



# The State Bar of California

## **Rule 1.8.10 Sexual Relations with Current Client (Rule Approved by the Supreme Court, Effective November 1, 2018)**

- (a) A lawyer shall not engage in sexual relations with a current client who is not the lawyer's spouse or registered domestic partner, unless a consensual sexual relationship existed between them when the lawyer-client relationship commenced.
- (b) For purposes of this rule, "sexual relations" means sexual intercourse or the touching of an intimate part of another person\* for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification, or abuse.
- (c) If a person\* other than the client alleges a violation of this rule, no Notice of Disciplinary Charges may be filed by the State Bar against a lawyer under this rule until the State Bar has attempted to obtain the client's statement regarding, and has considered, whether the client would be unduly burdened by further investigation or a charge.

### **Comment**

[1] Although this rule does not apply to a consensual sexual relationship that exists when a lawyer-client relationship commences, the lawyer nevertheless must comply with all other applicable rules. (See, e.g., rules 1.1, 1.7, and 2.1.)

[2] When the client is an organization, this rule applies to a lawyer for the organization (whether inside counsel or outside counsel) who has sexual relations with a constituent of the organization who supervises, directs or regularly consults with that lawyer concerning the organization's legal matters. (See rule 1.13.)

[3] Business and Professions Code section 6106.9, including the requirement that the complaint be verified, applies to charges under subdivision (a) of that section. This rule and the statute impose different obligations.

**NEW RULE OF PROFESSIONAL CONDUCT 1.8.10**  
**(Former Rule 3-120)**  
**Sexual Relations With Client**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Commission for the Revision of the Rules of Professional Conduct (“Commission”) evaluated current rule 3-120 (Sexual Relations With Client) in accordance with the Commission Charter. In addition, the Commission considered the national standard of ABA Model Rule 1.8(j). The Commission also reviewed relevant California statutes, rules, and case law relating to the issues addressed by the proposed rules. The result of the Commission’s evaluation is proposed rule 1.8.10.

**Rule As Issued For 90-day Public Comment**

The main issue considered was whether: to retain California's current approach that prohibits sexual relations in limited circumstances where the relations are: (i) required as a condition of a representation; (ii) obtained by coercion, intimidation or undue influence; or (iii) cause the lawyer to perform legal services incompetently; or to adopt the approach used in most jurisdictions that follows ABA Model 1.8(j) in prohibiting all sexual relations unless the consensual sexual relationship existed at the time that the lawyer-client relationship commenced.

As originally circulated for the 90-day public comment, proposed rule 1.8.10 substantially tracked Model Rule 1.8(j). The Commission believed, and continues to believe, that California’s current rule renders it difficult to prove a violation in the typical circumstance of consensual sexual relations<sup>1</sup> because the rule is not a bright-line standard. For example, where consensual sexual relations occur, the State Bar must prove that the relations caused the lawyer to perform legal services incompetently. While this might represent a regulatory policy of imposing a least restrictive prohibition on conduct protected under a constitutional right of privacy,<sup>2</sup> it imposes a complexity that is likely frustrating enforcement.<sup>3</sup> See the discussion of constitutional concerns provided after this executive summary.

The potential for the current rule requirements to frustrate enforcement becomes apparent upon close examination of California’s duty of competent representation that is formulated to be

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<sup>1</sup> The current rule also prohibits sexual relations that are not consensual as well as improper conduct seeking sexual relations that may or may not result in the occurrence of any sexual relations (e.g., relations sought or obtained by coercion or as a quid pro quo for receiving legal services for a lawyer). The proposed rule would no longer include these aspects of the current rule. Lawyers would continue to be subject to discipline for such misconduct under both Business and Professions Code § 6106 (acts constituting moral turpitude) and § 6106.9 which is the statutory analog to current rule 3-120. Moving to the Model Rule standard in proposed Rule 1.8.10 is not intended to abrogate these existing statutory prohibitions.

<sup>2</sup> Although the general prohibition in the Commission’s proposed rule is more restrictive than the current rule in regards to consensual sexual relations, it is not believed to be unconstitutional. In connection with the work of the first Commission, the State Bar inquired on more than one occasion with other jurisdictions that have the same or similar rule to Model Rule 1.8(j) (most recently in 2012) as to whether their rules have been challenged based on a constitutional right to privacy. No jurisdiction indicated a constitutional challenge and the published disciplinary case law of other states do not show any such challenges.

<sup>3</sup> There are no published California disciplinary cases applying rule 3-120.

consistent with Supreme Court precedent. Discipline case law provides that mere negligence is not a violation of the duty of competence. In *Lewis v. State Bar* (1981) 28 Cal.3d 683 [170 Cal.Rptr. 634], the California Supreme Court reaffirmed this principle stating that: “This court has long recognized the problems inherent in using disciplinary proceedings to punish attorneys for negligence, mistakes in judgment, or lack of experience or legal knowledge.” (*Lewis v. State Bar* at p. 688.) As a result of this longstanding interpretation of the duty of competence, even if a lawyer engages in consensual sexual relations that cause an act of simple negligence in the performance of a legal service, the lawyer cannot be held to have violated rule 3-120(B)(3). If the Commission’s proposed rule is adopted, this outcome would be different because all consensual sexual relations arising during the lawyer-client relationship would constitute a rule violation regardless of whether the lawyer provided competent legal services.

The Commission also believed, and continues to believe that this bright-line prohibition will have a salutary deterrent effect that is not present in the current California rule. Public commentators in connection with the first Commission’s project provided anecdotal evidence of misconduct that was not deterred by the current rule. In addition, other professions, such as psychotherapists, have stricter rules that are more protective. By comparison with the restrictions in those professions, retaining the current rule could diminish public confidence in the legal profession.

In tracking the language of Model Rule 1.8(j), proposed rule 1.8.10 as initially circulated for public comment also would have eliminated the express exception in the current rule that permits sexual relations between lawyers and their spouses. However, at that time, the Commission noted that: (1) most other jurisdictions do not have an express spousal exception but have not experienced known problems; and (2) a spouse who later becomes a client would fall under the exception for sexual relations that predate a lawyer-client relationship. However, see below.

Proposed rule 1.8.10 retains the definition of sexual relations in the current rule. This is a departure from the rule adopted in most jurisdictions but the Commission believes it is warranted because the definition promotes compliance and because the same definition appears in the statutory prohibition on sexual relations with a client (subdivision (d) of Bus. & Prof. Code § 6106.9). In addition, the proposed rule includes a new comment (Comment [3]) that provides an express reference to the statutory prohibition.

### **Revisions Following 90-Day Public Comment Period**

After consideration of comments received in response to the initial 90-day public comment period, the Commission revised the rule to expressly state that the rule applies only to sexual relations with a “current” client. The Commission also revised the text of paragraph (a) to include an express exception for sexual relations with a client who is the lawyer’s spouse or registered domestic partner. Further, the Commission added a new paragraph (c) that is intended to value the privacy rights of a client in those circumstances where a person other than the client alleges a violation of the rule. New paragraph (c) is derived in part from the Commission’s consideration of a comparable rule provision in Minnesota.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> The language in the Minnesota rule 1.8(j) provides that:

“(4) if a party other than the client alleges violation of this paragraph, and the complaint is not summarily dismissed, the Director of the Office of Lawyers Professional Responsibility, in determining whether to investigate the allegation and whether to charge any violation based on

In addition, in Comment [1] the Commission removed the brackets around a cross reference to rule 2.1. The brackets marked the reference to rule 2.1 as being tentative until the Commission determined whether to recommend a version of that rule. The Commission has now considered Model Rule 2.1 and is recommending that a version of that rule be a part of the State Bar's comprehensive revisions. Accordingly, the brackets are omitted in the current version of proposed rule 1.8.10.

With these changes, the Board authorized an additional 45-day public comment period on the revised proposed rule.

### **Final Commission Action on the Proposed Rule Following 45-Day Public Comment Period**

After consideration of comments received in response to the additional 45-day public comment period, the Commission made no changes to the proposed rule and voted to recommend that the Board adopt the proposed rule. A member of the Commission submitted a dissent to this rule that can be found following the Report and Recommendation.

The Board adopted proposed rule 1.8.10 at its March 9, 2017 meeting.

### **Supreme Court Action (May 10, 2018)**

The Supreme Court approved the rule as submitted by the State Bar to be effective November 1, 2018. But see, stylistic changes made by the Court in the title of the rule.

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the allegations, shall consider the client's statement regarding whether the client would be unduly burdened by the investigation or charge.”

**Rule 1.8.10 ~~[3-120]~~ Sexual Relations with Current Client**  
**(Redline Comparison to the California Rule Operative Until October 31, 2018)**

- (a) A lawyer shall not engage in sexual relations with a current client who is not the lawyer's spouse or registered domestic partner, unless a consensual sexual relationship existed between them when the lawyer-client relationship commenced.
- (Ab) For purposes of this rule, "sexual relations" means sexual intercourse or the touching of an intimate part of another person\* for the purpose of sexual arousal, gratification, or abuse.
- ~~(B) A member shall not:~~
- ~~(1) Require or demand sexual relations with a client incident to or as a condition of any professional representation; or (2) Employ coercion, intimidation, or undue influence in entering into sexual relations with a client; or~~
- ~~(3) Continue representation of a client with whom the member has sexual relations if such sexual relations cause the member to perform legal services incompetently in violation of rule 3-110.~~
- ~~(C) Paragraph (B) shall not apply to sexual relations between members and their spouses or to ongoing consensual sexual relationships which predate the initiation of the lawyer-client relationship.~~
- ~~(D) Where a lawyer in a firm has sexual relations with a client but does not participate in the representation of that client, the lawyers in the firm shall not be subject to discipline under this rule solely because of the occurrence of such sexual relations.~~
- (c) If a person\* other than the client alleges a violation of this rule, no Notice of Disciplinary Charges may be filed by the State Bar against a lawyer under this rule until the State Bar has attempted to obtain the client's statement regarding, and has considered, whether the client would be unduly burdened by further investigation or a charge.

**Discussion**Comment

[1] Although this rule does not apply to a consensual sexual relationship that exists when a lawyer-client relationship commences, the lawyer nevertheless must comply with all other applicable rules. (See, e.g., rules 1.1, 1.7, and 2.1.)

[2] When the client is an organization, this rule applies to a lawyer for the organization (whether inside counsel or outside counsel) who has sexual relations with a constituent of the organization who supervises, directs or regularly consults with that lawyer concerning the organization's legal matters. (See rule 1.13.)

[3] Business and Professions Code section 6106.9, including the requirement that the complaint be verified, applies to charges under subdivision (a) of that section. This rule and the statute impose different obligations.

~~Rule 3-120 is intended to prohibit sexual exploitation by a lawyer in the course of a professional representation. Often, based upon the nature of the underlying representation, a client exhibits great emotional vulnerability and dependence upon the advice and guidance of counsel. Attorneys owe the utmost duty of good faith and fidelity to clients. (See, e.g., *Greenbaum v. State Bar* (1976) 15 Cal.3d 893, 903 [126 Cal.Rptr. 785]; *Alkow v. State Bar* (1971) 3 Cal.3d 924, 935 [92 Cal.Rptr. 278]; *Cutler v. State Bar* (1969) 71 Cal.2d 241, 251 [78 Cal.Rptr. 172]; *Clancy v. State Bar* (1969) 71 Cal.2d 140, 146 [77 Cal.Rptr. 657].) The relationship between an attorney and client is a fiduciary relationship of the very highest character and all dealings between an attorney and client that are beneficial to the attorney will be closely scrutinized with the utmost strictness for unfairness. (See, e.g., *Giovanazzi v. State Bar* (1980) 28 Cal.3d 465, 472 [169 Cal.Rptr. 581]; *Benson v. State Bar* (1975) 13 Cal.3d 581, 586 [119 Cal.Rptr. 297]; *Lee v. State Bar* (1970) 2 Cal.3d 927, 939 [88 Cal.Rptr. 361]; *Clancy v. State Bar* (1969) 71 Cal.2d 140, 146 [77 Cal.Rptr. 657].) Where attorneys exercise undue influence over clients or take unfair advantage of clients, discipline is appropriate. (See, e.g., *Magee v. State Bar* (1962) 58 Cal.2d 423 [24 Cal.Rptr. 839]; *Lantz v. State Bar* (1931) 212 Cal. 213 [298 P. 497].) In all client matters, a member is advised to keep clients' interests paramount in the course of the member's representation.~~

~~For purposes of this rule, if the client is an organization, any individual overseeing the representation shall be deemed to be the client. (See rule 3-600.)~~

~~Although paragraph (C) excludes representation of certain clients from the scope of rule 3-120, such exclusion is not intended to preclude the applicability of other Rules of Professional Conduct, including rule 3-110.~~