

Social Work Education in Non-Sexual Dual Relationships

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Abstract

This study examined ethics education in accredited bachelor of social work programs in one Midwestern state, specifically regarding non-sexual dual relationships. The results of the study indicated that the majority of undergraduate social work students reported receiving instruction in ethical issues surrounding non-sexual dual relationships. Participants were asked to respond to 20 ethical dilemmas involving dual relationships. Two participant groups were used; the first was a novice group selected from university students in introductory social work courses, while the second, an advanced group, was drawn from students completing their final advanced courses or field work. The student participants indicated whether they believed the social worker in each scenario was acting ethically or unethically and how confident the participants were in their response. From the 20 scenarios, advanced students correctly answered six of them significantly more often than the novice students. The novice students were also significantly more likely to indicate uncertainty when answering the scenarios in 18 of the 20 cases.

1. Introduction

Social work by its very definition is a profession that assumes practitioners will have a

relationship with other people. This relationship is one that is considered to be of a professional nature and subject to laws and a code of ethics that further define its character. As Kagle & Giebelhausen (1994) explain, "A professional enters into a *dual relationship* whenever he or she assumes a second role with a client, becoming social worker and friend, employer, teacher, business associate, family member, or sex partner. A practitioner can engage in a dual relationship whether the second relationship begins before, during, or after the social work relationship" (p. 213).

The National Association of Social Workers (NASW) addresses dual relationships in Standard 1.06 of its Code of Ethics (2008) as follows: "Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there are risks of exploitation or potential harm to the client. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries."

Even with this prohibition against the formation of dual relationships that exploit clients, a review of ethics violations by social workers indicates that a substantial number of cases result from these boundary violations. Strom-Gottfried

(2003, p. 91) examined complaints considered by the National Association of Social Workers regarding violations of the organization's Code of Ethics. Of the 267 cases in which ethics violations were substantiated, 77 were the result of the formation of unethical dual relationships with clients. This represents the second most common violation in the study, followed by 70 findings labeled "Other Boundary Violations."

Accredited social work programs are clearly charged with addressing this content area by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) in its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards. Educational Policy 2.1.2 requires that social work faculty provide instruction to students on how to "apply social work ethical principles to guide professional practice" (CSWE, 2008, p. 4). Specifically this policy states that "social workers have an obligation to conduct themselves ethically and to engage in ethical decision-making. Social workers are knowledgeable about the value base of the profession, its ethical standards, and relevant law" (CSWE, 2008, p. 4).

2. Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study was to research, identify, and report social work student knowledge of the issues surrounding non-sexual dual relationships with clients. The specific research questions are as follows:

1. Do social work students enrolled in accredited baccalaureate social work programs in this Midwestern state report receiving instruction on the ethics of dual relationships?
2. What differences, if any, exist between novice social work students and advanced social work students in their application of the NASW Code of Ethics concerning dual relationships with clients?

3. Limitations of the Study

The participants in the study were enrolled in accredited social work programs in one

Midwestern state. The sample was taken from students participating in a single academic year (2008–2009). In order to generalize the results, a larger sample from a greater geographic area would be necessary. The sample was not a random sample but instead a sample of convenience.

4. Literature Review

The review of related literature examined research and professional writings that detail the development of a professional code of ethics for social workers. The review investigated the development and inclusion of language addressing client-professional relationships in the code of ethical conduct. Finally, the review details historic and current research surrounding the topic of non-sexual dual relationships. This review of research and professional literature demonstrates the extent of current exploration into this topic area as well as the needs for future research that exist.

5. The Professional Relationship

The relationship between a social worker and his or her client is not based on equality; it is inherently unequal, because the practitioner has influence over the client, who is often vulnerable (Kagle & Giebelhausen, 1994; Reamer 2003). The recognized nomenclature uses the term "boundaries" to describe the line between the clearly different roles that the client and the social worker have in the relationship (Strom-Gottfried & Dunlap, 1998). Boundaries are used to help clarify the professional relationship as opposed to one that is of a social nature. The formation of a dual relationship is considered a boundary issue.

Although states that license social workers have laws that directly speak to and affect the social worker-client relationship, professional literature in the field also suggests a legal obligation inherent in the relationship. Kutchins (1991) proposed that social workers' responsibilities to their clients clearly form a type of fiduciary relationship. Three primary aspects of this relationship are pointed to by the author as evidence of this association, and they are as follows:

- “1. Special duties arise because of the trust or confidence reposed in the fiduciary.
2. The Fiduciary has special powers to dominate and influence the client because of the nature of the relationship.
3. As a consequence, the fiduciary must act in the best interest of the client and cannot take advantage of the client to promote the fiduciary’s own interest” (Kutchins, 1991, p. 107).

6. Dual Relationships

The professional literature in the field of social work supports the idea that dual relationships with family, friends, and business associates are especially problematic, because of their involvedness and the difficulty of maintaining objectivity (Ramsdell & Ramsdell, 1993). Reamer (2001) has identified five primary domains or “conceptual categories” (p. 123) for dual relationships. First, he categorizes a group of behaviors he refers to as intimate gestures. Although this domain would include relationships of a sexual nature, it also includes a number of non-sexual intimate encounters, such as simple physical contact and providing services to a former lover. The next central domain is dual relationships that result in personal benefit to the social worker. Examples of this are trading goods and services with a client or using a client to gain useful information. The third domain Reamer identifies is emotional needs and dependency. Here Reamer focuses on ways that a helping professional may use a client to satisfy his or her own interpersonal needs. Examples may be extending relationships with clients beyond what is necessary and even reversing roles with the client. The fourth major domain would be altruistic gestures, such as exchanging gifts with a client or performing favors for each other. The final domain that Reamer identifies is the unanticipated circumstance. Instances of this may include attending the same social or community events, or sharing mutual friends.

Researchers have attempted to point out the inherent dangers in non-sexual dual relationships (Johner, 2006; Reamer, 2001). Johner (2006) argued that non-sexual dual relationships tend to undermine the client’s right of self-determination and are often legitimized by social work agencies or even the profession. Johner used case study examples to illustrate the hazards of non-sexual dual relationships. For instance, a social worker is shown holding a client support group in her home, exchanging gifts with clients, and attending social functions with clients. Johner’s line of reasoning was that these types of activities will foster client dependence, which may damage the client’s ability to fully exercise his or her right of self-determination.

A study conducted by Ramsdell and Ramsdell (1993) questioned former clients from an urban mental health center regarding various types of dual relationships. Surveys were sent to 346 former clients and 67 surveys were returned. Although part of the instrument used was specific to sexual relationships, many of the questions dealt with aspects of a dual relationship of a non-sexual nature. Issues such as using the professional’s first name in the therapeutic setting, sharing a meal, giving gifts, and social worker self-disclosure were addressed. This research suggested that a number of behaviors were considered to be beneficial, such as visiting a client in the hospital or addressing each other on a first name basis. Some behaviors the clients believed to be benign, such as sharing a meal with a client. Social worker behaviors that were viewed to be the most disruptive to the therapeutic relationship were drinking alcohol with a client, employing a client to perform services, or attending a social function such as a movie with a client.

In Kagle and Giebelhausen’s study of almost 5,000 helping professionals from across the nation, many admitted to engaging in non-sexual dual relationships and believed them to be ethical in nature (1994). The majority of those surveyed considered employing a client, taking a client on as a student, or becoming friends with a former client to be ethical. Kagle and Giebelhausen (1994) also

explored the controversial issue of transference and countertransference, and they found that this issue is not agreed upon by all researchers; many recognize that the therapeutic process involves revisiting and processing significant relationships in people's lives. This process can lead both the client and helper to project unconscious needs they may have.

A qualitative study conducted by Nelson, Summers, and Turnbull (2004) examined the issues of dual relationships in special education settings that relate to social work. Two central issues were identified as affecting boundary definition in working with families. First, a number of professions such as nursing, special education, and social work have identified what are clear and definite violations of their codes in regard to exploitative dual relationships. Second, the existing codes fail to define fully or give guidance on navigating dual relationships that are not clearly unethical. This study was an attempt to develop guidelines further by examining client (in this case parent) preferences regarding professional relationships.

The following research question was used to guide the study: "What are the specific perspectives of parents and professionals about the closeness-distance continuum of their relationship and about having one or multiple roles in their relationships?" (Nelson et al., 2004, p.155) The researchers conducted 34 focus groups and 32 individual interviews (137 total participants), and analyzed the transcripts. One of the key themes identified by the researchers was that of "dual relationships." Their qualitative data revealed that a number of parents saw a dual relationship with a professional, such as developing a friendship, as a positive and helpful aspect of their relationship. Some parents considered the professional who came into their home "like a member of the family" (Nelson et al., p. 159). Other parents, however, reported that they were uncomfortable with the dual aspect of their relationship. Some discussed the fear that the professional was trying to replace them as a parent at times, while others felt angry or hurt by their "friend" when they were not provided all of the services they thought they needed.

The authors suggested that professionals should understand the dynamic of transference and countertransference to protect clients they may work with. Transference is a psychoanalytic term referring to emotions and thoughts the client ascribes to the social worker in the context of their relationship (Abbott, 2003). These feelings often stem from past relationships the client has had with other people in similar power, authoritarian, or helping roles (Bonosky, 1995). Countertransference is likewise the emotions and thoughts a professional helper, such as a social worker, assigns to the client in the context of their relationship (Abbott, 2003). Although transference and countertransference are often associated with sexual attraction between client and helper, many other unconsciously influenced emotions may affect the relationship (Abbott, 2003). Nelson, Summers, and Turnbull also conclude that the area of dual relationships is not well defined and opens a number of possible complications. While they suggest that there are a number of possible benefits from dual roles in the field of special education, the potential for conflicts of interest seems to outweigh them in most situations.

To date, little research has been conducted on how dual relationships are addressed in social work education. One empirical study conducted by Congress (2001) focused on social work educators' beliefs regarding dual relationships. Congress attempted to survey 120 accredited social work programs. The results of the research indicated that the majority of social work educators found a dual relationship with current students of a sexual (98.9%) or therapeutic (94.3%) nature to be unethical. A much lower percentage believed that a relationship such as employment (40.2%) or social activity (25.3%) with current students was unethical. The study also attempted to examine what educators believed regarding dual relationships with former students.

In this area considerable differences were noted in beliefs associated to dual relationships of a sexual or therapeutic nature with former students. Only 29.9% of educators viewed sexual

relationships with former students as unethical, while 46% thought a therapeutic relationship to be unethical in nature. The vast majority of educators surveyed (92%) believed that hiring a former student as a research assistant was ethical, and most (81.6%) believed that attending a social function with a former student was ethical. Congress's final research question had to do with how educators and students learn about social work ethics. The majority of programs surveyed (98.9%) claimed to infuse ethics education throughout the curriculum and about half (50.6%) offered an elective course specific to ethics. Fewer than half of the programs had a policy on dual relationships (34.5%) and only 44.8% acknowledged discussing ethics and dual relationships at a faculty meeting.

7. Methodology

The study population was made up of students from six different CSWE-accredited baccalaureate social work programs in one Midwestern state. The sample came from both private and public institutions. The total sample size was 323 participants, with 192 participants in introductory social work courses and beginning theory courses (novice group) and 131 participants in advanced courses such as advanced practice or senior seminar courses (advanced group). The instrument is an attitude test using a Likert scale. Beyond the demographic data that was gathered (sex, age, etc.), participants were asked to respond to 20 scenarios. Each scenario presents a situation in which a social worker is confronted with a dual relationship with a client. The participant is asked to indicate whether the social worker is acting in a fashion that is ethical, ethical under most circumstances, unethical under most circumstances, unethical, or uncertain. The instrument incorporated Reamer's (2001) categorization of dual relationships into five domains shown below:

1. Intimate relationships or gestures
2. Emotional and dependency needs of the social worker
3. Personal benefit or conflicts of interest

4. Altruistic gestures
5. Unavoidable and unanticipated circumstances

The instrument includes four scenarios from each category of dual relationship type, for a total of 20 situations (Appendix A). Instrument validity was established by a panel of experts in the field of social work education. Instrument reliability was determined by using Cronbach's Alpha formula for internal consistency. The instrument was found to be reliable (20 items; $\alpha = .769$). The correct response to each scenario was identified by consulting the NASW Code of Ethics. Where clear direction was not given in the Code of Ethics, the researcher relied on responses from the panel of experts used in the instrument's development. The researchers obtained IRB approval/support from all institutions where participants are enrolled. All data were entered into SPSS for analysis. Analysis of the data has resulted in descriptive statistics such as measures of central tendency. The data were also analyzed using inferential statistics to test for significance. The researcher used statistical tests such as a chi-squared (χ^2) or *t* test to determine whether there were statistical differences between the beginning social work student group and the advanced student group.

6. Results

The results indicate that the majority of all student participants had received instruction on ethics and dual relationships. Table 1 details the frequency and percentage of novice students and advanced students who had or had not received instruction in dual relationships. As Table 1 indicates, the majority of all participants had received instruction in ethics and dual relationships. A large majority of advanced students indicated that they had training in ethics relating to dual relationships. While many novice students indicated that they had received instruction in the ethics of dual relations, significantly fewer of them had than advanced students at the .05 level ($\chi^2 = 73.54$ $df = 1$, $p = < .001$).

Table 1.
Frequency and Percentage of Dual Relationship Instruction by Student Level

	Received Instruction		No Instruction	
	Frequency	Percent	Frequency	Percent
Total Participants	235	72.8%	88	27.2%
Novice Participants	106	55.2%	86	44.8%
Advanced Participants	129	98.4%	2	1.6%

In Table 2, the frequency of correct responses by novice and advanced students was compared. “Uncertain” responses were removed from this response set. For purposes of analysis, responses were recoded when considering correct

and incorrect responses. Responses of “Ethical” and “Ethical Under Most Circumstances” were combined, as were the responses of “Unethical Under Most Circumstances” and “Unethical.”

Table 2.
Comparison of Correct and Incorrect Answers by Student Level

Scenario	Frequency		Percent Incorrect	Value of Chi (χ)	p - value
	Correct	Incorrect			
S1: Client hug					
Novice	159	29	15.4%	3.89	.049
Advanced	116	10	7.94%		
S2: Hand-holding					
Novice	75	81	51.92%	.14	.704
Advanced	54	64	54.24%		
S3: Client massage					
Novice	183	0	0%	0	N/A
Advanced	128	0	0%		
S4: Former lover					
Novice	144	13	8.28%	.36	.550
Advanced	117	8	6.40%		
S5: Client friendship					
Novice	65	70	51.85%	32.01	<.001
Advanced	95	20	17.39%		
S6: Self-disclosure					
Novice	145	23	13.69%	1.28	.257
Advanced	96	22	18.64%		
S7: Preferential scheduling					
Novice	39	110	73.83%	1.11	.292
Advanced	36	76	67.86%		

Social Work Education in Non-Sexual Dual Relationships

Scenario	Frequency		Percent Incorrect	Value of Chi (χ)	p - value
	Correct	Incorrect			
S8: Unnecessary services					
Novice	108	39	26.53%	8.24	.004*
Advanced	106	15	12.40%		
S9: Beneficiary of estate					
Novice	120	26	17.81%	13.15	<.001*
Advanced	112	4	3.45%		
S10: Legal advice					
Novice	163	11	6.32%	2.55	.110
Advanced	123	3	2.38%		
S11: Bartering for services					
Novice	18	129	87.76%	.21	.650
Advanced	16	97	85.84%		
S12: Business partner					
Novice	136	21	13.38%	5.52	.019*
Advanced	115	6	4.96%		
S13: Gift to client					
Novice	120	32	21.05%	18.95	<.001*
Advanced	65	49	42.98%		
S14: Alcohol use					
Novice	58	80	57.97%	13.04	<.001*
Advanced	23	89	79.46%		
S15: Client transportation					
Novice	109	29	21.01%	.89	.344
Advanced	79	28	26.17%		
S16: Give phone number					
Novice	52	94	64.38%	18.38	<.001*
Advanced	70	42	37.50%		
S17: AA meeting					
Novice	87	35	28.69%	.22	.636
Advanced	67	31	31.63%		
S18: Moonlighting					
Novice	58	53	47.75%	3.56	.059
Advanced	62	33	34.74%		
S19: Family gathering					
Novice	126	12	8.70%	.11	.742
Advanced	100	11	9.91%		
S20: Teacher conflict					
Novice	76	35	31.53%	4.49	.034*
Advanced	56	47	45.63%		

Note. For all analyses, degrees of freedom = 1.

* $p < .05$

Advanced students correctly answered the scenarios more often in 16 of the 20 scenarios. However, there is a statistically significant difference over the novice students in six of those. Novice students correctly answered three of the scenarios significantly more often than the advanced students.

7. Discussion

As reported, 98.4% of advanced participants reported receiving instruction in dual relationships. This indicates that of the sample of accredited BSW programs in the state, all incorporate training in the ethics of dual relationships into

their curriculums. As this is a requirement of the Council on Social Work Education, it appears that the sample institutions are fulfilling this obligation. Interestingly, 55.2% of novice-level participants indicated that they had already received instruction in dual relationships. This would seem to indicate that many students are being exposed to the Code of Ethics early in their social work education. None of the participant schools has a course in its curriculum that lists social work ethics as a primary content area. This would lead one to believe that ethics training is woven into the curriculum at various points of instruction. This would be consistent with Congress's (2001) findings that 98.9% of social work programs infuse ethics education throughout the curriculum.

Looking at individual scenarios, advanced students answered the scenarios correctly more often in 16 of the 20 dilemmas. Therefore, one can conclude that advanced-level students receive effective instruction on dual relationships throughout the duration of the respective social work program. Six of those comparisons had a statistically significant margin. Those 6 are: *S1: Client hug*, *S5: Client friendship*, *S8: Unnecessary services*, *S9: Beneficiary of estate*, *S12: Business partner*, *S16: Give phone number*. This appears to indicate that advanced students had a more sophisticated grasp of the NASW Code of Ethics and its application to ethical dilemmas.

There are three scenarios, however, in which novice students correctly answered the scenario significantly more often than advanced students. The first of these, *S13: Gift to client*, deals with the social worker giving the client a gift. Although the code warns against conflicts of interest, the advanced group may be applying too legalistic a view of this interaction. There is no specific prohibition of gift-giving between client and social worker. The code does require the social worker to be aware of the power differential in the professional relationship, however, and this could play a role in the advanced student decision making. Many human service agencies have a policy against giving gifts to clients or accepting gifts

from clients. Advanced students demonstrate a higher level of exposure to human service agencies and such policies through volunteer service learning experience and/or job experience. The fact that some advanced students currently work for such agencies and/or are aware of such policies may influence their decision making regarding this scenario.

The second situation, *S14: Alcohol use*, has to do with the use of alcohol by the social worker. As discussed earlier in this chapter, the researcher believes that the advanced student group probably approached this scenario from a professional boundary standpoint. The novice student group, having less training in boundaries and ethics, seemingly did not have the same level of concern regarding this boundary crossing.

The third scenario has to do with a possible conflict of interest when a social worker practicing in a rural community and a school teacher create a dual relationship. Here, in *S20: Teacher conflict*, the teacher's child is a client of the social worker. The social worker's child is also in the teacher's classroom. It is the opinion of the researcher and the consulted panel of experts that this relationship has a high potential of creating a conflict of interest and should be avoided. The scenario goes on to say that if the social worker does refer the client elsewhere, the client will have to get services from another county. The researcher believes that this information may have influenced student decision making. It would not be uncommon for advanced students to have received instruction on the challenges of rural social work practice. The difficulties associated with rural practice would have to be weighed against the possibility of a boundary violation.

When completing the instrument, the participants were given the option of choosing "uncertain" as a response to the ethical dilemma. Advanced students used this option significantly less than novice students in 18 of the 20 situations. Based on the given results, one can conclude that the advanced student group possesses a higher level of confidence when responding to ethical dilemmas. There is also a sharp contrast between

advanced and novice groups when looking at the frequency of using “uncertain” as a response. The advanced student group selected “uncertain” less than 10% of the time in 11 of the 20 scenarios. In only three scenarios did fewer than 10% of the novice students choose the same response. Novice students chose “uncertain” at a rate of 20% or more in 12 of the situations, wherein only two scenarios did advanced students do the same. As implied, advanced students seemed to approach these ethical dilemmas with much more conviction. By infusing ethics education throughout the curriculum, social work programs in this Midwestern state are preparing students for proper application of the NASW Code of Ethics.

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Appendix A

For all the scenarios below, the participants were given the following five response choices: ethical, ethical under most circumstances, uncertain, unethical under most circumstances, and unethical.

S1. A social worker employed as a mental health case manager has provided services to a client for the past two years. The client and social worker have decided to end services and terminate their relationship. At the end of their final session together the social worker embraces the client in a hug that was initiated by the client.

S2. A hospital social worker assists clients who often have terminal illnesses. While conducting a psychosocial assessment with such a client who is very distraught, the social worker initiated an embrace with the client and continued to hold her hand throughout the rest of the session.

S3. A social worker has an interest in therapeutic massage as part of her practice, but has not been trained as a massage therapist. The social worker often encourages clients to allow her to massage their shoulders as they talk during sessions.

S4. A social work clinician in private practice who specializes in intimate relationship counseling often works with individuals and couples on intimacy and relationship issues. By request of his client, the social worker has started to provide services to an individual with whom he had intimate relations about one year ago.

S5. A social worker who has worked with a client for several months has developed a fondness for the client and enjoys spending time with her. Approximately one year after their professional relationship had terminated, the social worker invites the former client out for coffee in order to establish a friendship.

S6. While providing services to a client whom the social worker respects and enjoys spending time with, the social worker finds herself disclosing personal information to the client that she doesn't provide to other clients (such as her marital status and personal interests). The social worker feels as though she can trust her client with this information.

S7. A social worker employed as a children's mental health case manager often arranges client contacts at client homes or in public settings outside of school hours. For one client, with whom the social worker enjoys spending time, the social worker always schedules later in the day so that if the session runs long it won't disrupt the rest of his daily schedule.

S8. A social worker has established a working relationship with a client whom she really enjoys. The social worker and client have decided to continue services even though the client has completed the treatment program. While the social worker is convinced that the client will benefit from the continued services, she admits that they are no longer necessary.

S9. A social worker discovers that a client with whom he has had a long-term professional relationship has named him as a beneficiary in his will. Upon the client's death, the social worker graciously accepts a sum of money from his estate.

S10. A social worker has a client who happens to be married to an attorney. At the conclusion of one session, the social worker asks her client if she could obtain some legal information regarding the social worker's upcoming real estate transaction.

S11. A social worker is providing counseling services to a client who happens to be an artist. The client has no insurance and few resources with which to pay for services. The social worker and the client work out a bartering arrangement where counseling services are provided in exchange for some pieces of the client's artwork.

S12. A client in an addiction treatment program discovers that she and one of the social workers have a mutual small business interest. They work out a plan to partner in a potentially profitable business venture together, which has nothing to do with the treatment program.

S13. A client who has completed a transitional living program is moving into his own apartment. The social worker decides to reward him by purchasing him a small kitchen utensil as a "housewarming" gift.

S14. A social worker is invited to attend a client's retirement party. In a show of client

support, the social worker attends the event. Alcoholic beverages are served at the party and the social worker enjoys some with the rest of the guests.

S15. A social worker provides intensive in-home family therapy to her clients. At the conclusion of one session with a single-parent family, the mother requests that the social worker give her and her son a ride to work as their car recently broke down. The social worker agrees to transport them to work.

S16. A social worker at a group home for juveniles has developed a good working relationship with a particularly distraught client. While the rest of the staff tries their best, it seems as though the client only trusts the social worker. Upon leaving for the weekend, the social worker leaves her home phone number with the client in case she has difficulties over the next several days.

S17. A social worker is employed in an addiction treatment program. The social worker herself has been through alcoholism treatment and has remained committed to the recovery program for

seven years. As part of her program, she regularly attends Alcoholics Anonymous meetings, some of which her current clients also attend.

S18. In an effort to earn some needed extra money, a social worker moonlights as a bartender at a local bar and grill. The social worker soon realizes that a number of former and current clients regularly frequent that very establishment.

S19. A social worker practicing in a rural setting learns that his sister is dating one of his former clients. The sister is planning to bring the former client to a family event, and the social worker decides to attend the family gathering.

S20. A social worker employed as a children's mental health case manager in a rural setting learns that the mother of one of his clients will be his daughter's teacher next school year. The social worker decides to keep the client on his caseload as he has already established a working relationship with the family. A referral to another worker will require the family to get services from another county.