



2014

## Ethical Guidelines for Social Work Supervisors in Rural Settings

Elizabeth T. Blue

*University of Wisconsin-Superior*

Ann M. Kutzler

*University of Wisconsin-Superior*

Suzanne Macron-Fuller

*University of Wisconsin-Superior*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Blue, Elizabeth T.; Kutzler, Ann M.; and Macron-Fuller, Suzanne (2014) "Ethical Guidelines for Social Work Supervisors in Rural Settings," *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*: Vol. 6: No. 1, Article 2.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61611/2165-4611.1051>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw/vol6/iss1/2>

This Feature Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Faculty Publications at Murray State's Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal by an authorized editor of Murray State's Digital Commons. For more information, please contact [msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu](mailto:msu.digitalcommons@murraystate.edu).

## Ethical Guidelines for Social Work Supervisors in Rural Settings

Elizabeth T. Blue

Ann M. Kutzler

Suzanne Marcon-Fuller

*University of Wisconsin-Superior*

**Abstract.** Little research literature exists integrating ethics, supervision, and rural/small community practice. This paper reports results of a study conducted by a joint student-faculty team. The study engaged supervisors in rural and small communities in two Midwestern states in semi-structured interviews. Interview data were then used to develop guidelines for BSW students about what constitutes ethical supervisory practice in rural environments.

**Keywords:** rural, supervision, ethics, boundaries

This study discusses the unique needs, roles and requirements of ethical social work supervision in rural and small community practice environments. It reports results of a joint student-faculty exploratory study conducted with 11 rural social work supervisors in northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin. The study gathered information about the nature of rural and small community supervisory practice, roles supervisors play, common ethical and boundary dilemmas they encounter, and barriers to ethical professional supervision. Initial guidelines for teaching BSW students about the realities of ethical social work supervision in rural environments emerged from the findings.

This was an independent project undertaken by two graduating seniors under the supervision and direction of a social work professor during an eight week period in the summer of 2011. Going into the project, the authors knew that summer sample recruitment could be problematic because of vacations, field work, and the large geographic service area. In short, rural practitioners' time and energy would be stretched thin. The authors approached this as an exploratory study, hoping to begin a wider discussion of this topic and to promote thinking about the topic among other professionals and students. It was the authors' fond desire that the study would serve as a catalyst for other interested parties to study as well.

Often social work students from rural or small community environments describe unique cultures, demands and mores embedded in the smaller communities in which they intend to practice. Students question how to locate ethical, professionally-based supervision when working in these smaller communities. They describe wanting to remain true to professional ethics, as taught in school, but know they will encounter numerous ethical gray areas in practice. Students may be working in settings where there are few other social work practitioners; as a result, they may struggle to find ethically-based supervision and mentorship. Students from rural and small communities know ethical and boundary issues abound in these environments. They also know that social workers' relationships with clients and the community are multi-layered, intertwined, excruciatingly visible, and unbelievably complicated. Social workers in these settings are often professionally and personally isolated with limited, often unpalatable, options available to them when engaging in ethical decision-making. Professional decision-making, grounded in social work ethics, has potentially widespread ramifications for them as workers and their families.

The two student researchers held some of these apprehensions themselves. They were concerned that acquiring and identifying ethical supervision might be an immediate issue for them when they graduated. They recognized that supervision would play a critical role in their professional development. This motivated them to discover more about how rural-based supervisors approach the supervisory role and manage ethical dilemmas. They also wanted to be able to recognize what constitutes ethically grounded supervision. The two of them conceived the study from these reservations, joining forces with a faculty person, who was already researching ethical supervision in smaller community environments.

There is much available resource material on ethical decision-making (Congress, 1999; Dolgoff, Loewenberg, & Harrington, 2005; Reamer, 1990). A robust literature exists on ethics and rural practice (Daley & Hickman, 2011; Ginsberg, 2005; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005; Martinez-Brawley, 2000). There is a strong literature base on supervision (Brashears, 1995; Dolgoff, 2004; Kadushin & Harkness, 2002; Levy, 1973; Weinbach, 2007) and on ethics and supervision (Cicak, 2011; Copeland, Dean, & Wladkowski, 2011; Dixon, 2010; Horn, 2011; Lerman, & Porter, 1990; Reamer, 1998). There is no literature, however, integrating ethics, rural practice and supervision.

Related social work literature focuses heavily on direct practice boundaries in rural communities (Boisen & Bosch, 2005; Daley & Doughty, 2006; Daley, & Hickman, 2011; Gumpert & Black, 2005; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005; Martinez-Brawley, 2000). Much of the available literature comes from outside of the United States. There is little reference specifically to supervisory roles in the rural environment (Galambos, Watt, Anderson, & Danis, 2005; Cohen, 1987). Ethics literature related to rural practice focuses on differences and difficulties in rural service delivery. It does not address how to work through these quagmires with the aid of a supervisor (Ginsberg, 2005; Healy, 2003; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005). In all of this literature, there are numerous cautions and guiding principles offered. Ethically appropriate supervisory strategies germane to rural situations were not offered. This study begins to address this gap, providing fresh community-based insights to use in working with BSW students in the classroom.

## **Method**

### **Participants**

Study participants were 11 individuals who at the time of the study or in the recent past had supervised human service workers and social workers in a rural environment. We sought participants engaged in social work supervision in rural northeastern Minnesota and northwestern Wisconsin since these areas were readily accessible. To develop the sample, professors and persons working in the two rural environments were asked to identify potential subjects. Participants were also identified using county government websites. Tribal governments and agencies were included in the sample given their prevalence in the study area. Additionally, once interviewed, respondents were asked to suggest other supervisors as potential participants. Forty-nine persons were approached to participate in the study. The final sample size was 11, which yielded a return rate of 22%.

This study used a non-probability criterion sampling method. Subjects were engaged in social work or social services supervision in rural areas. Rural has “generally [been] considered as having 2,500 residents or less” (Kirst-Ashman & Hull, 2012, p. 243). We considered the geographic areas in which we were collecting data, and created population definitions for these communities. These study definitions included: rural community (less than 1,000 residents), small town (1,000 to 5,000 residents), large town (greater than 5,000 residents), as well as an *other* category. One respondent commuted from an agency situated in a large community, which had a satellite agency in a rural community in the study area. That person was still considered a rural practitioner, serving an isolated rural community with limited services and resources. Because of the non-probability sampling method, the study results are not generalizable to anyone but the study participants.

**Participant characteristics.** There were 11 participants in the study. Table 1 presents demographic data on subjects’ gender, educational background, and ethnicity. The sample was predominately female and of European American descent. Respondents were not asked their specific ages.

Table 1

*Gender, Ethnicity and Education of Participants*

Ethnicity	Men				Women			
	BSW	MSW	Other BS/BA	Other Masters	BSW	MSW	Other BS/BA	Other Masters
European American	–	1	–	–	3	2	1	3
Asian American	–	1	–	–	–	–	–	–
Total	–	2	–	–	3	2	1	3

*Note.* Cells containing dashes had no respondents reporting the attribute.

Table 2 reflects participants’ experience as a social worker and as a supervisor. Nine of the 11 respondents (82%) had been in the field for 15 years or longer, all of whom at some time served as a supervisor. While there was a small subgroup of less experienced supervisors (three persons) among current supervisors, the majority of the group had depth of supervisory experience from which to share.

Table 3 identifies fields of practice in which the participants worked and agency auspices. All but one respondent worked for a public agency, including two who worked for tribal agencies. One of the persons who worked in mental health worked for a private for-profit agency. Table 4

looks at the location of agency in relation to distances traveled by clients for service and distances traveled by the social worker to come to work.

Table 2

*Experience in Social Work and Supervision*

Experience	Men		Women		All	
	Range	Mean	Range	Mean	Range	Mean
Years of Social Work <sup>a</sup>	16-38	27.0	10-36	19.1	10-38	20.7
Years as Supervisor <sup>b</sup>	10-14	12.0	2-25	8.3	2-25	9.0
# Now Supervising <sup>c</sup>	0-6	3.0	4-25	9.6	0-25	8.3
# in Past Supervising <sup>d</sup>	10-24	17.0	6-12	9.7	6-24	11.3

*Note.* <sup>a</sup>1 person (female) missing. <sup>b</sup>1 person (female) missing. <sup>c</sup>1 person (female) missing. <sup>d</sup>2 persons (female) missing; one a new supervisor.

Table 3

*Fields of Practice and Agency Auspices by Gender*

Field	Men		Women		Total In Field
	Public	Private	Public	Private	
Child Welfare	1	–	6	–	7
Mental Health	2	–	2	1	4
Adult Services	–	–	2	–	2
AODA	1	–	1	–	1
DD	–	–	1	–	1

*Note:* Cells containing dashes had no respondents reporting the attribute. Three of the participants practiced in multiple fields –two in three fields and one in two fields –all within the single agency in which each worked.

Table 4

*Agency Location and Distances for Clients and Workers by Gender*

Agency Location	Radius Agency Service Area in Miles			Miles Worker Lives from Workplace		
	N	Range	Mean	N	Range	Mean
Rural Community	1	40	40.0	1	4	4.0
Small Town	6	50-90	74.2	7	4-35	18.1
Larger Town	1	75	75.0	2	15-25	20.0
Tribal Community	1	15	15.0	1	3	3.0
All Communities	9	15-90	63.9	11	4-35	15.8

**Data collection techniques**

This study was an exploratory one-group cross sectional design with data collection carried out over eight weeks. We planned to collect data using a semi-structured interview process. Because the interviewers were students, interview training was conducted that included situational coaching and follow-up questioning strategies.

Three different semi-structured data collection methods using the same instrument were actually used: (a) two in-person interviews; (b) five phone interviews; and (c) four emailed/self-administered surveys. The initial study was to only use in-person interviews for consistency, but due to time constraints and an initially poor response, the study was expanded to include the other two collection methods. These additional methods then allowed us to collect as much data as possible in an efficient manner and in the time available. Many individuals we contacted indicated that they were interested and believed in the need for this study, but simply did not have the time to devote to it within the timeframe available. Although we began contacting individuals early in the process, reaching potential subjects by phone and/or gaining access to them was difficult. Often, contact had to be made through support staff who then acted as a liaison to the supervisor. Frequently, we were thrown into voice mail limbo and did not get responses even after numerous calls.

Each of the three data collection methods had its own strengths and limits. Both the in-person and phone interviews had the advantage of the presence of an interviewer to clarify possible misunderstandings the participants may have had. With telephone interviews, we, however, did not have non-verbal cues available to pursue. The self-administered survey, conducted through email, did not allow the participant to clarify any possible misunderstandings. The advantage of conducting a self-administered survey through email was that it allowed participants to complete it at their convenience. It also offered a level of privacy for the

participant that was not available in the other methods. In reality, it did little to improve the overall response rate.

### **Data analysis**

The researchers evaluated the data collected in two ways. We entered the demographic questions and the closed-response questions into a statistical program for descriptive analyses. We ordered the open-ended qualitative data into themes. Each team member independently themed the data, after which we came together to discuss each theme and come to mutual agreement about the category under which responses fell. After the data were grouped by theme, we tallied the frequency of occurrence of the themes and identified exemplars of responses under the various themes.

### **Measurement issues**

The two student researchers developed the survey instrument with input from their professor; first, we conducted a careful literature review which examined rural social work, ethics in rural social work, and supervisory best practices, seeking places in the literature where all these threads coalesced. From this work, survey items emerged. We used the literature to identify the common ethical issues in direct practice that were then matched with issues in supervision. As the first list of possible items was extensive; it required reduction and refinement. The list was scaled down during team discussions, as well as in consultation with other faculty members in the institution with which all three team members were affiliated.

### **Ethical, social justice, and human diversity issues**

The University of Wisconsin-Superior Institutional Review Board approved this research study (#676) before data collection began, to ensure the rights of the participants, to ensure informed consent, and to protect subjects' confidentiality. We crafted an informed consent script that was used to enlist participants using telephone contacts to initially identify study participants and request participation. We sent the interview schedule and the informed consent to each potential participant to look over before calling to schedule the interview. If a participant indicated a willingness to proceed at the time of the call and had received the consent and schedule, they were considered to have given their consent.

Ethical supervisory practice in rural settings has not been well defined to date. This study aligns with the social justice issues of fairness and competence in the workplace, and also guiding the ethical practice of rural professionals. We reached out to many kinds of agencies in an attempt to recruit diverse participants, including tribal government, and local government and private agencies. We exercised care in creating a survey that was inclusive in its terminology and which might appeal to a diverse group of participants.

## **Results**

### **Roles played by rural social work supervisors**

The survey document included a checklist of common roles often played by social work supervisors; participants could also add additional roles they felt they played. The roles employed on this survey item were derived from a well-known, commonly used social work text by Kirst-Ashman and Hull & Hull (2012), using their definitions. The researchers included investigation of these roles to discover the degree and extent to which these rural social work supervisors wore multiple hats in the execution of their responsibilities.

There were thirteen roles about which respondents were queried: enabler, mediator, integrator/coordinator, manager, educator, analyst/evaluator, broker, facilitator, initiator, negotiator, mobilizer, advocate, and mentor. One role, in particular, raised questions among respondents. In this study, the term enabler meant being helpful and supportive in assisting someone to reach an end or goal. Five respondents who participated in the face-to-face and telephone interviews indicated they were reluctant to identify themselves as playing the role of enabler. For them, the term had quite another meaning, making excuses for people's inappropriate behavior or assisting others in avoiding the consequences of their behavior. Interviewers had to reframe this definition for those respondents. Respondents described themselves as playing from 6-11 roles simultaneously. Table 5 describes the roles each said he or she had taken on the job by gender and in total.

Table 5

*Roles Played by Rural Social Work Supervisors by Gender*

Role	Men	Women	All Respondents
Teacher	2	9	11
Manager	2	9	11
Mentor	2	8	10
Mediator	1	8	9
Facilitator	1	8	9
Negotiator	1	8	9
Initiator	1	8	9
Coordinator	1	7	8
Analyst	1	7	8
Advocate	1	7	8
Mobilizer	1	7	8
Enabler	1	5	6
Broker	1	5	6
Other <sup>a</sup>	–	2	2

*Note:* Cells containing dashes had no respondents reporting the attribute. <sup>a</sup>The 2 responses in the “Other” category were a fiscal agent (1) and cheerleader (1).



### Unique needs of ethical supervisory practice in a rural area

The respondents identified four primary and unique ethical challenges that rural social work supervisors face. Table 6 describes these issues. Most of these related directly to defining and managing relationships. As one respondent indicated, “I am keenly aware of potential conflicts because they are more frequent in rural social work.”

Table 6

#### *Ethical Challenges Faced by Rural Social Work Supervisors*

Ethical Challenge	Number
Managing worker and agency protection of client confidentiality	7
Managing dual relationships with workers and community members	4
Managing dual roles within the agency setting	4
Setting appropriate boundaries with supervisees and co-workers	4

The supervisor respondents in this study agreed that in the rural environment, confidentiality is not limited to only information shared between agencies, but also can include information shared within an agency. One supervisor remarked, “Confidentiality issues are big. Staffing clients can be tough, because we have to be careful about too much information that can’t be shared, even between staff members.”

Three of the supervisors described concerns about being professionally isolated, meaning they were often the only professional social worker in the agency and sometimes the community; they described ramifications occurring when making decisions based on professional ethics, that were not necessarily understood or recognized by others in the agency or community. One said, “I feel isolated from other supervisors, and it’s hard to find other supervisors to consult with who understand what you are dealing with.”

Another three discussed the difficulty in making appropriate decisions about how to handle informally acquired knowledge. One of the three described this well: “Because of my longevity in the community, I also may know some things about families that my workers do not know and have had to wonder if what I know is necessary for the worker to know in dealing with the family.”

One supervisor described the tension she experienced because of the difficulty in finding and acquiring resources for clients, and another talked about dealing with issues relating to social isolation in the larger community and within the agencies. Finally, a supervisor told the interviewer she thought that it was sometimes difficult to convince employees that professionalism extended to off-duty as well as on-duty behavior.

## **Barriers to providing ethical supervision**

When asked to identify barriers to providing ethical social work supervision in their agencies, five supervisors divulged that being privy to informal knowledge and making decisions about what to address and what to let go was difficult. Five supervisors also described how difficult it was to avoid dual relationships in these smaller communities. Four respondents revealed that maintaining confidentiality could be incredibly difficult. One of them said, “Other county agencies assume an attitude of right-to-know in certain incidents. It is difficult to maintain relationships at the same time as setting privacy boundaries.” Another supervisor remarked regarding the prevalence of dual relationships, “You feel isolated in small communities. It’s not like other work situations where you can socialize and have fun, you always have to second-guess yourself.”

Other supervisors individually noted additional themes which created barriers to ethical supervision: dealing with limited resources in their small rural areas, experiencing social and professional isolation, small town politics, lack of equitable supervision, being uncomfortable that they may be practicing outside of their areas of expertise, and maintaining appropriate professionalism. One supervisor confided, “We also have community standard setters with long memories, so it is often difficult to procure services when providers have preconceived notions about individuals and families.” In carrying multiple roles as supervisors, they found themselves at times involved in areas about which their training and experience had not prepared them. As one said, “In a perfect world, you would know all of the areas you supervise. You are not specialized in one program. In the rural world, one supervisor supervises all areas.”

## **Guidelines employed to make ethical supervisory practice decisions**

Guidelines that these rural social work supervisors cited using most often included: the NASW Code of Ethics (eight supervisors), their own agency policy and procedures guides (seven supervisors), and their personal common sense and experience (six supervisors). One person explained, “I use sound social work theory and practice with back-up by statute and department rule. I try to consult the Code of Ethics, but find it is difficult sometimes. I use the Code as my guide, as well as county policies and common sense.”

Two supervisors reported using government regulations, such as the State of Wisconsin Department of Regulations and Licensing Code, The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (HIPAA), and the Data Practices Manual. One noted using the Board of Psychology Code of Ethics. One supervisor tries “using a worst case scenario outlook, should things blow up. I also like to think about if this was elsewhere, would I see a problem.” Another participant stated, “I tend to overcompensate because of the rural environment,” indicating he is overly cautious, because he is in a more isolated setting with less opportunity to consult on ethics.

## **Strategies for delivering ethical rural social work supervision**

Participants were asked what options or strategies they had developed for delivering social work supervision, given the limitations and uniqueness of the rural areas or the small communities in which they practiced. Ten supervisors identified each of these strategies:

working hard to encourage staff development, having themselves and employees cross train in order to understand and be able to stand in for one another if needed, and maintaining an open-door policy to allow supervisees adequate access to them and their time. One told us, “You must have a focus on staff development vs. program development, as often our only resource is our staff, not a new program.” Another stated, “As director, I understand the need to wear many hats and learned many roles that I would not normally have learned. For example, I became Rule 25 certified and a certified AODA prevention specialist so I could assist in areas with high work load.”

Five supervisors discussed each of these strategies: providing balance and flexibility by considering workers’ needs in order to develop and retain them, utilizing both formal and informal avenues of leadership, and reassigning cases if necessary. One supervisor stated that her “biggest strategy has been a focus on staff support and retention. If turnover is high, no one gets the attention they deserve. If retention is good, everyone gets the attention they need.”

Additional strategies identified were use of professional consultation to check out decisions that they (the supervisors) were making, finding the means necessary (i.e. additional training) to increase their own and workers’ areas of expertise, immediately and plainly addressing dual relationships, and setting clear boundaries and expectations. One disclosed, “I am following strict guidelines for myself in regard to my roles with my employees. I have no secondary relationships with them.”

### **Positive aspects of being engaged in rural social work supervision**

Supervisors were then asked to provide examples of the positive aspects of rural social work supervision. Nine of them noted the value of having strong personal connections within the agency and community to assist them in being better able to understand the agency and community needs; nine also noted that they liked working in an arena where change is more readily and immediately apparent. One respondent described herself as liking to see “the changes in my small community. I get to watch small changes develop on a bigger scale and help families for generations.”

Five respondents noted that it was important to them that they could develop relationships within the community, make beneficial workforce connections, and have fairly immediate access to power brokers in the agency and community. They felt that this strong networking amongst community professionals allowed for creativity in problem solving approaches. To illustrate, one said, “I have great opportunities and an increased knowledge base. I have access to power brokers that I wouldn’t have in a large community. This makes it easier to get things done and start new programs.”

Another positive aspect noted by two respondents was being able to access knowledge in the community informally as well as formally which allowed them a more accurate read of the needs of the community; two liked their opportunity to develop a personal style, to model professionalism, to understand resources available for clients well, to provide staff development opportunities, and to encounter variety in practice activities. One enthused, “Working in a rural environment helps you see a common bond of humanity. What an honor that is and how precious that is! At the school or store; interdependence that you may not see in an urban environment.”

## **Differing supervisory approaches**

Participants were asked if they used different supervisory approaches for employees with a social work education versus those without this background. Nine of the participants made comments indicating that they supervised at least some employees who did not have a social work education. Because of this, six said they often utilized staff development activities where they could add extra supervision and extra staffing for cases, as well as provide outside agency trainings. One supervisor noted, “I have learned to support their experiences and strengths and gently provide professional knowledge without judgment.”

Five described using a case-by-case evaluation according to the staff member’s needs. Two of them were careful to note that they did not treat these kinds of employees differently than employees with a social work background. One supervisor explained her approach with individuals without a social work education, saying, “It depends on who they serve. I have noticed that we have more discussions about person-in-environment issues. But, it has not been a big issue and I think it really depends on the individual.”

## **Advice for new social work supervisors**

The supervisors were asked to pass along advice to potential new supervisors in rural social work fields. The piece of advice offered most often was that new supervisors find balance and flexibility by being a boss first, by using fairness in dealing with employees, and by maintaining professionalism (modeling appropriate professional behavior and boundaries). One respondent advised, “Flexibility- you cannot hang on to a rigid set of guidelines. You think outside the box, follow process, so you don’t break the law, but don’t let it rule; the outcome matters.”

The second-most offered advice was that a new supervisor develop a personal supervisory style; the third most frequent advice was that the new supervisor should focus on professional development activities. The fourth most frequently offered advice suggested that the new supervisor use professional consultation to sort out complex issues and also recommended setting clear and professional boundaries with supervisees. Other suggestions were: using one’s creativity, looking to policies and procedures for potential guidance, being aware of informal knowledge making the rounds in the community, utilizing staff development, and being mindful of dual roles. As one supervisor cautioned, “The issues in rural areas are complex and each small community has history, changes very slowly, and values their community and what is special about it.” One participant felt it was easier to “come in with high expectations and then loosen up”, while others said “to lead by example” and advised new supervisors to “remember the context in which you practice.”

## **Discussion of the Findings**

Many themes ran through participant responses; for example, the issues of managing confidentiality and dual relationships came up frequently. Supervisors expressed concerns that agency employees did not understand ramifications of excessive internal sharing with other staff of case information within the agency. They described difficulties convincing supervisees that such unprofessional behavior damaged clients. Supervisors viewed dual relationships as

inevitable in smaller communities and felt a responsibility to manage power differentials that occurred occasionally with clients, coworkers, and other community members.

They also spoke often about professional and social isolation that social work supervisors experience in rural and smaller communities. They described consciously maintaining professional ethics at work. They recommended social support outside the professional environment and sometimes away from the community. They described feeling bothered that they sometimes avoided potential friendships with coworkers and supervisees, despite having a great deal in common with them, and they cited a lack of community alternatives.

Respondents felt it was important for supervisors to find balance, creativity and flexibility when working in a rural environment. They felt it necessary to find ingenious ways to create support for staff. They used open-door policies to create access for their supervisees, provided opportunities for modeling and discussion with supervisees, and trained staff to take on new duties and expand their abilities. They learned how to be understanding, but firm, and to think outside the box, while honoring rules and regulations. They found ways to become engaged in the community outside of their work roles.

Participants described very high levels of satisfaction with their jobs, in spite of having to manage ethical and other practice situations as a supervisor. They readily pointed to the uniquely positive aspects of practicing in the rural environment. They liked the variety the job offered and the closer connection to the community. They could see change occur, not just in the short run, but over time. They appreciated the easier access to power brokers not available in larger communities. They felt this made it easier to get things done and pursue new ideas.

### **Relationship of findings to literature review**

Respondents identified four ethical areas that corresponded with concerns identified in the literature review. Widely reported in the rural ethics and practice literature, concerns included:

1. The issue of dual and multiple relationships, which is reported widely throughout the rural literature (Boisen & Bosch, 2005; Galambos, et al., 2005; Healy, 2003; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005; Martinez-Brawley, 2000);
2. The issue of confidentiality (Galambos, et al., 2005; Healy, 2003; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005);
3. The issue of use of client information gained informally (Gumpert & Black, 2005; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005); and
4. Conflicts of interest (Ginsberg, 2005; Healy, 2003; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005).

### **Usefulness of findings to BSW education**

Future social workers should be exposed to the unique needs, roles, and requirements of ethical social work supervision in a rural/small community practice environment. This is true whether or not students think they will practice in a rural area. Many new social workers unexpectedly find themselves having to work in smaller communities when they had not necessarily intended to do so. Rural-based students are often already aware that they will have a need for reliable, ethical supervision. All students, however, can benefit from education about

ethics in rural situations, ought to be able to recognize ethically-grounded supervisory practices, and should know seek how to seek out adequate and ethical supervision. There are numerous gray areas for which students need additional ethical and practice guidance.

BSW students should be educated to seek supervision around the following rural practice issues:

- The implications and consequences of not setting good boundaries with clients and staff in an environment in which one is highly visible;
- The knowledge of when to use or not use informally acquired knowledge, which is a common occurrence in smaller communities;
- The development of expertise in locating supports and referral sources in an environment with scarce resources, as is the case with smaller communities;
- The necessity of seeking out consultation and advice from agency policies and procedures, the NASW Code of Ethics, and experienced and ethical mentors;
- Pursuit of professional and staff development opportunities whenever they arise;
- The importance of finding balance, both professionally and personally, in order to remain a viable social worker;
- The value of developing appropriate personal connections within the community, as these will offer vital support and information needed in serving rural clients well; and
- The significance of listening to the community to find solutions and resources.

Finally, BSW students should be taught to identify the character and quality of appropriate supervisory behavior, which is an especially critical aspect of rural practice. They should be taught to recognize the ideal supervisor as someone who: (a) regularly discusses ethics and boundaries, and their implications in rural practice; (b) actually uses the NASW Code of Ethics to build solutions with supervisees within the agency and in the larger rural community of practice; and (c) consistently models ethically appropriate personal and professional boundaries when working in a rural environment.

### References

- Boisen, L. S., & Bosch, L. A. (2005). Dual relationships and rural social work: Is there a rural code? In L. H. Ginsberg (Ed.), *Social work in rural communities* (pp. 189-203). Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Brashears, F. (1995). Supervision as social work practice: A reconceptualization. *Social Work, 40*, 692-699.
- Cicak, M. (2011). Ethical rules in supervision. *Annual of Social Work, 18*(2), 185-216.
- Cohen, B. Z. (1987). The ethics of social work supervision revisited. *Social Work, 32*, 194-196.
- Copeland, P., Dean, R. G., & Wladkowski, S. P. (2011). The power dynamics of supervision: Ethical dilemmas. *Smith College Studies in Social Work, 81*(1), 26-40.

- Congress, E. P. (1999). *Social work values and ethics: Identifying and resolving professional dilemmas*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth-Thomson Learning.
- Daley, M. R., & Doughty, M. O. (2006). Ethics complaints in social work practice: A rural-urban comparison. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 3(1). Retrieved from <http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/28/44/>
- Daley, M. R., & Hickman, S. (2011). Dual relations and beyond: Understanding and addressing ethical challenges for rural social work. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 8(1). Retrieved from <http://www.jswvearchives.com/spr11/spr11daleyhickman.pdf>
- Dixon, J. (2010). Social supervision, ethics and risk: An evaluation of how ethical frameworks might be applied within the social supervision process. *The British Journal of Social Work*, 40(8), 2398-2413.
- Dolgoff, R. (2004). *An introduction to supervisory practice in human services*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.
- Dolgoff, R., Loewenberg, F., & Harrington, D. (2005). *Ethical decisions for social work practice* (7th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks-Cole/Thomson Learning.
- Galambos, C., Watt, J. W., Anderson, K. & Danis, F. (2005). Ethics forum: Rural social work practice: Maintaining confidentiality in the face of dual relationships. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 2(2). Retrieved from [http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/index2.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=23](http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/index2.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=23)
- Ginsberg, L. H. (Ed.). (2005). *Social work in rural communities*. Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Gumpert, J., & Black, P. N. (2005). Walking the tightrope between cultural competence and ethical practice: The dilemma of the rural practitioner. In L. H. Ginsberg (Ed.), *Social work in rural communities*, (pp. 157-174). Alexandria, VA: Council on Social Work Education.
- Healy, T. C. (2003). Ethical practice issues in rural perspective. *Journal of Gerontological Social Work*, 41(3/4), 265-285.
- Horn, T. (2011). *Is it ethical? 101 scenarios in every day social work practice*. Harrisburg, PA: White Hat Communications.
- Kadushin, A., & Harkness, D. (2002). *Supervision in social work* (4th ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Kirst-Ashman, K. K., & Hull, Jr., G. H. (2012). *Generalist practice with organizations and communities*. Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

- Lerman, H., & Porter, N. (Eds.) (1990). *Feminist ethics in psychotherapy*. New York, NY: Springer Publishing.
- Levy, C. (1973). The ethics of supervision. *Social Work*, 18(2), 14-21.
- Lohmann, N., & Lohmann, R.A. (Eds.) (2005). *Rural social work practice*. New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Marlow, C. R. (2011). *Research methods for generalist social work* (5th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.
- Martinez-Brawley, E. E. (2000). *Close to home: Human services and the small community*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Reamer, F. (1990). *Ethical dilemmas in social service: A guide for social workers* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Columbia University Press.
- Reamer, F. (1998). *Ethical standards in social work: A critical review of the NASW Code of Ethics*. Washington, DC: NASW Press.
- Weinbach, R. W. (2008). *The social worker as manager: A practical guide to success* (5th ed.). Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

#### Author Note

Elizabeth T. Blue, Professor, Social Work Program, Department of Human Behavior, Justice, and Diversity, and Interim Dean of Faculties and Graduate Studies, University of Wisconsin-Superior; Ann M. Kutzler, Student, Social Work Program, Department of Human Behavior, Justice, and Diversity, University of Wisconsin-Superior; Suzanne Marcon-Fuller, Student, Social Work Program, Department of Human Behavior, Justice, and Diversity, University of Wisconsin-Superior. Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Elizabeth T. Blue, Interim Dean of Faculties and Graduate Studies, University of Wisconsin-Superior, P.O. Box 2000, Catlin and Belknap, Superior, WI 54880