

Multiple Relationships Between Graduate Assistants and Students: Ethical and Practical Considerations

Sarah E. Oberlander and Jeffrey E. Barnett
Department of Psychology
University of Maryland, Baltimore County

Most, if not all, psychologists have served as teaching or research assistants during graduate school, been instructed by teaching assistants, or both. As both faculty and students themselves, graduate assistants are faced with several dilemmas for which they typically have little preparation or guidance. These issues are explored in the context of the existing literature on multiple relationships in academic settings. Recommendations are made for graduate assistants, their faculty supervisors or mentors, and administrators to proactively address and confront these challenges in a manner consistent with the profession of psychology's ethics code and to minimize the potential for harm to those we are entrusted to teach.

Keywords: boundary issues, multiple relationships, teaching assistants, students, ethics

In many academic settings, graduate teaching and research assistants are an integral part of the learning process. The ethical ramifications of the multiple roles and relationships encountered by many graduate assistants deserve closer investigation, and these issues are certainly relevant for all academic fields. However, this is a central issue for those in the mental health field because students are being trained to become professional researchers, teachers, supervisors, and psychotherapists involved in intimate, power-based relationships with the potential for exploitation. Lessons learned during one's graduate school experiences about the appropriate maintenance of boundaries and how to ethically manage multiple roles and relationships will likely have a significant impact on one's future conduct as a

professional. For these reasons, the field of psychology has a code of ethics and licensure standards for boundary issues and multiple relationships in an attempt to prevent harm. The issue of multiple relationships between psychologists and those to whom they owe a professional obligation has received significant attention in the professional literature. Multiple relationships refer to any nonsexual or sexual relationships that occur in addition to the primary professional relationship (Lamb, Catanzaro, & Moorman, 2004).

Nonsexual multiple relationships include academic, supervisory, social, and financial or business relationships. Although both parties may benefit from nonsexual relationships, harm can also result from multiple relationships (Lamb et al., 2004). Nonsexual multiple relationships may be consciously sought out (e.g., attending a faculty–student social event), unexpected (e.g., both parties join the same synagogue), or unavoidable (e.g., legally mandated military relationships; see Barnett & Yutrzenka, 1994). In any event, nonsexual multiple relationships are cause for careful and systematic examination, consultation, and documentation. Psychologists should anticipate potential risks as fully as possible and take appropriate actions to prevent harm and exploitation (Younggren & Gottlieb, 2004).

Sexual multiple relationships have been investigated extensively, and although a survey of 298 clinical and counseling psychologists revealed that few reported engaging in sexual multiple relationships, more than half had considered entering a sexual relationship with a supervisee, student, or client (Lamb et al., 2004). Great consideration has been given to the importance of avoiding therapist–client (e.g., Borys & Pope, 1989, Smith & Fitzpatrick, 1995; Williams, 1992; Younggren & Gottlieb, 2004) and faculty–student (e.g., Biaggio, Paget, & Chenoweth, 1997; Glaser & Thorpe, 1986; Hammel, Olkin, & Taube, 1996; Plaut, 1993) sexual relationships. These authors and many others have repeatedly highlighted the abuse of trust, misuse of power, harm, and exploitation that occur as a result of sexual multiple relationships. Decision-making models have also been published to assist psychotherapists in avoiding problematic relationships and fostering ethical climates (e.g., Gottlieb, 1993; Younggren, 2002).

Unfortunately, less attention has been directed at multiple relationships in other arenas in mental health (Lamb, Catanzaro, & Moorman, 2003). Specifically, there have been very few systematic investigations of the multiple relationships encountered by graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) and graduate research assistants (GRAs). Alarming, recent surveys of GTAs suggest that they receive little or no training and supervision, and that most will engage in some form of unethical behavior (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000). The purpose of this contribution is to direct needed attention toward this ethical issue and provide relevant decision-making models and suggestions for graduate assistants regarding multiple relationships with students.

BOUNDARY ISSUES AND MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

The mental health field has a long history of attention to boundary issues and multiple relationships. Although mental health professionals serve in a wide range of roles, the literature on these important issues has been guided by a focus on the psychotherapy relationship, which has its roots in psychodynamic theory and technique. As such, psychotherapy is typically viewed as a transference-based relationship. The patient or client is seen as dependent on the more powerful psychotherapist, who must avoid all actions that might lead to impaired objectivity and judgment and the exploitation and harm that may be their result.

For these reasons, mental health professionals have typically been trained to avoid all behaviors and situations that might lead to this harm to the client or patient. Thus, great attention is paid to professional boundaries, the ground rules and structure for the professional relationship. These include issues such as role, time, space, touch, self-disclosure, gifts, and physical contact. Historically it has been believed that to cross any of these boundaries places the professional on a slippery slope and therefore at risk for additional boundary crossings that are likely to culminate with harmful boundary violations. Those who engage in harmful boundary violations and inappropriate multiple relationships have typically reached that point after engaging in a pattern that progresses from apparently benign and perhaps well intended boundary crossings to increasingly intrusive and harmful boundary violations and multiple relationships. It has, therefore, been believed that all boundary crossings place professionals on this slippery slope and that exploitation and harm will follow (Gutheil & Gabbard, 1993).

However, it has been seen that many health professionals may cross boundaries for a wide range of appropriate therapeutic reasons such as when using touch or self-disclosure when clinically indicated or when providing treatment out of office for a homebound patient. Such actions as part of a thoughtful treatment plan need not create any additional risk for exploitation and harm. In fact, a number of authors (e.g., Barnett & Yutrzenka, 1994; Lazarus, 1998; Lazarus & Zur, 2002) have made the case that to *not* cross boundaries and enter into some types of multiple relationships would result in harm to the patient or client. In fact, in some self-contained work settings, such as rural and military environments, the very nature of these settings requires a variety of boundary crossings and some types of nonsexual multiple roles and relationships for the health professional to function effectively and provide needed services (Barnett, & Yutrzenka, 1994; Schank & Skovholt, 1997).

Such issues are of great relevance to the academic environment, a setting that can be conceptualized as one of these self-contained settings as well. Although there are similarities between clinical and academic settings, there are also several important differences. In both settings, one individual is seeking services from an-

other and a power differential is present (Biaggio et al., 1997). However, the organization of a college or university is less linear than traditional professional settings, and the power differences are often not as clear (Smirles, 1998).

FACULTY–STUDENT MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Faculty–student relationships are often characterized by multiple and overlapping roles, many of which may be necessary and appropriate, such as professor–advisor, professor–research supervisor, and professor–teaching assistant supervisor (Biaggio et al., 1997). Nonsexual multiple relationships allow faculty members to serve as guides, role models, teachers, and sponsors of graduate students, offering unique opportunities for career and personal development (Johnson & Nelson, 1999).

However, the intimacy and mutuality often present in mentoring relationships also introduces the possibility of exploitation, as in the case of a sexual multiple relationship (Johnson & Nelson, 1999). Although it is difficult to ascertain realistic rates of sexual faculty–student relationships, several studies indicate disturbing trends. Pope, Levenson, and Schover (1979) surveyed 481 faculty members of the American Psychological Association (APA)’s Division of Psychotherapy and found that 13% reported entering into sexual relationships with students.

More than 10% of a sample of 482 APA members working in educational institutions reported becoming sexually involved with a student (Tabachnick, Keith-Spiegel, & Pope, 1991), although 71% of the sample described sexual relationships with students as unquestionably unethical. Nearly 20% of Tabachnick et al.’s sample reported engaging in sexual relationships with a student after a course had ended, and nearly 21% described these relationships as unquestionably unethical. Only 24% reported never having been sexually attracted to a student, and more than 15% believed such an attraction to be unquestionably unethical (Tabachnick et al., 1991). Recent research suggested that rates of sexual relationships between faculty and students may be declining, and in a survey of 368 APA psychologists, only 3% reported engaging in a sexual relationship with a student (Lamb et al., 2003).

In a retrospective study of faculty–student sexual relationships, Hammel et al. (1996) found respondents to report such relationships during their graduate training to be “coercive, ethically problematic and a hindrance to the working relationship” compared to how they viewed it at the time it occurred (p. 93). Research has suggested that engaging in sexual relationships during training is correlated with engaging in problematic multiple relationships and exploitative behavior in the future (Biaggio et al., 1997; Pope et al., 1979). Although this finding has not been replicated by all investigators (e.g., Lamb & Catanzaro, 1998; Lamb et al., 2003), 77% of psychologists who reported engaging in a sex-

ual relationship with a client, student, or supervisee noted that the relationship ended undesirably, and 90% report that they would avoid similar relationships in the future (Lamb et al., 2003).

GRADUATE ASSISTANT–STUDENT MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Graduate students are a unique and varied population. They are in a potentially precarious psychological position, as they are undergoing adjustments in lifestyle and may be experiencing isolation and distress due to demands of their graduate education. Graduate students occupy a unique power position as both students and teachers and they may be older than faculty members or younger than undergraduates. They are also highly dependent on faculty for mentoring, research and teaching experience, and career advancement (Schneider, 1987). Graduate assistants occupy many roles in an academic setting, including student, instructor, proctor, protégé, mentor, evaluator, supervisee, supervisor, and researcher. They are likely to enter multiple relationships with faculty, supervisors, other graduate students, and undergraduates throughout the course of their training. These relationships may consist of multiple dimensions of one role or multiple roles, potentially in conflict (Rubin, 2000). All of these relationships cannot and should not be avoided, but caution is warranted.

Graduate teaching assistants are often poorly prepared prior to entering the classroom, receive little or no supervision, and are asked to perform many of the same duties as a faculty instructor. In a survey of 261 GTAs, almost 50% had taught an introductory psychology or laboratory course, and all had either instructed or co-instructed a psychology course (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000). Sixty percent had written examinations, nearly 90% had graded assignments and examinations, almost 71% had assigned final grades, and nearly 82% had been required to hold office hours (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000). However, only one third were required to take a teaching readiness course, less than 6% had taken a course in ethics, and almost half had never received supervision (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000).

Disturbingly, more than 90% of students and faculty report witnessing unethical behavior by psychology graduate students (Fly, van Bark, Weinman, Kitchener, & Long, 1997). The traditional apprenticeship model of learning informally from faculty members does not seem to be adequate in preventing ethical transgressions (Folse, 1991).

As is illustrated in Case Example One, GTAs and GRAs are in a position to enter nonsexual multiple relationships with undergraduate students, and these may occur consciously, inadvertently, or unavoidably.

Case Example One

Kristen is a 27-year-old second year graduate student working as a research assistant in her advisor's laboratory. She is the supervisor of an undergraduate research assistant, a 19-year-old student named Anne. Kristen and Anne are also both enrolled in an upper-level psychology course open to both undergraduate and graduate students. The instructor of the course assigns Kristen and Anne, along with two other students, to work on a group project for the duration of the semester. Halfway through the semester, Anne fails to complete her duties in the research lab, and does not complete her weekly hours. Kristen's advisor asks her to explain the situation, and subsequently Anne is reprimanded. The next week in class, Anne confronts Kristen, arguing that if she and Kristen are friends, Kristen should have covered for her.

As previously highlighted, graduate assistants and undergraduates already engaged in a teaching or research relationship may find themselves inadvertently engaged in a nonsexual multiple relationship. For example, GTAs of a graduate-level course will likely be simultaneously engaged in peer relationships with some of the students in the course. Other nonsexual multiple relationships can occur outside of the classroom or research setting, such as both parties belonging to a student group on campus.

Graduate students serve an important role as mentors to undergraduate students, and are a valuable resource for information regarding the process of applying to graduate school and other professional issues. GRAs may consciously enter multiple relationships with undergraduate research assistants assisting in the collection of thesis or dissertation data. Although these conscious decisions can benefit both parties, they also provide the possibility for exploitation of the undergraduate in the unfavorable power position.

A dilemma that has not received sufficient attention in the literature on ethical issues in academia is illustrated in Case Example Two: the case of sexual relationships between graduate assistants and undergraduate students.

Case Example Two

Elena is a 23-year-old first year graduate student employed as a teaching assistant for an introductory psychology course. Her duties include proctoring examinations and meeting with students during office hours. Paul, a 26-year-old junior at the university, is absent during a weekly quiz and visits Elena's office to take a make-up quiz at the instruction of the professor. Over the next several weeks, Paul misses subsequent quizzes, takes make-up quiz-

zes with Elena, and begins to visit during office hours, discussing academic and personal issues. Elena views mentoring students as an important duty, and remains polite but professional. Eventually, Paul asks Elena if she would have dinner with him one night after class. Unsure of the school's policy, she declines, commenting that it is inappropriate for her to date students. Paul continues to pursue Elena after the semester has ended.

As previously illustrated, graduate assistants may find themselves in a position to decide whether romantic advances on the part of another student are appropriate, often with little guidance or supervision. Graduate students are also in the position to experience or commit sexual harassment. The first study of graduate students as perpetrators of sexual harassment was conducted in a dissertation by Smirles (1998), but this study looked at graduate students as victims of harassment only by advisors, and perpetrators only to undergraduates. Although it is unclear why this issue has been overlooked, it appears that this phenomenon has not yet been brought to the attention of researchers. In a 1992 survey of ethical dilemmas encountered by 679 members of APA, the issue was not mentioned (Pope & Vetter, 1992). In addition, students are not often surveyed about ethical concerns (Keith-Spiegel, Tabachnick, & Allen, 1993), and their power and influence are limited in their ability to bring these issues to the forefront of ethical debates.

There are no clear prevalence rates for graduate student–undergraduate sexual multiple relationships, either consensual or nonconsensual. In Branstetter and Handelsman's (2000) survey of GTAs, 98% reported that they had never engaged in a sexual relationship with a student, and 90% reported that these relationships were "definitely unethical." However, several items, including being sexually attracted to a student and engaging in a relationship after the course has been completed, were identified as difficult items to judge, with more than 25% of respondents answering "I don't know" when asked if these issues were ethical or unethical.

ETHICAL DECISION MAKING FOR GRADUATE ASSISTANTS

Although there have been no decision-making models suggested for graduate assistant–undergraduate relationships, Younggren's (2002) suggested guidelines for ethical decision making in multiple relationships can be adapted for use in this setting.

1. Is the dual relationship necessary? Graduate assistants may be unable to avoid multiple relationships in academic settings, and nonsexual multiple relationships between graduate students and undergraduates can be beneficial to both par-

ties. Caution is warranted when entering unnecessary multiple relationships in which the graduate student is in a supervisory or evaluative position. Clearly, a sexual relationship between a GTA and an undergraduate is not necessary and should be avoided.

2. Is the dual relationship exploitative? The risk for exploitation is increased when there is an imbalance of power in the relationship that favors the graduate student. This is particularly relevant for GTAs, who often have evaluative power over students.

3. Who does the dual relationship benefit? Multiple relationships exist in which graduate students and undergraduates both benefit. However, sexual relationships between GTAs or GRAs and students clearly do not benefit the student, given that the student is in a disadvantaged power position and is unable to willingly consent to the relationship (Plaut, 1993).

4. Is there a risk that the dual relationship could damage the student? Graduate assistants act as mentors and models for future professional behavior. As the individual in power, the graduate student bears the responsibility to take necessary steps to avoid harm to students. Again, students are unable to freely consent to a relationship with an individual in power, and therefore the risk of exploitation is present (Plaut, 1993). Engaging in a potentially exploitative relationship could increase the likelihood that the student would engage in exploitative behavior in the future (Pope et al., 1979).

5. Is there a risk that the dual relationship could disrupt the educational relationship? A primary function of the GTA is as an evaluator, and it is imperative that GTAs remain as impartial and objective as possible. Even in a nonsexual relationship, all other students in the class will not be afforded the same level of attention that is offered to the student engaged in the relationship. The presence of multiple relationships in a teaching or research situation can alienate other students and contaminate the academic environment for all.

6. Is the teaching assistant objective in his or her evaluation of this matter? It is a professional duty of graduate assistants to assess the possible risks of multiple relationships and consider their ability to remain impartial or objective. Engaging in a sexual relationship with a student clearly impairs objectivity.

7. Has the teaching assistant adequately documented the decision-making process? Many academic institutions have no formal documentation process in teaching or research situations. However, it is helpful for graduate assistants to record the steps taken to avoid problematic multiple relationships with students. This would also be extremely valuable in cases where sexual harassment charges are brought against either party. Timely and thorough documentation becomes a strong defense to allegations of professional misconduct (Younggren, 2002).

8. Did the student give informed consent regarding the risks of engaging in dual relationships? In situations where one individual has evaluative authority over another, the potential risk for exploitation and harm are severe. In the case of sex-

ual relationships between graduate assistants and undergraduate students, students are unable to freely consent to a sexual relationship (Plaut, 1993).

APPLICABLE GUIDELINES FROM REGULATORY BODIES AND ACADEMIC INSTITUTIONS

Members of the APA are held to the principles of the APA ethics code (APA, 2002). However, many ethical concerns relevant to the teaching of psychology are only briefly addressed in the ethics code or not addressed at all (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000). Professional psychologists have advocated for more clear and strict standards, and this call was heeded in the recent revision of the *Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Conduct* (APA, 2002). Rather than just prohibiting these relationships in situations in which a psychologist “has evaluative or direct authority” (APA, 1992, p. 1602), the current ethics code states “Psychologists do not engage in sexual relationships with students or supervisees who are in their department, agency, or training center or over whom psychologists have or are likely to have evaluative authority” (APA, 2002, p. 1070). However, it is important to note that there are no regulatory bodies noting ethical violations of graduate assistants (Branstetter & Handelsman, 2000).

In addition to the guidance provided in the APA ethics code, many institutions provide instructors with direction through institutional policies. For example, at the University of Maryland, Baltimore County (UMBC), the faculty handbook admonishes all who teach (including GTAs) to avoid all amorous and sexual relationships with those over whom they hold evaluative authority. It acknowledges that the power exercised by faculty, such as through grading and letters of recommendation, “diminishes the student’s freedom of choice in amorous and sexual relationships, even when no coercion is intended by the faculty member” (University of Maryland, Baltimore County Board of Regents, 2002). This highlights the harm that may result from such relationships both to the student involved and to the integrity of the academic environment overall. However, faculty and GTAs are only cautioned against entering into these relationships. In addition, mechanisms are not described for reporting unwanted sexual advances.

A sampling of other institutions reveals similar guidelines, with no institutions directly addressing GRA–undergraduate relationships. This informal sampling was gathered from universities with policies posted on the Internet. Similar to UMBC, Michigan State University classifies GTAs as “faculty,” and therefore includes GTAs under the faculty code. The Michigan State guideline maintains that a faculty member or GTA engaging in a sexual relationship with a student must immediately disclose the relationship to the administrator, who will immediately seek other supervision for the student. In cases that require continued supervision, the faculty member or GTA is advised to not evaluate work completed

by the partner, and he or she is required to find alternate evaluation (Michigan State University Board of Trustees, 1997).

Northern Illinois University also acknowledges that students are in a position of restrained freedom, which impairs their ability to freely engage in a relationship with a faculty member or GTA. The faculty handbook requires that the faculty member engaged in the relationship be responsible for arranging unbiased supervision of the student, although it is unclear exactly how this is accomplished (“Teaching at NIU,” 1999).

The University of Pittsburgh does not directly address relationships between GTAs and students, but it does have guidelines for reporting problematic relationships between faculty members and GTAs. In cases of sexual harassment or exploitation by a faculty member, the GTA is encouraged to contact the department chair. No further action is suggested (“Teaching Assistants,” n.d.).

The University of Georgia’s GTA guidelines suggest that any dual relationship, even a friendship, can harm a student if the GTA is unable to be objective. However, the policy does not explicitly discuss sexual relationships, other than to advise, “It is never a good idea to initiate or otherwise enter romantic relationships with students” (“Ethical Principles,” n.d.).

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR APPROPRIATE GRADUATE ASSISTANT—STUDENT MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS

Given that graduate assistants are in a unique position of power, it is likely that they will encounter necessary multiple relationships with students. Not all of these relationships can or should be avoided, but the graduate student must acknowledge his or her own responsibility to avoid exploitative or harmful multiple relationships because of the multiple roles in which he or she serves. Appropriate ethical behavior is likely even less clear in the area of nonsexual multiple relationships than with sexual relationships (Jorgenson, Hirsch, & Wahl, 1997), further highlighting the need for education of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty, and administrators regarding the potential benefit and harm of multiple relationships. In addition to clear institutional guidelines, appropriate training, and ongoing supervision regarding multiple relationships between teaching assistants and students, the strategies detailed in the following paragraphs will aid graduate assistants in preventing harmful relationships and provide a starting point for a discussion of these issues between graduate assistants and their supervisors.

1. Recognize your position of power over the students. Students in a disadvantaged power position are unable to freely consent to a multiple relationship (Plaut, 1993).

2. Recognize the vulnerabilities of many students of psychology. Due to the nature of the field of psychology, students may enter psychology programs with existing self-esteem problems, social skills difficulties, or other emotional vulnerabilities (Hogan & Kimmel, 1992). As an instructor, the burden of responsibility is placed on the graduate assistant to protect and not take advantage of the student.

3. Limit your social contact with students to professional and casual contact to reduce the risk of misunderstandings (Matthews, 1991). Providing one student with personalized extra attention or other special treatment may place the participants at risk for a harmful multiple relationship.

4. Be aware of the continuum of multiple relationships (Biaggio et al., 1997). Not all multiple relationships in academia are harmful, and certainly not all multiple relationships can be avoided. Be aware of those that are appropriate and beneficial, but be vigilant about entering those that hold the potential for impaired objectivity, exploitation, and harm (Barnett, 1999). This is particularly relevant for graduate assistants with supervisory or evaluative power.

5. Know the resources available to report sexual harassment. Prior to entering a teaching or research assistantship, graduate students should be provided with the university's sexual harassment policy, and should be made aware of the guidelines for reporting sexual harassment. If a graduate assistant feels he or she has been the victim of sexual harassment or unwanted sexual attention by a faculty member or student, that individual should immediately notify the course instructor, department chair, or other university official.

6. Consult with others. It is important that academic institutions foster discussions regarding problematic multiple relationships, boundary violations, and appropriate conduct in the teaching assistant role. In addition to documenting boundary crossings, graduate assistants should consult with peers, faculty members, and university officials to prevent boundary violations and harm.

7. Be vigilant. Graduate assistants should be aware of their own distress, isolation, and emotional needs as well as those of their students (Biaggio et al., 1997). Again, graduate school marks a transition in a student's life that may include isolation and extreme stress (Schneider, 1987). Graduate assistants should avoid meeting their own emotional or sexual needs through a relationship with a student. In addition, graduate assistants bear the burden of responsibility to be aware of student vulnerabilities that may impair judgment.

8. Acknowledge the power and responsibility of a faculty role (Biaggio et al., 1997). Any graduate assistant–student relationship is a fiduciary relationship, in which trust and confidence are provided for the graduate student to act in the student's best interest (Jorgenson, et al., 1997). Although it is unlikely that the level of self-disclosure in the graduate student–undergraduate relationship will rival that of the therapist–client relationship, transference may still be present in these mentoring relationships (Plaut, 1993). As evaluators, graduate assistants are also accountable for remaining as objective and impartial as possible. Younggren

(2002) suggested a “risk management mode” for clinicians that is also relevant for graduate students. That is, the graduate assistant should constantly be aware of his or her duty to protect the welfare of the student and to avoid harm and exploitation.

9. Develop a frame for evaluating faculty–student relationships (Biaggio et al., 1997). Graduate assistants should be equipped with information regarding appropriate and unavoidable multiple relationships with students. Barnett (1999) suggested considering issues that may arise on entering a multiple relationship in an academic setting to consider how one might respond to dilemmas before they occur. In addition, graduate students should be aware that all boundary violations and sexual harassment on the part of faculty members should be documented and reported.

10. Foster a climate for ethical relationships. The role of a graduate assistant often includes mentoring in addition to evaluation. Mentoring is important to the development and success of our profession, as it allows students to become competent professionals in the field of psychology. However, mentoring may also lead to an increased number of problematic multiple relationships (Biaggio et al., 1997; Johnson & Nelson, 1999). It is important to note that engaging in inappropriate sexual relationships as an undergraduate student is correlated with later inappropriate sexual relationships as a graduate student and professional (Biaggio et al., 1997). Students enter college with preexisting ideas about appropriate and inappropriate behavior on the part of faculty, and these do not appear to change as they mature (Keith-Spiegel et al., 1993).

IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although research has not yet adequately studied the area of multiple relationships between graduate assistants and students, the guidelines provided with regard to other problematic multiple relationships are clearly relevant here. Caution is certainly in order, given that many universities do not forbid a relationship between two consenting adults. Of interest, psychology departments at these academic institutions often seem to defer to the school’s broad policy. As psychologists and psychologists-in-training, there is a duty to attend to the possible ramifications of a relationship between two individuals of unequal power in an academic setting. Aspiring to the highest ideals of our profession is recommended, as articulated in the “General Principles” of the APA ethics code, which cover beneficence and nonmaleficence, fidelity and responsibility, integrity, justice, and respect for people’s rights and dignity,” (APA, 2002). In addition to the use of a formal decision-making model, these general principles should be utilized as guides for ethical conduct when faced with ethical dilemmas and challenges.

Engaging in a problematic multiple relationship with a student, whether nonsexual or sexual, changes the way that the student, and other students, will view

graduate assistants in the future. Therefore, it is suggested that graduate assistants refrain from engaging in potentially problematic or sexual relationships for the duration of their professional relationship. In situations where preexisting relationships exist that would compromise the objectivity of a teaching assistant, having the student enroll in another section of the course or taking it at a time when a different GTA is present is suggested. If this is not possible, it is recommended that the GTA request to be reassigned, allowing an objective evaluator to fill the role. After a student graduates from the institution, a relationship can likely be pursued with less risk for harm and exploitation.

Although ethical guidance against engaging in sexual relationships with current students is quite clear, the situation for former students is much more ambiguous. Students may later register for a subsequent course with the same teaching assistant, and as long as a student remains in that department, the potential for additional professional contacts remains. Even after graduation, a former student may seek a letter of recommendation or wish to use the former instructor or research supervisor as a professional reference. Yet at some point in time former students may become colleagues and the imbalance of power will no longer be present. An understanding of just when this important change occurs and how to best negotiate it is still unclear and needs further investigation.

There is a relative lack of training regarding ethical issues in current graduate school curricula. One course in ethics is clearly insufficient to address all topics psychologists are likely to face throughout their careers, and these concerns should be addressed in other courses and mentoring situations as well (Sell, Gottlieb, & Schoenfeld, 1986). The ethical issues facing those in the mental health field are complex, and they arise even in graduate school, where the student is introduced into multiple roles as protégé, student, supervisee, or supervisor of others in research and teaching settings. At many doctoral programs students typically do not take an ethics course until their second or third year, often after spending a substantial number of hours in clinical placements and months as a research assistant, protégé, or teaching assistant.

There is also inadequate formal preparation for such relationships for faculty advisors and mentors, and even less for graduate assistants and students (Johnson & Nelson, 1999). The small survey of university policies presented here illustrates this dearth of guidance. To avoid exploitation and harm, it is important to provide faculty, graduate students, and undergraduates with needed information regarding multiple relationships, boundary violations, and sexual harassment (Schneider, 1987). They must be sensitized to these issues, trained to address and manage the dynamics of these relationships in a respectful manner, and mechanisms must be in place to appropriately investigate and address all alleged inappropriate behaviors. Institutional policies should be promulgated that address these issues and they must be enforced in a supportive and respectful environment. Taken together, these recommendations, if implemented, can help

prepare faculty members and graduate students for their roles and the challenges they face, as well as move academic institutions forward toward creating a safe and respectful learning environment for all.

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association. (1992). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, *47*, 1597–1611.
- American Psychological Association. (2002). Ethical principles of psychologists and code of conduct. *American Psychologist*, *57*, 1060–1073.
- Barnett, J. E. (1999). Multiple relationships: Ethical dilemmas and practical solutions. In L. VandeCreek & T. L. Jackson (Eds.), *Innovations in clinical practice: A source book* (Vol. 17, pp. 255–267). Sarasota, FL: Professional Resource Press.
- Barnett, J. E., & Yutrzenka, B. A. (1994). Nonsexual dual relationships in professional practice, with special applications to rural and military communities. *The Independent Practitioner*, *14*, 243–248.
- Biaggio, M., Paget, T. L., & Chenoweth, M. S. (1997). A model for ethical management of faculty-student dual relationships. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *28*, 184–189.
- Borys, D., & Pope, K. (1989). Dual relationships between therapists and clients: A national survey of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *20*, 283–293.
- Branstetter, S. A., & Handelsman, M. M. (2000). Graduate teaching assistants: Ethical training, beliefs, and practices. *Ethics and Behavior*, *10*, 27–50.
- Fly, B. J., van Bark, W. P., Weinman, L., Kitchener, K. S., & Long, P. R. (1997). Ethical transgressions of psychology graduate students: Critical incidents with implications for training. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *28*, 492–495.
- Folse, K. (1991). Ethics and the profession: Graduate student training. *Teaching Sociology*, *19*, 344–350.
- Glaser, R. D., & Thorpe, J. S. (1986). Unethical intimacy: A survey of sexual contact and advances between psychology educators and female graduate students. *American Psychologist*, *41*, 43–51.
- Gottlieb, M. C. (1993). Avoiding exploitative dual relationships: A decision-making model. *Psychotherapy*, *30*, 41–48.
- Gutheil, T. G., & Gabbard, G. O. (1993). The concept of boundaries in clinical practice: Theoretical and risk-management dimensions. *American Journal of Psychiatry*, *150*, 188–196.
- Hammel, G. A., Olkin, R., & Taube, D. A. (1996). Student-educator sex in clinical and counseling psychology doctoral training. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *27*, 93–97.
- Hogan, P. M., & Kimmel, A. J. (1992). Ethical teaching of psychology: One department's attempts at self regulation. *Teaching of Psychology*, *19*, 205–210.
- Johnson, W. B., & Nelson, N. (1999). Mentor-protégé relationships in graduate training: Some ethical concerns. *Ethics and Behavior*, *9*, 189–210.
- Jorgenson, L. M., Hirsch, A. B., & Wahl, K. M. (1997). Fiduciary duty and boundaries: Acting in the client's best interest. *Behavioral Sciences and the Law*, *15*, 49–62.
- Keith-Spiegel, P. C., Tabachnick, B. G., & Allen, M. (1993). Ethics in academia: Students' views of professors' actions. *Ethics and Behavior*, *3*, 149–162.
- Lamb, D. H., & Catanzaro, S. J. (1998). Sexual and nonsexual boundary violations involving psychologists, clients, supervisees, and students: Implications for professional practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, *29*, 498–503.

- Lamb, D. H., Catanzaro, S. J., & Moorman, A. S. (2003). Psychologists reflect on their sexual relationships with clients, supervisees, and students: Occurrence, impact, rationales, and collegial intervention. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 34*, 102–107.
- Lamb, D. H., Catanzaro, S. J., & Moorman, A. S. (2004). A preliminary look at how psychologists identify, evaluate, and proceed when faced with possible multiple relationship dilemmas. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 35*, 248–254.
- Lazarus, A. A. (1998). How do you like these boundaries? *The Clinical Psychologist, 51*, 22–25.
- Lazarus, A. A., & Zur, O. (2002). *Dual relationships and psychotherapy*. New York: Springer.
- Matthews, J. R. (1991). The teaching of ethics and the ethics of teaching. *Teaching of Psychology, 18*, 80–84.
- Michigan State University Board of Trustees. (1997). *Conflict in interest in educational responsibilities resulting from consensual amorous or sexual relationships*. Retrieved April 13, 2003, from <http://www.oldsite.msu.edu/dig/BOT/amorous.html>
- 1996–1997 University of Georgia TA Mentors. (n.d.). *Ethical principles for college and university teaching and laboratory assistants*. Retrieved April 13, 2003, from http://www.isd.uga.edu/teaching_assistant/ta-topics/ethicalprin.html
- Office of Teaching Assistant Training and Development at Northern Illinois University. *Teaching at NIU: A handbook for teaching assistants*. (1999). Retrieved April 13, 2003, from <http://www.facdev.niu.edu/facdev/ta/pdfs/TAGuidePDF.pdf>
- Plaut, S. M. (1993). Boundary issues in teacher-student relationships. *Journal of Sex and Marital Therapy, 19*, 210–219.
- Pope, K. S., Levenson, H., & Schover, L. R. (1979). Sexual intimacy in psychology training: Results and implications of a national survey. *American Psychologist, 34*, 682–689.
- Pope, K. S., & Vetter, V. A. (1992). Ethical dilemmas encountered by members of the American Psychological Association: A national survey. *American Psychologist, 47*, 397–411.
- Rubin, S. S. (2000). Differentiating multiple relationships from multiple dimensions of involvement: Therapeutic space at the interface of client, therapist, and society. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 37*, 315–324.
- Schank, J. A., & Skovholt, T. M. (1997). Dual-relationship dilemmas of rural and small-community psychologists. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 28*, 44–49.
- Schneider, B. E. (1987). Graduate women, sexual harassment, and university policy. *Journal of Higher Education, 58*(1), 46–65.
- Sell, J. M., Gottlieb, M. C., & Schoenfeld, L. (1986). Ethical considerations of social/romantic relationships with present and former clients. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 17*, 504–508.
- Smirles, K. A. (1998). The sexual harassment paradox in graduate school: Experiences and answers. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 59*(04), 1919B–2077B. (UMI No. 9831969)
- Smith, D., & Fitzpatrick, M. (1995). Patient-therapist boundary issues: An integrative review of theory and research. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 26*, 499–506.
- Tabachnick, B. G., Keith-Spiegel, P., & Pope, K. S. (1991). Ethics of teaching: Beliefs and behaviors of psychologists as educators. *American Psychologist, 46*, 506–515.
- Teaching assistants and faculty (n.d.). Retrieved April 17, 2003, from http://www.pitt.edu/~ciddeweb/FACULTY-DEVELOPMENT/TA_HANDBOOK/chapter-5.htm
- University of Maryland, Baltimore County Board of Regents. (2002). *Amorous and sexual relationships*. Retrieved March 20, 2003 from <http://www.umbc.edu/provost/FacHandbook010705.pdf>
- Williams, M. (1992). Exploitation and inference: Mapping the damage from therapist–patient sexual involvement. *American Psychologist, 47*, 412–421.
- Younggren, J. N. (2002, May). Ethical decision-making and dual relationships. Retrieved March 29, 2003, from <http://ks pope.com/dual/younggren.php>
- Younggren, J. N., & Gottlieb, M. C. (2004). Managing risk when contemplating multiple relationships. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice, 35*, 255–260.

Copyright of Ethics & Behavior is the property of Lawrence Erlbaum Associates and its content may not be copied or emailed to multiple sites or posted to a listserv without the copyright holder's express written permission. However, users may print, download, or email articles for individual use.