Multiple Shades of Grey:

Navigating the nuances of ethical boundaries in social work practice

Terricka Hardy, LCSW, ACSW, BCD, CCFP

Hardy Consulting, LLC

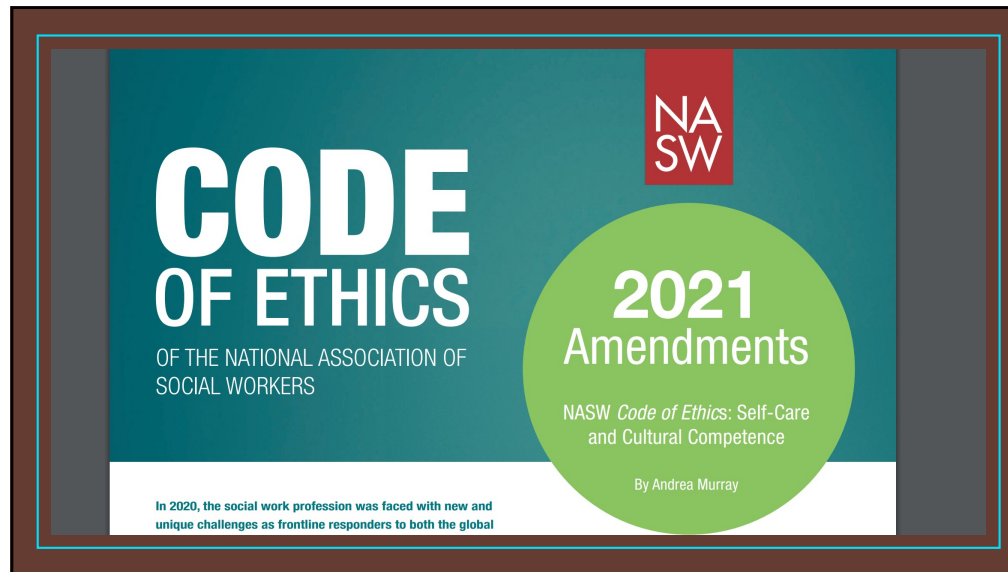admin@terrickahardy.com

LinkedIN: Terricka Hardy, LCSW

1

Terricka Hardy,

LCSW, ACSW, BCD, CCFP

Former NASW National Ethics Committee Member

Editor, International Journal for SW Ethics/ Values

Social Work Exam Prep Coach

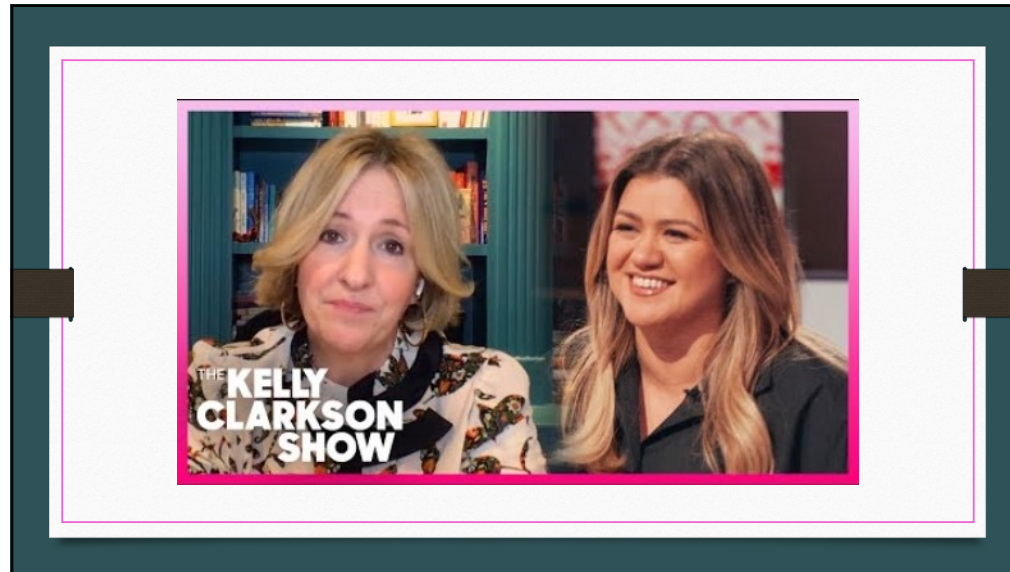Certified Compassion Fatigue Specialist

2

CODE
OF ETHICS

OF THE NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF
SOCIAL WORKERS

NA
SW

2021
Amendments

NASW *Code of Ethics*: Self-Care
and Cultural Competence

By Andrea Murray

In 2020, the social work profession was faced with new and
unique challenges as frontline responders to both the global

3

Learning Objectives

- 1. Discuss common ethical challenges in social work practice.

- 2. Define boundary crossings and boundary violations.

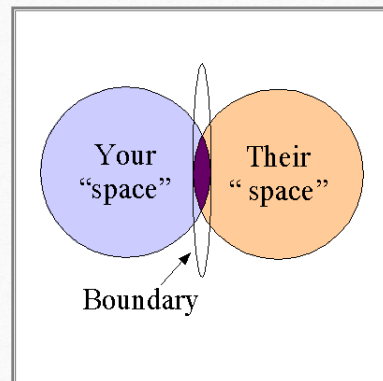- 3. Identify best practice strategies to establish and maintain ethical boundaries.

4

5

The most compassionate people are the most boundaried.
-Brene Brown

6

If this is true, then….

- Your ability to show compassion/ empathy in practice is directly connected to establishing and maintaining personal & professional boundaries.

7

What are boundaries

Your "space"   Their "space"

Boundary

- Limits set that allow for a safe connection based on the client's need.
- Limits identify what is acceptable/ unacceptable for a professional both at work and outside work.
- "Being with" the client, not becoming the client
- Knowing where you end & the client begins
- An understanding of roles/ responsibilities for client & professional

8

Why are boundaries important?

- Establishes a safe place for clients
- Nurtures the therapeutic relationship
- Builds sense of trust
- Helps professionals stay focused
- Opportunity for role modeling
- Protects the client & professional
- Helps to avoid Professional Impairment

9

Boundaries help control the power differential.

10

Boundary Crossings vs Boundary Violations

- **Boundary Crossings** happens when the professional relationships becomes personal.

- **Boundary Violations** happen when the professional exploits, manipulates, deceives, or coerces clients/ colleagues.

(Reamer, 2003)

11

Boundary crossings become violations when…

1. It interferes with professional discretion.
2. It interferes with the professional's impartial judgement.
3. Exploit clients, colleagues, or third parties for personal interests
4. Harms clients, colleagues, or third parties.

(Reamer, 2003)

12

Boundary Indicators

Client

- Referring to professional as a "friend"
- Receiving/ giving gifts
- Client asks for professional's personal info (home address, children's schools, etc.)
- Client expects to socialize w/ professional outside of professional setting (invitation to church, social media interaction)

Professional

- Reveals too much personal information to client
- Experiencing anxiety related to client/ client's situation (i.e. lack of sleep, etc.)
- Talks about work/client excessively
- Offering to provide assistance outside of professional role (babysitting, transportation, etc.)
- Talking about colleagues to client in a negative way

13

How boundaries are weakened

- Physical contact
- Inappropriate dress
- Horseplay/ flirting
- Sharing too much personal information like your own marriage problems, dating life, use of alcohol, etc.
- Allowing clients to break the client therapist agreement
- Selling or buying items from clients
- Seeing each other outside of counseling sessions /socially
- Extending individual sessions longer than agreed upon
- Dual relationships: Serving clients you know outside of the therapeutic relationship

14

Consequences of having poor boundaries

- Professional Impairment
- Poor Client service
- Client may feel confused, betrayed, abandoned
- Ethical Infractions
- Fidelity of professional, agency, SW profession compromised
- Client Injury

15

NASW Code of Ethics & Boundaries

- Conflicts of Interest
- Privacy/ Confidentiality
- Access to records
- Sexual Relationships
- Physical Contact
- Payment for Services
- Falsifying records
- Improper termination/ abandonment
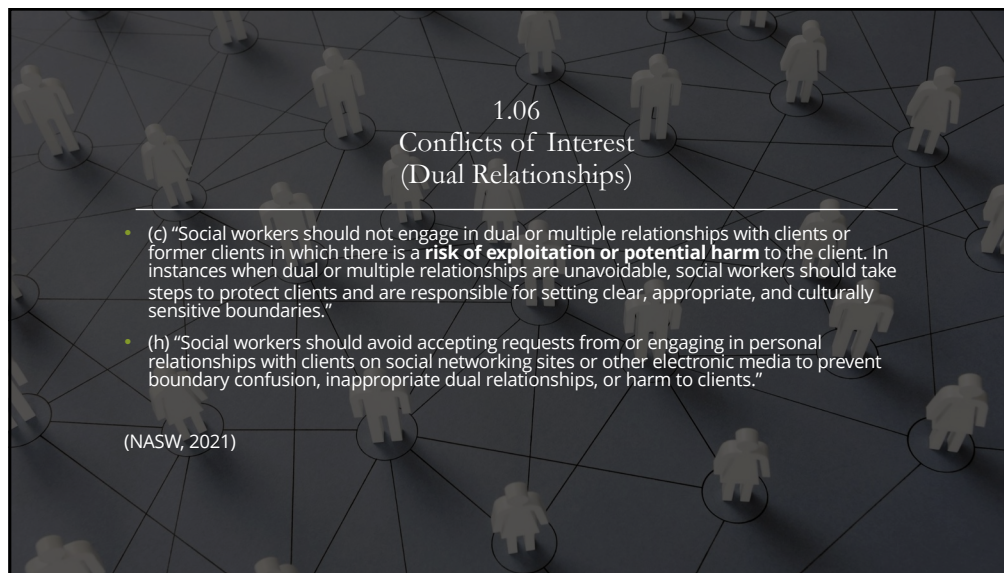- Lack of informed consent

16

Gray Areas:
Most Common **SUBSTANTIATED** Ethical Violations

- 1.01 – Commitment to Clients
- 1.06 – Conflicts of Interest
- 1.07 – Privacy and Confidentiality
- 1.09 – Sexual Relationships
- 2.11 – Unethical Conduct of Colleagues
- 3.04 – Client Records
- 4.04 – Dishonesty, Fraud, and Deception
- 4.06 – Misrepresentation

NASW (2024) Retrieved from: https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Professional-Review

17

1.06
Conflicts of Interest
(Dual Relationships)

- (c) "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."

- (h) "Social workers should avoid accepting requests from or engaging in personal relationships with clients on social networking sites or other electronic media to prevent boundary confusion, inappropriate dual relationships, or harm to clients."

(NASW, 2021)

18

1.06
Conflicts of Interest
(Dual Relationships)

- (e) Social workers should avoid communication with clients using technology (such as social networking sites, online chat, e-mail, text messages, telephone, and video) for personal or non-work-related purposes.

19

Best Practices in Social Work Technology

Do	Don't
• Maintain separate personal & professional social media/ websites.	• Avoid inappropriate dual relationships.
• Communicate w/ clients for professional purposes w/ **client consent.**	• Avoid conflicts of interest.
• Discuss digital policies w/ clients (i.e. emergencies, between appts).	• Avoid posting personal information that might create boundary confusion.
	• Accept friend, contact, or blog response requests from clients.

(ASWB, 2015)
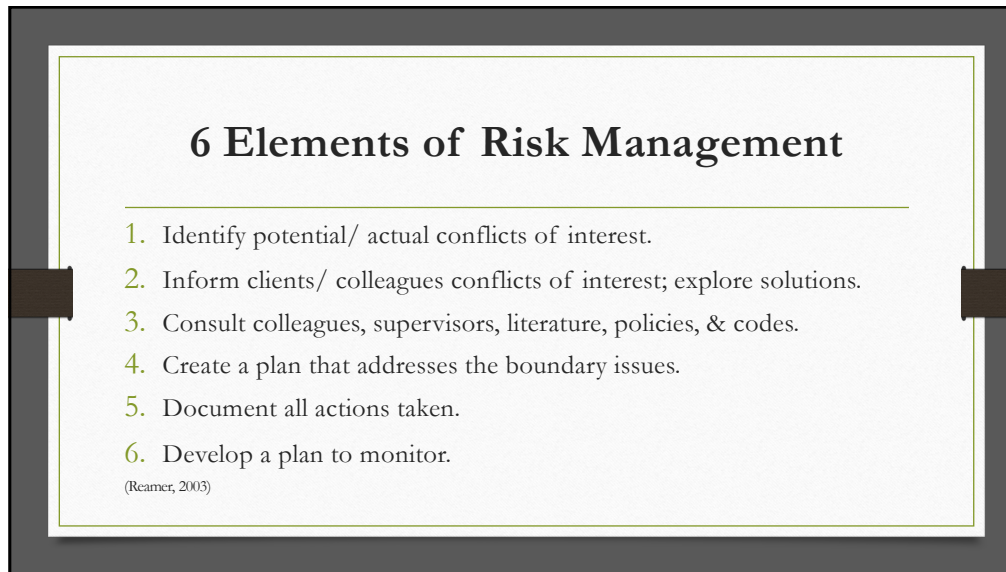
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21

22

1.07
Privacy & Confidentiality

- (m) "Social workers should take reasonable steps to protect the confidentiality of electronic communications, including information provided to clients or third parties. Social workers should use applicable safeguards (such as encryption, firewalls, and passwords) when using electronic communications such as e-mail, online posts, online chat sessions, mobile communication, and text messages."

(NASW, 2021)

23

6 Elements of Risk Management

1. Identify potential/ actual conflicts of interest.
2. Inform clients/ colleagues conflicts of interest; explore solutions.
3. Consult colleagues, supervisors, literature, policies, & codes.
4. Create a plan that addresses the boundary issues.
5. Document all actions taken.
6. Develop a plan to monitor.

(Reamer, 2003)

24

Ways to strengthen boundaries

- Maintaining appropriate space
- Maintaining appropriate dress
- Professional consultation
- Keeping time and number of session to agreed upon amount
- Setting limits
- Consistency
- Role model appropriate behavior / No personal favors
- Reinforcing definition of relationship

25

Red Flags that signal boundary violation

- Client is "someone special"
- Discussing private info about other clients to client
- Acting impulsively (very protective) towards client
- Client has large bill balance (running a tab)

- Granting special favors
- Extending client's counseling sessions
- Being attracted to the client

26

Ways to manage boundaries

- Self Check- Know your TRIGGERS
- Keep clients'/ colleagues' needs first
- Be Upfront- Know your boundaries & communicate them
- Practice- Have "ready responses" & practice w/ a coworker
- Conduct Reality Checks with colleagues
- Follow policy/ Codes of Ethics
- Practice Self-Care

27

Self Check Questions

- Would I feel comfortable discussing clients interactions w/ supervisor?
- Is my behavior code approved?
- Would you be comfortable allowing a coworker/manager observe your behavior?
- "Only I can take care of/understand my client, no one else can."
- Does my interactions w/ clients reflect treatment goals?
- Would I do this for every client?

28

Thank YOU!!

Contact Info:

Terricka Hardy, LCSW, ACSW, BCD

Email: admin@terrickahardy.com

www.terrickahardy.com

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29

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30