

The Ethics of Dual Relationships in Higher Education

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Dual relationships between professors and students have many ethical risks. This article discusses how the professor's role, characteristics of the situation, characteristics of the student, and a set of four decision criteria can be used to assess the risks of dual relationships. The examples of a professor who is involved in a consensual sexual relationship with a student and a professor who has a friend who wants to enroll in his or her class are used to demonstrate how the decision criteria can be applied. Several general characteristics of dual relationships are discussed.

Key words: dual-role relationships, dual relationships, higher education, ethics

The ethics of dual relationships between professors and students are unclear and largely unexplored. When dual relationships are discussed, it is often in the context of the therapist-client relationship (e.g., Pope, 1991). As both Matthews (1991) and Keith-Spiegel and Koocher (1985) indicated, however, there are multiple opportunities for dual relationships in the educational context.

Dual relationships in an educational setting have received relatively little attention perhaps because those in higher education are often not given explicit training on how to teach. The training that is provided does not include the ethical issues of professor-student relationships. One indicator of this is that there is very little literature on the ethics of teaching (Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985). A specific example of the lack of coverage comes from the work of Glaser and Thorpe (1986), who reported that only 22% of those responding to a survey of all the female members from the 1983 Division 12 (Clinical Psychology) membership roles of the American Psychological Association (APA) had received instruction in graduate school on the issue of sexual relationships between professors and students.

Given this situation, it is likely that many professors learned principles related to the teaching role through indirect socialization. Throughout their undergraduate and graduate careers, students are exposed to the behavior of faculty members. Faculty serve as models for ethical behavior, whether or not they are conscious of doing so. It is not surprising given the indirect nature of this process that the ethics of complicated relationships are unclear.

There are few written guidelines governing professor–student relationships (Zalk, Paludi, & Dederich, 1990). However, one set of guidelines is provided by the APA. The ethics of dual relationships in the educational setting are covered by the statement that psychologists should not exploit the trust and dependency of students and that psychologists should “avoid dual relationships that could impair their professional judgment or increase the risk of exploitation” (APA, 1990a, p. 393). The guidelines, however, do not address whether it is ethical for a professor to engage in a sexual relationship with a student (Keith-Spiegel & Koocher, 1985). Sexual intimacies are explicitly prohibited only in therapist–client relationships.

Recently, the APA (1990b) published suggested revisions in the ethical principles that deal explicitly with dual relationships in education. The revisions emphasize the ethical problems of dual relationships such as conflict of interest, impaired objectivity, impaired professional judgment, and increased risk of exploitation. They explicitly prohibit sexual relationships with current students.

These revisions, if adopted, will provide useful guidelines for concerned educators, but not all professors (even in psychology) are members of APA. It is useful then to outline some of the ethical issues inherent in dual relationships.

ASSESSING THE ETHICAL RISKS OF DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

Several situations involve dual relationships. For example, professors may have a professional colleague, a family member, or a friend who wants to take their class; professors may have a desire to become friends with a member of a class they are currently teaching; professors may want to engage in a business relationship with a member of a current class; professors and their students may be members of the same social organization or church; professors may desire to date their current students; professors may desire to become sexually involved with current students; or professors who are also therapists may have clients who wish to take their courses. All of these situations have a possible conflict of interest, but how do we decide which ones pose a significant threat to the educational process?

The first step is to analyze the professor’s role, characteristics of the situa-

tion, and student characteristics. This analysis focuses on the professor rather than the student, because the professor has the professional responsibility of acting in an ethical manner toward students.

The teaching role is rather complex. The professor's role includes teaching, not only in the narrow sense of the specific course material involved, but also in the wider sense of modeling for students how to use authority and knowledge appropriately. Trustworthiness is part of this role. Students often reveal sensitive information to professors, as they might to a therapist or a medical doctor, and they trust professors not to use this information to exploit them. Another component of this role is objective and equitable evaluation of students. In addition, professors should provide equal learning opportunities for all students. If one student has access to a professor's notes or extended tutoring sessions, then all students should have the opportunity for such access. The final component of the professor's role is power. Inherent in the professor-student relationship is the power of the professor over the student. The power comes from two sources; the professor both evaluates the student and is the authority in the subject matter (Paludi, 1990; Zalk et al., 1990).

Several student characteristics are important in analyzing the ethical considerations of a dual relationship. Both age and gender of the student influence the likelihood of certain types of dual relationships. Younger students may be more in awe of the professor's authority, whereas older students may have more interests in common with the professor (Schneider, 1987). The gender of the student may become relevant if a professor approaches a student for romantic involvement. The student's status as a graduate or undergraduate means that a student has opportunities for different relationships and faces different types of evaluations by faculty. For example, a graduate student may have more repeated and individualized contact with a professor than an undergraduate. A student's physical attractiveness may influence the likelihood of a professor engaging in a dual relationship. Several researchers have found that physical attractiveness is a powerful influence on attraction and liking (for a review, see Langlois, 1986).

The particular situation provides the context for examining both the professor's role and characteristics of the students. The degree of intimacy present may vary. In this case, I am using *intimacy* to mean access to personal information that is available to one or both parties either prior to the dual relationship or because of it. The degree of sexual attraction can also vary. One can argue that, to a certain extent, as long as we are considering human behavior there will be some degree of sexuality in a relationship. It is important to consider, however, the degree to which this sexual attraction is made explicit, the degree to which sexual behaviors are displayed, and the reasons for the attraction. Another dimension of the situation is the degree of contact in a professional role. Contact can range from almost zero (e.g., when a student is enrolled in the university but not in courses in a professor's department) to

frequent contact (e.g., when a student is a graduate student supervised by the professor).

The second step in deciding which dual relationships pose a significant threat to the educational process is to evaluate the ethical risk of the relationship by asking seven questions concerning whether the teaching role of the professor is compromised.

1. What is the student in the dual relationship learning? The educational goal is for students to develop their own competence, not to develop a dependency on having a "special" relationship with a faculty member.
2. What are other students learning? They should learn that all are treated equitably rather than learning that some have special privileges.
3. Does the student involved have a choice? There is some question about whether it is possible for a student who is in the less powerful position to feel that there are no consequences for refusing a professor's requests (Jacobs, 1991; Paludi, 1990).
4. Do all students have the same opportunity for access to a professor's attention? It is the professor's responsibility to make sure opportunities for consulting are offered equitably; the student's responsibility is to take advantage of these opportunities.
5. Is there actual or perceived loss of objectivity? A professor may feel that she or he has maintained objectivity in the evaluation process and may have maintained such objectivity. It may be difficult, if not impossible, however, to convince others that this is the case. The perceived loss of objectivity may be just as damaging as the actual loss of objectivity.
6. Are future evaluation decisions influenced? If there is a loss of objectivity (either real or perceived), then all evaluation decisions from that point on may be influenced.
7. What are the consequences for other faculty? Other faculty members may find that students lump all faculty members together as a group and expect to get similar treatment from all. They may find that it disrupts their ability to maintain a congenial working relationship with a colleague. Other faculty may also find that increased time is spent dealing with resolving issues resulting from dual relationships that have soured.

The final step in determining the ethical risk of a relationship is to use a set of four decision criteria to evaluate the answers to these questions. First, is the professorial role negatively compromised? Here it is necessary to refer back to the components of the professor's role and to remember that more is taught by a professor than course material. Students are also learning about the ethics of dealing with others. Second, is the professor exploiting the student? Two important issues are (a) the extent to which the power of the professor is responsible for establishing the relationship and (b) the extent to

which a student can choose not to participate in the relationship. Third, is the professor increasing the likelihood of being exploited? This can happen in situations in which keeping the relationship secret becomes important or in situations in which the student has privileged access to the professor. Fourth, is the professor's behavior interfering with the professional roles of other faculty? At issue here is whether a professor's behavior has gone far enough beyond the appropriate professional boundaries that others must intervene.

Two themes that underlie these criteria need to be made explicit. One is that professors are professionals and as such their behavior should be governed by principles such as those specified by APA. The specific principle applying to dual relationships is that psychologists (and here professors can be substituted) should avoid dual relationships that interfere with their role as a professional. Professors must decide whether the relationship interferes with their teaching behavior. The second theme is based on virtue ethics as discussed by Jordan and Meara (1990). Virtue ethics stresses the importance of the question, "Who shall I be?" In making decisions about dual relationships, professors must ask themselves not only whether their behavior will be influenced, but also whether their professional self-concept will be influenced. The issue for the professor making a decision about a dual relationship is, "Will the integrity of my professorial self be damaged?"

APPLICATION OF THE DECISION CRITERIA

I use two examples to demonstrate how the decision criteria can be applied. The first is of a professor who is involved in a consensual sexual relationship with a student. One reason I have chosen this example is because this is a situation that elicits diverse opinions about ethics (Fitzgerald, Weitzman, Gold, & Ormerod, 1988; McCormack, 1985; Zalk et al., 1990). Another reason for choosing this situation is that it is the only situation that has been addressed to any significant extent in the literature.

Most of the work on sexual relationships between professors and students focuses on the issue of sexual harassment. The definitions for *sexual harassment* include a range of behaviors from actual sexual contact to sexual innuendoes. Who is being harassed? On average, it is estimated that 30% of college women are sexually harassed (Benson & Thomson, 1982; Fitzgerald, Shullman, et al., 1988). Sexual harassment of male students does occur, but it is relatively rare (Fitzgerald, Shullman, et al., 1988).

Who is doing the harassing? One survey of college faculty from a major research university reported that about 25% of the men reported engaging in sexual relationships of some nature with their students. The number of female faculty who reported engaging in such behavior was extremely low (Fitzgerald, Weitzman, et al., 1988). Two surveys of women with doctorates in psychology

reported that an average of 15% were sexually involved with their male professors (Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Robinson & Reid, 1985).

It is not easy to disentangle from these statistics how many of the relationships were consensual. Given the power differential, however, there is some question about whether any sexual relationship between a professor and a student can be consensual (Hoffman, 1986; Jacobs, 1991; Paludi, 1990). In addition, Fitzgerald, Weitzman, et al. (1988) reported that, of the male faculty members who reported sexual involvement with their students, nearly all thought the relationships were consensual. Because consensual relationships are likely to be a subset of sexual harassment relationships, I argue that, based on the sexual harassment statistics, these relationships occur often enough to be a matter of concern. The statistics also indicate that the vast majority of such relationships are between male faculty and female students, so that is the specific situation on which I focus.

What are the characteristics of the professor involved in a sexual dual relationship? Neither age nor discipline can be used as discriminating factors. Benson and Thomson (1982) performed a survey of undergraduate students and reported that professors who approach students sexually come from all age groups and disciplines. The type of supervisory relationship may be predictive. Glaser and Thorpe (1986) reported that women graduate students in clinical psychology programs found that research and academic advisers were more likely to approach them on a sexual basis than were clinical supervisors and course instructors. Another characteristic is being unaware of the effects of certain behaviors. Those who counsel the victims of sexual harassment on college campuses (Truax, 1989) often find that the man's perception of the meaning of the situation differs from the woman's. The man thinks he is being friendly and supportive and the woman feels harassed. It is also possible that professors are using the relationship to meet their own self-esteem needs (Jacobs, 1991).

A psychoanalytic perspective on the characteristics of the professional involved in a sexual dual relationship is provided by Rutter (1989). He interviewed men and women who had been involved in sexual dual relationships in both academia and other settings. Typically, the man was in a position of authority over the woman. According to Rutter, sexuality for men is most intense when it is forbidden. Many men perceive the woman as important in helping them reach the feminine side of their personality. The men who are at risk for having what Rutter calls a "forbidden zone" relationship are those who feel that a woman can heal them and provide self-validation. Myths in our society (e.g., that women have special healing, nurturing, and sexual powers and that women should defer to men) increase the chances that a man will decide whether it is acceptable to engage in a forbidden zone relationship. If the relationship does not work out, then it can be explained in terms of a third societal myth, that women have special destructive powers.

The profile of the woman student involved in a sexual dual relationship presents a sharp contrast. Many of the characteristics of the women point to their vulnerability. Truax (1989) estimated that 35% of female students who are approached sexually by male professors were previous victims of incest or assault. Glaser and Thorpe (1986) reported that female graduate students involved with male faculty members were more likely to be divorced or separated. Robinson and Reid (1985) found that women were more likely to be under age 25 when involved with a male faculty member.

In his case studies, Rutter (1989) found that the relationship often occurred at a time when women felt they were growing in a new direction, both personally and intellectually. Many women felt that the relationship had important nonsexual value to them. They placed trust in the man and had shared intimate information with him prior to the sexual relationship. It was common for the women to report feeling that for the first time in their lives someone recognized them for what they really were. When the issue of sexual involvement arose, many women complied because they wanted to remain important to the man, and they did not want to end the relationship. After the relationship was over, many women felt guilty and blamed themselves for getting involved.

What is the outcome of most of these relationships? Glaser and Thorpe (1986) reported a trend toward negative evaluations of the relationships over time by the women involved. Women say that they did not feel coerced during the relationship, but looking back on the experience they can see that they were. They also said that the relationships were detrimental (Robinson & Reid, 1985). Interestingly, only 2% of psychotherapy professors (men and women) reported thinking that such relationships were beneficial, even though six times that number reported engaging in them (Pope, Levenson, & Schover, 1979). After the relationship is ended, both parties can suffer from grief and embarrassment and from the loss of what could have been a productive professor-student relationship.

The relationships pose significant problems for women's self-esteem. A problem women have both during the relationship and after it ends is evaluating their intellectual skills independently from their sexuality. It becomes difficult for women to separate whether the professor actually valued their intellectual capacity or whether he just wanted to go to bed with them. This can create self-concept problems for college-age women, especially because this is one of the times for working on identity issues (Dziech & Weiner, 1984). The cases in which women have difficulty sorting out their role in consenting to the relationship may pose significant threats to self-esteem because of feelings of deserving what happened and of blaming themselves for getting involved (Walker, Erickson, & Woolsey, 1985). The relationship may also create problems for the man's self-esteem. Male professionals who entered into the relationship in order to meet their own psychological needs may feel depressed

after the relationship ends and they realize that the woman was not the solution to their problem (Rutter, 1989).

Why do these relationships develop? The obvious answer to this question is that they develop because men are naturally attracted to women and vice versa. This answer is unsatisfying because it leaves many questions unanswered. Why, for example, do women become involved with professors when they are surrounded by male peers? A survey of college women found that very few reported a spontaneous sexual attraction to male professors (Dziech & Weiner, 1984). Why do male professors initiate relationships they think will be detrimental?

An answer that explains more of the data is that these relationships develop due to the simultaneous effects of the unequal power relationship, sexual interest, and differential socialization of men and women (Benson & Thomson, 1982). In our society, men are socialized to initiate sexual relationships. Theoretically, women are free to reject these advances, but in a situation of unequal power this is not the case. In this circumstance, a woman realizes that rejecting the sexual advance may lead to adverse consequences for her. In addition, women are socialized to find power sexually appealing, so they may find the sexual advances of the professor exciting (Walker et al., 1985).

Other important socialization differences may contribute to the problem. These include differences in communication styles and differences in orientation to responsibility. An example of the difference in communication styles that can lead to misunderstanding is reported by Tannen (1990). She found that women often say "yeah" during a conversation to indicate that they are listening, but men use it to mean yes. One can imagine what type of misunderstanding this can lead to during the initial stages of a dual relationship. Gender differences also have been reported in views of individual responsibility. Many men tend to view individuals as having responsibility for their own actions, whereas many women tend to emphasize that an individual has responsibilities for maintaining relationships with other people (Tannen, 1990). Again it is easy to imagine the misunderstandings that can result from these different orientations. A male professor may believe that a female student has free choice and the right to take responsibility for her own actions, but the female student is concerned about whether her rejection of sexual advances will harm the relationship.

The psychoanalytic explanation adds the factor of motivation. According to Rutter (1989), both men and women are trying to reach hidden parts of themselves, and they mistakenly believe that a forbidden zone relationship will help them. Because of the way men and women are raised in our society, they tend to deny the parts of their personality that are associated with the opposite gender. Therefore, women are motivated to let the more powerful man help them discover their own power, and men are motivated to want women to awaken their sense of self-worth and of being able to nurture.

How does this picture of the sexual dual relationship between a professor and a current student fit with the decision criteria mentioned earlier? Is the professor's role negatively compromised? Yes, every aspect of the professor's role is influenced negatively by such a relationship. Assuming that the professor does not have such a relationship with all class members, the professor has taught other students that favoritism exists and that there are not equal opportunities for all. This means that the professor is discriminating based on gender and sexual preference. Female students receive the message that their sexuality is important in attracting a professor's attention, and male students have learned that in this case they do not have equal status with female students. Their resentment can lead them to trivialize the accomplishments of female students. In addition, male students may receive the message that if you are a man in a position of power it entitles you to sexual privilege (Franklin, Moglen, Zatlin-Boring, & Angress, 1981).

Is the professor exploiting the student or increasing the risk of being exploited? The professor has violated the trust of the student that he as a professional can be counted on not to exploit her. Even if the professor makes every effort to grade the student fairly, there is a perception on the part of others that the student has received unequal treatment. The student herself may question whether she has been treated fairly. The professor has also increased the risk of exploiting the student due to ill feelings once the relationship is over, and he has also increased the risk of being exploited by the student. For many students, these ill feelings can have long-term consequences. Many undergraduate students will be continuing their education and may have to take required classes either from the professor or in the professor's department, and many need letters of recommendation.

Graduate students also run risks, perhaps even greater than those of undergraduates (Schneider, 1987). Graduate students often will remain in the same department as the professor; in fact, that professor may be the only one in their speciality area. Faculty make frequent decisions about the future of graduate students in terms of who will be retained in the program and who will be given funding. Letters of recommendation are critical to getting a professional job. It is important to note that the assumption that older students or graduate students are adults and should be considered as mutually consenting in these relationships ignores the very real power of the professor. Older, more mature students are not immune to the power of the professor, and they risk damaging their careers and self-images both during and after the relationship.

Is the behavior of the professor interfering with the professional roles of other faculty? The answer to this question is likely to be yes. To the extent that the relationship between the professor and the student has become recognized, other faculty members have to spend time deciding how to ensure that all students are being treated fairly. In addition, other faculty members may find that students generalize from the behavior of one faculty member to the rest

of the department and expect similar behaviors. Female faculty members may find that the message that women should be treated as sexual objects interferes with their own performance.

The discussion up to this point has focused on evaluating the decision criteria in terms of the principle of avoiding relationships that interfere with the professional role. The other issue in the decision criteria is whether the integrity of the self-concept, as it relates to the professional role, is damaged. If a professor is engaging in a relationship that involves exploitation, treating students unfairly, and burdening other faculty members, then the integrity of the professorial self-concept is likely to be damaged. It will be difficult to uphold professional standards in other situations if the answer to the question "Who am I?" is "I am a person who is willing to use my power to enter an exploitative relationship."

So far the discussion has focused on a consensual relationship between a male professor and a female student. Certainly other combinations are possible (e.g., homosexual relationships). Does the application of the decision criteria change when the genders of participants in the relationship change? To a large extent, the answer is no. Although it is the case that if two men or two women are involved we can assume similar gender socialization and similar communication patterns, there is still the power differential between the professor and the student. This power difference exists even in the case of a female professor and a male student. The power imbalance means that a student may feel uncomfortable in rejecting the overtures of a professor. If a relationship develops, the professional role and self-concept are likely to be negatively compromised. In fact, the risk of exploitation by the student may be greater in the case of a homosexual relationship. At the beginning of the relationship, the professor may have more power, but this power imbalance may flip by the end of the relationship if the student threatens to make the relationship public. Homosexuality is not widely accepted in our culture, and allegations of homosexual behaviors are likely to be more damaging to the reputation of the professor than allegations of heterosexual behavior.

What about nonsexual dual relationships? For example, what if a friend of long standing wishes to take a professor's course? In many ways this relationship poses the same problems as a sexual relationship. This type of relationship can negatively compromise the professional role of the professor. If the professor has a more intimate relationship with the friend than other students, this can interfere with evaluating the student objectively and with treating other students fairly. Other students may feel that it is "not what you know, but who you know" that is important for success. By engaging in this dual relationship, the professor may be increasing the risk of exploiting the student and the risk of being exploited. The friend, who is now a student, may not feel free to say no to social invitations or requests for favors. Alternatively, the friend might try to take advantage of the relationship to gain access to information about tests or special consideration on papers. The professor's behavior may interfere

with the roles of other faculty. Other students may generalize that all faculty members show favoritism. Faculty members may find that any evaluation decisions they make about the student are influenced by the fact that the student is a friend of a colleague.

Obviously the cleanest solution to handling the potential problems raised by a dual relationship is to avoid it. In many cases this is possible and desirable given the serious problems raised by dual relationships. There will be occasions, however, when this option presents as many problems as the dual relationship. For example, if the professor is the only one teaching a required course, a close friend may have to take it in order to graduate. Does this mean that the professor is forced to choose between committing a breach of ethics or denying a student entry into a required course?

There are no easy solutions to the question of how to handle a dual relationship that seems unavoidable. The decision criteria and the themes underlying them, however, can provide ideas about workable solutions. The first step is becoming aware of how a dual relationship can negatively influence professional judgment and lead to an increased risk of exploitation. The decision criteria discussed earlier can be used to evaluate systematically the potential impact of the relationship on both the professional role and self-concept. Once this has been done, the next step is to identify preventive measures. For example, if a friend enrolls in the professor's class and the professor is concerned about providing equal opportunities for access to all students, he or she might reach an agreement with the friend to minimize extracurricular social contact. This agreement would continue for as long as the friend is in the professor's class or will be evaluated by the professor.

It is important for professors to examine the motives for participating in a dual relationship. Examples of more positive motives are a desire to meet the need for generativity and a desire to facilitate intellectual growth. Examples of less positive motives include what Jacobs (1991, p. 130) termed "parentification" of the student. In this case, role reversal occurs and the student plays the parent role for the professor. In the example of the friend taking the professor's class, the professor might encourage the friend to take the parent role by requesting constant feedback and advice about the course and about how other students see the class. Another less positive motive is a need to raise low self-esteem. The professor might expect the friend to tell all of their mutual friends what a great teacher he or she is.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that there are several types of dual relationships. Some types, such as a consensual sexual relationship, should be avoided. Other types may raise ethical issues but can be handled with appropriate safeguards. As the discussion of the two types addressed in this article demonstrates, there are several

common issues in evaluating the ethical consequences of any dual relationship. First, it is important to remember that a professor and a student may perceive the nature of a relationship differently. Second, there is the issue of unequal power, which influences the perceptions of the nature of the relationship, the risks of the relationship, and the freedom to choose not to be a part of the relationship. Third, professors of all ages, ranks, and disciplines are susceptible to the lure of dual relationships. Fourth, graduate students and undergraduates share the student role, and there are risks to both in dual relationships. Fifth, the central issue in setting this boundary is power. According to McCormack (1985) the professor's power varies directly with the student's desire to achieve goals under the control of the professor. Once a student has progressed to the point at which these goals can be met outside the professor-student relationship, then the power of the professor diminishes. In this case, the conflict of interest also diminishes and the risks of a dual relationship become smaller. The more power the professor has over the student, the larger the risks and the more unacceptable the relationship.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Portions of this article were presented at the meeting of the Arkansas Psychological Association, Little Rock, Arkansas, November 1990.

Preparation of this article was supported by the Marie Wilson Howells Endowment.

I thank two anonymous reviewers and Kelly Carroll for their comments and suggestions.

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