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Boundary negotiations in living a professional life: Care of the self and others

This paper presents findings of research on discursive practices associated with professional boundary management. Boundaries are one of the primary concepts used to define the form and purpose of appropriate professional relationships where clarity of purpose, conservation of physical and emotional energy, and the ordering of spaces between professional work and private lives, protects both practitioners and the people they work with. Professional discourse constructs boundary management as typically shaped by distance, objectivity and the authority of professional expertise to define and manage problems on the other person's behalf and act in their best interests (Mellow, 2005).

The research approach used Foucault's (1984/1992) writing on ethics to analyse how professional subjectivity is negotiated and performed through discursive practices associated with the management of professional boundaries. The research method borrowed from the genre of autoethnography to examine one practitioner's experience of living and working within a region of New Zealand where one's community of practice frequently coincides with family commitments and social activities, within relatively small populations. The findings indicate three central elements in the discursive practice of professional boundary management, including normalising lines or limits, practising with zones of therapeutic helpfulness and relationship negotiation in context. Boundary negotiations are practised as strategies for critique, reinvention and repositioning of the professional self that are always subject to the discursive constraints and possibilities of power. Professional subjectivity becomes apparent as constant negotiations of relationships between self and others within the normative values that guide considerations about therapeutic purpose, boundary limits and exchanges.