

The Ethics of Non-Sexual Multiple Role Relationships in an Adult Learning Community

I. Introduction

In the world of the social science practitioner (psychologist, social worker, counselor), dual or multiple role relationships refer to any circumstance whereby a practitioner assumes a role or roles additional to that of professional practitioner. Examples include friendship or romantic relationship with a client, teaching a client, employing or having any other business relationship with a client, having lunch with a client, accepting gifts from or giving gifts to a client (APA 2002). Sexual activities with a client are obviously and appropriately forbidden. Other dual or multiple role relationships (MRR) are most often also seen as inherently bad and generally proscribed by the ethical standards of the social science professions. This ethical standard stems from a medical orientation to providing psychotherapy or counseling which fundamentally sees the consumer, client, or patient in a weakened position and the therapeutic relationship characterized by an inherent power imbalance between the role of the therapist and that of the patient. This relationship model based on a medical paradigm centers on a therapeutic relationship model that objectifies the role of the patient and his or her illness. Another model sees the individual seeking a therapist as an 'educated consumer' or from an adult education perspective as an adult responsible learner who will ultimately determine what the therapeutic process is about. This ethical orientation views both relationship partners as coequals with shared responsibility about the definition of their relationship and the correctness of any dual relationship (DeLeon 2002).

Any ethical debate originates in contradicting moral views and judgments about the rightfulness of human actions. This paper will study the role of paradigmatic assumptions in the debate about MRR and propose an additional perspective that serves the exigencies of a small psychotherapy training institute, the Process Work center of Portland, Oregon. Process Work refers to a school of psychology founded by Arnold Mindell, a graduate of the Jung Institute in Zurich, Switzerland. In the Process Work model, MRR refers to the practitioner-client relationship, and also to overlapping roles within Process Work learning community and training programs. Such roles include therapist, supervisor, examiner, study committee member, client, informal student, and formal student. Teachers and students, therapists and clients, supervisors and trainees may be co-participants in class or seminar settings, and often meet in social settings and community gatherings. In the training programs, teachers may serve as supervisors, therapists, or study committee members. While this is not unusual for a psychotherapy training institute, or even for academic psychology programs, where for instance, teachers may also be clinical supervisors, the Process Work approach to MRR is unique for several reasons, with interesting implications for research on multiple role relationships. Firstly, it is embedded in a developed theoretical foundation of roles, fields, and awareness. Secondly, the Process Work learning community is a dense, informal network, in which interaction is loosely structured, resulting in a high degree of interaction, providing rich opportunities for studying the complexities of an alternative approach to relationship. The specific context of the Process Work community has prompted a reflexivity that is not necessarily present in normative thinking in this area, and may serve to generate a valuable metaperspective.

The present paper explores paradigmatic influences in the Process Work MRR model. Following the accepted view that a paradigm is “an approach to phenomena; a filter through which we see, define, order, understand and communicate about the world around us,” (Creswell 1994, p.1) this author starts out with the assumption that paradigms are not fully conscious. Like any perceptual filter, paradigms are shaped by cultural, historical, and contextual factors that may be unknown to those immersed in them. It is human nature to see things as ‘natural’ or ‘normal,’ and hence, not worthy of further investigation. Without bringing awareness to bear on cultural norms and assumptions, we are constrained and limited in what we see and do. Paradigms in this regard, are a form of power. They define reality, interpret events, manipulate viewpoints, and mobilize biases. They not only exert power through what they focus on, but through what they omit as well. Paradigms create or reinforce values and practices and limit the scope of inquiry to those issues that fall within their view of reality (Bachrach & Baratz 1970).

Thus, paradigms are both comprised of, and forward assumptions about phenomena and the social world. Becoming aware of a paradigm is a critically reflexive process, made possible by systematically looking at the social, philosophical and historical traditions that shape us. This article looks initially at the Process Work approach to MRR, and then examines two areas of paradigmatic influence: professional psychology and adult education. In conclusion, this author will summarize the influence these paradigms have on Process Work’s approach to multiple role relationships.

II. The Process Work Paradigm

The Process Work approach to MRR rests on the related concepts of roles and fields. Role theory is derivative of both sociological role theory and field theory from quantum physics, particularly the idea that the electromagnetic field structures and organizes behavior (Mindell 2000). Common to both is the idea that roles are organized by the system or field. Roles are functional sub-sets of behaviors and identities, both conscious and unconscious. At the unconscious level, they are subtle, implicit tendencies that arise in the form of deep feelings, nonverbal signals, and moods. They are found in unintended communication ('double signals'), dreams, and projections, and are understood to be present in all relationships, not just therapeutic ones. In Process Work theory, interaction is the sum of all roles, not all individuals. Implicit or invisible roles are often picked up and acted out unconsciously by members in the group, often leading to complex relationship interactions, especially in therapy. Role and field theory is so central to the Process Work model that there is no separate concept of multiple role relationships within the therapeutic relationship. Rather, all relationships are assumed to consist of roles structured by the 'dreaming' field.

Process Work addresses multiple role relationships in therapeutic settings by specifying the therapist's responsibility regarding roles. The therapist's responsibility is to notice and support all roles in a given field. She understands that since many of these roles are invisible, and are expressed in subtle feelings, nonverbal signals, and moods, she is likely to experience them as her own feelings and reactions. Thus, she is responsible for becoming aware of her inner experiences, and understanding that they may be structured by the field. Her main task is to make them useful to the client's development. As Mindell states, the therapist's job is to "follow the Tao before it manifests,

to become conscious of deep feelings and intuitions before they're expressed" (Mindell 1997).

Mindell explains that being aware of deep feelings prevents therapists from getting "dreamt up," or reacting unconsciously towards the client in less than useful ways. Irresponsible and harmful behaviors on the part of the therapist are the result of being so affected by subtle roles and feelings that she is unable to see the other person. In addition, the pressure of the therapist role to know and be wise often clouds her vision, making her even less able to see her client.

This understanding of role is complemented by another definition of role as function. In everyday vernacular, a person's occupation or position within the social world is a role: mother, teacher, assistant, and so on. Process Work theory recognizes that roles are stratified by societal values.

Understanding this ranking process is critical to understanding the roots of conflict. Conflict emerges when one individual carries more than one role, with differing functions and/or ranks. For instance, the therapist's role is to support the overall development of the client, whereas the examiner's role is to evaluate skills. These two functions contradict each other. Multiple role relationships which pose less conflict are those in which functions are symmetrical. For instance, both supervisor and study committee member serve evaluative functions, hence, there is less conflict when those roles overlap.

When role functions are unclear, unconscious or mixed with other functions, it also means the role's accompanying power or rank is implicit, or carried in the form of unintended, and hence, confusing signals. This is dangerous because power is hidden, rather than explicit. As Mindell says, 'there is no sense of safety unless all the roles are present and represented. What is scary is not the role someone is in, but the role they are not in. When roles and their accompanying rank are implicit, there is a

double message; one role contradicts another, presenting the one with lesser power with a double-

bind dilemma: which role to follow? Mindell emphasizes the necessity of awareness here: the therapist, teacher or supervisor is responsible for discussing and making the roles as conscious as possible. In the training programs, the awareness of a role, its function, and associated rank or power is the responsibility of those with greater rank. When roles are explicit, individuals can move fluidly between them, and address them directly with choice and consensus.

Underlying this understanding of roles is Mindell's theory of rank. Rank (Mindell 1995) encompasses levels of power, not only material, social and contextually derived power (education, professional status, economic status, gender, race, nationality), but also power derived from invisible or non-material sources. Using a metaphor of the "infinite and finite games of life," Mindell (1997) sees material rank as part of the finite game of life, a game in which winning depends on material goods, size, time, titles, etc. Spiritual or psychological rank, the power of one's inner abilities, connection with the divine, and psychological ability belong to the infinite game of life. Such rank is eternal. It does not end with death, but belongs to the beyond. While roles in the training community are governed by social functions and contextual variables, rank is also a function of connection to one's life myth, dreams, and inner powers.

III. Professional Psychology Paradigm

1. Mainstream Psychology's Approach to MRR

Multiple role relationships are defined in professional psychology as any circumstance whereby a therapist assumes a role or roles additional to that of a clinician. Multiple concurrent professional

and/or other definitive role relationships are perceived to foster conflicts of interests and harm the individual's treatment (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel 1998). The most current guidelines of the American Psychological Association (APA 2002) added relationships with a person closely associated with or related to the person with whom the therapist has the professional relationship to the definition of MRR. Direct and indirect (through a relative or person associated with the client) MRR are generally proscribed in the profession, based on the premise that conflicting interests might impair the psychologist's objectivity or interfere with the effective execution of their duties, resulting in harm or exploitation. Origins of this position lie in concern with the power differential between therapist and client and the corresponding attempt to protect clients from exploitation and harm. In addition, the traditional psychoanalytic emphasis on neutrality and transference work has contributed to an insistence on the strict separation of roles.

The current ethical guidelines of the American Psychological Association do not prohibit dual or multiple role relationships that would not reasonably be expected to cause impairment or risk of exploitation or harm. However the general consensus in the profession is that any other type of dual or multiple relationships are unethical and to be avoided. The term 'dual relationship' tends to be used interchangeably with 'exploitation,' 'harm' or 'sex with client'. Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (1998) claim in their ethics text "...we are convinced that lax professional boundaries are often a precursor of exploitation, confusion and loss of objectivity" (p.172). Using a 'slippery slope' argument, non-sexual dual relationships are said to lead inevitably to sexual dual relationships and ensuing harm. The failure to adhere to rigid ethical standards will necessarily foster relationships that are sexual or otherwise exploitative and harmful. Gabbard (1994) describes this process as

follows: “...the crossing of one boundary without obvious catastrophic results (making) it easier to cross the next boundary” (p.284).

Numerous studies on dual relationships support the belief that multiple role relationships in psychotherapeutic settings are dangerous, difficult to regulate, and harmful to the client. In a national survey of ethical dilemmas encountered by members of the APA, Pope and Vetter (1991) concluded that next to confidentiality, ‘blurred dual or conflictual relationship, was the second most frequently reported troublesome issue reported by psychologists’. While many psychology professionals agree that such relationships constitute unethical behavior, discrepancy has been found between what practitioners say and do. In a large U.S. study, Borys and Pope (1989) examined ethical attitudes and practices of psychologists, psychiatrists, and social workers. A majority believed dual role behaviors to be unethical under most conditions; most reported that they had rarely or never engaged in the behaviors. Yet, a year earlier, Pope and Baijt (1988) examined conflict between law and values in the professional practice of psychologists of senior standing, and found that all respondents acknowledged non-compliance with a legal or professional obligation in light of a client’s welfare or some deeper value. Overall, there is a lack of comprehensive, systematically gathered data concerning psychologists’ beliefs about and compliance with ethical principles, and little is known about which resources they valued as effective in guiding appropriate behavior.

2. MRR in Training Contexts and Academia

In training contexts or academia, there is less certainty and greater divergence of opinion about what constitutes an inappropriate dual or multiple role relationship between supervisor and counselor.

Keith-Spiegel (1994) suggests that historically the educational field has not focused on the ethical conduct of teachers, but educators have openly commented on the ethical expectations of other professions. The increasing interest in issues of MMR by educators rests on the fact that faculty/student relationships have many similarities with the therapist/client relationship: both entail an unequal relationship in which the therapist/faculty hold a certain amount of power over their clients/students. This power manifests itself in many ways (power of reward, evaluation, and advantage in information and expertise). Furthermore when educators engage in MRR with students the students risk to experience hostilities from other students who perceive preferential treatment (Biaggio, Paget, & Chenoweth 1997).

Student/faculty relationships are multiple, tend to be overlapping, and often evolve into a collegial relationship after the student's graduation. This transition is for both the student and faculty member complex and difficult. Students and faculty members may be placed in many situations where they come in contact with each other i.e., social settings: colloquiums, special events, community settings (recreation), interest groups and receptions. These types of settings offer informal socializing and many opportunities for personal disclosure. Student disclosure, the blending of elements of therapeutic treatment with academic coursework is especially critical for consequent ethical problems (Koocher & Keith-Spiegel 1998). Students and faculty may perceive relationships differently and it is essential that the faculty member consider the possibility of harm to students that may develop out of differing expectations.

Exploitation and objectivity are key ethical elements in educational contexts. For example, Ryder and Hepworth (1990) state that dual relationships between mentors and student are endemic to many educational work contexts. In such contexts, most mentors will have more than one relationship with their students (e.g., graduate assistant, co-author, co-facilitator). Like therapist-client relationships, the concern is that for both counselors and mentors, dual relationships are problematic if they increase the potential for exploitation or impaired professional objectivity. In academic settings, it is therefore often recommended that mentors be diligent to avoid situations which put a student at risk for exploitation or increases the possibility that the mentor would be less objective.

Biaggio, Paget, and Chenoweth (1997) advise that it is best for faculty to foster ethical relationships in order to avoid problematic conduct. They claim that the most influential ethical attitudes that student learn come from experiencing the faculty modeling ethical behavior. They propose three ethical guidelines faculty should consider when engaged in relationships with students. These include: "(a) acknowledging the power and responsibility of the faculty role, (b) developing a frame for evaluating faculty-student responsibility of the faculty-student relationships, and (c) fostering and maintaining a climate that supports ethical relationships with students" (p. 15). They also offered a set of self-evaluative questions for the faculty to consider when engaging in MRR (see appendix).

3. Alternative Approaches to MRR within Professional Psychology

Although there is a general consensus in professional psychology that dual and multiple relationships are unethical and to be avoided, alternative views have emerged. Some psychologists (Lazarus & Zur, 2002; Zur, 2000a, 2000b; Lazarus, 1994, 1998) maintain that ethical rules and

standards regarding dual/multiple role relationships are rigid and even counter-productive. They argue that the existence of ethical standards does not necessarily translate into their adherence. Zur warns that a climate of rigid ethical standards may in fact lead to an increase in hidden relationships. A focus on the observance of strict ethical standards also gives less attention to education and training of practitioners in how to deal with the complexity of MRR. Lazarus and Zur (2002) argue that the question of "how to educate caring clinicians" is currently overlooked and even minimized by the focus on standards for behavior from a rigid risk-management perspective. They also suggest that prohibition of dual relationships might in fact enable incompetent and ineffective therapists to stay unexposed in business without accountability. Zur also questions prohibiting clients' familiarity or "duality" with therapists, suggesting that familiarity leads to informed choice and richness in therapeutic relationship. Others acknowledge the power imbalance between the role of the therapist and that of a patient but also maintain the notion of the 'educated consumer' which then assigns both parties to jointly define the 'correctness' of any dual relationship (DeLeon 2002).

Lazarus and Zur (2002) differentiate between boundary violations "...that are harmful, exploitative and in direct conflict with the preservation of the clients dignity and the integrity of the therapeutic process" (p. 6), and boundary crossing which they claim is "... a benign and often beneficial departure from traditional therapeutic settings and constraints" (p. 6). They further argue that rigid boundaries may lead to distance and coldness that are incompatible with healing. They favor flexible boundaries that are based on sound clinical judgment and personally tailored to the patient's needs. For them the danger and opportunity for exploitation is proportional to the amount of isolation in a given therapeutic relationship. Rigid boundaries increase isolation and contrary to traditional

expectations increase the probability of exploitation. Community connections with the client are

preventative for abuse from undue power from the therapists' professional status. The problem of

the therapists' propensity to abuse their power does not lie within non-sexual MRR but in individual therapist's dispositions to corruption and selfishness.

4. Relationship to the Process Work MRR model

The professional psychology paradigm implies that all dual and multiple role relationships are inherently harmful. This strict ethical prohibition can be understood if one considers the roots of the professional psychology paradigm. Psychology is a descendant of medical science, and views the therapist-client relationship through the filter of health and illness. The therapeutic relationship is considered a doctor-patient relationship. Fears of exploitation rest on the assumption that the client is a patient in a debilitated or 'weakened' condition, and thus unable to make sound judgments. The psychoanalytic tradition similarly views the therapeutic relationship through a medical lens, as well as being based on the theory that distance and neutrality are necessary for a successful transference relationship on which effective analysis depends.

The medical background to the professional psychology paradigm also frames the therapist-client relationship as that of expert-novice. Mental illness, psychological and emotional problems are viewed as conditions whose cure resides in the expert knowledge of the practitioner. This imparts greater rank to the professional's role, which must be mitigated by laws and restrictions. Increased awareness of the misuse of rank and violation of power relationships grew out of post-war research into trauma and abuse, and the consciousness raising work of civil rights and feminist activists.

Research into survivors of trauma and abuse showed that what looked like compliant behavior and even positive feedback to suggestions could be a trauma reaction, fear of reprisal, and subservience to authority. The civil rights and feminist movements brought heightened awareness of the dangers of power abuse in professional relationships, where social oppression leads to unquestioning obedience to the one in the role of expert or authority.

In so far as Process Work is used in therapeutic settings, these considerations are important. Process Work theory on MRR acknowledges and incorporates these ethical constraints, particularly with regard to how abuse, trauma and the client role can diminish a client's relative power, and capacity to assert or defend herself, in the therapeutic relationship. However, the Process Work model also stands outside the professional psychology paradigm, to the extent that it is not solely based on premises of pathology and power inequity, and is influenced by non- medical/psychological paradigms discussed below.

IV. Adult Education

Process Work is not a specific form of adult education. However the adult education paradigm is intrinsic to Process Work in various ways. Process Work's methods are designed with the client-as-learner in mind, emphasizing the client's self-awareness. Its self-therapy methods are based on the belief that a client can work towards her own self-development, without the help of a professional. The Process Work model is taught to adult learners, in adult education settings such as seminars, workshops, classroom instruction and fieldwork. It is often studied as continuing education, in conjunction with a higher degree in the field of mental health. Many students and practitioners

attend institutions founded in the adult education principles and practices, and these influence the way Process Work is practiced and taught. For these reasons, adult education is included as one of the background paradigms influencing the Process Work MRR model.

1. Historical influences of the Adult Education movement

Adult education refers to a sub-discipline in the field of education that focuses on education of adults past public school age. It has a long and rich history in the United States, with roots in the political movement to empower adults as democratic citizens. Following Dewey's (1926) pragmatic approach to education, the adult education movement is based on the idea that in order for democracy to work, people need to be empowered to participate in the political process, and in the choices and policies that affect their lives. A significant aspect of the adult education movement sought to help people realize the American Dream, by integrating them (particularly immigrants) into the mainstream, and helping them to become functioning citizens and participate in American life.

2. Current trends in adult education

Today, the adult education movement still reflects its historic roots, and is further shaped by the civil rights struggles of the 1950s and 1960s, and the growing influence of relativist, constructivist approaches in the social sciences. The major trends in adult education today include self-directed learning, critical reflection, learning-to-learn, and multicultural and experiential learning models.

An important relationship exists between adult development and adult education. According to Merriam (2001), one of the best-developed theoretical links between adult development and learning

lies in the theory of andragogy. The term currently defines an alternative to pedagogy and refers to learner-focused education for people of all ages. The andragogic model asserts that five issues be considered and addressed in formal learning. They include (1) letting learners know why something is important to learn, (2) showing learners how to direct themselves through information, and (3) relating the topic to the learners' experiences. In addition, (4) people will not learn until they are ready and motivated to learn. Often this (5) requires helping them overcome inhibitions, behaviors, and beliefs about learning. Andragogy is based on the assumption that, by and large, adults are self-directed beings who are the products of an accumulation of unique and personal experiences and whose desires to learn grow out of a need to face the tasks they encounter during the course of their development.

Self-directed learning means that the learner takes control of the learning process. She is responsible for setting her learning goals, locating resources, deciding which methods to use, and evaluating her progress. Within this model, the teacher is viewed as a resource, not as the expert. Educators will function as mentors of self-directed learning and evaluation in settings like study committees and research colloquia.

The critical reflection model, following the philosophic direction of the Frankfurt School, views education as the process of questioning and replacing assumptions that have been hitherto uncritically accepted as representing commonsense wisdom. It strives to help learners embrace alternative perspectives on previously taken for granted ideas, and to recognize the hegemonic aspects of dominant cultural values. The 'learning-to-learn' model proposes that becoming skilled at

learning in a range of different situations and through a range of different styles is an overarching purpose of adult education.

Multicultural education acknowledges that traditional forms of education have overlooked the role cultural styles and influences play in the education process. Furthermore, experiential learning is valued in adult education settings. This is based on the belief that education should be grounded in adults' experiences, and that these experiences represent a valuable resource. According to this model, "experience is the adult learner's living textbook"(Lindeman, 1926, p. 7). The gradual accumulation of experience over the course of one's life is seen as the chief difference between learning in adulthood and learning at earlier stages in the lifespan. Then, personal disclosure and involvement is an intrinsic part of adult education settings. To prevent ethical problems Koocher and Keith-Spiegel (1998) suggest six precautionary steps for experiential or 'affective' learning situations. 1. Proper information at the beginning of a course or curriculum of exactly what the expectations are. 2. Assistance in locating alternative settings if a students should decide to discontinue the course and making personal disclosure optional by offering alternative assignments. 3. Offering individual time for students who experience difficulties with the course. 4. Careful selection of grading criteria and excluding personal disclosure as evaluation criteria. 5. Careful screening and aptitude testing of students/applicants. 6. Hiring external faculty for experiential courses (p. 389).

3. Relationship to the Process Work MRR model

Adult education brings awareness of rank, hierarchy, hegemony, and critical reflection into our understanding of MRR. Modern theories of adult education address the problem of rank and power imbalance, and strive to correct the learner's passivity developed over centuries of traditional education models. Adult education has brought heightened awareness to the more subtle aspects of rank, how it appears in hegemonic assumptions and uncritical absorption of ideas and ways of thinking.

The adult education principle that the learner guides the learning process, is similar to Process Work's client-centered, feedback oriented approach. The learner's own style of information processing, integrating material, and becoming self-aware is paramount in the Process Work learning process. The learner is also expected to critically interact with teachers, peers, and the learning material, affecting relationships between supervisor and trainee, teacher and student, and even therapist and client.

In contrast to the medical model in the professional psychology paradigm, where the client is seen as the powerless member of the dyad, the adult education paradigm sees the learner "in the driver's seat" of her educational process. The client or student directs the learning process, through explicit instruction to the teacher or therapist, and indirectly, through feedback and signals of non-compliance, which the teacher and therapist is given responsibility for noticing.

Like the Process Work paradigm, adult education is holistic, following the original vision of participatory democracy that the whole person must be developed to participate in the democratic process. Thus, adult education methods include not just intellectual learning, but personal experience, and bring emotional, spiritual, and relational dimensions into the learning process. Because relational and emotional intelligence is equally valued, challenging interpersonal situations are not avoided, but appreciated as stimulus for further learning. The participatory democracy paradigm behind adult education is also evident in the Process Work organizational structure, as students and teachers together co-create the training program.

V. Conclusion

The ethics of non-sexual MMR are controversial. Most ethical guidelines do not acknowledge any possibility that MRR can be constructive. Others not only state that non-sexual dual relationships are unavoidable but see in them an opportunity for increased connectedness, more sharing, greater honesty, more personal integrity, more responsibility, more social integration, more complete healing, and more egalitarian human interaction (Tomm 2002). Process Work, a small psychotherapy training community has tried to develop its own approach to MRR. Process Work MRR model include: 1) the concept of roles and fields, and the value of making explicit all the roles in a given field, and 2) rank awareness, particularly the awareness of one's power and privilege vis-à-vis someone with lesser rank. Process Work aligns itself with other approaches to MRR that favor flexible boundaries and more awareness rather than rigid boundaries and their implicit danger of isolating the therapist. Process Work follows an adult education model of self-directed and experiential learning that sees clients, supervisees, and students not only as disempowered, but also

as co-responsible adults. In such a setting the connection between teacher and student, therapist and client, bear many chances for mutual learning. Unstructured relationship interaction is an intrinsic part of life, and of the educational and personal growth process. Preventing it, limiting it, or making it less unpredictable may deprive both student and teacher of growth opportunities.

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Appendix:

1. What is the student learning? Is the student becoming competent on a "special" relationship?
2. What are the other students learning? Are they learning about equitable treatment or special privilege?
3. Does the student involved have a choice? Does the power differential allow the student freedom to refuse a professor's request?
4. Do all students have the same opportunity for access to a professor's attention? Are opportunities for consulting offered equitably?
5. Has the professor lost, or is he or she perceived to have lost, the capacity for objective evaluation?

