

Expectation and Actuality in Clinical Psychology Practica: Students' Perspective

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The premise of this research was that practica are a crucial part of the training and professional socialization of doctoral students in clinical psychology. However, this aspect of training is less studied and less regulated than other aspects of training, including graduate academics, internship, and post-doctoral positions. Missing almost entirely from the literature is the student's perspective on practica training, a perspective which might benefit graduate programs and training sites in their efforts to provide the best training. Obtaining a candid student perspective can be challenging due to pressures students may feel to misrepresent their training experiences out of fear of negative evaluation and their subordinate position in comparison to supervisors and administration of their graduate program and practicum. The current study's main concern dealt with what students expected from their practicum training versus what they actually received in fundamental domains including supervision, client contact, assessment, and research experiences. This study also explored what students did if there were shortfalls in their training. Other domains researched included how training oriented students perceived their practica to be, students' level of satisfaction on various domains, and narrative feedback students had for their training sites related to training and client service.

The data was gathered via an internet-based survey which yielded 321 responses from clinical psychology doctoral students at programs located in 38 states, Canada, and Puerto Rico. These students, who were reached from invitations to participate disseminated on NCSPP, CUDCP, and APAGS list serves, were diverse on a number of demographic variables, including gender, prior schooling, type of practicum setting, degree pursued (Ph.D. versus Psy.D.), ethnicity, and sexual orientation. Most respondents were trained at APA-accredited programs. The response rate was estimated to be approximately 8.5%, a rate which is on the low end of what has been reported in the literature on internet surveying.

The survey found that while the majority of students received what they expected in terms of basic elements of training, a large minority of students did not. For example, 28% of students in the sample revealed that they received primary supervision from someone other than a doctoral-level

licensed psychologist. Shortfalls in training (defined as 80% or less of what they expected to receive) affected a substantial proportion of students as well: 31% of students experienced a shortfall in assessment experiences and 35% of students had less client contact than expected. In general, students cited factors outside their own control as responsible for these deficits, including both reasonable and unreasonable disruptions by their supervisors. When asked to whom they reported these shortfalls, most students reported either no one, or individuals unassociated with their academic or practical training. Both graduate school program administration and training directors were rarely turned to by students when it came to revealing discrepancies in training. More than three-quarters of those who reported shortfalls said that the situation did not change.

Students were also asked to rate the degree to which their practica were oriented toward training, assessed via the Training Orientation Inventory, a 32-item instrument developed for this study. This inventory presented statements about experiences posited to be fundamental to training and development as a psychologist. Responses to this inventory indicated that students felt mostly neutral about their practica sites' orientation toward training. However, students also rated these same training orientation statements as moderately to very important to their development as psychologists, noting the following were most crucial: the ability to disclose difficult issues to their primary supervisors, seeing ethical breaches handled satisfactorily, working at a site that accurately represents what it expects from the student, being able to give feedback about the training experience to the supervisor without fearing negative consequences, and being able to give feedback to their schools without fearing negative consequences.

On satisfaction measures, students indicated that they were mildly to moderately satisfied on all indices; most interesting to note is that satisfaction with their professional development was most highly correlated with satisfaction with their practicum, even more so than satisfaction with their academic training.

Narrative responses outlined a wide range of feedback that students would provide to their sites, if they had a chance. The feedback provided was, on the whole, of a highly articulate and specific nature, and provided an indication that students do have feedback of import to offer, should training sites create an environment where this feedback is welcomed and can be provided in an atmosphere which ensures safety and precludes reprisal. It is also of interest to note that students in both Ph.D. and Psy.D. programs had nearly entirely similar experiences in terms of training activities, degree of training orientation of their practicum sites, and satisfaction levels.

In conclusion, this study endeavored to give more voice to those who are the recipients of our training processes. Despite limitations related to sampling procedures, low response rate, and the one-sided nature of only surveying students about the issues, there are sufficient intriguing results from the survey responses to generate some useful implications from this study. First, the majority of students in the sample are receiving what they expect from their practica, at least in terms of training building blocks, such as supervision, assessment, client contact, and research. Students are mildly to moderately satisfied with many different aspects of their training, including their practica and academic schooling. In the narrative responses, a common theme was that students were learning a great deal from their experiences at practica, albeit not always in ways that were comfortable or even intentional on the part of the training site.

While some discrepancies found in this survey are most likely those that result from misunderstandings, a difference of perspective, or are reported by students who might be particularly difficult to satisfy, other discrepancies we would all agree - student, academic program, and practicum site alike - differ quite markedly from what was committed to ahead of time and compromise the training experience. From students' responses, and from the pattern of data, it appears clear that the issue of occupying a lower rung in the training power hierarchy is a salient variable for students, and contributes to their silence on a range of important issues. One wonders if those in our profession might be better able to communicate an interest in and an ability to absorb feedback, even if it is difficult to hear, or about issues which are difficult to change. At what point are we willing to raise the bar on training at practica, to give more students more of what they hope for, not just what they need? Having these difficult and complex issues on the table, rather than the results of them negatively affecting students, sites, and training would be a more mature, productive way of dealing with these issues.

On a very practical level, it appears necessary for students and academic programs to initiate a dialogue about what might not be said in formal evaluative channels. This is a daunting proposition because students will be quite hesitant for a number of rational reasons to implicate themselves in the shortcomings of their training experiences. Setting up expectations in the training process and ways to evaluate them proactively is important. Without a clear and forceful message that academic programs want to know what is happening during practica, and without a means for students to disclose without negative consequences, students may perceive the message that the status quo is good enough, and that their concerns are

not of import. How the resulting cynicism about the possibility for honesty and change plays out as students, the future of the profession, take over the reins, is of concern.

Thank you for reading this synopsis of my findings related to practice. If you have any comments, questions, or concerns, please contact Steven M. Gross, 242 Washington Avenue, #1, Brooklyn, NY 11205, or e-mail: steven_m_gross@antiochne.edu.