Preface

Only recently have boundary issues become an explicit topic of conversation among human service professionals. Boundary issues occur when practitioners—including social workers, psychologists, counselors, psychiatrists, and psychiatric nurses—establish more than one relationship with clients, whether professional, social, or business. Not until the 1990s did a critical mass of literature on the subject begin to emerge. This is the latest chapter in the evolution of the broader field of applied and professional ethics. Exploration of boundary issues also is the most recent development in my own evolving concern with professional ethics.

I first explored issues of professional ethics in the mid-1970s, at about the time the broader field of applied and professional ethics was just emerging. My inquiry started when I began to appreciate the complex ways in which human service professionals—including clinicians, community organizers, administrators, policy makers, and researchers—encounter daunting ethical dilemmas and decisions. At the time, I did not fully grasp how my nascent interest in this subject reflected a much larger phenomenon: the emergence of a new, bona fide academic field focused on professional ethics. With the benefit that only hindsight can provide, I now understand how significant that period was. What began as a fledgling interest among a relatively small coterie of scholars and practitioners has evolved into an intellectually rich, widely respected field with its own conceptual frameworks, body of knowledge, vocabulary, and academic imprimatur. Professional ethics truly has come of age.
Paralleling this phenomenon, my own understanding of ethical issues has evolved, leading up to my current interest in boundary issues—particularly those in which human service professionals become involved in “dual relationships” with clients. Up through the late 1980s, my work in the professional ethics arena focused mainly on the nature of diverse ethical dilemmas encountered by practitioners, ethical decision-making models, and the practical implications of ethical theory. During this period my colleagues and I paid relatively modest attention to boundary issues; the general subject hardly was a major focus of attention.

By the early 1990s, my own interests had broadened to include issues pertaining to what I now call ethics risk management, including concepts and strategies that human service professionals can use to protect clients’ rights and prevent ethics complaints and lawsuits that allege ethics-related negligence or malpractice committed by professionals. This interest stemmed in part from my expanding service as an expert witness (to use the court’s term) in a large number of lawsuits around the United States involving human service professionals as plaintiffs or defendants. Also, my emerging interest in risk-management issues has been influenced by my position as chair of a statewide committee responsible for reviewing and adjudicating ethics complaints filed against social workers. A significant portion of the court cases and ethics complaints in which I have been involved have concerned the kinds of boundary issues that I examine in this book. Also, my recent experience as chair of the committee that rewrote the National Association of Social Workers’ Code of Ethics deepened my understanding of the complicated challenge involved in cultivating ethical standards pertaining to boundary issues.

What I have learned over the years is that, without question, boundary and dual relationship issues are among the most challenging ethical dilemmas in the field. Some dual relationships need to be prevented, such as sexual relationships with clients. Other dual relationships need to be managed carefully—for example, when professionals who practice in rural areas encounter clients in the community. Our collective understanding of these issues—the diverse forms they take, their consequences and implications—has matured greatly in recent years. This book represents my effort to organize and reflect on these complex issues and to suggest how human service professionals who face them can best protect clients and themselves.

This book contains considerable case material. In most instances, I report case-related details that I have disguised to protect the privacy of the parties involved. Some cases are a matter of public record.
Tangled Relationships