there can be harm, however, the nature of the harm and who is harmed are still inconclusive. Research investigating appropriate interventions once harm has occurred has not been conducted. Directions for further research are discussed.
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What’s the Harm?

Looking at the Effects of Psychology Doctoral Student – Educator Sexual Relationships

Until the 1970s, sexual contact or intimacies [defined as sexual intercourse or direct genital stimulation] between psychologists and those they were responsible for (such as clients, clinician supervisees, research assistants, and students) went mostly unacknowledged by the profession as a whole. Pope, Levenson, and Schover (1979) argued it was at this time that a number of factors, such as the second-wave feminist movement, sex therapy, the consumer movement and insurance companies, became the catalyst for identifying it as a problem and insisting that the psychological community address this issue. They did not elaborate on how these movements contributed to the psychological movement. The second-wave feminist movement took place roughly between the early 1960’s through the late 1970’s. Whereas the first-wave feminist movement focused on legal obstacles to inequality, second-wave feminism addressed a wider range of issues including sexuality. Many feminists of the 1970s viewed the postwar Freudian psychoanalysts as misogynists and their theories as inherently oppressive to women. For example, Freudian theory incorporated women but in relation to men. The Oedipus complex focused on the male and his conflict in relation to his sexuality, therefore, females experienced “penis envy” (Gerhard, 2001). As a result, psychologists (typically males) engaging in sexual intimacies with clients and students (typically female) were seen as continuing acts of oppression.

The rise of sex therapy in the 1970’s, facilitated by Masters and Johnson’s book, *Treatment of Sexual Dysfunction*, in 1969 highlighted the need to define legitimate sex therapy (as cited in Holden, 1974). Controversy arose around training, licensure, and accreditation of sex
therapists. This became especially important when some therapists engaged in sexual contact with their clients under the guise of so-called “therapeutic practices” (Holden, 1974). It is unclear what Pope et al. (1979) meant by the consumer movement, however, at this time the insurance companies focused on advocating for consumers’ rights and for protecting the consumer’s interests by establishing best practice laws and standards (such as evidence based practice) (Cochrane, 1971). Pope, Weiner, and Simpson (1978) argued as it pertained to the business of psychology, the goals included both development of therapeutic interventions based upon scientific psychological principles and reducing any abusive power that could be wielded as a byproduct of the psychologist’s expertise by empowering the rights of the consumer (i.e. client, supervisee, student) to demand legitimate treatment (as cited in Pope, Levenson, & Schover, 1979).

Initially, the response to sexual relationships between psychologists and their clients ranged from those such as Shepard (1971) and Romeo (1978) who advocated for such relationships, to others such as Master and Johnson (1976) who argued that therapists who engage in sexual intercourse with their clients be charged with rape. In 1975 in response to this growing issue, the American Psychological Association (APA) initiated a task force on sex bias and sex-role stereotyping in psychotherapeutic practice. The APA declared sexual contact between therapists and their clients to be unethical. (Holroyd & Brodsky, 1977; Kenworthy, Kufacos, & Sherman, 1976; Landis, Miller, & Wettstone, 1975; “Report of the Task Force,” 1975; Taylor & Wagner, 1976).

As with sexual relationships between client and therapist, there have been a range of responses to sexual relationships between doctoral-level psychology students and psychology educators that continues to date. Some authors are completely opposed to such relationships
arguing that it is inherently exploitive. Sullivan and Ogloff (1998) stated they “take the position that students and therapy clients are more similar to each other than to persons involved in purely social relationships” (p. 231) and that therapist-client sex has been well documented and has “been likened to the impact of incest” (p. 241). They conclude that “these effects may be generalized to some extent to students” (p. 241). Others argue that while the potential for exploitation is a concern, there is also the potential for long term and mutually beneficial relationships (Keller, 1990). Zakrzewski (2006) found that many students believed sexual relationships between student and professor to be the behavior of two consenting adults and that their sexual behavior was not anyone else’s business. Tabachnik, Keith-Spiegel, and Pope (1991) suggested some argue that neither laws nor APA can legitimately hinder the right to free association (including the right to define that association as sexual) of two consenting adults. In 1979 Pope, Leveson, and Schover drew public attention to the prevalence of sexual intimacies occurring in doctorate level psychological training programs when they conducted the first national survey among APA Division 29 members inquiring about sexual contact between graduate psychology students and their educators, either past or present.

In 1992, despite the range of opinions on the subject, the American Psychological Association changed the language of the ethical code of conduct (American Psychological Association, 1992) to explicitly state in section “1.19 Exploitative Relationships” that psychologists do not engage in sexual contact with students over whom they have evaluative authority because such relationships are likely to impair judgment or be exploitive. Prior to this change, the ethical code more vaguely stated that psychologists did not exploit, including sexually, their students nor did they condone sexual harassment (American Psychologist, 1981). In the most recent version of the APA ethical code of conduct (American Psychologist, 2002)
there are two sections addressing the issue of sexual conduct between psychologists and students: section 3.08 Exploitive Relationships and 7.07 Sexual Relationships with students and supervisees (American Psychologist, 2002). The former states that psychologists do not exploit persons they have supervisory, evaluative or other kind of authority over, the latter specifies that psychologists do not engage in sexual relationships with students or supervisees who are either in their work place (department, agency, or training center) or those individuals they either have evaluative authority over or likely to do so at some time. Unlike the former version, there is no justification or explanation for why sexual contact is considered unethical.

Despite APA attempts to decrease or stop sexual association, sexual contact between students and educators continue to occur (Zakrzweski, 2006). Koocher and Keith-Spiegal (1998) stated that romantic and sexual relationships are “the most powerful, the most frequently discussed, and often the most potentially damaging activities that can occur in a professional context’’ (Koocher & Keith-Spiegal, 1998, p.201). The objective set forth in this paper is to examine the literature for the purpose of addressing the following questions. First identify what, if any, harm occurs as a result of sexual contact between a doctorate level psychology student and a psychology educator? Secondly, what is the nature of the harm? Thirdly, who is harmed? And lastly, does the research suggest appropriated interventions once harm has occurred?

**REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

Several studies have documented the prevalence of doctoral level psychology students engaging in sexual contact with a psychology educator (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel, Olkin, & Taube, 1996; Lamb and Catanzaro, 1998; Pope et al, 1979; Robinson & Reid, 1985; Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, & Pope, 1991; Thoreson, Shaughnessy, & Frazier, 1995;
Zakrzewskil, 2006). Sexual contact is defined as sexual intercourse or direct genital stimulation (Zakrzewskil, 2006). While sexual contact between students and educators is by no means unique to doctorate psychology programs, two studies investigating prevalence rates have indicated that sexual contact may be more prevalent among psychology doctorate students in comparison to other mental health professions (Gartrell, Herman, Olarte, Localio, & Feldstein., 1988; Thoreson et al., 1995).

Thoreson, Shaughnessy, and Frazier (1995) found that female doctoral level counselors reported more frequent sexual contact than those of female master level counselors. They speculated that this may be influenced by having spent more time in school and thus, having more opportunities to become sexually involved with their professors and supervisors. Also as doctoral level students they are more likely to be perceived as equals by their professors or supervisors (Thoreson et. al, 1995). Gartrell, Herman, Olarte, Localio, and Feldstein (1988) investigated the prevalence of psychiatric residents’ sexual contact with educators. They compared their findings to the prevalence rates with doctoral psychology rates available at that time. They noted that sexual contact was more prevalent among psychology doctoral students (22%-25% to 6.3%). The researchers proposed that the greater employment opportunities in psychiatry for female residents allowed for less anxiety associated with declining sexual advances, than their peers in psychology (Gartrell et al., 1988). Whatever the reasons, research suggests that sexual contact between students and educators may be a more likely experience for doctoral psychology students in comparison with other mental health professionals.

The reported rates for doctorate level psychology students engaging in sexual contact with a psychology educator have varied from 2% in Zakrzewskil’s (2006) study to 25% in Pope et al.’s (1979) study. It is unclear why there is such a large discrepancy. Initially, research data
seemed to suggest that sexual contact in psychological training programs was increasing. Pope et al. (1979) found 5% of females who had graduated 21 years earlier reported engaging in sexual relationships with an educator compared with 25% of females who had graduated in the last 6 years.

But more recent studies indicate prevalence rates are decreasing. The most recent study reported prevalence rates as low as 2%. However, this same study also reported 25% percent of participants reported knowing firsthand of a sexual contact occurring between a student and a professor (Zakrzewskil, 2006). This percentage may be indicative of multiple people knowing of the 2% engaged in a sexual relationship or sexual relationships are being underreported.

Research has identified some of the characteristics of those students who are most likely to engage in sexual contact. It appears that female doctorate level students (11% to 17%) are significantly more likely to experience a sexual contact than male doctorate level students (2% to 4%) (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel, Olkin, & Taube, 1996; Pope et al., 1979; Robinson & Reid, 1985; Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, & Pope, 1991; Zakrzewskil, 2006). Glaser and Thorpe (1986) found that 31% of those women (N=25) reported they had engaged in sexual contact with more than one educator. They also identified that female doctoral level students who became divorced or separated during graduate training reported a significantly higher incidence of sexual contact with an educator in comparison to females who were married or single.

Four studies have investigated the educators who are most likely to engage in sexual contact with a doctoral level student (Lamb & Catanzaro, 1998; Pope et al., 1979; Tabachnick et al., 1991; Zakrzewskil, 2006). Two of the studies focused on educators, while the third asked current students about educator behaviors. The rates of educators who admitted to becoming sexually involved with their students varied from 1.7% to 13% (Lamb & Catanzaro, 1998; Pope
et al., 1979; Tabachnick et al., 1991). It appears that predominately male educators engage in sexual contact. Pope et al. (1979) and Tabacnick et al. (1991) found 19 to 26% of male educators reported engaging in sexual contact and 8%, as compared to 12% of female educators. The most recent study conducted asking students about educators’ behaviors found that male educators were exclusively involved in sexual contacts (Zakrzewskil, 2006).

Research has also identified some of the characteristics of those educators who are most likely to engage in sexual contact. Pope et al. (1979) asked both students and educators about the characteristics of educators who engaged in sexual contact. They found that research/academic advisers accounted for almost one third of the reported first sexual contacts (which represented the highest group membership). Respondents engaged in working relationships with course instructors were five times more likely and respondents working with clinical supervisors three times more likely than research/academic advisers. Female students indicated they are more likely to engage in sex with a course instructor (75%) than their clinical supervisor (47%), whereas male students reported more sex with their clinical supervisor (86%) than their course instructor (29%) (Pope et al., 1979). The most recent study found that course instructors represented the highest group (44%) of those who engaged in sexual contact, while research or academic advisors represented 33% of those who engaged in sexual contact (Zakrzewskil, 2006). This finding is consistent with female student reports from Glaser and Thorpe’s study (1986).

Research has linked sexual contact between doctoral psychology student and educator with the presence of a working relationship. Three studies focused on the timing of sexual contacts in relation to the working relationship. Two studies found that no sexual contact occurred in the absence of a working relationship. Furthermore, both studies found that the
greater proportion of sexual contact between graduate students and psychology educators occurred prior to or during the professional working relationship, as opposed to, after or when a working relationship did not take place. (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel et al., 1996; Lamb and Catanzaro, 1998).

In summary, research that has investigated sexual contacts has provided information about how often, with whom, and when. The prevalence rates of sexual contact between doctoral psychology students and educators have found a range from 2% to 25%. Despite initial findings suggesting sexual contacts were increasing, the data actually suggests there has been a decrease in sexual contacts. Female psychology doctoral students are far more likely to be involved in comparison with men, psychiatric residents, and master level clinicians. The most typical pairing seems to be a female psychology student with a male course instructor or research advisor. These sexual relationships do not seem to take place outside the presence of a working relationship and typically occur before or during the working relationship.

Opinions

Three literature review articles came to the conclusion that professor-student dating cannot be consensual given the inherent dependency of students have on their educators. Literature which supports the claim that the perceptions that student-educator sexual relationships are embraced by most psychologists. Yet those who have had personal experience tend to see them as less problematic.

Quatrella and Wentworth (1995) argued that at the heart of the issue is the debate about whether professor-student dating can ever be consensual. Many scholars have discussed the presence of a power differential inherent in the professor-student relationship. The student is dependent on the educator for such things as grades, research opportunities, recommendations,
and committee memberships (Pope et al., 1979; Quatrella & Wentworth, 1995; Schneider, 1987; Sullivan & Ogloff, 1998). Quatrella and Wentworth (1995) stated that the unequal status underlying the relationship makes it impossible for it ever to be consensual and, as such, professor-student dating is inherently a form of sexual harassment. The authors cite the Supreme Court decision in *Meritor Savings Bank v. Vinson* (1986) as an example of how a defense based on “consensual relationships” is no longer valid in sexual harassment cases because the person in power cannot use “voluntariness” as a defense (Quatrella & Wentworth, 1995, p. 250). This case involved a female employee at a bank who, after being fired from her job, sued the vice-president for creating a hostile working environment by coercing her into having sex with him. The defense attempted to claim that the sexual engagement was voluntary. Quatrella and Wentworth argue that this case has a direct impact on professor-student relationship dynamic because the power differential inherent in the educational relationship influences a student’s choices with respect to the educator.

Schneider (1987) argued that graduate students are more dependent on their relationships with their educators than undergraduate students. Unlike undergraduates, who may more easily drop courses or change professors without serious and long-lasting effects to their career, the risks involved in alienating an educator is much greater for graduate students. Sullivan and Ogloff (1998) argue that doctoral clinical psychology students may be even more dependent on their relationships with educators than certain other graduate level disciplines, due to the difficult job market in psychology.

Sullivan and Ogloff (1998) also take the position that students are not free to give full voluntary consent to a variety of activities suggested by their supervisors, including but not exclusive to, consent to sexual relationships. As such, these authors reported that they take the
position that romantic relationships between students and educators should, at least, be strongly discouraged and would prefer that they were subject to discipline by ethics review boards. They argue that the psychological impact of sexual relationships between students and educators has been generally ignored beyond superficial items on surveys asking if it was beneficial or detrimental. And while they acknowledge that the lack of research prevents us from knowing the strength of the psychological impact, Sullivan and Ogloff argued that the psychological impact known of therapist-client sex may generalize, to some extent, to students. They presented their argument by stating that psychological impact of the violation of trust and boundaries in therapist-client sex has been well documented, and likened to the impact of incest by researchers such as Kenneth Pope and Jacobs. They proceed by noting that research shows a tendency for some women to regret their sexual relationships years after they are over and to perceive them as harmful. They stated that similar to other forms of victimization, students may experience a variety of feelings such as fear of being condemned by others and shame, or that they got what they deserved, which may prevent them from coming forth to report their professors’ behaviors and to seek healing. Lastly, they argue that generally students who are involved in sexual relationships with professors are “vulnerable” because they are typically young, relationally inexperienced women, beginning graduate school. Sullivan and Ogloff (1998) conclude that because they are vulnerable they are by definition are more likely to suffer as a result.

When psychologists are asked about their perceptions as to whether there is harm as a result of sexual student-professor relationships, generally they tend to say yes. Curiously, the psychologists who have actually engaged in a sexual relationship tend to see it as less harmful than those who have not. Glaser and Thorpe (1986) also found that the vast majority of psychologists (regardless of experience of sexual relationships with professors) reported
believing that sexual contact during a working relationship was harmful, to a considerable degree, to the working relationship itself. Harm was not defined by the researchers for the purpose of the study. However, they found that those individuals who had engaged in a sexual relationship with an educator either prior to, during, or outside of a working relationship, tended to view sexual contact outside of an ongoing working relationship as less harmful than other respondents. In addition, the time of the sexual contact, relative to the working relationship, did not impact the perception of sexual contact as problematic for those who had engaged in sexual contact versus those who had not.

**Six Studies**

Six studies have investigated the impacts and/or outcomes that can result due to sexual contact between educators and doctoral psychology students. All of the studies used the same methodology to recruit participants and administer questionnaires. The researchers identified their sample using various divisions of APA (i.e., Division 12, Division 29, student affiliates) and mailed out between 954 to 1,056 questionnaire packets. In each study, the packets included a cover letter, the questionnaire, and a return addressed, stamped envelope. Response rates varied from 30% to 60% (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel et al., 1996; Lamb and Catanzaro, 1998; Pope et al., 1979; Robinson & Reid, 1985, Zakrzewskil, 2006). Two of the studies investigated the impact of sexual contact by asking the respondents about perceptions at the time of the sexual contact and their current perceptions about historical sexual contact (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel & et al., 1996)

Pope et al. (1979) conducted a survey using a sample consisting of 1,000 psychologists randomly selected from the 1977 APA Division 29 Directory to investigate sexual intimacies in psychological training. Four hundred and eighty one responses (48%) were used for analysis.
They asked participants about their sexual behaviors both as students and as educators. They found that 10% of psychologists admitted to engaging in sexual relationships as students and 13% reported engaging in sex with students as educators. The researchers attempted to learn more about the possible attitudes of the 48% who did not respond to their survey by comparing the results between early versus late returns of questionnaires. Their comparison found that respondents returning their questionnaires later indicated they had significantly more sexual contact as students with their educators than those who returned their questionnaires early. The late respondents, as professionals, were four times more likely to have sex with their own students or clients. These respondents also tended to report that they believed sexual relationships between students and educators could be beneficial to both parties.

Pope et al. (1979) found that 2% of all participants (psychologists who had engaged in sexual contact as a student, as an educator, and those who had not) clearly affirmed the proposition that sexual contact could be beneficial to both parties. Twenty-one percent of all participants chose “perhaps” as their answer to the question about whether sexual contact could be beneficial to both parties. On the other hand, they found that 77% of all participants disagreed that sexual contact could be beneficial to both parties. Pope et al. reported that 50% of psychologists who had sexual contact with an educator when they were students, reported they disagreed that sexual contact could be beneficial to both parties.

Robinson and Reid conducted a survey revisiting sexual intimacies in psychology using a sample of 954 females randomly selected from the 1978 APA Membership Directory. The usable questionnaires represented 30% (N=287) of the sample. Robinson and Reid reported that 13.6% of females reported sexual experiences as students. In addition to investigating the experiences of female students, they also asked about the experiences of female employees. The study also
included investigating sexual seduction as well as sexual experiences. Sexual seduction refers to behaviors such as flirting, joking, and excessive attention. When reporting some of their results, they did not differentiate between the experiences of sexual encounters and sexual seduction. The researchers found that for the majority (85%) of females who had a sexual experience of either sexual contact or sexual seduction contacts were not once only involvements. Of the 69% who reporting that their supervisor or educator initiated the sexual experience, 25% reported experiencing it as coercion. When asked about whether there was genuine caring involved in the sexual experience, 60% affirmed that there was. When asked about whether they would become involved again if given the same situation, 52% (N=85) stated they would. Despite these statements, 95.7% felt that these relationships were likely detrimental to both parties.

Glaser and Thorpe (1986) conducted a survey of all the female members of APA Division 12 to investigate their experiences of sexual intimacies during graduate training as well as their past and present perceptions of those events. The researchers mailed the questionnaire to 1,047 female members of APA Division 12, 464 responded to the survey. Seventeen percent (N=80) of the participants indicated that they had engaged in intimate sexual contact with at least one psychology educator during graduate training. Of the 17%, 31% (N=25) reported they had engaged in sexual contact with more than one educator.

Hammel, Olkin, and Taube (1996) investigated student-educator sex in clinical and counseling psychology doctoral training by surveying 1000 (600 females and 400 males) American Psychological Association members. They had a response rate of 51% (52% females and 49% males). They found that 10% of respondents reported sexual contact with an educator, 2% of male respondents and 15% of female respondents.
Lamb and Catanzaro (1998) conducted a survey investigating sexual and nonsexual boundary violations involving psychologists, clients, supervisees, and students. They randomly gathered a sample of 1,000 psychologists (50% clinical and 50% counseling) from 18, 500 practitioners provided by the APA office of Research and Demographics. They reported a response rate of 60% (596 returned). Of the respondents, 52% were male and 48% were female.

Zakrzewski (2006) conducted a national survey of American Psychological Association student affiliates, investigating involvement and ethical training in student and educator sexual relationships. The survey was mailed to 1,053 APA student affiliates, randomly generated from the APA research office. This resulted in 448 usable surveys, which was consistent with previous response rates from prior studies investigating similar research subjects. The participants were primarily female (75%), Caucasian (77%), heterosexual (91%), and single (52%) with an average age of 33.25 years and a range of 20–69 years. Zakrzewski found that 2% of the participants had sexual contacts with educators. Eight percent of participants reported that, as students, they had experienced sexual advances from educators. Nine percent of all the participants reported that they had experienced a sexual contact, advance, or both with an educator, with women reporting a higher incidence than men (11% to 4%). Twenty-five percent of participants reported knowing firsthand of a sexual contact occurring between another student and a professor.

**Evidence of Harm**

When Pope et al. (1979) and Robinson and Reid (1985) studied sexual contact between doctoral psychology students and educators they included a vague question about the benefit or the cost of engaging in such behavior. Pope et al (1979) found that 77% of all participants (psychologists who had engaged in sexual contact as a student, an educator, and those who had
not) denied the proposition that sexual contact could be beneficial to both parties. Robinson and Reid (1985) reported that 95.7% of participants (again, regardless of experience or lack of experience) felt that such contact was likely to be detrimental to one or both parties. Neither study differentiated between the opinions of those who had been a party to the sexual involvement from those who had not been party to such engagement, to determine if experience impacted perception.

Coercion. Researchers have identified coercion as a type of harm that can result due to professor-student sexual relationships. Three studies surveyed licensed psychologists about their perceptions of coercion playing a role in their sexual contact with their educators (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel et al., 1996; Robinson & Reid, 1985). Of the three studies, two compared how perceptions of coercion changed from the time of the sexual contact to retroactively perceiving coercion. Similar results were found across the four studies for perception of coercion playing a role in their sexual experiences. Robinson and Reid (1985) found that 25% of women felt that their sexual experience was a result of coercion. Glaser and Thorpe (1986) found that 28% of respondents reported that they believe coercion played a role in the sexual contact. This increased to 50% of respondents stating they believed, at the time of the study, that they were, in fact, coerced into sexual contact. Hammel, Olkin, and Taube (1996) found that 10% of respondents reported that they believed they were coerced and 10% of respondents have mixed feelings about whether or not they believed they were coerced at the time of sexual contact. This increased to 29% of respondents retroactively believing that they were coerced and 18% of respondents retroactively having mixed feelings about whether they were coerced into sexual contact. The trend that appears to emerge is that with time students may come to see their sexual relationships with educators as coercive.
**Hindrance.** Two studies investigated the perception of hindrance to the working relationship as a result of sexual contact among licensed psychologists who engaged in a sexual contact with an educator when they were students. Glaser and Thorpe (1986) found that 19% reported considering sexual contact a hindrance at the time of the contact, in contrast to the 33% at the time of the study considered it a hindrance to the working relationship. Hammel et al. (1996) found that 51% of respondents considered sexual contact a hindrance to the working relationship at the time of sexual contact. This increased to 70% retroactively perceiving sexual contact as a hindrance to the working relationship. Both studies indicated that a portion of students perceived sexual contact does hinder the working relationship and demonstrated a trend for that perception to increase retrospectively. However, the earlier study indicated that these perceptions are held by a minority of respondents, whereas, the later study indicates that these perceptions are held by the majority of respondents.

**Ethically Inappropriate.** Two studies surveyed licensed psychologists with experience of sexual contact with an educator as a student for their perceptions of professional and ethical problems due to sexual contact. Glaser and Thorpe (1986) investigated how female students who had engaged in sexual contact viewed the ethics of such contact. They found that at the time of the sexual contact 36% of participants reported they believed there were professional and ethical problems due to sexual contact. However, at the time of the study, the percentage increased to 56% believed ethical problems existed due to sexual contact (Glaser & Thrope, 1986). In contrast, Hammel et al. (1996) found that 47% of respondents reported believing at the time of contact that professional and ethical problems were created. This increased to 84% of respondents retroactively perceiving the presence of professional and ethical problems as a result of sexual contact (Hammel et al., 1996). In both studies, retroactively the majority of
respondents perceived professional and ethical problems due to sexual contact. Consistent with the findings for coercion and hindrance to the working relationship, perceptions of professional and ethical problems increased retroactively.

As discussed in the introduction, the APA ethical guidelines have dictated that it is unethical for a psychologist to engage in a sexual relationship with a student. Explicit in the guidelines is the responsibility of psychologists (including those who are earning their degrees) to adhere to the guidelines and take action to prevent continued unethical behaviors by colleagues and peers. However, Zakrzewskil (2006) found that 53% of students who learned of a sexual relationship between another student and an educator reported that they would either not feel safe, feared their identity would not be protected, and/or there would be negative repercussions for pursuing appropriate actions (as defined by the APA ethical guidelines).

Research has shown conflicting results as to whether or not sexual relationships between students and educators convey a model for students as to proper behavior in their future. Pope et al. (1979) found that females who engaged in sexual contact as a student with an educator were significantly more likely to engage in sexual contact as a professor. Twenty-three percent of females who had sex with an educator also reported having sex with a client, as opposed to 6% who did not have sex with an educator but did so with a client. The correlation between engaging in sexual contact as a student and as a professional among males was inconclusive given the size of the sample (Pope et al, 1979). These correlations indicate a possible modeling effect. However, Lamb and Catanzaro (1998) did not find a significant relationship between psychologists who as students engaged in a sexual relationship with an educator, or therapist, and psychologists who engaged in a sexual relationship with their students and/or clients.
Sexual relationships in other graduate programs

Gartrell et al., (1988) conducted a national survey investigating psychiatric residents’ sexual encounters with educators and patients. Their sample included all 1,113 psychiatric residents who were identified as PGY-4 trainees in the American Medical Association Masterfile. They had a response rate of 50.4%. Of the 548 respondents, 321 were male, 225 were female, and 2 did not specify gender. Their methods were similar to that of the studies investigating psychologists (i.e., questionnaires, including cover letter and stamped envelope). They gathered information with forced-choice questions as well as space for additional comments.

Gartrell et al. (1988) yielded more specific information about possible negative and positive repercussions when conducting research on sexual relationships between psychiatric educators and psychiatric residents. They investigated the resident’s feelings about the contact at onset and at the time of the study, as well as the effect on the working relationship both at onset and at the time of study. The researchers also investigated overall feelings about the sexual contact from the residents’ perspective. For the query about feelings of contact at onset, two residents affirmed feeling that it was inappropriate, one resident affirmed that it was harmful, and two residents affirmed that it was exploitive. The results for the query about feelings regarding contact at the time of the study found an increase in negative feelings from onset to time of study: seven affirmed it was inappropriate, seven affirmed it was harmful, and seven affirmed that it was exploitive. The researchers reported that residents were allowed multiple responses for questions related to feelings about the contact (onset and current), however, they did not report upon the pattern on each residents’ responses (for example, they did not indicate whether the seven residents who affirmed that the contact was inappropriate were also the same seven
who affirmed that it was harmful and exploitive). In regard to effect on the working relationship at onset, the results found that two residents indicated it had a mixed effect and one resident indicated that it was harmful. Responses regarding the effect on the working relationship at the time of study found that four subjects described the effect as mixed and six indicated that it was harmful. Overall, nine residents indicated having mixed feelings and four residents indicated having regret about the sexual contact (Gartrell et al., 1988).

In addition to the force-choice or numerical specification responses in the survey, Gartell et al. (1988) allowed for additional comments. From this information, they were able to gather more specific information about the nature of the harm as a result of the sexual contact. Gartell et al. reported that four of the residents who had engaged in sexual contact experienced it as sexual harassment. One female respondent wrote “I wish I had not….I was young, scared, and naïve” (Gartrell et al., 1988, p. 692). Another resident was quoted as saying that she was harassed by her research advisor when he attempted to undress her without her consent. The researchers reported that this resident wrote that this experience “derailed my career for 2 years” (Gartrell et al., 1988, p. 692). Given that most of the data collected about sexual contact is from those students who have completed their training, this is the only evidence acquired that indicates the potential severity of harm such contact can have on a student’s career path.

One study surveyed female graduate students of all disciplines. Schnieder (1987) gathered information collected in a short quantitative survey investigating sexual harassment as a problem for graduate women. The survey included an open-ended section that was utilized by 24% of the 356 female participants. Schnieder (1987) summarized the results to identify more specifics about how the female graduate students were coerced into having sexual contact with their professors. The study found that 30% (n=25) of graduate women felt coerced into being
sexual with their professor, 50% reported coercion in the form of begging and appeals for sympathy, 20% reported coercion in the form of promises of academic reward, and 20% reported coercion in the form of threats of academic penalty. The participants were also asked about what feelings they experienced during and after the educator’s coercion that influenced their subsequent behavior. The results indicate of those students who felt coerced by their professors, 46% reported being fearful of jeopardizing their academic careers, 36% reported being embarrassed, and 14% reported being physically afraid (Schnieder, 1987).

**DISCUSSION**

This review investigated four hypotheses. The first was to identify what, if any, harm occurs as result of sexual contact between doctoral level psychology students and psychology educators? The answer to this question is yes, harm can occur. The second question was to identify the nature of the harm. The answer to this question is that the results are inconclusive. The third question was to identify who is harmed. The answer to this question is also that the results are inconclusive. The last research question asked whether or not the research suggests how to intervene once harm has occurred. The answer to this question is no, the research has not addressed how to intervene once harm has occurred.

Culturally, discussing sex in professional environments openly is often avoided (even considered taboo), despite the efforts of some to address it explicitly. For many people the topic of sex is an intriguing, anxiety-provoking topic that invokes strong emotions. Secrecy regarding sex can be problematic because it breeds the opportunity for abuse. The purpose of this literature review was to synthesize the information regarding the problems that have been identified with sexual relationships between professors and students, highlight areas in the research that were incomplete, and propose a course of research from this point forward.
In fact, research does suggest that harm can occur as a result of sexual contact between graduate students and educators. Most of the research has focused on the impact on the student. Zakrzewski (2006), however, found that students who are not engaged in a relationship, but have knowledge of a student-educator sexual relationship, may also be negatively impacted. In addition, results were mixed about whether students who have engaged in a sexual relationship with a professor may be more likely to engage in a sexual relationship with a client. The research investigating doctoral level psychology students and educators suggests that it is either not beneficial and/or detrimental to both parties. More specifically, studies have identified harm as occurring in the forms of coercion, hindrance, and ethical inappropriateness.

Research investigating sexual relationships between other graduate students (psychiatric residents and disciplines not specified) identified other problematic issues that may arise. For example, one finding demonstrated that student-professor sexual relationships may derail students in their career path. This research has identified problems that can arise as a result of student-educator sexual relationships, but these problems have not been identified as unique to this type of working relationship. Nor is it conclusive that the only way to address these problems is to forbid them from happening (Gartrell et al., 1988; Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel et al., 1996; Lamb and Catanzaro, 1998; Pope et al., 1979; Robinson & Reid, 1985, Schnieder, 1989; Zakrzewski, 2006).

This literature review illuminated a number of interesting findings. The findings are, in general, inconclusive but offer possible directions for furthering research on this topic. Understanding the full story is vital for informing what position the psychological community and its members take on this matter and why.
The first intriguing finding was the discrepancy in perceptions concerning sexual contact between those who have experienced a sexual contact versus those who have not. Those who have engaged in a student-educator sexual relationship perceived less harm than those who had not, however, the research does not explore this further to account for these differences. The most obvious difference between the two groups is one group has experienced sexual contact and the other has not. As such, the cognitive processes that occur in evaluation are different. For those who have not engaged in a sexual relationship it is a global question. Because they are not able to draw upon their personal experiences, they are being asked to imagine what it might be like. Considering it is outside their personal experience, they are not likely to understand the nuances that exist in the interpersonal interaction. But for those who have engaged in a sexual relationship the question regarding perception of harm is a more specific question. There is a complexity to their reasoning about the question, because they can draw upon their personal understandings of the nuances. This may account for why their perceptions indicate it is less harmful that those who have not had personal experience.

Another possible explanation for the difference between the two groups is based on the theory of cognitive dissonance. Those who engaged in a sexual relationship may experience dissonance perceiving their behavior as harmful. Acknowledging that they engaged in something harmful may threaten their sense of self, such as “I am a person who makes good judgments,” therefore, describing the sexual contact as not harmful or somewhat harmful, may help to maintain self schemas. Further research is needed to conclusively interpret this finding.

Another trend highlighted by the research is that those students who engaged in a student-educator sexual relationship tended to evaluate that interaction as more negative with the passage of time. The process of maturation and changing cultural values may account for this trend. Life
experience inherently gives individuals more information to develop perspectives and evaluate ideas, situations, and experiences. In the case of sexual relationships, having had other experiences, with various relationships, appears to have altered how these individuals (mostly females) evaluated past sexual relationships with their professors. They have had time to evaluate how their sexual relationships have had an impact on them and understand the complexity of that impact. Similarly, changing cultural values likely impacted how individuals have evaluated their sexual relationships with their professors. The culture within the psychological community has come to consider student-educator relationships unethical. As members of this community, these individuals are likely to be influenced by this perspective. How much maturation and changing cultural values accounts for these changing evaluations over time should be investigated further.

Perhaps the most significant finding is the discrepancy in the research about whether or not student-educator sexual contact has any relationship to therapist-client sexual contact. Pope et al.’s (1979) findings suggested that students who engaged in sexual relationships with professors were significantly more likely to engage in sexual relationships with their clients. This finding indicates concerns regarding other consequences for student-professor sexual relationships. A possible explanation for this finding is that poor boundaries and associations with problematic dual relationships have been modeled for the students. Given that APA began to alter their code of ethics before research began which suggested other areas of harm, this finding alone may have been disturbing enough for APA to facilitate these changes to the ethics code. On the other hand, Lamb and Catanzaro (1998) did not find a correlation between these two types of dual relationships.
Concrete conclusions about the underlying reasons why student-educator sexual relationships occur cannot be drawn from these two contradictory findings. Pope et al., (1979) proposed that student-educator sexual relationships and therapist-client sexual relationships reflect poor boundaries. It is inconclusive as to whether students and educators enter into sexual relationships exclusively because of poor boundaries. In addition, unethical sexual relationships are not the only sexual relationships reflective of poor boundaries. Further research is needed to flesh out these possible correlations.

The research and discussion concerning sexual relationships between professors and students is far from finished. When it began in the 1970’s in reaction to a number of social and political movements, e.g., the second wave feminist movement, sex therapy, and the consumer movement, the discussion took on a voice of concern about the harmful impact dual relationships might have. The psychological community, particularly APA, took action addressing these concerns by encouraging further study and through changes to the Code of Ethics. First APA recommended that psychologists avoid relationships that may be problematic, then progressively moved towards the more restrictive stance that psychologists do not engage in sexual relationships with students.

Psychologists, such as Pope (1993) and Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997), have written about how professors can avoid engaging in sexual relationships. The problem with this approach is in what we know of human nature: telling people not to do something they want to do does not prevent them from doing so. For example, in my personal experience as a Roman Catholic, the Roman Catholic Church has been largely unsuccessful in convincing people not to have sex out of wedlock because it is a sin. For some the threat that it is a sin doesn’t mitigate their desire to have sex. For others, they do not believe it is a sin in the first place. It is likely that
it is for these same reasons student-professor sexual relationships continue. Some are not
deterred by the statement that it is unethical and some do not believe sex between consensual
adults can be considered unethical. Lacking conclusive evidence in the research, it remains
questionable whether there are sufficient grounds to call all sexual relationships between a
professor and student unethical. On one side of the argument, there is ample evidence of harm.
Harm, however, is not unique to unethical relationships. Are all sexual relationships between
students and educators problematic or can they be conducted ethically? The research does
demonstrate that some are able to engage in such a relationship satisfactorily.

Essentially, student-educator sexual relationships are about sex in the workplace. A
doctoral psychology graduate school is a special kind of workplace. I would recommend that
future research investigate studies that have been conducted concerning other workplaces. For
example, research investigating sexual relationships in corporations or in hospitals. Research
concerning other workplaces may yield information about how to address sexual relationships
that occur: what works and what does not.

Psychological researchers writing on the subject of student-educator sexual relationships
have expressed concern for the potential for psychological harm that can occur as a result of the
doctoral psychology students and educators. Some have expressed the concern that psychological
harm is on par with therapist-client sexual relationships. There is no evidence supporting (or
denying) this concern. At this time the research has minimally addressed the presence of
psychological harm. This is an important line of inquiry that should be explored. Furthermore,
research has not investigated possible successful interventions once harm has occurred. As with
the Catholic Church’s stance on sex out of wedlock, it is not enough declare that sexual
relationships between professors and students should not happen because they are unethical and
then simply hope for the best. At this point, the research tells an incomplete story about sexual relationships between students and educators.
References


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