

# A Field Liaison's Reflection on Dual Roles and Boundaries

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**Abstract:** This narrative focuses on a new field liaison exploring dual roles and boundaries. The experience is explored applying a relational framework. I explore my journey through my relationship with my father and how this impacted my current view of social work as well as how it was challenged when I lost my father.

**Keywords:** field liaison, boundaries, relational social work, dual roles

## Prologue

“It is you,” said my student with surprise in her voice. I looked up with tears running down my exhausted face. I was holding the hands of my father, who was on life support in the Intensive Care Unit (ICU). My first-year social work student, who had noted my surname on her field placement admission's roster, had come down to our floor to confirm if the patient was one of my relations, as I was her faculty field liaison.

## Introduction

After spending several years working as both a field instructor and clinical supervisor, I became a field liaison. I was excited to take on this role, which enabled me to support students to bridge the theoretical concepts they were learning in the classroom with their experiences in their field placements. As a field liaison, I would provide support not only to students, but also to field instructors and their agencies, assisting them in connecting to the field office and supporting them with gate-keeping aspects of the role, including socializing new social workers (Tully, 2015). I acted as both a consultant for the field instructor and as an evaluator for the students; therefore, the duties and tasks of my role were diverse. At times, I was alternately a mediator, instructor, and mentor to students. I quickly learned that part of my role included teaching others about the scope and responsibilities of our partnership (Royse, Dhooper, & Rompf, 2016). Despite these varied roles and obligations and their corresponding challenges, I closely followed the *National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics* in my application of dual relationships and had strict boundaries with the students (Sugimoto, Hank, Bowman, & Pomerantz, 2015).

Similar to the professional boundaries with both clients and staff, which I adopted in the clinical social work field over the course of fifteen years, I limited disclosure of personal information to a professional minimum (Knox, 2015). I made sure to always keep the conversations with my staff focused on their work performance or clients' well-being. I continued these practices with my students: for example, I kept business office hours and made appointments with students instead of being readily available. I always met with students at the social work school or at their field sites. When I scheduled virtual meetings, I made sure to have a neutral background. I asked students to refrain from texting me and to focus on professionalism and learning goals in our interactions (O'Leary, Miller, Olive, & Kelly, 2017). While I strived to be relational, warm,

open, and compassionate in our interactions, I deflected curious personal inquiries about my life—such as whether I had a partner or children and other related questions—in the manner of a seasoned practitioner. I was often present in their practice classroom and visited them at their field sites, regularly discussing the importance of creating professional boundaries. I also wanted my students to observe me model professional boundaries in these diverse environments in order to prepare them for their macro and micro roles within community settings. We engaged in individualized meetings, email exchanges, Zoom and Skype check-ins, and telephone calls so that I could be updated on their progress throughout their field experiences; our relationship stayed within the bounds of that between social work field liaison and social work student.

Keeping the personal and the professional separate was not always an easy path, as I was dealing with my own personal challenges. I struggled to compartmentalize and separate from my field liaison role these duties: completing my doctorate work, parenting young children, and navigating the challenges of caretaking for a father who was terminally ill. Many of my students were also experiencing their own challenges: several of the students' mental health struggles or past traumas resurfaced as they entered their field placements (Gilbert & Stickley, 2012). Certain students were facing chronic health issues, eating disorders, moving to a new city, relationship crises, and financial struggles; in addition, certain students were confronting structural issues of discrimination in their agencies. Through class discussions, process-recordings, and one-on-one interactions, I learned about their journeys to social work and the biases and challenges they faced within the field. Through supervision they integrated their social work field experiences and past post-traumatic growth experiences and their intersectional identities into their work. Often a student's disclosure was a vital part of our supervision process; this disclosure helped me to better support the students, providing tailored support (Knox, 2015).

Early on in the fall, I found that I had to shift to a relational social work framework as a field liaison to support my social work students during their field experiences. Relational social work in this context would highlight “mutuality and interaction in the relationship between the self and other” (Goldstein, Miehl, & Ringel, 2009, p. xii). Additional relational social work concepts that I utilized with my students would recognize the resilience and strengths of the students and their paths of growth, acknowledge intersectionality and how this impacts human development and the relationship between the field liaison and student, and finally emphasize empathic attunement between the student and field liaison (Goldstein et al., 2009). Utilizing a relational framework with the supervisee, I would negotiate our liaison relationship through shared interactions and experiences (Goldstein, et al., 2009). Instead of lecturing to the supervisee about boundaries, I would email a student who had texted me a gentle reminder, or when a student was experiencing personal issues that arose at the field site, I would offer resources for support. I would focus on the relationship between the student and myself and the student and their field site and closely monitor this parallel process. If appropriate, I would share my own social work practice experiences and integrate these examples into our work together.

During our individual meetings, one student, “Mae,” discussed the impact that her adoption has had on her own social construction of race and identity in the social work practice. She had been raised by white Italian parents in a predominately Caucasian upper middle-class neighborhood in a rural area of Ohio. Since attending our large urban social work school, Mae had been

discovering more about her culture and her ancestry and was for the first time engaging a diverse range of individuals and was able to forge new relationships that expanded on her own idea of identity. She had been taught to be color-blind (to believe that everyone is the same and that racism does not exist) by her parents, but now saw that this belief system had hurt her and was now impacting her clients. Mae began to proudly identify as a student of color and often brought up the racial inequalities that her clients were experiencing during our supervisions.

Like many of my other first-year social work students, Mae had transitioned from college directly into social work school with experiences in community service or clubs leading her to the social work profession. While she had worked for several years in various roles in the service industry, the field placement as a hospital social worker served as her first professional role in the field. She wanted to thrive in this new role. However, she was very quiet and unsure of herself and often waited for direction before engaging with clients. During Mae's first few months in the field, she experienced several challenges, including advocating for supervision or support from her busy field instructor, who expected to take maternity leave near the end of her first semester. Since she did not receive significant guidance, she reached out to me more frequently to pose questions and to seek support. I met with her and her field instructor to support her with requesting additional responsibility and she was successful during this interaction by bravely requesting more opportunities such as running a group. I saw Mae grow from being timid to being more confident in her first-year intern role while performing intakes and discharges as well as offering social support to the patients and their families.

My student Mae was the acting social worker on the floor when my father was admitted into the Intensive Care Unit on the cancer floor in the middle of her second semester. When she came to his room to see me that day, my father was newly unresponsive and as his health power of attorney, it was my role to make the decision to take him off life support. When she saw us, she instantly entered the room and engaged with me, my sister, and my mother, who were distraught. His rapid decline had been sudden, and we were all stunned and grief-stricken. Interacting with my student at this time filled me with anguish, as I was cognizant of the awkwardness, tension, and overlap between the private and professional realms; simultaneously I also embraced the utility of the moment and made requests for various supports which she readily took note of (we requested that a chaplain visit us, etc.). I instinctively repressed my feelings to be able to carry out a civil conversation about banal subjects like the cafeteria food, parking, and the weather. Mae kept a friendly disposition during our interaction, but I could also sense the tension between her urgency to be helpful and my own preference for the conversation to end. She came back to our room at a later time to check on us and by then, our stay at the hospital had nearly ended, because my father died later that night.

When I returned to teach our practice class, our relationship was changed and impacted by this challenging interaction. I had been seen as the person who needed help in a moment of extreme vulnerability due to grief and loss. She had been acting in the role of social worker and helper. Mae tried to subsequently check in with me on several occasions to discuss my loss, and I found that I could not hold back tears due to the rawness of losing my father. She would wait for me after class or come up and talk to me during a break. She brought me a sympathy card and once even made the offer to talk if I ever needed to. She would say, "How are you feeling today?" and

I would respond “Fine, how are you?” almost as if in an automatic response. She would try to meet my eye during class and give me a sad smile or nod. I was experiencing the shock and numbness of grief and struggled to keep my composure during the class, so I came to want to avoid these interactions. I finally opened up with my fellow practice professor about this dynamic, and she would at times act as a buffer. It was an ethical dilemma for me because I did not want to hurt Mae’s feelings and this situation was not her fault at all. I could sense she wanted my approval. However, I also needed to protect myself because my own professional boundaries had been crossed and I was unsure how to best proceed. Ultimately, I kindly thanked Mae for her concern, but clearly asked her to not engage with me on this matter because it was too difficult, and I wanted to spend the class time focusing on the material and on her and her peers.

In the midst of a family crisis and in shock at the hospital, in retrospect, I regret that I did not request that another social worker fill her role. The boundaries and ethics of our field liaison and student relationship shifted; as a full-time social work professor and faculty field liaison, I must now grapple with the challenges inherent to the field liaison/professor and student relationship. I had endeavored to successfully transition back to our original roles as field liaison and student; we achieved this transition on the surface level, but there was a great deal which remained unspoken and unaddressed regarding our previous interaction. She had been present during one of the most vulnerable and difficult moments in my life.

### **Growing Up**

Starting when I was four years old, I would frequently accompany my father on home visits to the homes of his clients. We lived on the Eastern Shore of Maryland in a rural area with extensive corn and soybean fields and farming near both Harriet Tubman and Frederick Douglass’s birthplaces. Despite the historical significance of the Underground Railroad, there was a drastic economic divide between the residents who were Black and the White upper class—with an almost nonexistent middle class—who lived in this region. In the early 1980s, several of the families whom we visited had children with physical, developmental, and mental health challenges. These families often did not have running water or access to indoor plumbing for a bathroom. When we would visit these families, we would bring vegetables from our bountiful garden, cookies, or needed supplies from the local health department where my father was employed as a mental health case management supervisor. We would visit in living rooms, backyards, porches, and at kitchen tables and talk about both the joys and challenges these families were experiencing. Through these site visits, I first learned about relational social work in practice by watching my father deeply listen to and share with these clients. I can still remember the big smile on his face when he greeted the often-wary caregivers and the looks of relief and tenderness that were on the faces of those on the receiving end of the exchanges. My dad would explain that the most vital part of the visit was connecting with and forming genuine relationships with the individuals. He was modeling relational empathy for me and teaching me to do the same. In my house growing up, the terms “client” and “friend” were interchangeable, and clients often called me on the landline to check in and talk to my dad and would frequently chat with me or my younger sister. Clients were present for holidays or to help with a yard project, for which they were compensated. There was a multiplicity of roles inherent within his

everyday relationships with his clients.

As a licensed professional counselor in a rural environment who was inspired by pastoral counseling, my father followed a vocational calling to serve others. He believed that boundaries needed to be broken down to prevent a divide within the relationship. When I ultimately attended social work school and began to practice, my own professional practice diverged from my father's style. I sought a private life within a large city as compared to a rural community. I embraced the *NASW Code of Ethics* (2017), and I learned about dual roles and clearly defined boundaries, which were typically easier to uphold in an urban environment due to social norms which prioritize the delineation between the professional and personal realms. While I had witnessed and experienced less established boundaries growing up, I transitioned to the other end of the boundary spectrum and created strict boundaries. As a new social worker, I did not have personal pictures on my desk or disclose being queer or married, I never approached a client in a public setting, and I consistently redirected Facebook invitations and personal inquiries from clients and supervisees.

### **Conclusion**

In spite of these values, in the aforementioned situation with my student Mae, I had involuntarily disclosed information about my family and about my grief. I was vulnerable and exposed not only as a field liaison, but also as a family member dealing with loss. At the end of the semester, Mae approached me to thank me for encouraging her to run a group on the cancer unit and for the support I provided to her during her field placement. Mae took a deep breath and said to me: "Thank you also for letting me help you and your family that day." As I nodded a response, I noted that when practicing relational social work with students, I can still maintain clear boundaries while also allowing vulnerability to be present in our interactions. Subsequently, I have endeavored to embody the relational approach in my relationships and interactions with students. Through exploring the grief surrounding losing my father, I continue to strive to be intentional about my being self-reflective and vulnerable and use this as a tool and not a barrier in my role as a field liaison and social work professor. This experience also reminded me that boundaries and relationships are constantly in flux and that change is always to be expected. Further research on dual roles with field liaisons and students and when the social worker needs help should be explored through qualitative research.

On a smaller scale, I have since integrated my relational approach into my teaching and field liaison philosophy, which I review during the first class with my students each semester so they are familiar with the approach and what it means in our work together. Relational social work techniques are powerful teaching tools that help to create a dynamic learning environment where we focus on the here and now and the experiences of the students and cultural context of field and the social work classroom. I also stress that I welcome feedback, and that I am also still learning, and that it is challenging work to be reflective while we engage with others. If I make a mistake in class or have a learning experience from my own work, I model apologizing and share my feelings about the experience as openly as I can. I also share that the syllabus is a guide, but that it is subject to change as needed to meet the needs of the students and their areas of expertise and how my social work training and experience can be shared to create a rich

learning environment for everyone. I share with my students the importance of context for how they experience the world. I also highlight examples of social work ethical situations in the grey where circumstances are not always clear and that as social workers, we have to figure out the best possible answer that stays true to social justice principles, social work values, and integrity.

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