**Managing Dual Relationships in Social Work: An Ethics Report**

**Introduction**

Dual relationships occur when a social worker has multiple roles with a client beyond the professional relationship—whether social, familial, financial, or otherwise. While some dual relationships are unavoidable, particularly in rural or small communities, they present significant ethical dilemmas that require careful navigation. This report explores the complexities of dual relationships in social work using a practice-based scenario, referencing the **NASW Code of Ethics (2021)**, ethical decision-making models, and best-practice frameworks. It also offers strategies for managing these relationships while preserving professional integrity, client wellbeing, and trust in the profession.

**Case Scenario**

Rita is a community social worker in a small regional town in Western Australia. She works primarily with families experiencing domestic violence and poverty. A new client, Leanne, was referred to Rita after experiencing family violence. During their second session, Rita realized that Leanne is the cousin of her long-time friend and is often present at social gatherings within the community.

As the sessions progressed, Rita began receiving messages from her friend asking about Leanne’s situation. Although Rita did not disclose any details, she found herself avoiding social functions to prevent uncomfortable interactions and possible confidentiality breaches. Rita now feels emotionally conflicted and is unsure whether continuing with Leanne as a client compromises professional ethics.

**Understanding Dual Relationships**

According to the **National Association of Social Workers (NASW, 2021)**, dual relationships are not inherently unethical but become problematic when they impair professional judgment, increase the risk of harm to the client, or result in exploitation. In this case, Rita's role in a small community means encountering clients in non-professional settings is likely, yet the overlap between personal and professional circles raises questions about boundaries, confidentiality, and role conflict.

Rural social work research confirms that practitioners in close-knit communities often manage dual roles out of necessity (Gonyea, Wright, & Earl, 2014). What distinguishes ethical from unethical practice is the level of self-awareness, proactive boundary management, and client-focused decision-making.

**Relevant Ethical Principles**

Several key ethical principles are engaged in this case:

* **Confidentiality**: Social workers are ethically bound to protect client information. Sharing even general updates with third parties—such as Rita’s friend—would be a breach of confidentiality (Reamer, 2018).
* **Professional Boundaries**: The **AASW Code of Ethics (2020)** emphasizes the importance of maintaining professional roles and avoiding relationships that could impair impartiality.
* **Self-Determination and Non-maleficence**: Social workers must ensure that dual roles do not interfere with a client’s autonomy or increase the risk of emotional harm.
* **Competence**: When the dual relationship begins to affect the practitioner’s emotional regulation, decision-making, or performance, as in Rita’s case, it becomes an ethical concern requiring supervision or case transfer.

**Ethical Decision-Making Models**

To address such dilemmas, social workers are encouraged to apply structured ethical decision-making frameworks. The **Loewenberg and Dolgoff model** includes:

1. **Identify the problem**  
   Rita has overlapping social and professional roles with Leanne and her family.
2. **Determine who will be affected**  
   Leanne, Rita, Rita’s friend, and the community's perception of confidentiality and trust.
3. **Consult ethical guidelines**  
   NASW and AASW Codes of Ethics, agency policy, and supervision.
4. **Explore possible options**  
   a) Continue with Leanne and reinforce boundaries  
   b) Transfer Leanne’s case  
   c) Involve a supervisor to mediate
5. **Consider consequences**  
   Continued therapy could help Leanne, but Rita’s emotional discomfort could impact service quality.
6. **Make the decision and document**  
   Transparency and thorough documentation of the decision-making process are essential.

**Best Practices for Managing Dual Relationships**

To ethically manage dual relationships, social workers should consider the following:

* **Anticipate and plan for overlapping roles**, especially in rural or cultural communities.
* **Discuss potential dual relationships** openly with the client and seek informed consent where appropriate.
* **Engage in supervision and reflective practice** to explore personal feelings and professional limits (Zubrzycki & McArthur, 2015).
* **Establish clear boundaries and communicate them** with clients and community members.

In Rita’s case, the best course of action may be to discuss the issue with a supervisor and assess whether continued service provision is in the client’s best interest. If boundaries cannot be maintained, a respectful referral to another practitioner should be made.

**Cultural and Contextual Considerations**

In Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, dual relationships are often inevitable due to kinship systems and communal structures. Rather than avoiding dual roles entirely, social workers must approach them with cultural humility and transparency (Briskman, 2014). This includes recognizing power dynamics, seeking cultural supervision, and prioritizing community-defined ethics alongside professional standards.

**Personal Reflection**

As a student social worker, I have encountered similar tensions during placement in small community agencies. It is tempting to “fix” situations quickly or maintain harmony by avoiding difficult conversations. However, these situations remind me that ethical practice is not about avoiding complexity, but rather engaging with it thoughtfully.

In Rita’s case, acknowledging her emotional discomfort and seeking supervisory support is not a weakness but a sign of ethical maturity. It reinforces that the wellbeing of the client and integrity of the profession must guide decisions.

**Conclusion**

Dual relationships are complex and context-dependent, particularly in tight-knit or culturally specific communities. While not inherently unethical, they require vigilance, planning, and reflective practice. This report emphasizes the importance of ethical guidelines, supervision, and client-centered decision-making in maintaining boundaries and minimizing harm. For social workers like Rita, navigating these relationships is not about perfection, but about transparency, humility, and continuous learning.

**References**

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