

Third Edition

Boundary Issues in Counseling

Multiple Roles and Responsibilities

Barbara Herlihy
Gerald Corey



AMERICAN COUNSELING
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**American Counseling
Association**

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Dedication

To our colleagues who struggle with the issues in this book.

Preface

Dual or multiple relationships may be among the most controversial of all issues in the counseling profession. They have been the subject of extensive debate that has produced many questions and has moved us toward a stance on multiple relationships that is more flexible and culturally sensitive. We expect that this book will be useful to others who share our interest in boundaries and dual or multiple relationships and who struggle, as we do, to find a clear personal stance on the issues involved.

This book is a resource that reflects the current thinking of our profession on boundary issues, but we also wanted it to represent a diversity of opinion and perspectives. To that end, we have invited 40 guest contributors (30 of whom are new to this edition) to share their thoughts.

New and updated contributions focus on multicultural and social justice perspectives on cultural boundaries and offer insights into counseling Latino, African American, and Muslim clients. Our guest contributors address boundary considerations in a number of new and emerging specialty areas of practice, including disaster mental health work, social media friendships and school counselors, working with clients with end-of-life concerns, managing multiple relationships in military settings, in-home service delivery, and a postmodern perspective on ethical decision making. Other new topics include the client's perspective on the impact of sexual boundary violations; managing sexual attractions; multiple roles that doctoral students are challenged to play; addressing supervisee incompetence; challenges in the supervision of addictions counselors; and school counselor boundaries with teachers, administrators, and parents. This third edition provides a look at current

thinking and discussions on professional boundaries and multiple relationships in our changing world. In addition to the contributed pieces, all the chapters have been revised, most chapters contain expanded discussions on the topics, new trends have been identified, and current literature is cited.

This third edition highlights the revised ethics code of the American Counseling Association (2014) as well as specific standards drawn from the ethics codes of the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (2012), American Psychiatric Association (2013b), American Psychological Association (2010), American School Counselor Association (2010), Association for Counselor Education and Supervision (1993), Association for Specialists in Group Work (2008, 2012), Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association (2007), Commission on Rehabilitation Counselor Certification (2010), International Association of Marriage and Family Counselors (2011; Hendricks, Bradley, Southern, Oliver, & Birdsall, 2011), and National Association of Social Workers (2008).

We have organized the book to begin with a general introduction and overview of dual or multiple relationships and a range of boundary issues in counseling practice. We define the issues and areas of concern ([Chapter 1](#)), then focus on sexual dual relationships ([Chapter 2](#)) and present the client's perspective ([Chapter 3](#)). [Chapter 4](#) addresses multicultural and social justice perspectives on boundaries, which is a foundation for many of the chapters that follow. [Chapter 5](#) examines boundary issues in counselor education and is followed by chapters on supervision and consultation ([Chapter 6](#)), the education and training of group counselors ([Chapter 7](#)), group counseling and couples and family counseling ([Chapter 8](#)), and school counseling ([Chapter 9](#)). [Chapter 10](#) focuses on the specialty

areas of disaster mental health, private practice, addictions counseling, and rehabilitation counseling. In [Chapter 11](#) we focus on unique boundary issues that arise for practitioners in rural practice, counselors in the military, counseling clients with end-of-life concerns, providing in-home service, and counselors working in forensic settings. [Chapter 12](#) reviews 11 key themes in this book, asks questions to encourage integration and reflection, and offers a decision-making model.

We make no claim to having discovered the answers to many complex and difficult questions. Rather, it is our aim to raise issues, present a range of viewpoints, and discuss our own position. Our hope is that you will use this material as a springboard for further reflection and discussion. We invite you to think about the issues that are raised, apply them to your own work, and discuss them with colleagues.

This book focuses on boundary issues with a wide variety of client populations. Although the topic is narrow in focus, dual and multiple relationships are pervasive in the helping professions. This book is a valuable supplement for courses in ethics and professional issues and for practicum, fieldwork, and internship seminars. We hope counselor educators, clinical supervisors, and students benefit from the personal perspectives provided that identify potential problems and suggest solutions when crossing boundaries in dual or multiple relationships. Our aim is to aid all practitioners who struggle with boundary issues in their work today.

About the Authors

Barbara Herlihy, PhD, LPC, LPC-S, is University Research Professor in the Counselor Education graduate program at the University of New Orleans. She has served on the American Counseling Association (ACA) Ethics Committee as chair (1987–1989) and as a member (1986–1987, 1993–1994) and as a member of the task forces to revise the 1995 and 2005 ACA codes of ethics.

Dr. Herlihy is the coauthor of several books on ethical issues in counseling: *Ethical, Legal, and Professional Issues in Counseling* (with Ted Remley, 2014); *Boundary Issues in Counseling* (1997, 2006), the *ACA Ethical Standards Casebook* (1996, 2006), and *Dual Relationships in Counseling* (1992)—all with Gerald Corey; and the *ACA Ethical Standards Casebook* (with Larry Golden, 1990). She is also the author or coauthor of more than 50 journal articles and 25 book chapters on ethics, multicultural counseling, feminist therapy, and other topics. She is the recipient of the Southern Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Courtland Lee Social Justice Award and the Association for Counselor Education and Supervision Distinguished Mentor Award. She is a frequent presenter of seminars and workshops on ethics across the United States and internationally, most recently in Malta, Venezuela, and Mexico.

Gerald Corey, EdD, ABPP, NCC, is a professor emeritus of human services and counseling at California State University at Fullerton. He is a Diplomate in Counseling Psychology, American Board of Professional Psychology; a licensed counseling psychologist; and a Fellow of the American Counseling Association (ACA), the Association for Specialists in Group Work (ASGW), and the American

Psychological Association (APA), in both Division 17 and Division 49. He is the recipient (with Marianne Schneider Corey) of both the Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Mental Health Counselors Association in 2011 and the ASGW's Eminent Career Award in 2001.

Dr. Corey has authored or coauthored 15 textbooks in counseling that are currently in print, has made five educational DVD programs on various aspects of counseling, and has written numerous articles and book chapters. Some of his coauthored books include *Issues and Ethics in the Helping Professions* (with Marianne Schneider Corey, Cindy Corey, and Patrick Callanan, 2015), *Becoming a Helper* (with Marianne Schneider Corey, 2011), *I Never Knew I Had a Choice* (with Marianne Schneider Corey, 2014), *Groups: Process and Practice* (with Marianne Schneider Corey and Cindy Corey, 2014), and *Theory and Practice of Counseling and Psychotherapy* (2013). In the past 35 years the Coreys have conducted group counseling training workshops for mental health professionals at many universities in the United States as well as in Canada, Mexico, China, Hong Kong, Korea, Germany, Belgium, Scotland, England, and Ireland.

Guest Contributors

Our guest contributors have enriched this book immensely. They have provided a diversity of perspectives, including those of student, counselor educator and supervisor, practitioner, and specialist. They have shared their thoughts and opinions and have raised issues that are well worth considering. These contributors (and the chapters in which their contributions appear) are as follows:

Fred Bemak, EdD, is a professor and academic program coordinator of the Counseling and Development Program and director of the Diversity Research and Action Center at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. He is also the founder and director of Counselors Without Borders ([Chapter 4](#)).

L. DiAnne Borders, PhD, is Burlington Industries Excellence Professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro ([Chapter 6](#)).

Leon D. Caldwell, PhD, is a senior research associate at the Annie E. Casey Foundation and former associate professor of educational psychology at the University of Nebraska, Lincoln ([Chapter 4](#)).

Kellie Giorgio Camelford, MS, LPC, NCC, is a professional secondary school counselor in New Orleans and a doctoral candidate in counselor education at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 9](#)).

Christina Capodilupo, PhD, is adjunct professor in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University ([Chapter 4](#)).

Beth Christensen, PhD, NCC, LPC, is a mental health counselor in private practice in New Orleans, Louisiana,

and an adjunct faculty member at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 2](#)).

Rita Chi-Ying Chung, PhD, is a professor in the Counseling and Development Program at George Mason University, Fairfax, Virginia. Her research focuses on multicultural and social justice issues in counseling and psychology ([Chapter 4](#)).

Amanda Connell, MS, graduated from California State University, Fullerton. She currently works for two community mental health agencies and focuses on clients with substance abuse, disabilities, anxiety disorders, and trauma and on group work ([Chapters 2](#) and [11](#)).

Russ Curtis, PhD, is an associate professor in counseling in the College of Education and Allied Professions at Western Carolina University ([Chapter 9](#)).

Kristen N. Dickens, MA, is a doctoral student in counselor education at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 5](#)).

A. Michael Dougherty, PhD, is professor emeritus of counseling and former dean of the College of Education and Allied Professions at Western Carolina University ([Chapters 6](#) and [9](#)).

Roxane L. Dufrene, PhD, is an associate professor of counseling in the Department of Educational Leadership, Counseling, and Foundations at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 6](#)).

Matt Englar-Carlson, PhD, is a professor of counseling and the cofounder and codirector of the Center for Boys and Men at California State University, Fullerton ([Chapter 7](#)).

Holly Forester-Miller, PhD, LPC, is the president of Medical Hypnosis Consultants, PLLC, and Wellness

Consultants International in Durham, North Carolina, and an instructor and small group leader at Duke University Medical School ([Chapters 7](#) and [11](#)).

Harriet L. Glosoff, PhD, is professor and counselor education doctoral program director at Montclair State University ([Chapter 10](#)).

Robert Haynes, PhD, is a psychologist and author associated with Borderline Productions. He served as psychology internship director at Atascadero State Hospital for 25 years ([Chapter 11](#)).

Kathryn L. Henderson, PhD, is assistant professor of counselor education at the University of Texas at San Antonio ([Chapter 6](#)).

Mary A. Hermann, JD, PhD, is an associate professor and chair of the Department of Counselor Education at Virginia Commonwealth University ([Chapter 2](#)).

W. Brad Johnson, PhD, is a professor of psychology at the U.S. Naval Academy and a faculty associate in the Counseling Graduate Program at The Johns Hopkins University ([Chapter 11](#)).

Bonnie King, MA, is a doctoral student at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 11](#)).

Gerard Lawson, PhD, is an associate professor of counselor education and the Counselor Education Program Area Leader at Virginia Tech ([Chapter 10](#)).

Arnold A. Lazarus, PhD, ABPP, was a distinguished professor emeritus, Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology, Rutgers University; and was president of The Lazarus Institute, Skillman, New Jersey ([Chapter 1](#)).

Raul Machuca, PhD, is an assistant professor of counseling at Barry University and diplomate of the

Academy of Cognitive Therapy ([Chapter 4](#)).

Amy Manfrini, PhD, is a licensed marriage and family therapist with a doctorate in counseling psychology from the University of Southern California. She teaches in the Human Services Department at California State University, Fullerton, and is in private practice in Laguna Hills, California ([Chapter 8](#)).

Catherine Geoghegan McDermott, MS, is a nationally certified counselor and licensed professional counselor with 3 years of experience working at an all-female high school in New Orleans. She graduated from Loyola University with a master's degree in community counseling and is currently a doctoral candidate at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 9](#)).

Edward E. Moody Jr., PhD, is a professor of counselor education and chair of the Department of Allied Professions at North Carolina Central University ([Chapters 7](#) and [11](#)).

Ed Neukrug, EdD, is professor of counseling and university professor at Old Dominion University ([Chapters 1](#) and [3](#)).

Thomas A. Parham, PhD, is Vice Chancellor, Student Affairs, and an adjunct faculty member at the University of California, Irvine (UCI). He has also served as Assistant Vice Chancellor for Counseling and Health Services, Counseling Center Director, and Director of the Career and Life Planning Center at UCI. He is licensed to practice psychology in California ([Chapter 4](#)).

Kristina A. Peterson, PhD, is an assistant professor of counseling and human services at Roosevelt University ([Chapter 5](#)).

Phyllis Robertson, PhD, is an associate professor in counseling in the College of Education and Allied Professions at Western Carolina University ([Chapter 9](#)).

Holly A. Stadler, PhD, is professor of counseling and human services and Associate Vice President for Institutional Effectiveness at Roosevelt University ([Chapter 5](#)).

Mark Stebnicki, PhD, LPC, CRC, CCM, is a professor and coordinator of the Military and Trauma Counseling Certificate Program, Department of Addictions and Rehabilitation, at East Carolina University ([Chapter 10](#)).

Derald Wing Sue, PhD, is professor of psychology and education in the Department of Counseling and Clinical Psychology at Teachers College, Columbia University ([Chapter 4](#)).

Stacy L. Thacker, PhD, is a forensic psychologist who has worked for the State of California with the Board of Parole Hearing's Forensic Assessment Division since 2007 and previously worked as a psychologist at Atascadero State Hospital for 11 years ([Chapter 11](#)).

Adrianne Trogden, MA, is the Chief Clinical Officer at ACER, LLC, owner of Trogden Consulting, LLC, and a doctoral candidate at the University of New Orleans ([Chapter 6](#)).

Mevlida Turkes-Habibovic, PhD, is a graduate of the doctoral program in counselor education at the University of New Orleans. Her professional experience includes working with at-risk youth in a residential facility and in public schools ([Chapter 4](#)).

Laura J. Veach, PhD, LPC, LCAS, NCC, CCS, is associate professor and addictions counseling coordinator in the Department of Counseling at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and associate professor in the Department of Surgery at Wake Forest School of Medicine ([Chapter 10](#)).

Susan L. Walden, PhD, is a retired counselor and counselor educator, most recently at Houston Independent School District and Sam Houston State University. She is currently a personal trainer at the Trotter Family YMCA in Houston, Texas ([Chapter 3](#)).

James L. Werth Jr., PhD, ABPP, is behavioral health and wellness services director for Stone Mountain Health Services, headquartered in Pennington Gap, Virginia ([Chapter 11](#)).

Erica L. Whiting, MS, is a doctoral candidate in the Doctor of Psychology Program in Counseling Psychology at Radford University, Radford, Virginia ([Chapter 11](#)).

Chapter 1

Boundary Issues in Perspective

Dual or multiple relationships occur when a professional assumes two or more roles simultaneously or sequentially with a person seeking his or her help. This may involve taking on more than one professional role (such as counselor and teacher) or combining professional and nonprofessional roles (such as counselor and friend or counselor and lover). Another way of stating this is that a helping professional enters into a dual or multiple relationship whenever the professional has another, significantly different relationship with a client, a student, or a supervisee.

Multiple relationship issues exist throughout our profession and affect virtually all counselors, regardless of their work setting or the client populations they serve. Relationship boundary issues have an impact on the work of helping professionals in diverse roles, including counselor educator, supervisor, agency counselor, private practitioner, school counselor, college or university student personnel specialist, rehabilitation counselor, and practitioner in other specialty areas. These issues affect the dyadic relationship between counselor and client, and they can also emerge in complex ways in tripartite relationships (such as client/supervisee/supervisor or client/consultee/consultant) and in family therapy and group work. No professional remains untouched by the potential difficulties inherent in dual or multiple relationships.

This book is a revision of our earlier editions, *Dual Relationships in Counseling* (Herlihy & Corey, 1992) and

Boundary Issues in Counseling: Multiple Roles and Responsibilities (Herlihy & Corey, 1997, 2006b), but with an expanded focus. Since we last wrote together about this topic, helping professionals have continued to debate issues of multiple relationships, roles, and responsibilities; power; and boundaries in counseling.

Because of the complexities involved, the term *multiple relationship* is often more descriptive than *dual relationship*. *Dual* or *multiple relationships* occur when mental health practitioners interact with clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business. In the most recent versions of the *ACA Code of Ethics* (American Counseling Association [ACA], 2005, 2014), both of these terms have been replaced with the term *nonprofessional interactions* to indicate those additional relationships other than sexual or romantic ones. In this book, we continue to use the terms *dual* or *multiple relationships* to describe these nonprofessional relationships as well as dual professional relationships.

This revised edition is based on the assumption that counseling professionals must learn how to *manage* multiple roles and responsibilities (or nonprofessional interactions or relationships) effectively rather than learn how to *avoid* them. This entails managing the power differential inherent in counseling or training relationships, balancing boundary issues, addressing nonprofessional relationships, and striving to avoid using power in ways that might cause harm to clients, students, or supervisees. This book rests on the premise that we can develop ethical decision-making skills that will enable us to weigh the pros and cons of multiple roles and nonprofessional interactions or relationships.

Beginning in the 1980s, the counseling profession became increasingly concerned with the ethical issues inherent in

entering into multiple relationships and establishing appropriate boundaries. Much has been written since then about the harm that results when counseling professionals enter into sexual relationships with their clients. Throughout the 1980s, sexual misconduct received a great deal of attention in the professional literature, and the dangers of sexual relationships between counselor and client, professor and student, and supervisor and supervisee have been well documented. Today there is clear and unanimous agreement that sexual relationships with clients, students, and supervisees are unethical, and prohibitions against them have been translated into ethics codes and law. Even those who have argued most forcefully against dual relationship prohibitions (e.g., Lazarus & Zur, 2002; Zur, 2007) agree that sexual dual relationships are *never* acceptable. We examine the issue of sexual dual relationships in detail in [Chapter 2](#).

In the 1990s and until the turn of the century, nonsexual dual and multiple relationships received considerable attention in professional journals and counseling textbooks. The codes of ethics of the ACA (2014), the American School Counselor Association (ASCA; 2010), the American Psychological Association (APA; 2010), the National Association of Social Workers (NASW; 2008), and the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT; 2012) have all dealt specifically and extensively with topics such as appropriate boundaries, recognizing potential conflicts of interest, and ethical means for dealing with dual or multiple relationships. Since this book was last revised in 2006, new articles on these topics have slowed to a trickle in the professional literature. There has been an increasing recognition and acceptance that dual or multiple relationships are often complex, which means that few simple and absolute answers can neatly resolve ethical dilemmas that arise. It is not always possible for counselors

to play a singular role in their work, nor is this always desirable. From time to time we all will wrestle with how to balance multiple roles in our professional and nonprofessional relationships. Examples of problematic concerns associated with dual relationships include whether to barter with a client for goods or services, whether it is ever acceptable to counsel a friend of a friend or social acquaintance, whether to interact with clients outside the office, how a counselor educator might manage dual roles as educator and therapeutic agent with students, how to ethically conduct experiential groups as part of a group counseling course, and whether it is acceptable to develop social relationships with a former client.

In this chapter, we focus on nonsexual dual relationships that can arise in all settings. One of our guest contributors, Arnold Lazarus, makes a case for the potential benefits of transcending boundaries. He takes the position that benefits can accrue when therapists are willing to think and venture outside the proverbial box. The following questions will guide our discussion:

- What guidance do our codes of ethics offer about dual or multiple nonprofessional relationships?
- What makes dual or multiple relationships problematic?
- What factors create the potential for harm?
- What are the risks (and benefits) inherent in dual or multiple relationships, for all parties involved?
- What important but subtle distinctions should be considered?
- What safeguards can be built in to minimize risks?

Ethical Standards

The codes of ethics of all the major associations of mental health professionals address the issue of multiple relationships. To begin our discussion, consider these excerpts from the codes of ethics for mental health counselors, marriage and family therapists, social workers, school counselors, and psychologists.

The *ACA Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2014) provides several guidelines regarding nonprofessional interactions. Counselors are advised that:

Sexual and/or Romantic Relationships Prohibited

Sexual and/or romantic counselor-client interactions or relationships with current clients, their romantic partners, or their family members are prohibited. This prohibition applies to both in-person and electronic interactions or relationships. (Standard A.5.a.)

Previous Relationships

Counselors consider the risks and benefits of accepting as clients those with whom they have had a previous relationship. These potential clients may include individuals with whom the counselor has had a casual, distant, or past relationship. Examples include mutual or past membership in a professional association, organization, or community. When counselors accept these clients, they take appropriate professional precautions such as informed consent, consultation, supervision, and documentation to ensure that judgment is not impaired and no exploitation occurs. (Standard A.6.a.)

Extending Counseling Boundaries

Counselors consider the risks and benefits of extending current counseling relationships beyond conventional parameters. Examples include attending a client's formal ceremony (e.g., a wedding/commitment ceremony or graduation), purchasing a service or product provided by a client (excepting unrestricted bartering), and visiting a client's ill family member in the hospital. In extending these boundaries, counselors take appropriate professional precautions such as informed consent, consultation, supervision, and documentation to ensure that judgment is not impaired and no harm occurs. (Standard A.6.b.)

Documenting Boundary Extensions

If counselors extend boundaries as described in A.6.a. and A.6.b., they must officially document, prior to the interaction (when feasible), the rationale for such an interaction, the potential benefit, and anticipated consequences for the client or former client and other individuals significantly involved with the client or former client. When unintentional harm occurs to the client or former client, or to an individual significantly involved with the client or former client, the counselor must show evidence of an attempt to remedy such harm. (Standard A.6.c.)

The standard of the *AAMFT Code of Ethics* (AAMFT, 2012) dealing with dual relationships advises therapists to avoid such relationships due to the risk of exploitation:

Marriage and family therapists are aware of their influential position with respect to clients, and they avoid exploiting the trust and dependency of such persons. Therapists, therefore, make every effort to avoid conditions and multiple relationships with clients that could impair professional judgment or increase the risk of exploitation. Such relationships include, but are not limited to, business or close personal relationships with a client or the client's immediate family. When the risk of impairment or exploitation exists due to conditions or multiple roles, therapists document the appropriate precautions taken. (1.3.)

The NASW (2008) code of ethics, using language similar to that of the AAMFT, focuses on the risk of exploitation or potential harm to clients:

Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries. (Dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social, or business. Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively.) (1.06.c.)

The *Ethical Standards for School Counselors* (ASCA, 2010) also advises that school counselors avoid dual relationships that carry a potential risk of harm and, like the ACA, suggests safeguards. The school counselors' code is the only one, among those reviewed here, that addresses the burgeoning usage of social media and its potential for

creating inappropriate relationships between students and professionals.

Professional school counselors:

Avoid dual relationships that might impair their objectivity and increase the risk of harm to the student (e.g., counseling one's family members, close friends or associates). If a dual relationship is unavoidable, the school counselor is responsible for taking action to eliminate or reduce the potential for harm to the student through the use of safeguards, which might include informed consent, consultation, supervision and documentation. (A.4.a.)

Maintain appropriate professional distance with students at all times. (A.4.b.)

Avoid dual relationships with students through communication mediums such as social networking sites. (A.4.c.)

The APA (2010) code addresses multiple relationships quite extensively:

(a) A multiple relationship occurs when a psychologist is in a professional role with a person and (1) at the same time is in another role with the same person, (2) at the same time is in a relationship with a person closely associated with or related to the person with whom the psychologist has the professional relationship, or (3) promises to enter into another relationship in the future with the person or a person closely associated with or related to the person.

A psychologist refrains from entering into a multiple relationship if the multiple relationship could reasonably be expected to impair the psychologist's objectivity, competence, or effectiveness in performing his or her functions as a psychologist, or otherwise risks exploitation or harm to the person with whom the professional relationship exists.

Multiple relationships that would not reasonably be expected to cause impairment or risk exploitation or harm are not unethical.

(b) If a psychologist finds that, due to unforeseen factors, a potentially harmful multiple relationship has arisen, the psychologist takes reasonable steps to resolve it with due regard for the best interests of the affected person and maximal compliance with the Ethics Code.

(c) When psychologists are required by law, institutional policy, or extraordinary circumstances to serve in more than one role in judicial or administrative proceedings, at the outset they clarify role expectations and the extent of confidentiality and thereafter as changes occur. (3.05.)

As can be seen, the ethics codes for mental health professionals all take considerable care to address dual and multiple relationships. Ethical problems often arise when clinicians blend their professional relationships with other kinds of relationships with a client. The ethics codes of most professional organizations currently warn against crossing these boundaries when it is not in the best interests of the client. The emphasis is no longer on an outright prohibition of dual or multiple relationships; rather, the focus has shifted to avoiding the misuse of power and exploitation of the client. Also, it is increasingly

acknowledged that some nonprofessional relationships are potentially beneficial.

What Makes Dual or Multiple Relationships So Problematic?

Dual and multiple relationships are fraught with complexities and ambiguities that require counselors to make judgment calls and apply the codes of ethics carefully to specific situations. These relationships are problematic for a number of reasons:

- They can be difficult to recognize.
- They can be very harmful; but they are not always harmful, and some have argued that they can be beneficial.
- They are the subject of conflicting views.
- They are not always avoidable.

Dual or Multiple Relationships Can Be Difficult to Recognize

Dual or multiple relationships can evolve in subtle ways. Some counselors, counselor educators, or supervisors may somewhat innocently establish a form of nonprofessional relationship. They may go on a group outing with clients, students, or supervisees. A counselor may agree to play tennis with a client, go on a hike or a bike ride, or go jogging together when they meet by accident at the jogging trail. Initially, this nonprofessional interaction may seem to enhance the trust needed to establish a good working relationship in therapy. However, if such events continue to occur, eventually a client may want more nonprofessional interactions with the therapist. The client may want to

become close friends with the counselor and feel let down when the counselor declines an invitation to a social event. If a friendship does begin to develop, the client may become cautious about what he or she reveals in counseling for fear of negatively affecting the friendship. At the same time, the counselor may avoid challenging the client out of reluctance to offend someone who has become a friend.

It can be particularly difficult to recognize potential problems when dual relationships are sequential rather than simultaneous. A host of questions present themselves: Can a former client eventually become a friend? How does the relationship between supervisor and supervisee evolve into a collegial relationship after the formal supervision is completed? What kinds of posttherapy relationships are ever acceptable? These questions are explored in later chapters.

Dual or Multiple Relationships Are Not Always Harmful, and They May Be Beneficial

A wide range of outcomes to dual or multiple relationships is possible, from harmful to beneficial. Some dual relationships are clearly exploitive and do serious harm to the client and to the professional involved. Others are benign; that is, no harm is done. In some instances, dual relating may strengthen the therapeutic relationship. Moleski and Kiselica (2005) provide a review of the literature regarding the nature, scope, and complexity of dual relationships ranging from the destructive to the therapeutic. They suggest that counselors who begin a dual relationship are not always destined for disaster. They describe some therapeutic dual relationships that complement and enhance the counseling relationship. For example, in counseling clients from diverse cultures, practitioners may find it necessary to engage in boundary