

# Crumbling in the cornerstones of clinical psychology?

Leniency and halo biases in practice-based assessments

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**This project is supported by an  
Australian Learning & Teaching  
Council Grant PP-1624**



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# Overview

- Background:
- Widespread reliance upon supervision reports in many professional training courses
- Inadequate outcomes from current assessment practices.



# Are Supervisors' Ratings Biased?

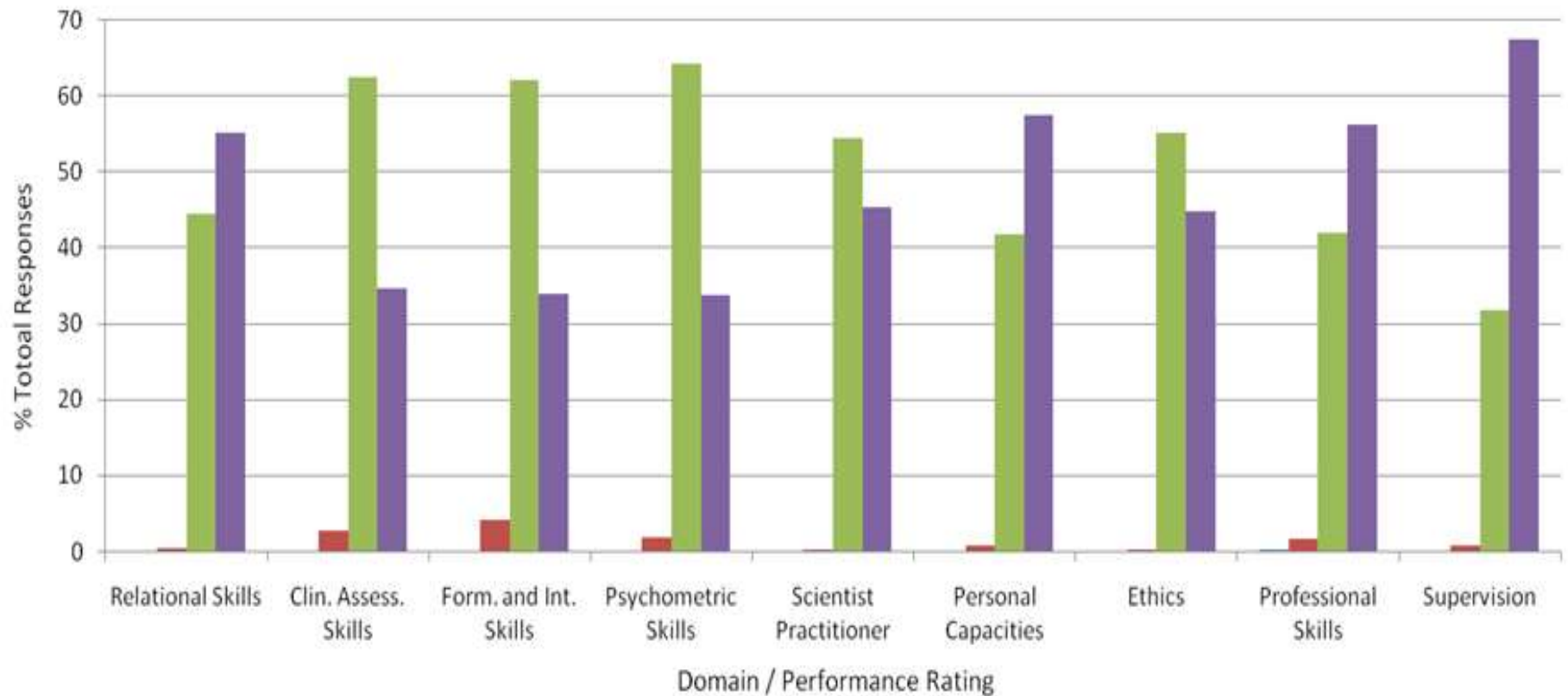
- Broad consensus from researchers across several health disciplines that their data suggest systematic biases affecting field supervisor ratings.
- Two prominent biases: leniency and halo.
- Several studies attest to a leniency bias
  - In social work: Bogo et al., 2002, 2004; Lazar & Mosek, 1993)
  - In psychology (Borders & Fong, 1992; Gonsalvez & Freestone, 2007)
  - Similar trends from other disciplines
- Current paper focuses on psychology

# The Leniency Bias in Psychology

- Largest study was conducted by Gonsalvez & Freestone (2007) at UoW.
- DATA: 291 end-placement reports by field supervisors over a 12 year period (1993-2004)
  - Placement grades: Above 80% of students received Distinction or above
  - Coursework: 60% received Distinction grades or above
- Attempts made to correct for leniency bias by changing a 5-point scale (Fail/Pass/Credit/Distinction/High Distinction) to a 6-point scale (addition of Borderline Pass). No effect on leniency bias.

**Table 1 – Number (percent) of total responses to all retrospective CYPRS rating within each domain items across all performance levels.  
(Number of collected forms – N = 140).**

<i>Domain</i>	<i>Performance Level – %</i>			
	<i>1</i> <i>Unsatisfactory</i>	<i>2</i> <i>Needs Developt</i>	<i>3</i> <i>Devel well</i>	<i>4</i> <i>Competent</i>
<i>Relational Skills</i>	-	0.4	44.5	55.1
<i>Clin. Assessment Skills</i>	-	2.8	62.5	34.7
<i>Formulation and Intervention Skills</i>	-	4.1	62.0	33.9
<i>Psychometric Skills</i>	-	1.9	64.3	3.8
<i>Scientist Practitioner Approach</i>	-	0.3	54.4	45.3
<i>Personal Capacities</i>	-	0.8	41.7	57.5
<i>Ethics</i>	-	0.2	55.1	44.7
<i>Professional Skills</i>	0.1	1.6	41.9	56.2
<i>Supervision</i>	-	0.8	31.8	67.5
<b>Total number of ratings</b>	<b>0.03</b>	<b>1.6</b>	<b>49.1</b>	<b>49.3</b>



- 1 **Unsatisfactory Progress:** Progress is considerably below the rate or standard expected at this stage of training. There may be an absence of a particular feature, poor judgement or performance, inappropriate behaviour, etc. Major Problems are evident.
- 2 **Needs Development:** Progress is evident but limited and is below the standard expected at this stage of training. There are problems and/or a lack of consistency e.g. displays a rigid adherence to taught rules and is unable to take account of situational factors, discretionary judgement is not evident, etc.
- 3 **Developing Well:** Is performing well at the level expected at this stage of training.
- 4 **Competent:** Performance has reached professional competency i.e. is on par with a Clinical Psychologist working in their first job upon qualification.



# Are Supervisors' Ratings Influenced by the Halo Effect?

- Several researchers indicate the possibility of **halo bias** (e.g., Bogo et al., 2002; Borders & Fong, 1995; Dohrenbusch & Lipka; 2006)
- Halo-type bias is consistent with data from Gonsalvez and Freestone (2007)
  - Strong, relationships observed among the 11 domains when rated by the same supervisor, AND
  - Relatively weak between-supervisor agreement

Issue is common to other health professions.....

In medical students rated by different supervisors on 7 occasions, rating “excellent” is common







# Summary

- Converging evidence from several studies within psychology and across other disciplines
- In the case of supervisors' assessment of students' practicum competencies:

WE HAVE A PROBLEM



# Do Supervisors think their Ratings are Biased?

- Study by Robiner et al., 1987
- Sample: supervisors in APA-accredited clinical psychology in USA
- Examined
  - Acknowledgement of bias in own ratings
  - Beliefs that other supervisor ratings were biased
  - Beliefs about bias in letters of reference

# Rating Bias By Supervisors

<b>Item</b>	<b>Yes (%)</b>	<b>Not Sure</b>	<b>No (%)</b>
<b>Belief that other supervisors are biased in rating interns</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>31%</b>	<b>11%</b>
<b>Supervisors who believed that their own ratings of interns were biased</b>	<b>58%</b>	<b>32%</b>	<b>10%</b>



# Reasons for Leniency Bias

Robiner et al, 1987

- Guilt/fear of damaging supervisee's career (60%)
- Awareness of subjectivity inherent in evaluation (49%)
- Difficulty providing negative feedback (50%)
- Fear of potentially diminished rapport (48%)
- Personal identification with Se's problems (32%)
- Legal and administrative issues (10%)



# Being Lenient: An Attractive Option?

- Being altruistic, supportive, and reinforcing of positive behaviours are valued within the helping professions,
  - “being judgmental” may be difficult
- If evaluations are negative and the recommendation is to fail a trainee, the supervisor may have to demonstrate
  - Fairness and impartiality
  - Diligence in following due process
  - Not just a “subjective” opinion
  - Potentially unpleasant confrontations with trainee

# Are Supervisors' Ratings Influenced by the Halo Effect?

- It could be argued that several contextual factors collude to prime and accentuate halo biases in practicum settings
- The quality of supervisory relationship affecting ratings is a type of halo effect
- Psychodynamic theory would predict halo-type effects as a consequence of parallel process involving play of trans & counter-trans.

# Are Supervisors' Ratings Influenced by the Halo Effect?

- Supervisors are trained to be “positive, facilitative, supportive, and constructive” in their feedback to supervisees BUT are required to deliver “objective” ratings at end-placement
- “all evaluations are made within the context of the supervisory relationship and cannot be separated out from this.”

(Tweed et al., 2010)

# Rating Bias: Implications

- “It may not be an exaggeration to consider the existence and extent of supervisory bias to be the most critical quality assurance issue confronting clinical psychology....” (Robiner et al, 1987, p 62)
- Inaccurate ratings may be a disservice to the training program, profession, public.
- Effect on Se: Leniency may foster inflated self perceptions? Prevents appropriate self-assessment and remediation strategies?

- It is 25 years since this was highlighted as a problem, but we still do what we have always done.....
- Can we construct a better way of assessing students that is less susceptible to bias?
- Watch this space.....



Cite as:.....

**Bushnell JA**, Gonsalvez CG, Blackman R, Deane F, Bliokas V, Nicholson-Perry K, Shires A, Nasstasia Y, Allan C, and Knight R. *Crumbling in the cornerstones of clinical psychology? Bias in practice-based assessments of student competencies*. Annual Conference of the New Zealand College of Clinical Psychologists, Dunedin, 11-13 April 2013.

