Ethical guidelines for managing professional boundaries and multiple relationships

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1. **Introduction**

1.1. In the course of their professional lives psychologists frequently face the potential for multiple relationships, a situation which may occur in all fields of psychology. These Guidelines identify the ethical issues and clarify the responsibilities of psychologists that emerge when they are managing professional boundaries and multiple relationships.

1.2. These Guidelines also inform psychologists about the importance of managing multiple relationships with the highest regard for the welfare of their clients, and the need to be alert to risk factors in their professional practice (Knapp & Slattery, 2004).

1.3. The APS Code of Ethics (2007) defines multiple relationships as those that occur when a psychologist rendering a psychological service to a client also is, or has been:
   (a) in a non-professional relationship with the same client;
   (b) in a different professional relationship with the same client;
   (c) in a non-professional relationship with an associated party; or
   (d) a recipient of a service provided by the same client.

Refer to the Code, General Principle C: Integrity

Explanatory Statement

...Psychologists are aware of their own biases, limits to their objectivity, and the importance of maintaining proper boundaries with clients. They identify and avoid potential conflicts of interest. They refrain from exploiting clients and associated parties.

1.4. Multiple relationships per se are not necessarily unethical, and some multiple relationships are unavoidable. However, psychologists are aware that being in a multiple relationship has the potential for adversely affecting clients.

1.5. Psychologists are often called upon to provide services, support or advice in other contexts or roles from their usual professional role. Further, in some settings such as contained communities and remote or regional communities, psychologists are more likely to encounter situations where they might form multiple relationships with their clients. In such situations psychologists maintain clear roles and clear professional boundaries.

Refer to the Ethical guidelines for psychological practice in rural and remote settings (2016).

2. **Conflict of interest**

Refer to the Code, standard C.3. Conflict of interest.

C.3.1. Psychologists refrain from engaging in multiple relationships that may:
   (a) impair their competence, effectiveness, objectivity, or ability to render a psychological service;
   (b) harm clients or other parties to a psychological service; or
   (c) lead to the exploitation of clients or other parties to a psychological service.

C.3.2. Psychologists who are at risk of violating standard C.3.1. consult with a senior psychologist to attempt to find an appropriate resolution that is in the best interests of the parties to the psychological service.

C.3.3. When entering into a multiple relationship is necessary due to over-riding ethical considerations, organisational requirements, or the law, psychologists at the outset of the professional relationship, and thereafter when it is reasonably necessary, adhere to the provisions of standard A.3. (Informed consent).

2.1. Psychologists exercise sound professional judgement when managing multiple relationships in order to avoid any potential for exploitation or harm to clients, and to ensure the effectiveness of the psychological service. Psychologists clarify the boundaries of the professional relationship with clients in order to minimise the potential for conflicts of interest.

2.2. Psychologists are vigilant whenever a potential multiple relationship may occur, and they take the time to assess the ethical appropriateness of such a relationship. Psychologists consider consulting with a senior psychologist or colleague before providing a psychological service to a client if there is likely to be a multiple relationship or a conflict of interest.
2.3. The responsibility for maintaining professional boundaries rests with the psychologist, not the client. Psychologists exercise sound professional judgement in all situations in order to respect their client’s autonomy while avoiding harm to the client.

2.4. Psychologists identify any potential conflicts of interest related to a psychological service, and take appropriate steps to resolve them. When determining the appropriateness of engaging in a multiple relationship, psychologists consider:

- their personal motive and what, if anything, they stand to gain through the multiple relationship with the client (Lamb, Catanzaro, & Moorman, 2003; 2004);
- whether their personal needs are taking precedence over the needs of the client;
- whether or not entering into the multiple relationship is necessary or can be avoided;
- the potential for the multiple relationship to cause harm to the client;
- the extent to which the multiple relationship may prove beneficial to the client;
- the inherent power differential in a professional relationship which impacts on other potential interactions with a client;
- whether there is a risk that the multiple relationship could disrupt the effectiveness of the psychological service;
- how objective the psychologist can be in evaluating the matter (Gottlieb & Younggren, 2009).

2.5. Where a multiple relationship is identified, all relevant parties are informed if there is potential for a conflict of interest. If a client wishes to proceed with the psychological service, a plan for managing the situation in the best interests of the client is discussed and documented. Psychologists consider seeking independent advice from a senior psychologist or colleague to support their professional judgement, and ensure that the welfare of the client is not compromised.

Refer to the Code, standard B.11. Termination of psychological services

B.11.3. Psychologists make reasonable arrangements for the continuity of service provision when they are no longer able to deliver the psychological service.

2.6. Psychologists may determine that the best course of action is to discontinue providing the psychological service to their client. If this decision is made, psychologists manage the termination and/or referral process in a sensitive and responsible manner.

3. Multiple clients

Refer to the Code, standard B.5. Provision of psychological services to multiple clients.

B.5. Psychologists who agree to provide psychological services to multiple clients:

(a) explain to each client the limits to confidentiality in advance;
(b) give clients an opportunity to consider the limitations of the situation;
(c) obtain clients’ explicit acceptance of these limitations; and
(d) ensure as far as possible, that no client is coerced to accept these limitations.

Refer to the Code, standard B.4. Provision of psychological services at the request of a third party.

B.4. Psychologists who agree to provide psychological services to an individual, group of people, system, community or organisation at the request of a third party, at the outset explain to all parties concerned:

(a) the nature of the relationship with each of them;
(b) the psychologist’s role (such as, but not limited to, case manager, consultant, counsellor, expert witness, facilitator, forensic assessor, supervisor, teacher/educator, therapist);
(c) the probable uses of the information obtained;
(d) the limits to confidentiality;

... When psychologists work with multiple clients they are alert to the possibility that there may be an increased risk of multiple relationships forming. For example, psychologists may take referrals from third parties (e.g., lawyers, medical practitioners, teachers, human resources managers, etc.) with whom they may also be in a non-professional relationship (e.g., a friend, a relative, a neighbour, etc.).

Refer to Ethical guidelines for psychological services involving multiple clients (2014).
4. Confidentiality

Refer to the Code, standard A.5 Confidentiality

A.5.1. Psychologists safeguard the confidentiality of information obtained during their provision of psychological services. Considering their legal and organisational requirements, psychologists:

(a) make provisions for maintaining confidentiality in the collection, recording, accessing, storage, dissemination, and disposal of information;
...

A.5.3. Psychologists inform clients at the outset of the professional relationship, and as regularly thereafter as is reasonably necessary, of the:

(a) limits to confidentiality; and
(b) foreseeable uses of the information generated in the course of the relationship.

4.1. In the case of a multiple relationship, when psychologists have a non-professional relationship with an associated party, they take particular care to maintain confidentiality of the client’s information. Psychologists do not allow their non-professional relationship with the associated party to undermine or adversely affect the delivery of psychological services to the client.

4.2. In the case of a multiple relationship with a client, psychologists release information to other parties only with the informed consent of the client, and only when required for the benefit of the client and the effectiveness of the psychological service, unless required by law.

4.3. Psychologists are mindful that information gained through one role or relationship with a client is not divulged in any other role or relationship, unless agreed to by the client.

4.4. Where psychologists provide psychological services to the same client through more than one funding stream they discuss with the client the potential benefits and disadvantages of linking or keeping separate the records relating to the different services.

5. Professional boundaries

Refer to the Code, standard B.3. Responsibility.

B.3. Psychologists provide psychological services in a responsible manner. Having regard to the nature of the psychological services they are providing, psychologists:

(a) act with the care and skill expected of a competent psychologist;
(b) take responsibility for the reasonably foreseeable consequences of their conduct;
(c) take reasonable steps to prevent harm occurring as a result of their conduct;
...
(e) are personally responsible for the professional decisions they make;
(f) take reasonable steps to ensure that their services and products are used appropriately and responsibly;
(g) are aware of, and take steps to establish and maintain proper professional boundaries with clients and colleagues; and
(h) regularly review the contractual arrangements with clients and where circumstances change, make relevant modifications as necessary with the informed consent of the client.

Refer to the Code, standard A.2. Respect.

A.2.1. In the course of their conduct, psychologists:

(a) communicate respect for other people through their actions and language;
(b) do not behave in a manner that, having regard to the context, may reasonably be perceived as coercive or demeaning;
(c) respect the legal rights and moral rights of others; and
(d) do not denigrate the character of people by engaging in conduct that demeans them as persons, or defames, or harasses them.

5.1. Psychologists take responsibility to establish a clear framework for working with clients and maintaining clear professional boundaries (Barnett, Lazarus, Vasquez, Moorehead-Slaughter, & Johnson, 2007; Ivey & Doeges, 2013; Knowles, 2014). They establish professional boundaries at the outset of the psychological service by clearly communicating to clients the nature of the services to be provided, and outlining their role, the limits to confidentiality, how information will be used and stored, and the financial arrangements. This process provides
the foundation for an effective professional relationship, enabling informed consent and fostering a sense of trust and safety for the client.

5.2. Psychologists actively monitor and maintain their professional boundaries throughout the provision of psychological services. Psychologists recognise that some clients will test, challenge or violate boundaries during the provision of a psychological service. They also recognise that psychologists with well-established boundaries and role clarity are better able to provide a competent psychological service in their client’s best interests.

5.3. When managing professional boundaries, psychologists consider the following questions to help clarify whether they are acting in the best interests of their client:
- am I overstepping my limits of competence?
- is there a possibility of a conflict of interest developing?
- am I self-disclosing more than usual?
- am I finding it difficult to stay in my professional role?
- am I providing a different level or quality of professional service than is indicated for the client’s situation?
- are any of my current personal difficulties adversely influencing my professional objectivity?
- am I avoiding discussing the client in supervision?

Refer to the Code, standard C.4. Non-exploitation.

C.4.3. Psychologists:
(a) do not engage in sexual activity with a client or anybody who is closely related to one of their clients;
(b) do not engage in sexual activity with a former client, or anybody who is closely related to one of their clients, within two years after terminating the professional relationship with the former client;
(c) who wish to engage in sexual activity with former clients after a period of two years from the termination of the service, first explore with a senior psychologist the possibility that the former client may be vulnerable and at risk of exploitation, and encourage the former client to seek independent counselling on the matter; and
(d) do not accept as a client a person with whom they have engaged in sexual activity.

5.4. Psychologists are aware that the Code specifically prohibits sexual activity with current clients, and prohibits sexual activity with former clients within a two year period after the professional relationship has ended. This matter is also referred to in the Ethical guidelines on the prohibition of sexual relationships with clients (2007), and will not be addressed further in this document.

6. Risk factors for boundary violations

6.1. Professional settings

6.1.1. Work setting
Psychologists are mindful of the effects of location when delivering a psychological service. Where possible, psychologists provide appropriate venues to conduct their psychological services based on the needs of the client group, and avoid venues that allow the potential for confidentiality to be breached, or create a lack of privacy that interferes with the provision of the psychological service. Psychologists who work with clients in settings such as residential or community care facilities take steps to ensure there is as much privacy as possible, and check that the client is satisfied with the level of privacy that can be achieved. They respect the client’s right to refuse the psychological service if the client is not satisfied with the level of privacy available.

6.1.2. Home office
Psychologists are particularly aware of the potential for blurred boundaries when working from home offices because the clients may gain insights into the psychologist’s private life, which can cause boundary confusion for each party (Maroda, 2006; Schank & Skovolt, 2006). Psychologists with home offices manage their work setting carefully to avoid their clients being exposed to inappropriate personal information about the psychologist.

6.1.3. Psychologists practising in small or contained communities
When psychologists and their clients live in a small or contained community, some multiple relationships may be inevitable (Schank & Skovolt, 2006). Psychologists potentially socialise, shop and take part in community activities with clients, former clients, and clients’ families and friends. In such situations, at the outset of the service psychologists discuss how to manage the multiple relationship with the client. When encountering clients in other settings psychologists demonstrate respect for their client and are especially mindful of client confidentiality (Malone & Dyck, 2011).
6.1.4. Providing supervision

The supervisor/supervisee relationship poses particular challenges for psychologists, who are aware of the power differential and potential conflicts of interest in that relationship. The supervision relationship can be further complicated when the supervising psychologist also employs the supervisee, when the supervisee is paying for supervision as part of meeting the requirements for registration or area of practice endorsement in a contract of service arrangement, or when the supervisor is assessing the supervisee as a part of a university course requirement. Psychologists clearly establish with their supervisees what each can expect from the supervisory relationship. Psychologists anticipate the potential conflicts of interest between multiple roles, and with their supervisee/employee outline a clear process for managing such conflicts. Psychologists do not engage in psychological assessment, therapy, intimate relationships or business ventures with their supervisees. When the supervision is being provided within an organisational setting, the psychologist clarifies with the employer and the employee the process and requirements for reporting any concerns.

Refer to Ethical guidelines on supervision (2013).

6.2. Financial arrangements

6.2.1. Psychologists are aware that accepting goods or other non-monetary remuneration from clients in return for psychological services can create the potential for conflict and exploitation within the professional relationship. Psychologists are responsible for foreseeing the potential risks and benefits of bartering arrangements and the suitability and sustainability of the practice over the longer term, including the potential for harm to the professional relationship if the bartering arrangement breaks down.

6.2.2. Psychologists avoid entering into business or other commercial partnerships with clients because such arrangements have the potential to compromise the professional relationship.

6.2.3. Notwithstanding section 6.2.2., psychologists who provide supervision under a commercial arrangement carefully consider the ethical implications of such arrangements and ensure that the focus of the supervision is to benefit the supervisee.

Refer to Ethical guidelines regarding financial dealings and fair trading (2012).

6.3. Family and friends

All clients are entitled to objective psychological services that focus on their best interests. Hence, psychologists avoid providing psychological services where they have a pre-existing and/or ongoing relationship, (e.g. family or friends) that may impair their judgement, independence or objectivity towards the client. However, in the absence of other options and when harm is imminent if action is not taken, psychologists may provide a psychological service to family or friends.

6.4. Former clients

Psychologists are responsible for carefully assessing the risks and benefits of any form of future relationship with a former client, and for ensuring that the former client will not be adversely affected. Prior to engaging in a social, financial, or business contact with a former client, psychologists consider:
• the extent to which they and the former client can establish an equitable relationship;
• whether the former client is dependent on the psychologist in any way;
• whether the former client may want to re-establish a professional relationship in the future;
• the nature of the past psychological service (e.g., counselling, supervision);
• the duration of the previous professional relationship;
• the potential for the new relationship to undermine the effectiveness of the past psychological service.

6.5. Multiple professional roles

Psychologists can be qualified as members of two or more professions or occupations. Psychologists avoid working in multiple professional roles with the same client because there is a strong risk of role confusion for both client and psychologist.
6.6. Multiple psychological services

*Psychologists* inform their *clients* about the type of role they are performing. They avoid situations which may require them to provide more than one *psychological service* to the same *client*, such as being a treating practitioner and a forensic assessor. When a *psychologist* is requested to engage in multiple roles, the advantages and disadvantages are discussed with the *client*.

6.7. Social media

6.7.1. Professional use of social media
*Psychologists* make a clear distinction between their professional and personal use of social media, and ideally maintain separate professional and personal social media profiles. When using social media for professional purposes, they use the same standards as they would for professional public disclosure via any other medium. *Psychologists* are aware that their disclosure of private information on professional social media sites may compromise the effectiveness of the *psychological services* they offer (Tunick, Mednick, & Conroy, 2011). They give careful consideration to the nature, impact and consequences of the information they publish on social media sites and what information they obtain about *clients’* social media sites (Taylor, McMinn, Bufford, & Chang, 2010).

Refer to *Ethical guidelines for providing psychological services and products using the internet and telecommunications technologies* (2011).

6.7.2. Personal use of social media
*Psychologists* are aware of the potential detrimental impact on the *professional relationship* if *clients* are able to access the *psychologist’s* personal information from the *psychologist’s* own social media sites.

6.8. Self

6.8.1. Self-disclosure
While self-disclosure may be beneficial in some *client* relationships and in some cultural contexts, *psychologists* are aware of the potential for self-disclosure to also lead to a compromising of professional boundaries (Audet, 2011). Self-disclosure can draw the *psychologist* into a personal relationship with a *client* with whom they have, or are building, a *professional relationship*. Prior to disclosing personal information, *psychologists* examine their motivations for self-disclosure, the potential impact on the *client*, and ensure that any self-disclosure is for the benefit of the *client*.

6.8.2. Lack of self-care
Providing *psychological services* can often be stressful. *Psychologists* may concurrently experience personal stressors which can impact on their work. *Psychologists* monitor their own levels of stress, and regularly attend to self-care to avoid lapses in professional judgment.

6.9. Other factors

6.9.1. Physical contact
*Psychologists* are aware that any physical contact needs to be culturally appropriate and acceptable to the *client*, and that there may be differences in interpretation between men and women regarding touch. Motivational factors underlying decisions to engage in physical contact should also be considered. For example, from some perspectives a reassuring touch may be considered an appropriate response with certain *clients* in some situations. However, *psychologists* appreciate the potential for misinterpretation by *clients* of any physical contact.

Refer to *Ethical guidelines relating to procedures/assessments that involve psychologist-client physical contact* (2006).

6.9.2. Emergency situations
In an emergency situation regarding a person with whom a *psychologist* has or has had a previous connection, the *psychologist* assesses whether the potential risks associated with that person receiving no *psychological service* are greater than the potential risks of providing a *psychological service* to the person. In such situations *psychologists* document:

- informed consent from the *client*;
- the reasons for the decision to provide a *psychological service* to the person with whom they have or have had a previous connection;
- advice they have received from a senior colleague before making the decision to provide a *psychological service*;
- the lack of alternative service providers; and
- any other issues of concern.
7. Summary

While some multiple relationships may be inevitable and are not necessarily unethical, they can potentially lead to impaired judgment, and sometimes inferior or harmful service delivery. Therefore, if a multiple relationship is necessary or has arisen, psychologists manage the relationship so that the benefits to the client(s) are maintained and the potential for harm is diminished. The responsibility for maintaining professional boundaries rests with the psychologist, not the client.

8. References

Australian Psychological Society. (2015). Ethical guidelines for the provision of psychological services for, and the conduct of research with, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. Melbourne: Author.

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