

# Age Factor In Teacher Counsellors Perception Of Ethical Standards In Counselling: The Case Of Selected Secondary Schools In Kiambu-Kenya.

<sup>1</sup>Ngugi Peter Kamande, <sup>2</sup>Dr. Isaac W. Kingori, <sup>3</sup>Prof. John Kanjogu

<sup>1</sup> Karatina University, Kenya

<sup>2</sup> Laikipia University, Kenya

<sup>3</sup> Laikipia University, Kenya

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## Abstract

*Similar To Other Professions, Counselling Is Guided By Ethical Standards Which Aim At Protecting The Welfare Of The Client And The Counsellor. However, In Spite Of The Critical Role That The Standards Play In A Counselling Relationship, The Extent To Which A Counsellor Will Observe The Standards May Be Dependent On The Way He/She Values Or Perceives The Standards. The Study Presumed That Perception Of The Standards May Be Influenced By The Counsellor's Age. This Is The Assumption That This Study Sought To Validate In The Context Of Delivery Of Counselling Services By Teacher Counsellors In Secondary Schools In Kiambu County, Kenya. The Study Was Anchored On Moral Development Theory. The Study Adopted A Mixed Method Research Design. Using A Self-Delivered Questionnaire And Focus Group Discussion, Data Was Collected From 165 Randomly Selected Heads Of Counselling Departments In 281 Secondary Schools In The Study Area And Five Officials Of The Guidance And Counselling Association In The County. Data Accruing From The Focus Group Discussion Was Transcribed For Ease Of Analysis While Responses To The Questionnaire Were Analysed Through One-Way Anova At .05 Alpha Level. Five Areas Were Focused By The Study. These Included Ethical Standards Relating To Counsellor-Client Relationship, Counsellor Integrity, Clients Informed Consent, Clients Confidentiality And Putting The Clients First. Accruing Findings Demonstrated That The First Two Standards Were Perceived Favourably By The Study Participants While The Other Three Were Perceived Unfavourably. The Research Further Found That Age Had A Statistically Significant Influence On The Perception Of Ethical Standards Among Teacher Counsellor's In Secondary Schools In Kiambu County, Kenya ( $P= 0.000$ ,  $F=6.104$ ). The Findings Offer Useful Insights On How To Improve Quality Of Counselling Services To Students In Secondary Schools Within And Outside Kenya.*

**Key Words:** Age, Teacher Counselor, Perception, Ethical Standards, Secondary Schools

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## I. BACK GROUND OF THE STUDY

Ethical standards are at the core of counselling practice and are one of the critical factors that determine the quality of counselling services. Counselling as a profession is governed by ethical standards and unless it's provided on ethical basis, it may cease to serve its intended purpose. All professions are guided by ethics and counselling is not an exception. The public image of the usefulness of counselling depends on how counsellors maintain satisfactory standards of practice (Bond, 2009). Clients seek counselling at a time they are troubled and vulnerable which gives the counsellor considerable power over them for good or harm. The client vulnerability therefore creates a corresponding obligation on the counsellor to be ethical in their exercise of power and professional expertise.

Ethics refers to suggested standards of conduct based on a set of professional values and moral decision making regarding professional behaviour established by a profession. Ethical standards on the other hand refer to obligatory standards, principles, and guidelines that regulate counselling practice (Bond, 2009). Mutually agreed ethics and acceptable standards of practice provide the bedrock which ensures that practitioners and clients are safeguarded and served with a defined framework and agreed boundaries. In this way, the professional search for integrity and credibility is validated (COSCA, 2009). This study focused on five ethical standards, namely; client's informed consent, client's confidentiality, counsellor integrity, counsellor –client relationship, and putting clients first. Adhering to ethical standards ensures that the counselling process is effective and that the interests and dignity of the client is protected.

A counsellor's ethical practice is associated with effectiveness of counselling (Ivey *et al.*, 2010). Studies by Bahari *et al.*, (2014), Kerby (2009), and Min (2012) found a relationship between counsellors' ethical practice and counselling outcomes. The ethical standard of informed consent was associated with the client's motivation to participate in the treatment plan, a positive counsellor-client therapeutic relationship, improved counselling outcomes and open communication. A similar finding was reported in a study by Kwon and Jo (2012) which found a significant relationship between confidentiality and the counselling outcomes. A study done by Ngumi (2005) found confidentiality to be necessary in establishing trust. This is in agreement with the findings of Affum *et al.*, (2019) who conducted a study in Ghana and found that counsellor confidentiality increased client's confidence to the counselling process and outcomes.

During the therapeutic process informed consent, which is a moral and legal necessity, is an essential component. Additionally, informed consent lays the groundwork for the development of a collaborative alliance and working relationship between the client and the therapist. Informed consent refers to a client's right to information about their therapy and the freedom to make their own decisions about it. Providing clients with information they need to make informed choices promotes clients active cooperation in the counselling plan (Corey, 2013). Informed consent procedures demonstrate that psychotherapists respect client's right to self-determination. A study conducted by Fisher and Oransky (2008) found that informed consent enhanced client's meaningful contributions to treatment through enhanced mutual trust, rapport building, and facilitated a sense of ownership in the therapeutic process. Similarly, Beahrs and Gutheil (2001) study showed that benefits of informed consent in psychotherapy included fostering positive treatment outcomes, strengthened the therapeutic relationship, enhanced client's autonomy and responsibility and lessening risks of the therapist against potential legal liability.

Confidentiality is a key ethical standard in counselling practice. It can be described as the fundamental intent to protect a client's right to privacy by ensuring that matters disclosed to the counsellor are not relayed to others without the informed consent of the client (Corey, 2013). According to Bond (2009), confidentiality of the counsellor is central to developing a trusting and productive counselling relationship. No genuine therapy can occur unless clients trust in the privacy of their revelations to the therapist. Confidentiality is considered as a major factor in the effectiveness and delivery of counselling services. Studies done by Azfredrick (2015), Chan and Quinn, (2012), Jenkins (2010), Wu, *et al* (2012), Kamunyu, *et al.*, (2015), Mushaandja *et al.*, (2013), and Momanyi, (2013), found that lack of confidentiality was one of the major factors inhibiting the use of counselling services by students.

Though study findings have indicated a positive relationship between ethical practice and counselling outcomes, cases of ethical violation have been reported. Leung *et al.*, (2003) found that though teachers were aware of issues such as informed consent and confidentiality, they rarely translated this awareness into written policies and standard procedures. Majority of the teachers (53%) in the study sample reported that they only occasionally or rarely informed students regarding disclosure of information obtained in counselling at the onset of a counselling relationship. Ngumi (2005) found that majority of the teacher counsellor's released information without first obtaining consent from the client. Jenkins (2010) found that of the 53.8% of the participants who had utilized counselling services, more than half reported that they were dissatisfied with the services received and that they were reluctant to seek counselling services again for the fear that confidentiality will not be maintained.

Counsellor's non adherence to standards of practice could cause damage to clients. A counsellor's good intentions are insufficient in counselling and are dangerous unless the counsellor is competent as a practitioner and works at a satisfactory level of standards and ethics. According to Lambie *et al.*, (2012), knowing ethical codes differs greatly from applying the ethical code. Therefore, though statutory regulation increases control of therapeutic practice, it does not give total control nor does it provide guaranteed protection to the public. Therefore, the person of the counsellor and his or her perception of ethical standards may determine level of adherence to these standards and the effectiveness of counselling services he or she offers to clients. A favourable perception of ethical standards may lead to a higher level of adherence to ethical standards and vice versa.

According to Nevid (2007), the term perception refers to the process by which the brain integrates, organizes, and interprets sensory impressions to create representations of the world. Ali and Rahman (2014) define perception as the process whereby people select, organize and interpret sensory stimulations into meaningful information about a phenomenon. Thus, perception is the cognitive and psychological process by which sensory information is simplified, organized and interpreted. When contextualized in this study, the term perception refers to the way in which a teacher counsellor views and interprets the ethical standards in the counselling profession. Perceptions have been linked to therapeutic outcomes as well as a potential barrier to treatment. According to Coleman (2019), mental health practitioners' perceptions assist in their ability to maintain ethical compliance. A teacher counsellor's favourable perception and compliance with ethical standards will transform counselling practice into an effective process where the interests and dignity of the

clients are protected and vice versa. A study by Woldeab and Sapo (2020) in Ethiopia revealed that teacher's professionalism was found to be significantly affected by their perception.

Every teacher counsellor is exposed to the concept of ethical conduct, universal values and acceptable behaviors. However, counsellors develop beliefs about the profession and the professional ethical standards which have the potential to influence their actions in a counselling relationship. Maintaining ethical standards in counselling practice may be determined by the value a practitioner attach to them. An individual's perceived importance of an ethical issue have a significant impact on the ethical judgment and behavioural intention (Guffey & McCartney, 2008). Ethical issues that are attached greater importance by a counsellor have the potential to generate a greater motivation to act ethically and vice versa. Since teacher counsellors' are expected to comply with ethical standards, their views in terms of their perceptions of these standards in the delivery of counselling services cannot be ignored. Learning how teacher counsellors' perceive ethical standards in counselling is critical as these standards are the primary resources for practicing counsellors' and the cornerstone of counselling outcomes.

There is need to mention that in as much as counsellors' are expected to be governed by values and principles governing their profession, the likelihood of personal factors influencing the way they interact with their clients cannot be ruled out. This view has been informed by findings accruing from previous studies on perception of ethical standards within and outside the counselling-client engagement dockets. For instance, a study carried out by Hursen (2012) in Turkey revealed that age had a significantly differential effect on teachers' attitudes towards professional development activities. This finding is consistent with the results of subsequent studies by Yucel and Ciftel (2012) in Turkey and Ermasova and Ermasova (2017) in Russia respectively. Other studies however have reported contradicting findings. For example, Khan (2012) in Pakistan found no significant difference in regard to age and student's perceptions of unethical behavior. Due to the contradicting findings, there is need for more studies in this area.

In Kiambu County, students have experienced various challenges. Indiscipline cases including arson have been reported. For example, girls of Stepjoy School burnt their dormitory where two students lost their lives while students of PCEA Kamandura Girls High School set ablaze two dormitories where property worth 7 million shillings was destroyed (Mugo, 2016). These negative behavioural tendencies bring the question of quality of student's guidance and counselling services in secondary schools in the county into focus. Indeed, cases of non-adherence to ethical guidance and counselling standards among teacher counsellors in the county have also been reported (Ngumi, 2005; Wambui, 2015). These violations of ethical standards may be an indication that teacher counsellors' may not be aware of the ethical standards in counselling and/ or have little regard for them.

This study therefore, sought to establish how teacher counsellors' in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya perceive ethical standards in counselling and to what extent teacher counsellors' perceptions of the ethical standards are influenced by their age.

## **II. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM**

Similar to other professions, counselling has its own ethical guidelines which counsellors are expected to observe in order to protect the dignity and well-being of their clients. For, example, in any counselling relationship, the counsellor is expected not only to obtain informed consent from their clients and ensure confidentiality but also to put client's welfare first and ensure his/her integrity and that of the profession. This has the implication that counsellors must subscribe to these guidelines failure to which the expected counselling outcomes may not be realized. However, there is paucity of research in Kenya on how secondary school teacher counsellors perceive the ethical standards in the profession since it has a bearing on the quality of services they offer to their student clients. This is what motivated this study whose overall aim was to determine whether age influences secondary school teacher's counsellor's perceptions of ethical standards in the profession.

## **III. LITERATURE REVIEW**

As much as counsellors are governed by values, ethical and professional standards, there is a likelihood of personal factors such as age influencing their perceptions of ethical standards. For instance, a study by Hursen (2012) in Turkey found that teachers' views toward such professional activities varied significantly depending on their age. This is in concurrence with the findings of a study by Maree and Radloff (2007) in Tanzania and Okafor *et al.*, (2015) in Nigeria that found that younger accountants showed a strong ethical stance. Torff and Sessions (2008) assessed variables linked to teachers' attitudes toward professional development in a different study. The study's findings showed that teachers' views toward professional growth were significantly predicted by their age. Increased age tended to lead to increased support for professional development in teaching.

A study by Ermasova and Ermasova (2017) in Russia found a positive relationship between age and ethical perceptions. Those workers who were 26 years and older scored higher compared to those who were

younger. Yucel and Ciftce (2012) in Turkey study found out that age had a significant influence on employees' ethical perceptions. Ahmadi and Ashrafjahan (2011) conducted a study on factors affecting ethical perceptions and attitudes of managers in Iran. According to the study, a manager's age significantly affected how they judged an employee's ethical behavior. Further, studies by Nathan (2015) in South Africa and Okafor *et al.*, (2015) in Nigeria found age and ethical judgments to be significantly correlated. .

It is important to note that contradicting findings have been reported. For instance, a study conducted in America by Croarkin *et al.*, (2003) revealed that there were no significant differences between the counsellor's age and perceptions of how informed consent influences therapeutic alliance. Sarkozy's (2010) study in America found no significant differences in regard to psychologist's age, attitudes and practices related to informed consent. Khan (2012) in his study on student's perception of ethical behavior in Higher Educational Institutions in Pakistan found no significant difference with regard to students' perceptions of unethical behavior based on age. Due to the contradicting findings, there is need for more studies on the influence of age on ethical perceptions.

#### IV. METHODOLOGY

The study adopted the mixed method research design. The target population was the 281 heads of guidance and counselling departments of secondary schools in Kiambu County and the five officials of guidance and counselling association in the county. The sample was 170 participants who comprised 165 heads of guidance and counselling departments and five officials of the guidance and counselling association in the County. The sampling methods utilized were stratified sampling, simple random sampling and purposeful sampling methods. Primary data was collected through self-administered questionnaires and focused group discussion. A pilot study was carried out in 17 randomly selected schools in the neighboring Murang'a County. The instruments were validated by subjecting them to expert's scrutiny. The instruments reliability coefficient was 0.80, which was accepted. Data from the questionnaires was analysed by use of descriptive and inferential statistics while that from focused group discussion was organized in themes for ease of identifying emerging patterns of responses.

#### V. FINDINGS OF THE STUDY

The objective of the study was to determine whether age influences teacher counsellor's perception of ethical standards in the counselling profession in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya. These included client's informed consent, client's confidentiality, counsellor integrity, counsellor-client relationship and putting clients first. The result of the analysis of the mean perception scores of the five ethical standards is summarized in Table 1

**Table 1: Teacher Counsellors Mean Perception Scores on Ethical Standards**

<b>Ethical Standard</b>	<b>Mean</b>
Clients informed consent	2.23
Clients confidentiality	2.67
Counsellor integrity	3.09
Counsellor-client relationship	3.35
Putting the clients first	2.84
Mean of means	2.84

**Source: Field Data, 2022**

From the data presented, it is clear that the overall mean was 2.84. This can be interpreted to mean that generally, teacher counsellors had an unfavourable perception of ethical standards. This finding is in agreement with the findings of earlier studies by Cant (2012), Blease *et al.*, (2020) and Croarkin *et al.*, (2003). Further, it can be noted that teacher counsellors had a favourable perception in only two ethical standards. These were counsellor-client relationship and counsellor integrity and an unfavourable perception of the ethical standards of putting clients first, client's confidentiality and client's informed consent. It is also worth noting that the means of client's confidentiality and client's informed consent were below the grand mean (2.84).

Findings from the focus group discussion seem to collaborate this finding since most participants had unfavourable perceptions on various ethical standards. One participant for instant stated as follows:

*'I think in my opinion some details on informed consent are not necessary. For instance, telling the client about the benefits and risks of counselling, the likely outcomes of the counselling process, the treatment goals and techniques are details that the client may not require. To me it's not relevant''.*

Another participant put his view as follows:

*“For me some details are not relevant. For example, what does my educational level and professional training have to do with counselling the student? What therapeutic value does it add? The fact that the client has come voluntarily means he/she is ready to be counselled. In any case, I don’t have a lot of time to spend on each client. In fact I only want to help the client deal with the issue causing psychological disturbance.”*

On the ethical standard of client’s confidentiality, one participant observed the following:

*“In my opinion some details about confidentiality and its limitations are not necessary. For instance, to tell a client that you will be breaking confidentiality in some cases may scare the client from the counselling process or ay even not open up. It may make the client skeptical about the counsellor.”*

Another participant stated the following:

*“For me some details are not relevant. For example, how is the storage of client’s records important to him/her? It my business of how I keep them. I don’t think some details such as when, to whom, how I break confidentiality is not important. Of what therapeutic value is it?”*

On the ethical standard of putting clients first, all the participants’ appeared to indicate that it’s not possible in a school context. One of the participants stated as follows:

*“You see the primary business in a school is academic performance. Therefore, a teacher’s success is measured by performance and not by the quality of counselling services. A teacher will prioritize teaching at the expense of counselling. This means that I have very little time left to offer counselling services”.*

Another participant also seemed to agree that adhering to ethical standards is not easy in a school set up and put it as follows:

*“I agree that teaching is the primary responsibility in a school. There is also a lot of paperwork for the teacher and therefore counselling a client is not a priority. I can’t imagine missing a class to counsel a student. When am i going to recover that class? It is about Teacher Performance Appraisal Development and modules.*

However, there seemed to be consensus among the participants on the importance of the ethical standards of counsellor-client relationship and counsellor integrity. For instance one participant stated as follows:

*“I think it’s obvious that counselling can only happen in an environment where there is a very good relationship between the counsellor and the client. I think in the absence of a relationship, no counselling can take place.”*

A second participant seemed to agree and stated:

*“I totally agree with my colleague that without a relationship, counselling can’t be effective. A positive rapport is a necessary ingredient of therapeutic success. Otherwise without it, counselling outcomes will be negative”.*

On counsellor integrity, one of the participants observed the following:

*“In my opinion I agree that the counsellor has an obligation to uphold their integrity and that of the profession. Otherwise, how do you expect clients to come to us for help if they cannot trust us? For clients to have trust on us, we must be careful how we carry ourselves, otherwise we can be the reason clients may avoid utilizing counselling services. For instance, counsellors’ must maintain confidentiality; treat clients with respect and dignity not just as students, and protecting their rights as clients”.*

Having presented the summary of teacher counsellor’s mean perception scores on ethical standards, the next assignment entailed establishing whether teacher counsellor’s age influenced their perception of ethical standards. The distribution of the respondent’s by age indicated that majority of the teacher counsellors (35%) were in the age bracket of 36-45 years. They were followed by those in the age bracket of 26-35 years and those who were 56 years and above who constituted 24% each of the total respondents. The teacher counsellors between 46-55 years accounted for 11% of the respondents. The least proportion of the teacher counsellors was those between 25 and below who constituted 6% of the respondents.

A close scrutiny of the presented data further reveals that majority of the teacher counsellors (94%) were in the age groups above 26 years. It may be reasonable to conclude that a significant number of the teacher counsellors were likely to have been in the teaching profession for a considerable period of time. Consequently, they may have adequate exposure to issues related with ethical standards and formed some perceptions on them. The respondents mean perception of ethical standards by age is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Respondents’ Mean Perception Scores on Ethical Standards by Age**

Age Bracket	Frequency	Percent	Mean Perception	Standard deviation
25 and below	9	6	2.23	.535
26-35	36	24	2.73	.735
36-45	54	35	2.97	.788
46-55	18	11	3.00	.820
56 and above	36	24	2.8	.735

Source: Field Data, 2022

Data presented in Table 2 shows clearly that the highest perception mean score on ethical standards was attained by respondents in the 46-55 age category (mean=3.00) and 36-45 age category (mean 2.97) while the lowest (mean 2.23) was attained by their counterparts in the 25 years and below age category. This implies that perception of ethical standards was favourable for respondents aged between 46-55 years while unfavourable for respondents aged 25 and below. Evaluation of the data in table 2 shows that perception mean scores on ethical standards increased with an increase in teacher counsellor’s age. It is important to note that though there was an increase of perception means scores with age, the perception mean score started declining for the teacher counsellors who were above 56 years. The perception mean scores on ethical standards trend appears to suggest that an increase in a teacher counsellor’s age had a positive influence on perception of ethical standards. It appears that the older the teacher counsellor, the higher the likelihood he/she will perceive ethical standards favourably save for those beyond 56 years. It needs to be mentioned that the teacher counsellors in this age category are almost reaching retirement age which is 60 years.

The mean scores were in turn subjected to one-way ANOVA with a view of determining whether they were statistically significantly significant or not. The objective of this analysis was to confirm the truth of the assertion proposed by the hypothesis that: Age has no statistically significant influence on perceptions of ethical standards among teacher counsellors in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya.

The results of the ANOVA test are summarized in Table 3.

		Sum of Squares	Df	Mean Square	F	Sig.
Teacher counsellor’s perception of Ethical Standards	Between Groups	5.258	4	1.314	6.104	.000
	Within Groups	31.871	148	.215		
	Total	37.129	152			

Source: Field Data, 2022

An examination of the data in Table 3 shows that the computed F-value (F=6,104; p<.05) was statistically significant at  $\alpha=.05$ . Based on the foregoing findings, the null hypothesis that perceptions of ethical standards do not differ with the age of the teacher counsellor was rejected because the probability value, (p = 0.000) was less than 0.05. Thus, the null hypothesis that age has no statistically significant influence on perceptions of ethical standards among teacher counsellor’s in secondary schools in Kiambu County, Kenya was rejected. Therefore, a conclusion was made that age had a statistically significant influence on perceptions of ethical standards among teacher counsellors’ in secondary in Kiambu County, Kenya. This implied that age was a reliable predictor of teacher counsellor’s perceptions of ethical standards.

This finding is consistent with findings of studies by Woldeab and Sapo (2020) , Allyne *et al.*, (2010), Hassan *et al.*, (2015), Ermasova and Ermasova (2017), Yucel and Ciftce (2012), Akman (2011), McNair (2019), Wilford and Wakunuma (2014), Theuri (2008), Nathan (2015) and Okafor *et al.*, (2015) that there was a significant relationship between age and ethical perceptions. However, contradictory findings were reported by findings of studies by Khan (2012), Sarkozy (2010), Croarkin *et al.*, (2003), Khalizani *et al.*, (2011), and Sabir (2021) who found that no relationship between age and ethical perceptions.

## VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The research objective of this study was to establish the influence of age on perception of ethical standards by teacher counsellor’s in secondary school in Kiambu County, Kenya. The study concluded that teacher counsellors had an unfavourable perception of ethical standards. Further, the study found that age had a statistically significant influence on the teacher counsellors perception of ethical standards (p=0,000, F=6,104). Therefore, the study recommends that the Ministry of Education and the Teachers Service Commission should initiate programmes that will enhance favourable perceptions of ethical standards. The programmes should put a special focus on the ethical standards of informed consent, confidentiality and putting clients first which teacher

counsellors had unfavourable perceptions. Capacity building should also be implemented especially for young teacher counsellors and those that are beyond 56 years.

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