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02A Lesson Proper for Week 4

Maintaining Appropriate Professional Boundaries

Ethical issues with professional boundaries comprise the majority of complaints brought against human service professionals for review by their governing boards (Abbott, 2008; Reamer, 2003; Strom-Gottfried, 2000, 2003). Interns confront numerous professional boundary issues daily as they decide what behaviors are and are not advisable in their relationships with clients and colleagues. Boundary issues are involved in questions such as:

- “How much should I tell clients about my own life?”
- “Is it alright to socialize with clients?”
- “How involved should I get in the lives of my clients?”
- “Is it appropriate to accept a date with an employee in my field agency?”
- “Is it appropriate to develop a personal friendship with my supervisor?”

A common boundary issue that human service interns struggle with is the urge to “rescue” clients. Because human service professionals want to help others, it is easy to get overinvolved in clients’ lives to relieve them from the distress that they are experiencing (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss, 2006). Efforts to rescue might range from offering false reassurance to decrease a client’s pain at the moment to more extreme urges to take clients home with you or to fight their battles for them in their conflicts with others. Whether mild or severe, efforts to rescue clients are almost always counterproductive because they rob clients of the opportunity to grow and learn through grappling with their problems. Instead, clients tend to become dependent upon the worker to handle their issues in the future, become angry at the worker for not rescuing them successfully, or resent the worker’s paternalistic attitude

toward them. In any case, the client, the worker, and their relationship tend to suffer in the long run. It is generally best to “err on the side of caution.” Some case examples will illustrate and clarify the nature of professional boundary issues experienced by students in their internships.

Maintaining Appropriately Open Boundaries

While there has been much attention to students and professionals whose boundaries are too open to clients and their concerns, drawing them into troublesome situations, concern has also been expressed regarding those whose borders are too closed and too rigid (Davidson, 2005; O’Leary, Tsui, & Ruch, 2013). These workers distance themselves from clients and co-workers inappropriately, guarding against revealing anything about themselves, refraining from conveying warmth and interest, or avoiding developing supportive relationships. Relationships that are too distant and boundaries that are too closed can become an ethical issue when the quality of care and the helping relationship is compromised. Complicating this issue is that what is considered appropriate in protecting personal boundaries can vary to some extent from one community to the next. Rural settings in which relationships tend to be more informal, for example, can present particular challenges in maintaining traditionally clear boundaries between professionals and clients as community norms set expectations for greater openness and flexibility (Barnett & Johnson, 2010; Pugh, 2007). Some human service interns may be especially prone to maintaining overly closed boundaries throughout the internship due to their inexperience in developing professional relationships and their style and relationship dynamics. The training is the time to practice developing appropriate professional relationships with both clients and co-workers. Students who choose to distance themselves during this time will miss the total educational value of the internship and possibly even harm client outcomes as well. Those who maintain very rigid personal boundaries during the training will still learn from their experiences. Still, they will be less likely to experience the personal growth and skill development that come with deeper engagement in positive professional relationships.

Guarding Against Dual and Multiple Relationships

Dual or multiple relationships constitute a boundary issue that is much-discussed and controversial in human services. Due to the frequency and complexity of this particular problem, it is worthy of special attention here. Dual or multiple relationships occur when a helping professional assumes additional roles with a client and the professional helping role. The formal ethical standards of the human services professions consistently warn against the development of such relationships as holding many potential risks in terms of harm and/or exploitation of the client and possible impairment of worker professional judgment and objectivity. Although the most controversial and widely discussed secondary roles are sexual or romantic relationships, multiple relationships take many forms, all of them carrying some level of risk. These roles might be social, financial, or business. Due to dual relationship concerns, it generally considers inappropriate to provide professional services for friends, family members, and other individuals with a preexisting relationship.

Despite the clarity of these guidelines, the natural world can have a way of blurring the lines. For example, if you are only superficially acquainted with someone, is it acceptable to work with them in a professional-client relationship? If a client brings you a small birthday gift, does this mark the beginning of a social connection? If you know a close

family member of the client personally but not the client himself, does this constitute a dual relationship? Human service professionals in small, rural communities where “everybody knows everybody” can find it particularly difficult to avoid multiple relationships (Gonyea & Wright, 2014). Codes of ethics acknowledge that multiple relationships are unavoidable and advise professionals to manage such situations carefully through clarifying boundaries and taking precautions to minimize risks of harm to the client. Similarly, legal advisors acknowledge that multiple relationships sometimes cannot be avoided and advise that professionals in such relationships should document thoroughly the precautions they take to minimize risk to the client (Hermann, 2006). The case below provides an example of an intern’s experiences with boundaries and dual relationships in his field experience.

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