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Ethics Alive! Boundaries in a Small Community - Where Everybody Knows Your Name*

by Allan Barsky

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As Standard 1.06(c) of the NASW Code of Ethics suggests, "Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client." Thus, this standard starts with the premise that it would generally be inappropriate for social workers to provide services to their close friends, family members, doctors, lawyers, and other business associates. Note that this standard does not provide an absolute prohibition against dual relationships.

One reason to avoid dual relationships is to protect the nature of the professional relationship. Clients may be confused if the social worker is acting as an intimate friend one moment, but is acting as a somewhat distanced professional in another moment. Another reason to avoid dual relationships is that if one relationship sours, then that could negatively affect the other relationship. For instance, if a social worker, relying on the advice of a financial advisor, loses money on a particular investment, the social worker may become angry with the financial advisor, thus making a social worker-client relationship between the two complicated. Alternatively, if a family member is a client, the client may be at risk of exploitation if the social worker uses information learned in counseling to manipulate the client within family relationships.

But what are social workers' ethical obligations when they live in small communities and dual relationships are unavoidable? This article begins by defining a small community and then explores the steps that social workers should take when engaging in unavoidable dual relationships.

A "community" is a group of people who are connected by living in close proximity or by mutual interests and interactions. Examples of "small communities" include neighborhoods, housing complexes, and small towns, as well as people who share common interests such as religious worship, gardening, or online gaming. For the purposes of this article, the term "small community" does not simply mean small in number (e.g., a town under 5,000 people), but also a tightly-knit community where everyone knows

each other and frequent interactions may be expected.

Consider a Deaf community in which members of the community frequently get together for social, political, or cultural activities. A social worker from this community may know and have interactions with virtually all members of the community. Despite having dual relationships, it may be appropriate for this social worker to provide services within this community. Although one could argue that the social worker should refer clients to people outside the Deaf community, it may be desirable for deaf clients to be served by deaf workers.

In some instances, dual relationships are unavoidable. Consider a social worker for a school. When the social worker serves different students, the worker should do so with the awareness that each student may have friendships or other relationships with one another. Students' concerns may even be related to issues with other students. Similar dual relationship issues arise for social workers in group foster homes, assisted living facilities, and other residential facilities. In such cases, the question is not how to avoid dual relationships, but rather, how to manage the risks associated with dual relationships.

The second part of Standard 1.06(c) suggests, "In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries." So, the question becomes, "What does it mean to set clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries?" Boundaries are invisible lines of demarcation. They create a sense of separation. As a member of a community, I am free to hug other members of my community, with their consent. As a social worker, however, I need to consider whether hugging clients is professionally appropriate. If my client is also a member of my religious congregation, then I need to consider whether hugging is appropriate, not only in my social work office, but also in my interactions with the client in the community.

One of the primary boundaries to establish is that of client confidentiality. Although confidentiality is important in large communities, the dynamics of small communities lead to additional challenges for social workers. Assume you are in a local restaurant and a client approaches you. The mere fact that the client is approaching you may signal to others that this is one of your clients. Ignoring the client may be disrespectful, and asking clients to avoid all public contact with you may be impractical in a small community.

There is no single answer as to what is the appropriate response to these boundary questions. Rather, social workers should discuss potential boundary concerns with clients and jointly determine what would be appropriate. Workers could ask clients, for instance, "What would be the best way to handle chance meetings in the community?" The client may decide to avoid such meetings or may have no major concerns about speaking with the worker in the community. By engaging the client in such discussions, workers empower clients to determine how to handle these issues. As a matter of risk management, social workers may also document what steps they took to manage boundaries, given the potential risks of a dual relationship.

Within counseling sessions, social workers need a high degree of self-awareness to ensure that information learned from one client does not seep into work with other clients. Consider a social worker within a prison. One client informs the social worker that his cellmate is having terrible nightmares. When the social worker sees the cellmate, would it be appropriate for the worker to ask the cellmate about the nightmares? Although the question may be relevant, it threatens the professional boundaries that social workers should establish with and between clients. If either client feels the social worker has betrayed his trust, the therapeutic relationship with the client is imperiled.

Social workers may also need to have conversations with friends and family members about their type

of work and the need to maintain confidentiality and professional boundaries. When I was doing outreach work with street youth, sex trade workers, and people involved in drug sales, I was living in the same community where I was working. I advised my friends, "If someone approaches me on the street and starts talking, please do not ask whether and how I know them." I also let my clients know that, even if they approached me while I was with others, I would not share confidential information. Clients could decide whether they wanted to acknowledge that they knew me. I would avoid acknowledging them unless they acknowledged me first.

Standard 1.06(g) provides, in part, "Social workers should be aware that involvement in electronic communication with groups based on race, ethnicity, language, sexual orientation, gender identity or expression, mental or physical ability, religion, immigration status, and other personal affiliations may affect their ability to work effectively with particular clients." Consider, for instance, a social worker who advocates online for gay rights. Unbeknown to the worker, a client is part of the online discussion and becomes incensed with one of the social worker's postings. During the next session, the client is still angry with the worker and has trouble focusing on her own concerns. The worker should address the client's concerns without imposing his political agenda on the client. If the worker and client can re-establish a positive working relationship, then the counseling process may continue. If issues from their online relationship cannot be separated from their worker-client relationship, then the social worker may need to refer the client to another professional.

To pre-empt problems, social workers should carefully consider whether and how they participate in certain online communities, including how this may affect their relationships with future clients. This is not to suggest that workers must avoid participation in online communities; still, they may want to be careful about the language they use and how it may be interpreted. Whether social workers are advocating online or within an in-person town hall meeting, they should do so with respectful language, honest information, and professional demeanor.

Issues related to boundaries in a small community can be complex, with no simple or perfect solutions. Under the U.S. Constitution, everyone has the right to freedom of association and freedom of speech. When people enter the social work profession, they are also agreeing to act in ways that place client interests as primary (Standard 1.01). Conflicts may arise when personal freedoms conflict with professional obligations. Social workers are not expected to cut themselves off from their communities. In fact, having social workers who participate actively in their communities—personally and professionally—fits with the social work values of "human relationships" and "social justice." When dual relationships arise, however, social workers and clients should discuss what steps they can take to maximize the benefits of the social work relationship and minimize the risks related to the dual relationship.

What types of dual relationships arise in your practice? How do you manage them? Let the conversation continue, and be mindful not to include information that could be linked with any particular client.

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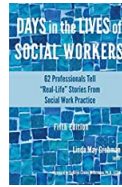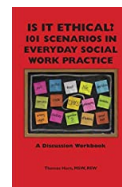
* "Where everybody knows your name" is borrowed from the lyrics of the Cheers television show theme song, written by Gary Portnoy, Judy Hart Angelo, and Julian Williams.

Tags

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Very Helpful

I'm so glad that this article was written! Managing dual relationships in metroplexes or larger cities can be super easy, and I always felt like the discussion of dual relationships left out smaller cities/communities. It was wonderful to read something that addresses it.

Albert more than 1 year ago | *reply*

Very relevant topic

Thanks for talking about small town social work. I wrestle with these exact issues everyday, not as much online as in-person relationships in various different spheres around the community. For example, a client who happens to join my faith community. I attempted to sift through my feelings in my own social work blog-appreciate reading others' thoughts on the issue!

Mandy more than 2 years ago | *reply*

Boundries

Use wisdom instead of emotion. It often means putting someone else's needs over your own. And you need the wisdom to figure out what your projecting onto the relationship to fill your own underlying and often childish needs. Never easy but very necessary if you truly want to be good at what you do.

Amy more than 2 years ago | *reply*

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