

Practising ethically as a rural psychologist

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As an undergraduate [psychology] student, I sat through my university ethics lectures in a state of rising anxiety ... The lecturer stated that under no circumstances, should psychologists engage in multiple relationships ... Then another academic, a practicing psychologist in a regional town joined the lecture. He revealed how, under some circumstances, he engaged in multiple relationships. I felt confused. When I become a psychologist, I wondered how I might determine ethical from unethical practice in a rural community. I questioned whether I could serve the needs of clients known to me and still practice ethically (Student, 2013).

All psychologists in Australia are required to adhere to the Australian Psychological Society (APS) Code of Ethics. Psychologists working outside major centres have described a range of rewards associated with rural and remote practice but also several aspects of their work that pose challenges to ethical practice. These include: being presented with situations beyond the limits of competence, boundary management, maintaining confidentiality in small communities, and professional isolation. These challenges are well described in the literature and often referred to as barriers to recruitment and retention of the workforce. In response to this feedback, the APS developed Guidelines for Psychological Practice in Rural and Remote Settings.

This paper focuses on the issue of managing professional boundaries and multiple relationships in rural practice. It provides an overview of the Code of Ethics that requires psychologists to refrain from engaging in multiple relationships and how the Guidelines assist psychologists to apply the principles of the Code to the context of rural and remote practice. To illustrate the types of strategies used by psychologists to manage multiple relationships, examples will be drawn from a series of interviews undertaken with 12 practicing psychologists across rural Australia. The data suggests that it is possible for rural psychologists to practice in a safe and culturally sensitive manner that mostly aligns with professional ethical frameworks.

The paper will conclude by drawing attention to the need for professional ethical frameworks to shift from an assumed urban-centric model of practice to one that is values-based and independent of location. Recommendations for the training of psychologists and other health professionals to enable them to actively navigate ethical situations in situ will be discussed.