

# **Professional Boundaries and Dual Relationships in Rural Social Work: Challenges and Opportunities**

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# Agenda

Introduction

Rural Context

Appropriate Boundaries

Case Discussion

Questions

Key Conclusion





The Rural Context(s)

# Ethics of Professional Boundaries - COI's

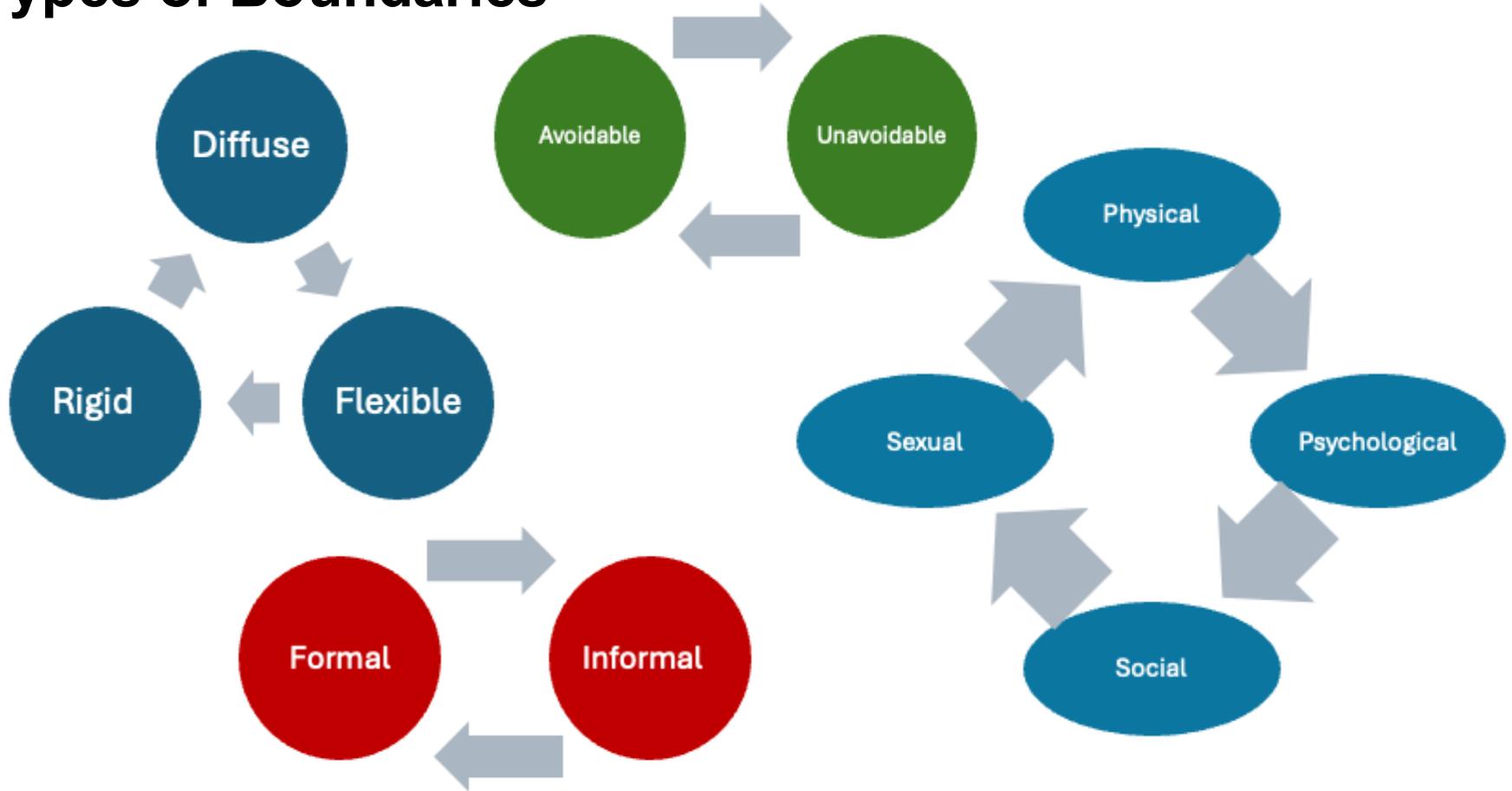
## **NASW COE 1.06(a) Conflicts of Interest**

Social workers should **be alert to and avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgment**. Social workers should **inform clients** when a real or potential conflict of interest arises and **take reasonable steps** to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients' interests primary and **protects clients' interests** to the greatest extent possible. In some cases, protecting clients' interests **may require termination** of the professional relationship with proper referral of the client.

# Ethics of Professional Boundaries - Dual Relationships

1.06 (c) Social workers **should not engage in dual or multiple relationships** with clients or former clients in which there is a **risk of exploitation or potential harm** to the client. In instances **when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable**, social workers should take steps to **protect clients** and are responsible for **setting clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries**.

# Types of Boundaries



# Rural Social Work: Myths and Realities

1. Small, close-knit communities (inter-connectedness)
2. Rural norms
3. Everybody knows everybody
4. Authenticity
5. Informality
6. Lack of alternative professionals
7. Avoidable and unavoidable dual relationships



Is rural practice inherently riskier than urban practice?

# Reframing Boundaries in Rural Practice

1. Rural communities view personal relationships as important
2. But SWs need to maintain professional boundaries
3. But those boundaries may not be as formal as in urban areas
4. Rural areas may see stiff & formal relationships as rude
5. Especially with someone they don't know, formality breeds distrust
6. So, we may need to create boundaries in culturally appropriate ways
7. A key element in these relationships is: protect clients from exploitation and harm
8. While still offering culturally appropriate, effective services

# Framework for Managing Ethical Issues

1. Identify ethical issue
2. Access help
3. Use critical thinking
4. Manage conflict
5. Plan and implement decision
6. Evaluate and follow up

(Barsky, 2023)

# Collaborative Ethical Decision-Making With Clients

- Many ethical issues can be resolved by informed consent
- Engage clients in collaborative conflict resolution
- Identify needs interests (safety, respect, effective services, reducing risks, maintaining privacy...)
- Brainstorm options
- Jointly select options that satisfy most important needs and interests

# Relevant Social Work Values

- Access to services
- Human relationships
- Integrity
- Respect for the dignity and worth of all people

## Value Conflicts

- SW
- Client
- Agency - Coworkers, Supervisees, Educators/Students
- Community

# Ethical Challenge: Social Worker - Client Boundaries

- Sandy (SW) in a small community works as a child welfare worker
- Sandy is assigned to investigate potential neglect by her neighbors, Jeanette and Clarence
- Sandy is the only child welfare worker in the county.

What ethical issues does this situation raise?



# Ethical Challenge - Supervisor-Supervisee Boundaries

1. Hugo (supervisor) is working with a practicum student, Shelley.
2. During high school Hugo and Shelley dated (8 years ago).
3. Hugo still has feelings for Shelley, but they are not currently dating.
4. Few alternatives for practicum placements (or alternative supervisors) in the community.

Types of boundary concerns?

Suggestions for managing boundary or dual relationship issues?

# Ethical Challenge: SW Prof-Student Boundaries



- A professor in private practice is approached by a student
- The student (retired military) discloses having a mental health issue (PTSD)
- The student asks the professor for assistance from the prof.
- The community is small and doesn't have many clinicians that deal with PTSD issues.

How should the professor respond?

What roles are appropriate/inappropriate?

# Ethical Challenge - Coworker Boundaries

1. Gabby and Estrella are coworkers in SW department of the hospital.
2. The hospital does not have a policy about dating among employees.
3. Gabby and Estrella have started dating but do not want to tell anyone about this relationship.

Any ethical issues re boundaries or dual relationships?

Does it matter that the couple is lesbian and the community may not “approve”?

# Ethical Challenge - Boundaries between Group Members

- SUDs group designed for clients referred by Problem-Solving Courts (Drug Court)
- Two group members, Hal and Adina, know each other as neighbors in a small town - children go to school together; members of same church

Is it ethical for them to be in the same group? Why/why not?

Who decides? How?

What are the risks if they are in the same group?

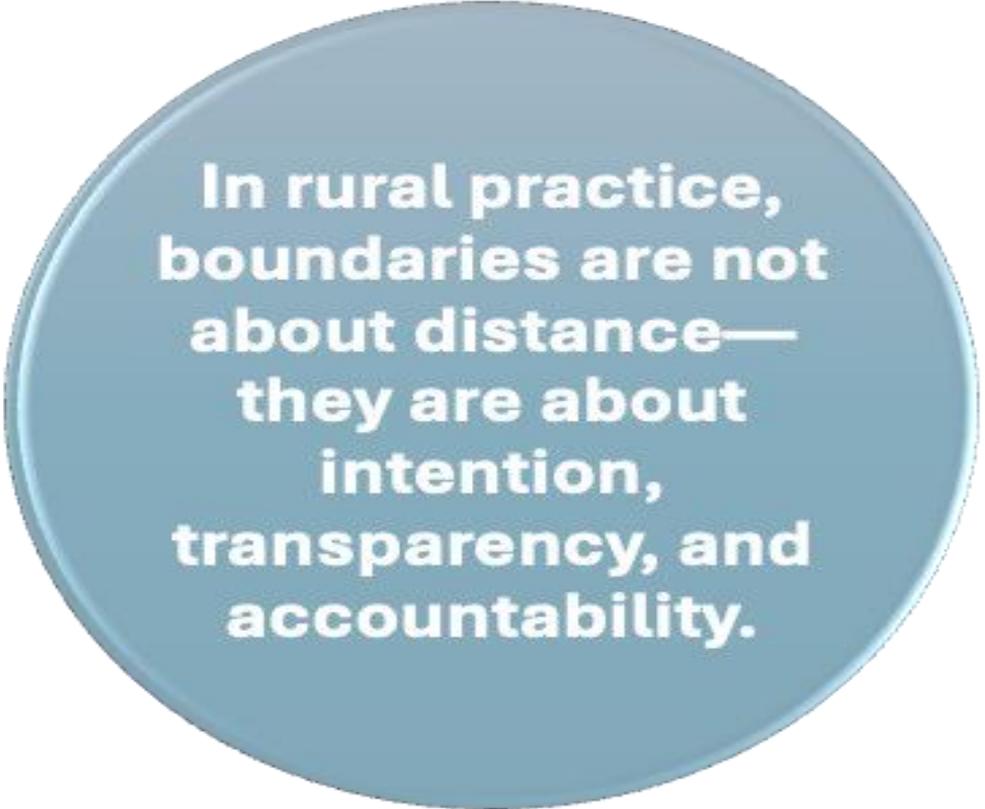
# Mitigating Risks re Dual Relationships and Informal Boundaries

1. Identify boundary and dual relationship risks early
2. Discuss concerns openly with clients
3. Brainstorm options to maximize benefits and minimize risks
4. Work toward collaborative solutions
5. Document: concerns, options, consultations, agreements, monitoring
6. When in doubt, refer out

# Preparing Students for Rural Practice & Boundary Concerns

1. Teach students about mindfulness and cultural humility (understanding self and community context)
2. Provide students with strategies for ethical practice: cultural guide / mentor, know alternate resources, how to build trust in community
3. Use case studies to teach contextual ethics
4. Encourage students to focus on strengths and best practices in rural SW (not just risks or problems)

# Conclusion



**In rural practice,  
boundaries are not  
about distance—  
they are about  
intention,  
transparency, and  
accountability.**

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