Ethical Consequences of Using Social Network Sites for Students in Professional Social Work Programs

Rebecca G. Judd Ph.D., LMSW-IPR
Texas A & M University - Commerce
Rebecca_Judd@tamu-commerce.edu

Lon B. Johnston, Ph.D., LCSW
Texas A & M University- Commerce

Abstract

The use of Web 2.0 media such as Facebook and Myspace by social work students can result in unanticipated ethical dilemmas. This paper identifies potential areas of concern related to unprofessional behaviors, conflicts of interest, and protecting confidentiality of clients, colleagues, instructors, and agencies as students interact on social network sites.

Key Words: Ethics, Social Work, Social Network Sites, Internet, Web 2.0

As students transition from being a typical college student to someone in a professional social work program, the expectation is that they will become assimilated into the culture of the social work profession through the acquisition of values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills (Lay, Khaja, McGuire, & Gass, 2008; Weiss, Gal, & Cnaan, 2004). Professional socialization or the manner in which it occurs for students has not been adequately demonstrated within the social work literature, but is considered to take place within the classroom and through field placements, exposure to professional settings, and modeling behaviors of peers and professors (Barretti, 2004; Weiss et al, 2004). Although questions remain regarding the process of professional socialization, the rapid expansion of technology and proliferation of online social network sites (SNSs) add yet another environment that warrants consideration for social work students.

At a time in society when an increasingly educated public is placing greater demands on professionals (Randall & Kindiak, 2008), students in an academic program of social work must be made cognizant of potential ethical concerns related to personal privacy, boundary setting, and the persistence and searchability of information shared within virtual communities as they progress to professional status. Actual or potential ethical dilemmas associated with the presentation of a *professional self* include the unprofessional use of bias and derogatory language, as well as encountering conflicts of interest and breaching confidentiality related to clients, peers, colleagues and agencies.

Challenges within the virtual world identified by Palen & Dourish (2003) that could lead to potential pitfalls for students in social work programs include a lack of understanding and management of spatial and temporal boundaries, and the intersection of multiple spaces. This paper

explores potential ethical dilemmas for social work students when they are interacting on social network sites.

1.0 Social Networking

Evolving from a resource for reading content and finding information, the Internet is now also home to Web 2.0 media, in which people actively converse with other users and participate in the creation of content (Giffords, 2009). A primary element of Web 2.0 media is such social network sites (SNSs) as Myspace and Facebook.

SNSs can be defined as:

"a web-based service that allows individuals to (1) construct public or semi-public profiles within a bounded system; (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system" (Boyd & Ellison, 2008, p. 211).

Common features of online social networks include a personal profile representing oneself for the purpose of being contacted or making contact with others who share the site (Gross & Acquisti 2005). Social networks and blogs are now the fourth most popular online activity, with member communities being visited by 67% of the global online population (Nielson, 2009). Individual time spent interacting within these communities is growing at three times the overall Internet rate, accounting for almost 10% of all Internet time (Nielson, 2009). The use of social networking web sites has reached almost half (48%) of the American population in 2010, translating into 78% of teens; 77% of those ages 18 to 24; 66% of those ages 25 to 34; and 50% of those ages 35 to 44 having a personal profile page (Webster, 2010).

As social networking has expanded, social work educators, along with those in the medical and teaching fields, are navigating uncharted territory in terms of how online interactions by students should be governed and how to define what represents appropriate professional behavior within online social communities (Brown, 2010;

Chretien, Greysen, Chretien & Kind, 2009; Cuesta, 2006; Garner & O'Sullivan, 2010; MacDonald, Sohn & Ellis, 2010). Research has demonstrated that most users of SNSs do not take advantage of privacy settings (Gross & Acquisti, 2005; MacDonald et al., 2010; Tufekci, 2008). Online postings have been found to reveal personal information that might result in modifying the professional relationship between client and practitioner (MacDonald et al. 2010). The sheer numbers using these sites introduces concerns related to a thinning of boundaries separating the social work student's personal life from the developing professional image in interactions with peers, instructors, and current or future employers and clients.

Tied to a professional image is the activity of impression management, usually used synonymously with self-presentation, and representing a conscious or unconscious effort to convey specific information about oneself (Goffman, 1959). In an academic social work program, there is an expectation that students will develop a professional self that is guided by a constant awareness of social work's mission, values, and ethical standards for practice (NASW, 2008). The student's development of the skills to appropriately manage his or her professional presentation is of utmost importance for the professional socialization process.

2.0 Professional Presentation

As up-and-coming professionals, students must learn how to regulate, control, and set clear boundaries within the context of various personal and professional interrelationships among themselves, clients, organizations, and communities (NASW, 2008). Through this learning process, students become aware of how and when to present themselves in an appropriate manner within the various contexts in which they will interact as professionals.

Because it is impacted by awareness and a sense of being in the public spotlight, impression management, *or the presentation of*

a professional self, is associated with boundaries that move dynamically as contexts change (Kelly & Rodriquez, 2006; Tice, 1992; Palen & Dourish, 2003; Schlenker, Dlugolecki & Dohertry, 1994). Students learn to adjust their actions based on the setting (i.e., supervision, counseling sessions, staff meetings, and informal conversations) and population with which they are actively involved. Feedback in the physical environment includes verbal and nonverbal communication encompassing visual, auditory, and tactile cues that are key elements in assisting students to learn appropriate interaction techniques. As computer mediated communication (CMC) has expanded within recent years, researchers have initiated investigations into differences that may occur between online and face-to-face communication. Two views can be found within the research. Some feel that CMC is a superior media for communication because it removes physical barriers such as appearance and mediates the effects of social anxiety that can be caused by face-to-face interactions (High & Chaplan, 2009; Joinson, 2001). But CMC can also result in communication loss because there is a lack of contextual cues that may result in depersonalization (Seery, 2010). In relation to the latter, the lack of contextual cues in the virtual world can result in potential missteps in relation to an appropriate presentation of a professional self.

First, a great amount of identity relevant information may be disseminated easily through a social network site – and shared with large and unknown numbers of friends and strangers – including clients, employers (current or future), colleagues, and professional peers. Research has shown a willingness of college students to provide their real names on profiles within social network sites, along with political views, sexual orientation, religion, and romantic status (MacDonald et al., 2010; Tufekci, 2008). Almost one third (30%) of Facebook users are willing to make all of their profile information available to a random stranger and his/her network of friends (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). Personal information

that may not be shared within the context of a social work student's relationship with a client, peer, or employer is now readily available to not only these individuals, but also to a much wider, often unanticipated audience crossing over into other contexts while also becoming persistent in time (Kornblum, 2008).

Second, temporal boundaries reflect the ability of information to be recorded and its consequent persistence for future audiences (Palen & Dourish, 2003). Students' information related to their intimate relationships, social activities, and collegiate work is available for future audiences, thus potentially impacting yet-to-come professional relationships. Increasingly, employers utilize network sites as a component of the screening process with almost half of those surveyed citing information about substance use and inappropriate photos or information as top areas of concern (Havenstein, 2008). Other employers use social network sites to monitor their current employees' behaviors outside of the workplace (Stross, 2008). Teachers are one category of professionals who have experienced publicized incidents related to lapses in judgment resulting in removals or suspensions from employment in states such as Florida, Colorado, Tennessee, and Massachusetts (Shapira, 2008).

As students begin to construct their professional images, interactions within a social network site can compromise control over their own personally relevant information, and ability to construct an accurate moral identity. Others may contribute to this profile by uploading photos or text about the students – often without the students' informed consent (Palen & Dourish, 2003). Although some students may have their personal profiles set to private, their friends may not. Interacting with peers in social settings may result in pictures and references made within the context of a relaxed, nonprofessional atmosphere being posted on the page of a friend who has not set his or her profile to private.

Closely tied to the management of a professional image is the ability to recognize

and eliminate bias and derogatory language within one's professional practices. NASW's Code of Ethics is very specific regarding the use of derogatory language: "Social workers should not use derogatory language in their written or verbal communications to or about clients. Social workers should use accurate and respectful language in all communications to and about clients" (NASW, 2008 1.12). Social work students receive instruction on how to recognize bias and incorporate culturally sensitive language when working with clients. Postings on SNSs by students in other professional programs have been shown to include use of profanity; frankly discriminatory language; and depictions of sexually suggestive material (Chretien et al. 2009; MacDonald et al. 2010).

Derogatory language may be unintentional, such as the example of one special education teacher who has multiple bumper stickers posted on her profile page, including one that says "You're a retard, but I love you" (Shapira, 2008), or that of medical students who belonged to a group entitled *Perverts United* (MacDonald et al., 2010). Despite the fact that these actions are not made within the context of a professional setting, they are now transmitted across audiences and may be seen as reflective of the student's ethical makeup. No published literature was found regarding postings by social work students, but research indicates many college students have uploaded questionable content (Chretien et al. 2009; Tufekci, 2008). It is anticipated social work students would not be an exception.

3.0 Conflicts of Interest

The virtual community is the place where multiple offline and online geographical boundaries merge, with each individual setting having differing behavioral expectations and requirements. Boundaries can become blurred as multiple environments – personal, social, and professional – can intersect on the social network site. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008, 1.06c):

Social workers should not engage in dual or multiple relationships with clients or former clients in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the client. In instances when dual or multiple relationships are unavoidable, social workers should take steps to protect clients and are responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries. Dual or multiple relationships occur when social workers relate to clients in more than one relationship, whether professional, social or business. Dual or multiple relationships can occur simultaneously or consecutively.

In an offline environment, the student will have a close social network of a few intimate or significant ties, with upwards of 1000 or more acquaintances; while online social networks contain friends in the hundreds and additional friends within three degrees of separation possibly measuring in excess of 100,000 (Gross & Acquisti, 2005). The result is that social network sites offer an underestimated sense of audience, as users cannot be aware of all of those who will view shared information. Thus the management of actual or potential conflicts between the expectations placed upon students within the context of the profession and their social, sexual, religious, and business relationships may become obscured.

In addition, while sharing personal information and opinions, the "words" posted will remain unchanged whereas perspectives shift with each new group viewing the information. Clear, appropriate, and culturally sensitive boundaries in the offline environment disappear in the virtual world. A social work student experiencing difficulty in the current academic setting posted information related to a lack of understanding of the information being presented,

personal struggles impacting her ability to do well in her classes, and opinions about the professor's skills and abilities. This type of self-disclosure may be met with a supportive response from peers and fellow students. However, if viewed by current or former clients, confidence in the social worker's skills and abilities may be eroded. Additionally, a future employer may view this information and have concerns about the social worker's ability to maintain a balance between personal and professional life.

4.0 Privacy and Confidentiality

Associated with the need to identify and avoid conflicts of interest is the importance of maintaining privacy and confidentiality when posting comments related to the academic setting, instructors, and clinical cases in which the student may be involved. As outlined in the NASW Code of Ethics, social workers are expected to respect clients' right to privacy, including not soliciting private information, and if private information is shared, applying the standards of confidentiality. Confidentiality is also extended to information shared by colleagues in professional relationships and transactions (NASW, 2008). Without physical boundaries, such as an office or the walls of an agency, or tactile cues resulting from the direct visual or auditory contact with a client and/or peer, the potential to engage in the sharing of confidential information increases.

Students may post comments related to their schools, classes, professors, or field agencies in a positive or negative manner. Comments that previously would have occurred only within the walls of a student lounge, library, or dorm setting are now posted on the walls of Facebook and disseminated across multiple environments. There, they may be intercepted by clients, instructors, peers, or agency professionals. One national survey of U.S. medical schools reported incidents of students posting unprofessional online content that included reported violations of patient confidentiality (Chretien et al. 2009).

In the event a client within a field placement locates the social work student's Facebook or Myspace page and posts information, the client may then become vulnerable to this information being shared across the network of friends and acquaintances of the student, resulting in a potential violation of ethical standards for privacy and confidentiality. A unique area of potential concern can be related to direct practice with clients. Similar to concerns regarding group treatment, clients may fear confidential information being shared with others (Oliver, 2009; Sandstrom, 1996) if the social work student utilizes social network sites. This can obviously indirectly affect the social worker/client relationship.

As social work students gain skills in completing client assessments and obtaining collateral information to enhance treatments, they may be faced with decisions about accessing a client's Myspace or Facebook not only to obtain information but to verify information shared by the client in a therapeutic setting. In the legal realm, postings on social networking sites are being admitted into court proceedings and considered to be public information (Hayden, 2010). Especially in settings that serve non-voluntary clients, social work students may find themselves faced with ethical dilemmas about how such information is used in the treatment process. The NASW Code of Ethics (2008) requires social workers to provide services based on valid and informed consent. If that agency policy allows for searching personal pages of a client's SNSs, the social work student should inform the client that postings will be utilized as a component of service provision.

5.0 Social Work Education

Faculty and staff within programs of social work are expected to provide a learning environment that facilitates students' acculturation into the professional realm via NASW values and ethical standards. In response to advances in technology, NASW, in conjunction with the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), developed Standards for Technology and Social

Work Practice in 2005, targeted at guiding the use of technology as an adjunct to direct practice. However, guidelines and expectations for utilizing Web 2.0 media, including SNSs, by social work students and professionals is severely lacking at this time. There appears to be a large gap in the level of knowledge and expertise of students and that of academics regarding the use of SNSs, along with a paucity of social work literature addressing both the negative and positive aspects of this new frontier.

The NASW Code of Ethics offers the best guidance at this time when encountering ethical dilemmas related to information posted on SNSs. Students who use SNSs will need to be cognizant of upholding the ethical responsibilities of providing informed consent, maintaining confidentiality, and minimizing dual relationships.

As social work educators begin to address professional socialization within the virtual environment, they can learn from those in other academic fields about positive outcomes related to the use of SNSs. Designing courses or educational experiences that create communities of reflective practice on social networks such as Facebook can be used to challenge students to think critically about their online personae and the potential repercussions of inappropriate online activity for themselves, the academic institution, and the profession (Brown, 2010; MacDonald, 2010). "When faculty in preparation programs understand the nature of their students' self-portrayals (through SNS) they can better determine how to prepare these students for a profession that demands high moral and ethical standards," (Olson, Clough & Penning, 2009, p. 450). Incorporating the use of SNSs within the classroom may provide an underutilized tool for such enhancement and a venue for addressing the potential ethical dilemmas that may arise.

6.0 Conclusion

Students in an academic program of social work are taught and evaluated on aspects of professional behaviors to include punctuality, respectfulness, maintaining confidentiality, appropriate attire, cultural competence, and the demonstration of assessment and intervention skills. Web 2.0 media such as SNSs introduces a new environment for consideration within the evaluation process. Although there are many positive avenues associated with the utilization of online communities (Giffords, 2009), and the social work profession is developing ways to maximize this media for education and advocacy, students must be made aware of potential pitfalls related to posting of personal information. Research needs to examine whether schools of social work have existing policies addressing online behaviors of students. It is also important to determine the effects of policies and curricular programs on students' online behavior and professional development. Sharing content online that may fall into the category of unprofessional behavior can reflect poorly on the student, affiliated institutions, and the social work profession, as well as damaging client relationships. Discussion among students and faculty should occur to help define what is public and private and what constitutes professionalism in the era of Web 2.0. Furthermore, credentialing bodies and professional organizations should explicitly address these issues to provide guidance to educators and students alike.

References

Barritti, M. (2004). What do we know about the professional socialization of our students? *Journal of Social Work Education,* 40(2), 255-283

Boyd, D. & Ellison, N. (2008). Social network sites: Definition and conception. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication, 13(1),* 210-230.

Brown, A. (2010). Social media: A new frontier in reflective practice. *Medical Education, I 44(8), 744-745.*

Chretien, K. C., Greysen, S. R., Chretien, J. P, & Kind, T. (2009). Online posting of

unprofessional content by medical students. *JAMA,* 302 (12), 1309-1315.

Cuesta, C. (2006, August 31). Students love social-networking sites and so do employers. Fox News, retrieved 07/02/2010 from http://www.foxnews.com/printer_friendly_story/0,3566,208175,00.html

Garner, J. & O'Sullivan. (2010). Facebook and the professional behaviours of undergraduate medical students. *The Clinical Teacher,* 7, 112-115.

Giffords, E. D. (2009). The Internet and social work: The next generation. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services, 90*(4), 413-418. doi:10.1606/1044.3894.3920

Goffman, E. (1959). The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life. In D. M. Newman & J. O'Brien (Eds.), *Sociology: Exploring architecture of everyday life* (pp. 120-129). Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications.

Gross, R. & Acquisti, A. (2005). Information revelation and privacy in online social networks: The Facebook case. in *Proceedings of the 2005 ACM workshop on Privacy in the electronic societ.* New York, pp 71 -80. doi: 10/1145/1102199.1102214. Retrieved from http://portal.acm.org/citation.cfm?id=1102199.1102214#

Havenstein, H. (2008, September 12). One in five employers uses social networks in hiring process. *Computer World*, from http://www.computerworld.com/s/article/print/9114560/One_in_five_employers_uses_social_networks_in_hiring_process

Hayden, K. K. (2010). The proof is in the posting: How social media is changing the law. *Texas Bar Journal,* 73(3), 188-191.

High, A. C. & Chaplan, S.E. (2009). Social anxiety and computer-mediated communication during initial interactions: Implications for the hyperpersonal perspective. *Computers in Human Behavior, 25*(2), 475-482.

Joinson, A. N. (2001). Self-disclosure in computer-mediated communication: The role of self-awareness and visual anonymity. *European Journal of Social Psychology, 31,* 177 – 192.

Kelly, A. E., & Rodriquez, R. R. (2006). Publicly committing oneself to an identity. *Basic and Applied Social Psychology,* 28 (2), 185 - 191.

Kornblum, J. (2008, Jan. 18th). Social, work lives collide on networking websites. *USA Today,* Retrieved July 21, 2010 from: http://www.usatoday.com/tech/webguide/internetlife/2008-01-17-social-network-nobarriers_N.htm

Lay, K., Khaja, K., McGuire, L., & Gass, S. (2008) Grounding MSW students in social work values and ethics: An innovative approach. *Journal of Social Work Values & Ethics,* 5(2) retrieved July 1, 2010 from http://www.socialworker.com/jswve/content/view/95/65/

MacDonald, J., Sohn, S., & Ellis, P. (2010). Privacy, Professionalism and Facebook: A dilemma for young doctors. *Medical Education,* 44, 805-13.

NASW (2008). Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers. Retrieved from http://www.naswdc.org/pubs/code/code.asp

Nielson (2009, March). Global Faces and networked places: A Nielson report on social networking's new global footprint. Retrieved 7/10/2010 from http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/wp-content/uploads/2009/03/nielsen_globalfaces_mar09.pdf

Oliver, C. (2009). Enhancing confidentiality within small groups: The expectations of AIDS service organizations. *Social Work with Groups,* 32, 274-287.

Olson, J., Clough, M., & Penning, K. (2009). Prospective elementary teachers gone wild? An analysis of Facebook self-portrayals and expected dispositions of preservice elementary teachers. *Contemporary Issues in Technology and Teacher Education,* 9(4), 443-475.

Palen, L. & Dourish, P. (2003). Unpacking "privacy" for a networked world. *CHI: Proceedings of the SIGCHI Conference on Human Factors in Computing Systems 5 (1), 129-136.*

Randall, G. E. & Kindiak, D. H. (2008). Deprofessionalization or postprofessionalization? Reflections of the state of social work as a profession. *Social Work in Health Care, 47*(4), 341- 354.

Sandstrom,K. L. (1996). Searching for information, understanding, and self-value: The utilization of peer support groups by gay men with HIV/AIDS. *Social Work in Health Care*, 23(4), 51-74.

Seery, A. (2010). Education, the formation of self and the world of Web 2.0. *London Review of Education, 8*(1), 63-73.

Schlenker, B. R., Dlugolecki, D. W., & Doherty, K. J. (1994). The impact of self-presentations on self-appraisals and behaviors: The power of public commitment. *Personality and Social Psychology Bulletin, 20*, 20-33. Retrieved from http://psp.sagepub.com/

Shapira, I. (2008, April 28th). When young teachers go wild on the web. The Washington Post, Retrieved 07/17/2010 from http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2008/04/27/AR2008042702213.html

Stross, R. (2007, December, 30). *How to lose your job on your own time*. The New York Times. Retrieved July, 17th, 2010 from: http://www.nytimes.com/2007/12/30/business/30digi.html

Tice, D. (1992). Self-concept shift and self-presentation: The looking glass self is also a magnifying glass. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology,* 63 (3), 435-451.

Tufekci, Z. (2008). Can you see me now? Audience and disclosure regulation in online social network sites. *Bulletin of Science, Technology and Society,* 28(1), 20-36.

Tufekci, Z. (2008). Grooming, gossip, Facebook and Myspace. *Information, Communication & Society, 11(4)*, 544-564.

Webster, T. (2010, June 17th). The social habit - Frequent social networkers. Edison research. Retrieved from: http://www.edisonresearch.com/home/archives/2010/06/the_social_habit_frequent_social_networkers_in_america.php

Weiss, I., Gal, J. & Cnaan, R. A. (2004). Social work education as professional socialization: A study of the impact of social work education upon students' professional preferences. *Journal of Social Service Research, 31*(1), 13-32.