

Dual Roles and Other Ethical Considerations

by Ben E. Benjamin, Ph.D.

This paper is about making explicit the necessity for good working boundaries in any professional relationship and the reasons why it is important. The following sections include discussions of dual relationships, confidentiality and informed consent. We take an in-depth look at some of the interpersonal issues and dilemmas that inevitably arise in a massage school. We then suggest some concrete guidelines that will create an environment for better working relationships between members of the school community. It is our hope that this information will assist individual schools in exploring and implementing ethical guidelines that feel right for their staff, teachers and students.

When a school or an organization is in the initial phases of development it develops rules and policies with regard to finances, curriculum, teaching quality, hiring, firing, administrative procedures, etc. However, policies and guidelines having to do with the personal relationships within the organization have been generally ignored, and the idea actually makes many people leery. Yet when there is confusion about roles or power differences in an organization, and when appropriate boundaries between members are not made explicit, difficulties regularly arise which can have a profoundly negative effect on the functioning of the organization. For example, ignorance of the psychological impact of a power differential leads to actions that can easily make employees or students feel hurt, misunderstood and angry.

We have found that in order for such guidelines to be effective, they must be based on an understanding of certain psychological concepts related to individual and group functioning. These would include an understanding of the consequences of transference, countertransference, power differentials and dual role relationships. Education and training in these areas are vital in order for teachers and staff members to sensitively deal with these issues.

DUAL RELATIONSHIPS

In considering ethical behavior in massage schools we need to look at dual relationships in the school setting. Dual relationships are those relationships in which different roles overlap. In each relationship there is a different set of expectations and responses. For example, my neighbor is now my student. How I interact with this person will be different in each setting because of the role change. If this neighbor, who is now also my student, has a dog that rips up my flower bed and knocks down my fence, how will the resolution of the conflict with my neighbor affect my relationship with that student - especially if it doesn't go well.

Students are, by definition, in a less powerful position than administrators and teachers. School personnel have a say about the success or failure of each student in the school. Because of this, students are in the more vulnerable position. Administrators and teachers often underestimate both the impact of their more powerful position and

the strong emotions that can be aroused in the students. The danger in not realizing this is that students can be taken advantage of in many areas: personally, professionally, emotionally, financially, and educationally. A good goal for school personnel would be to minimize the potential for unconscious acting out of power issues through dual relationships.

Whenever there is a power differential in a relationship, there is a strong potential for transference and countertransference to arise in that relationship. Transference on the part of students means that they might start responding in the school setting to certain individuals in a way that is reminiscent of how they related to other power figures in their early life. Students who question everything in class, fail to pay their tuition on time, have a crush on a teacher, attempt to be the perfect student are often enacting old patterns of behavior, trying to get unconscious needs met. Often, a student experiencing transference will unconsciously try to engage the person with power (real or perceived) in a special relationship in addition to the current formal relationship at school.

An often overlooked reality is that bodywork can be a very regressive experience for the receiver. When someone is touched in a caring way in a power differential relationship, the touch often evokes a childlike state and a strong transference. Massage school students are especially vulnerable in their school setting because they receive a lot of massage in a short period of time. They can move in and out of regressed states without being

completely aware of those changes. Transference on the part of students to teachers and staff members is very common. It is therefore essential that school personnel be aware of its manifestations and consequences and know how to handle it.

Countertransference is similar to transference. This dynamic is enacted by the teacher or administrator and is also a reenactment of unconscious needs. This individual may have an investment in a student seeing him/her in a particular way related to their role as a teacher or manager. For example, a teacher may have an unconscious need to be seen as an expert, someone who is knowledgeable and right most of the time. Or, the teacher may have a strong need to be seen as a "nice person", someone who never does anything "tough". How does the teacher act toward the student unwilling to treat the teacher in the way that he or she desires? And what happens to the student who acts in the desired way toward the teacher?

In either case the student is in jeopardy. If the teacher needs an unquestioning, deferential student in order to feel good about him or herself the student doesn't get to creatively question - which is one of the basic needs of real learning. The student that does openly question this teacher may be seen as a troublemaker and evaluated accordingly.

Teachers and others in power roles can also unconsciously try to engage a student in a special relationship in order to reinforce their power position or a particular perception of themselves. A teacher unconsciously caught in a caretaker role may tend to create friendships with students. Forming sexual relationships with students may be the way another teacher reinforces a need to be seen as desirable, lovable or powerful.

Business partnerships with students can be a way to feel dominant and strong when the teacher may unconsciously feel powerless in some other aspect of his or her life.

Serving as a Positive Role Model

These same dynamics occur in client-therapist relationships and have the same potential for confusion and harm to the client as to the student. In this sense, the massage school student's experience is similar to that of the client and will strongly influence their future behavior. Massage school staff and faculty who maintain appropriate boundaries and minimize dual relationships or acting out of transference and countertransference with their students are in effect serving as positive role models.

It is widely recognized that as humans we do what we have experienced and observed. A study by Pope et al. (1979) showed that when educators engaged in sexual dual relationships with their students, those students were significantly more likely to engage in sex with their clients once they became practitioners. Students will learn how to relate appropriately with their clients if others have related consciously and respectfully with them in their daily school interactions. This experiential learning is the most potent training teachers can give to their students.

Some Working Definitions

Let's establish some clear working definitions before we begin discussing their implications. What follows are the most common kinds of dual relationships that can occur in a school setting between students and school personnel:

1. socializing
2. friendships
3. dating
4. sexual
5. employer/employee
6. client/therapist

The risks created by dual relationships appear along a continuum from high to low. It is important to understand the distinctions between them in order to understand the possible dangers. For instance the distinctions among the first four categories above may or may not be clear to the people involved. The continuum can be thought of in this way:

- a) how much and what kind of intimacy is involved
- b) what is expected in each activity
- c) what are the consequences if a student does or does not participate.

Socializing includes: students and their teachers/staff being together at a school function such as a party, graduation ceremony, retreat or workshop; voluntarily attending an event as a group such as a concert, movie, lecture, party that is not part of school; or students and teacher going out after class for food or drinks.

Friendships imply that there is a more intimate interaction between two people based on personal sharing, mutual liking and loyalty. In a friendship both people want and expect their needs to be met in a give and take.

Dating implies a more romantic component of a mutual attraction between two people. Their time together is more exclusive and generally is for the purpose of getting to know each other as potential partners.

Sexual relationships mean that two people have been physically sexual together. This can occur as an isolated incident or as an extension of socializing, friendship or dating.

Employer/employee relationships may be fairly common in massage schools. Work-study employment is one way students can afford their

training. A variation of this theme is if an individual teacher or staff employs a student in their own business.

A client-therapist relationship is when a student receives ongoing therapy from a teacher or other staff person or when the student has a faculty or staff person as a client. (e.g. massage, psychotherapy, chiropractic, etc.).

In each of the above dual relationships, the questions that need to be asked by teachers and other school staff are:

- What are the power dynamics?
- How does this kind of relationship affect my subjective response to the student?
- Can I truly be objective about a student's performance if I have another kind of relationship with him/her?
- How will others perceive our relationship and what effects will that have in and out of the classroom?
- How will it affect the student's ability to learn from me?
- What does the student expect from me in terms of special treatment?
- What is the potential for harm to the student?

For instance, will a student receive a lower evaluation if he or she doesn't go for an after class snack or conversely receive some slack because they do? Most of us would immediately say "of course not" but every interaction with a student leads to a subjective impression that can affect how the teacher perceives the student. Alternatively, the investment both the teacher and student have in maintaining their friendship may

compromise their ability to give each other honest teacher-student feedback when appropriate. It is possible and highly probable that a teacher will unconsciously evaluate a student differently based on out of class interactions.

Research in the field of psychology has indicated several things about dual relationships:

1. A sexual relationship between a client and a therapist is the most damaging kind of dual relationship to a client.
2. "There is a clear relationship between sexual and nonsexual dual role behaviors." (Borys, 1988, p.155). That is, nonsexual dual relationships often lead to sexual relationships.
3. Male practitioners tend to engage in nonsexual dual relationships more with female clients than with male clients. They also tended to rate social, financial and other dual roles as more ethical than female practitioners. (Borys and Pope, 1989)

Although psychological research focuses on client-therapist interactions, student-school personnel issues are essentially the same. The dynamics of transference / countertransference, boundaries, trust, power, safety, and objectivity between student and teacher/administrator are virtually identical.

The Risk Continuum of Dual Relationships

The dangers and benefits of dual relationships can be considered along a continuum of low risk to high risk situations. At risk are the welfare of the individual student, the loss of integrity and credibility of the teacher/administrator and the well being of the entire school. Several factors enter into the picture

- the type of relationship, the extent of the power difference, the degree of emotional maturity of those involved and the ability of both individuals to communicate. Most importantly, it is the ethical responsibility of the person in the power position to be conscious of the possible pitfalls and to avoid harm to the student.

1. Dual relationships that should be avoided because of the high risk to the student's welfare and education:
 - a. Sexual and dating relationships between student and teacher.
 - b. Sexual and dating relationships between students and middle or upper level administrators/directors.
2. Dual relationships that should also be avoided to safeguard the student's educational experience but with somewhat less risk.
 - a. A friendship between a student and teacher.
 - b. A friendship between a student and middle or upper level administrator/director.
 - c. An ongoing therapist/client relationship between student and current teacher.
 - d. An employer/employee relationship between a student and current teacher.
3. Dual relationships with a lesser power differential that could be problematic and uncomfortable but usually would not jeopardize the student's education:
 - a. A sexual or dating relationship between student and lower level administrative personnel.

- b. A friendship between student and lower level administrative personnel.
4. Dual relationships that have a low risk of becoming problematic:
- a. Socializing between teacher and student(s) in a group setting such as school party, cultural event.
 - b. Hiring a student to work for the school.

Sexual relationships have the greatest risk for transference and countertransference and unconscious acting out of these dynamics. A student's welfare psychologically and educationally is most at risk in these situations. This is particularly true if the relationship ends badly. The difficulty in understanding the importance of this boundary lies in the fact that people who are attracted to each other always feel that their relationship is special and different and won't have the problems other relationships have.

Friendships, dating and sexual relationships may jeopardize many aspects of the student's education. Most obviously, a student's evaluation or grade can be directly affected by the relationship between a student and teacher. If they have an argument or a break-up, it seems highly unlikely that an evaluation will be objective. The student could be evaluated more or less favorably because of the special relationship.

A relationship also affects others in the school. An often ignored consequence is the effect on other students who may have feelings of jealousy or favoritism (real or perceived) that distract them from learning. The classroom setting may foster a feeling of intrigue with alliances being drawn between the two parties because classmates have heard of personal difficulties

and start to take sides. Other teachers may have strong feelings about the relationship and might try to rescue the student if they perceive exploitation by the involved teacher or might be unduly prejudiced toward the student. It may also become difficult for teachers to confer about a particular student when they know of a teacher's involvement with that student.

Another concern is the difficulty that either student or teacher might feel in remaining in the school setting if problems between them occur. This can be a very emotionally distressing experience, which can interfere greatly with the student's education and have wide-ranging implications for the teacher and the school.

There are sometimes close personal relationships that predate the school experience. This often takes an extra effort on the part of both individuals to have the experience be successful. One way some people handle it is to have the friendship recede to the background for the period of time that the person is a student. Another way may be to arrange it so that the student is never registered in that teacher's class.

Another situation which has the potential for difficulty is the massage therapist/client relationship between a student and a current teacher. An ongoing therapeutic relationship with a current student is usually not advisable. The therapist's role is to be nonjudgmental and supportive while a primary part of a teacher's role, in addition to being supportive, is to evaluate.

An example of potential trouble might be as follows: A student goes to their teacher for a massage therapy session and feels upset by something that happens in the session. Perhaps the student feels pressured to continue an ongoing

treatment relationship, or the treatment caused some ongoing pain, or the student felt the teacher crossed over some personal boundaries. The student may not be comfortable enough to talk to the teacher about the issue and this may compromise his or her educational experience.

In some cases, however, there can be a positive side of this dual relationship. The student may be able to talk about the incident with the teacher and both may grow and learn a lot from the interaction. The teacher may also learn important information about a student in a private session and be in a position to help the student get more out of their school experience. There can be specific guidelines set up for learning purposes where it is beneficial to a student's education to receive some bodywork from their teacher. Since some treatment work from a current teacher can be problematic or rewarding, certain guidelines can lower the risks involved. Examples of guidelines that protect student and teacher are limiting the number of sessions and having a periodic structured feedback session. There are not easy answers to these questions. As you can see there is both the potential for very rich and very painful experiences in this delicate dual relationship.

The major factor in employing students is to be clear that the student's school performance is evaluated separately from his/her job performance. A second factor concerns confidentiality issues. It is probably best to avoid placing a student in a job like student records, or one involving finances, where confidentiality issues may be involved. If some confidentiality is part of a particular job, that issue should be clearly addressed with the student.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Confidentiality is also an important and tricky concern in massage schools. Confidentiality is not legally bound in a school setting as it is in a therapeutic relationship. In therapy, a client has a legal right to confidentiality except in very specific situations such as suicidal or homicidal tendencies or child abuse. In a school setting, information shared between student and teacher or administrator is not a legal consideration but an ethical one.

There are two broad concepts that may help clarify confidentiality in schools. The first is the principle of avoiding harm, the second is the "need to know" guideline.

The avoid harm principle concerns both teacher or administrators harming students and students harming others within the school context. Confidentiality is counterproductive in situations where someone wants to harm another person, fears being hurt by someone, has suicidal, homicidal or other aggressive tendencies, or distorts reality in a manner that could result in violence.

The need to know rule has a useful function. When you are thinking of passing on information about a student consider first the distinction between "needing to say" vs. "others needing to know". Often, we feel compelled to share information just because we know it or feel burdened by it. Sometimes it is important to share the information to maintain safety. The following questions offer useful guides:

- Does someone need to know?
- If so, who?
- Is it also important that someone not know?
- How much information needs to be shared?

- Have I stated the limits of confidentiality to those involved?
- Have I separated hearsay from fact?

Confidentiality is often unknowingly violated around student records and grades or evaluations. A teacher might announce to the class that everyone passed a quiz except for two students. This information is not helpful to anyone and the potential for harm lies in the fact that students may be able to surmise who has failed. The only people needing to know grades are those directly involved such as the student, teacher, registrar and advisor.

It is potentially useful that teachers share information with each other about students who are having difficulty if the intention is to look at patterns and then help the student. This can often be a time when it is tempting to share personal information about a student that should remain private, because we think it is affecting their school performance. In this way, confidentiality is often violated with the best of intentions. It may be more helpful to encourage the student to share that kind of information with other teachers as needed or to get the student's permission to do so.

Written student records should be private territory also. Each school should determine who has access to the records such as the Registrar, Education Director, Dean of Students, etc. Applicant materials should also be respected and again are the concern of specified individuals in the school.

Informed consent is a concept borrowed from the medical and mental health professions regarding a person's interests and autonomy. In a school setting informed consent means that there is full

disclosure of the terms of the relationship between the student and the school and a clear understanding and respect for the rights of the student.

The value of informed consent is that it avoids a parental approach of "we know best and you don't need to know what that is because we'll take care of it". It actively engages the student in the learning process. Very importantly, it also requires that the school be clear about expectations of student behavior and performance.

Informed consent reinforces two humanistic elements of a massage school education: relationship and communication. Potential problems are avoided when guidelines are explicit from the beginning rather than after the fact. For example, good personal hygiene seems an essential prerequisite for our work, however, we can't assume that students will know and value our criteria.

There are several ways for a school to convey informed consent information:

1. *A code of ethics for teachers, staff and students.* A code of ethics should state general and specific guidelines for behavior. Examples are: no physical or verbal abuse directed toward a school member; no sexual activity in any massage therapy setting; no cheating or plagiarism.
2. *A bill of rights for students and the entire school community.* Examples of this are: you have the right to your personal beliefs; you have the right to be touched in a safe manner; you have the right to not be exploited.
3. *A written list of expectations.* This list can include what a student can expect the school to provide and what the school

expects of the student's behavior. Each item should be followed by a clear explanation. Examples of these are: personal and academic integrity; personal hygiene; and willingness to accept and respond to helpful feedback.

4. *Other school policies.* These may be ethical issues that are stated as a more formal policy such as substance abuse, disciplinary procedures for cheating, infectious conditions.
5. *A contract.* This is another way to impart information. A contract can include some or all of the above as parts of a signed agreement.



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An Interview with Dr. Sonia Nevis

Sonia March Nevis, PhD, is a practicing Gestalt therapist in Cambridge, Massachusetts. She was a founding member and a former director of training at the Gestalt Institute of Cleveland and has been a supervisor to psychotherapists for over 25 years. Dr. Nevis has been a valued consultant and supervisor to the Muscular Therapy Institute for the past seven years.

Ben: How would you define a dual relationship?

Sonia: Dual relationships are those relationships in which different roles overlap. In one relationship, one person may have greater knowledge or power, while in another role the relationship may be more egalitarian or the power differential may be reversed.

Ben: Could you give some examples?

Sonia: An intimate relationship or friendship between a therapist and a client, a boss and secretary, a teacher and a student, a friend and business partner. These are dual relationships where different roles overlap. And in all of these but the friend and business partnership, there is a power differential.

Ben: Can you give me some historical perspective on dual relationships in the mental health field?

Sonia: In the beginning of psychotherapy therapists worked hard to limit all dual relationships even to the extent that 2 clients couldn't even see each other in the waiting room. That was extreme, but it was based on the idea that it would create complications. Even children and parents couldn't see the same therapist.

Ben: When did this begin to shift? Twenty years ago?

Sonia: Longer. About 30 years ago - when family therapy, began to develop. Psychotherapists realized that they were losing a lot of important data by seeing members of the family separately. They became aware that by observing people with their children and significant others within their family system, more information was available. At this time, psychotherapists saw the possible benefits to dual relationships and things began to change.

In the sixties, dual relationships were encouraged. There was a feeling that if therapists became friends with their clients they could be more helpful. Boundaries became less rigid. In the 80's and 90's we are seeing the pendulum swing back as people became more aware of the complications that can arise in dual relationships.

Ben: Why is this such a complex issue?

Sonia: The reason that dual relationships are a problem is not simply that you have one person with more power than the other. It's complex because, in dual relationships, when one person has more power there are two issues that must be handled. The first is how does the person in power handle power. Are you talking about someone who is an abuser of power, or are you talking about someone who is using their power to nurture the other? The second issue is how is the person with less power responding. When they are in a position of less power do they handle it easily or do they resent it or get confused by it or project intentions onto the person with more power that aren't really there.

Let's consider the first situation, the person with more power. The temptation to misuse this power is

great. Because of their power they can easily get what they want and may not necessarily consider the needs of the other. The person with lesser power can become an object and get taken advantage of. In order to not take advantage of a dual relationship, the person with more power must constantly monitor whether they are using the relationship in this way.

So you see it becomes complex in this situation because the person in power regularly must say no to something they may want or need that they could easily get. And they must do this by ignoring their wants and actually paying special attention to the needs of the person with less power.

Ben: And even the people who do it well, I imagine, inadvertently abuse the power. When the person of greater power makes a statement, it has more weight than the other person. I would think that it might be difficult not to abuse that power in some way.

Sonia: Yes! That's right.

Ben: And then there's the problem of people who abuse power and don't know it.

Sonia: That is a big problem. But it isn't the only problem. The other problem as I said is how the person with less power responds. Because even if you have someone that isn't an abuser of power, you might have someone in an underdog position who can project like mad, misunderstand or put different meaning on the situation.

The person with more power may be fine, but the other person may not be. Let me give you an example from years ago. A party was given at the end of the workshop. The participants and the leader were at the party. The leader of the workshop kissed one of the participants. The leader was fine. He could go back to his other role.

But the participant wasn't fine. She couldn't go back to the other role. She got all mixed up. The kiss meant more to her than to the workshop leader and she was outraged. So, that is why I am saying that if the person in power can handle it, it isn't enough. You have to make sure other people can handle it.

Ben: How do you assess which dual relationships might work and which won't.

Sonia: If the person with less power is of an older psychological age, (an emotionally mature individual) it may work well. But not everyone agrees with me on this. If you look around the room you will see paintings that were bartered with artists I have done work for. I think that the ethics committee would say that is not ok because the artist wouldn't feel powerful enough to stand up to me in terms of their barter. However, I chose to look at the situation as more complex than simply yes or no. For example if they are psychologically young, they couldn't stand up to me, it would not be fair and it would be a mistake for me to barter with them. However, I also say if they are a reasonable psychological age, like these people were, there is no problem!

Ben: Given the complexity of the issue, why chance it.

Sonia: What you gain in dual relationships is that you can come to know so many different dimensions of a person. And when you know someone better, you can really give to them in a much richer way. Different situations bring out different parts of ourselves, and we are much more known. If Lea had never seen you at school, you wouldn't be known in the same way. And to be known that way, to be really known, that is an experience that we crave.

The same thing with supervising and therapy. The more you knew someone the easier it was to supervise them. Some people would say that you should never supervise a psychotherapy client, and I understand their reservations. But I also say that when this is done well, with careful consideration of their psychological age, it truly enriches the supervision and the therapy.

Ben: But if you supervise someone is it harder to be their therapist?

Sonia: It isn't for me, but it is for some people.

Ben: Why?

Sonia: This speaks again to the complexity. Because as a therapist, the focus of the role is to be supportive. The major key is support, and the minor key is confrontive. And as a supervisor, the major key is confrontive and the minor key is supportive. You are changing keys in a sense. And you have to work hard to be clear which key you want to be in at any one time. It's not always easy.

In truth both therapy and supervision are supportive. And if you supervise that same person, you see it as more of a major/minor key thing. There is no question that there are variations in it. If you have someone as a client and also supervise their work, you are in a slightly different position. That doesn't bother me at all. But you'll remember that how I respond to it is only half the equation. The other half is how the client responds. That is where it can get complicated. Just because I can do it, or you can do it, isn't enough. Again we have to be keenly aware of the effect of that on the person we are in a dual relationship with.

Ben: What kinds of dual relationships should be avoided?

Sonia: Intimate sexual relationships between client and therapist, teacher and student, upper levels of school administrators and students, and bosses and secretaries are the first that come to mind.

Ben: Which are relatively safe?

Sonia: Well you see, that's a tricky question. Only dual relationships that have no real power differential have any intrinsic safety. I might have a friendship with my business partner, or occasionally do business with a friend. This type of dual relationship will mostly be fine since none of the roles we will be in have more power than the other.

However, in a dual relationship where there is a power differential, no relationship is necessarily safer than another. It will always depend on the criteria that I have been talking about: how do each of the people in the relationship respond to either having more power or less power. Safety will always depend on two things being true: 1) The person with more power must not be a conscious or unconscious abuser of power; and 2) the person with less power must be old enough psychologically to be comfortable having two types of relationships with the same person. Therefore, relative safety will nearly always be easier to discern in terms of the type of people in the relationship, rather than the type of relationship.

Ben: Do you have any final thoughts?

Sonia: What I hope I've been able to get across in response to your questions is this: at best dual relationships are difficult. There are plenty of reasons not to attempt them. I can always support someone for playing it safe when considering a dual relationship. However, I also believe that if both people are up to the task, dual relationships can be enormously enriching.

