Multiple or Dual Relationships in Human Services

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Multiple or Dual Relationships in Human Services Professional Practice

Multiple or dual relationships refer to a situation whereby professionals in human service practice enter into other relationships besides the professional one preconditioned by the work setting. Reeser (2017) asserts that a dual relationship between a human service professional and a client can happen before, during, or after their meeting in the work setting. Over the years, multiple and dual relationships have been viewed from a negative perspective and associated with client harm through ways such as exploitation, poor judgement, and sexual transgressions. Nevertheless, there are many definitions put forward to explain dual relationships in human service. The definitions are meant to help stakeholders in the human service profession differentiate between ethical and non-ethical dual relationships.

There are numerous ethical drawbacks that result from dual relationships in human service which impact the profession negatively. Almost all the agencies and organizations in the human service profession have addressed the issue of dual relationships in their codes of ethics. Some of these organizations include the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), National Organization of Human Services (NOHS), and the American Psychological Association (APA). These organizations have provided clear regulations that guide professional relationships in service delivery because over 60% of the complaints and lawsuits in human service involve dual or multiple relationships. The goal of the profession is to offer high quality service and protect the client from harm. Therefore, it is unethical to allow dual relationships that can undermine the dignity of the client, lead to poor judgement, and affect decision-making. According to Burgard (2018), dual relationships are a legitimate concern in human service because of the numerous complaints and lawsuits that have been filed by clients regarding the matter.

Dual relationships lead to a lack of professionalism by human service providers resulting to poor judgment and decision-making. For instance, if a professional and the client initiate a romantic relationship between them, it will be difficult for the practitioner to judge the client truly and guide them professionally. This harms the delivery of service to the client. "Harm is usually connected to some kind of exploitation of the client, be this an undue exertion of power, or even sexual transgression" (Burgard, 2018). This is why many dual relationships are forbidden by most associations in their codes of ethics. They are unethical and they undermine the goals and mission of the human service profession.

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics

The NASW code of ethics addresses dual relationships under section 1.06 "conflicts of interest" (pg.9). According to the code, social workers should not engage in extra relationships that can lead to harm or exploitation of the client. "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" (socialworkers.org). However, NASW recognizes that there are instances where dual relationships cannot be avoided. In such cases, the code gives human service practitioners the responsibility of protecting the client by setting clear, culturally appropriate, and sensitive boundaries that uphold professionalism in practice.

The key word in the NASW code of ethics is "a risk of harm or potential exploitation to the client". There are dual relations that are not harmful to the client such as a social worker and a client having children in a similar school or attending the same church. However, sometimes problems arise if the relationship was initiated before the professional one. In such cases, the code bestows a responsibility on the social worker to uphold the

interests and well-being of the client and set appropriate professional boundaries. This responsibility applies even when a client approaches the practitioner requesting for a secondary relationship. According to NASW, it is possible for a social worker's power to intrude in the relationship they share with the client, and the vulnerability and issues of the client are carried into the relationship. For instance, a client may have a business of selling clothes and the social worker decides to buy her dresses from the client. There will be exploitation of the client if they feel compelled to lower the selling price for the social worker. There will be harm to the client if the social worker makes a complaint of poor services. This is unethical and it can compromise their professional relationship.

In a dual relationship, the social worker is forced to subordinate the needs of the client with theirs. This is a violation of section 1.01of the code which states that "social workers' primary responsibility is to promote the well-being of clients" (socialworkers.org). Clients may be unaware of the power differences in the client-practitioner relationships and it is only ethical for social workers to prioritize the needs and interests of the clients.

Current Empirical Research Articles

Reamer, F. G. (2020). Boundary issues and dual relationships in the human services. In *Boundary Issues and Dual Relationships in the Human Services*. Columbia University Press.

- Reamer provides an overview of human service boundary problems in circumstances where professionals find themselves in multiple or dual relationships. The author demonstrates how ethical issues related to dual relationships are among the leading problems and challenges in human service professional practice. According to the article, the multiple relationships cause confusions and lead to conflicts of interest that

harm the client and violate the ethics of the profession. This article supports the unethical nature of dual relationships in human service practice.

Goodine, P. (2017). Managing Multiple Relationships in Therapeutic Roles in Rural Communities. *BU Journal of Graduate Studies in Education*, *9*(2), 24-30.

- Goodine explores existing literature on how multiple relationships between practitioners and clients develop and how they can be regulated to benefit both the client and the professional. According to the author, some of the dual relationships are unavoidable and professionals require support to identify boundaries and balance them with the expected conduct. “It is imperative that professional judgement is used on an individual basis to assess the extent to which multiple relationships should exist” (Goodine, 2017). The article provides important measures that can be used to promote relationship ethics in human service practice.

Rollins, W. (2020). Social worker–client relationships: Social worker perspectives. *Australian Social Work*, *73*(4), 395-407.

- The author of the article focuses of the social work profession to describe the different relationships that exist between clients and social workers. He brings in the concept of “a helping relationship” which is an essential aspect of ethics in human service. While the author believes that there is need for a helping relationship between clients and professionals, Rollins asserts that achieving desirable client outcomes requires social workers to uphold their professional code of ethics and prioritize client needs.

References

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