



Practice Notes:

Dual Relationships - Approach with Caution

Pamela Blake, M.S.W., RSW, Director of Professional Practice and Education

Practice Notes is designed as an educational tool to help Ontario social workers, social service workers, employers and members of the public gain a better understanding of recurring issues dealt with by the Complaints Committee that may affect everyday practice. The notes offer general guidance only and members with specific practice inquiries should consult the College, since the relevant standards and appropriate course of action will vary depending on the situation.

Recurring Issue: Dual Relationships

As readers will see from the Discipline Decision Summary on page X, the member was found to have failed to maintain clear and appropriate boundaries and in so doing, to have committed serious acts of professional misconduct.

Previous Practice Notes on "Boundary Violations" (Perspective Fall/Winter 2003/2004) addressed the continuum of boundary transgressions, from those which in and of themselves likely pose little risk of harm to the client, to those which likely pose a major risk, including lasting or permanent damage. This article will deal specifically with the issue of dual relationships.

A dual relationship is defined as a situation in which a College member, in addition to his/her professional relationship, has one or more other relationships with the client, regardless of whether this occurs prior to, during, or following the provision of professional services.¹

It is important to focus on dual relationships for a number of reasons:

- ♦ Sexual abuse is frequently preceded by less serious forms of boundary violations which can easily occur where there are dual relationships
- ♦ In addition to our professional role, we all play many other roles. We are members of families, communities and interest groups. We have friends, hobbies and affiliations.

The likelihood is therefore great that we will encounter situations in which our professional and personal roles intersect. The likelihood is increased when the membership of a community is small.

- ♦ Dual relationships are inherently risky. Although dual relationships per se are not prohibited by the standards of practice, the standards of practice do prohibit various types of conduct that may be associated with dual relationships (such as engaging in professional relationships that constitute a conflict of interest, having sexual relations with clients, etc.). Whether or not a dual relationship is appropriate requires careful scrutiny to appraise the risks in an honest way, and to arrive at a course of action that is truly in the client's best interest.

While dual relationship situations may frequently arise, each situation is complex and requires the member to perform an analysis of the pertinent factors, and the risks involved before making a decision about what course of action to take. Members are strongly encouraged to seek supervision or consultation when confronted with dual relationships. There are rarely easy answers. For guidance however, members should refer to the standards of practice.

Consider the following:

Scenario #1

- ♦ A social worker is a member of the board of a self-help organization, located in a small town in Ontario. She is approached by a staff member of the organization, who requests that the social worker see him and his wife in marital therapy, in the social worker's private practice.

In considering how one might deal with this situation, the following standards of practice are applicable:

Principle II, Competence and Integrity:

2.2 Integrity

"College members are in a position of power and responsibility with respect to all clients. This necessitates that care be taken to ensure that all clients are protected from the abuse of such power during and after the provision of professional services.

College members establish and maintain clear and appropriate boundaries in professional relationships for the protection of clients. Boundary violations include sexual misconduct and other misuse and abuse of the member's power."

2.2.1 "College members do not engage in professional relationships that constitute a conflict of interest or in situations in which members ought reasonably to have known that the client would be at risk in any way. College members avoid or declare conflict of interest situations. College members do not provide a professional service to the client while the member is in a conflict of interest. (See also Interpretation 3.7.)"

As a board member, the social worker has a duty to act in the best interest of the organization. The board is responsible for overseeing and evaluating the activities of the organization, including its employees. As such, she is in a power position. She would be wise to question the appropriateness of learning personal information about the employee and his wife, while ultimately being responsible for decisions that may impact on his job. The issue of conflict of interest or the perception of this by others must also be considered, in that it could appear that the member is directly benefiting from her board work in her private practice. The issue of conflict of interest would also arise in the context of her carrying out her duties as a member of the board. After careful thought, the member offers to refer the employee to her trusted colleague in a nearby community.

Scenario #2

♦ A social service worker, who works as a case manager for a mental health agency, is asked to supervise the field placement of a student who is a former client. The student tells the social service worker that she is excited about the prospect of being supervised by the social service worker as she really enjoyed their counselling sessions some years back.

Members are reminded of Principle III, Responsibility to Clients:

3.7 "College members avoid conflicts of interest and/or dual relationships with clients or former clients, or with

students, employees and supervisees that could impair members' professional judgement or increase the risk of exploitation or harm to clients."

In this instance, the social service worker initially felt very positive about the possibility of supervising the field placement of a former client. She was pleased to learn that the client had progressed in her education, and that the client had good memories of the work they did together. However, the social service worker also had to acknowledge that her prior knowledge of the client/student gained from the professional relationship, could have an impact on her judgement and hence on her role as a field supervisor. The former client/ student's comments that she was "excited" about working again with the social service worker also gives rise to concern. It would be critical to clarify the expectations held by the former client regarding a supervisory relationship, and essential that she understand that while a counselling relationship is largely supportive, it is the role of a field supervisor to critically evaluate a student. The need for clear boundaries also must be considered. A client is expected to reveal personal information - a student is not, and in fact field supervision should not stray into a counselling or therapy relationship. Confidentiality issues are also pertinent. The member decided that she would decline the request to supervise the field placement of the former client.

Scenario #3

♦ A client admires a painting that hangs on the wall of the social worker's office. The social worker discloses that she herself is the artist, and that painting is one of her passions. Subsequently, the client who is the owner of an art gallery, invites the social worker to show her work in the gallery.

The social worker appreciates the client's admiration of her work and is tempted by the possibility of finally gaining recognition of her art, a long held dream of hers. However, she must also consider whether entering into a dual relationship could have any negative consequences for the professional relationship. Of note are the following interpretations found in Principle I, Relationship with Clients:

1.5 "College members are aware of their values, attitudes and needs and how these impact on their professional relationships with clients."

1.6 "College members distinguish their needs and interests from those of their clients to ensure that, within professional relationships, clients' needs and interests remain paramount."

In this situation, the wish to accept the client's offer is driven by the social worker's desires, and not by the client's needs. She declines the client's offer.

Scenario #4

- ◆ A social worker, who does volunteer work for an environmental advocacy group, is surprised to see one of his clients at a meeting of the organization. He is further surprised when the client, at the meeting, volunteers to join a committee of which the social worker is also a member. Although the social worker and the client have discussed their shared values about environmental issues, and the client knows of the social worker's volunteer work, they had not discussed the client becoming involved in the group.

The social worker was initially taken aback by the presence of his client at the organization's meeting. He was unsettled and unsure how to handle this situation, which had been imposed upon him by the client. Upon further exploration in discussion with a colleague, he recognized that there was evidence of other boundary crossings initiated by the client. He further recognized that he would feel inhibited in committee meetings and that he would have to monitor what he said. He felt resentful towards the client, for intruding on a pleasurable aspect of his personal life. It was critical that he became aware of this, both to assist him in his ongoing work with his client and in determining how he would deal with the volunteer situation. He realized that he would need constant vigilance to ensure that boundaries were maintained with the client and arranged regular consultation sessions for himself. Members are reminded of the following interpretation:

2.1.5 "As part of maintaining competence and acquiring skills in social work or social service work practice, College members engage in the process of self review and evaluation of their practice and seek consultation when appropriate."

As stated, dual relationships are complicated and perilous. The safest route is to avoid dual relationships, though this may not be possible at all times. When confronted with the issue of dual relationships members are encouraged to:

- ◆ Review the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice
- ◆ Analyze the situation from the perspective of possible impairment to one's own judgement and risks to the client
- ◆ Identify the issues that are pertinent to the particular situation
- ◆ Consider various courses of action, and weigh the benefits and risks of each

- ◆ Identify what steps could be taken to minimize or avoid risks
- ◆ Engage in a process of self-reflection and strongly consider discussing the dilemma with a supervisor or colleague.
- ◆ Prior to taking action, articulate and document the date, the factors considered, the decision made and the rationale for it, which will demonstrate that the decision is in the best interest of the client.

Members who enter a personal relationship with a client or former client are reminded of the following:

3.8 " In a situation where a personal relationship does occur between the member and a client or former client, it is the member, not the client or former client, who assumes full responsibility for demonstrating that the client or former client has not been exploited, coerced or manipulated, intentionally or unintentionally."

It is inevitable that members will from time to time encounter a situation in which there is the potential for a dual relationship with a client. It is essential that members have the ability to critically analyse the situation as it arises, in order to make a decision that is in the best interest of the client. This article is intended to highlight some of the important considerations and provide guidance to members who are grappling with this complex professional issue.

For more information about this or other practice issues, please contact the Professional Practice Department at practice@ocswssw.org

Please note that any references to the College's Standards of Practice in this article refer to the first edition of the Standards. The second edition of the Standards of Practice did not come into effect until July 2008.