

Dual Relationships:
Examples of the Limitations of Ethical Proscription

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A professional code of ethics can best be described as a comprehensive and systemically arranged statement of principles and standards of conduct. While the necessity of having a code of ethics is rarely debated in professional literature, the dilemmas associated with the interpretation and integration of such statements is the source of much discussion. In the United States, seventy years of debate over social work ethics has seen the experimental draft code attributed to Mary Richmond in the 1920's, develop into the comprehensive, formally adjudicated statement known as the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, first adopted in 1960 and last revisited as recently as 1999. Similarly the Canadian Association of Social Workers' (CASW) code has the same history and was amended as recently as 2005.

That our codes have undergone numerous revisions over the last 80 years is a sign that the understanding of what is ethical behaviour is similar to social norms generally, that is, they change over time. Rather than a sign of weakness, adaptability enables a code to remain relevant to modern practice. Such changes may be due to pressure exerted from internal forces within the association or, as in the case of revisions made to the NASW code in 1990 as a result of a US Federal Trade Commission investigation, in reaction to external forces (Reamer, 1995).

Given this openness to debate and change, practitioners from various personal backgrounds and professional practice settings should not be hesitant to enter debate over ethics. Indeed, given that the complexion and complexity of North American society has changed so dramatically since the days of Mary Richmond it is critical that practitioners from diverse cultural and ethical backgrounds and new and emerging practice contexts contribute to ethical debate. This author's first significant foray into ethical debate began in 1995. I wrote in response to an article which suggested the need for further clarification of the ethical prohibition against

engaging in dual relationships with clients (Brownlee and Taylor, 1995). The authors of the original article recognized the dilemma faced by rural and isolated practitioners who find themselves engaged in trade or non-professional social and community contact with former or current clients. (They offer the example of the rural practitioner whose clients operates the only general store and post office in the community). This author's reply echoed the concern and drew comparisons to the ethnic practitioner who finds themselves meeting frequently with clients in social settings within the ethnic community (Wright, 1995).

For the purposes of this discussion I would like to suggest that there are a number of considerations which should first be articulated as we begin to discuss modern ethical challenges. First we should understand that most ethical thinkers fall into one of two ranges: teleologists or relativists who measure the ethics of a course of behaviour based on the consequences of the actions - and deontologists or absolutists who believe that certain actions are inherently right or wrong regardless of outcome (Reamer, 1990 as referenced in Hartsell, 2006).

Though I would hesitate at this point to assert that one position is greater than the other, I believe it is important that we are aware that the different approaches exist. This can help us clarify and better understand diverse opinions, particularly those that are seated in a mode of thinking different than our own.

Second, we should understand that our belief about the nature of the social work/client relationship frames the context for much ethical debate. It has been suggested that a social work relationship is uniquely professional and has two critical components: fiduciary responsibility and therapeutic responsibility. These two words support an understanding of the social work relationship as one of inequality in which the social worker has the primary obligation for

ensuring that the vulnerable client is protected from the potentially abusive power of the social worker (Johner, 2006).

It should also be understood that there is a difference between boundary crossing and boundary violations. “A boundary violation happens when a social worker is involved in a dual relationship that is exploitative, coercive, manipulative, or deceptive.” While boundary crossings are those dual relationships that do not have those negative, aggressive elements (Johner, 2006). This difference suggests that some dual relationships have the potential of being ethical or unethical or somewhat in between and that the context and nature of the dual relationship is a determining factor.

Finally it should be noted that certain practice models and emerging theories challenge our traditional “pumps and pearls” (with all due respect to Mary Richmond) model of social work practice. Minuchin asserted that the role of the therapist was to serve as the “good enough mother” (Minuchin, 1974 as referenced in Goldenberg, 1996). Similarly, child welfare settings in our jurisdiction and the standard of care for children in the care of the state ought to be treated as if cared for by a wise and conscientious parent. Post modern practice methods that reject the power/vulnerability foundation of the worker-client relationship; and an increasing leaning towards intensive community and home based treatment models that promote intense affective relationships between workers and clients all threaten to undermine the earlier assertions. I predict emerging interventions aimed at supporting strong racial identity among aboriginal and indigenous African Canadians will further stretch our understanding. These will rely heavily on practitioners that are embedded in their communities and serve not only as “therapists” but also serve as mentors and elders and practice primarily from a traditional ethnic set of values and

philosophies and only secondly refer to professional codes of ethics for guidance. For these practitioners, post modern and traditional ethnic practitioners, the code of ethics will present significant challenges.

These examples illustrate two important issues that must be considered when discussing and developing ethical codes: That a wide diversity of practitioners must be consulted if the code is to reflect real practice, and, that a code must be seen as a developing set of guidelines to ethical practice, not an absolute proscription. This should not lead us to turn our backs on the idea of ethical codes. Rather it should engage us more significantly in ethical debate and articulation.

This should not leave the practitioner feeling directionless. Modern codes of ethics are never intended to serve as the Urim and Thummim of professional practice.¹ The NASW Code of Ethics describes itself as offering "...general principles to guide conduct, and the judicious appraisal of conduct, in situations that have ethical implications" (NASW, 1993, preamble). This statement is significant. It recognizes that the final responsibility for ethical practice lies firmly with the individual practitioner. Codes of ethics require the application of professional judgement in order for ethical practice to follow. This necessitates that each professional must adopt, articulate, and practice a model of ethical decision making that takes into consideration their respective professional code, their practice setting, the theoretical framework of their practice, and their cultural, personal and professional values (Pine, 1987).

¹**Urim and Thummin.** Two objects attached to the breastplate worn by the high priest in ancient Israel. The high priest used these two objects to directly ascertain the will of God in doubtful matters involving the welfare of the state.

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