Clients of means—and even clients with modest assets—will sometimes feel moved to give a practitioner a gift as a gesture of pure, unadulterated generosity.

CASE 4.10

Don S. was a case manager in a day program for senior citizens. One of his clients, Mildred N., was a spry eighty-seven-year-old who had attended the program for six years. Ms. N. often told her children how special and helpful Mr. S. was to her. Mr. S. and Ms. N. sometimes talked about their shared love of art; Ms. N. was known locally for her large and valuable art collection.

Ms. N.'s health deteriorated badly, and it became clear to her and her two adult children that she would need a nursing home placement. Mr. S. helped Ms. N.'s children locate and assess the suitability of several local facilities. He went above and beyond the call of duty to spend time with Ms. N. and her children as they made their decision.

Several days after Ms. N. entered a nursing home, Mr. S. received a large special-delivery package. He was surprised to find that the N. family had sent him a small sculpture by an internationally famous artist as a token of their heartfelt appreciation. The art had been in Ms. N.'s personal collection. Mr. S. had the sculpture appraised and estimated that the market value was about $9,000.

Most practitioners agree that in many instances—when there is no evidence of ulterior motives that might lead to egregious boundary violations—human service professionals may keep gifts of modest value. Some social service agencies permit staff to do so, although they may stipulate that staff members must thank the clients on behalf of the agency, that is, make it clear that the gift will be shared with the agency's staff at large. This procedure can defuse the interpersonal dynamic and potential boundary confusion between the client and practitioner; depersonalizing the transaction may help staff members to avoid complicated boundary issues.

In contrast the psychologists surveyed by Pope, Tabachnick, and Keith-Spiegel (1995) were generally inclined to believe that accepting expensive gifts was unethical. About one-third of the group (34.2 percent) stated that accepting a client's gift worth at least fifty dollars was unquestionably unethical, and a similar portion (36.2 percent) stated that doing so was ethical only under rare circumstances. Only about 12 percent of the sample stated that accepting a gift of this sort was ethical under many circumstances or