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# **Professional Work in Remote Northern Communities: A Social Work Perspective**

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**Professional Work in Remote, Northern Communities:  
A Social Work Perspective**

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**Title: PROFESSIONAL WORK IN REMOTE, NORTHERN COMMUNITIES: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE**

**Abstract**

It is a challenge to recruit and retain good employees. In northern and remote parts of Canada the challenge is readily apparent when it involves the recruitment and retention of professional workers. Part of the difficulty might be attributed to the urban base of most professional education programs. However, whether education is based in the urban south or in the north, it is important that students in professional education programs develop and learn what it is like to work in an isolated community. This article discusses some of the challenges that are unique to the personal aspect of professional practice in a northern environment. The challenges include factors such as high visibility, high accessibility, dual or multiple relationships, access to too much information, heightened scrutiny by community members, increased responsibility, and limited access to professional development. These challenges are common to a range of professions, but for the purposes of this discussion, they will be examined primarily from the perspective of social work. Examples are drawn from the author's personal practice experience.

**Key Words**

Community, location, north, professional, remote, role, space, worker

## **PROFESSIONAL WORK IN REMOTE, NORTHERN COMMUNITIES: A SOCIAL WORK PERSPECTIVE**

Work in the northern and remote parts of Canada presents some unique challenges and opportunities. The nature of the work experience is also related to the role played by individual workers. People employed in professional roles face challenges that are different from those employed in non-professional work. Before examining the nature of the challenges it is important to gain a sense of what is meant by north, or northern and remote, or remoteness.

Canada is described as a northern country although the concept of 'northern' is somewhat difficult to define. Geographers like Louis Hamelin (1979) attempted to define the concepts of north or northern through a process of quantification that involved a number of elements or criteria. Latitude, temperature, vegetation, and types of transportation are a few of the criteria that Hamelin included in the development of the Polar Value Scale designed to measure the degree of nordicity in terms of a particular place or community. However, Hamelin noted that the idea of north or northern is inclined to be fairly subjective and relative. For example, if a new graduate from the University of Toronto were to obtain employment and relocate to Prince George, British Columbia, the person might describe Prince George as northern compared to Toronto. On the other hand, another young person who moves to Prince George from Dease Lake British Columbia might be inclined to believe that Prince George is part of the urban south.

Graham (1990) notes that the definition of north or northern is difficult. She refers to Hamelin as well as others that have attempted to arrive at an acceptable definition. Graham notes that a definition that can be widely agreed upon is difficult to achieve.

For the purposes of this discussion, the concept of north is considered to be subjective but it will be used in conjunction with the idea of remoteness. The concept of remoteness is also a difficult term to define as the meaning varies according to people and contexts. The Australian Bureau of Statistics (2003) noted "there is no widely accepted standard which determines just exactly where the 'city' becomes the 'country' ie. how remote is remote" (p. 5). The Australian Bureau of Statistics also recognizes that the idea of remoteness is contextual and relative. This means that while Tasmania might be considered a remote part of Australia, within Tasmania there are communities that are not considered remote and others that are regarded as remote. Huskey (2006) asks, "What makes a place a remote region? Like any good economist my answer is, it depends (p. 148).

The concept of remoteness may be regarded negatively, or at least understood in terms of deficiency. Meir, a social geographer who was interested in nomadic Bedouin groups, presented the idea of remoteness as the 'tyranny of space', at least in terms of its impact on social service delivery. Berman (2006) also described some obstacles to delivery of social services that result from remoteness. These include things like distance as well as cultural separation. The latter problem develops when service providers travel

to remote communities from distant locations. There may be a lack of understanding pertaining to local practices and local communication. Turbett (2006) compared social work in remote parts of Scotland and Atlantic Canada. He noted that climate can also contribute to the idea of remoteness especially winter conditions that may cut off communities for periods of time.

It is fair to say that the concept of remoteness generally applies to communities that are removed from major population and service centres. For purposes of this discussion it is assumed that remote communities don't have a full range of services that people in urban centres take for granted. Access to health care or access to a range of retail goods requires the community residents to travel to a larger centre where goods and services are available. This idea of being removed may also vary with the season and weather conditions. Residents of a community that are able to access a major population centre within a couple of hours by car might not be regarded as living in a remote or isolated community in the summer when driving conditions are good. However, during the months of winter when weather can restrict movement, residents of the same community may feel very isolated and cut off from the rest of the world.

When a community is remote and northern, the community may also be fairly isolated in terms of proximity to other communities. This may serve to strengthen the sense of localism or sense of place. Residents of the community are contained as it were and they live and work in fairly close proximity to one another. This use of space is different than what one might experience in more densely populated rural areas where communities are in close proximity. In that type of situation residents can easily choose to work in one community and live in another. This is important in that it means people can achieve a degree of separation between the space of employment and the personal space. In remote, northern communities this is more difficult to achieve as the community will generally be small and community members are highly visible to each other. The range of activity space is limited (Golledge & Stimson, 1997). Agnew (2005) argues that the ideas or concepts of space and place must be seen as related. He says that place is often associated with the world of the past; it is a specific location. Space is the world of the present and the future; it is more abstract and associated with experience of the location.

This discussion is based on some assumptions and generalizations regarding northern and remote communities. The communities are actual places but the space or personal experience of the place creates a set of phenomena that are unique to the remote, northern location. First it is assumed that northern and remote communities often depend on a single major industry such as forestry or mining. In the case of First Nations communities, and some non-First Nations communities, residents may pursue a traditional lifestyle of hunting, gathering, and trapping, supplemented by tourism, fishing, or other forms of work that tend to be seasonal in nature. Second it is assumed that the communities lack services and where certain services are available the selection or choice may be limited or there may only be one option. A third assumption that follows is that the number of professionals is small. This contributes to factors such as high visibility.

Professionals who work in remote, northern communities, face a number of challenges that are arguably unique to the work experience in an isolated community. For purposes of this discussion, the focus will be on social work but the principles apply to other professionals. Certain factors may be more exaggerated for social workers given the nature of their work but the issues also affect other professionals and workers in remote isolated communities. The concept of high visibility is one key factor that affects social workers and other professionals and will be discussed at greater length. In addition to high visibility there are other factors that come into play. These include high accessibility, dual or multiple relationships, access to too much information, heightened scrutiny by community members, increased responsibility, and limited access to professional development.

### **Visibility**

High visibility is a reality of life in the small, isolated community. All community members are affected in that people tend to have a fairly good idea of what transpires in the lives of others who share the same locale or living space. In larger cities there is a degree of anonymity and people can literally live for years in large apartment complexes without ever seeing their neighbours, let alone getting to know their neighbours, or developing a sense of what happens in their neighbours' personal lives. The reasons for high visibility in isolated, northern communities are fairly obvious. In communities with only one or two grocery stores, maybe one or two schools, one day care and so on, people's paths cross and people have access to details of others' personal lives that they would not have in a larger centre.

This reality is not new. In Canadian history certain individuals always had a visible and noticeable presence. The Northwest Mounted Police officers, the Indian agent, the missionary, priest, or cleric, the school teacher, the Hudson Bay store manager, all were officials that had a high profile and within small isolated communities they were highly visible. Their behaviour and actions were in the public domain and any personal indiscretions would be duly noted. In short, life in a small, isolated village or town meant that you had to be prepared to give up any pretence of anonymity and personal privacy was difficult if not impossible to achieve. The same conditions are apparent in contemporary northern and remote Canadian communities.

This is not necessarily a bad state and in fact it may be a source of comfort for some residents of small towns. Community members become like a large extended family and their knowledge of personal details can translate into a broader net of support and concern. However, this situation might also represent a problem in that the person who craves and desires privacy will find that state difficult to achieve. This fact has a particular resonance with professional workers such as social workers. Consider for a moment the social worker that works in child protection or child welfare and carries a caseload of parents who have difficulty in parenting. One of the social worker's tasks might be instructing those parents in parenting skills and helping and coaching the parents to develop appropriate forms of discipline that provide alternatives to techniques that may be abusive or unhealthy for their children. If this same social worker has a two-

year old child who throws a tantrum while shopping with their social worker parent, the scene in the one local grocery store will be highly visible to community members, including any clients who might be in the store at the same time. The mystique that can be created through educational and professional credentials will suddenly be swept away as people realize that the social worker does not have the answers and things aren't quite as easy as the social worker described during the last meeting about parenting skills.

Another case in point that might affect professionals working in northern or remote communities relates to the use of alcohol. Excessive and irresponsible alcohol consumption is associated with a range of social ills and health problems. Driving offences, motor vehicle accidents, incidents of violence, relationship issues, and employment and financial concerns can be some of the social consequences of alcohol misuse. Fetal alcohol spectrum disorder, alcohol related depression, physical injuries, and cirrhosis are just a few of the health problems that arise from alcohol misuse. Professionals like social workers, community health nurses, clergy, and police often deal with alcohol misuse and its consequences. Although the past few decades have seen a growth in the concept of harm reduction and responsible social drinking, there remains a strong ethos or belief that abstinence is the only way to deal with alcohol misuse. For the professional who is a moderate drinker and enjoys the occasional glass of wine with a meal or a bottle of beer on a hot day, access to alcohol may only be through one retail outlet in the community. Given the high levels of visibility, community members, including clients, may become aware of a professional who purchases or uses alcohol. Some people might consider this unacceptable and the credibility of a given professional may suffer as a result. In a larger community with multiple retail outlets this is rarely if ever a concern. Lifestyle and habits are often on public display because of the high levels of visibility in small isolated communities. Professionals who relocate from urban centres may find this type of scrutiny intrusive and difficult to deal with. People in the community look for congruence between what a person does and what they might expect or tell others to do. The social worker who refers a client to an alcohol treatment centre may be expected to model the same type of behaviour that he or she expects of the client.

It is also clear that the issue of high visibility affects the spouse and children of the professional. For example, the social worker who provides counselling to parents who have difficulty with a teenager may run into credibility problems if his or her own teen is also engaging in behaviour that might be considered risky or unhealthy. In a larger centre community members and clients are unlikely to know the children of social workers and other professionals, let alone how they behave. However, in a small isolated community the behaviour of the social worker's children and the social worker's spouse or partner are highly visible and may be the subject of community scrutiny and judgment of the social worker. The same consequence extends to other professionals. This can create additional tension within the families of professional workers.

When I worked as a supervisor in social services I had responsibility for social workers and nurses in a number of small isolated communities. One of my supervisees was a single parent who entered a professional career later in life. This person had several teenage children and one of the children experienced some difficulties in school related

to attitude and attendance. This became known in the small community and very quickly community members stopped seeing this worker for assistance with teen management issues. Had the worker lived in a larger centre like Calgary or Vancouver, it is unlikely that any of the worker's clients or potential clients would have known anything about the person's personal family situation.

The issue of high visibility also creates challenges for community members who use health and social services. Certain services may have a degree of stigma attached and in a large centre people can usually hide the fact that they are using the particular service. However, in a small, isolated community this anonymity is more difficult to achieve. People may avoid using a service to avoid the labeling or stigma that result within the community. However, avoidance of the service may produce more serious consequences for the person and this is problematic. For example, there may be one Alcoholics Anonymous group that meets Monday and Wednesday evenings in a local church basement. Everyone in the community knows what happens in the church on those evenings and attendance is visible to community members. People may experience shame because of problems with alcohol misuse and they may wish to hide the fact that they have a problem or at least they may want to deal with that problem in a discrete manner. That desire may be frustrated given the highly visible nature of life in a small, isolated community.

The issue of high visibility is not altogether negative for social workers or other professionals in that the visibility of the clients or service users enables a professional to keep track of a person's progress. People's movements and activities are fairly easy to discern and if a person is engaging in behaviour or doing things that affect their progress, the social worker or other professional will figure it out fairly quickly. An example might involve the young parent who has a problem with drug and alcohol misuse. In instances where the misuse is severe it might be necessary to bring the person's child or children into care as they may need protection from harm or neglect. In situations of this nature the goal is usually one of returning the children to the parent as quickly as possible. This is often achieved by referring the person to a drug and alcohol treatment resource and ensuring that they achieve control over their use of alcohol. In a large city or a densely populated rural area the same strategy might be used. However, the outcome or result will not be as visible. In a small, isolated community with one bar and one liquor outlet it is easier to determine if a person has stopped using alcohol.

The issue of high visibility is a two-edged sword. Clearly there are certain advantages but the disadvantages are also apparent. Professionals moving to work in a small, isolated community need to be aware of this challenge and they have to develop a level of comfort with 'living in a fish bowl.' If one is unable to come to terms with this reality the work and living conditions will be unpleasant and stressful. There is no real escape from the fish bowl existence and workers need to accept and adjust to this reality that affects not only them but also members of their family. If the high visibility is a source of discomfort or concern for a spouse or child, this can lead to conflict and stress where the worker is torn between work and family.

## Accessibility

Accessibility is a closely related concept that influences the lives of professionals who live and work in small, isolated communities. The fact that people know the location of your personal residence leads to a sense of always being 'on call' as leaving the place of work does not mean leaving work. Professionals who can draw a line in the sand may be able to resist this pressure but with some types of employment even if you are able to draw a line in the sand it may still be impossible to resist the entreaties of fellow community members who ask for service. In some types of work this reality can also be frightening and oppressive.

I am reminded of personal experiences that highlight this issue. When I began to work as a child protection social worker in an isolated, northern community, I was advised by my supervisor to avoid listing a home telephone number. The supervisor suggested that I would need privacy and also that I might have to deal with angry people from time to time and it would be best if they could not easily find me after working hours. During my first week of employment I dealt with a number of cases of child abuse. One involved a teenage boy whose adult caregiver hit him during an argument. I worked with this family discussing adolescent development, appropriate responses, and alternative methods of discipline that were more acceptable and appropriate in nature. After my first week of work I was getting ready for bed late in the evening when there was a knock on my apartment door. I went to see who was there and to my surprise the caregiver of the teenage boy was at the door. The person came to see me because the boy had not followed an agreed upon curfew and the caregiver wanted to know what to do. I was taken aback because I couldn't fathom how this person knew where to find me. As a newcomer to this fairly small isolated community I should have realized that finding someone is a relatively easy matter.

One of the people I replaced left the position of employment fairly quickly. One morning this social worker came out the door to find the family dog shot dead in the front yard. The worker did not know who was responsible but at the time this worker was dealing with several clients who had histories of violence. The worker did not want to put their young family at risk and abruptly resigned. This example illustrates the fact that accessibility is not just an issue for the individual professional but it also affects family members. People like social workers or police who work with people on a statutory basis may deal with individuals who are angry and even if they are angry at the perceived injustice of a system, they may target the perceived representative of the system when they express their frustration.

Accessibility leads to levels of stress. This may result from several factors. First there is a sense that one can never truly leave work. People's issues, concerns, and troubles don't fit into a neat 8:30 to 5:00 time slot. If a person is charged with providing support or some other form of intervention the necessity for the activity could occur at any time during the day. People in crisis or facing extremely difficult issues cannot easily index their troubles to fit the defined working hours of the professional. If there is a problem they want to deal with it as quickly as possible.

Like the issue of high visibility, the challenge of accessibility is also a two-edged sword. Just as clients can easily access the social worker, the social worker, or other professional can easily access clients. In a larger centre it is easier to avoid contact if that is the person's desire. However, in small, isolated communities it is not as easy to avoid. Large urban centres allow service users or clients to achieve a sense of anonymity and a degree of privacy. Resources, including human resources, are more plentiful and community members do not have to seek out 'the social worker' or 'the nurse' as there are others to fill and take their places, often within structures that have designated after hours and weekend workers. The reality of work in small, isolated communities is that the 'surveillance' component of work is substantially less difficult. While this is a controversial aspect of work and one which workers would rather not discuss, the reality is that it becomes a necessity, especially in statutory areas such as child welfare, probation, parole, communicable disease control, and other legislated programs. When it is easier 'to keep tabs' on people the job can also become somewhat easier.

Accessibility is a function of the physical space in remote, isolated communities. There are advantages and disadvantages associated with this characteristic. Life in a small town invariably leads to a blurring of boundaries between the professional space and the personal space. When the professional is 'in community' it becomes very difficult to separate personal space from professional or work space. In order to survive and thrive in this type of environment people have to learn to negotiate this particular challenge so as not to become overwhelmed and discouraged.

One way to do this is to set firm boundaries whereby the professional always communicates that there is a clear separation between personal space and work space. For example, one social worker I knew enjoyed playing bingo. The worker was employed in a child protection position in a small, remote community and I asked this person whether or not clients or family members of clients ever tried to discuss personal child welfare issues during the bingo game. The worker indicated that this happened but that it was important to say that this is my time and I will be happy to talk about these matters tomorrow when I'm at work. The worker consistently delivered this message and eventually most people came to understand that this type of discussion had to occur in the social worker's work environment.

Employers and employing agencies can also address the stress that results from accessibility by ensuring that professionals are able to leave the community on a consistent and regular basis. When a person is not in the community it provides some sense of relief and a chance to take a break.

### **Dual and Multiple Relationships**

Dual or multiple relationships present a serious challenge to the professional working in an isolated and remote community. The terms dual and multiple relationships are often used interchangeably. In professions such as social work, psychology, medicine, and nursing, the individuals deal with situations, information, and material of a

highly sensitive and personal nature. A dual relationship is generally regarded as any relationship that exists in addition to the professional helping relationship. The term multiple relationship refers to the same thing although it acknowledges that there may be more than one type of relationship in addition to the professional helping relationship. For example, a social worker may work with a person as a client but that client may also be a neighbour and sit on the same day care board as the social worker. Professional organizations involved in health and social service delivery tend to define dual or multiple relationships in a fairly similar manner. The American Psychological Association (APA, 2002, p. 6) states that:

A multiple relationship occurs when a psychologist is in a professional role with a person and (1) at the same time is in another role with the same person, (2) at the same time is in a relationship with a person closely associated with or related to the person with whom the psychologist has the professional relationship, or (3) promises to enter into another relationship in the future with the person or a person closely associated with or related to the person.

The Board of Registration for Social Workers in British Columbia (BRSW, 2004, p. 8) defines a dual relationship as:

.... a situation in which a social worker, in addition to his/her professional relationship, has one or more other relationships with the client, regardless of whether this occurs prior to, during, or following provision of professional services.

Similar directives and definitions are found within a wide range of professional organizations that deal with sensitive relationships involving a degree of trust and vulnerability on the part of the person or client seeking service. The Canadian Medical Association Code of Ethics (2004, p. 2) states, "Do not exploit patients for personal advantage." The College of Registered Nurses in BC published a document titled *Nurse-Client Relationships* (2006) in which a variety of dual relationships are described ranging from sexual relationships, to friendships, to giving and receiving gifts.

Some aspects of dual relationships are fairly clear. For example, most people understand that a professional should not engage in a sexual relationship with a client. People who seek the services of a nurse, social worker, counselor, physician, member of the clergy, and other helping professionals are often in a position of need and vulnerability. They trust the professional to provide them with the required care, information, or advice. The relationship is one in which the professional has power over the client or patient and as such, there is always the potential for abuse or exploitation. Sexual abuse or using the power over relationship to develop a sexual relationship is a possibility and one that is a serious concern for professional regulatory bodies. In all small, isolated communities this concern is regarded just as seriously as it might be in large urban communities.

Matters become more complicated when looking at non-sexual dual relationships. Authors representing different professional disciplines have discussed the problems and challenges associated with this factor (Brownlee, 1996; Taylor & Brownlee, 2000; Scopelliti et al., 2004; Sidell, 2008). Non-sexual dual relationships run through a wide range of social situations and while non-sexual dual relationships can arise and do arise

in larger urban centres, the frequency and complicated nature of these factors become more pronounced in isolated, northern communities. Examples of non-sexual dual relationships might include being a business customer, a friend, a neighbour, mutual involvement in a community organization such as a church, service club, athletic organization, school, day care and so on, lending and borrowing money, and receiving or being offered gifts. Some specific examples serve to highlight the challenges associated with dual relationships.

*Example 1*

*A social worker is employed in a child protection position with responsibility for investigating reported cases of child abuse and child neglect. The social worker is asked to investigate a case of child abuse involving the coach of a hockey team. The social worker's son plays on the same hockey team.*

*Example 2*

*A school counselor has been providing counseling to a grade 8 student who has been very disruptive in school. The child's father doesn't like the school counselor. The father works as the town's only plumber. The school counselor needs to have a new sink installed and must contact the only plumber.*

*Example 3*

*A local member of the clergy has been counselling an adult woman who reported that she thinks she was sexually abused by her stepfather when she was 10 years old. The member of the clergy has been encouraging the woman to report the matter to the police but she is hesitant as her memory of the event is not clear. The clergy member discovers that his 9 year old child plays with another child at the woman's stepfather's home.*

*Example 4*

*A psychologist lends a good friend \$2000.00. Several weeks later the friend's 8 year old daughter is referred for an assessment.*

*Example 5*

*A public health nurse provided service to a First Nations family pertaining to a newborn that was having difficulty feeding. The problem was resolved and the family was very grateful. The family offers the nurse gifts of moose meat and smoked salmon.*

*Example 6*

*A doctor treats a 40 year old man for depression and suicidal ideation. The man's mood improves and the suicidal thoughts disappear. The man invites the doctor and his family over for dinner.*

Many of these examples can arise in larger centres but the likelihood is diminished. Not only is it less likely that situations of this nature will develop but if they do, it is often possible to refer the matter to a colleague and avoid the dual relationship or conflict of interest. The restricted space and movement in small, isolated communities tend to promote and create these types of challenges. Strict and literal adherence to codes of ethics can obligate the professional to avoid the dual relationship at all costs. However, if

this is the chosen course of action it has the potential to produce unintended consequences. Refusal of a gift or dinner invitation might be seen as an insult. The helping professional who wishes to avoid possible conflicts associated with dual relationships may become increasingly withdrawn to the point where the person fails to engage with the community. Community members may come to regard the professional as snobbish, or isolated, or as disengaged from community. This can have serious consequences for credibility and acceptance within the community. The closeness and familiarity that develops in a small, isolated community can have benefits related to knowledge and awareness as noted earlier in the discussion regarding accessibility and visibility, however, there are also clear challenges.

The struggle with dual or multiple relationships typically arises out of conflict between the professional role and the personal role. Codes of ethics are designed to protect the public from unscrupulous or inappropriate behaviour by professionals. They are also designed to offer guidelines and guidance to professional workers. Codes of ethics and ethical guidelines are typically developed in urban centres by people who reside in those urban centres. As a result, the reality of living in a small, isolated community may not necessarily be considered or represented in the construction of the ethical rules and guidelines. In small, isolated, northern communities dual and multiple relationships are unavoidable (Delaney et al., 1997). The nature of space and location has a direct influence on the professional's work. Role conflict may arise and this creates stress for the professional with clear potential for an existential crisis. The person may have to consider what it means to be both a community member and a professional worker and how those roles can be reconciled when they seem to conflict.

This is a complex problem and that needs to be addressed by educators, as well as professional regulators. Educators need to discuss the concept of dual or multiple relationships as they occur in remote, northern communities. Students need to work through practice examples so they are familiar with the issues and can make the best possible decisions when they become professional practitioners. Regulators must become more aware of the differences between the work environment in urban centres and in remote, northern communities. This awareness can lead to improved Codes of Ethics that are more sensitive to the reality of remote, northern practice.

### **Access to Too Much Information**

The geographic location of work can also influence the nature of information that is accessible to the professional. In large centres like Greater Vancouver or Toronto there are many health and social services offices. Workers in those offices may have some access to knowledge and information relating to people who are clients of the agency but the workers may not encounter the clients outside of the working relationship. More isolated communities that are smaller in population size present a different picture. Information that enters into the agency or organization system is information that pertains to people who are not just clients. They are people who may be neighbours, friends, or associates in various other roles. This reality has some practical implications that may present difficulties from an ethical perspective.

As an example, it might be useful to consider the following situation:

*Example 7*

*A social worker lives in a small, isolated, northern community of about 2000 people. The office is small. The worker is employed to recruit, train, and supervise foster parents. There are two other workers in the office who work in the area of child protection. They are responsible for investigating reports of child abuse and neglect. Each morning the three workers have a brief meeting to go over new intakes. One morning the workers discuss a report submitted from a school about a 9 year old child who exhibits inappropriate behaviour that is highly sexualized in nature. The child has not disclosed any abuse but the school is alarmed and suspects that something must have happened to the child. The social worker that looks after the foster parents recognizes the child's name. The social worker realizes that their own 9 year old child plays with the child and has spent time at the child's home.*

In this example the access to information presents the social worker/parent with an ethical dilemma. There is no substantiation of abuse at this point in time but there is concern about behaviour that may suggest abuse or inappropriate exposure to sexual activity. Because the social worker's child plays with the child under question there may be a safety concern for the social worker's child though at this time there is no substantiation of injurious or harmful behaviour, let alone association with a particular individual or individuals. However, this case example provides some idea of the challenges that can arise with access to too much information. It is a condition that applies to living in small, isolated communities and rarely arises in large urban centres. In larger centres access to information does not occur in the same way given the size of organizations and agencies as well as the size of client caseloads. In larger centres the concepts of space and location are generally different in that social workers or other helping professionals often live away from the area in which they work. As a result, contact is less likely between a client and the social worker's family members. It is important to remember that social workers and other professionals are under obligation to respect the confidentiality of information. What is knowledge at work cannot be broadcast to people outside of the agency or work environment. This includes family members. To do otherwise is a breach of confidentiality and this can lead to disciplinary procedures within the profession as well as the place of employment.

### **Heightened Scrutiny by Community Members**

The nature of space affects visibility and one component of this is that decisions made by professionals in small, isolated communities can come under intense scrutiny by community members. This is especially the case in matters that affect personal health and wellbeing. The nurse in an outpost nursing station who sends a patient home only to have that patient develop serious medical complications, the social worker who leaves a child in a home only to see the child seriously injured, the doctor who misdiagnoses a serious ailment, these are all examples of situations and circumstances that are a cause for

concern in any community regardless of its location or size. However, in a small isolated community decisions of this nature are visible and known to community members. The judgments and accompanying reactions or actions of community members can affect the professional's credibility and their capacity to act. Loss of credibility can effectively destroy any possibility of further practice within the community.

In 1994 British Columbia Judge Thomas Gove (1995) led an inquiry into the death of 5 year old Matthew Vaudreuil. Matthew was murdered by his mother Verna Vaudreuil, despite the fact that the family was well known to various health and social service providers including social workers, doctors, homemakers, and case aides. The independent commission of inquiry was to look into what had gone wrong and to make recommendations for change. During the course of the inquiry various public hearings were held in a number of communities where Matthew and Verna Vaudreuil had lived. People involved with the family were called before the inquiry and their testimonies were duly reported in the media. One of the social workers described testifying before the inquiry in a northern community. The testimony was reported in the media and the next day when this social worker was shopping in a local store another customer approached them and launched into the social worker, blaming the worker for Matthew's death. The other customer read the newspaper and given the small size of the community the person knew the social worker. In reality the worker had limited involvement with Matthew and Verna. However, the fact that this worker lived in a smaller, more isolated community exposed them to this type of public judgment and reaction. Workers in Vancouver where Matthew was murdered were able to retain relative anonymity and their sense of privacy even though they also appeared before the same commission of inquiry. The personal space of the larger centre ensured that they were able to maintain a degree of separation between their personal and professional roles. They were not subject to the type of public scrutiny experienced by the worker in the small, northern community.

### **Increased Responsibility**

The nature of larger organizations generally allows for new or junior people to be supported and gradually introduced to progressively more difficult work. Organizations with a large number of staff are usually better able to manage the introduction of new workers. The gradual introduction of a new worker can be to the organization's advantage as recruitment and training of new staff are expensive and costly in terms of time. If new employees receive a more gradual and 'gentle' introduction to the work it may promote better retention. The new worker is not overwhelmed with the job and they are able to gain confidence as they take on increased responsibility and progressively more difficult tasks.

In remote, northern communities this type of gradual introduction is more difficult to achieve. Organizations are smaller with fewer employees and there is limited access to specialized resources. As a result, there is greater likelihood that new employees will be expected to assume difficult tasks early on in their work experience (Schmidt & Klein, 2004). This can put a new social worker, nurse, or physician in a difficult position as they may be expected to provide a service that is beyond their level

of experience. In the case of social work, many northern workers in Canada deliver services using a generalist model of practice. This means that the workers don't specialize in a particular program area but apply a framework of practice to a range of programs. For example, workers in the Yukon Territory are expected to deliver child welfare services, community mental health services, alcohol and drug services, services to seniors as well as services in other program areas. Many of the small Yukon communities outside of Whitehorse have social services offices staffed by one worker. Consequently, that worker is a 'Jack or Jill of all trades' expected to meet a wide range of community requests and needs for service.

This type of situation imposes increased responsibility on the worker. Delaney and Brownlee (1995) note that the demands and responsibilities can lead to a worker practising beyond competence. Job expectations and pressure from the community push workers into situations for which they may not be prepared. This creates potential ethical dilemmas. At the same time it must be pointed out that the opportunity to develop a broad practice is also appealing to some workers (Schmidt & Klein, 2004). Broad practice that touches on many aspects of a community's experience creates excellent opportunities for learning.

### **Limited Access to Professional Development**

Large urban centres afford a range of educational opportunities. The presence of a university or universities, as well as community colleges, creates ample access to continuing education activities. Situation or location on main transportation routes, as well as a critical mass of population, ensure that workshops, conferences, seminars, continuing education, graduate studies, and symposia are readily available. If a professional worker has the time, the inclination, the organizational support, and the funds to attend these educational options, they will encounter a range of opportunities for professional development.

Professional workers in remote, northern communities do not have the same opportunities. Professional development and continuing education options are not as readily available and the remote location generally means that transportation to a site for professional development is expensive and time consuming. As a result, access to professional development is more limited. With improvements in computer technology and communication it is increasingly possible to access training in remote locations. However, the type of interaction is qualitatively different from what happens in face-to-face encounters. Social connections and interaction can occur through technology but arguably this does not produce the same quality of experience. As a result, workers feel that they are at a disadvantage and this can lead to problems with retention as some workers cite this as an issue for relocation (Schmidt & Klein, 2004).

### **Opportunities**

Work in remote locations includes some challenges and it is easy to characterize the experience in a negative light. However, this type of work also has benefits that are

associated with the location. For example, career advancement can occur fairly rapidly. This happens for a number of reasons. Turnover of staff can be high in some northern and remote locations. On one level this is a problem but turnover also means that remaining staff gain seniority more rapidly and they have opportunities to engage in a wider variety of work activities. Career advancement can also occur more rapidly because of the opportunities to engage in wide array of activities. When a worker is called upon to be a 'Jack or Jill of all trades' it means that the same worker gains a very broad base of experience that opens many doors. If a worker wishes to become a supervisor, an opportunity may present itself at a much earlier point in their career (Schmidt, 2008).

Although there are problems associated with rationalizing professional and person roles in small, isolated communities, those workers who can achieve a sense of integration may also experience a tremendous amount of support from the community. The worker is familiar with residents of the community and if the community genuinely views the worker as a part of the social fabric, then that worker can usually count on a great deal of support.

Clearly life as a professional worker in a small, remote community is not for everyone. However, the remote location often means ready access to outdoor recreation opportunities. Skiing, fishing, hunting, camping, hiking, and various other outdoor activities are readily available and accessible. The activities are literally on the doorstep. Life in a remote community may not be appealing to the person who enjoys, professional opera, theater, and high-level professional sports, but anyone who enjoys outdoor activities will not be disappointed.

While issues such as high visibility and accessibility can be stressful and difficult there are also certain benefits or advantages. In the case of the people served by the professional, the professional is able to observe their progress, their successes, and failures. When improvement and growth occurs this can be very gratifying. In a larger centre it is not often possible to see what happens to a person as they move through the life cycle.

## **Conclusion**

The concepts of space and location can present challenges as well as opportunities in isolated, northern communities. Educators and employers have a responsibility to adequately prepare the professional worker for the reality of practice in this environment. It is an environment that will be uncomfortable for some people and this often leads to a short stay before the person moves to a location that better suits their needs and level of comfort. This type of rapid turnover is costly and it hurts the community that counts on some level of stability and continuity among professional workers. Familiarity and knowledge of the environment and the nature of living and working in this environment are also important for the worker's family members. Workers and worker's family members that are adequately prepared and have a clear idea of the challenges, as well as the opportunities, are more likely to stay and become a part of the very rich lifestyle afforded in Canada's remote, northern communities.

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