



Cultural Beliefs and Ethical Reasoning in Counselling Practice among Postgraduate Counsellor Trainees in Nairobi Kenya

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.68050/JAMS.2026.755>

Received: 28 September 2026; Accepted: 05 October 2026; Published: 13 October 2026

ABSTRACT

Balancing ethical dilemmas in the context of cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning is a delicate balance among postgraduate counsellor trainees in Nairobi. This qualitative research study aimed to examine postgraduate counsellor trainees' lived experiences of ethical reasoning in relation to cultural beliefs in counselling practice. The study was guided by four research objectives: To examine postgraduate counsellor trainees' lived experiences of ethical reasoning in relation to cultural beliefs in counselling practice, to identify common ethical dilemmas that emerge in counselling practice within the context of cultural beliefs, to assess the institutional and supervisory supports that shape ethical practice among post graduate counsellor trainees and to explore strategies counsellor trainees employ in navigating ethical decision-making in culturally sensitive contexts. The study utilized an explorative research design with purposive sampling technique to select 10 postgraduate counsellor trainees (n=10) for the study. The study was anchored by the theory of Ethics of Care. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews were used to collect data from the participants and thematic analysis was used to analyse data and identify recurring patterns and meanings from participants' narratives on cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning. Five key themes emerged from the data: - (a) Tension between cultural beliefs and professional ethical standards, (b) facing ethical dilemmas in real-life practice, (c) Personal values and cultural identity on ethical reasoning, (d) Training, supervision and institutional support, (e) and navigating ethical decision making. The findings of this study brought to light the critical ethical implications, including the urgent need for culturally responsive training in institutions, strong supervision procedures and regulatory frameworks to support postgraduate counsellor trainees in navigating complex ethical challenges. This study also amplified the voices of postgraduate counsellor trainees in contributing to the development of counselling practice in Kenya in regards to balancing cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning in practice.

Keywords: Cultural Beliefs, Ethical Reasoning, Postgraduate counsellor trainees, Counselling ethics.

INTRODUCTION

Counselling practice in Kenya is greatly influenced by the country's dynamic culture, traditions and communitarian worldviews (Muraya, 2023). Often, the counselling practice finds itself at a crossroad between integrating cultural beliefs with ethical reasoning into global ethical considerations. Cultural beliefs greatly impact individuals, communities and societies on how they view mental health, and are affected by family roles and social interactions (Eshun et al.,2024). Ethical reasoning on the other hand enhances professional guidelines for practicing counsellors, guiding them to the foundations of fairness and handling client confidentiality. Ethical reasoning equally ensures autonomy and client respect in counselling practice (Miguel & Silvia, 2020). One of the core values in counselling emphasizes therapeutic relationships, a very delicate balance between the responsibility of the counsellor to protect the client's wellbeing and a client's right to be listened to, respected and to be given support. The ethical codes of Deontology, Utilitarianism, Virtue ethics and Ethics of care offer guidelines to practitioners. More related to this study are the ethics of care which advocate human connections, empathic engagement and responsiveness to the needs of the individual, providing centrality to ethical practice (Sivil,2023). The theory of ethics of care strongly resonates with African communitarian ethics where community bonds are deeply valued and practiced.

Codes of ethics by professional Associations have been formulated in various countries to guide the counselling practice. The Kenya Counselling and Psychological Association, KCPA, locally has offered set co-



des of ethics that are expected to be followed by counsellors. These include minimum ethical requirements on areas like intake and informed consent, confidentiality, competence and respect for multicultural counselling (Chatfield et al., 2021). Practically around the world, the American Psychological Association (APA) has developed guidelines that have been accepted internationally. Ethical codes and standards are useful for practising counsellors as they guide the practitioners to confront dilemmas that arise during client therapy. One common dilemma experienced in the Kenyan context is decision making of how much client information can be disclosed to family members while still protecting the client in therapy.

The legal framework in Kenya has enhanced ethical practice further to protect vulnerable populations. The Mental Health Act (2018) mandates that practitioners protect the rights and the dignity of persons with mental health challenges and to ensure that they receive adequate care and non discrimination. The Children's Act (2022) mandates protection of Minors with counsellors expected to balance confidentiality with mandatory reporting in cases where safety of a child is at risk. On the other hand, Data Protection Act (2019) safeguards client information in Digital records and online communication. Therefore, all these laws are a reminder to postgraduate counsellor trainees that the ethical decisions are not made in isolation but within a system of accountability.

Balancing cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning in counselling practice is a great concern in counsellor education, more so for postgraduate counsellor trainees preparing to begin professional practice in multicultural settings. With counselling ethics framed around the universal principles of autonomy, beneficence, non maleficence, confidentiality and justice, these ethical guidelines are more westernized and emphasize on individualism. However, Brady and Chidchoi (2021) state that the western formed ethics may cause a conflict in collectivist cultures, where family is involved and communal responsibilities are significantly included. Previous research has proved that ethical reasoning is not just founded on the theoretical knowledge of the professional codes and standards, but is also about personal disposition, the cultural orientation of the counsellor trainee and the context within which the practice is carried out. For example, a study conducted by Martinez and Dong (2020) found that mindfulness and cognitive flexibility strongly predicted multicultural counselling competence among U.S. graduate trainees, an indicator of the importance of reflective and adaptive abilities.

A similar study conducted in China by Zhou (2025) examined how counsellor trainees and practitioners navigated western formed ethical standards and the African communal cultures. The study employed a conceptual analysis methodology and the key findings showed that counsellors often found difficulties in a bid to balance between western formed ethical guidelines and African collectivist cultural beliefs and values, especially when balancing family values and individual privacy in practice. These findings strongly show that postgraduate counsellor trainees need to learn to negotiate complex moral issues, balancing professional principles with cultural beliefs.

In Africa, the traditional culture and western ethics tension has stood out more vividly. In a study conducted by Payi et al. (2025) among South African counselling trainees indicated that one's cultural perception shaped their ethical responsibility, and that made application in multicultural contexts difficult. In yet another study conducted in Kenya by Ngugi et al., (2023), findings indicated that counsellors struggled with balance between communal expectations and the professional duties of ensuring confidentiality and autonomy of the client. This is further emphasized by a study conducted in Kenya by Mwiti (2024) whose study findings indicated that counselling practice in African contexts was deeply influenced by culture and traditions that at times conflicted with formal ethical principles and legal guidelines. A similar study in Kenya by Mwanje and Egunjobi (2025) found that counselor trainees using traditional counselling practices encountered ethical ambiguities, requiring careful navigation between cultural belief traditions and ethical reasoning in practice.

These studies reviewed reveal a significant gap that Kenyan counselling platforms lack a concise understanding of how postgraduate counsellor trainees balance cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning in training and in practice. It is important to address this gap so as to develop counselling frameworks that are ethically sound and culturally responsive in local context. Postgraduate counsellor trainees should understand that counselling theories, codes and legal guidelines are a part of their training coursework, however there is lived



reality in the counselling practice. Counselling practice brings theory to practice for the ethical principles learned in the classroom, while coming face to face with ethical dilemmas where postgraduate counsellor trainees are presented with a need for ethical reasoning. In practice, a postgraduate counsellor trainee will often find themselves at crossroads, between cultural beliefs and the autonomy and privacy of their clients where rigidity of ethics and communitarian family expectations become deeply human. This study is most appropriate as it will aid the researcher to explore how postgraduate counsellor trainees may experience the complex balance between cultural beliefs with ethical reasoning. The study will also clarify whether postgraduate counsellor training is effectively empowering postgraduate trainees to practice in culturally inclusive and ethically acceptable environments.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of the study was to conduct qualitative research examining how post graduate counselor trainees balance cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning in Kenya's multicultural context. The study used a phenomenological study approach to understand how post graduate counselor trainees balance cultural beliefs with ethical reasoning for best practice. Focusing on this phenomenon, the study aimed to provide evidence-based findings that would enrich multicultural counselling with Kenyan context and beyond.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

1. To examine postgraduate counselor trainees' lived experience of ethical reasoning in relation to cultural beliefs in counselling practice.
2. To identify common ethical dilemmas that emerge in counselling practice within the context of cultural beliefs.
3. To assess the institutional and supervisory supports that shape ethical practice among post graduate counsellor trainees.
4. To explore strategies counsellor trainees, employ in navigating ethical decision-making in culturally sensitive contexts.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

To fulfill the objectives of the study was guided by the following research questions:

1. What are the lived experiences of postgraduate counsellor ethical reasoning in relation to cultural beliefs among postgraduate counselor trainees in counselling?
2. What ethical dilemmas emerge in counselling practice within the context of cultural beliefs?
3. What institutional or supervisory supports shape ethical practice?
4. How do counsellor trainees navigate ethical decision-making in such contexts?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Ethical reasoning in cross-cultural contexts ought to be an essential part of counsellor training and education and a mandatory part of the curriculum for postgraduate counsellor trainees transitioning to professional practice. As counselling needs are increasingly emphasizing the need for multicultural competence and responsiveness, trainees are expected to balance personal cultural worldviews with professional ethical standards that are often grounded in Western-formed standards. This balance is not just in concept or theory, but it must also be felt within lived therapeutic encounters with real clients whose worldviews are equally influenced by family systems, communal expectations and traditional values and practices. In understanding



how postgraduate counsellor trainees navigate the multicultural balance, ethical reasoning will be strengthened in cultural responsiveness and will be grounded in counselling practice.

Cultural Beliefs and Ethical Reasoning In Counselling Practice

Previous studies have demonstrated consistently that ethical reasoning in counselling practice is influenced by both formal training and personal cultural orientations. A study conducted by Martinez and Dong (2020) in the USA assessed multicultural competence in counselling among graduate students in practice. By using a qualitative survey design, the findings showed that cognitive flexibility was a strong predictor of ethical reasoning in multicultural counselling competence. These findings suggest that internal predispositions of the postgraduate counsellor trainee may shape how they balance and respond to ethical dilemmas, and indicator that ethical reasoning may be partly rooted in their multicultural reflective abilities. Another study by Koc and Kafa (2019) examined how counsellors navigate cultural beliefs when applying ethical principles. The study findings showed common tensions between the western formed ethical principles and collectivist cultural beliefs, especially in the context of family involvement and decision making. Trainees reported difficulty reconciling professional ethical standards such as autonomy and confidentiality with cultural and relational obligations. It is therefore imperative that cultural competence training would enhance ethical sensitivity and improve trust in multicultural counselling.

Within the African context, Banks (2020) conducted a study in United Kingdom, among Jamaica in a Caribbean black community and employed a phenomenological design to examine multicultural competencies in counselling practice. The study conducted using in-depth interviews found that many counselling practitioners struggled to include multicultural competence in their practice, especially where personal cultural practices were greatly influenced by their own perceptions in ethical responsibility. These findings indicated that ethical reasoning is within cultural identity and that postgraduate training must address this balance in a correct way. Similarly, Mwiti (2024) in a study conducted in Meru, Kenya found that African culture and values greatly influence both the client expectation and the counselling practice. The study found that counsellors encountered ethical dilemmas when confronted by traditional healing practices that conflict with the professional ethical guidelines. It is therefore imperative that postgraduate counselor trainees develop capacity for multicultural sensitivity while integrating evidence-based practice, and thereby affirming the need for multicultural competence as foundational in African contexts.

A study conducted by Ngugi et al., (2023) in Kiambu county assessed teacher counsellors' practice of ethical standards in schools within Kiambu county. Findings of this study indicated that counsellors had to frequently balance communal expectations of family involvement in decision making with professional ethical practice in regards to confidentiality and client privacy and autonomy. This study concluded that stronger postgraduate training and supervision is important to empower the counselors to manage the conflicting cultural beliefs and ethical practice. Mwanje and Egunjobi, (2025), in Kenya complimented the study by conducting a qualitative case study in Kenya examining how traditional cultural beliefs integrated with contemporary counselling. The findings showed that traditional cultural practices conflicted with ethical dilemmas causing an imbalance between professional codes with cultural traditions. This calls for the need for structured guidance in navigating culturally sensitive ethical complexity within training programmes.

A similar study was conducted in Nairobi, Kenya by Muraya (2023) to examine elements of African traditional cultural beliefs and practices that affect psychological wellbeing of African Christian students in university and how they could be helped in counselling to regain congruence. The study used focus discussion groups and inductive case studies with in depth interviews. The findings of this study indicated that indeed there were some elements of cultural beliefs and practices that impinge on the psychological well being of the students. Therefore, the study recommended a need for helpers to integrate the traditional culture of the client with appropriate models of counselling to help the affected to gain back their equilibrium and enjoy greater fullness of life.

These studies therefore show a common pattern, that postgraduate counsellor trainees do not just apply ethical standards in practice, they also face complex moral dilemmas that are culturally grounded, embedded in communal practices and the professional expectations of counselling practice. This makes ethical reasoning



among postgraduate counsellor trainees relational, within the context in which they practice and multicultural important in daily practice. While Western formed ethical principles provide foundation for guidance, the African evidence suggests that they require contextual inclusion to remain relevant in collectivist societies. However, despite growing interest in multicultural competence and ethical dilemmas, limited empirical research had directly examined how postgraduate counsellor trainees negotiate cultural beliefs with professional ethical standards within structured training environments. By addressing this gap, the counselling practice would advance culturally responsive education for postgraduate counsellor training and equally strengthen ethical practice in the ever-growing diverse counselling contexts.

Ethical Dilemmas Emerging in Counselling Practice

Past studies indicate that ethical dilemmas in counselling practice are shaped by a complex balance of training quality, cultural contexts within which the practice is carried out, developmental maturity and ability in decision-making and other systemic factors. Research across global contexts shows that ethical decision making extends beyond formal education to include personal and contextual influences that shape counsellors' moral reasoning and professional conduct. A quantitative study conducted in the United States by Nelson in United States (2021) examined predictors of moral and ethical decision making among counselor trainees. The study examines training quality, personality of the trainees and educational exposure. Findings indicated that training alone does not automatically increase competence in ethical reasoning and decision making. Maturity, reflective capacity and the quality of supervision greatly influence ethical reasoning outcomes, indicating the need for a multidimensional approach to improve ethical competence in ethical training.

A similar study conducted in China by Zing and Zheng (2025) using conceptual analysis explored ethical dilemmas in the context of university counselling training. The study findings emphasized that increasing cultural diversity exposure in higher education settings introduces complex ethical challenges for trainee counsellors preparing for multicultural practice that would support ethical reasoning in complex ethical challenges. The findings confirmed the need for ethics training that includes multicultural realities and supports contextual moral reasoning to ensure culturally responsive counselling practice. A study in South Korea by Choi et al. (2020), carried out a psychometric study to examine moral reasoning among graduate students in South Korea. The Defining Issues Test (DIT) evaluated ethical reasoning growth during multicultural professional training. Findings validated its use in supporting counselling education and assessing ethical competency as a way to improve multicultural ethical reasoning in cultural beliefs complexity. These studies therefore confirm that there is an urgent need for essential use of decision-making models to resolve ethical dilemmas in practice and consistent documentation for postgraduate counsellor trainees in practice.

The reviewed literature therefore demonstrates that ethical dilemmas in counselling practice are influenced by individual developmental factors, training quality, cultural diversity, and socio-cultural context. It is worth noting that global research highlighted the importance of regular and mandatory supervision in practice, whereas studies from multicultural and communitarian perspectives emphasize the need for culturally responsive ethical models that consolidate communal beliefs and values together with professional counselling standards.

Navigating Ethical Decision Making in the Complexity of Cultural Beliefs

Balancing ethical decision making in diverse cultural African settings is a growing concern. In counselling training and practice. The dominance of western formed ethical standards have often conflicted with communal cultural beliefs and practices, and therefore there has been a necessity for contextually grounded ethical practices that include both professional ethics balanced with cultural realities in context. However, practical implications of culturally grounded ethics go beyond research, as stated by Forane, et al., (2026). The ground-breaking study on the African philosophy Ubuntu, introduced an innovative approach that may guide the practice of culturally responsive balance between cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning. The research methodology integrated Ubuntu core principles of interdependence with spiritual connectedness, that results in collective wellbeing in addition to behavioural therapy concepts. This model showed that when the process of therapy is culturally adopted to include relational autonomy and community values, it may enhance a more



empathic engagement with ethical compatibility for better balance between cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning. Although this study operates at the crossroads of technology and counselling, it provides the central insight that ethical decision making in African contexts must extend beyond individual-centric cognitive models to incorporate indigenous ethical principles.

Complementing this field-level insight, Appiah et al., (2024) conducted a scoping review of ethico-cultural and implementation challenges associated with the individual-based informed consent model in African research contexts. The procedure rooted in western principle of individual autonomy requires one to give consent by themselves whereas the study findings indicated that this misaligned with African collectivistic social structures which give priority to community decision making and community gatekeeping. The findings also underscored the rigidity towards autonomy-driven consent which is likely to marginalize local cultural norms and undermine communal trust, and may lead to what is critically termed as ethical dumping. To address the challenges, the study suggested adopting a context specific multi-consent model that would include community engagement and quick ethical assessments and yet preserve individual autonomy within a culturally appropriate informed consent.

In Kenya, a recent study by Njonge (2025) examined the ethical dilemmas that counsellors practicing in rural settings encountered. The study employed face to face interviews with Masters and PhD level trained counsellors working in geographically remote locations. The study findings identified pervasive tensions as one of the challenges faced by the counsellors, between professional ethical training and the community's local cultural expectations. The counsellors also reported facing frequent ethical challenges emanating from dual relationships, scarcity of professional supervision, lack of resources and the frequent need to constantly reconcile the professional ethical codes with deeply ingrained cultural values and traditions. These challenges forced counsellors to engage in continuous self examination and value negotiations so as to deliver ethical and responsible care in the cultural landscapes they worked in.

Together, these studies show that ethical decision making in culturally complex African settings cannot be adequately navigated through Western models alone. Rather, they point to broader ethical approaches: to build culturally sensitive frameworks that meaningfully integrate cultural values, communal decision-making traditions, and professional ethical standards. Without such integration, counsellors and practitioners risk perpetuating ethical dissonance, undermining trust, and failing to serve the needs of the populations they aim to support. Future research should continue to refine context-specific ethical models that balance universal ethical principles with cultural beliefs and moral norms.

Shaping Ethical Practice Through Institutional and Supervisory Support

Majority of African studies have increasingly recognised that ethical decision making in counselling is not sustained by competence only but is also greatly shaped by institutional guidelines and supervisory systems. Supervision is a critical component of ethical practice for postgraduate counselor trainees as it provides a reflective space for accountability and professional support. In many African countries however, there are visible gaps in formal supervision and training, leading to regulatory oversight which in turn affects the quality of ethical reasoning in counselling practice.

In South Africa, a study conducted by Hendricks et al. (2021) examined the efficacy of clinical supervision practices among counselling psychology supervisors in practice. The quantitative survey design involved 44 participants and assessed supervision training, their professional competence as well as their experience in supervisory practice. The study findings indicated that many supervisors undertook supervisory roles with no adequate formal training, and that there was very limited institutional frameworks for regulatory guidance. This absence of structured modalities of supervision exposed the counselling practice to potential ethical vulnerability because inadequately trained supervisors were likely to struggle guiding postgraduate counselor trainees through complexities of ethical dilemmas. The study concluded that strong formal supervision training and mandated institutional regulation was essential to safeguard ethical standards in professional practice.

A similar study conducted in Botswana by Wyllie (2025) examined knowledge attitudes and practices of clinical supervision among practising professional counsellors. The mixed method explanatory sequential



study involved 210 practising counsellors through quantitative questionnaires and qualitative interviews from 38 supervisors from five districts in Botswana. The study participants expressed positivity towards clinical supervision, and acknowledged that it was important for ethical accountability and client delivery outcomes. However, findings also pointed towards inconsistent access to quality supervision, with most supervisors exposed to formal supervisory training and lack of national standardized supervision frameworks. Both practising counsellors and the supervisors recommended that institutional supervision frameworks and mandatory supervisory training are key in strengthening ethical practice, elevating professional development and service quality delivery.

Further evidence from South Africa reinforces the centrality of supervision in ethical practice. A qualitative study conducted by Ratlabala and Terblanche (2022) explored supervisors' perspectives on coaching supervision aimed at developing ethical organizational practice. Using in-depth interviews of 13 well experienced supervisors, findings indicated that supervision provided a structured reflective platform where practitioners could critically examine concerns of confidentiality, boundary management, complexities of contracting and other practice related pressures. Supervision was therefore viewed as an instrumental component in enhancing reflective practice, sensitivity in ethics practice and professional integrity. These findings were related to organizational coaching; however, they indicate broader implications for counselling practice, an indicator that structured supervised practice is likely to strengthen ethical reasoning and model better decision-making practice.

In the local context, a similar study conducted in Kenya by Adeli and Mbutitia (2019) sought to examine training for professionalism in institutions of higher learning in Kenya. The study looked at the role of higher institutions of learning as one of preparing students to be creative in dealing with decision-making challenges in counselling practice. For students to be useful counselors in society, they require both technical expertise and professional skills. The study employed a phenomenological analysis of Counsellors' Attachment and Practicum Experience. The study collected data through focus group discussions and interviews from all the participants. Using data from 117 students, 42 lecturers and 13 site supervisors, Thematic analysis was employed to analyze the data. Findings concluded that although institutions of higher learning in Kenya have good curriculum for training counselors, students' supervision in practicum was not assessed well. The study findings imply that the use of collaborative partnerships is necessary to improve professional development in teaching, making assessments, decision-making and client management in the counselling practice.

All these studies seem to conclude that ethical competence is institutionally led and developed. When supervision is delivered in an informal, inconsistent and under-regulated manner, those in practice encounter increased difficulties in handling ethical dilemmas and thereby a compromised professional accountability and client welfare. However, robust supervisory guidelines are possible when counselling training is structured, regulated clearly and reflective dialogues are encouraged. All this significantly increases ethical reasoning and builds up professional integrity. Therefore, the African multicultural setting needs to urgently institutionalize supervisory structures that should include ethical oversight strategies within training and practice of counsellors, and thereby providing environments that will sustain ethical responsiveness and culturally grounded professional practice.

While there is growing recognition that institutional and supervisory practices greatly impact on ethical practice within African counselling set ups, past studies have mainly focused on supervisory roles, regulation gaps or the general supervision deliver and not on assessing how postgraduate counsellor trainees experience and interpret institutional engagement in training and supervisory support in navigating cultural ethical dilemmas. Equally, there have been limited studies that have examined cultural beliefs and practices with supervision processes to understand how ethical reasoning is influenced by the training environment. As a result, there is a need to fill this gap with empirical and contextual understanding of how institutional frameworks and supervision may shape ethical decision making among postgraduate counsellor trainees practicing with culturally complex African settings and in particular those undertaking postgraduate training and practice.



METHODOLOGY

The methodology section employed an exploratory qualitative research design to examine the post graduate counsellor trainees 'lived experiences in balancing cultural practices and beliefs with ethical reasoning. This exploratory was most suitable for this study as it investigated complex, context-specific phenomena where pre-existing indigenous frameworks were limited. This design was most suitable for the current study because it helped explore the experiences of postgraduate counsellor trainees in balancing cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning in counsellor training practice.

Participation and inclusion criteria used a purposive sampling approach, with a sample size of 10 post-graduate counsellor trainees (n=10), who were at the time undertaking their practicum experience within Nairobi County. Inclusion criteria selected participants who were actively enrolled in Masters 'programs in Counselling psychology, and who were already actively engaged in supervised clinical practicum attending to local clients and were willing to participate in reflection on cultural and ethical practice in their work. The participating cohort of 10 postgraduate counsellor trainees included individuals from different religious groups, which in turn reflected on the multicultural landscape of Nairobi.

Recruitment for participants was done through notifications from the academic departments as well as professional cohort groups and networks. Face-to-face semi-structured interviews using a researcher – developed interview guide were conducted. Each interview was conducted for approximately 45 – 60 minutes and thus allowing the participants enough time to reflect on complex clinical situations, their personal values and their supervision experiences.

The interviewer audio-recorded all data with consent from the participants and transcribed the recordings verbatim to safeguard linguistic fidelity and also to capture nuances in original tone and related meaning. Data analysis used Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis approach, where transcripts were read several times for familiarization with the data, which was then followed by assigning open and axial codes. The codes were thereafter sorted into trainees' themes and then reviewed with the entire data set for internal consistency and then refined to develop the final five key themes reflecting the counsellor trainees' experiences.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

This chapter presented the findings of this study based on cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning in counselling practice among postgraduate counsellor trainees in Nairobi County. To collect data for this study, the researcher used semi-structured interviews and observation guides. Using thematic data analysis, the data was transcribed verbatim to retain the meaning of the participant and accuracy. The researcher then assigned reference codes, open codes and axial codes. The researcher then worked on the data, combining and refining. Emerging themes were identified and recorded. The emergent themes are hereby listed: - (a) Tension between cultural beliefs and professional ethical standards, (b) Facing Ethical Dilemmas in Real Life Practice, (c) Personal Values and Cultural Identity on Ethical Reasoning, (d) Gaps in Training, Supervision and Institutional Support and (e) Navigating Ethical Decision-Making. Each theme was discussed in relation to existing literature and its contribution to the world of knowledge.

The empirical findings from this study emphasize that ethical decision-making among postgraduate trainees should not be minimized to a rigid or rule-bound compliance of Western-formed codes of ethics. There should be interpreted through the lens of Ethics of Care theory, where ethical reasoning is understood in a collectivist setting as inherently relational, with a strong emphasis on empathy, human responsiveness and interconnectedness.

Tension between cultural beliefs and professional ethical standards.

The study findings identified critical and persistent tension between cultural and communal expectations against the professional ethical standards that are the foundation of the counselling profession. According to Koc and Kafa (2019) Participants reported that they experienced tension between community expectations that



emphasize family involvement, shared responsibility and relational identity, contrary to standardized ethical principles of confidentiality, autonomy and individual client rights. For instance, with regards to confidentiality and family involvement, counsellor trainees frequently faced dilemmas with community members and family expecting full disclosure in regards to children client therapy.

Participant 1 had this to say

“I was giving therapy to a teenage girl – 15 years old with Assent obtained from her and consent from both parents who had brought her for therapy. Around the third and the fourth session, the parents started putting pressure on me to share what the issue was with their daughter. I declined to share client information with the parents who felt I was disrespectful, but ethically, I had to protect my young client.”

While Western individualistic models advocate for strict client privacy, an Ethics of Care framework on the other hand acknowledges the role of communal healing which requires a delicate balance between autonomy of the individual and respect for the family and community. This view is supported by a study by Appiah et al., (2024), stating that community gatekeeping and decision-making misaligned autonomy. Therefore, the participant’s experience was an indicator of the relational and emotional cost of abiding to ethical standards where a therapist may easily be seen as being disrespectful or culturally insensitive.

A similar experience by another participant equally underscored this tension between culture/religion and the ethical standards. Additionally, Participant 5 said:

“As a therapist from a minority Muslim community, when someone is going through some life struggles, the family must know and be involved, however in the counselling practice, I am told to keep confidentiality and privacy.”

The participants identified the emphasis of culture and religion as reinforcement to collective coping mechanisms, where involving family is expected and is considered an essential component to healing. Similarly, Mwiti (2024) found that culture and client values greatly influence the counselling practice. However, the inclusion of ethical standards such as autonomy and confidentiality does marginalize the communal approaches. The resulting conflict automatically places the therapist in a complex situation where they must balance the dual complexity of ethical standards and cultural expectations.

The overall findings suggest that ethical reasoning in relation to cultural belief contexts requires a flexible approach to ethical standards and reasoning. The practitioners may need to be culturally responsive in decision-making and should consider integrating respect and communal values as they also safeguard the ethical standards. Past studies have argued that the approach to counselling ethics ought to allow flexibility and dialogue with clients and their families, and especially in African communal societies. This emphasizes the importance of multicultural competence together with ethical reflexivity in the counselling practice, especially while working within perverse settings like Nairobi County.

Facing Ethical Dilemmas in Real Life Practice

Practicing postgraduate counsellor trainees are likely to encounter complex and unique ethical dilemmas in real-world situations. These dilemmas are often complex with overlapping issues such as dual relationships, matters of confidentiality or cultural expectations (Zing &Zheng,2025). Previous studies suggested that ethical dilemmas are rarely clear-cut and require a more technical judgement. Similarly, the participants of this study reported facing frequent and complex real-life ethical dilemmas during counselling practice, including dual relationships, confidentiality breaches and culturally influenced expectations from families and clients. One common issue is usually the navigation of dual relationships in close knit communities. Participant 4 added:

“As a practicing therapist who is also a practicing religious leader, it is common for a client to walk in therapy and first ask me to pray for them. They may then proceed to request me to pray for their partner/husband to stop taking alcohol, and most likely disregard therapy in favour of prayers. The complex dual relationship in the therapy room is unsettling, depending on which role I play”.



The blurred boundaries that occur when the therapist has multiple roles in society should clearly be outlined. Among African and religious settings, a spiritual role is seen as a helping role, where the practitioner may struggle to adhere to professional boundaries. Furthermore, safeguarding and dual relationships would require the counsellor trainees to have structured supervision and institutional guidelines that incorporate communal realities.

Confidentiality dilemmas also emerged as a recurring challenge, said Participant 6;

“The CEO of an organization wanted updates about a client’s progress, who was their employee and for whom they were paying for therapy. I was torn because the client really needed their job and respected the CEO, but ethically, I was bound not to share.”

This challenge portrays the pressure on therapists by institutions associated with the client, and the possible risks to client welfare when confidentiality is breached. When institutions demand disclosure, ethical codes guide that client information shall remain protected unless the client consent is given. The therapist must therefore navigate these competing loyalties.

Traditional and cultural belief systems complicated ethical practice further, said Participant 7.

“A client came for therapy with a belief that their problems are caused by curses and spiritual attacks perpetrated by a family member. As a counsellor, I struggled to respect the belief of my client, while still applying the ethical standards prescribed. I chose to remain neutral, so I do not cause the client any harm”.

Therapists face a challenge in balancing respect for clients’ cultural beliefs and evidence-based practice guided by ethical reasoning. However, integrating Ethics of Care into therapy is crucial for the therapist to maintain neutrality, as a way of aligning with culturally competent care without dismissing the client’s own reality nor their grounded worldview. Ethics of care equally prioritizes non-maleficence without necessarily dismissing the client’s belief system. The participants’ experiences shared here therefore suggest that ethical dilemmas will come in many different situations, some from cultural beliefs, and with no clearly defined solutions, and will therefore require more reflexive ethical reasoning.

Personal Values and Cultural Identity on Ethical Reasoning

The study findings indicate that ethical reasoning among postgraduate counsellor trainees is greatly influenced by personal values, their culture of upbringing and strong religious beliefs. Instead of being purely guided by the standard ethical codes, participants described having internal negotiations between professional guidelines and personal convictions.

Participant 4 had this to say:

“I have struggled working with a client who is married as a second wife, and is struggling to fit in within the family, church and community. My personal values conflict with polygamy issues. However, I must remain neutral in practice and support my client in therapy”.

This is supported by a study by Nelson (2021) in the USA whose findings indicated that ethical reasoning and reflective capacity improved ethical competence. This brings to light the internal ethical conflicts that happen when a therapist’s personal beliefs are not congruent with the clients’ lived experiences. The practitioner must therefore exercise self-awareness and put aside personal biases and assumptions to uphold the professional ethical standards.

Some of the participants also spoke about how religious values have significantly shaped their ethical interpretations, Participant 1 added;

“I feel like my upbringing and religious values affect how I see issues in counselling practice. I have been seeing a young lady who had had multiple abortions and was now struggling with shame, guilt and self-blame.



As a Christian I sometimes feel inclined to guide my client in line with my religious morals, but professionally, I must remain non-judgmental and neutral and support her fully”.

This affirms that ethical reasoning must demonstrate non-judgmental practice beyond the practitioners’ strong moral convictions. There is clearly a conflict between personal morals and professional neutrality especially in situations where religion strongly influences identity and worldview. Using decision making models as stated by Choi et al., (2020) may guide the practitioner in therapy.

In addition to this, cultural beliefs and norms around age and sexuality equally influence the counselling practice: Participant 8 had this to say;

“I was working with an elderly couple with therapy, and issues of intimacy in the marriage came up, with one partner blaming the other for poor personal hygiene. Much as I aimed to support the couple, there was a lot of weight navigating the sessions, especially since the couple were the age of my own parents, and speaking of intimacy in therapy felt like a cultural taboo”.

The sentiments are supported by Muraya (2023) whose study suggested the importance of integration of traditional culture in counselling for more effective outcomes. In some ways, cultural taboos can shape our emotional responses and impact our ethical reasoning. This experience is supported by ethics of care perspective, guiding practitioners to embrace relational, contextual and emotional ethical reasoning in place of a pure rule-based approach.

Gaps in Training, Supervision and Institutional Support

The findings of the study have further indicated that ethical competence is significantly shaped by the quality of training, supervision and institutional support systems. While the participants acknowledged training value, there were also gaps between theory and practice that were identified.

Some participants reported gaps in multicultural and ethical reasoning training as Participant 6 said;

“The ethics we learn in class are not equivalent to what we come face to face in the field. The real situation is very different, and I feel more practical exposure is necessary to support postgraduate counsellor trainees as they prepare to go to practice.

This supports the claim on the importance of multicultural competence training in a study conducted by Martinez and Dong (2020). Similarly, a study conducted in China by Xing and Zheng (2025) emphasized the need for cultural diversity training in higher education settings to support complex ethical challenges. These findings suggest that there is a disconnect between theoretical classwork and the real-world application, highlighting that there is need for more experience in learning and more case-based learning. This was further affirmed by participant 4;

“I believe supervision can be both a strength and a limitation because I really feel helped when I have good supervision. But sometimes, supervisors are unavailable, or they may not take cultural issues seriously, leaving me feeling stranded.”

There is an indication that inconsistent supervision may limit opportunities for ethical reasoning and professional growth, particularly in complexity of cultural beliefs. Participants also raised concerns about unequal access to support was also raised. Participant 10 had this to say;

“There was a time when I felt our training was inconsistent, with some of my peers not able to access the same level of supervision, and that affected how confident we feel in handling ethical issues.”

This is supported by Hendricks et al., (2021) whose study recommended strong formal supervision to support counselling trainees in practice.



And finally, the participants emphasized the need for stronger institutional frameworks. Participant 9 stated that;

“Maybe we should have stronger institutional frameworks that would offer more structured guidance to handle cultural dilemmas as well as general or standard ethics.”

The findings therefore align with a study by Xing and Zheng (2025) suggesting that competent ethical reasoning is not solely an individual attribute, but it should be institutionally developed and firmly supported. When strong training structures are enhanced by integrating multicultural ethics into training, by ensuring equitable access to resources that are essential in preparation for counsellors to navigate the ever-complex ethical landscapes.

Overall, the themes demonstrated that ethical reasoning in counselling practice is dynamic, contextual and deeply ingrained in culture and relational realities. The experience of postgraduate counsellor trainees emphasizes the importance and the findings show that postgraduate counsellor trainees need to move beyond rigid ethical frameworks and adopt more contextually responsive and culturally appropriate approaches in ethical reasoning and decision-making.

Navigating Ethical Reasoning and Decision-Making in Counselling Practice.

It is evident that, despite the challenges faced, postgraduate counsellor trainees have adopted reflective strategies to navigate ethical dilemmas in different cultural contexts. Despite the challenges, postgraduate counsellor trainees have employed various adoptive strategies to navigate ethical dilemmas in culturally sensitive contexts which also include consultation, deeper reflection in ethical reasoning and ethical considerations.

One key pillar of navigating ethical decision-making is the critical resource of peer support as stated by Participant 2;

“When I feel stuck during practice, I turn to my peers who have been of great support to me. Talking to my fellow postgraduate counsellor trainees helps me normalize the struggles and offers different viewpoints for issues I am working on”.

In a similar manner, using structured supervision has provided professional guidance to many, as stated by Participant 3;

“I see many clients in a week, and when I am unsure about a certain client issue, I bring my issue to our Tuesdays supervision forum. This helps me to see things from a professional perspective and in turn helps my client too.”

According to Riva et al., (2026) the strategies outlined above concur with best practices in ethical decision-making, with the emphasis that consultation and supervision are key safeguards against ethical errors in decision-making. Equally, reflective practice has proved to be useful in ethical decision-making. Participant 8 said;

“I usually take time to reflect on the session afterwards and ask myself if I balanced the culture of my client and ethical reasoning well.”

This indicates that self-reflection is useful in developing ethical competence and culturally sensitive practice. In addition to this, participants had also adopted culturally responsive communication. Participant 9 added;

“In one therapy session where the family is insistent on knowing the details of the issues discussed with the client, I took time to explain the principle of client confidentiality in a culturally sensitive way so that the family would understand without feeling excluded in therapy”.



This was supported by a study by Mwanje and Egunjobi (2025) whose findings showed an imbalance between professional codes and cultural expectations and the need for structured guidance to navigate the same. With this approach, there is a need for an integrative model of ethical reasoning and practice that can bridge professional ethical standards with cultural beliefs and expectations, and thereby enhancing both ethical practice and client/family relationships.

IMPLICATIONS OF FINDINGS

This study was insightful and has important implications, especially for counselling practice, theoretical training, supervision, policy and most importantly within culturally diverse and communal contexts in Nairobi.

a. In counselling practice, there is an urgent need for counselling which is culturally responsive, adoptive, flexible and context sensitive and not rigid as the ethical standards. Therapists should be able to negotiate confidentiality in family-oriented contexts and manage dual relationships in close-knit communities. Ethical reasoning therefore requires not just theoretical knowledge of ethical codes and standards but also requires cultural humility, reflexive practice and relational sensitivity.

b. Ethical decision-making and ethical reasoning is not merely a procedure to be followed but should be viewed in relational and contextual aspects. Integration of frameworks such as Ethics of Care brings about empathetic relationships and understanding issues in context of the situation. Counsellor training should include multiple lenses that are principle-based, virtue-based, and care-based to address complex dilemmas with clear-cut solutions.

c. Between theory in ethics training and real-world practice, there is a gap that may be bridged by including more experiential and practice-oriented learning and more case studies, role-plays and scenarios that are culturally relevant. Cultural ethical dilemmas should be integrated into ethical training to prepare trainees for real life practice.

d. Supervision is essential for the development of ethical competence when offered in regular, structured and culturally informed environments. It is important to equip supervisors with skills to address cultural dilemmas and ensure equal access to supervision for balance, preparedness and confidence in practice.

e. Institutional support and policies are key in training counsellors with clear and relevant ethical guidelines that enable the trainees to address complex cultural issues in practice. Strong institutional frameworks will help set higher standards for ethical support and reduce malpractice.

f. Personal and professional development are important in training, giving counsellor trainees space for reflective practice, ability to clarify their values, attending personal therapy to grow their self-awareness, and enabling them to manage their biases while at the same time maintaining professional neutrality.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion

This study highlighted the importance of ethical reasoning in counselling practice among postgraduate counsellor trainees engaged in practicum within Nairobi. The findings of the study demonstrated that the context of Nairobi has ethical dilemmas that are complex and deeply rooted in culture, society and institutions. The study also revealed that ethical reasoning was not just about classroom training but was equally shaped by personal values, culture of origin, and religion. This in turn creates a moral and emotional challenge that requires careful ethical balance to maintain professional competence. Postgraduate counsellor trainees therefore need to be adaptive and engage in peer consultation, supervision and reflective practice to manage ethical complexities.



Recommendations

The recommendations for this study included:

- i. Postgraduate counsellor trainees should be guided to bridge the gap between theory and practice at different stages of training for improved balance between cultural beliefs and ethical reasoning.
- ii. include institutions purposely strengthening ethics training to be culturally sensitive, including African worldviews including ubuntu communal values and care to increase balance in practice
- iii. Improved supervision structures that are accessible, high quality and available for all counsellor trainees should be established to address both standard ethical issues and cultural dilemmas.
- iv. Finally, institutions should aim to strengthen support systems to help postgraduate counsellor trainees with an opportunity to collaborate and reduce professional isolation in practice.

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