Letter of Intent:

A Competency Based Guidelines and Resource Manual for Rural Counsellors in British Columbia

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Introduction and problem statement

In British Columbia there are many small communities and rural areas located a significant geographical distance from larger urban centers. Counsellors practicing in a rural context find themselves within a distinct culture shaped by geographical isolation, rural values, and limited resources. Ethical issues related to dual relationships, confidentiality, lack of privacy, professional isolation, and generalist practice arise in the rural counselling context. These ethical issues can impact counsellor competence, particularly for individuals who are beginning counsellors and have limited experience with ethical decision-making. However, even for experienced counsellors who are governed by a code of ethics, urban developed guidelines are not easily generalized to the unique social realities of living and working rurally. Awareness of rural counselling issues and the flexible application of ethical principles in ethical decision-making can assist competent rural counselling practice.

A manual for rural counsellors that supports ethically competent counselling is the intended outcome of this CAAP final project. The manual will include practice guidelines for rural counsellors and a resource list of professional associations and supervisory bodies that provide information and support to counsellors. The scope of the resource list will be limited to the researcher’s home province of British Columbia and related Canadian organizations. The manual will be developed in document form that can be distributed in a printable CD format to rural counselling agencies in British Columbia and to other interested parties upon request.

Rationale for a rural counsellor guidelines and resource manual
Competence is “the foundation of ethical practice” and is evident in an individual “having the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform adequately professional roles and the ability to recognize when one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities are inadequate or impaired” (Kitchener & Anderson, 2000, p. 66). Counselling competence can be an issue in rural or remote areas where counsellors have limited access to supervision, collegial support, and professional development opportunities. The development of a guidelines and resource manual for ethical counselling practice in rural communities can assist in enhancing professional competence. This can be particularly true for beginning counsellors who lack graduate training or who are not regulated by a professional body with a code of ethics. In addition, the benefits of a rural counsellor guidelines and resource manual can be extended to counselling agency boards and directors. Agency directors and board members make ethical decisions and support employees faced with ethical dilemmas common to rural counselling practice, thus for these individuals counselling competency is also a concern.

The researcher will draw on current rural counselling literature to emphasize the unique considerations and ethical issues that emerge for counsellors in the rural context. The resource list to be included in the manual will be compiled from web-based information on counselling associations and professional regulating bodies. Encouraging awareness and promoting dialogue regarding ethically competent practice will likely have direct benefits for clients, counsellors, and other stakeholders associated with community agencies. Through engaging in this final project, the researcher will be broadening the understanding of rural counselling issues and the supports and information needed to ensure the client’s best interests are competently met.
Supporting literature

Rural counselling issues. Recently, educators and service providers in the counselling field have directed their attention toward the distinctive features of rural counselling practice and the inherent concerns associated with living and working in a remote setting. The research on rural counselling has helped to promote understanding of the unique needs and social realities of those living and working rurally. In the rural context geographical isolation, rural values, and limited resources have contributed to dual and overlapping relationships, professional isolation, lack of privacy, and potential confidentiality issues for counsellors (Breen & Drew, 2005; De Las Fuentes, Willmuth, & Yarrow, 2005; Harowski, Turner, Levine, Schank, & Leichter, 2006; Helbok 2003; Palmer & Kaufman, 2003; Schank, 1998). In rural areas counsellors have encountered a mistrust of outsiders and stereotypes associated with the provision and use of counselling services (Harowski et al, 2006). As highly visible members of a community, rural counsellors have also experienced a lack of privacy, finding their personal lives under public scrutiny (Helbok, 2003). In addition, geographical isolation and limited resources have contributed to a greater incidence of generalist practice versus specialization within counselling, regardless of training and experience (Hargrove, 1986; Helbok, 2003; Schank, 1998; Smith, 2003). These features of the rural counselling context have resulted in ethical dilemmas, which arise due to uncertainty or conflicts among values, principles, and obligations. Three areas that have appeared most problematic for rural counsellors include dual and overlapping relationships, professional isolation, and generalist counselling practice.
A common ethical dilemma that rural counsellors have faced is related to boundary issues. Nickel (2004) has indicated that “anonymity which facilitates boundary delineation often does not exist” in the rural context (p. 19). Consequently, overlapping and dual relationships have been the norm rather than the exception for rural counsellors (Breen & Drew, 2005; Harowski et al., 2005; Perkins, Hudson, Gray, & Stewart, 1998; Schank, 1998). These relationships have ranged from the provision of separate counselling services to individuals well know to each other, to shared community and social activities, to interaction in the context of community businesses. Inter-agency contact and social relationships with other helping professionals, such as medical or educational service providers, have also weakened the boundaries of confidentiality for clients in common. Researchers have found that under these types of circumstances information sharing without client consent has occurred (Breen & Drew, 2005; Schank, 1998; Smith, 2003). Regardless of the inherent challenge of informal contact for rural counsellors, respect for clients and the integrity of the counsellors have been reflected in adherence to ethical principles related to confidentiality.

Despite the overlap of personal and professional relationships, rural counsellors have experienced significant professional isolation (Breen & Drew, 2005; Harowski et al., 2005; Helbok, 2003; Schank and Skovholt, 2006; Smith, 2005). Rural counsellors have often been sole service providers in a geographically large catchment area. Consequently, rural counsellors have had few colleagues and limited options for referring clients on when boundary issues have arisen or the needs of clients are outside their area of expertise. In addition, opportunities for consultation and supervision have been limited, with counsellors being left to make ethical decisions without input from colleagues or a
supervisor. This aspect of rural practice isolation has been a concern for many counsellors (Breen & Drew, 2005; Helbok, 2003; Roberts, Battaglia, & Epstein, 1999; Smith, 2005). Limited professional development opportunities have also been an outcome of rural isolation with implications for staying current in practice standards and interventions. The need for accessible professional development has been highlighted in the literature on rural counselling practice and has also been a consideration in the development of courses addressing the rural counselling context (Harowski et al., 2006; Johnson, Brems, Warner, & Roberts, 2006; Schank and Skovholt, 2006; Smith, 2005). In general, professional isolation has, in combination with other risk factors such as overwork and high visibility, contributed to competence issues and possible burnout (Schank & Skovholt, 2006; Helbok, 2003).

In the rural context, counsellors have often been required to practice as generalists due to limited professional resources (Hargrove, 1986; Helbok, 2003; Schank, 1998; Smith, 2003). Rural counsellors who have worked as generalists have been required to flexibly and creatively use resources in the provision of effective and appropriate client service. However, generalist practice has contributed to the provision of counsellors’ services outside the boundaries of their training and experience (Hargrove, 1986; Helbok, 2003; Schank, 1998; Smith, 2003). As a result, rural counsellors have found themselves compromised regarding the ethics of competent practice. For generalist counsellors, the distinct challenge has been balancing the need for competence in ethical practice, clients’ needs, and their own comfort level in stretching the scope of practice (Breen & Drew, 2005; Schank, 1998; Smith, 2003).
Competence and rural counselling. Competence has been defined by Kitchener and Anderson (2000) as an individual “having the knowledge, skills, and abilities to perform adequately professional roles and the ability to recognize when one’s knowledge, skills, and abilities are inadequate or impaired” (p. 66). In addition to training and experience, personal awareness and integrity have been regarded in the literature as important aspect of competence (De Las Fuentes, Willmuth, & Yarrow, 2005; Gross, 2001; Schank & Skovholt, 2006). For counsellors who have come to rural counselling from a variety of backgrounds, what was considered adequate training and experience likely varied based on the context and mandate of each counselling agency and the available counselling positions. As there has been a limited pool of applicants to draw from within rural areas, entry level counsellors have often been hired based on availability, for exhibiting qualities of social interaction, and for the ability to think and work independently. In rural areas many counsellors have been hired who “are young or lack a post graduate professional education” (Perkins et al., 1998, p. 1317). As a result, individuals have been hired into rural counselling positions that required them to work outside the boundaries of competence. This has contributed to ethical dilemmas for counsellors. The ethical principal of responsible caring has been consistent in both the Canadian Counselling Association (2002) and the Canadian Psychological Association (2001) ethics codes in the expectation that the provision of client service be within the boundaries of competent practice.

Professional competence has required knowledge of ethics in addition to therapeutic skills and techniques. Ethical principles have provided a set of guidelines and rules that inform professional practice. However, ethical policy that has been developed
in urban areas may not directly apply to the rural context. Schank (1998) has cautioned that “prevailing standards in training in ethical codes and regulations usually developed in urban areas are not so easily adapted to rural areas” (p. 270). Consequently, rural counsellors have been challenged with making ethical decisions based on guidelines that do not necessarily take into account the practicalities of rural practice.

Rural counsellors are faced with ethical dilemmas derived from the reality of practicing in small community settings. To provide effective and competent counselling services, a rural counsellor should have a clear and functional understanding of the ethical principles of counselling practice as well as knowledge of the unique socio-cultural context of the rural environment. The intent of this researcher is to develop a manual that provides guidelines for addressing the distinct issues faced by rural counsellors and a resource list to support competent and ethical rural counselling practice.

Methods and Procedures

In order to address some of the identified issues in rural counselling practice, this researcher’s intent is to develop a manual to provide guidelines for promoting ethical and competent counselling in the rural context based on an extensive literature review. In addition, this researcher’s intent is to include in the manual a brief resource list for counsellors in British Columbia as a reference for locating associations and governing bodies related to the counselling profession. The goal of developing a competency based guidelines and resource manual for rural community counsellors is to increase awareness of rural counselling issues and the resources that support ethics knowledge and professional competence. The goal of the researcher is to support professional
counselling practice in rural communities which benefits counsellors, agencies, and most importantly the clients they serve.

The project will begin with a comprehensive review of literature regarding the ethical issues common to rural counselling practice, with emphasis on the ethical issue of competence. Topically relevant articles will be accessed via the Academic Research Premier data base, the Psychology and Behavioral Sciences Collection, and the PsycINFO data base using the key terms rural, remote, psychologist, counsellor, counselling, psychological counselling, social work, practitioner, counselling issues, dual relationships, competence, ethics, professional boundaries, and training. The data bases will also be used to access articles identified in reference lists from the relevant articles obtained in the initial data base search. Books will be accessed through the Campus Alberta Applied Psychology Program, the University of Calgary library indexes, and the Health and Human Services Library of the Ministries of Health and Children and Family Development in the province of British Columbia.

The practice guidelines for rural counsellors and the brief resource list for counsellors in British Columbia will be presented in a simple manual format that includes the literature review. The scope of the resource list will be limited to the researcher’s home province of British Columbia and related Canadian associations. The manual will be developed in document form that can be distributed in a printable CD format to rural counselling agencies in British Columbia and to other interested parties upon request. The time frame for the completion of this project will be nine months.

_Level of risk and appraisal of time commitment_
The development of the rural counselling practice guidelines and the resource list will not involve the counsellor cohort, community agencies, or potential clients that these documents are intended to benefit. Both the counselling guidelines and resources will be based on a review of literature and web-based counselling associations, and will not involve any subject-based research.

A significant literature search regarding rural counselling and the ethical principle of competence has already been conducted. Consequently, the scope of the project is realistic for a nine month time frame.

Implications of the Project

The intent of this researcher is to provide rural counsellors information, practice guidelines, and a means for contacting professional counselling associations and supervisory bodies in the form of a reference manual. Developing ethical practice guidelines and a resource list for rural community counsellors can assist with capacity building and professional competence. Promoting adherence to the ethical principal of competence can facilitate counselling practice that is in the best interest of the client. In rural counselling, barriers to competence may include generalist practice, limited access to supervision and consultation, few colleagues and referral options, and limited professional development opportunities. Rural counsellors are faced with balancing knowledge of ethical principles with the practical realities of the rural counselling context. Limited knowledge of ethical principles and the lack of an ethical decision-making model can compromise professional practice and client service. In addition, in the absence of awareness or consideration of rural ethical issues, urban based ethical principles may be applied without sensitive consideration of the uniqueness of the rural counselling context.
Competent counselling practice requires an understanding of ethical principles and the capacity to actively apply them in clinical work. However, rigid adherence to these principles can conflict with practical considerations in the rural context and limit counsellor responsiveness. In general, a sound rural counselling approach is “predicated on clinicians’ abilities to work with patients, gather expertise, structure clinical practice in an informed manner, mobilize scarce resources, and build collegial and personal support” (Roberts, Battaglia, & Epstein, 1999, p. 502).

In rural counselling decision-making in the face of ambiguity, conflicting values, limited resources and consultation, and overlapping roles requires courage, client input, and the ability to choose a course of action which is in the client’s best interest (Perkins et al., 1998; Schank & Skovholt, 2006). Promoting awareness of ethically competent rural practice can broaden understanding of rural counselling issues and the supports and information counsellors need to ensure that the client’s best interests are competently met.
References


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