



Boundaries: Being in Relationship Responsibly

Alyssa Benedict, 2004

Boundaries

One of the most important topics to consider in our day-to-day work with girls and women is maintaining healthy and professional boundaries. This becomes particularly important to consider in light of the fact that being effective with females requires that we connect with them and adopt a relational approach. This naturally introduces the potential for boundary violations on our part or on the part of the females with whom we work. Several things impact how we define healthy and professional boundaries – our gender, our culture, our own upbringing, etc. Because so many of us have had a variety of experiences, it becomes important at the personal and office/agency level to discuss boundaries and develop some consensus around what a healthy and professional boundary is.

Definition of Boundaries

A boundary is defined as “the professional distance needed to be an effective staff person, reduce agency liability, and prevent staff-burnout. Boundaries can be physical, emotional/psychological, and sexual” (Maniglia, 2000).

Balancing Support and Limit Setting

One common misconception about gender responsive practice is that it involves being “soft” with female clients and not holding them accountable. This is fundamentally untrue. It is not about having to choose between setting limits with a client or being gender responsive. Our main task is to set limits as needed using a gender responsive approach (Benedict & Sokoloff, 2004).

Adopting relational practice, in part, involves using a supportive approach - even when we have to set limits and hold clients accountable. Providing girls and women with support and setting limits can easily be interpreted as being at odds – like opposite ends of the spectrum. This is not the case. Providing support sometimes includes setting limits, and setting limits can always be done in a supportive manner. The two concepts are best seen as **interwoven** (Benedict, 2004).

Relationship building/being supportive and **limit setting** are essential parts of gender responsive practice and maintaining professional boundaries with females.

Being supportive with the females we work with involves listening, processing and understanding.

Setting limits involves drawing boundaries as needed and holding girls and women accountable in a gender responsive manner. *This includes being mindful of the Five Core Practice Areas when we*

have to set limits; essentially, setting limits in a relational, strengths-based, trauma-informed, culturally competent and holistic manner (Benedict, 2004).

Both of these skills are required as part of gender responsive practice.

The Impact of Culture and Trauma on Boundaries

Culture and trauma are critical considerations in a discussion of boundaries. Cultural norms impact how people interact with others and view the world. Being culturally competent involves an awareness of the ways in which an individual's background can influence thoughts, attitudes, feelings and behaviors. Additionally, cultural competence transcends ethnicity and also includes an individual's religious/spiritual orientation, socioeconomic standing/class, sexual orientation, etc. Therefore, it is critical that we maintain an expanded definition of culture as we work with girls and women (Benedict, 2004). Trauma experiences can also impact how females interact with others and view the world. Trauma-informed practice involves accounting for trauma and its effect on a client's behaviors and perceptions. It is critical to account for each female's unique cultural norms and preferences and her unique life experiences (including any trauma she may have experienced) so that we can be more mindful of boundary issues that are important for her.

Responding to Client Violations of Boundaries

It is critically important to respond to a client's violation of boundaries in a way that allows you to set a limit in a clear but supportive manner. Getting angry or taking it personally just makes the situation more difficult. It is critical to remember that most client boundary violations have little to do with us and are more likely linked to a client's past experiences. Getting angry makes it about us. Assuming prevents us from understanding what the real issue is. Our best response is one designed to dovetail with our goal to help girls and women understand their lives and coping behaviors and make healthy choices.

Setting a Limit Using a Relational Approach

Using Relational Language (see Benedict, 2002) can be an extremely helpful skill in responding to client boundary violations.

Let's look at an example:

A female client asks a staff member where she/he hangs out socially after work. How could the staff member respond using relational language?

Possible staff response:

It sounds like your curious about what I do after work. I completely understand that. I am really interested in talking with you about the things you do in the community that help you to stay connected to supportive people and relationships.

Point: Our primary goal is to be there for our clients and do our job. We may need to explain that in a supportive manner if they probe us for personal information.

A female client asks an officer if she/he likes to cook.

Possible staff responses:

The staff member answers honestly and then asks the client if cooking is one of her hobbies.

Point: It is OK to briefly answer general questions that reveal our humanity to our clients without breaching boundaries. At the very next opportunity, however, it is important to link the dialogue back to her work with us. In the above example the staff member could briefly answer and then move the conversation to focus on the client's interests and how they relate to her case plan. Again, it is important that this be done in a supportive manner.

Staff Violations of Boundaries

Staff violations of boundaries are often unintentional. Some reasons for staff violations of boundaries include, but are not limited to, not wanting to disturb the relationship, being afraid of a backlash from the client, and fear of not being gender responsive.

What do we do when we believe we have crossed a boundary?

- Get support from colleagues
- Tell a supervisor
- Correct the situation with your client (with support from a supervisor)

Important Considerations About Boundaries

Maintaining healthy and professional boundaries with girls and women requires ongoing discussions and training opportunities facilitated by individuals who are familiar with gender responsiveness theory and practice.

It is recommended that, at minimum, programs:

- Have a specific policy regarding boundaries
- Provide training to practitioners
- Provide a forum for ongoing, regular discussions about boundaries
- Provide guidance and oversight through supervisions
- Include expectations about maintaining healthy, professional boundaries as part of staff competencies