Ethical Issues in Electronic Communication and Social Media

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Michael A. Gillette, Ph.D.
(434)384-5322   mgillette@bsvinc.com
http://www.bsvinc.com

Two Opening Cases

Facebook Ethics

"It's In The Public Domain"

During therapy, student client A mentioned that while he was recently on Facebook, he noticed a posting from another client that indicates possible dangerous or suicidal ideation. Should the therapist access Facebook to verify the information, and if so, what should he do with the information once he has it? Suppose that once the therapist does this, he realizes that Facebook might contain a wealth of information about his clients, so he does a general search on all of the students on his case load and finds that most of them have Facebook pages and that some of those postings indicate illicit substance abuse behavior. Should the therapist confront his consumers with this information?

Facebook Ethics
"Questions"

- Would it be ethical for the counselor to examine the relevant Facebook page?
- Finding information on Facebook to be useful, would it be ethical for the counselor to look up all of his clients to see if they have postings?
- How should information from Facebook be used once it is obtained?
- Would the case be different in a different therapeutic setting?
- Would the case be different depending on the type of professional involved?

Facebook Ethics
"The Core Issue"

While discussions around the opening case generally begin with concerns of confidentiality, the core ethical issue is not actually one of privacy. The primary ethical issue in this case is one of boundaries and potential dual relationships.

Facebook Ethics
"Conceptual Divergence"

Is a Facebook page a document or a virtual location?

Is it an object or a place?

Facebook Ethics
"Relevant Expressions"

- Facebook Stalking

- "Guess who I bumped into this morning on Facebook?"

Facebook Ethics
"The Core Issue Revisited"

If the primary ethical issue in this case is one of boundaries, then we must assume that social boundaries exist when dealing with social networking sites. This supports the view that social networking sites are virtual spaces rather than document exchange servers, and it opens the possibility for the creation of a therapeutic virtual space.

The New Electronic World
"The Evolution of a Paradigm"

As our culture sheds its dependence on spatial proximity, an emerging comfort with physically remote interaction will generate the need for an adjustment of requirements and expectations. This will create new opportunities for choice and access, but it will also necessitate a transition to a more flexible understanding of social and professional interaction.

Online Counseling
"The Fundemental Question"

If online social networking actually takes place in a virtual space rather than as an exchange of documents, then is it possible that virtual social interactions are real? If so, can that virtual space be made real enough to support a therapeutic exchange?

Social Media Ethics
"Clinically Indicated Googling"

Mr. G is a 50-year-old client who has been receiving outpatient counseling for over a year. His therapist believes that he is demonstrating a recent increase in delusional thinking, especially concerning reports of personal activities. Mr. G claims to be a world-class cyclist, for instance, and that he is preparing for the upcoming Tour De France where he will be riding with the American team. Mr. G's counselor would like to be able to do some reality checking on these claims in order to better understand Mr. G's current psychiatric condition, but the client refuses to all contact with family or friends. The clinician considers Googling Mr. G and perhaps scanning for his social networking presence to assess the legitimacy of his claims. Would accessing Google in this way violate confidentiality? Would it be appropriate to look at Mr. G's Facebook page? Does the provider need to ask for consent from Mr. G before doing any cyber research?

Email, Texting, Tweeting

Emails, Texts and Tweets
"Conceptual Expectations"

- Confidentiality
- Instantaneous Delivery
- Immediate Response
- Context and Tone
- Casual Conversation vs. Formal Correspondence
- Boundaries

Applications in Long Term Care

Facebook Ethics
"Who's Your Friend?"

Ms. O has been living in your community for several years and he recently took a class in computer literacy. After completing the class, Ms. O created her own Facebook page, of which he is very proud. Ms. O has now sent "friend" requests to the staff members who work at the facility. How should the staff members respond?

Social Media Ethics
"Family Doesn't Count"

It is often the case in your community that clients who are directly receiving services may involve their family members in aspects of their services (e.g. group activities, as visitors, as sources of information). The family members are not actually clients, but is it ethical to connect with these family members on social media? Is it a boundary violation to view their social media posts and to gain information about your members indirectly?

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Social Media Ethics
"One Step Removed"

Provider A is friends with Provider B on Facebook. While visiting Provider B's page, Provider A notices that Provider B is friends with one of Provider A's clients. Provider B has no professional relationship with the client, so there does not seem to be any boundary violation between the client and B. However, there are many comments on B's page written by the client, tagged photos of them together, and links to other conversations. By visiting Provider B's page, Provider A is able to see a lot of material about and by the client. What should Provider A do with this access and information?

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Social Media Ethics
"I Didn't Use Names"

A client in your program recently complained that he felt very uncomfortable with postings made by a staff person who works in your organization. After searching the internet, you were able to discover a blog written by a staff member whom you supervise. The blog describes the staffer's experiences during work hours, and although it does not use names, it clearly describes interactions with consumers in an identified region within specific periods of time. The provider often expresses his personal frustration with his clients and refers to them in uncomplimentary ways. What are the ethical limits of your supervisory response to the blog?

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Facebook Ethics
"Be Careful Of Who Is Watching"

Staff member P was called into the Director's office after it was discovered that he had posted derogatory comments about the agency where he works on his Facebook page. The postings were written on Ms. P's "wall" and included criticisms of how the agency operates, specific complaints about supervisory staff, and gossip about co-workers. Would it be ethical for the Director to discipline Ms. P regarding her comments?

Social Media Ethics
"It's Just PR"

The community where you work routinely posts photos of various activities on its professional webpage and Facebook page. The facility is careful to avoid disclosing PHI, so client photos are rarely used and when they are used it is only with consent (what kind?). Staff photos often appear prominently, however. Is there any ethical problem with the organization using photos of their programs and staff members in this way?

Electronic Healthcare
"I Thought I Made Myself Clear"

Client L placed a clear suicidal threat on her Facebook page six hours before committing suicide. When the lawyers pressed their case of negligence against staff, they inquired about why that call for help had been ignored.

Alternative: Client L tweeted her therapist prior to carrying out suicide.