Where angels fear to tread?
Leniency and the halo effects in practicum-based assessment of student competencies

Bushnell, J., Nicholson Perry, K., Blackman, R., Allan, C., Nasstasia, Y., Knight, R., Shires, A., Deane, F., Bliokas, V. & Gonsalvez, C.

Background and aims: Health professional education invariably includes clinical field placements as an integral component of professional training in an effort to ensure that knowledge, skills, and behaviour learned about in an academic context are integrated and applied to clinical practice. Significant weight is usually attached to the assessment of competence by supervisors, which typically consists of a structured report rating performance on a number of areas. Such reports are subject to systematic rating biases, particularly leniency and halo errors. Strikingly similar results are observed across disciplines including psychology, social work, nursing, pharmacy and medicine. The leniency bias is typically evident in the reluctance of field supervisors to assign low- and fail-grades to students on placement. The halo bias is reflected in an overall positive impression of a student who has done well in one competency domain, reducing judgement of true differences between competency domains. Factors contributing this phenomenon may include the small numbers of students on placement at any given time, leaving the supervisor without an ‘anchor’, and leading to a greater propensity for uncertainty and bias. Secondly, the active face-to-face engagement and intensive supervisor-student interactions over an extended period of time in the field may lead to a relatively close supervisor-student interpersonal relationship that serves to systematically bias supervisor ratings. This study set out to determine the extent of the problems with reliability and validity of supervisor judgments of competency in postgraduate clinical psychology training.

Methodology: Archived data from 140 ratings of students by supervisors in four university postgraduate clinical psychology courses in 2009-2010 were analysed in order to explore the extent to which limitations on supervisor reports described in the international literature were found in the ratings of student performance by these Australian clinical psychology supervisors.

Findings: Supervisors made almost no use of the options for rating student performance using either “Unsatisfactory progress” or “needs development” categories forming bottom half of the four point scale.

Conclusions and implications: The findings suggest that leniency and halo effects are operating to skew the ratings of student performance. These problems are far from trivial. Reluctance to fail a student or to prescribe additional remedial work when necessary may put the public at risk by graduating practitioners who are not yet fit to practice. Alternative approaches, such as the vignette matching procedure developed by Bogo and colleagues, that show some promise as methods of reducing supervisor bias, warrant further investigation.

Citation: Gonsalvez, C. J., Bushnell, J., Blackmann, R., Deane, F., Bliokas, V., Nasstasia, Y., Nicholson Perry, K., Allan, C., Knight, R., Shires, A., Hyde, J. (2011). Where angels fear...