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*The Practitioners' Notebook / Bloc-notes des praticiens*

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## Reflections of a Rural Practitioner Réflexions d'une praticienne en milieu rural

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### ABSTRACT

Some ethical dilemmas are more prevalent or more complicated to resolve in rural practice. In this practice note, I share some of the reflections that have helped me to unpack some of the ethical complications of overlapping relationships and objectivity, community pressure and integrity, generalist practice and competency, interdisciplinary collaboration and confidentiality, and professional development and support in rural professional practice.

### RÉSUMÉ

Certains dilemmes éthiques sont plus répandus et plus difficiles à résoudre lorsqu'on pratique en milieu rural. Dans ce bloc-notes de praticienne, je partage certaines réflexions qui m'ont aidée à résoudre une bonne part des complications éthiques découlant de chevauchements dans les relations et l'objectivité, de pressions exercées par la collectivité et l'intégrité, de la pratique et la compétence du généraliste, de la collaboration interdisciplinaire et la confidentialité, ainsi que du perfectionnement et le soutien professionnels dans l'exercice de la profession en milieu rural.

*[Editor's Note: This contribution is published in the Practitioners' Notebook, a non-peer-reviewed section of the Canadian Journal of Counselling. Its intent is to provide practical information to readers. Where applicable, client name(s) have been altered to protect confidentiality.]*

*The beauty and solitude of towering spruce trees and rolling hills during routine, almost traffic-less commutes. The comfort of personal familiarity with those I meet at my child's school, or local stores, or when receiving services. The acceptance and respect I receive as a professional in a small community. This balanced with the challenge and reward of piecing together a complicated beautiful puzzle—how to work in a rural area balancing the inherent ethical complexities with the rewards and opportunities that I have had. (Personal analytic journal notes, May 2009)*

As counsellors, we are in the business of relationships and, consequently, we are continually immersed in the complexity of human interaction. Here I share some of my reflections regarding the complexities of rural professional practice.

*Early in our marriage, I shopped locally with my spouse. Unfamiliar with rural life, he thought I knew everyone. He was puzzled about why I rarely introduced him*

*or explained where I knew people from. He came to realize that many community residents are acquaintances, extended family, colleagues, or clients (present or past). Once, under the assumption that my spouse knew details of my work, one of his students revealed details of a horrific childhood trauma. After that he decided that it didn't matter how I knew people. It was easier to assume everyone was a client, and it was often faster to shop alone! (Personal analytic journal notes, May 2008)*

Rural practice can foster ethical dilemmas that are more prevalent or more complicated to resolve.

*It was heart-wrenching to hear that my stalwart but gentle child had been bullied at school for several weeks. My request for a meeting with the school was immediately granted and the teachers handled the situation efficiently and respectfully. I was surprised to hear another parent suggest that they had not received such an intervention. Would things have gone so smoothly for me if I was not the local psychologist? (Personal analytic journal notes, January 2009)*

Overlapping relationships occurs when we enter into other, non-professional relationships or roles with clients. This may occur before, during, or after the professional relationship and may arise either by choice or by chance (Moleski & Kiselica, 2005).

*Pulling out of town I notice flashing RCMP lights in my rear-view mirror. I slow down and pull over to let them pass but they slow down and pull over, too. They are stopping me! My first reaction is to be appalled, given my frequent collaborations with the RCMP. Surely they wouldn't stop me?! Then I catch myself and make a mental note to not behave as though I expect favouritism. That turns out to be the least of my worries. I notice the people passing by and know that they notice me. It is not just embarrassing but it doesn't look very professional of me! (Personal analytic journal notes, November 2008)*

Community pressure is common in rural communities that can be considered to be embedded environments. This requires familiarity with the specific values and culture of the area in which we practice and the subsequent community expectations (Jameson & Blank, 2007; Thorngren, 2003).

*The lack of local resources for people affected by cancer was an ongoing frustration—free services are only available in the city 300 kilometres away. When at a meeting with some of the psychologists from this department, I talked to them about the lack of referral resources for our area. The next thing I knew I was attending training and getting consultation from our provincial oncology services. As the one psychologist put it, "We can't provide services to rural areas but we will help you to do it." Not exactly what I had been looking for and not an area I had any previous training in. (Personal analytic journal notes, March 2009)*

Rural practice conditions (such as lack of referral resources) often necessitate a generalist approach. Specialization is impractical, as rural service needs require practitioners to be multi-skilled in dealing with diverse populations (Jameson & Blank, 2007; Thorngren, 2003).

*I often work with addiction counsellors. One of these counsellors has no formal education or professional registration but is gifted in relationships and quite charismatic. Countless times she has betrayed the confidentiality of clients and established enmeshed boundaries. I have reviewed my concerns with her, her supervisor, and within clinical consultation team meetings. There are times when I feel a sense of transference—almost anger towards her repeated behaviour. I am cognizant that I have to be careful not to damage our professional relationship particularly if I want to impact her professional development. (Personal analytic journal note, February 2009)*

Interdisciplinary collaborations are common for rural practitioners as an effective way of providing for an integrated community response (Jameson & Blank, 2007; Moleski & Kiselica, 2005).

*There is a small group of psychologists in rural practice who regularly attend the national convention. I have noticed a great sense of camaraderie amongst this group. Perhaps it is similarities in personality, but more likely for me it is having that rare feeling of collaboration with people who are familiar with my context. It is another form of small community. (Personal analytic journal notes, June 2008)*

Professions in Canada tend to be urban-centric, and those in rural practice rate their undergraduate and postgraduate professional training in psychology as only somewhat adequate for rural practice (Jameson & Blank, 2007).

In this field, relationships are the crux of my work. As a person-in-relation, they are significant to my identity. As a rural practitioner, reflexivity is key to my understanding of self, relationships, and ethics.

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#### *About the Author*

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