ORIGINAL RESEARCH

Boundary Issues and Multiple Relationships in Genetic Counseling Supervision: Supervisor, Non-supervisor, and Student Perspectives

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Abstract Boundary issues and multiple relationships potentially affect all supervision interactions. *Boundary crossings* are departures from the strictest professional role and may or may not benefit supervisees. *Boundary violations* are outside common practice and may place supervisees at significant risk. *Multiple relationships* occur when supervisors concurrently or consecutively hold two or more roles with supervisees. Studies in other fields indicate supervisors and supervisees may be uncertain about professional conduct regarding these issues. In this study, genetic counselor supervisors ($n=126$), non-supervisors ($n=72$), and genetic counseling students ($n=129$) completed an anonymous survey investigating four major questions: 1) Are various boundary issues and multiple relationships perceived as differentially appropriate? 2) Do supervisor, non-supervisor, and student perceptions differ? 3) What challenging situations have respondents experienced? and 4) What management strategies did they use? There was general agreement among groups in their appropriateness ratings of 56 hypothetical supervisor behaviors, although supervisor ratings tended to reflect stricter boundaries regarding the appropriateness of interactions than student ratings. A majority rated unavoidable boundary crossings and supervisor multiple relationships involving an academic relationship as most appropriate, and romantic/sexual multiple relationships and/or boundary violations as least appropriate. Analysis of respondents' actual challenging situations revealed many involved boundary violations, placed students at risk of harm, and often resulted in student compliance.

Supervision in clinical settings is critical to the skill development required to practice genetic counseling effectively (McCarthy Veach and LeRoy 2009; Weil 2000). Genetic counseling students typically spend over 800 h in the clinic under direct supervision by certified genetic counselors or clinical geneticists. Supervision in helping professions is a very relationally-based activity, and thus, despite best intentions, ethical challenges inevitably arise regarding multiple relationships and boundary issues (e.g., Burian and O'Connor-Slimp 2000; DeJulio and Berkman 2003; Gottlieb et al. 2007; Heru et al. 2004; Pearson and Piazza 1997).

Audience comments at a workshop on multiple relationships in genetic counseling supervision (Callanan et al. 2007) indicate multiple relationships occur and often pose difficulties for supervisors, students, and program directors (e.g., creating uncertainty about appropriate professional conduct and challenges in maintaining distinct roles). Yet there are no specific professional guidelines for genetic counselors to follow in handling these difficulties other than the National Society of Genetic Counselor's (NSGC) Code of Ethics (2006) which states that counselors

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"maintain appropriate limits to avoid the potential for exploitation in their relationships with students and colleagues." Furthermore, there are no published studies of boundary issues and multiple relationships in genetic counseling supervision. As a first step towards providing additional guidance regarding these issues, the present study investigated genetic counselor supervisor, non-supervisor, and student perceptions of the appropriateness of various boundary crossings, boundary violations, and multiple relationships in supervision, challenging situations they encountered as either a supervisor or student supervisee, and strategies they used to address these situations. Non-supervisors comprised a comparison group to determine whether professional role affects perception of these issues.

Definitions of Boundary Issues and Multiple Relationships

The following definitions, adapted from psychology literature, were used in this study. It should be noted that there is a high degree of overlap among these terms as multiple relationships and boundary crossings increase the risk of boundary violations. Moreover, the complexity of these interactions precludes the establishment of a definite line between boundary crossings and boundary violations.

Boundary crossings refer to benign departures from usual professional behavior that typically do no harm to supervisees and may even positively affect their professional development (Gutheil and Gabbard 1998). They may be unintentional or intentional, and some are unavoidable (e.g., supervisor and student attend the same workshop). Some authors caution, however, that boundary crossings, if not carefully managed, may aggregate and lead to a *slippery slope* that results in various types of exploitation (Gutheil and Gabbard 1993; Sonne 1994). For instance, a hand on the supervisee's shoulder at the end of a supervision session might escalate into physical intimacy.

Boundary violations are episodic or recurrent actions that encroach upon supervisees' physical boundaries (e.g., physical intimacy) and/or psychological boundaries (e.g., asking a supervisee to divulge her responses to an anonymous evaluation of a clinical rotation). They comprise intentional departures from one's professional boundaries. Most involve supervisors' desires to satisfy personal needs, and given the power differential, may lead to exploitation (Barnett et al. 2007; Glass 2003).

Multiple relationships refer to instances when a supervisor has both a primary professional relationship with a supervisee and at least one other, significantly different relationship with her or him (Gutheil and Gabbard 1993; Pope 1991). The other relationship can be social, financial,

or professional; and concurrent or consecutive (Sonne 1994). Multiple relationships are engaged in consciously and intentionally (Pope and Vetter 1992), and since these roles have different goals and tasks, they may lead to numerous boundary crossings and boundary violations. Some multiple relationships may be beneficial, for example, serving as a clinical supervisor and as a member of a student's thesis committee (Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000). Nevertheless, dynamics common to multiple relationships include role conflicts, questionable personal motivations, and power differentials (Kitchener 1988; Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; O'Connor Slimp and Burian 1994).

Boundary Issues and Multiple Relationships in Supervision

Supervision involves a fiduciary relationship, meaning the supervisee trusts the supervisor to work for his or her best interests; as such, supervision requires clear boundaries in order to foster trust and best serve supervisees (Gottlieb et al. 2007). There is a lack of consensus, however, regarding the nature of boundary crossings and violations in supervision relationships with students in the counseling/psychotherapy field (Keith-Spiegel et al. 2002). A similar lack of consensus may exist among genetic counseling supervisors, although no published data exist to support or refute this hypothesis. Lindh et al. (2003) surveyed 182 genetic counselor supervisors and found more than 90% relied on trial and error, student feedback, and consultation as resources for their supervision, while only 34.4% sought guidance from supervision books, and only 26.4% had received formal supervision training. It might be expected, therefore, that genetic counseling supervisory boundaries would be unclear or variable.

Related Factors

Numerous factors may contribute to boundary issues and multiple relationships within supervision. For instance, supervisors frequently struggle to act empathically without slipping into a personal relationship with students (Bernard and Goodyear 2004). Additional factors include student and supervisor personal motivations (e.g., loneliness, need to be liked) and professional motivations [e.g., student's need to form a professional identity (Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; O'Connor Slimp and Burian 1994)]; cultural factors [e.g., supervisees from collectivistic cultures may view certain multiple relationships as common and acceptable (Kertesz 2002)]; supervisors' lack of emotional management [i.e., they are unaware of their own and their supervisees' emotions, and/or they lack skills for addressing them (Falender and Shafranske 2004)]; and transference

and countertransference. For example, in response to one's "professional elder" (i.e., the supervisor), supervisees may experience transference, and thereby attempt to replicate early parent-child interactions (Jacobs 1991). Supervisees who have critical or unsupportive parents may resist supervisor feedback, while those who are accustomed to pleasing their parents may similarly attempt to please supervisors (Jacobs 1991). Either type of supervisee reaction may challenge professional boundaries.

Personal needs may *drive* both supervisors and supervisees to cross boundaries. For instance, both supervisors and supervisees may attempt to decrease their anxiety about the evaluative nature of supervision by behaving more like friends than two professionals (Bernard and Goodyear 2004). Supervisors and supervisees often have similar backgrounds, and their *natural attraction* may play a role in boundary crossings (Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; O'Connor Slimp and Burian 1994). Emotional needs (e.g., personal distress) frequently interfere with ethical decision making, resulting in a gap between what professionals think they *should* do and what they *actually* do (Falender and Shafranske 2004).

Some multiple relationships are unavoidable because training programs are small communities, and supervisors often have additional roles by virtue of their job description, including instructor, administrator, and/or advisor (Kitchener 1988). Ideally, supervisors serve as role models for their students in each of these relationships (Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; Heru et al. 2004), but these roles may compete with each other when supervisors have limited time, energy or skill to fulfill all of them (Kitchener 1988).

Some multiple relationships develop because the student had a prior role with the supervisor (e.g., friend). In this case, role conflicts are more likely if either party tries to maintain the original relationship and/or dismisses the power differential within supervision.

Other multiple relationships develop after the supervisor and student have begun supervision. In these cases, motivations for entering into a second relationship should be considered.

Potential Impact

Boundary crossings, boundary violations, and multiple relationships, especially those motivated by personal needs, pose ethical dilemmas due to potential exploitation, loss of professional objectivity, and harm to professional and personal development (Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; Kitchener 1988). Exploitation may occur because the student feels his or her ability to make an autonomous decision about engaging in various activities is limited. In our experience, students are mindful of the power differen-

tial and may recognize that at stake are rotation evaluations, recommendations for employment, loss of a smooth transition from student to professional, and/or loss of honest feedback to improve their skills. The parameters of the supervisory relationship may become blurred, either temporarily or permanently. The supervisor may fail to facilitate and evaluate the student's learning, or, when the supervisor does exert power, the student responds negatively (Pearson and Piazza 1997). Supervisees may respond defensively (e.g., avoiding supervision, losing motivation, and being unable to develop a strong working alliance), thus impeding their professional development. One long-range concern is that supervisees may adopt questionable behaviors learned from their supervisor when they eventually become supervisors (Heru et al. 2004).

Purpose of the Present Study

Anecdotal and empirical literature primarily from psychology demonstrates that boundary issues and multiple relationships pose numerous challenges, and they vary in their potential benefits and risks for the involved parties. The extent to which these findings generalize to genetic counseling supervision is unknown, however. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to assess multiple relationships and boundaries issues in genetic counseling supervision. Four major research questions were investigated: 1) Are different types of multiple relationships, boundary crossings, and boundary violations perceived by genetic counselors as varying in appropriateness? 2) Do supervisor, non-supervisor, and student perceptions of their appropriateness differ? 3) What types of challenging boundary issues have genetic counselors (either as supervisors or supervisees) and genetic counseling students experienced? and 4) What strategies did they use to resolve these situations?

Method

Participants and Procedure

Genetic Counselor Sample

Upon receipt of approval from a University of Minnesota Institutional Review Board in Summer 2008, full members of the NSGC who were enrolled in that organization's listserv ($\sim N=1{,}177$), were sent an email inviting them to participate in an anonymous online survey examining perceptions of the appropriateness of multiple relationships and boundary issues in supervision. The email invitation consisted of a cover letter, an informed consent statement,

and a hyperlink to the survey. The initial invitation yielded 137 responses and a second request, sent one month later, yielded an additional 75 responses. Of the 212 returned surveys, 14 were excluded because only demographic items were completed. Thus, the final sample consisted of 198 respondents (~usable response rate=16.8%; 198/1,177). Their demographic characteristics are summarized in the Results section.

Genetic Counseling Student Sample

Upon receipt of institutional review board approval in Winter 2009, program directors from all American Board of Genetic Counselors (ABGC) certified programs in North America, with the exception of the investigators' programs, were sent an email asking them to forward an attached research invitation to their students (~N=425). The invitation contained the same description of the study sent to genetic counselors. The initial invitation yielded 100 responses. A second invitation, sent 1 month later, resulted in an additional 43 responses. Of the 143 returned surveys, 14 were excluded because only demographic items were completed. The final student sample consisted of 129 individuals (~usable response rate=30.4%; 129/425). Their demographic data are summarized in the Results section.

Instrumentation

The research team, comprised of three experienced genetic counselors, a licensed psychologist, and a doctoral student in counseling psychology, worked collaboratively to develop parallel versions of a survey consisting of three sections: demographic items, list of genetic counseling supervisor behaviors, and an open-ended item regarding respondents' personal experiences with boundary issues and multiple relationships. Items were based on existing literature and the investigators' experiences as counselor educators, clinical supervisors, and supervisees. The survey sent to genetic counselors was identical to the one sent to students, with the exception of a few demographic items (described next).

Section A of the survey consisted of demographic items about respondents' gender, ethnicity, age, relationship status, and whether or not they participated in a workshop on multiple relationships in supervision at an NSGC Annual Education Conference (Callanan et al. 2007). In addition the students were asked about their year in school and the number of clinical rotations required and completed; the genetic counselors were asked about their practice specialty, genetic counseling experience, supervision experience, and supervision training.

Section B consisted of a definition of "multiple relationships" and "boundary issues" and a list of 56 randomly-ordered supervisor behaviors involving boundary crossings, boundary violations, and/or multiple relationships. These behaviors are listed in Table 1. Respondents were asked to assess the appropriateness of each behavior, using a 5-point rating scale (1 = Never appropriate, 2 = Appropriate under rare conditions, 3 = Appropriate under some conditions, 4 = Appropriate under most conditions, 5 = Always appropriate), and an option of "Not sure." Section C consisted of one open-ended item asking respondents to describe a challenging situation they had experienced involving boundary issues and/or multiple relationships as either a supervisor or a student supervisee, and how the issue was resolved.

After several iterations, a draft of the survey was piloted on two ABGC-certified genetic counselors. Based on their feedback, minor wording changes were made to improve clarity of a few items.

Data Analyses

Descriptive statistics (means, standard deviations, n's and percentages) were calculated as appropriate for all items in Sections A and B of the survey. Reliability for the 56 items in Section B was calculated using a Cronbach's Alpha analysis for responses from both the genetic counselors and students.

Responses to the open-ended item in Section C were analyzed using an interpretive content analysis method (Giarelli and Tulman 2003) which allows ideas to be counted or described. The first author analyzed the content of responses by grouping them based on their conceptual similarity, drawing upon some of the terminology in the extant literature on multiple relationships and boundaries. Next each grouping was reviewed and given a name that reflected the major theme illustrated in the responses. After the themes were defined, coding was done inclusively, such that all instances which could be seen as part of the theme were counted. Therefore, the same statement could be coded into multiple themes. The second author served as data auditor, reviewing themes and responses. Any disagreements were discussed to achieve consensus. Throughout this process, modifications were made to better represent the data.

Results

Sample Characteristics

Genetic Counselors

The genetic counselors were predominantly female (95.5%; n=189) and most identified themselves as Caucasian/White

Table 1 Mean ratings of the appropriateness of supervisor behaviors

Supervisor behaviors	Genetic counselor				Student (n=129)	
	Supervisor (n=126)		Non-Supervisor (n=72)			
	M	R	M	R	M	R
Supervisor…						
1) and student attend same church.	4.31	1–5	4.33	2-5	4.40	2–5
2) and student use same exercise club over the lunch hour.	4.2	1–5	4.37	2–5	4.30	1–5
3) is also student's instructor for a course.	4.16	1–5	4.12	2–5	4.25	2–5
4) serves on student's thesis committee.	4.14	1–5	4.01	2–5	4.21	1–5
5) and student have lunch together.	3.94	2–5	3.99	2–5	4.11	2–5
6) drives student to professional conference.	3.7	2–5	3.93	2–5	4.02	2–5
7) carpools with student to clinic during clinical rotation.	3.43	1–5	3.5	1–5	3.40	1–5
8) attends student's wedding.	3.07	1–5	3.21	1–5	3.53	1–5
9) talks about movies & books or other topics unrelated to supervision during supervision.	2.85	1–5	2.83	1–5	3.22	1–5
10) provides genetic counseling to relative of the student.	2.82	1–5	2.69	1–5	2.75	1–5
11) tries to resolve student's conflict with another faculty member.	2.79	1–5	3.11	1–5	2.76	1–5
12) and student are both in same course, and supervisor discusses course-related matters with student during supervision.	2.78	1–5	3.04	1–5	3.07	1–5
13) became friends with student during clinical rotation.	2.73	1–5	3.1	1–5	3.40	1–5
14) discloses details of student's current personal stress to program director without student's acknowledge.	2.57	1–5	2.17	1–4	2.11	1–5
15) invites student and her classmates to her wedding.	2.45	1–5	2.91	1–5	3.22	1–5
16) invites student to a party at her house.	2.39	1–5	2.61	1–5	2.63	1–5
17) borrows $5.00 from student.	2.35	1–5	2.93	1–5	3.06	1–5
18) tries to have a personal relationship with student.	2.34	1–5	2.74	1–4	3.02	1–5
19) maintains personal friendship with student throughout clinical rotation.	2.32	1–5	2.75	1–5	3.21	1–5
20) shares a room with student at professional conference.	2.15	1–5	2.3	1–5	2.33	1–5
21) conducts supervision in public place (e.g., cafeteria).	2.1	1–4	2.38	1–5	2.42	1–5
22) asks student to prepare materials for a class the supervisor is teaching alone.	2.09	1–5	2.14	1–4	2.12	1–4
23) asks student to baby-sit for her child.	2.08	1–4	2.35	1–4	2.72	1–5
24) discloses details of student's current personal stress to other supervisors without student's knowledge.	2.07	1–4	1.89	1–4	1.72	1–4
25) gives student advice about conflicts she is having with her parents.	2.03	1–4	2.33	1–4	2.60	1–5
26) asks student to buy Girl Scout cookies from her daughter.	2.02	1–5	2.48	1–5	2.93	1–5
27) gives job information and interview information only to his current student supervisee.	2.02	1–4	2.13	1–5	2.25	1–5
28) who is also student's thesis advisor, allows student time off from clinic to prepare her thesis.	1.95	1–4	2.14	1–5	2.28	1–5
29) asks student to help with a research project without pay or co-authorship.	1.87	1–4	1.92	1–4	2.03	1–5
30) agrees to talk with student who wants to discuss a classmate the supervisor will supervise in the future.	1.84	1–5	2.13	1–4	1.94	1–5
31) has a romantic relationship with student's friend.	1.79	1–5	1.97	1–4	2.00	1–5
32) asks student to a social gathering without inviting student's classmates.	1.79	1–5	2.06	1–5	2.39	1–4
33) criticizes student's performance because it might reflect negatively on supervisor's reputation.	1.73	1–5	1.94	1–4	2.08	1–5
34) takes student out for a drink without the other classmates.	1.66	1–4	2.01	1–5	2.02	1–5
35) accepts a gift worth>$20 after evaluating student's performance in clinical rotation.	1.54	1–5	1.9	1–5	2.13	1–5
36) who is also a research employer of student, decides to fire student because of his impression the student is irresponsible in clinical rotation.	1.54	1–3	1.71	1–4	1.58	1–4
37) discloses details of her current divorce to student.	1.49	1–4	1.78	1–4	2.23	1–4

Table 1 (continued)

Supervisor behaviors	Genetic counselor				Student (n=129)	
	Supervisor (n=126)		Non-Supervisor (n=72)			
	M	R	M	R	M	R
38) uses student's behavior as an example in a class involving other genetic counseling students (without student's permission).	1.37	1–3	1.64	1–4	1.58	1–4
39 "sides with" student in criticizing another supervisor.	1.35	1–3	1.59	1–3	1.68	1–4
40) accepts donation from student's parents.	1.33	1–4	1.49	1–3	1.60	1–5
41) asks student for details about her psychotherapy treatment.	1.32	1–4	1.43	1–3	1.34	1–3
42) requests first authorship of a paper when the student authored majority of manuscript.	1.22	1–4	1.4	1–3	1.40	1–4
43) gives student a loan for tuition when student runs out of funding.	1.22	1–3	1.37	1–3	1.41	1–3
44) asks student's personal opinion about one of her classmate's clinical skills.	1.22	1–4	1.4	1–3	1.44	1–4
45) asks for a discount on books the student is selling.	1.21	1–4	1.45	1–3	1.68	1–5
46) asks student to nominate her for a professional award.	1.17	1–4	1.53	1–4	1.72	1–5
47) who is also instructor of a class that involves the student, assesses student's clinical performance based solely on her performance in class.	1.13	1–5	1.13	1–5	1.08	1–5
48) evaluation of student in clinical rotation includes comments about student's unsatisfactory performance in supervisor's class.	1.11	1–3	1.19	1–3	1.12	1–5
49) who is also student's thesis advisor, evaluates student negatively in clinic because student is not working very hard on her thesis.	1.08	1-2	1.11	1–3	1.17	1–5
50) asks student to pick up and pay for breakfast for her.	1.08	1–3	1.32	1–3	1.33	1–4
51) accepts gift worth>$20 before evaluating student's clinical performance.	1.06	1-2	1.28	1–3	1.36	1–3
52) who is also a research collaborator with student, publishes content from student's research, without student's consent.	1.02	1-2	1.03	1-2	1.06	1–3
53) avoids providing necessary feedback in order to maintain a friendship with student.	1.01	1-2	1.04	1-2	1.03	1-2
54) asks student out on a date.	1.00	1-1	1.08	1–3	1.07	1–3
55) has a romantic relationship with student.	1.00	1-1	1.08	1–3	1.06	1–3
56) engages in sexual activity with student.	1.00	1-1	1.07	1–3	1.05	1-2

M mean and *R* range

n's vary slightly for mean ratings because not all respondents answered every item, and a few individuals answered "not sure"

Items are rated on a scale where 1 = Never appropriate, 2 = Appropriate under rare conditions, 3 = Appropriate under some conditions, 4 = Appropriate under most conditions, 5 = Always appropriate, and NS = Not sure

Means reflect only those ratings of 1 through 5

Items are presented in descending order of magnitude for the supervisors' mean ratings

(93%; *n*=184). Their mean age was 33.3 years (SD=7.87). Their mean years of genetic counseling experience was 7.4 (SD=7.47). The most prevalent practice specialties (respondents could endorse multiple options) included prenatal (50%; *n*=99), cancer risk counseling (33.8%; *n*=67), and pediatrics (28.8%; *n*=57). A majority (86.4%; *n*=171) were seeing patients at the time of the survey. The supervisor group consisted of 126 individuals who responded to a survey item asking whether they were currently supervising students or had done so in the past 5 years; of these, 98 were supervising a student(s) at the time of the survey. The mean years of supervision experience for the supervisor group was 5.4 years (SD=5.08 years) versus a mean of 0.6 years (SD=2.88 years) for the non-supervisor group. Twenty-two respondents reported attending the multiple relationships workshop by Callanan et al. (2007).

Genetic Counseling Students

Most student respondents were female (94.6%) and Caucasian/White (83%). Their mean age was 24.5 (SD=3.24). Slightly over half (55%; *n*=56) were second year students, and over two-thirds (67.4%; *n*=87) were in a clinical rotation at the time of the survey. The mean number of clinical rotations they had completed was 2.8 (SD=2.65). Only one respondent reported attending the multiple relationships workshop by Callanan et al. (2007).

Perceptions of the Appropriateness of Supervisor Behaviors

Reliability Analysis

An internal consistency estimate of reliability was computed for the 56-item scale of supervisor behaviors. For the entire sample of genetic counselors and genetic counseling students, the coefficient alpha was .897, indicating satisfactory reliability.

Ratings of Behaviors

Means and standard deviations for supervisor ($n=126$), non-supervisor ($n=72$), and student ($n=129$) ratings of each of the 56 behaviors are presented in Table 1 and illustrated in Fig. 1. An examination of the means in Table 1 suggests a great deal of consensus among the three groups' ratings of the appropriateness of various behaviors. For instance, they rated the same behaviors among the top eight, and they rated the same behaviors among the bottom three. Figure 1 further illustrates the consistency among the groups' ratings, with students rating all but two items the highest in appropriateness, followed by non-supervisors, and then supervisors. Despite these group consistencies, there was individual variability for many of the 56 items listed in Table 1, as evidenced by every number on the 5-point rating scale being endorsed by at least one respondent from each group (26/56 items for supervisors; 20/56 items for non-supervisors; 37/56 items for students). Importantly, however, there was greater agreement within and across

groups for items judged as most inappropriate, as the ranges are smaller after item 35.

All three groups had mean ratings of 4.00 or greater (where 4 = appropriate under most conditions) for two behaviors reflecting unavoidable boundary crossings—*attend the same church*, and *use the same exercise club*; and two reflecting supervisor multiple relationships involving an academic relationship—*instructor for a course*, and *on the student's thesis committee*. The student group had mean ratings greater than 4.00 for two additional boundary crossing behaviors—*have lunch together, and supervisor drives student to a professional conference*.

All three groups had mean ratings of 3.00 or greater (where 3 = appropriate under some conditions) for two boundary crossing behaviors—*carpool to a clinic during the clinical rotation*, and *attend the student's wedding*. As shown in Table 1, non-supervisors had mean ratings greater than 3.00 for an additional three behaviors, and students had mean ratings greater than 3 for an additional seven behaviors. Students rated two boundary issues as less appropriate then either supervisors or non-supervisors—*supervisor discloses details of student's current personal stress to program director without student's knowledge*, and *supervisor discloses details of student's current personal stress to other supervisors without student's knowledge*.

Three boundary violations and multiple relationships of a romantic and/or sexual nature were rated as "never appropriate" by every supervisors (Mean=1.00), and as "never appropriate" by the vast majority of non-supervisors and students. These items are: *engage in sexual activity*

Fig. 1 Comparison of supervisor, non-supervisor, and student ratings

The Appropriateness of Supervisor Behavior Perceived by Supervisors, Counselors, and Students
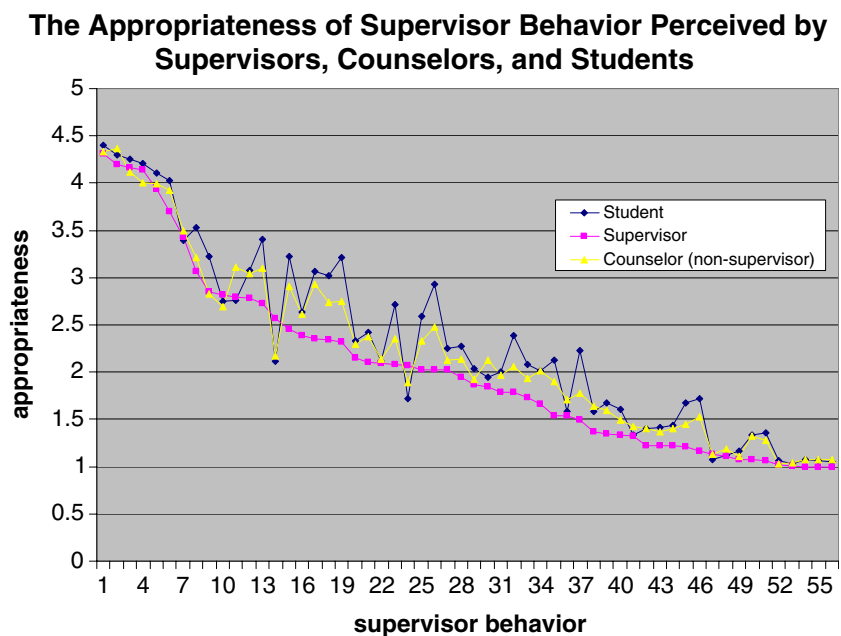
with the student, *ask the student out on a date*, and *have romantic relationship with student*.

Analysis of Challenging Situations

Fifty-five genetic counselors and 24 students responded to an open question asking for a description of a challenging situation they experienced involving boundary issues and/ or multiple relationships in genetic counseling supervision. Counselors provided 35 situations in which they were the student, and 24 in which they were the supervisor. Responses were coded according to: (1) type of issue (boundary crossing, boundary violation, multiple relationship), (2) context (social, academic, financial), (3) possible motivations, (4) strategies for resolving the situation, and (5) effects of the situation. Responses were often categorized multiple times. Examples from genetic counselor supervisors and non-supervisors are reported together as there were no apparent differences in the situations, and half occurred when they were students.

Type of Issue

The genetic counselors' examples included multiple relationships (e.g., a new counselor supervises former classmates; *n*=28) and situations that might comprise either boundary violations or boundary crossings (e.g., "friending" students on Facebook, and showing students photos of one's colleagues at a party; *n*=31). The students' examples similarly included multiple relationships (*n*=6; e.g., supervisor was also student's instructor and program director), and either boundary violations or boundary crossings (*n*=18; e.g., supervisor evaluated student's performance in social situations on a clinical rotation evaluation form, and supervisor invited student to engage in a leisure time pursuit with her).

Context

The most prevalent context for genetic counselors' situations were *social* such as friendships, disclosing personal information, driving together, lived together, asking student to babysit/house sit/dog sit (*n*=40; e.g., "I have been in clinics where it is expected that you eat lunch with a group of counselors, then the counselors discuss personal information. I am not comfortable in those situations and would prefer to be left to have lunch on my own in order to avoid such odd situations"), followed by *academic* issues (*n*=17; e.g., "A supervisor…told stories about her classmates from genetic counseling school and used that as a means to ask me about my classmates (many who she would be later supervising" and "My supervisor…asked us about our experiences [in personal counseling]…in class, in front of

other students. I do not think this is appropriate, whether she asks us in front of classmates or alone"), and *financial* issues (*n*=2; e.g., "I had a supervisor who would ask me for…money, which she would say she'd pay back but she never did. I felt uncomfortable addressing the [issue]…"). Two themes were evident in the students' situations: *academic* (*n*=13; e.g., supervisor discussed performance of other students); and *social* (*n*=11).

Reasons for Challenging Situations

As shown in Table 2, nine themes reflect respondents' perceptions of the reasons for the challenging situations: (1) lack of clarity about boundaries; (2) role conflicts; (3) gratification of supervisor needs; (4) unavoidable situation; (5) incidental involvement; (6) intended to benefit student; (7) transference/countertransference; (8) supervisor/student similarity/attraction; and (9) no reason given. The most prevalent reasons for both genetic counselors and students are lack of clarity about boundaries (*n*=15 for counselors; *n*=7 for students), and role conflict (*n*=13 for counselors; *n*=7 for students).

Strategies for Resolving Issues

As shown in Table 3, respondents' descriptions of strategies they used to resolve these situations were categorized into seven themes: (1) compartmentalization, (2) discussion, (3) compliance, (4) consultation with a third party, (5) restrict self-disclosure, (6) avoidance of the issue, and (7) no strategy indicated. The most prevalent strategies for genetic counselor respondents were compartmentalization (*n*=20), discussion (*n*=11), and compliance (*n*=10). For student respondents, "no strategy indicated" was the most prevalent theme (*n*=10), followed distantly by compartmentalization (*n*=3).

Perceived Effects of Situations

As shown in Table 4, five themes were extracted for perceived effects of the challenging situations. By far, the most prevalent themes were no effect indicated (*n*=23 for counselors; *n*=8 for students), and student was harmed (*n*=17 for counselors; *n*=11 for students). Mixed effects was also a prevalent theme for genetic counselors (*n*=12).

Discussion

In this study genetic counselors, supervisors, and students from the U.S. and Canada participated in an anonymous online survey assessing their perceptions of the appropriateness of various boundary issues and multiple relationships and

Table 2 Perceived reasons for challenging situations

Theme	Example
Lack clarity about boundaries	"…While on rotation we had a tough clinic day. I invited the entire office staff, including the student, out for happy hour to overcome the tough day. In retrospect this was crossing a boundary."
	"I have often felt very uncomfortable in terms of not knowing where the boundaries should be in the supervisor-supervisee relationship, especially as different supervisors have different feelings regarding what that relationship should be. I cannot think of a specific situation at the moment, but I definitely do recall being constantly on edge, unsure if my own actions were appropriate."
Role conflicts	"[I] didn't address mildly inappropriate clothing in student because we had developed a friendly relationship."
	"…a supervisor had a job opening in her clinic. She used the personal information that was shared…to make a decision about whether or not to offer the job."
Supervisor need gratification	"As a student supervisee, a supervisor who was over-stressed and unhappy in her job spent a lot of time complaining to me…"
	"(Supervisor) requests for babysitting."
Unavoidable situation	"I am a clinical instructor in a genetic counseling program and I supervise [clinical rotations]. I often have to separate behavior and evaluation in the two settings."
	"Supervisors in my program serve as clinical supervisors, research mentors, personal mentors, teaching faculty, [employers]… Naturally, the boundaries sometimes blur…"
Incidental involvement	"I have had older students who are parents and have children the same ages as my children. This had led to relationships outside of school or clinic I think many of these things can be acceptable if you are sensitive for the potential abuses and actively work against them."
	"I had a [social acquaintance] with the [partner] of one of my past supervisors. We have a mutual understanding that we do not discuss school/work related issues which would involve [the supervisor] and myself."
Intended to benefit student	"In my experience, genetic counseling students, particularly in the second year, are going through some major 'life changes'. Marriage, breakups of long-term relationships, parental issues, financial difficulty, professional development issues, classmate issues, etc. Often a supervisor is a person that they may turn to for support and gentle guidance during tumultuous times, particularly when they are in the clinic for many hours/days per week. For many students, I have allowed them to vent without fear of having the information reflect on their evaluation. I have also made that clear to them at the time, that this discussion was separate from my evaluation of them as a student and professional…"
	"The supervisor…was very supportive of me. I still contact her on occasion. She said that she would keep an eye out for any jobs that open in the area and let me know about them. She has also written a letter of recommendation for a fellowship that I applied for. I would consider her a friend and would go out for a meal with her."
Transference/ countertransference	"Feedback from one of my supervisors was strongly influenced by personal opinions of me as opposed to solely my performance."
	"favoritism (by the director or supervisors) based on personal affinity and not performance."
Similarity/attraction	"Genetic counselors are often young females, so it was not unusual to have a supervisor who was the same age as you and with whom you had a lot in common. There were a couple that I could have seen us being friends if we were not in the context of supervisor-supervisee. Occasionally with these supervisors, the topic of conversation may become more friend-like than student-supervisor, however, not inappropriately so. As the student, I always felt that the more appropriate time for friendship would be after graduation."
	"My supervisor and I were very close in age and had multiple things in common. We talked about how after my rotation with her was over, we could get together and hang out (but only after she was no longer my supervisor)…"

their personal experiences with such issues. Major findings are discussed next, followed by study limitations, practice suggestions, and research recommendations.

Genetic Counselors, Supervisors, and Students Perceived Multiple Relationships and Boundary Issues as Varying in Appropriateness

All three groups of respondents perceived 56 different types of supervisor behaviors involving multiple relationships, boundary crossings, and boundary violations as varying in appropriateness. Consistent with research in other helping professions (cf. Gottlieb et al. 2007), unavoidable boundary crossing behaviors (e.g., *attend the same church*, and *use the same exercise club*) and multiple relationships involving the supervisor in another academic relationship (e.g., *instructor for a course*, and *on the student's thesis committee*) were rated as most appropriate by a majority of respondents. The seven behaviors that received the highest ratings involve situations in which the student and supervisor share membership or circumstances that often are unavoidable.

Table 3 Strategies for resolving challenging situations

Theme	Example
Compartmentalization	"being a student's supervisor and thesis advisor in the spring of her 2nd year. we clarified our roles for each relationship and had set aside time for rotation vs. thesis work."
Discussion	"I had a clinical rotation with my mentor as my supervisor. The rotation did not go as well as either of us had planned in regards to my performance. We discussed this and our disappointment. We discussed that we should process what had happened, however, I wanted the experience behind me so I never brought it up again once it was done."
Compliance	"[Re: Supervisor who spent a great deal of supervision time discussing her personal issues]…As the student, I felt that I needed to comfort her, offer reassurance, and agree with her on these matters."
Consultation with 3rd party	"Supervisor was also thesis advisor and gathered opinion about thesis performance based on clinical rotation. Attempted to change opinion by working hard on thesis (didn't work). Also tried multiple conversations with program director Re: coping and different communication methods with advisor/supervisor."
Restrict self-disclosure	"I felt that my supervisor would often share personal details about my cases and supervision with my classmates without explicit permission. This was based on the fact that my supervisor shared such details about my classmates with me or in classes I attended. In order to resolve the situation, I was very guarded about the things I said in supervision, always making sure that they were things I would not mind being shared with others."
Avoidance	"Attended a…[social event] for a supervisor BEFORE she was my supervisor. Didn't really know her before…Was a bit awkward having her as a supervisor after that. Nothing was done, it just wasn't discussed."

Table 4 Perceived effects of challenging situations

Theme	Example
Mixed effects	"As a student, I had a supervisor who was also my instructor... It could have been difficult to have her grading assignments on one hand and then giving feedback in clinic on the other. We talked quite openly about this and the fact that it was challenging for both of us to keep things separated. There were never any issues for me, although I know that some of my classmates had some problems with the situation. There were a few assignments that all of us were graded poorly on and the particular student who was with the instructor/supervisor in clinic at that time did not feel comfortable in either place (classroom or clinic) with that individual. I do think that there can be some benefit to seeing a student in both the classroom and clinic setting because 1. it gives a better sense of the student as a whole – she may have had an off day in clinic but is capable of demonstrating the skill in the classroom or vice versa and 2. the instructor/supervisor has a better understanding of the current obligations of the student.
	"…The most difficult experience I had was with a supervisor who demanded a great deal of my time, frequently discussing clinical responsibilities during, before, or after class time. I also felt a good deal of pressure to work with this supervisor on research...This required me to be firm on what the agenda was when we met and the amount of time we could allot to our multiple responsibilities."
Student harmed	"My supervisor was undergoing [a major life event]…I was trying to be a good friend because she seemed to have no one else to support her. Unfortunately, I didn't know how to handle the situation more professionally. I didn't know how to draw boundaries when my own supervisor was reaching out for advice from me…I didn't share her private life with any of the other students or supervisors. I got a really high evaluation for that clinical rotation, and until this day I'm not really sure if it was deserved, or if it was a 'thank you' gesture. I now feel that our communication was inappropriate, I just didn't know how to deal with it at the time…"
	"I had a situation in which I…developed a close personal relationship with this supervisor; we were also close in age. [One day]…I felt that I could be open with her about some of the struggles I was having in my sessions, and I asked her for some more specific comments on feedback that I had been getting. She told me that I was being 'defensive'... I felt hurt and confused by her reaction…"
Other professionals harmed	"One of my colleagues…had a personal friendship with one of the students (established when they were both students). That colleague was consistently giving the student an overly favorable evaluation compared to everyone else's assessment of her performance, and we were concerned that it was because of the friendship… it is very difficult to assess performance in this situation because it is entirely possible that the student's counseling was better with her 'friend/supervisor' because she was more comfortable."
Positive effects on student or supervisor	"…as a genetic counseling student, I was in a relationship that was breaking up and it was very helpful for the supervisor just to listen to me—although she was busy and a little reluctant (she may have been uncomfortable), it was important for me to feel heard…"
	"The supervisor…was very supportive of me. I still contact her on occasion…I would consider her a friend…"

Those in the next most "acceptable" group (items 8–22 in Table 1) involve greater levels of interpersonal interaction or exchange of information. There are two notable exceptions. Students had lower ratings than either genetic counselor group for a supervisor disclosing the student's personal stress to other parties (program director, other supervisors) without the student's knowledge. The students appeared to be particularly concerned with actions that could jeopardize their evaluation in clinical rotations and/or their training program. Understandably, evaluation is a very stress-provoking aspect of supervision (Bernard and Goodyear 2004). Moreover, the fact that the supervisor disclosed without the student's knowledge may heighten concerns that s/he is not acting in the student's best interest. These findings suggest supervisors should be particularly vigilant about disclosing personal information about students.

Many of the behaviors in the range of items 27–34 involve a supervisor giving special privileges to students or making inappropriate demands of students. These results suggest that activities initiated by supervisors as opposed to students are perceived as potentially more problematic.

There tended to be greater uniformity of ratings for behaviors reflected in items 35–50; ratings generally were in the lower range. Many of these behaviors involve explicit boundary violations and clearly unethical behaviors. Boundary violations and multiple relationships of a romantic and/or sexual nature were rated as least appropriate by the vast majority of respondents.

While boundary crossings seemed more "benign," as evidenced by respondents' ratings, they nevertheless may pose risks. For example, some authors caution that boundary crossings, if not carefully handled, may aggregate, and eventually result in mismanagement of transference and countertransference and/or sexual misconduct (Gutheil and Gabbard 1993, 1998; Sonne 1994). Thus, boundary crossing may escalate, resulting in harmful, unethical violations.

Although there was a fair amount of consistency in the mean ratings provided by the three groups, supervisors' lower mean ratings for most items tended to reflect stricter boundaries regarding the appropriateness of interactions, especially when compared to student ratings. These results might signal that experience leads to more prudence in supervisory relationships. Moreover, students cannot be expected to appreciate the risks accruing from multiple relationships and boundary crossings the way counselors and supervisors can.

Another noteworthy finding is that over half of the 56 behaviors were rated by 1 or more respondents as "appropriate under all conditions." Furthermore, a few non-supervisors and students rated the supervisor behaviors involving sexual and romantic relationships as "appropriate under some conditions." These findings suggest a certain degree of individual variability in perceptions of boundaries and multiple relationships and indicate a need for specific professional guidelines.

Genetic Counselors and Students Experienced a Variety of Challenging Boundary Issues and Multiple Relationships

Many respondents described challenging situations they experienced personally. Some involved supervisor behaviors that a majority of respondents had rated as appropriate under some to most conditions (e.g., car pooling, having lunch together). The most prevalent situations involved social contacts and lack of clarity about boundaries, and they had mixed effects, typically including some sort of harm to the student. A certain amount of social contact is unavoidable because the genetic counseling profession is a relatively small community. Furthermore, new genetic counselors often become supervisors of individuals with whom they previously were peers. Some authors suggest supervisors take the lead in discussing the shift to a professional relationship at the beginning of supervision (Biaggio et al. 1997; Ladany et al. 1999). The present findings also are congruent with prior research showing supervisors and supervisees may develop social relationships due to common interests or backgrounds, desire to minimize discomfort by creating a more parallel supervision relationship, transferential feelings, and/or a desire for a collegial interaction upon graduation (O'Connor Slimp and Burian 1994).

Consistent with effects identified in the counseling and psychotherapy supervision literature (cf. Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; Heru et al. 2004; Sonne 1994), respondents reported loss of objectivity by involved parties, exploitation of the less powerful student, and in some cases, emotional abandonment by the supervisor. These results are concerning because, as demonstrated in the psychology literature (Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; Sonne 1994; Heru et al. 2004), when supervisees are harmed, they are likely to distrust the supervisor and avoid supervision, and their disengagement results in a less interactive supervision process and diminished learning. Indeed, the theme of "restricted self-disclosure" identified in this study, illustrates a type of student disengagement strategy. Additional research is needed to determine the prevalence of these types of outcomes for genetic counseling students. Nevertheless, the findings illustrate the complex nature of boundary issues and multiple relationships and support the need for supervisors to proceed cautiously.

Common strategies for resolving these challenging situations were compartmentalization, discussion (of the issue), and compliance. Passive strategies such as compliance, suggest that some supervisees "go along with" behaviors with which they are uncomfortable because they

feel unable to decline without repercussions. In the present study situations described as having positive outcomes typically included discussion as a management strategy. Discussion is consistent with recommended supervisor strategies in related fields including: recognizing the nature and the complexity of the boundary/multiple relationships issues (Biaggio et al. 1997); being aware of the power differential, potential conflicts and transference issues (Gutheil and Gabbard 1998; Kitchener 1988); discussing the potential risks to the relationship (Barnett et al. 2007; Younggren and Gottlieb 2004); accepting responsibility for redressing problems (Kitchener 1988); and seeking consultation when experiencing emotional distress because of the issue (Biaggio et al. 1997; O'Connor Slimp and Burian 1994).

Study Limitations

Several limitations to this study suggest caution in drawing definitive conclusions about the findings. First, a low return rate and a non-random sample for genetic counselors raise questions about the generalizability of the results. However, the genetic counselors' demographic characteristics seem generally consistent with those for the population of North American genetic counselors (cf. Smith et al. 2004). The student sample size is modest and non-random, and includes a number of individuals who had little first-hand experience with genetic counseling supervision. A larger sample of more experienced students may have yielded different results. It also is unknown whether the genetic counselors and students who responded to this survey would differ in important ways from non-respondents. For instance, individuals who were particularly sensitive to boundary issues and multiple relationships may have participated in this study.

Another limitation is only about 28% and 19% of the genetic counselors and students, respectively, provided examples of challenging situations. Possible reasons include social desirability (e.g., not wanting to highlight challenges they have experienced), a low incidence of boundary issues and challenging multiple relationships, and/or lack of attentiveness to these issues. Another possible limitation is that respondents were "primed" to report certain types of situations after reviewing the list of 56 supervisor behaviors contained in the survey.

The findings are self report, which may not reflect actual practice; indeed, as mentioned previously, respondents may have been motivated to respond in socially desirable ways. Finally, the use of single-sentence descriptions of supervisor multiple relationships, boundary crossings, and boundary violations belies their complex and often ambiguous nature. Respondents might have provided different evaluations of their appropriateness if more details about

supervisor and student motivations and other contextual variables had been provided.

Educational and Practice Recommendations

The present results reveal that, similar to other helping professionals, genetic counseling supervisors and students confront complex boundary issues and multiple relationships. In order to minimize their harmful effects on students, supervisors, and possibly genetic counseling patients, it is essential that all parties involved recognize and manage these issues effectively. Based on the present findings and extant literature, we recommend the following strategies.

Supervisor Strategies

Supervisors are responsible for establishing, clarifying, and maintaining boundaries for the professional relationship (Gutheil and Simon, 2002). An understanding of the functions of boundaries in supervision, and awareness of various types of boundary crossings and boundary violations may help supervisors articulate clear expectations while remaining flexible enough to allow boundary crossings likely to benefit students (e.g., serving on student thesis committees, serving as a student's course instructor) (Gutheil and Gabbard 1998). Further, supervisors should recognize that certain boundary crossings and multiple relationships are unavoidable (Gottlieb et al. 2007; Younggren and Gottlieb 2004) and discuss these situations with their supervisees (e.g., identifying differences in goals and outcomes).

Supervisors should be aware of factors that may prompt boundary issues and multiple relationships. These include lack of ethical guidelines, transference and countertransference, personal needs, role conflicts, power differentials (Kitchener 1988; Burian and O'Connor Slimp 2000; O'Connor Slimp and Burian 1994), individual differences (e.g., openness, anxiety), and cultural factors [e.g., supervisees from collectivistic cultures may view certain multiple relationships as common and acceptable (Kertesz 2002)]. Supervisors should be vigilant about potential exploitation or harm, be aware the power differential may make it difficult for a student to decline a request (social or personal), be sensitive to supervisees' reactions, and monitor their own unconscious motivations (Glass 2003; Pearson and Piazza 1997). They also should seek consultation to manage transference and countertransference (Glass 2003; Johnson 2007). Maintaining clear boundaries is particularly critical when either a supervisor or student experiences personal distress (Gottlieb et al. 2007).

One strategy for helping supervisors clarify boundaries is the use of a "supervision disclosure statement," a document that articulates expectations about supervision

processes and outcomes (McCarthy Veach and LeRoy 2009). These statements typically include a *due process* section that identifies persons/resources to which students can express concerns about the supervision they receive. Additional strategies include creating a supervision environment that encourages disclosure and discussion of boundary issues, periodically engaging students in conversations evaluating the relationship, supervisor participation in peer supervision, and suspending non-essential roles until supervision ends (Younggren and Gottlieb 2004).

Several decision-making models exist for evaluating the potential effects of multiple relationships. These models variously emphasize role conflict and power differentials (Kitchener 1988); evaluating the potential for significant learning for the student in question, as well as potential effects of the multiple relationship on other students and the whole graduate program (Blevins-Knabe 1992); and consideration of the duration and termination of the supervisory relationship when evaluating benefits and risks (Gottlieb 1993). Burian and O'Connor-Slimp (2000) developed a decision tree to help guide supervisor actions. Specifically, the supervisor would consult with a colleague and/or with the student, to answer these questions: (1) Is the additional relationship necessary or should I avoid it? (2) Can it potentially cause harm to the supervisee? (3) If harm seems unlikely or avoidable, would the additional relationship prove beneficial? (4) Is there a risk the multiple relationships could disrupt the supervisory relationship? and (5) Can I evaluate the matter objectively? Next, the supervisor would seek further consultation from a trusted colleague in order to speak honestly about her or his concerns. The supervisor would also look for internal clues–Is the issue eliciting strong feelings in me? Do I feel reluctant to discuss the situation with colleagues? Whose needs are being met? Next the supervisor would carefully re-evaluate potential professional and personal risks and benefits to the student, themselves, classmates, other co-workers, and the training program. At that point the supervisor would inform the student of the potential harm of a multiple relationship. Finally, and importantly, the supervisor would inform the director of the student's training program.

Administrator Strategies

Genetic counseling program directors and genetic counseling agency administrators can promote the management of boundary issues and multiple relationships by creating an environment that facilitates ethical behaviors. Gottlieb et al. (2007) recommend that administrators: (1) be aware of power differentials; (2) define the supervisory relationship, including its fiduciary nature and concomitant responsibilities; (3) develop and adhere to a standardized process for evaluating student and supervisor performance; (4) estab-

lish a set of rules and procedures regarding boundary issues and multiple relationships; and (5) consider reassigning roles to other staff. In addition, we recommend genetic counseling graduate programs educate students about boundary issues and multiple relationships in supervision and the profession develop specific guidelines for the ethical practice of supervision.

Research Recommendations

Future research should include larger samples to increase the external validity of the present findings. Further investigations of supervisee perceptions of the appropriateness of multiple relationships, boundary crossings, and boundary violations will help to determine the extent to which their perspectives are consistent with those of their genetic counselor supervisors. Some respondents commented that it was difficult to evaluate certain supervisor behaviors due to their brevity. More detailed case examples of boundary issues and multiple relationships could be developed and used in future investigations. Cases could be varied according to their context (e.g., social, academic, financial), motivations (e.g., unintentional, to gratify personal needs), and outcomes (e.g., harm to student, harm to supervisor). Research of this type potentially will contribute to the establishment of supervisor "best practices."

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