

ROBERT S. WRIGHT, R.S.W.  
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

RANDY SMITH  
PRESIDENT

TELEPHONE } 667-3336  
FACSIMILE } 667-1594

# Family and Children's Services of Cumberland County

PO Box 399  
26-28 Prince Arthur Street  
Amherst, N.S.  
B4H 3Z5

On September 26, 2001, I was privileged to be invited to be the opening speaker and a panel member of a workshop for Agency Field Supervisors regarding the issue of Dual Relationships. The following is an edited version of my presentation on that day.

As a place to start our discussions on the issues of Dual Relationships, I thought I would offer a few comments by stating some fundamental questions and attempting to address all but one of them. Perhaps you will find more interest in the question I don't address than in those I do:

Why do social workers have a Code of Ethics?

This is the one question that I'm not going to attempt to address. The history of the development of Codes of Ethics in the field of social work is closely associated with our development as a profession. The controversy continues in this regard: Are we professionals, should we be, are our aspirations for professionalism in conflict with our obligations to our clients? I'll leave these questions for another day and not address them directly here, though I'll encourage you to keep them in the back of your mind throughout the day. Having said that, I will

suggest that it is essential for social workers to have a code of ethics in order to be recognized as a profession:

A profession is based on a specialized body of abstract and theoretical knowledge that is transmitted through a system of elaborate, formal training. Its members, bound together by a set of commonly held norms and a code of ethics, are experts in their special fields of practice and are so recognized by the larger society. A professional person is expected to have a sense of autonomy, a belief in self-regulation, a commitment to service, and a conception of work as a calling rather than simply a means of earning a livelihood.

(Khinduka, 1995, p 681.)

Of course, the short answer to this question of “why a code of ethics” is the simply reply “to protect our clients.”

What are Dual Relationships?

Brownlee & Taylor (1995) provide a basic definition of a dual relationship. They offer that “. . . a dual relationship exists when a social worker participates in a second role category with a client, in addition to the professional role of service provider”. They go further to quote Gottlieb (1993) who adds that a dual relationship exists when “. . . in addition to the professional relationship, there is some other relationship with the individual: friend, family member, student or business partner.”

Why should social workers avoid or strictly manage their dual relationships?

Again, the short answer is simple: The restriction on dual relationships are in place to

protect the client. The danger most often associated with dual relationships is that of exploitation of the client by the social worker. The Social Work Code of Ethics (Canadian Association of Social Workers, 1994) discusses this potential harm in chapter four, the section on the limits on professional relationship. That section states:

4. A social worker shall not exploit the relationship with a client for personal benefit, gain or gratification.
- 4.1 The social worker shall respect the client and act so that the dignity, individuality and rights of the person are protected.
- 4.2 The social worker shall assess and consider a client's motivation and physical and mental capacity in arranging for the provision of an appropriate service.
- 4.3 The social worker shall not have a sexual relationship with the client.
- 4.4 The social worker shall not have a business relationship with a client, borrow money from a client, or loan money to a client.
- 4.5 The social worker shall not have a sexual relationship with a social work student assigned to the social worker.
- 4.6 The social worker shall not sexually harass any person.

Brownlee & Taylor (1995) suggest that managing non-sexual dual relationships is a line of defence against the slippery slope towards sexual relationships with clients. They go on to suggest that "There is a clear risk of inadequate service being provided if objectivity is lost and the client's needs conflict with the social worker's personal life".

Why do ethnic and rural practitioners have greater difficulty dealing with dual relationships?

Brownlee & Taylor (1995) outline the concern for rural practitioners quite clearly. In a nutshell, it is difficult if not impossible for the rural practitioner not to encounter their clients regularly in settings outside of the helping relationship. We share the same communities with our clients and if we are involved in activities at school, buy our groceries and access services in the community in which we practice, dual relationships are inevitable. The case is very similar for ethnic and other minority practitioners. The African Canadian, Native, Asian, GLBT, or any practitioner that is also intimately connected and active within their nurturing system will unavoidably be involved in dual relationships. The GLBT hospice worker, the Native child welfare worker, the African Canadian inner city school social worker, the Asian immigrant settlement worker, all of these practitioners conceivably practice within a community context in which they have significant personal involvements. Are they then disqualified from practising within their community?

If we are to draw that conclusion than we eliminate the very reason why agencies and organizations have been actively recruiting these persons to these positions. Sue & Sue (1990) suggest that the helping relationship is more likely to be effective the closer the cultural similarity between client and clinician. In our efforts to provide more effective and appropriate service to ethnic and otherwise marginalised persons we have acknowledged the need to recruit helpers from these communities. In doing so, we create work environments that are full of dual relationships, often with administration that is poorly prepared to manage them. The result is the burnout and disaffection of the practitioner and continuation of poor service to the client and community.

Where do I go for help with my dual relationships and other ethical concerns?

Several years ago there was a well publicized case in which a psychiatrist was disciplined by his professional association for violating the ethical obligation of confidentiality. The case was fairly complex. To those who observed the case through the media, it appeared to flow as follows: The psychiatrist had seen a certain female patient for some time. He saw in the news that his client or former client was asserting that she had been raped. The trial of the alleged perpetrator was highly publicized and the psychiatrist believed, given his knowledge of his client who was the accuser, that the prosecution would result in an grave injustice. The psychiatrist brought his concerns to the attention of the court after consulting with colleagues and members of his regulatory board. His former client subsequently accused him of violating his ethical obligation to her. Despite his consultations prior to his disclosure, he was disciplined for his violation.

This story, though not a social work case that deals with dual relationship, clarifies one important point: Regulatory bodies do not have the capacity to sanction actions as ethical outside of the context of a complaint and subsequent investigation. I would go further and suggest that urban and ethno-centric professional organizations are poor places for rural, ethnic, and otherwise marginalised practitioners to go for aid. Practitioners then should be wary of seeking definitive confirmation of their actions as ethical from their professional associations. Instead practitioners need to be informed, thoughtful and clear about how their practice conforms or deviates from the Code of Ethics. They should participate regularly in fora where ethical considerations are discussed. They should include discussions of ethics in their case notes, and describe their conformity and variances in the context of pursuing their clients' informed best

interests. And they should advocate for greater voice within the profession to have their needs and the context of their practice reflected in the Codes of Ethics which is the foundational document of our professional identity. To this end I would like to end my comments by reproducing the letter that I prepared in response to the Brownlee & Taylor (1995) article:

I read the article entitled *CASW Code of Ethics and Non-Sexual Dual Relationships: The need for clarification*” with great interest.

The issue of Non-Sexual Dual Relationships has been the most frequent ethical concern that I have had to address in the last six years of practice. As a member of the African Canadian Community, I have shared some degree of non-professional relationship with almost every Black client I have ever served. As I have looked to the CASW (and other) codes of ethics to assist me in navigating these dilemmas I have found them lacking.

As a result I have developed a method of practice that keeps all my colleagues, supervisors and clients fully apprised of my various personal, professional and community involvements. Practising in this way, with an ‘open book’, has allowed me to discuss potential conflicts with clients long before they occur. It has helped my colleagues and supervisors understand the nature of the Black community and the challenges faced by its members as they seek out culturally appropriate services. This method also ensures that potential conflicts are shared with colleagues, whose objective view is constantly obtained.

As I reflect on the issue of Non-Sexual Dual Relationships and our current position in the CASW Code of Ethics, it is obvious that the issues and concerns of rural or ethnic practitioners have been overlooked. The need to involve such practitioners in the general workings of our

professional association is clearly indicated. In addition to the recommendations noted, I would suggest that CASW make more concerted efforts to ensure ethnic and rural participation in the provincial chapters of the association. (I was one of only two or three Black social workers who attended our annual meeting this summer.) I would also suggest that a moderated discussion on this topic be undertaken in an e-mail forum of Registered Social Workers. This would provide even wider participation and perhaps facilitate inclusion of rural practitioners.

My thanks to the authors of this insightful article. Let's keep TSW/LTS relevant to those in the trenches!

Robert S. Wright, RSW, Nova Scotia

## References

Brownlee, K. & Taylor, S. (1995). CASW code of ethics and non-sexual dual relationships: the need for clarification. The Social Worker/Le Travailleur Social, 63, 133-136.

Canadian Association of Social Workers. (1994). Social Work Code of Ethics. Ottawa.

Khinduka, S. K. (1995). Social work and the human services. Encyclopaedia of Social Work, 19<sup>th</sup> ed. vol. 2. 681-695. Washington, DC: National Association of Social Workers.

Sue, D. W. & Sue, D. (1990) Counselling the Culturally Different. New York: John Wiley & Sons.

Wright, R. S. (1995). The issue of non-sexual dual relationships frequent ethical concern (letter to the editor). The Social Worker/Le Travailleur Social, 63, 152.