
Ethical Considerations of Social Networking for Counsellors Considérations morales de gestion de réseau sociale pour des conseillers

William Bratt

University of Victoria

ABSTRACT

The use of online social networking websites has increased among Canadians in recent years. There are many professional and ethical implications for counsellors who use these sites. Although they offer advantages to counsellors, their use can also raise issues around ethical conduct. Because the counselling literature has not yet addressed these issues, this article draws on literature from other disciplines. A variety of issues are discussed using multidisciplinary references. The author concludes that online social networks are valuable tools for connecting with friends and loved ones, but competent practitioners should be aware of the ethical concerns inherent in their use.

RÉSUMÉ

Dans les dernières années, l'utilisation par les Canadiens de sites web de réseautage social est devenue de plus en plus fréquente. Il y a de nombreuses implications professionnelles et éthiques pour les aidants professionnels qui choisissent d'utiliser ces sites. Bien que l'utilisation de réseaux sociaux en ligne puisse être avantageuse pour les aidants professionnels, cette utilisation peut également soulever de sérieuses questions déontologiques et éthiques. Parce que la littérature en counseling n'a pas encore abordé ces questions, cet article fait appel à la littérature existante dans d'autres disciplines. Une variété de thèmes est abordée en se référant à des références multidisciplinaires. L'auteur constate que les réseaux sociaux en ligne constituent des outils bénéfiques pour être en contact avec ses amis et ses proches, mais que les aidants professionnels compétents devraient être conscients des préoccupations éthiques inhérentes à leur utilisation.

The past decade has ushered in technological advances that have changed the way people communicate with one another. The improvement of wireless technology and the evolving capabilities of the Internet have made a tremendous impact on the norms that influence socialization and how we understand both private and public information (Boyd, 2007; Zur, 2008). One of the most noteworthy of these changes is the birth of social networking websites and their rising popularity around the world. For example, Facebook (2010), a widely used social networking site, reported that their worldwide membership more than doubled between February 2009 and February 2010. In Canada, the use of blogs, photo sharing, and online discussion groups increased 7% between 2007 and 2009 (Statistics Canada, 2010). Ellison, Steinfeld, and Lampe (2006) describe online social networks as spaces for individuals to present themselves, express their social networks,

and establish or maintain communication with others. These sites allow members to post personal information, share pictures, and connect with other users with similar interests, all with an often-perceived sense of anonymity.

The online public disclosure of private information can potentially yield negative consequences for users of online software. Helping professionals are also not immune to the harm that may occur as a result of irresponsible uses of online resources. The easy access to publicly posted private information raises several professional and ethical concerns for helping professionals (Boyd, 2007). While the use of online social networks offers advantages to counsellors, including tools for maintaining relationships with people living great distances away, their use can also raise serious issues around boundaries and ethical personal conduct (Boyd, 2007). Unfortunately, the ethical implications of using online social networks has received little attention in the professional counselling literature, while other disciplines, including nursing, medicine, pharmacy, and education, have discussed this topic to a greater extent (e.g., Cain, 2008; Cain, Scott, & Akers, 2009; Guseh, Brendel, & Brendel, 2009; McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009). A search of both Canadian and non-Canadian counselling codes of ethics revealed that issues surrounding online social networking are not addressed in the American Counseling Association *Code of Ethics* (2005), the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy *Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2010), the Australian Counselling Association *Code of Conduct* (2008), or in the Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy Association's *Code of Ethics* (2007) or *Standards of Practice for Counsellors* (2008). The purpose of this paper is therefore to discuss and apply the current multidisciplinary discourse around the ethical use of online social networks to the reality faced by Canadian counsellors in the 21st century, with a particular emphasis on the literature from the nursing field.

SELF-DISCLOSURE AND PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Professional counsellors have a responsibility to become aware of how their actions impact others (Corey, Corey, & Callanan, 2011). This statement has implications for how counsellors carry themselves both within and outside the counselling arena. Within the confines of a session, counsellors are advised to recognize their own needs and to strive to keep those needs from impeding the therapeutic growth of their clients (Corey et al., 2011). It is considered ethical practice to suspend actions, such as self-disclosure, unless the counsellor believes there may be some benefit to the client (Corey et al., 2011; Zur, Williams, Lehavot, & Knapp, 2009). Self-disclosure is defined as the revelation of personal, rather than professional, information by a therapist to a client (Zur et al., 2009). Counsellors are advised to maintain a level of control over personal disclosures made by way of direct interpersonal interactions (Corey et al., 2011). However, because of the currently prevalent use of online social networks, counsellors must also be wary of self-disclosures they make within the cyber domain (Zur, 2008).

For helping professionals, the Internet has significantly changed the nature of self-disclosure and transparency (Zur, 2008; Zur et al., 2009). Zur et al. (2009) argue that although self-disclosure is often regarded as purposeful, unintentional disclosures do occur. Because online social networks are essentially forums for broadcasting personal information, the use of these sites increases the likelihood of counsellors engaging in unintentional disclosures. Using online resources that are common in most Canadian households, clients are now able to find a wealth of information about their therapists (Zur, 2008; Zur et al., 2009). A common and simple way for clients to accomplish this is by joining social networks, such as Facebook (www.facebook.com), MySpace (www.myspace.com), or Twitter (www.twitter.com). Although a client's intentions may be benign (e.g., curiosity), there is a potential for covert malign actions, such as befriending one's counsellor by using an online pseudonym (Zur et al., 2009). Highly curious and intrusive clients may join social networks under a false name, befriend the clinician, and become privy to very personal and private information, unbeknownst to the counsellor (Zur et al., 2009).

Writing from a background in psychiatry, Luo (2009) states that unintentional self-disclosures made by therapists online also have the potential to harm clients and compromise the therapeutic relationship. From his perspective, a significant reason to avoid online self-disclosure to clients is to minimize the obstruction of transference, which he asserts may be a crucial aspect of the therapeutic process. Luo states that the ability for clients to connect with therapists via online social networks poses ongoing potential threats to the transference process, making it more challenging if not unachievable. Thus, the damage that online disclosures may pose to the therapeutic growth of clients is a further reason to avoid such actions.

This modern issue both exemplifies and reaffirms the need for counsellor self-awareness. To effectively address the potential for harm due to unintentional self-disclosures, clinicians must be aware that all of their online postings may be viewed by their clients, and that those postings may stay online, in some form, forever (Hoser & Nitschke, 2010; Zur et al., 2009). It is advised that therapists search for themselves online periodically by simply putting their names into a Google search (Taylor, McMinn, Bufford, & Chang, 2010; Zur, 2008; Zur et al., 2009).

Additionally, Taylor et al. (2010) suggest that counsellors establish their own self-monitoring strategies regarding online behaviour. They assert that peer consultation, documentation of online activity, and intentionality may be the best methods that clinicians have to protect themselves and their clients from the harm that may result from online self-disclosures. By staying alert to online information involving themselves, counsellors are better equipped to maintain awareness of the online personae that they maintain.

PROFESSIONALISM AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKS

The problems of unintentional online self-disclosure bring to light the importance of counsellors' awareness of their own attitudes and how they conduct themselves outside of sessions. While working within the counselling arena, thera-

pists are likely to embrace and employ the common attitudes of effective helpers, such as empathy and open-mindedness (Neukrug & Schwitzer, 2006). However, outside the session, it is conceivable that counsellors will demonstrate attitudes or behaviours that are non-therapeutic. For example, counsellors may, in their personal lives, respond or offer ribald humour, engage in political criticism, or even demonstrate prejudicial attitudes (Neukrug & Schwitzer, 2006). If counsellors act on socially unacceptable attitudes or engage in irresponsible or questionable behaviour in their private lives, it is possible that this will become known in the community. Consequently, their professional reputation will become tarnished. It therefore follows that if counsellors engage in similar behaviour within the context of an online social network, the potential for negative consequences is magnified by the vast readership of the Internet.

Concern regarding online professional conduct has been expressed by writers working in a number of fields, including academia (Cain, 2008), nursing (McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009), and pharmacy (Cain et al., 2009). These authors share the common belief that a lack of professionalism in online social networking can have significant deleterious effects on one's career.

McBride and Cohen (2009) describe the case of a nursing student who was expelled from the University of Louisville for her posts on MySpace. The student was reprimanded for writing about her patients, as well as her attitudes regarding gun rights, abortion, and other issues. Cain et al. (2009) make an argument for the importance of "e-professionalism," which involves regard for professional attitudes and behaviours displayed via online personae. Their study is based on the assumption that one's professional image can be compromised by publishing personal details, comments, and opinions, and/or joining controversial online groups. The authors in both articles draw the conclusion that the public judges professionals not simply by their demeanour at work, but also by the behaviour and values that they demonstrate in their personal lives.

For counsellors, this not only has implications for how clients may view a therapist, it also demonstrates the impact that online disclosures may have on future job opportunities. Although participation in online social media is primarily for personal and entertainment reasons, there has been an increase in employers using information posted online to make judgements of a professional nature (Cain et al., 2009; Witt, 2009). These messages offer important points of guidance for therapists interested in making use of online social networks. Counsellors should become aware of how their actions could lead to problems within their community. However, when interacting with others on online social networks, it is equally important for counsellors to recognize that their online actions may have the same effect, and be viewed by even more people than in the non-virtual world.

The negative implications of unprofessional conduct via online social networks are not merely limited to helping professionals. In an article directed toward clinical psychologists, Lehavot, Barnett, and Powers (2010) describe the potential impact unprofessional online conduct may have on the client and the therapeutic alliance. The authors recommend that professional helpers remain cognizant

of the content of their postings, and avoid engaging in online actions that may facilitate unprofessional boundary crossings by either clinicians or clients. Such discrepancies may put strain on the therapeutic relationship and hinder the client's therapeutic growth.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING

From the outset of a counsellor's career, the importance of client confidentiality is iterated time and again (Corey et al., 2011). Because counsellors are privy to a wealth of intimate information from their clients, there are complex legal and ethical obligations to keep information private (Corey et al., 2011). Within the counselling realm, confidentiality is defined as a fundamental ethical responsibility to take every reasonable precaution to respect and safeguard a client's disclosed information (CCPA, 2008). Further, all counsellors have an obligation to protect this information from inappropriate revelation to any person outside of the therapeutic relationship (CCPA, 2008). The need for counsellors to honour and maintain confidentiality in their working practice is based upon principles that reflect the foundation on which the profession resides (Schulz, Sheppard, Lehr, & Shepard, 2006). Specifically, the principles of "integrity in relationships" and "respect for self-determination" both unite to address the importance of client autonomy, the right for people to live their own lives and to have information pertaining to their well-being kept in confidence (Schulz et al., 2006). While professional and ethical issues regarding confidentiality are replete with nuances and exceptions, this basic definition and understanding is sufficient for the purpose of this article.

The professional obligation to uphold standards of confidentiality is not limited to those working in the counselling field. Many other disciplines that deal with human health and wellness employ their own standards of confidentiality (Cain et al., 2009; McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009). While the importance for helping professionals to maintain confidentiality throughout their conventional everyday interpersonal interactions has been stressed extensively in the literature (Corey et al., 2011), only recently has confidentiality become an issue with regard to online conduct (McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009). Some authors suggest that the perceived sense of anonymity when using online social networks can result in a blurring of the boundaries between acceptable and risky personal and professional behaviour (McBride & Cohen, 2009). When this occurs, helping professionals are more likely to breach client confidentiality online.

McBride and Cohen (2009) refer to a case that took place within the nursing community in which two Wisconsin nurses were fired when they allegedly posted photos of a patient's x-ray on Facebook. The act of posting confidential information, even when names are not used, has resulted in considerable legal trouble for some helping professionals (McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009). For those viewing confidential information posted by helping professionals, such as nurses, it is often possible to identify patients based on descriptions of conditions, the hospital at which they are admitted, or other information (Witt, 2009).

In the case described above, a referral was made to the FBI for possible violations of the *Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act* (HIPAA). Although Canadian counsellors are not bound by this American act, there is a legal obligation to uphold the standards contained within Canada's *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* (FIPPA; Turner, Uhlemann, & Stoltz, 2007). With regard to confidentiality, this act asserts that client information can be disclosed only in the event that (a) the client provides full written consent; (b) the counsellor is served with a court-ordered subpoena or warrant; (c) there is concern for public health or safety; (d) a law enforcement proceeding subpoenas it; or (e) if a client's file contains information necessary for contacting an injured, ill, or deceased client's next of kin (see Turner et al., 2007, pp. 426–427). Because online social networking sites do not fulfill these criteria, the disclosure of confidential client information on a social network could result in considerable legal ramifications if another online party reports the breach of confidentiality and unethical practice to the authorities. Additionally, the potential for a client to experience harm as a result of a counsellor's online breach of confidentiality is undeniable and could result in any number of negative consequences for that client.

MULTIPLE RELATIONSHIPS AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

In counselling, multiple relationships are defined as those in which a therapist is in a professional role with a person in addition to another role with that same individual, or with another person who is close to that individual (CCPA, 2008). Multiple relationships are generally discouraged, although no code of ethics states that nonsexual multiple relationships with clients are inherently unethical (Corey et al., 2011). Because of this, it may be difficult to understand the rationale behind this discouragement. These norms exist because of the potential for therapists to abuse their power in the counselling relationship at the expense of the client (Corey et al., 2011). Most professional codes of ethics warn against these types of relationships because of the potential for the impairment of counsellors' judgement, their ability to render effective services, or the potential to cause harm or exploitation to clients (Corey et al., 2011). Ultimately, counsellors are discouraged from engaging in multiple relationships with clients because it minimizes their potential to uphold the fundamental principles on which counselling ethics reside (Schulz et al., 2006).

Because of the disconnection between real-life interactions and the perceived anonymity of the online world, "befriending" another person on a social network is as simple as clicking a mouse. The ease of establishing and maintaining online relationships is of concern to professional counsellors who strive to avoid engaging in multiple relationships with clients (Zur et al., 2009). It is conceivable that clients may seek out their therapists on a social network for a number of reasons (Zur et al., 2009). Clients who have a good working relationship with their counsellors may want to connect with them on a more personal level, while other clients may feel isolated in their personal lives and believe that an online "friendship" with their counsellor could bring their relationship to the next level.

Alternatively, a situation may arise in which a counsellor makes a hasty decision to answer a single question or concern posed by a client over a common social networking site because it is easy and convenient. Whatever the case, the act of accepting an online friend request from a client or communicating over a social network serves as an invitation into the counsellor's personal life and an opening into the realm of multiple relationships.

Witt (2009) cautions health practitioners against entering into multiple relationships with clients. By agreeing to be "friends" in the online world, helping professionals muddy the waters between personal and professional roles (Witt, 2009). Using examples from nursing, Witt outlines some of the plausible outcomes that may arise from online "friendships" with patients or their families. First, she describes the potential for an increase in the likelihood of a practitioner breaching confidentiality under the premise that when nurses befriend patients online, there may be an assumption of consent for sharing of information. A situation of this nature can be laden with difficulties when outcomes are not as expected, or when information becomes more public than originally intended.

Second, Witt (2009) warns of the danger of self-disclosure when professionals are friends with their clients on social networks. Specifically, nurses may share information about themselves that affects the trust their patients and their families place in them (Witt, 2009). Patients are unlikely to be impressed upon reading that their nurse was overtired and had not slept all day before going to work, although such news may be pleasing to a plaintiff's attorney (Witt, 2009).

Counsellors can learn from these examples as they, too, are bound by similar standards of professional practice. They are also equally capable of falling prey to the same errors in judgement as other helping professionals. As suggested by Younggren and Gottlieb (2004) and outlined by Corey et al. (2011), the same questions that counsellors use to make sound decisions about multiple relationships in the real world may be employed when considering the ethical consequences of engaging in an online multiple relationship with a client:

- Is entering into a relationship in addition to the professional one necessary, or should I avoid it?
- Can the multiple relationship potentially cause harm to the client?
- If harm seems unlikely, would the additional relationship prove beneficial?
- Is there a risk that the multiple relationship could disrupt the therapeutic relationship?
- Can I evaluate this matter objectively? (Corey et al., 2011, p. 273)

In most cases, entering into a multiple relationship with a client in an online social network is both avoidable and unnecessary. For counsellors whose clients invite them to become online friends, the opportunity to engage the client in an open discussion around the issue should be observed and taken advantage of. In such an event, the counsellor has the responsibility to engage in a transparent dialogue with the client around the reasons for professional and personal boundaries in their online interactions (Neukrug & Schwitzer, 2006). This type of conversation can bolster the quality of the therapeutic relationship and result in the client becoming more understanding of the counsellor's personal and professional limitations.

CASE STUDY: APPLICATION OF ETHICAL ONLINE SOCIAL NETWORKING CONDUCT

Taking the example of Lauren, a recent graduate from a Master's in counselling program who is in her mid 20s, the ethical implications of using online social networks are considered. Consumer data from 2008 indicates that the primary users of social networking software are between the ages of 17 and 25 (Cain, 2008). Additionally, in 2009 there was a significant increase in the number of users aged 35 and older from around the world (Witt, 2009). These figures show that a considerable number of adults around Lauren's age are embracing online social networking trends.

Over the past year, Lauren had considered creating a Facebook profile. A primary source of uncertainty pertaining to this decision related to her concern with how maintaining an online public profile might impact her practice as a new professional counsellor. In her mind, the last thing she wanted was to have clients or their family members finding her online and trying to "friend" her. Lauren's rationale behind this reluctance resided in her desire to avoid multiple relationships with clients, coupled with a sense of unease about having personal information accessible to some people she might not want to share it with.

Recently, Lauren decided that she would proceed with creating a Facebook profile. After carefully weighing the costs and benefits of participating in an online social network, she decided that the benefits were of greater importance to her than the costs. Specifically, Lauren recognized the usefulness of Facebook as a means of connecting with many of the friends she had made over the years, several of whom were scattered around the world. By way of the social network, Lauren was able to keep those people updated on current events in her life and stay connected with less effort than it would take to individually call them on the telephone on a regular basis.

Self-Disclosure and Protection of Privacy

The reservations that Lauren had about joining Facebook were closely in line with many of the concerns raised in the multidisciplinary literature. For example, she considered how having her own personal information on the Internet might affect her professional life. While she would not feel comfortable with clients looking her up on Facebook in an effort to learn more about her, she recognized that she may run that risk by engaging in an online social network. To address this concern, she looked into the privacy settings provided by the network. Facebook allows users to regulate who can (a) view their profile, (b) contact them and obtain their contact information, (c) search their profile using Facebook or other search engines, and (d) interact with them on Facebook. By increasing the privacy settings under each of these criteria to the maximum level allowed, Lauren enabled only selected people to view her profile and interact with her. By doing so, she was able to minimize the extent to which she engaged in unintentional self-disclosure to curious clients who might try to find her Facebook profile.

Professionalism, Confidentiality, and Online Conduct

To address the issue of professionalism and online conduct, Lauren was mindful of the public nature of Facebook. In doing so, she ensured that she did not post statements that she would not feel comfortable verbalizing within earshot of a group of people in the community. As the literature indicates, it is important to remember to “think before you post” (Witt, 2009, p. 257). Lauren therefore strived to cultivate awareness of those who might be reading what she posted. She was able to regulate her online conduct by imagining (a) her supervisor, (b) her instructors, (c) her clients and their families, and (d) future employers reading what she posted. By erring on the side of caution, Lauren took steps to protect herself from inappropriate public disclosures.

Lauren’s approach to upholding professionalism in her online conduct also served as a safeguard from breaching confidentiality on social networking sites. She was well aware of the repercussions that can follow the unethical breach of confidentiality. She therefore ensured that she avoided sharing private client information with peers, friends, and family in her everyday life. The same was true when using Facebook. She knew that venting online about difficult clients would be both disrespectful to those clients and professionally inappropriate. Lauren therefore looked for more ethical debriefing procedures when she felt the need to discuss a troubling professional situation.

Multiple Relationships and Facebook

The issue of multiple relationships came up for Lauren when a client proposed that she join a Facebook group to which he belongs. In that case, Lauren respectfully declined his invitation and explained the reasons behind her professional avoidance of multiple relationships. Luckily, the client was understanding and respectful of her boundaries.

The rule that Lauren followed to avoid multiple relationships with clients on online social networks was “do not add them.” In other words, if a client proposed, either in a session or in an online context, that they should be Facebook friends she was firm about not accepting invitations. Instead, she would engage in a transparent dialogue with that client in their next session to ensure that there is a mutual understanding of one another’s positions. This approach facilitated respect of Lauren’s own boundaries as well as respect for the client, whom, as the literature suggests, is most likely to benefit from abstaining from multiple relationships (Corey et al., 2011).

CONCLUSION

The many facets and implications of counsellors’ use of online social networks have yet to be fully understood and thoroughly studied. While research and commentary from other fields is sparse, discourse is increasing and the issues are being addressed more readily than in the early part of this decade. By taking a multidisciplinary approach to the literature coming from other fields, counsellors are able

to use the existing information to inform their practice. In doing so, counsellors may note the similarities between their own and other helping professions with regard to concerns surrounding ethical competency in their online personal lives.

Issues of boundaries, professionalism, confidentiality, and multiple relationships are all matters of concern shared by counselling and other helping fields (Cain, 2008; Cain et al., 2009; McBride & Cohen, 2009; Witt, 2009; Zur et al., 2009). Counsellors and other helping professionals have strived to establish clear and firm guidelines for ethical practice. The repeated compromise of ethical frameworks by counsellors through the use of online social networks could eventually lead to undermining the credibility of the larger professional community. The continued engagement in unethical online conduct could seriously damage the public view of professional counsellors and harm clients in its wake. The underlying message behind all of the current multidisciplinary literature is that online social networks are helpful tools for connecting with friends and loved ones.

Competent practitioners should also be aware of the ethical pitfalls inherent in their use of online social networks. These pitfalls may yield deleterious consequences for both counsellors and clients. Having strategies to address these concerns is important, should the need arise. One potential alternative to the strict avoidance of making contact with clients by way of social networks is for counsellors to create online profiles specifically for professional use. By including only information relevant to their practice in their professional profiles, counsellors may avoid unintentional online disclosures and keep their contacts with clients on a strictly professional level. By recognizing the advantages and disadvantages of using online social networks, counsellors may be able to maintain an ethically sound balance between their professional lives, personal lives, and their online personae. Further exploration of these issues will be helpful to counsellors as we move farther into the 21st century.

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About the Author

William Bratt is a Master of Arts student in the counselling psychology program, Department of Education Psychology and Leadership Studies, Faculty of Education, University of Victoria. His main interests are in spirituality, trauma recovery, and ethical concerns related to counsellors' use of online social networks.

Address correspondence to William Bratt, University of Victoria, Maclaurin A451, 3800 Finnerty Road, Victoria, BC, Canada, V8W 2Y2; e-mail willbratt@hotmail.com