



Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.

Examining the Complexities of the Social Worker–Client Relationship

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The social worker-client relationship has been described as the “soul” (Biestek, 1957 in Coady, 1993), the “heart” (Perlman, 1979 in Coady, 1993) and the “major determinant” (Hollis, 1970 in Coady, 1993) of social work intervention. Historically within social work, the relationship that exists between worker and client has been viewed as the most integral element and distinguishing feature of the profession. In Proctor (1982), Biestek (1957) compares the importance of the worker-client relationship within social work to that of other professions. He states that a good interpersonal relationship is desirable but not necessary for professions such as medicine and law. Biestek goes on to place greater value on the worker-client relationship specific to the social work profession by stating, “a good relationship is necessary not only for the perfection, but also for the essence of casework service in every setting” (p. 430). Despite the apparent importance of the relationship between social worker and client, the very nature of this relationship is one that poses complexity and challenge to practicing social workers. This edition of *Practice Matters* will review the characteristics of the social worker-client relationship by defining the client. Ethical quandaries that social workers face in practice specific to the social worker-client relationship will be discussed.

Defining the Client

Social workers interact with individuals, couples, families and groups in a variety of practice settings while providing a wide spectrum of services. For members of the Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers, the definition of a “client” is found in the CASW Code of Ethics (2005). The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) defines a client as “a person, family, group of persons, incorporated body, association or community on whose behalf a social worker provides or agrees to provide a service or to whom the social worker is legally obligated to provide a service” (p. 10). Though practice settings and services vary, when defining a client it is wise to ask, “To whom do I have an obligation in respect to the services I am providing?” (Blake, 2008).

The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and the Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) provide values and principles intended to guide ethical social work practice. A social workers ethical responsibilities to clients is addressed in value 1: *Respect for the Inherent Dignity and Worth of Persons*, value 3: *Service to Humanity* and value 4: *Integrity in Professional Practice*. By adhering to these values and the accompanying principles, social workers recognize the importance of respect of all persons and place professional service before one’s personal goals.

Determining who the client is and establishing the appropriate boundaries within the context of the professional relationship isn’t always clear. Ethical dilemmas often arise when working with clients. These situations require critical thought and the use of professional judgment before proceeding. Consider the following case scenarios:

Scenario #1 - The Dual Relationship

Suzy, RSW is the only social worker in a health centre located in a small rural community. She has just received a referral to see a client needing assistance to access financial support and mental health counseling. The client is her cousin. Suzy wonders how she should respond to the referral.

This scenario is common for social workers practicing in rural and remote communities. Non-sexual dual or multiple relationships are inevitable for social workers practicing in small communities where the dynamic of “everyone knows everyone else” is present. A dual relationship is described as “a situation where the member, in addition to his/her professional relationship, has one or more other relationships with the client” (Van Den Broek, 2005). For example, the client may be a family member, a neighbor, your child’s grade 1 teacher or babysitter.

It is advised that dual relationships should be avoided for the purpose of not exploiting the power imbalance in the social worker-client relationship (CPO, 1998). For the social worker who is the sole practitioner in a small community, this is not always possible. It's important to recognize that not all dual or multiple relationships are unethical. But, understanding the social worker-client relationship in this context requires critical thought and strategy, particularly when striving to maintain professional boundaries and integrity. Social workers are responsible to assess each client relationship individually and maintain a professional boundary that is safe for the client and establishes the parameters for service.

If faced with this ethical dilemma, a few strategies to consider include:

- Consultation – Being the sole practitioner does not mean that you have to work in isolation. Consult with your supervisor, a colleague, a social worker in another organization or your professional association. Discussing the dilemma with another professional will help to determine the parameters of the client relationship.
- Communication – Open communication with the client is critical. Discussing the nature of the client relationship will help identify any potential conflict of interest and may prevent any problems from developing. Talk to the client about goals for service, your role as social worker; identify services that can and cannot be provided, informed consent and confidentiality.
- Documentation – Maintain a current and accurate record. Document the steps taken to address your identified concerns with the client relationship. Document the steps taken to assist the client to obtain their goals.
- Consult the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) – Maintain your practice in keeping with the Code of Ethics. An excerpt of value 4: Integrity in Professional Practice states, “Social workers strive for impartiality in their professional practice...” and “It is the responsibility of social workers to establish the tenor of their professional relationship with clients, and others to whom they have a professional duty, and to maintain professional boundaries” (p. 6).

Scenario #2 - The Professional Boundary

John, RSW has been providing social work services to a client for the past two years. Although most of the goals for service have been met, John continues to see the client as he relates to the client on a personal level because of shared life experiences. The client views John as his friend. The client is facing financial strain and has approached John asking to borrow money.

Given the nature of the social worker-client relationship, there is an inherent power imbalance that exists. Therefore, professional boundaries are warranted in every social worker-client relationship. According to Peterson (1992) in Dietz & Thompson (2004), boundaries are “the limits that allow for a safe connection based on the client’s needs” (p.2). The CASW Code of Ethics (2005) confirms the importance of professional boundaries in the social worker-client relationship in value 4 - principle 3, which states, “social workers establish appropriate boundaries in relationships with clients and ensure that the relationship services the needs of clients” (p. 7).

Traditionally, establishing professional boundaries is how social workers avoid exploiting a client or taking advantage of the unequal relationship that exists between social worker and client. Clients may not always understand what is meant by relationship boundaries, and at times, may unknowingly engage in behavior or make a request that crosses a professional boundary. The social worker has an ethical duty to act in the best interest of the client and is responsible for establishing and maintaining boundaries. Moreover, the social worker is accountable should a boundary violation occur.

There are areas within the social worker-client relationship when boundaries can become blurred. One such area is self disclosure. In an effort to establish rapport and a relationship with a client, workers often share information about their personal lives and may find themselves becoming friends with the client. A risk that accompanies self disclosure is shifting the professional relationship to focus on the social workers needs instead of the client’s needs. Although in some cases self disclosure may be appropriate, the determining question to ask is “Will sharing this information benefit the client or serve the client’s needs?”

Another area that often causes the professional boundary to become blurry is giving or receiving gifts. Giving or receiving a gift that extends beyond acceptable gestures, such as a cup of coffee, a meal or a holiday hamper, can change the professional nature of the social worker-client relationship. Engaging in gift giving or receiving that extends beyond a token value could lead to a boundary violation. A risk to the social worker-client relationship could exist if a gift is given to the client and the

client may feel obliged or pressured to reciprocate the gesture. The client may feel that they now “owe” the social worker or they may feel a sense of indebtedness to the social worker. The client may feel obliged to return the gesture as to not jeopardize the services needed.

When reflecting on professional boundaries, here are some questions to consider (CPO, 1998):

- Is this in my client’s best interest?
- Whose needs are being served?
- Will this have an impact on the service I am delivering?
- Am I taking advantage of the client?
- Does this action benefit me rather than the client?
- Am I treating this client differently?
- Am I comfortable documenting this decision/behavior in the client file?
- Does this contravene the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) or the Social Workers Act (2010)?

Conclusion

This article established the significance of the social worker-client relationship by examining the complexities and ethical dilemmas which exist within the confines of the very relationship that is recognized as a corner stone of the profession. Social workers are reminded to exercise critical thinking and professional judgment when assessing relationships with clients. Social workers should engage in consultation with a supervisor or colleague to enhance professional insight into the social worker-client relationship. Finally, the CASW Code of Ethics (2005) and the CASW Guidelines for Ethical Practice (2005) will guide social workers to an ethically sound practice within the social worker-client relationship.

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