Doing the Right Thing When Anonymity Isn't Possible (or Valued)

A Review of

Ethical Practice in Small Communities: Challenges and Rewards for Psychologists
by Janet A. Schank and Thomas M. Skovholt

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Reviewed by

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What's an ethically minded psychologist to do when a request for psychotherapy is made by someone whom the psychologist knows in another context? The potential client may be a colleague at a small college, a member of the same church, part of the same local gay or lesbian community, or part of the same military unit. For several decades, it appeared that the only right thing to do was to avoid the multiple relationship and refer the potential client to another professional. This, of course, presumes that there is another colleague to refer to and that this practice fits the community values in which the psychologist practices.

Anyone who has ever practiced within a rural community has faced this dilemma on a regular basis. To survive in rural practice, psychologists previously had to engage in multiple relationships, but they made sure not to talk about it at professional meetings and to hang their collective head low when the next ethics workshop speaker reminded them of the shady practice of multiple relationships. What rural psychologists have discovered more recently is that these ethical dilemmas are faced by many psychologists who practice in various small communities. The major contribution of Janet A. Schank and Thomas M. Skovholt's book, Ethical Practice in Small Communities: Challenges and Rewards for Psychologists, is documenting that this practice is common. What once may have been thought of as a unique characteristic of rural practice is now seen as part of psychological practice in a variety of small communities—military; feminist; gay, lesbian, bisexual, or transgendered; religious; small colleges; and law enforcement.

This book grew out of the dissertation research Schank conducted under the mentoring of Skovholt at the University of Minnesota. Schank interviewed several rural psychologists about ethical dilemmas for her dissertation research, and in this book the focus has been broadened to examine additional small communities. Schank and Skovholt's collaboration on this book in itself represents their changing roles from student–teacher to protégé–mentor to colleagues.

Although the focus of the book is on practice in small communities, there is a brief but helpful review of the development of the American Psychological Association (APA) Ethics Code (APA, 2002; see also APA Web site version at http://www.apa.org/ethics/). Because many of the dilemmas of small-community practice deal with overlapping relationships, specific attention is given to the evolution of the APA Ethics Code in regard to multiple relationships. Prominence is given to this current Ethics Code, which provides more clarity regarding multiple relationships than did previous versions (see 1992 APA Ethics Code at http://www.apa.org/ethics/).
This is particularly relevant to the book because "about half of the complaints that came before the APA Ethics Committee involved boundary or role conflicts" (p. 27).

These authors clearly know what makes multiple relationships problematic, and they cite many reasons to avoid these relationships when possible. However, they also recognize the embedded values of small communities. These communities often devalue anonymity and embrace intimate knowledge of one another. As the authors point out, in small communities, people often seek treatment because they know the psychologist or someone being treated by the psychologist (p. 45). To practice effectively, a psychologist has to recognize and have some level of comfort with the local norms and values of the community. Thus, the ethical dilemmas of small-community practice are not so much in terms of the amount of out-of-therapy contact a psychologist has with a client as it is with whether the psychologist and client can stay in their appropriate roles (p. 56).

In addition to role confusion, other dangers of small-community practice include temptations to practice beyond one's competence because of limited professional resources, burnout, isolation, and bartering. Although these dangers can exist in any practice, they are more likely in small communities.

Following an extensive chapter on rural practice, the authors address issues relevant to other specific small communities. Many of the ethical concerns are consistent across these communities, but issues specific to each area are addressed. Their section on communities of color and cultural–ethnic communities was particularly helpful in pointing out the necessity for psychologists to practice ethically while accommodating the cultural context, values, and beliefs of their clients.

After describing three ethical decision-making models, the authors provide 16 strategies to consider when practicing in small communities. These strategies are helpful in stimulating thoughtful deliberation and introspection for practicing psychologists. They further address ways to deal with the posttherapy relationship, which is another dynamic of small-community practice.

This book provides a positive perspective on small-community practice. Rather than engendering fear, as often happens in ethics workshops, this book provides practical guidance for dealing with real-life dilemmas. It affirms the complexity of small-community practice while demonstrating ways that ethical principles can support good decision making. There are numerous examples and anecdotes (perhaps too many) that come from the actual experiences of psychologists. These are not court cases or legal briefs, so it will be easy for many psychologists to relate to the situations described.

This book will be useful to those who practice in small communities as well as to faculty who teach courses on professional ethics. The affirmation of small-community practice combined with the practical strategies for evaluating ethical dilemmas will be useful to many who are in or anticipate being in professional practice.

Reference