

counselor preparation

Classification of Dual Relationships in the Helping Professions

**BRIAN PEARSON
NICK PIAZZA**

A classification system of dual relationships is presented. Dual relationships are conceptualized as not being inherently harmful or unethical. Options available to persons involved in dual relationships are discussed.

Dual relationships are prevalent in the helping professions. The American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Committee (1988) reported that dual relationships accounted for 23% of all ethical complaints. Malley, Gallagher, and Brown (1992) noted that dual relationships are the second most frequent ethical dilemma reported by college and university counseling centers. In addition, dual relationship issues apparently affect all helping professionals, regardless of discipline (Borys & Pope, 1989), work setting, or client type (Herlihy & Corey, 1992).

Traditionally, discussion has revolved around determining the ethics of specific dual relationship scenarios. By this we mean that particular types of dual relationships (e.g., sexual contact between a counselor and an active client) are examined to determine whether they are ethical or not. Authors who attempted to categorize dual relationships did so according to either the setting or the nature of the relationship. Borders and Leddick (1987) divided dual relationships between supervisors and trainees into sexual involvement, supervisors counseling trainees, and other

Brian Pearson is a doctoral candidate, and Nick Piazza is a faculty member, both in the Counselor and Human Services Department at the University of Toledo, Ohio. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent to Brian Pearson, Counselor and Human Services Education, 2801 Bancroft Street, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH 43606-3390.

nonsexual dual relationships that could evolve into a dual relationship. More recently, Anderson and Kitchener (1996) divided nonromantic and nonsexual dual relationships with former clients into eight categories (e.g., friendship, business relationships, workplace relationships). Although they divided three of these categories into "intentional" and "circumstantial" subcategories, the categories themselves were based on the specific nature or setting of the relationship.

We believe that categorizing dual relationships in such ways is too narrow and focused to be of use to professionals except in very specific circumstances. There are simply too many situations and conditions to usefully outline all of them. Outlining all possibilities would be cumbersome and, more important, may not be helpful to the professional. In addition, these categorizations are static, whereas relationships are dynamic. Simon (1989) pointed out that boundary violations such as sexual relationships with clients are often the result of a gradual erosion of boundaries. Typically, dual relationships do not happen suddenly. They emerge and develop.

Although it is important to be aware of different scenarios regarding dual relationships, we believe it is most useful for professionals to be aware of the different ways in which dual relationships originate. With this knowledge, the professional can accurately identify potential or developing high-risk situations and respond in a proactive rather than reactive manner. This article first provides an overview of the literature on dual relationships. Then we propose a categorization system of dual relationships based on the nature of their development. The potential for this system of categorization to anticipate or predict the development of dual relationships is discussed.

Professionals enter into dual relationships when they "assume two roles simultaneously or sequentially with a person seeking help. This may mean two professional roles, such as counselor and teacher, or combining a professional and a personal role," (Herlihy & Corey, 1992, p. 3) such as supervisor and friend. The primary determinants of a dual relationship seem to be twofold. First, there is a professional relationship in which a counselor or a supervisor has "an advantage of power" (Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985, p. 251) over another. Second, this professional relationship is either preceded by, subsequent to, or concurrent with another professional or personal relationship.

It is the potential abuse of this advantage of power that seemed to be central to the extensive research into dual relationships. Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (1985) noted that practitioners and educators "often hold an advantage of power over the people with whom they work, especially when they are psychotherapy clients

or students. They occupy a position of trust and are expected to advocate the welfare of those who depend on them" (p. 251). This advantage of power puts professionals in a position to subordinate the client's or student's interests to their own (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994). It is important to consider that a dual relationship is not necessary for abuse or exploitation to occur. Any time there is a power differential, there is the potential for abuse of that power (Peterson, 1992). Likewise, dual relationships are not always abusive or exploitive (Herlihy & Corey, 1992; Smith & Fitzpatrick, 1995). However, having a second relationship with people with whom a professional relationship exists makes it easier to abuse that power.

Herlihy and Corey (1992) proposed that a definitive resolution on dual relationships is problematic, if not impossible. They argued that dual relationships are problematic because they are (a) so pervasive, (b) difficult to recognize at times, (c) sometimes unavoidable, (d) sometimes harmful but may also be beneficial, and (e) the subject of conflicting advice. Consequently, counselors and counselor educators often find themselves in complex situations that are difficult to avoid, and for which they have unclear guidance and ultimate responsibility for their decisions and behavior. What they need is a system of classification that will help them both to recognize existing dual relationships and to predict when dual relationships are likely to develop. This system would allow them to respond to existing and potential dual relationships in a proactive manner, thereby lessening the chance of unethical or harmful behavior.

CLASSIFICATION OF DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

What follows is a classification system for dual relationships. We developed the classification system from a review of the literature regarding dual relationships in counseling, supervision, and counselor education. During this review, we noted that authors tended to discuss dual relationships as if they emerged fully developed and were distinct entities. They also tended to categorize them based on the behaviors displayed in the relationships (e.g., sexual, nonsexual) or the setting (e.g., family therapy, practicum training). The result was a large body of literature that was situation-specific, with many redundancies, discussing situations that were already fully developed. It seemed that what was needed was a system of classifying dual relationships that paid attention to the development of such relationships.

We recognized that most professionals are well-meaning and attempt to behave ethically but are probably unaware or mini-

mally aware of situations that may lead to the development of relationships with serious ethical implications. To develop this classification system, we grouped the various dual relationships discussed in the literature based on the circumstances from which they arose. Five categories were identified: circumstantial multiple roles, structured multiple professional roles, shifts in professional roles, personal and professional role conflicts, and the predatory professional.

Circumstantial Multiple Roles

At times, dual relationships occur out of pure coincidence. Examples would include a counselor who is returning defective merchandise to a store where the only clerk is a current client, or a counselor whose child befriends the child of a client. As noted by Smith and Fitzpatrick (1995), such incidents are inevitable in small communities. The risk in these cases seems to be primarily a misinterpretation of which relationship is in effect at the time, and therefore which relationship "rules" are in effect. For example, the aforementioned store clerk could interpret his or her customer's complaints or demands as personal attacks, thereby affecting the client-counselor relationship.

Recommendations for dealing with such situations include open discussion regarding the actual or potential dual roles. In small communities, or when there is reason to believe such an incident might occur, this could be done early in the relationship. In the case of an unforeseen, chance meeting, a time to discuss the incident and reactions to it should be arranged, preferably as soon as possible.

STRUCTURED MULTIPLE PROFESSIONAL ROLES

Dual relationships often occur because they are integral to a professional's job. They can occur between professional colleagues or between a professional and a nonprofessional, such as a student or a client. What is essential to this type of dual relationship is that the nature of all the relationships is professional. Structured multiple professional roles are prevalent in counselor education and supervision. Kurpius, Gibson, Lewis, and Corbet (1991) pointed out that faculty and supervisors can hold multiple roles simultaneously, including those of instructor, advisor, supervisor, administrator, employer, and mentor. These roles are typically perceived as complementary and are not necessarily thought to create conflicts of interest for the professional. However, problems can arise if the professional loses sight of, or takes advan-

tage of, the power differential inherent in his or her role (e.g., the faculty member who requests first authorship of an article when the student coauthor deserves it). The supervisee or student may give in to the professional's wishes due to the power differential of one relationship, even if the nature of the other relationship is peer-like.

When jobs necessitate dual relationships, the professional needs to be aware of the potential for harm. Although such relationships can be quite beneficial (Bowman, Hatley, & Bowman, 1995), such as an educator being a mentor to a student, care must be taken that all parties are aware of the roles, boundaries, and power dynamics involved in the situation to minimize the potential for harm.

Faculty and supervisors, however, do have one role that can create conflict. In their role as evaluators, faculty and supervisors are expected to be "aware of any personal or professional limitations of supervisees which are likely to impede future professional performance" (Association for Counselor Education and Supervision [ACES], 1993, p. 7). Frequently, this information can only be obtained through a relationship that Kurpius et al. (1991) described as "bearing some semblance to a therapeutic one" (p. 49). Students, understanding the evaluative nature of the relationship, may not feel free to open up and admit personal fears, limitations, or concerns. If they do open up, and the information is used in a manner that the students think negatively affects them, they may feel betrayed.

Another difficulty arises when the faculty member or supervisor is tempted to provide therapy services to the student. The power differential between faculty members and supervisors and their students cannot be overemphasized and makes a therapy relationship untenable. Herlihy and Corey (1992) stated that counselors and counselor educators have different duties, and that this interferes with counselor educators' ability to act as counselors to students or supervisees. A counselor's duty to the client supersedes all other duties and interests. A counselor educator has a duty to his or her student or supervisee, but duty to the public and the profession takes precedence. Becoming counselor to students and supervisees results in loss of objectivity regarding evaluation and loss of unconditional regard. Also it is unlikely that the student will freely disclose information that might be used negatively in an evaluation (Herlihy & Corey, 1992). This results not only in poor quality counseling, but also in possible harm to present and future clients of the student or the supervisee.

ACES' (1993) *Ethical Guidelines for Counseling Supervisors* give explicit guidance in this regard. Standard 2.09 recognizes that

faculty and supervisors will often have multiple relationships with persons under them and admonishes professionals to take necessary steps to "minimize potential conflicts" (ACES, 1993, p. 7). This standard recommends dividing supervisory roles among several professionals to avoid creating conflicts of interest. Standard 2.11 states that "personal issues should be addressed in supervision only in terms of the impact of these issues on clients and on professional functioning" (ACES, 1993, p. 7). If a supervisee or student requires personal counseling or psychotherapy, then the supervisor should arrange for a referral. Referral to another professional is required under the *ACA Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice* (American Counseling Association, 1995), which states that professionals do not provide counseling services to people "with whom they have administrative, supervisory, or evaluative relationships" (Standard A.6.B, p. 3). Finally, ACES Standard 2.10 states that supervision should be terminated if a dual relationship forms that creates a conflict of interest or calls the professional's judgment into question (p. 7).

As in circumstantial dual relationships, open discussion of the issues and consultation is recommended. In addition, Cavallaro and Ramsey (1988) suggested establishing separate "locations or times for performance of each role" (p. 225). For example, a supervisor who is also friends with a supervisee could meet in the supervisor's office if the nature of the interaction was professional (e.g., supervision, clinical meetings) and meet in other locations if the nature of the interaction was personal.

Shifts in Professional Roles

Dual relationships can occur when there is a change or shift in organizational structure, thereby changing the relationships of those within the organization. An example of such a shift would be two therapists in an agency who have developed a close friendship. Because there is no power differential (they are both at the line staff level), this creates no difficulty. The supervisor of their program then resigns, and one of them successfully bids for the position, gaining supervisory authority over the other. Other examples of this are when clients become coworkers or former students are hired as faculty in programs from which they graduated, suddenly becoming educators to former peers and peers with former educators.

Both parties may deny that their relationship will be affected by a change in roles, especially if they initially were friends. Their efforts to preserve their original relationship may cause them to deny the power dynamics involved in the new relationship. The

person with lesser power, even if aware of these dynamics, may be hesitant to openly discuss the situation. So, the situation can end up with the parties pretending there is no power differential (not changing their behavior toward each other), or their behavior is changed but neither acknowledges or discusses it. In either case, the potential benefits of their new relationship will be stifled. For example, a supervisor may not feel she or he has permission to criticize a supervisee's work. Another possibility is that when the supervisor does use her or his power, the supervisee could feel resentful or angry. Both of these situations could lead to inadequate supervision of work or ineffective supervisory relationships, possibly leading to clients being harmed.

It is critical that an open dialogue take place concerning the limits, roles, boundaries, and power structure, when a new situation evolves in a professional relationship. Because of the preexisting relationship, outside consultation from a neutral party to help negotiate the dialogue is recommended if either party is concerned or suspects that the new relationship will cause difficulties. This negotiation should be monitored regularly until both parties adjust to their new relationship. Again, as in other dual role types, establishing a different place for each role to be enacted may help clarify which is in effect at the time (Cavallaro & Ramsey, 1988).

Personal and Professional Role Conflicts

In this type of dual relationship, there may be a preexisting professional relationship that is followed by a personal relationship, or the parties may have already developed a personal relationship that is followed by a professional one. Circumstances in which a professional relationship becomes complicated by the development of a subsequent personal relationship seem to have received the most notoriety, primarily because of increasing attention to sexual dual relationships between professionals and their clients, students, or supervisees. However, this type of dual relationship does not have to be sexual or romantic in nature. Social or peer-like dual relationships, such as collaborating on publications or engaging in a shared pastime (such as a sport or a hobby), are also examples of mixing personal and professional roles.

Whenever a personal relationship is added to a professional one, there is potential for harm. The critical issue here is the power differential inherent in the professional role. There is always the possibility that the person with less power in the professional relationship will feel coerced or forced within the personal relationship. If the relationship is not coercive, the situation can still

create the perception among others that there is a problem or conflict of interest. For example, a faculty member who socializes with a student may be perceived by other students or faculty as susceptible to favoritism.

Both ACA and ACES have taken very clear and definitive positions on sexual relationships with clients or supervisees. ACA Standard A.7.a states that "counselors do not have any type of sexual intimacies with [current] clients" (ACA, 1995) and avoid forming sexually intimate relationships with former clients for at least 2 years following termination of services (Standard A.7.b). In addition, ACA Standard A.6.a states that dual relationships of a nonsexual nature with clients should be avoided and cites "familial, social, financial, business, or close personal relationships" (ACA, 1995) as examples.

The ACES (1993) Supervision Standard 2.10 and ACA (1995) Standard F.1.b prohibit supervisors from engaging in sexual or other nonprofessional relationships with either their supervisees or their students until the supervision or instructional relationship has ended. ACES Standard 2.10 goes on to state that "dual relationships with supervisees that might impair the supervisor's objectivity and professional judgment should be avoided" (ACES, p. 7).

When the relationship is not sexual, the danger can seem slight at the time, because the benefits of the relationship tend to dominate our thinking. Care must be taken to fully examine these relationships for possible harm or conflict before they become personal in nature. Using a third, impartial party to help in this process is recommended (Herlihy & Corey, 1992). In addition, due to their complexity and strong potential for harm, we recommend either group, conjoint, or individual consultation for both parties to clarify the interpersonal dynamics and potential for harm.

At times, two parties with a personal relationship develop a second, professional relationship. An example would be a counselor who sees a friend, family member, or peer as a client. This circumstance is very similar to the previous one, but the dynamics of how it occurs are slightly different.

Expedience can be an issue in these relationships, for example in rural areas where there is not much, if any, choice of professionals. At times a professional decides to form the second relationship due to pressure from others, rationalizing that familiarity with the person will have a positive effect on the therapeutic process or will prevent embarrassment.

In those cases in which a dual relationship is unavoidable or seen as advantageous, the professional is well advised to discuss different roles, limits, and concerns before beginning services. If

services are initiated, ACA Standard A.6.a requires that "counselors take appropriate professional precautions such as informed consent, consultation, supervision, and documentation to ensure that judgment is not impaired and no exploitation occurs" (ACA, 1995).

The Predatory Professional

This final type of dual relationship occurs "when professionals exploit the relationship to meet personal needs rather than client needs" (Peterson, 1992, p. 75). Predatory professionals deliberately seduce or exploit others, unconcerned with anything but their own needs. Edelwich and Brodsky (1991) characterized these professionals as severely character disordered. One example of this type of dual relationship would be professionals who exploit clients, students, or supervisees by actively recruiting them as sexual partners. Another illustration would be professionals who exploit clients, students, or supervisees for illicit personal financial gain, for example, by soliciting money for services that were not rendered. This classification represents a type of professional rather than a situation, but one that needs to be recognized so that the offending professional can be confronted and either rehabilitated or removed from the profession (Edelwich & Brodsky, 1991). Indeed, the APA ethical codes (1992) state that there is a duty to confront unethical behavior if it can be done without breaking confidentiality.

DISCUSSION

Dual relationships are common in the practice of the helping professions, with many being unavoidable. Indeed, Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (1985) wrote "if we argued that no dual roles are permitted, we would be forced to advocate [living] as hermits" (p. 252). Dual relationships are not inherently harmful and may in fact be beneficial (Bowman et al., 1995; Herlihy & Corey, 1992). Multiple professional roles such as advisor-instructor, supervisor-mentor, counselor-advocate, and others enhance our effectiveness as counselors and educators. However, risk of harm, or the perception of harm, seems to increase as both level of intimacy and power differential increase. In addition, the influence of the power differential is not always obvious. Pope, Levenson, and Schover (1979), in a survey of female doctoral graduates in psychology, found that 72% of students who had sexual contact with educators felt no coercion at the time of the relationship. At the time of the study, however, only 49% still felt there had been no coercion. They also found that over time, the perception that the dual relationship

negatively affected the working relationship with the professional increased. Hammel, Olkin, and Taube (1996) replicated these trends with APA members, as did Miller and Larrabee (1995) with American Association of Counseling and Development (AACD; now the American Counseling Association) members. This implies that at the time of the relationship the parties involved may not have been totally cognizant of the power dynamics and implications of such a relationship. It is easy to justify behavior when there is a desire to engage in personal relationships and a belief that there will be a gain, emotional or otherwise. It is therefore crucial that as professionals we are aware of the situations that may lead to dual relationships so we can behave in a proactive rather than reactive manner, and hopefully avoid harming our clients and trainees. Consultation with peers, colleagues, professionals, ethics committees, or others is also recommended to clarify appropriate boundaries and issues (Herlihy & Corey, 1992).

This classification gives the professional a system with which to organize his or her thinking about dual relationships. Such a classification should allow professionals to anticipate situations in which dual relationships are likely to develop and manage the risks associated with those situations. In addition, this classification would serve as a guide for counselor educators in formulating research regarding dual relationships and as a curriculum guide for instructing new professionals in the ethics of dual relationships.

REFERENCES

- American Counseling Association. (1995). *Code of ethics and standards of practice*. Alexandria, VA: Author.
- American Psychological Association. (1992). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, 47, 1597-1611.
- American Psychological Association Ethics Committee. (1988). Trends in ethical cases, common pitfalls, and published resources. *American Psychologist*, 43, 570-576.
- Anderson, S. K., & Kitchener, K. S. (1996). Nonromantic, nonsexual posttherapy relationships between psychologists and former clients: An exploratory study of critical incidents. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 27, 59-66.
- Association for Counselor Education and Supervision. (1993). Ethical guidelines for counseling supervisors. *ACES Spectrum*, 53(4), 5-8.
- Borders, L. D., & Leddick, G. R. (1987). *Handbook of counseling supervision*. Alexandria, VA: Association for Counseling and Development.
- Borys, D. S., & Pope, K. S. (1989). Dual relationships between therapist and client: A national study of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 20, 283-293.
- Bowman, V. E., Hatley, L. D., & Bowman, R. L. (1995). Faculty-student relationships: The dual role controversy. *Counselor Education and Supervision*, 34, 232-242.
- Cavallaro, M. L., & Ramsey, M. (1988). Ethical issues in gerocounseling. *Counseling and Values*, 32, 221-227.
- Edelwich, J., & Brodsky, A. M. (1991). *Sexual dilemmas for the helping professional*. New York: Brunner/Mazel.

- Hammel, G. A., Olkin, R., & Taube, D. O. (1996). Student-educator sex in clinical and counseling psychology doctoral training. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 27*, 93-7.
- Herlihy, B., & Corey, G. (1992). *Dual relationships in counseling*. Alexandria, VA: American Association for Counseling and Development.
- Kagle, J. D., & Giebelhausen, P. N. (1994). Dual relationships and professional boundaries. *Social Work: Journal of the National Association of Social Workers, 39*, 213-219.
- Keith-Spiegel, P., & Koocher, G. P. (1985). *Ethics in psychology: Professional standards and cases*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Kurpius, D., Gibson, G., Lewis, J., & Corbet, M. (1991). Ethical issues in supervising counseling practitioners. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 31*, 48-57.
- Malley, P., Gallagher, R., & Brown, S. M. (1992). Ethical problems in university and college counseling centers: A Delphi study. *Journal of College Student Development, 33*, 238-244.
- Miller, G. M., & Larrabee, M. J. (1995). Sexual intimacy in counselor education and supervision: A national survey. *Counselor Education and Supervision, 34*, 332-342.
- Peterson, M. R. (1992). *At personal risk: Boundary violations in professional-client relationships*. New York: Norton.
- Pope, K. S., Levenson, H., & Schover, L. R. (1979). Sexual intimacy in psychology training: Results and implications of a national survey. *American Psychologist, 34*, 682-689.
- Simon, R. I. (1989). Sexual exploitation of patients: How it begins before it happens. *Psychiatric Annals, 19*, 104-112.
- Smith, D., & Fitzpatrick, M. (1995). Patient-therapist boundary issues: An integrative review of theory and research. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 26*, 499-506.