A Model for Ethical Management of Faculty-Student Dual Relationships

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The article discusses the nature of faculty-student dual relationships and provides guidelines for their ethical management. Three general guidelines for faculty in maintaining ethical relationships with students are (a) acknowledging the power and responsibility of the faculty role, (b) developing a frame for evaluating faculty-student relationships, and (c) fostering and maintaining a climate that supports ethical relationships with students. As a profession, psychologists should be discussing this issue more openly, and research on problematic faculty-student relationships and their management is warranted. Awareness of dilemmas concerning dual-role relationships and experience in addressing these dilemmas may provide valuable lessons for the student's future professional interactions with clients, students, and other professionals.

In recent years, psychologists have paid increasing attention to the ethical management of dual and overlapping relationships between therapists and clients. However, less attention has been paid to the management of another relationship that involves unavoidable overlap: that between faculty and students. Over the course of training, students and faculty can develop various types of multiple and overlapping relationships within the context of shared interests and close working proximity. These overlapping relationships and changing roles invariably raise ethical questions. The purpose of this article is to discuss the nature of these relationships and to provide guidelines for their ethical management. Because the graduate education setting is more likely to be characterized by closer and more varied faculty—student relationships, the focus here will be on that setting.

Faculty-Student Roles and Problematic Dual Relationships

There are many similarities between the therapist-client and the faculty-student relationship. Both involve an inherently unequal relationship in which one person is seeking a service (therapy or education). There are several bases of power (Douglas, 1985; Raven, 1965), and therapists and faculty alike may exercise these various types of power over their subordinates: reward power (by dispensing approval and grades), coercive power (by disapproving or devaluing actions), referent power (by serving as a role model), information and expert power (by

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possessing knowledge and the authority to dispense it), and legitimate power (by having an implicit contract to provide a service).

However, there are some important differences between faculty-student and therapist-client relationships. Unlike relationships with clients, faculty-student relationships are typically characterized by numerous multiple and overlapping roles. Kitchener (1988) has noted that in our ordinary understanding of the faculty position such overlapping roles are part of the job expectations. For instance, the faculty person must alternately play the roles of provider of knowledge and evaluator of the student's knowledge, mentor of the student's research and supervisor of the graduate research assistant, academic advisor to the student and informer on the student's progress. Furthermore, in professional graduate programs, the faculty must strike a balance between advocating for and enhancing the student's development on the one hand and safeguarding the public from incompetent or unethical professionals on the other. Also, the faculty-student relationship is not static, because the student progresses from neophyte to advanced student, from student to graduate, and from graduate to colleague.

The student faces numerous quandaries in attempting to interface with the various faculty roles. In the classroom the student must be open to learning but may also fear revealing ignorance. When addressing the academic advisor, he or she must know how to obtain appropriate guidance but may be concerned about the consequences of revealing life circumstances that impinge on academic functioning. As a graduate assistant, he or she may want to please and may not know how to handle the imposition of unrealistic demands. As a supervisee, the student may experience trepidation about addressing countertransference issues that involve sensitive personal material.

It is not uncommon in graduate programs for faculty and students to come together in professional and social settings, for example, in colloquiums, receptions, and special events. These activities offer important opportunities for the exchange of scholarly ideas, discussion of professional topics, and socialization of students into the profession. When informal socializing is part of these activities, questions may arise about appropriate levels of personal disclosure between faculty and students. Simi-

larly, mentoring relationships between individual faculty and students may involve unique opportunities for close working relationships. Although mentoring relationships may be much sought after by students for their educational value, they may also present greater risk for student exploitation than do more distant relationships. Also, problem-ridden relationships may follow the student for years. For example, a graduate may feel that she cannot confront continuing sexual harassment by a well-known professor who may have the power to jeopardize her career by, for instance, withholding letters of reference or refusing to recommend appointments.

Some faculty-student circumstances may present greater potential for dual or overlapping relationships than others. For example, a recently divorced and distressed faculty person may find comfort in a student advisee's expression of sympathy. Or young faculty, feeling that they have more in common with similarly aged students than with other faculty, may share personal information with some trusted students. Faculty may also come into contact with students in such community settings as recreation or interest groups. Such dual and overlapping relationships are not uncommon and do not necessarily lead to inappropriate interactions. But they do call for vigilance on the part of faculty, because the potential for harm may arise in the context of differing expectations.

The graduate program represents a small and sometimes rather closed community; such communities present special challenges for the management of ethical relationships because of the unavoidability of multiple relationships (Brown, 1991). Even within the graduate community there may be subcommunities that form because of the need for support or identification among some groups. For example, ethnic faculty and students may be assigned to advising or mentoring groups, and gay or lesbian faculty and students may form associations for the purpose of supporting each other. Such associations may provide much-needed opportunities for support and role modeling. Within these subcommunities there may be different norms and expectations for social interactions. Although specific behaviors may thus have different meanings depending on these norms, it is nevertheless important for faculty to maintain boundaries appropriate to an educational relationship.

Attention to problematic aspects of the faculty-student relationship has generally focused on clear violations of boundaries (e.g., sexual exploitation). Although there is general consensus that such contact is unethical or at least inappropriate, reported rates have been fairly high. A survey of female psychologists by Glaser and Thorpe (1986) found that 17% reported intimate sexual contact with a psychology educator during graduate training, It is noteworthy that evaluations at the time of that contact were neutral, but at the time of the survey many participants perceived that contact as having been extremely exploitive and harmful. Sexual relationships between faculty and students may have far-reaching ramifications. For instance, Pope, Levenson, and Schover (1979) found that engaging in sexual contact as students with educators was statistically related to later sexual contact as professionals. Thus, it may be the case that there is an unfortunate modeling effect when students experience a violation of boundaries during their education. Another aspect of faculty-student relationships that has received some attention relates to the question of a supervisor providing therapy to a

supervisee. It is generally agreed that such a therapy relationship can interfere with the supervisor's ability to appropriately focus on the needs of the supervisee's client and to maintain objectivity in evaluating the supervisee's performance as a therapist (Kurpius, Gibson, Lewis, & Corbet, 1991).

Engaging in sexual intimacies with a student or providing therapy to a student are clear examples of problematic dual relationships. But many other practices can be exploitative: the appropriation of a research assistant's ideas, the ill use of a graduate assistant, a failure to confront academic dishonesty out of fear of losing popularity, and the like. Dual and overlapping faculty-student relationships can be placed on a continuum from obviously exploitative and unethical (e.g., engaging in sexual intimacies with a current student) to potentially benign (e.g., serving as an instructor and an advisor to a student at the same time). The midpoints on this continuum represent the "gray" areas of faculty-student relationships: They are the subtle but little-discussed everyday experiences of faculty and students, and they probably account for the majority of problematic faculty-student relationships. Problematic dual relationships clearly have the potential to be very stressful and harmful to students; students are likely to experience significant emotional distress, which will likely interfere with the educational experience. However, little research has examined the impact of these relationships on students.

Problematic overlapping relationships affect not only the faculty and students directly involved, but as Slimp and Burian (1994) have pointed out, others in the training environment and even the larger professional community. Hostilities between students can arise from the perception of preferential treatment. Also, the professional judgment of faculty or training staff who are involved in dual relationships may be criticized by their colleagues, leading to antagonisms or even ostracism. Slimp and Burian have warned that dual relationships can have even wider impact on the profession as a whole, because students are not learning to set clear professional boundaries, putting them at risk for future boundary difficulties with clients or supervisees.

American Psychological Association (APA) Ethical Guidelines for Student-Faculty Relationships

The 1992 version of the APA Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct contains numerous references to psychologists' relationships with students (APA, 1992). The Concern for Others' Welfare Principle includes students in the list of those for whom psychologists must consider the welfare and rights. One of the ethical standards specifically addresses teaching, training, supervision, research, and publishing; here psychologists are urged to recognize the power they hold over students and avoid engaging in conduct that is demeaning to them (Standard 6.03b). Other standards variously exhort psychologists to be sensitive to the potential harmful effects of other contacts on their work and on those persons with whom they deal because it may not be feasible to avoid social or other nonprofessional contacts with students (Standard 1.17a); resolve potentially harmful multiple relationships with due regard for the best interests of the affected person (Standard 1.17c); and not engage in sexual relationships with students over whom

the psychologist has evaluative or direct authority (Standard 1.19b).

As Standard 1.19b clearly states, the APA ethical guidelines prohibit sexual relationships when an evaluative or authority relationship is present. Keith-Spiegel (1994), in a discussion of how the 1992 APA ethics code relates to teaching psychologists, has applauded the clarity of the code in specifying the unethical nature of sexual relationships with students and supervisees but suggests that the definitions of evaluative and direct authority can be less than clear when we consider the multiple faculty roles that can come into play during the course of a student's training.

Keith-Spiegel (1994) also has noted improvements in the 1992 ethics code as it relates to dual-role relationships between faculty and students. She has raised the issue that good teaching, especially at the graduate level, can involve mentoring or social and collegial contact that is considered normative. The new code recognizes these realities while encouraging attentiveness to potential exploitation (Standard 1.17b). Using the code for guidance, Keith-Spiegel has advised that "teaching psychologists are wise to carefully evaluate every situation, including outlining the mutual role obligations, before making contracts to introduce overlapping roles into relationships with students" (1994, p. 367).

Thus, the 1992 APA ethics code includes some specific guidelines about avoiding harm to students. It is noteworthy that the very specificity of these standards may render them less than useful when faculty are seeking guidance about the gray areas of their overlapping relationships with students. Also, although it is clear that faculty should be sensitive to the potential harmful effects of dual relationships, the code does not provide guidance about how to evaluate the potential for harm or about how to establish appropriate boundaries with students.

Recommendations for the Conduct of Student-Faculty Relationships

Three general guidelines for faculty to attend to in maintaining ethical relationships with students are (a) acknowledge the power and responsibility of the faculty role, (b) develop a frame for evaluating faculty-student relationships, and (c) foster and maintain a climate that supports ethical relationships with students.

Acknowledging Power and Responsibility of Faculty Role

For faculty to recognize the potential for harm in dual relationships, they must concede that they hold a position of power and authority over students and that their conduct has consequences for students. Dual and overlapping relationships are unavoidable in educational settings and thus require careful monitoring so that students will not be harmed. Until recent years some professionals held that dual relationships were avoidable and that if they simply did not engage in obvious conflicts of interest with clients or students, then they could be absolved of responsibility for dual relationships. However, a particular contribution of recent discussions has been a recognition of the unavoidability of dual and overlapping relationships

and the consequent necessity for active management of these relationships (Biaggio & Greene, 1995; Brown, 1991; Smith & Fitzpatrick, 1995).

Brown (1991) has made a number of recommendations for managing dual relationships in therapy, and these have clear applications for managing relationships with students. Brown first encourages acknowledging and validating the existence of dual relationships in order to deal with them in a deliberative manner and avoid any exploitation. She believes that such acknowledgment is essential for making conscious and thoughtful decisions. The following illustration provides an example of such an acknowledgment.

Vignette A. Professor Andrea Grant employs Student Bob Eager as a research assistant. Professor Grant is also initiating a new research project for which she has no funding and posts a call for student research volunteers. The call indicates that student volunteers will become members of her research team and that all persons on the team will be authors on any publications resulting from the team's work. Professor Grant knows that the topic of this new project is of interest to Student Eager and fecognizes that this could lead to confusion on the student's part about whether and how it might be appropriate for him to participate. The professor thus explains to the student that he is welcome to volunteer for this research team if he wishes but that she wants to acknowledge that she is currently supervising his work on the assistantship and that this relationship may complicate the student's decision. Professor Grant explains that she does not expect the student to volunteer for this research team but does want to extend the same invitation to him as to other students. She also explains that if he does not volunteer for the new project, he will not work on this project under his existing assistantship duties and that if he does join the new project, he will be treated as other members of the research team. Professor Grant then asks Student Eager if he has any other questions about the implications of his involvement or about their roles in this situation.

Vignette A analysis. In this instance, Professor Grant appropriately acknowledged the existing supervisory relationship, explored its possible impact on the student's decision making, and discussed implications of his joining or not joining the team. By naming this situation and exploring some of the possible complications, she has attempted to clarify roles and responsibilities for herself and the student in advance. By raising these issues she gives the student permission to ask any questions he may have about their working relationship. If she had simply invited the student to join the research team without discussing their current supervisory relationship, the situation could easily have been awkward and confusing for the student. He might have wondered whether the invitation was really a request or a demand to extend his assistantship responsibilities. If he had accepted the invitation, he might also have been unclear regarding his status on the team. Would he be included as an author on any publications or would he simply be functioning as a research assistant? If Professor Grant had not brought up any of these issues, he may have been reluctant to inquire out of trepidation about revealing his lack of knowledge about expectations in these situations.

Thus, as this example illustrates, faculty must recognize and acknowledge the power they have over students. It is faculty

who bear responsibility for maintaining ethical relationships with students, and it is therefore incumbent on faculty to explicitly acknowledge their power over students. If faculty appropriately discuss the nature of their various roles with respect to students, then students are given permission to seek clarification when confusion arises. Students who feel unclear about their roles or responsibilities should first seek clarification from the involved faculty person. If for some reason this is not feasible or desirable, students can consult a trusted peer, advisor, ombudsperson, or administrator. The APA Ethics Code or Ethics Committee can also be consulted if the student is unable to get the requested clarification on campus or if a serious ethical problem is suspected.

Developing a Frame for Evaluating Faculty-Student Relationships

Acknowledging and accepting responsibility for the faculty role is a necessary but not sufficient condition for maintaining ethical relationships. Judgments must be made about what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate conduct, and this is not an easy task given the complex nature of faculty-student relationships. Such relationships generally evolve over time from large power differences to less consequential ones, from clear role differentiation to more common and shared goals, and from less egalitarian to more collegial. Also, students can differ a great deal in levels of maturity and sophistication, and this has implications for how faculty relate to them. Thus, faculty experience shifting relationships with students, and different conduct is appropriate at different times with different students.

Defining the ethical faculty-student relationship. Given the multiplicity of roles and fluidity of relationships with students, it is challenging for faculty to sort out reasonable, even valuable, practices from potentially problematic ones. Brown (1991) has recommended developing a flexible frame with a core set of norms to guide ethical behavior.

To evaluate relationships with students then, some core understanding of what constitutes an ethical and appropriate relationship, as well as some frame to evaluate specific conduct, is needed. We contend that an ethical relationship with a student is one in which three conditions are met: (a) educational standards are maintained, (b) educational experiences are provided for the student, and (c) exploitative practices are absent.

The first component of this definition appears to focus less on the faculty-student relationship than on the general goal of education. However, this component recognizes the professional educator's dual responsibility. That is, a professional educator's first responsibility is to define and uphold educational standards such that psychologists in training will demonstrate the knowledge and skills expected of a person with such a degree. The next level of responsibility is to the student, and it requires that the educator offer educational experiences or that education is the raison d'etre of the faculty-student relationship. There is a potential for the first two conditions to come into conflict, specifically when a student is not able to meet academic, professional, or ethical standards. In such instances, the faculty's first obligation is to uphold educational standards. The third component of the definition requires that exploitative practices are absent from the relationship. Because it is conceivable that a student may experience both educational benefits as well as exploitation in a particular relationship, this third requirement is necessary to define an ethical relationship. In effect then, the ethical faculty-student relationship is one in which educational goals have primacy and in which exploitation is absent. Departures from an appropriate focus for faculty-student relationships are illustrated next.

Vignette B. A Student Evaluation Committee is reviewing a student's progress. All the faculty on the committee are concerned about this student's continuing failure to meet program requirements in a timely fashion and are debating how to approach the student and her problematic performance. Faculty A is the student's advisor and feels that she should take the role of advocate for the student and press for leniency and facilitation of the student's continuation in the program. Faculty C is the department chairperson; he has had problems all along with this student, is concerned about how she reflects on the reputation of the department, and argues that steps should be taken immediately to remove the student from the program. Faculty R has the student on his research team and requests that no decision be made about the student's status until all the data for his research have been collected.

Vignette B analysis. In this committee there are a variety of positions taken vis-à-vis the student, but no single position conforms to all components of the definition of an appropriate focus on the faculty-student relationship. Given that the first responsibility of faculty is to maintain educational standards, Faculty A's position of simply advocating for the student is misguided. To advocate for a student under any circumstances could result in an untenable position under some circumstances (e.g., if a student were to engage in serious and unethical conduct that proved irremediable). That is, Faculty A has failed to consider her obligation to uphold educational standards. Similarly, Faculty C's singular focus on the reputation of the department is also not defensible in that it fails to give any consideration to providing an educational experience. Faculty R's position seems to be motivated solely by his desire to complete his research and benefit from the student's contribution. Absent from his approach are concerns about the maintenance of standards and the importance of providing timely feedback to the student. This student situation is obviously complicated because it touches on questions of evaluation and remediation, which are outside the scope of this discussion. However, an appropriate focus here would give primary consideration to the program's educational standards and also consider the faculty's responsibility to offer appropriate feedback and guidance in the context of its goal to provide an educational experience.

Evaluating faculty-student dual relationships. Given that the foregoing frame for faculty-student relationships comprises three components, any relationship or conduct with a student can be evaluated in light of these components. The faculty person must first ascertain whether educational standards are being maintained in his or her interactions with students. In general, this condition is met if the faculty person has clarity about educational standards and applies them consistently. That is, giving preferential treatment to a favored student or being excessively harsh on another student may indicate an inappropriate faculty-student relationship.

Next, the faculty person must determine whether providing

an educational experience is the primary focus of the relationship. This condition is generally met if the focus is on the student's education, not on the faculty person's gain. Here the literature on client boundary violations can inform the evaluation of whether appropriate faculty-student boundaries are in place (Brown, 1994; Gottlieb, 1993; Smith & Fitzpatrick, 1995). Brown (1994) has recently presented a conceptual formulation for understanding boundary violations for therapeutic relationships. She defined boundary violations as being characterized by (a) an objectification of the client (i.e., client is viewed as an object of gratification); (b) a reflection of acting out or gratification of the therapist's impulses; and (c) an exemplification of placing the needs of the therapist paramount in a consistent and persistent manner. This model can be used by an educator to assess the nature of his or her relationships with students in order to ascertain that educational goals are the motivating force for these relationships. That is, if the student is treated as an object of gratification, or if the relationship is more focused on meeting the professional or personal needs of the faculty person than on meeting the student's educational needs, then it is likely that the student is somehow being exploited.

There has been much attention in recent years on problematic therapist—client dual relationships, and we now have a better understanding of how to identify such situations with clients. But there has been little attention to the problem of faculty—student dual relationships, with the exception of work by Blevins-Knabe (1992) and Plaut (1993). Blevins-Knabe (1992) has proposed a decision-making model by which to assess the ethical risks and possible threats to the educational process of dual relationships between a professor and student. She sets forth seven questions to elicit information about the extent to which the faculty role may be compromised by faculty conduct:

- 1. What is the student learning? Is the student becoming competent or dependent on a "special" relationship?
- 2. What are the other students learning? Are they learning about equitable treatment or special privilege?
- 3. Does the student involved have a choice? Does the power differential allow the student freedom to refuse a professor's request?
- 4. Do all students have the same opportunity for access to a professor's attention? Are opportunities for consulting offered equitably?
- 5. Has the professor lost, or is he or she perceived to have lost, the capacity for objective evaluation?
 - 6. Are future evaluation decisions apt to be influenced?
- 7. Are there consequences of the dual relationship for other faculty members? Are they having to resolve issues resulting from soured dual relationships?

These questions focus on some very specific problems attendant to faculty-student relationships in which educational goals are compromised. Blevins-Knabe (1992) has contended that professors must determine whether their dual relationships interfere with their role as a professional educator. She has also maintained that the educator's professional identity is at stake when making a decision about a dual relationship and that the educator should ask him- or herself, Will my professional integrity be damaged? Thus, the foregoing frame for evaluating appropriate faculty-student relationships as well as the specific

questions set forth by Blevins-Knabe can be used to evaluate faculty relationships with students.

Faculty—student relationships are often complicated, and it may be difficult to assess them, even with the help of a model. Emotional distress on the part of the faculty member over the situation can further cloud his or her judgment. Thus, it is important for faculty to seek consultation when they find themselves struggling to understand their conduct or relationships with particular students.

Fostering a Climate for Ethical Relationships

Fostering ethical relationships between faculty and students is probably the best way to prevent problematic conduct. At the individual level, faculty must understand the nature and extent of their personal and professional needs and must engage in adequate self-care. They must be meeting their needs in such a way that these needs do not inappropriately impinge on relationships with students. Faculty should take precautions to avoid acting on poor judgment and should seek consultation around areas of concern and confusion. It is especially important to obtain consultation during times of personal stress, distress, or impairment.

Kitchener (1992) has pointed out the importance of faculty role modeling appropriate ethical behavior in instilling ethical attitudes and behavior in students. She has argued that "even when graduate programs have excellent course work in ethics, if faculty model unethical behavior it is very possible that the most influential ethical attitudes that students learn will not come from explicit ethics education but from the experiences that they have in other areas of the curriculum" (p. 190). And Canon (1992) has addressed this phenomenon for the psychologist who also serves an administrative role:

The actions of psychologist—administrators (and the highly visible consequences of those actions) model, for better or worse, wittingly and unwittingly, just how psychologists conduct themselves in ethical matters in a world that is only a step or two removed from the graduate seminar or the consulting room. (p. 211)

Thus, it is extremely important that faculty and administrators accept the responsibility of modeling appropriate and ethical relationships with other professionals, students, and clients.

At the program level, professionals and students might well benefit from training and practice in addressing ethical issues concerning dual-role relationships. Slimp and Burian (1994) have suggested that training sites install ethics committees composed of trainees and staff to address these issues and establish written policies regarding acceptable and prohibited dual-role relationships. They also have recommended that these policies be written in such a way as to protect those who hold less power and that the policies be distributed and discussed in detail at the beginning of the year. The intent would be to increase student and staff understanding of and sensitivity to the issues, to establish expectations for ethical behaviors, and to increase the likelihood that problematic dual-role relationships will be more readily identified and addressed. Similarly, Goodyear, Crego, and Johnston (1992) have noted that institutional rules and norms can have a great influence on how faculty and students behave. They have suggested that psychology programs enact actual policies to address ethical problems, or at the least, openly discuss these matters. Such discussions would serve the purpose of sensitizing faculty to be reflective about their behavior and its consequences.

Educational programs should instill the view that ethical considerations should be an ongoing aspect of professional behavior rather than a concern that arises only in response to a problem. In this sense, training in ethical decision making may serve as a means to prevent the development of potentially problematic faculty-student relationships; this would certainly raise awareness of ethical concerns among students, faculty, supervisors, administrators, and other staff. Merely naming the issue can facilitate more open discussion among faculty and students and can instill a sense of empowerment among students. When faculty model ethical behavior, they generate heightened awareness of ethical concerns not only within the educational setting but in all professional contexts. Awareness of dilemmas concerning dual-role relationships and experience in addressing these dilemmas provide valuable lessons for the student's future professional interactions with clients, students, and other professionals.

Summary and Conclusions

Because faculty-student multiple relationships are an integral part of the educational endeavor, it is essential that the potential for harm be acknowledged. Strasburger, Jorgenson, and Sutherland (1992) have articulated the "slippery slope" phenomenon whereby seemingly minor erosions of appropriate boundaries in professional relationships lead to more significant and egregious boundary violations. The multiple and fluid roles involved in faculty-student relationships make these relationships vulnerable to this slippage, and it is thus essential that faculty bring ethical decision making to the management of their relationships with students.

Faculty are responsible for monitoring their relationships with students, and it is desirable that such monitoring take place at the individual, program, and profession levels. As a profession, we should be discussing this issue more openly, and research on problematic faculty—student relationships and their management is warranted. There is very little literature that provides guidance to structure our thinking, not to speak of conduct, in this area. Because of the subtleties and complexities involved, approaching this topic with ongoing thoughtfulness and attention will probably be more useful than attempting to apply a narrow set of rules.

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