

Ethical Compass



Ethical Compass is an initiative of the NLASW Ethics Committee and is intended as a resource for members. The issues covered in this publication have been identified by social workers as part of the NLASW ethical consultation process and from a review of ethical trends in practice.

Dual Relationships: An Ethical Reality

A dual relationship is “a relationship a social worker might have with a client or former client outside the professional or therapeutic relationship (business, social, financial, personal)” (NLASW, 2018, p. 19). These relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively. There are times when social workers may find themselves in ethical dilemmas related to dual relationships. This edition of Ethical Compass will highlight some of the things social workers need to consider in practice.

Standards of Practice: The NLASW produced Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador (2018) that addresses dual and multiple relationships. It is important that social workers review this document and the pertinent standards including:

- a) Social workers evaluate potential or actual dual or multiple relationships to ensure that the client’s interest remains primary.
- b) Where a dual or multiple relationship exists, social workers are responsible for ensuring that appropriate boundaries are established and maintained, and that the social worker-client relationship is safeguarded.

Boundary Continuum: Dual relationships may be avoidable in some situations, and unavoidable in many others (i.e., social workers who live and work in rural communities). Regardless of the context, ethical dilemmas pertaining to dual relationships can be quite complex, and it is helpful to examine them within the context of the boundary framework. Boundaries issues may fall along a continuum (encounters, boundary crossings, and boundary violations). Boundary violations would involve client harm and should be avoided. Boundary crossings, in and of themselves are not unethical, but should be carefully considered to ensure the client’s best interest. In these situations, social workers evaluate the nature of the dual relationship to assess for client harm (actual, potential or perceived), and make decisions that are in the best interest of the client. (See NLASW Standard of Practice 2018 for definitions of boundary violations and crossings - http://www.nlasw.ca/sites/default/files/inline-files/Standards_of_Practice.pdf).

Professional Judgement: Every dual relationship and situation is unique and requires careful consideration. The following questions are helpful to consider:

- Is the dual relationship avoidable or unavoidable? If unavoidable, what steps can be taken to minimize risk?
- What is the nature of the professional relationship? Does the context of practice make a difference?
- Is the relationship having an impact on one's objectivity and decision-making?
- Whose needs are being met by the dual relationship? Social worker or client?
- Is this creating a blend between one's personal and professional life? Does this result in a conflict of interest (actual or perceived)?
- Could client confidentiality be compromised?
- Are exceptions being made for one client? If so, why?
- What policies, standards, or ethical values are applicable to the situation?
- How might this dual relationship be perceived by one's social work colleagues, employer or community members?
- Are there cultural elements that need to be considered?
- What options are available for addressing the dual relationship?

Informed Consent & Documentation:

Having conversations with clients regarding dilemmas posed by dual relationships can build trust in the social work relationship. It is important that clients have a good understanding of the importance of professional boundaries. For example, if the social worker lives in a rural community, contact with clients in different capacities may be unavoidable. In those situations, social workers would talk to their clients about the practice realities, how client confidentiality will be maintained, and how they will address each other in a social context. It is also important that social workers document one's decision-making on how ethical decisions pertaining to dual relationships were addressed as part of the informed consent process.

This edition of Ethical Compass highlighted some of the ethical considerations social workers must be aware of in relation to dual relationships. As with any practice issue, social workers consult the Code of Ethics, Standards of Practice, best practices and use professional judgement in resolving issues in the best interest of client. Ethical dilemmas pertaining to dual and multiple relationships and boundaries are complex; some are clear and straightforward, while others tend to be ambiguous and subtle. Therefore, consultation with a supervisor/manager is also recommended when navigating dual relationships in practice and planning how to manage social connections and dual relationships that are unavoidable or unexpected.

References:

Canadian Association of Social Workers (CASW). (2005). Code of Ethics. Canadian Association of Social Workers. (2005). *Code of ethics*. Ottawa: Author.

Newfoundland and Labrador Association of Social Workers. (2018). *Standards of Practice for Social Workers in Newfoundland and Labrador*. St. John's: Author.