An Exploration of the Development of Professional Boundaries

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Abstract

Professional boundaries and ethical behavior are fundamental principles in the field of social work, yet there is great variation in how individual social workers interpret and apply these principles. This review of current literature explores the extent to which personal traits, job duties, and agency policy may contribute to the development, interpretation, and application of professional boundaries.

Keywords: Professional boundaries, professional ethics, social work ethics, development of boundaries, code of ethics

1.   Introduction

The nature of the social work profession carries unique challenges for practitioners. In order to be effective in their roles, social workers must develop relationships with their clients built on mutual trust and an understanding of client strengths, challenges, and goals (Compton, Galaway, & Cournoyer, 2005). This intimate relationship and clinical approach can blur the boundary between professional and personal communications and behaviors. It is expected that social workers practice by adhering to the code of ethics developed through their professional organizations (Fine & Teram, 2009; National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Two significant factors affect how individual social workers respond to that expectation. First, a comprehensive professional code of ethics was not available until the late 1900s (Reamer, 1998). Second, while the code prescribes standards for many professional behaviors, there continues to be widespread debate regarding personal versus professional values, ethical decisions and client needs, and individual interpretation of the written code of ethics (Landau & Osmo, 2003).

The social work profession has experienced several metamorphoses over time (Reamer, 1998). As a result, it is not unreasonable to expect that individual social workers may have different interpretations of professional responsibilities. Understanding the factors that contribute to the development of professional boundaries may lie at the base of diverse interpretations and could, ultimately, inform future professional codes, practice guidelines, and educational efforts (Davidson, 2005; Fine & Teram, 2009; Green, Gregory, & Mason, 2006; Osmo & Landau, 2006).

2.   History

Although social work was not established as a formal profession until the late 20th century, individuals have been doing social work since the early 1900s. Through the years, the emphasis and interpretation of values and ethics have undergone several different phases. Early in the profession's inception, social workers were primarily concerned with the values and needs of their clients

as they advocated for individual and community change in response to social injustices. By the mid-1900s, social work pioneers recognized that the previously held emphasis on client values must be widened to include social work professional values and standards. While there were early attempts to increase education, create ethics committees, and introduce a professional code by which social workers should abide, it was not until 1947 that the Delegate Conference of the American Association of Social Workers adopted the first official code of ethics (Reamer, 1998).

In the early 1980s, as ethical dilemmas and discussions emerged in many fields across the country, social work literature began to focus on ethical challenges, complications, and decision making within the profession. Those discussions shifted the focus from client-centered versus profession-centered values to a focus on sequential decision-making processes to help navigate the complexities of ethical issues (Reamer, 1998). Partially as a result of the changes that have occurred over time, not all social workers and social service agencies have embedded the comprehensive code of ethics into daily practice. Furthermore, there are several guidelines in the written code that require situational interpretation. This results in diverse opinions and behaviors between and among practitioners and agencies.

3.   The Research Question

While each step in this historical development has increased the profession's understanding of how social workers *should* behave, it has done little to help the field understand how social workers develop their professional boundaries and ethical stance, thereby defining *why* social workers behave as they do (Green et al., 2006). As society and technology change, professional encounters with values, boundaries, and ethics increase in complexity (Fine & Teram, 2009). Despite the recommended, and sometimes mandated, student education and continued education promoted at the state, national, and international levels, social workers violate the code of ethics on an alarming

basis (Davidson, 2005). Gaining an understanding of how social workers develop and interpret their professional boundary limits may enhance educational efforts and agency policy, prompting a minimization of client harm caused by social worker violations.

In a qualitative study with child welfare supervisors, Bogo and Dill (2008) discovered that policy, organizational culture, supervisory relationships, and personal development all contributed to the participant's professional behavior in the supervisory role. Other research suggests that religion, culture, and community demographics contribute to one's sense of values and boundaries (Reamer, 2006). While agencies and workers cannot control certain environmental factors such as rural versus urban settings, they can affect organizational influences that may influence professional boundaries. Based on the proposition that professional boundaries are shaped by a worker's personal development and professional environment, current literature was examined to answer the question: How do personal traits, job duties, and agency culture impact professional boundaries and ethical behavior?

4.   Personal Traits

In order to gain an understanding of the individual social worker's professional behaviors, it may be important to examine personal influences—especially in relation to the development of professional boundaries. By the time social work students enter the professional work world, they have lived approximately one-fourth of their lives (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010). Individuals who study and become social workers as nontraditional students may have considerably more life experience. In either case, only the latter two to four of those lived years are devoted to professional social work education. It is reasonable to assume that new social workers may draw on all their life experiences, not just formal education, when approaching and forming their professional selves. These lived experiences likely shape how social workers interact with their clients.

In her work regarding the role of power in social work, Mandell (2008) opines that the previously accepted concept of *use of self* should be revisited by the profession. Use of self "is generally understood as being centered in a core, definable self shaped by personal history and psychological and emotional experiences; in many instances it is understood to be operating outside of our consciousness" (Mandell, 2008, p. 237). In her argument supporting the important elements that use of self involves, Mandell draws a strong link to the development of professional boundaries.

> These serve us in setting and maintaining boundaries and confidentiality, conveying empathy and respect, building rapport and trust, and modeling constructive social behavior. Use of self is often considered by workers to be synonymous with boundaries and personal integrity, especially when they are in tension with the dictates of the professional code of ethics. What constitutes appropriate boundaries and ethical behavior tends to vary according to the context and one's own theoretical framework. (Mandell, 2008, p. 237)

Mandell maintains that the unique personhood of individual social workers enters into all social and professional interactions affecting, on a conscious or an unconscious level, the social worker and the client. She extends this concept to areas of practice that evoke tension and stress, suggesting that each social worker approaches these challenges from a unique subjective viewpoint. That individual perspective is the foundation on which the social worker will proceed with the client (Mandell). Mandell's argument supports the notion that personal traits influence the development of professional boundaries.

The findings from two different studies, which were designed to examine the experiences of social workers, revealed a similarly close connection between personal and professional influences (Buchbinder, 2007; Françozo & Cassorla, 2004). Françozo and Cassorla (2004) interviewed 10 Brazilian social workers at the height of the country's fragile social policies. The social workers were asked to tell their life histories, from the moment they selected social work as their chosen profession to the current time. The authors situated their study among several others that examined the reason individuals chose a social work career. Among those cited is Reynolds who, the authors write, "describes her journey as a social worker, discussing the close interchange between personal and professional experience" (Françozo & Cassorla, 2004, p. 212). Reynolds' response typifies those of the participants Françozo and Cassorla interviewed, drawing distinct linkages between their professional and personal viewpoints.

Buchbinder's (2007) study of 25 Jewish, female social workers in Israel examined "the reciprocal influences between their personal and professional worlds" (p. 163). The focus of the research included "On what ways do meaningful life events influence one's professional career?" (p. 164). Powerful statements were made by the participants in Buchbinder's study regarding the influence of their childhood and young adult years on their social work experiences:

> I learned since I was little that you cannot trust this world, you must act on your own. …If I am at work and I see someone who is alone, it activates me, sometimes up to the point of losing control, to do everything to help. …Over the years I had the feeling that I had to give something in order to feel strong; at that time I felt that helping others strengthened me as well. (p. 170)

In the telling of her relationship with her father another participant states, "It was also something obsessive; it was something with no limits that I took totally into my work" (Buchbinder, 2007, p. 169). This social worker recognized how

her personal history contributed to her lack of boundaries, stressing the need to remain vigilant to her obsessive tendencies. While the intent of Buchbinder's study was not to examine the development of professional boundaries and ethics, the shared life histories from the participants reveal strong connections between personal influences and professional behavior, including professional boundaries.

The common thread between the research of Mandell (2008), Françozo & Cassorla (2004), and Buchbinder (2007) focuses on how personal traits affect professional behaviors. While their evidence has limitations, their research provides solid justification of the need for further understanding around this issue.

5.   Job Duties

A second factor to be explored in the development of professional boundaries and ethics is that of job duties. Social work jobs place practitioners in a vast array of settings and situations requiring different levels of involvement. A social worker might secure a position that includes living with clients (residential treatment centers), transporting clients (child protection services), meeting vulnerable clients in their own home (hospice work), or meeting clients only in a formal setting (hospital or clinic work) (Compton, Galaway, & Cournoyer, 2005). How might these different practice settings impact the development of professional boundaries and ethical behaviors?

Bogo and Dill (2008) discussed boundary issues with child welfare supervisors who participated in their study. The supervisors stressed that child welfare work, unlike many other areas of social work, is based on mandates that require protection of children while maintaining a respectful approach with the client and client systems. Upholding this fine line between two different client needs (those of the child and those of the adult) requires the development and continual monitoring of strong, clear professional boundaries.

Conversely, Sherr, Singletary, and Rogers (2009) studied the role of spirituality and social work in a Christian-based agency whose primary goal is to aid clients by connecting them to a support group of parishioners from area congregations. Historically, there has been strong debate regarding the separation of religion from social work practice. Yet, in this agency, support from a religious perspective is the foundation of the program. The social workers practicing in this agency were "upfront about the religious nature of the program. They even specifically referred to God in the screening process" (Sherr et al., 2009, p. 162). In another setting, the discussion of religion as a part of treatment could be considered a violation of the code of ethics (NASW, 2008). This is a prime example of how job duties may have an influence on professional boundaries and ethical behaviors.

Another example of the influence of job duties on practicing social workers is related to the definition of a client. There is widespread debate between practitioners and agencies regarding this issue. At what point does a client become a former client, thereby allowing for a different type of relationship between the former client and the social worker? Mattison, Jayaratne, and Croxton (2002) found significant correlations between social workers' response to that question and their respective areas of practice. Practitioners in private practice tended to take the stance of "once a client, always a client" (Mattison et al., 2002, p. 58); whereas public-sector workers viewed the client as moving to former status at the end of services. Those same public-sector social workers had a significantly higher response to the approval of multiple or dual relationships with clients, which—depending on one's definition of a client—may not be a violation of the code of ethics (NASW, 2008).

An alternative look at the influence of job duties on professional boundaries and ethical behavior is to examine it from the client's perspective. Several authors (Clements, 2004; Swartz, Perry, Brown, Swartz, & Vinokur, 2008; Ungar, Manuel, Mealey, Thomas, & Campbell, 2004) suggest that a less rigid and formal approach (i.e., relaxing professional boundaries) may result in more effective client-worker relationships and outcomes.

A study conducted with 109 patients in a dialysis center focused on the relationship between patient-staff interactions and the patient's mental health. There was a strong correlation between decreased depressive symptoms in patients and increased personal interactions from staff (Swartz et al., 2008). The findings suggested that the more personal disclosure a staff member permitted with a patient, the better the patient responded, which correlated to improved mental health status. It could be speculated that since the social worker's goal is to improve client outcomes, lowering boundaries related to self-disclosure in a setting such as a dialysis unit might be warranted.

In a recent project with 6,000 tenants of a housing provider, Clements (2004) discovered that when she assumed more professional roles and behaviors she was less effective in instilling self-determination among the tenants.

> I found times when I did not act in my role of community development worker and acted instead as one human being interacting with other human beings. Any time when I acted primarily in this capacity communication improved, relationships improved and resources flowed. (Clements, 2004, p. 71)

Clements increased the time she spent with the tenants in social activities, including recreational drinking, craft sessions, picnics, and cultural events, in order to maintain effective communication.

Similarly, Ungar et al. (2004) studied the effectiveness of indigenous workers (community guides) in helping oppressed individuals and groups become a part of their communities. Their findings were in direct contrast to how social workers are taught to conduct themselves when working with clients (NASW, 2008). The community guides (active and participatory leaders in the community) were engaged in personal relationships with their neighbors, yet their efforts to promote effective change were highly successful. These findings threaten the "insider-outsider dichotomy" (Ungar et al., 2004, p. 559) that is typically supported by the social work profession.

Without additional research, generalizations about social workers adapting their professional boundaries and ethical behaviors according to job duties are inconclusive. However, the works of Swartz et al. (2008), Clements (2004), and Ungar et al. (2004) provide evidence that job duties influence social worker behaviors, which may in turn influence professional boundaries.

6.   Agency Culture

The final focus of this literature review is that of agency culture. There is considerable overlap between agency culture and job duties, but they are not entirely synonymous. Job duties refer to the day-to-day responsibilities of a social worker in a specific position. Agency culture includes formal job descriptions, policies, procedures, and the organization's general view of client-worker relationships (Schein, 2004).

Due to the multiple and sometimes conflicting interpretations of professional boundaries and ethical behaviors, Elaine Congress (2001) recommended that agencies develop policies. Responding to a gap in the literature, she surveyed 87 social work educators to explore their beliefs regarding dual relationships with social work students. Congress (2001) analyzed the results against comparable studies that measured social worker beliefs regarding dual relationships with clients. Not unlike in other published studies, the social work educators had differing views on the definition of a former student versus a current student.

The most marked difference between this study and other comparable studies involved the issue of sexual relationships with former clients/students. While the vast majority of social workers (96.4%) believed a sexual relationship with a client, even a former client, was unacceptable behavior, 39.1% of the social work educators believed sexual relations with former students were not unethical (Congress, 2001). Based on her findings and the obvious ambiguity around this issue, Congress advocated for the implementation

of agency policy to influence and enforce professional boundaries and ethical practice. This stance calls for agency policy and procedures to dictate professional behaviors rather than relying on social workers to apply their individual interpretations.

Another example of the impact of agency culture on social work practice is being highlighted by the postmodern movement. Ungar (2004) presented the challenges for practitioners who subscribe to the postmodern theory. Laced throughout his argument is the conflict between postmodern practice, which encompasses the diminution of boundaries, and the traditional culture of social service agencies, which promotes a clear division between client and worker. Ungar recognized that a movement toward postmodern social work confronts the traditional services delivery system. "[W]orkers in the meantime have to practice in ways agreeable to their employers" (p. 495). In essence, Ungar confirmed the notion that agency culture influences professional boundaries and ethical behaviors, regardless of the beliefs that individual social workers may hold.

As a clinician working with children and youth, Marshall (2009) summarized the impact of agency culture on clients. Citing a study of 248 practitioners conducted in Hawaii in 2000, Marshall asserted that agency policies are established in response to professional fears: fear of physical harm, fear of litigation, and fear of damage to one's reputation (p. 37). She opined that global policies may, inadvertently, prohibit social workers from demonstrating adequate care and compassion to their clients. For instance, a *no touch* policy prohibits the social worker from modeling affection to a child whose therapeutic goal is to learn how to trust and love. This discrepancy between actions and words may, unintentionally, have a negative impact on clinical results.

As demonstrated by these authors, policies and procedures often dictate professional behaviors. It may be assumed, then, that agency culture influences professional boundaries and ethics. However, whether agency culture assists in the development and maintenance of an individual's professional boundaries and ethical behaviors or merely reinforces compliance, cannot be ascertained through these studies.

7.   Discussion

A common theme across the literature stresses the need for education and training for all social workers. Most professional social work organizations and regulatory bodies concur (Reamer, 1998). Every two years in the state of Wisconsin, all certified and licensed social workers are required to participate in four hours of continuing education focused solely on professional ethics and boundaries (Wisconsin Department of Regulation and Licensing, 2010, p. 19). The Council on Social Work Education requires that ethics be taught in all accredited schools of social work in the United States (Council on Social Work Education, 2008, p. 4). This emphasis, combined with the profession's history, proves the value that social work places on professional boundaries and ethical behavior (Marsh, 2003; Reamer, 1998).

Why, then, did readers open a fall 2009 issue of the *Milwaukee Journal Sentinel* to the disturbing story of a Wisconsin social worker who had sexual relations with a client, fathered her baby, and denied the behavior for years until the client stepped forward (Stephenson, 2009)? Is this behavior the result of the social worker's individual interpretation influenced by his personal traits, job duties, or agency culture? Is this evidence that, despite the profession's efforts to clarify professional roles and responsibilities, they have become more confusing? Or is this breach of professional ethics related to some other phenomenon?

While this review of the literature answered neither the questions above nor the question of how personal traits, job duties, and agency culture affect professional boundaries and ethical behavior, it did illuminate some of the confusion within the profession. Citing other studies, Marshall (2009) asserts that agency policy protects the professional. The National Association of

Social Workers touts the code of ethics as a tool to protect clients' rights (NASW, 2008). Community activists and postmodern social workers encourage relaxing professional boundaries in order to serve clients more effectively (Green et al., 2006; Ungar, 2004; Ungar et al., 2004). Practitioners present vastly different interpretations and explanations for their individual professional decisions. This may be due, in part, to the mixed messages that come from the profession itself (Congress, 2001; Fine & Teram, 2009).

One group of authors (Buchbinder, 2007; Françozo & Cassorla, 2004; Mandell, 2008) presents compelling arguments for the often-overlooked influence of a social worker's personal self on professional development. Based on the continued presence of ethical misconduct in spite of the profession's best efforts to provide clear-cut parameters, this is one area of influence that demands additional attention.

Mandell (2007) stresses the need for a process by which social workers can gain insight into their own personhood "comprising individual developmental history and multiple social identities in the context of personal experience, education, socialization and political milieus" (p. 237). She carries her banner into the practice field by discussing the lack of self-monitoring and reflection that is available to guide practicing social workers due to time and funding constraints.

According to the participants in the study conducted by Françozo and Cassorla (2004), their greatest satisfaction, professionally, was connected to their greatest satisfaction, personally. While not a new discovery, it may be an important point in the discussion of professional boundaries and ethical behaviors. That is, the ways in which individual social workers feel most personally satisfied might be closely related to how they develop their professional boundaries.

Buchbinder (2007) drew many connections between the influences of the family-of-origin on social workers' decisions to study the profession. A participant in the study explained how she chose her career:

There is something in our family that is deeply rooted, values of helping others and friendships as being very dominant, really to give something, in the direction of giving and receiving to society and friends. …From the start, I saw myself as working with people, working with problems that are connected with growth. (p. 165)

Buchbinder (2007) suggested these findings be used as an impetus in professional social work training to help social workers connect their past, present, and future personal and professional selves.

8. Conclusion

The scholars cited in this literature review provide an array of evidence that professional social work boundaries and ethical behaviors are influenced by a worker's personal development *and* professional environment. Yet the degree and sequence of those influences is still unanswered, and assumptions cannot be conclusively drawn explaining the differences in social workers' professional behaviors, leaving many opportunities for continued research.

Based on the findings from this literature review and the unethical issues that continue to arise with client-worker relationships, it is important to the profession, the practitioners, and future clients that clarity is brought to this matter. This can be accomplished by keeping the topic of professional boundaries and ethical behavior at the forefront of social work research.

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