

# "If you serve too many masters, you'll soon suffer:" Multiple relationships in graduate school

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The risk level and acceptability of... dual or multiple relationships... might be partially dependent on *cultural or geographic factors* and the specific type of professional relationship (e.g., long-term psychotherapy vs. organizational consultation vs. community-oriented activities). In some situations, for instance, a dual or multiple relationship *might be inevitable or culturally expected* (e.g., in rural, indigenous, or immigrant communities), or could enhance the benefit of an activity. However, in all such situations, the psychologist is responsible for making an honest appraisal of the *benefits and risks* involved in the *context of the specific situation*, including but not limited to: determining the feasibility of alternatives in light of those risks and benefits; deciding whether to enter into or continue the relationship; establishing relationship boundaries appropriate to the work being done; and managing the relationship (e.g., by seeking advice or establishing other safeguards) to ensure that the dignity, well-being and best interests of the member(s) of the public are protected.<sup>1</sup> (Italics added.)

Graduate school is in a unique environment. Young adults are there for only a few years, and most of their activities are with a relatively small group. Often, they are surrounded with the same people for their education, employment, and social life. Unlike the undergraduate

experience, there generally is not a distinct summer break where students leave and return to the environment in the fall. It is also a very hierarchical environment. Although the hierarchy is based on knowledge and experience, and individuals often rise through it quickly, it is nonetheless a hierarchy with strong differences in power and responsibility. Thus, graduate students are immersed in a small, high pressure, hierarchical environment, where they are required to assume multiple roles.

Graduate students often see themselves as a separate community. Although they spend considerable time with faculty, they realize that faculty are in a different category and that there is an evaluative component in those relationships. Also, graduate students often don't see themselves as citizens of the city in which they are living to attend school, making them feel more isolated and dependent on each other in their small separate community.

Small groups of individuals, in high-pressure environments, for long hours over many months often develop strong bonds. This can be due to mere proximity, as they attend the same small seminars, work in the same labs, or share offices, but strong, and often lifelong, friendships can develop. In some instances, even romance occurs.

When new students enter into graduate school, they're entering a new environment unlike any they may have experienced before. Often, they are in new cities where they have few, if any, family or social connections. They are also required to start assuming a new role as the previous role of undergraduate student, with its unique cultural norms, is no longer appropriate in the graduate school environment. In this new role and this new environment, they look for guidance from senior students – generally those in

their program or their lab. Therefore, in addition to filling the role of mentee to a research supervisor, they step into the role of mentee or junior colleague to the more senior students in their program. This can put them in a very vulnerable position because they are isolated and need to rely on others within this new small academic community.

After a few years in this environment, they too become more senior graduate students, slowly developing into the role of informal mentors. Along with informal roles, the program often puts them into a more senior role within the small hierarchy of the community. For example, a senior graduate student may be a teaching assistant for a graduate level course. If they're taking a course in supervision, they may be required to provide formal supervision to more junior graduate students. In their labs, they may take on the role of research coordinator for the faculty advisor. They also may supervise junior graduate students' research within the lab, particularly research for their own doctoral dissertation. As such, even though these communities may be small and ever transitory, with students entering and leaving regularly, they are uniquely set up to have important and significant dual roles between senior and junior graduate students.

Having these types of dual roles is seen as culturally normative within a graduate program. The senior graduate students typically learn how to navigate the dual roles based on the experiences they had when they were junior graduate students (not that long ago). However, the efficacy of this model of navigation is dependent upon whether the senior graduate students learned healthy or unhealthy ways of handling these multiple roles when they were in the more vulnerable position of junior graduate student. Each program devel-

ops its own cultural or local norms based on the histories of the students that came before.

One model of understanding graduate training in psychology is to see it as a developmental continuum. When one starts graduate school, one comes in with the identity and mindset of the student. Generally, having come from the undergraduate milieu, this way of thinking about their role dominates their approach to their role when starting graduate school. However, by the end of graduate school, the self-identity of the student has become closer to that of a professional.

This progression cannot be seen as a simple stepwise development from year to year. For example, it would not be the case that someone in fourth year would be twice as far along this developmental journey as someone in second year. It is more likely that the rapid immersion at the beginning results in a rapid learning of the new norms of the small community, with subtle markers in the transitional stages of the development.

Because of the vulnerability of graduate students during this time of rapid transition, it is important that programs recognize and attempt to manage the ethical dilemmas and potential for harm that can result from such dual roles. As Standard III.31 of the *Code* states:

Manage dual or multiple relationships or any other conflict-of-interest situation entered into in such a way that bias, lack of objectivity, and risk of exploitation or harm are minimized. This might include involving the affected party(ies) in clarification of boundaries and expectations, limiting the duration of the relationship, obtaining ongoing supervision or consultation for the duration of the dual or multiple relationship, or involving a third party in obtaining consent (e.g., approaching a primary client or employee about becoming a research participant).

The following are examples of practical steps graduate programs can take to help protect graduate students.

1) Early in their entry into graduate school, graduate students should be made clearly aware of the potential risks and pitfalls inherent in their new roles. This would include the likely or required multiple relationships that will occur with the other graduate students, particularly those at different levels of progression through the program. It also would include discussion of the multiple roles they may have with a faculty member who may be their research supervisor, their course instructor, their employer through a grant, their work supervisor through a teaching assistantship, their senior collaborator, and possibly even their clinical supervisor.

2) Ensure that there are policies and procedures in place to deal with any issues that may arise due to the multiple roles students may fill, and that new graduate students are taught how these protect them. As students progress through the program and develop in

their roles, they should also be reminded of how the policy and procedures affect them.

Graduate programs have been small communities with their own unique cultures for centuries. However, as our profession develops in its understanding and appreciation of how these environments can place vulnerable graduate students at risk, it is incumbent on those with more power and authority in these communities to recognize the potential negative impact of multiple relationships, and to minimize any potential risk of exploitation or harm.

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