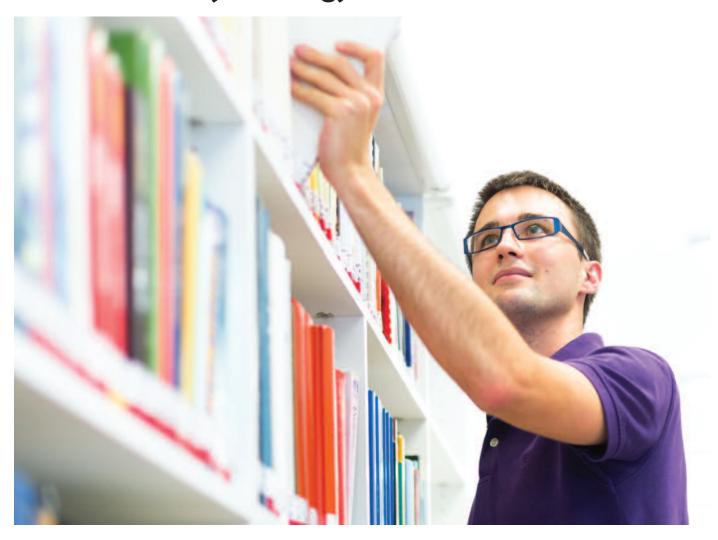# Avoiding a Generational Clash:
Ethical Considerations in Supervising Millennial Psychology Graduate Students

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Introduction

Supporting the development of the next generation of psychologists is a significant and valued contribution many psychologists make by providing supervision to graduate students. Indeed, facilitating the professional development of trainees and students by ensuring their understanding of the discipline's values and ethics, and the development of their needed competencies, is part of the responsible caring and responsibility to society values of the *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* (in particular, see ethical standards II.25 and IV.5).[i] However, many ethical issues can arise in the supervisor-supervisee relationship.

The premise of this article is to explore the idea that the type of ethical issues that arise in supervision and the best methods for handling them may depend partly on the "generations" of the supervisor and supervisee. Particular attention will be given to the Millennial generation as supervisees, to which an increasing proportion of graduate students in psychology belong.

The *Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists* guides all psychologists to uphold values of responsible caring and in-

tegrity in relationships by evaluating how their personal experiences, attitudes, beliefs, values, social context, individual differences, stresses, and specific training influence their activities, thinking, and interactions with others. It encourages psychologists to integrate this awareness into all of their actions (in particular, see ethical standards II.10 and III.10). The importance of such self-knowledge is re-iterated in CPA's *Ethical Guidelines for Supervision in Psychology: Teaching, Research, Practice and Administration*.[ii] Although there are many factors that can contribute to individual beliefs and potential biases, there has been very little discussion or literature in psychology regarding generational differences in values, attitudes, and behaviours that may lead to confusion or even conflict in supervision. Such confusion and conflict can be very detrimental.[iii][iv]

Although there is little empirical guidance from within our own discipline, we can draw from research regarding other disciplines and the broader workforce.

The Generations

Generations are defined in such literature as groups of people born during specific years (typically 15-20 year periods). Each generation is believed to share similar values, dispositions, preferences, knowledge, and activities that are shaped by common significant experiences, all of which serve to create distinct generational culture. The descriptions below are drawn from various sources and include broad generalizations. Not all individuals from each generation hold identical beliefs and values, and each situation and relationship should be approached with individual differences in mind.[v][vi][vii][viii]

1. The oldest generation is known as the **Veterans or Traditionalists** and includes individuals born from 1922 to 1945. Defining events include the Great Depression and World War II, and as a group they tend to value hard work and sacrifice, following rules, respect for and trust in authority, and loyalty.
2. The **Baby Boomers** include individuals born from 1945 to 1965. Defining events include the moon landing, and the civil rights and women's movements. As a group this generation tends to be highly educated, driven, dedicated and optimistic, and to question everything, value personal growth, consider change, and draw self-worth from their work.
3. **Generation X** includes individuals born from 1965 to 1980. Defining events include recurring economic recessions and job loss, and more two career homes. As a group they tend to value diversity, confidence, outcomes, clear expectations, and a balance of home and work life. They tend to be more skeptical, self-reliant, self-directed, and more informal.
4. **Millennials** (sometimes referred to as Generation Y) include individuals born from 1980 to 2000. Defining events include 9/11 and terrorism, economic globalization, the technology boom, the Internet, and multiculturalism. They tend to be team oriented, desire immediate feedback, and

believe that respect must be earned. Negative stereotypes of Millennials include that they tend to be narcissistic, entitled, lazy, spoiled, and overprotected.

Particular Ethical Considerations with Millennials

A review of the literature suggests two main areas that need particular ethical consideration in supervising Millennials; namely, communication and feedback, and boundary issues in the use of technology.[ix][x][xi][xii]

With respect to communication and feedback, Millennials generally have more limited experience with failure, are focused on high achievement, and desire more immediate and positive feedback. As a group, they appear confident, but are likely to be more sensitive to what, when, and how critical feedback is delivered. Many ethical complaints against supervisors are thought to be avoidable through the provision of timely feedback.[xiii] For supervision with Millennials, particular consideration needs to be given to the importance of clear communication about supervisor and supervisee expectations, regular provision of feedback, and supporting Millennials' comfort in receiving and integrating critical feedback by offering it in a supportive manner. For example, Millennials are likely to have difficulty with the "no news is good news" approach of Traditionalists, or the direct and more informal communication style of Generation Xers. Conflict may also arise with Baby Boomers if Millennials have unclear expectations and are asked to make perceived personal sacrifices for work.

Given their widespread use of technology from an early age, Millennials may be at particular risk for boundary issues in the ethical use of technology, particularly social media and social networking sites. This could include, but is not limited to, risks associated with students making private information about themselves accessible to clients or supervisors, sharing information about clients, and/or harming society's perception of the profession through careless, rude, or potentially discriminatory remarks online. It may be particularly valuable to discuss these issues explicitly with Millennials in supervision, rather than assuming a level of comfort or knowledge about the ethical risks associated with use of technology in these ways. This is relevant even when supervisors may not be comfortable or familiar with the technology themselves (particularly Baby Boomers and Traditionalists).

Despite these differences, generational diversity brings opportunities for new perspectives and ideas, ultimately leading to the advancement of the profession of psychology.

Invitation: Please feel free to send your comments about this article or any ideas you have regarding topics for future Ethics Corner articles to ethicscttee@cpa.ca.

Disclosures: The author is a millennial PhD student in Clinical Psychology.

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