The Boundaries of the Social Work Relationship Revisited: Towards a Connected, Inclusive and Dynamic Conceptualisation

Patrick O’Leary*, Ming-Sum Tsui, and Gillian Ruch

Patrick J. O’Leary holds professorial appointments at Griffith University, Australia, and the University of Southampton, UK. He has worked as both a practitioner and a researcher in the areas of gendered violence and child protection for the last twenty years. Ming-sum Tsui’s research interests include: social work theory and practice, social work education, supervision and professional development, and substance abuse. He has published 105 items of research works, including eleven books and forty-five journal articles. Gillian Ruch is a senior lecturer in social work in the Faculty of Social and Human Sciences at the University of Southampton. Her research and teaching interests lie in the fields of relationship-based and reflective practice. She is committed to promoting the well-being of practitioners and managers in the interests of those with whom they work.

*Correspondence to Patrick O’Leary, School of Human Services and Social Work, Griffith Health Institute, Griffith University, Meadowbrook, QLD 4131, Australia. E-mail: p.oleary@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

In all professional relationships, there are power imbalances and the potential for discrimination and exploitation. To safeguard against such violations, the concept of professional boundaries is advocated, yet the construction of these boundaries is presented as if it is rudimentary for everyone. Historically, the professional boundaries created within the field of social work have been influenced by other professions, most notably medicine. Integral to these traditional models are professional boundaries that separate the professional from the client and concentrate on what the boundary is, rather than why it is needed and how it is created. As a consequence, the professional boundaries within social work have become increasingly incongruent with developments in the profession’s unique theoretical and value base. Despite the widespread acceptance of the importance of professional boundaries, scant attention has been paid to their construction and the degree to which they reflect the ethos of the social work profession. This paper examines professional boundaries and presents an alternative conceptualisation of boundaries in social work relationships. The model emphasises connection rather than separation, advocating a process that encourages mutuality. Implications for social work research, education and practice are also examined.
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Introduction

The centrality and importance of the social work relationship have been consistently emphasised in the profession’s literature for over a century. Social work is a profession that involves relationships with individuals, between individuals, with individuals in groups, with individuals and organisations, and between organisations (Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto, 2008; Kadushin, 1972; Perlman, 1979; Petr, 1983; Richmond, 1899; Wilson et al., 2011). Over time, social work theorists have developed sophisticated processes to address the power imbalances and instances of exploitation and discrimination that may arise in relationships with clients. There are numerous contested terms (‘client’, ‘service user’, ‘consumer’) used to describe the people with whom social workers work. For the purpose of this paper, we will use the term ‘client’. This term should be taken to include collective clients such as families and communities. There are many seminal texts that are intended to guide practitioners through the ethical quandaries that can arise within the domain of professional practice (Banks, 2006; Loewenbergen et al., 2000). Yet, the creation and management of the boundaries of the social work relationship have received little attention: these boundaries are usually assumed and are modelled on more general conceptions of professional boundaries. A definition of the specific nature and boundaries of the social work relationship is absent in social work literature (Chu et al., 2009; Coady, 1993; Petr, 1983; Proctor, 1982). As a result, the social work relationship has adopted restrictive artificial barriers that are not in keeping with the profession’s values and some of the realities of practice. The configuration of social worker–client relationship boundaries has failed to keep pace with the advances of contemporary theory and practice, resulting in calls for ‘radical shifts’ (Alexander and Charles, 2009) in its conceptualisation.

By critically examining the professional boundaries of the social work relationship, we propose an alternate approach to the creation of such boundaries. This conceptualisation is more compatible with contemporary theoretical developments within the profession. Given that social work is both a local and an international profession (Dominelli, 2010; Healy, 2001), the bounds of its relationships need to be reframed to accommodate the wide range of geographical, socio-political, economic and cultural differences it embraces. This is particularly important in non-Western societies such as the Middle East and Africa, where professional socialisation may create barriers to social work practice (Al-Krenawi and Graham,
Furthermore, as the social work profession gains greater recognition in developing countries, such as China and India, there is need for an inclusive and representative approach to the conceptualisation of social work knowledge and the use of self (Yan and Tsui, 2007; Alphonse et al., 2008).

Understanding professional boundaries

Social work is at the forefront of professions that address the ontological need for relationships and respond to the breakdowns of personal and societal relationships. Most notably, the quality, consistency and continuity of social work relationships with high-risk families have been cited as critical factors in tragic cases in the UK (Winter, 2009). Recent serious cases, such as ‘Baby’ Peter Connelly, have highlighted the importance of close, yet purposeful, relationships and the crucial role they can play in a child’s safety or even survival. Whilst the ability to forge good interpersonal relationships is desirable, but often not essential for highly developed professions such as medicine and law, it is an absolute precondition of effective social work practice (Chu and Tsui, 2008; Chu et al., 2009; Proctor, 1982; Ward et al., 2010). Before all others, the core skill required by social work is the capacity to relate to others and their problems. It is the foundation for successful outcomes of intervention but is a skill that is difficult to exercise effectively. There are personable and intimate aspects to the relationship that share many of the qualities of friendship (Beresford et al., 2008; Doel et al., 2010). Clients often entrust very personal information and feelings in the process of the intervention. Yet, at the same time, social workers must always remain conscious of their professional role. They must limit the personal disclosure, expectations, extent, duration and focus of the relationship; there must be some terminal points to the engagement (Turney, 2010). Managing this delicate process has been conceptualised as maintaining ‘professional distance’, premised on the belief that a psycho-social separation will encourage rational scientific objectivity. It safeguards against the emergence of bonds that are personal, sexual, religious, financial or business-oriented and allows the social worker to observe and help from a ‘safe’ distance. These necessities and constraints have led to competing humanistic and ethical constructs of the social work relationship. One of the responses to managing these demands has been the construction of professional boundaries.

Traditionally, the bounds of the relationship were set by professional bodies as a way of separating social workers from their clients. For example, the British Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics (BASW, 2002, p. 6) states that social workers have a duty ‘to set and enforce explicit and appropriate professional boundaries’. Similar references concerning professional boundaries can be seen in codes of ethics around the world (National American Association of Social Workers
Boundaries have been used to avoid conflicts of interests and to prevent exploitation or harm (Reamer, 2003). The origins of this didactic and hierarchical construction of the social work relationship can be linked to the influence of the medical model: the doctor–patient relationship placing the doctor at the centre of the power structure, as a representative of rational authority (Kane, 1982).

While the medical model has been heavily criticised by social work theorists (Tower, 1994; Warshaw, 1989), this approach remains influential in the formulation of boundaries in the social work relationship (Ramsay, 2003). This conceptualisation of the social work relationship separates the professional social worker from the client (see Figure 1). Over time, common metaphors have evolved to describe the violation of professional boundaries such as ‘crossing the line’ or ‘blurring the boundaries’ and there seems to be a general consensus that social workers must put a boundary between themselves and the client. The boundaries stipulated in the social work code of ethics and literature are referenced as if they possess a universal meaning. The default assumption is that these boundaries refer to the traditional model of separation from clients. As a result, the boundaries of social work relationships are homogenised, even though the literature maintains that there is a great heterogeneity in the contexts in which social workers engage with clients (Sudbery, 2002; Anderson and Wiggins-Carter, 2004). The presumption that rational objectivity is achieved through the creation of professional distance or separation suggests that, somehow, relationships can be managed in such a way as to preserve discrete ‘professional’ boundaries. Such a stance underestimates the place of inter-subjectivity and unconscious dynamics inherent in all relationships (Ruch, 2010). Nor does such a presumption reflect the importance that social work places on care and concern in relationships (Tsui and Cheung, 2004). Gray (2010), in her examination of emerging ethical

![Figure 1 Traditional Conceptualisation of Professional the Boundary](https://academic.oup.com/bjsw/article-abstract/43/1/135/1695229/01400000)
theories, such as feminist ethics of care, in the context of increasingly complex problems in harsh practice environments, suggests this can produce important considerations about the way social work relationships are constructed and distinguished from other types of professional relationships. Additional complexity is generated by the inherent tensions, both ethical and political, that social work embodies, such as self-determination versus social control and differences in the epistemological outlooks of the social workers themselves. As Chu et al. (2009) assert, social work is a moral and political practice and decisions regarding the setting of boundaries are inherently subjective.

Defining the social work relationship: political, therapeutic, participatory or mutual?

In order to be clear about how professional boundaries might most appropriately be configured, it is necessary to understand the nature of the professional social work relationship. Most social workers are employees in public or voluntary welfare organisations where the social work relationship is defined within the parameters of organisational objectives: clients’ meet the mandate of the agency, no matter what distortion this entails. Given these organisational constraints, it is surprising that social work’s definition and description of the social worker–client relationship have remained so vague. This can be attributed, in part, to the ineffable nature of relationship, despite ongoing efforts to present scientific evidence of its effectiveness (Coady, 1993).

Historically within the Western context, social work’s theoretical basis has been understood as being on a continuum. Psycho-dynamic perspectives located at the individual end of the theoretical continuum have been pivotal in defining social work relationships as primarily therapeutic in nature (Sudbery, 2002). In contrast, at the collective end of the continuum, the influence of Marxist sociology has led some theorists to maintain that the practice of social work supports capitalism by categorising people and acting as a means of social control (Howe, 1998; Payne, 2005). Further developments in humanistic psychology and structuralism have led to the introduction of client-centred approaches (Rogers, 1980) and the systems approach to social work represents an attempt to combine these different perspectives (Petr, 1983). Whilst these various approaches are important developments in the theorising of social work practice, they do not focus on ‘how’ the social work relationship and its boundaries are constructed and maintained.

More recently, social work theorists have become sensitive to the power imbalances and potential for discrimination and disempowerment in social work relationships that develop primarily as a result of trauma or adversity
The emergence of post-structural approaches to social work has led to a more critical appraisal of the complex nature of relationships with people who are oppressed or marginalised and has contributed to a concerted effort to challenge reductionist understandings of professional relationships to better cope with the diversity and uniqueness of people’s individual circumstances (Ruch, 2005). Contemporary therapeutic approaches that draw on humanistic, post-structural and critical theoretical paradigms advocate transparency and the deconstruction of power relations (Healy, 2005). Social work theorists have used Foucauldian theory to question the role of the ‘expert’ and the nature of ‘truth’ in social work relationships and the potentially disempowering effects of such concepts (Hartman, 2000; Healy, 2005). In addition, post-structural and feminist theorists have challenged the various epistemological assumptions of social work (Mandell, 2008). The new approaches that have arisen from this critique, such as narrative therapy, seek to avoid pre-judgement by giving greater voice to marginalised clients through collaborative working. Social workers are now required to be more reflective and accountable in their relations with clients. Advocates of narrative therapy encourage collaboration with clients and maintain that the traditional notion of professional boundaries disempowers clients (Bird, 2000).

Alongside these developments, there has been a proliferation of models of practice, such as cognitive behavioural and solution-focused therapy, associated with the burgeoning ‘What works?’ and evidence-based agendas (McNeish et al., 2002). Social workers are often proponents of specific models, claiming that they are highly effective and closely compatible with the aims of social work. However, empirical research has shown little variation in the effectiveness of the array of approaches. It is the quality of relationship between the social worker and the client rather than the specific model of practice that has been proven to be a strong predictor of outcomes (Coady, 1993; Howe, 1998). Research conducted by Lee and Ayon (2004), for example, shows that the quality of the relationship between the social worker and the client is significantly related to better outcomes in child-protection cases, regardless of the model of intervention employed.

In attempting to reconceptualise the boundaries of professional social work practice, there are clearly tensions operating that need to be thoughtfully responded to. On the one hand, it has been suggested that the traditional representation of professional boundaries reinforces power imbalances and tends to undervalue the personal exchange required to engage with clients meaningfully (Bird, 2000; O’Leary, 2004). As a response, advocates of traditional social work relationships assert that boundaries that separate professionals from their clients guard against professional misconduct and prevent unhealthy dependence or close emotional attachment (Reamer, 2003). In developing this new model that optimises the boundaries of social work relationships, we are not
advocating for the uncritical adoption of a post-structural interpretation of professional boundaries in social work. Gould (1990) and other scholars have warned of the dangers of Foucauldian approaches to social work that would effectively eliminate any claim of expertise. To avoid falling into such traps, our reconceptualisation of professional boundaries takes into account the broad spectrum of contemporary theoretical influences. At the same time, it recognises, embraces and works with the ethical complexity inherent in social work practice.

**Setting the ethical parameters of the social work relationship**

Social work aims to encourage self-determination and promote social justice and the relationship between the social worker and the client is the starting point for realising these goals. These exchanges are marked by the complex interaction of personal and broader environmental factors. Inevitably, however, ethical questions arise in the social work relationship when moral and political imperatives are in conflict with the individual client’s well-being. Cultural differences, leading to disparities in moral and political outlooks, further complicate the relationship. The traditional notions of boundaries separating clients from professionals do not encompass the complexities of the political and moral practice that social work encompasses, nor do they take account of the cultural diversity and the mutuality in social work relationships.

Alexander and Charles (2009) argue that the difficulty of balancing the need to relate to clients and the ideals of professional behaviour can make the position of social worker untenable when placed within the traditional notion of professional boundaries. Social work’s mission extends well beyond clinical domains and into political and social spheres, all within the confines of the social worker–client relationship. Its focus must encompass both the individual therapeutic purpose and the collective consciousness to bring about both individual well-being and social change. In this way, issues arising from individual intervention may see a client and social worker working together within the community to protest and develop community action. For example, in Lebanon, young people in Palestinian refugee camps raised a concern about poor lighting with a social worker. This led to the young people creating a micro project that resulted in the installation of security lighting. In this case, it is possible that the client becomes the main actor. In a similar vein, developments in personalisation policy in adult social care in the UK are shifting the process of decision making and creating greater client autonomy in their relationship with social workers and care workers (Leece and Peace, 2010). Given this changing practice landscape and the recognised
shortcomings of traditional notions of professional boundaries, conceptualising boundaries in social work contexts that are conducive to these emergent professional purposes is a timely and important undertaking.

Unsurprisingly, boundary issues, in a variety of international contexts, are often difficult to negotiate. For example, cultural practices such as sharing tea or meals with clients may play an important role in developing the social worker–client relationship. However, accepting the offer of an alcoholic drink may violate certain ethical assumptions. In Hong Kong, senior citizens in elderly homes often give red envelopes of money to young front line social workers in Chinese New Year because they regard social workers as friends of the younger generation. The social workers usually accept this money but inform the management and the clients that the money will be put into the fund for the seniors’ leisure activities. Sometimes, it seems impossible to maintain a strictly professional separation from clients and avoid any social and personal exchanges. Rural social work, in both developed and developing nation contexts, presents challenges to traditional notions of professional boundaries in social work practice. Social workers in rural communities are often also involved in other social activities and community organisations (Pugh, 2007). These are often referred to as ‘dual relationships’, where the community context for social workers requires both a professional relationship as well as social contact (e.g. church, sports and schools) with the client (Kagle and Giebelhausen, 1994). These situations demand careful consideration to determine what constitutes an appropriate professional stance.

To complicate matters further, consideration must be given to variables such as gender, class, culture and sexuality that shape the complex dynamic of the social work relationship. There are inherent issues of power and accountability when, for example, male social workers counsel women who have experienced male violence or white social workers advocate the ethnic minorities rights of black clients. Many clients do not voluntarily enter into their relationship with a social worker, but have been legally obliged to participate. Regardless of whether the relationship is voluntary or involuntary, there is an essential criterion for a professional social work relationship: it must have a purpose and function, and these form the basis of the relationship. Reamer (2003) suggests a risk-management protocol to deal with such boundary issues. Whilst successful protocols would ensure transparency in social workers’ dealings with clients, their creation does not incorporate client negotiation. What Reamer (2003) fails to address is how these protocols might be ethically and inclusively constructed to meaningfully incorporate the clients’ perspectives.

Ethical codes reiterate that social workers must have professional boundaries in their relationships with clients (BASW, 2002; NASW, 2008; AASW, 2010; HKSWRB, 2009). This is seen as a necessary requirement to protect both parties, but these codes mention only ‘what’ boundaries should be
maintained; they pay very little attention to ‘why’ and ‘how’ boundaries are set. However, in a comprehensive study conducted by Doel and his colleagues (2010), a clear majority of social workers relied on their own sense of what is appropriate or not, instead of the complicated code of ethics or formal guidelines, in many cases ‘as big as a book’, set by professional bodies. For the most part, they relied on an assumption of the traditional notion of separation. Clients have no role, or a very minimal role, in the formulation of these professional codes of ethics even though they are the group most affected. It is this exclusive and implicit model of boundary setting that we are seeking to reconfigure.

Reconceptualising the boundaries in the social work relationship
Connection not separation

In our proposed model, we place the social worker and the client at the centre of a set of boundaries that promote connection and the use of self, rather than separation and professional distance. This stance challenges the dominant discourse in relation to boundary setting that has been historically defensive and protective in nature. Adopting a positive, relationship-based and inclusive attitude to professional boundaries opens up exciting possibilities, particularly as little is known about the impact on practice of inclusive boundaries (Doel, 2010) or instances in which practitioners ‘went the extra mile’ for clients (de Boer and Coady, 2007). Needless to say, such a reconceptualisation does not negate the importance of establishing limits based on clear values and ethical considerations. It is the professional responsibility of social workers to take the lead in the formation of an effective and ethical relationship, but the development of boundaries needs to include client participation. This model attempts to capture a more authentic representation of social work relationships. It emphasises the dynamic nature of boundary setting that reflects changes within the professional relationship over time and acknowledges the interplay of both visible dimensions of the relationship and the less visible, unconscious dynamics that are recognised through the practitioner’s reflective processes.

Within the fields of family therapy and counselling, Bird (2000) and O’Leary (2004) have suggested an alternative model for professional boundaries. The model outlined here draws on and adapts these ideas to reconceptualise professional boundaries in social work. Figure 2 illustrates our conceptual model and gives examples of issues that fit within and outside the professional boundary. The noteworthy aspect of this reconceptualisation is that the boundary surrounds and connects the social worker and client, rather than separates the two parties. Underlying this reconceptualisation is the belief that the social work relationship is unique: it has
qualities in common with other associations such as friendships, but it is a distinct relationship that cannot be extended in the same realms as family or intimate relationships (Turney, 2010). Hence, the encompassing boundaries, depicted in Figure 2 as circles, can expand or contract, depending on how the characteristics of the boundaries are configured in each unique instance. The emphasis on relational connectedness is in keeping with a range of contemporary theoretical perspectives—social constructionism (Parton and O’Bryne, 2000), narrative therapy (Epston et al., 2002), critical theory and reflection (Fook and Gardner, 2007; Healy, 2005) relationship-based practice (Ruch, 2010)—all of which place importance on the equal but distinctive roles of the key partners in the relationship and the specific expertise they bring to it.

Within the internal boundary of the relationship, there are particular expectations and understandings that relate to the ethics, purpose and functions of social work. This includes a common understanding of the reasons for the relationship. The context for sharing information and the commitment on completing agreed-upon tasks also affects the boundary of the
relationship. Skills associated with narrative approaches and systemic family systems work are especially pertinent to the model, as they are respectful of the diverse ‘stories’ that all parties bring to the encounter and facilitate the process of relationship-building through ‘restorying’ (Vetere and Dowling, 2005). These skills are particularly important in statutory social work where the potential for professional interventions and boundaries to be imposed ‘on’ individuals and families rather than negotiated ‘with’ them is heightened, on account of the anxiety-provoking circumstances being addressed. The findings of research conducted with families engaged in the child protection system endorse the importance of transparency and reciprocity in the boundary-setting process. According to de Boer and Coady (2007), families appreciated ‘soft, mindful and judicious use of power’ and ‘an humanistic attitude and style that stretches traditional professional ways-of-being’. Boundaries, therefore, need to be set to clarify the scope of the relationship and the type of exchange that would promote desired outcomes (Doel, 2010). Cultural and individual preferences, such as ways of greeting and speaking, might be incorporated into the boundaries of the relationship. It is often helpful to agree that problematic issues, such as cultural misunderstandings, will be discussed as transparently as possible. The aspects of relationships identified in the central circle of the model are crucial ingredients of all relationships and will be specifically negotiated in each unique case. Those located in the second circle, separated from the central circle by a dashed line to depict the permeable nature of the boundary, hold a less pivotal role in relationship building and boundary setting and, therefore, may, in some instances, be included in boundary-setting discussions, and in other instances not. For example, it may be entirely appropriate in some cases for personal disclosure to be excluded from the professional relationship whilst, in other contexts, it may be beneficial. The outer circle of the model encompasses those aspects of professional relationships that are unethical, non-negotiable and consequently located outside of the relationship boundary. As the model illustrates, the successful resolution of professional boundary issues is a skilled and multifaceted activity and can depend on achieving a balance between ‘personal privacy, the safety of vulnerable individuals and the protection of the wider public’ (Doel et al., 2010, p. 8).

Connection and dynamism

As the previous paragraph highlights, a distinctive feature of the model is its acknowledgment of the permeable and dynamic nature of professional boundaries. Whilst certain aspects of the professional relationship are non-negotiable—sexual relations, for example, being outside of the solid outer boundary—most aspects are open to discussion, require sensitive, context-specific responses and need to be understood as an on-going
process requiring renegotiation, throughout the duration of professional involvement, as opposed to being founded on a static, immutable contract.

It is often the immediacy of boundary-setting decisions that perturbs practitioners, with professional encounters frequently requiring swift reactions. Deciding how to establish, ‘on the spot’, for example, an appropriate professional boundary when unexpectedly encountering a male partner in the course of a home visit to conduct a child protection assessment is such an instance. Under such conditions, it is easy to see how a model based on the principle of separation is attractive, as it is compatible with, and legitimates, what are often defensive responses that emerge in anxiety-provoking situations and when acting under pressure. The tendency to resort to distancing behaviours, and in the scenario above for example, to adopt a boundary that excludes rather than includes and connects with the partner, and, in so doing, possibly implying that the female client should act similarly, is a common professional response. In the past decade, the emergence in many Western nations of an increasingly risk-averse political climate, with its concomitant managerialist strategies, has played a significant part in the defensive and distancing configuration of professional relationships (Broadhurst et al., 2010). Having the capacity to ‘think on your feet’ is an important skill for social workers to acquire if the proposed model is to be effective. Equally, when boundaries have been set, social workers need to be aware of the importance of regularly reviewing them with clients to ensure they remain relevant and appropriate to the prevailing circumstances. Put another way, social workers need to develop the ability to reflect both ‘on’, and particularly ‘in’, action (Schon, 1983), in order to determine how best to respond at any particular moment and to base their reflections on the principle of connection, not separation, as the preferred approach. Such a stance requires an understanding and ability to respond to what are often invisible and unconscious dynamics operating within the relationship. In particular, these dynamics are associated with the significance of gender and ethnicity on professional relationships, with female social workers, for example, establishing boundaries with male clients that are informed by their own early and recent experiences of men in their lives and vice versa for male social workers.

Developing the skills to identify and articulate these unconscious dynamics that shape a social worker’s relationship with a client is an important aspect of a reflective mindset. A recurrent criticism of reflective, psychodynamically informed approaches, however, has been the potential for it to pathologise individuals and to locate the responsibility for personal circumstances entirely at the level of the individual. Recent reconceptualisations of these approaches, however, have addressed these criticisms (Ruch, 2010). The articulation of unconscious behaviours, if sensitively done, can be liberating and emancipating for individuals who gain insight into how they configure relationships with others and, particularly in the case of statutory work, with those in positions of authority. By adopting a
connected, inclusive, reflective and participatory approach to the creation of boundaries, it is possible for the visible and invisible, individual and structural dynamics and dimensions of professional relationships to be held in a creative tension.

Connection and reciprocity

A central characteristic of the proposed model is the recognition of the reciprocal nature of the ‘connected’ professional relationship. Clients are often viewed as the sole recipients in the social work relationship. Empirical evidence has indicated, however, that social workers are not ‘selfless givers’: they receive psychological benefits from their professional relationships with clients (Lazar and Guttmann, 2003). Psycho-dynamic and post-structuralist perspectives conceive the social work relationship as a process in which both clients and workers are affected by developments and clients observe that social workers have a greater emotional influence when they are truly present and understood. In fact, Howe (1998) suggests that the way social workers understand their clients and work with them is the best demonstration of the profession’s capacity to connect and unite. Social workers often experience psychological distress when they hear about a client’s trauma. Whilst practitioners must learn to manage this ‘vicarious traumatization’ during the course of their professional development (Sexton, 1999), being witness and connected to distress and conditions of social exclusion plays a pivotal role in the development of a better understanding of the lived experience of clients. Developing psycho-dynamic reflective skills that can address the conscious, unconscious and reciprocal aspects of professional relationships is critical for effective, sensitive boundary management and professional well-being (Fook, 2002; Ruch, 2010).

Connection, ethical exclusion and use of self

It is important to recognise that there are issues and behaviours that are clearly outside the boundaries of the professional relationship (outer circle of Figure 2). Ethical violations such as sexual relations and other forms of exploitation or discrimination are indisputably outside the remit of the relationship. Where the potential for boundary breaches is heightened, for example, in the case of dual relationships in small communities, the model encourages the social worker and the client to acknowledge the risks and to focus on how they can manage their connections rather than on how they can maintain their distance. Social workers and clients may decide to position particular types of behaviour or attitudes outside the boundary of their relationship. For example, if the client is a man who has abused women, it might be agreed that sexist attitudes and language will be
challenged. Personal information that is not relevant to the issues discussed may be considered off limits.

Of course, the proposed model represents a starting point: it must be adjusted to fit particular contexts and needs, and to reflect contemporary developments in social work. Current research on the social work relationship will help to inform the construction of the boundaries of the social work relationship that are transparent, considered and acceptable. In this regard, social workers’ ‘use of self’ is vital to their ability to relate to clients (Ward, 2010). Arnd-Caddigan and Pozzuto (2008) view the use of self as a relational and interactional process. Social workers must continually reflect on their role, purpose and function in order to achieve a connection with clients and insights into their experience. The earlier reference to Beresford et al.’s (2008) research in the field of palliative care highlighted how clients most valued the friendship of their social workers and underlines how important the use of self is for effective practice. This point is reinforced by clients’ appreciation of cross-boundary behaviour as an expression of personal concern (Turney, 2010). In developing a model that focuses on connection, social workers need to develop their expertise in understanding what facilitates connections and what inhibits them. Social workers often come from the dominant cultural group; therefore, relationship forming with clients from minority groups requires an understanding and critical appraisal of dominant ‘taken for granted’ views of the world. To be able to do this requires a relationship with the client in which the social worker is able to learn and acknowledge the influence of factors such as white privilege beyond an academic or clinical understanding into a direct personal integration (Gollan and O’Leary, 2009). Here, the quality of the relationship is shaped by the care and consciousness that the social worker both explicitly and implicitly displays. This will have a substantial influence on intervention outcomes. Needless to say, practices that are unethical, discriminatory or exploitative can do much more harm than good.

Implications for social work theory, practice, education and research

Contemporary social work theory already is aligned to the dynamic model that we have proposed. However, the model challenges these theories to pay more critical attention to how boundaries can be negotiated in a global world. Codes of ethics for professional bodies refer to boundaries but place the power of boundary setting with the social worker and simultaneously do not offer guidance as to how boundaries can be set, other than clearly situating obvious boundary violations such as sexual relations as unethical. Professional associations might use the model to better elucidate
the distinctiveness of the professional boundaries in social work relationships. This may invoke greater discussion with clients about how the relationship might differ from their experience with other professionals. To assist this, social work education needs to embrace the concept of connection as an integral dimension of social work values. The concept can helpfully underpin teaching about relationship building and boundary setting. Modelling this through the delivery of teaching, for example, that is done in collaboration with clients, is an important means of bringing alive in the classroom the dilemmas this approach generates. As part of the modelling process, educators can demonstrate their capacity to reflect ‘in the moment’ and can help students develop the reflective skills and mindset that are pivotal to the application of the model in practice. From this universal value base, it is possible to conceive of social workers developing skills in relationship-based practice and boundary setting that are transferable across geographical and cultural domains. In a similar vein, social work practice needs to be premised on the principle of connection within professional relationships, recognising that how this is negotiated will be unique to individuals and their social, political and cultural settings.

It could be said that, in the course of its development, social work research has been mindful of the distinctive position and contribution of clients and has endeavoured to adopt an approach that is inclusive and endorsing of connections rather than separations in the research process. From the outset, there has been a commitment for clients to be involved in all aspects of the research process—from the identification of research topics, in research design and data-collection processes, through to the strategies for disseminating findings (Smith, 2009). The model offers a process for negotiating the relationship between social work researchers and clients. Moreover, the model itself requires research to evaluate its effectiveness in order to refine the methods for negotiating relationships in specific contexts.

Conclusion

Ethical issues arising in social work have rightly received considerable attention but responses to them have invariably been premised on the belief that professional boundaries are clear for all to see and are professionally determined on the basis of separation and passivity as opposed to connection and dynamism. Countering this presumption, our positively orientated boundary-setting model, based on the creation of boundaries that establish connections within professional relationships, is more in keeping with the contemporary ethos of social work. It incorporates current theories and practices of social work that maintain that the social work relationship is both professional and unique, shaped by collaborative interaction and created by a mutually agreed-upon and context-specific set
of boundaries. Collaborating with the client in the setting of professional boundaries is likely to have a positive impact on the quality of the relationships we have with clients, itself an important factor in successful outcomes. Our proposed model acknowledges that social workers bring particular expertise to the relationship. Uncertainties are likely to arise in social work relationships that will require social workers to reflect on the viability of the boundaries in place. This will require the expertise of the social worker to facilitate the participation of the client within their mandate. In prioritising connection over separation, the complexity of this relationship-centred approach to professional boundaries cannot be underestimated, nor can its potentially transformative qualities. Conceptualising the boundaries of the social work relationship in this way enhances clients’ sense of autonomy, level of participation and dignity, and has the potential to make the whole process of intervention more humane.

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