# Crumbling in the cornerstones of clinical psychology?

Leniency and halo biases in practice-based assessments

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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?

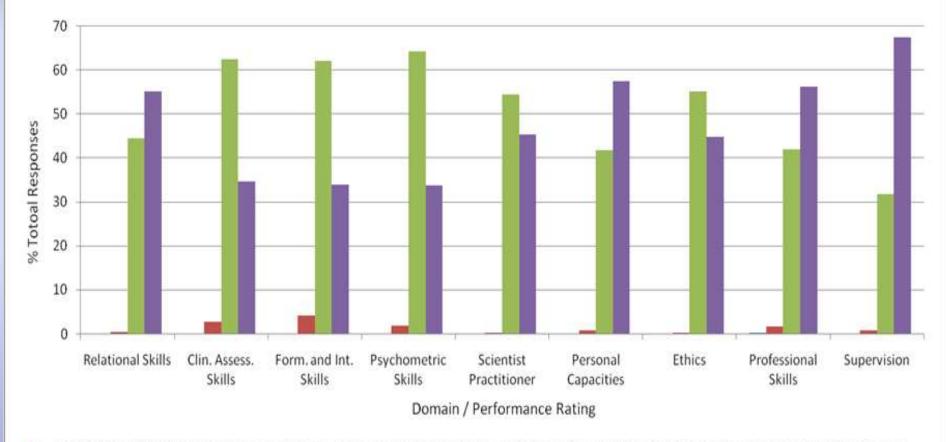
- Broad consensus from researchers across several health disciplines that their data suggest systematic biases affecting field supervisor ratings.
- Two prominent biases: leniency and halo.
- Several studies attest to a leniency bias
  - In social work: Bogo et al., 2002, 2004; Lazar & Mosek, 1993)
  - 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 6point 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).

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



- 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.
- 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.
- 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



#### Supervisor ratings of competence of medical students

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# Supervisor ratings of competence of medical students vs Objective Structured Clinical Examination

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Name	Student No	SPR Rotation1	SPR Rotation2	SPR Rotation3	SPR Rotation4	SPR Rotation5	SPR Rotation6	SPR Rotation7	S
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## 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

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

#### 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 recommendations 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."

### 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 selfassessment 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......

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