Ethical Standards for Social Workers' Use of Technology: Emerging Consensus

Frederic G. Reamer, Ph.D.
Rhode Island College
freamer@ric.edu

Abstract

Social workers are making increased use of technology to deliver services to clients, communicate with clients, gather information about clients, communicate with and about colleagues, and educate students and practitioners. The advent of technology—including Internet, text (SMS), email, video, social media and networking, cloud storage, and other forms of digital communication and software—has introduced novel and unprecedented ethical challenges. Very recently, these dramatic changes in the ways that social workers use technology have led to major efforts to develop new ethical standards in the profession. These efforts have occurred in three distinct, albeit related, domains: (1) practice standards, (2) regulatory and licensing standards, and (3) code of ethics standards. This article provides a synthesis of emerging ethical standards and consensus thinking related to social workers' use of technology. It is essential that today's social workers be thoroughly familiar with these significant developments to ensure that their practice complies with prevailing ethical standards.

Keywords: ethics, ethical standards, technology, digital, standards of care

Introduction

When social work was formally inaugurated as a profession in the late nineteenth century, practitioners worked face-to-face with people who struggled with poverty, urbanization, immigration, health care, education, employment, aging, housing, sanitation, and many other personal, social, and environmental challenges. Over the course of decades, social work scholars and practitioners developed and refined models and methods of intervention designed to provide *in-person* assistance to individual clients, families, groups, communities, and organizations. Traditionally, clinical social workers have learned about the critical importance of eye contact, body language, posture, tone of voice, and interpretation of clients' nonverbal cues. Community organizers and social work administrators have learned about the profound importance of interpersonal skills, how to engage audiences, and how to manage interpersonal conflict. Also, social work educators have learned about the complexity of classroom dynamics, interpreting and managing students' classroom behaviors, and the importance of connecting with students one-on-one. Throughout the profession's history, social workers have appreciated the essential role of in-person human connections. Indeed, human connection is highlighted in the NASW *Code of Ethics*; the phrase "importance of human relationships" is listed as one of social work's six core values (NASW, 2017).

In contrast, in recent years—a relative fraction of social work's storied history—increasing numbers of practitioners have begun to use technology extensively to deliver services, administer programs, communicate with and gather information about clients and colleagues, and educate students and practitioners, thus introducing

novel questions about what social workers mean by the sacrosanct term *human relationships.* Some clinical social workers provide counseling services to clients they never meet in person, communicating with them only by video, email, chatroom messages, text messages, and online avatars. Similarly, some social work supervisors are overseeing the work of supervisees they never meet in person. Some social work educators are teaching students without ever sharing a physical classroom with them, and some agency administrators conduct meetings primarily online. Other social workers are using technology to supplement face-to-face contact.

The widespread use of technology in social work is controversial. Some social workers are uncomfortable with the proliferation of technology in professional practice (Lamendola 2010; Mattison 2012; Santhiveeran 2009). For example, they worry that in clinical social work the expanding use of distance counseling options dilutes the meaning of therapeutic relationship and alliance and compromises social workers' ability to comply with core ethical values and standards related to informed consent, privacy, confidentiality, professional boundaries, competent practice, and termination of services, among others. Critics argue that clinical services provided remotely greatly increase the likelihood that social workers will miss important clinical cues, for example, clients' tears or physical discomfort in response to the social worker's probing question or comment. Clinicians who offer distance counseling services may find it difficult to maintain clear boundaries in their relationships with clients, in part because of ambiguity surrounding the temporal limits of their interactions that are no longer limited to office-based visits during normal working hours.

There is also controversy among social work educators (Reamer, 2013; Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015). Some applaud the use of distance education technology to expand social work education programs' reach, especially to remote and rural locations. Others decry the advent of degree programs that are entirely or primarily online, arguing that in-person contact between teacher and students is an essential component of quality education and gatekeeping.

Indeed, times have changed. Due to technological advances and innovations, social work is being redefined and transformed, which has led to challenging questions about what it means to be a social worker, what social work entails, and what new ethical standards are required.

The Use of Technology in Social Work

Online mental health resources and services emerged as early as 1982 in the form of "distance" or remote self-help support groups (Kanani & Regehr, 2003; Reamer, 2013a; Skinner & Zack, 2004). In social work, the earliest discussions of electronic tools focused on practitioners' use of information technology (Schoech, 1999) and the ways in which social workers could use Internet resources, such as online chat rooms and Listservs joined by colleagues, professional networking sites, and e-mail (Finn & Barak, 2010; Grant & Grobman, 1998; Martinez & Clark, 2000).

The most ambitious development and use of technology in social work has occurred in the clinical realm (Chester & Glass, 2006; Dowling & Rickwood, 2013; Lamendola, 2010; Mattison, 2012; Menon & Miller-Cribbs, 2002; Reamer, 2012, 2015a, 2015b; Zur, 2012). It includes the use of computers (including online chat and email) and other electronic means (such as smartphones and video technology) to (a) deliver services to clients, (b) communicate with clients, (c) manage confidential case records, and (d) access information about clients (Lee, 2010; Menon & Miller-Cribbs, 2002; Santhiveeran, 2009; Zur, 2012).

Also, social work education, supervision, and administration have been transformed by technology (Casey, 2008; Reamer, 2013). In the early 1990s, the advent of high-speed broadband transmission introduced the Internet as a way to administer programs and educate students and practitioners (Rumble, 2008). Social work administrators can convene online video meetings that include participants located in remote sites.

Some social workers provide online supervision to colleagues they never meet in person. The creation of online course management systems, such as WebCT and Blackboard, transformed colleges' and universities' opportunities to reach off-campus students throughout the world. Today, increasing numbers of social work educators are teaching hybrid (combined in-person and online) and exclusively online courses using web-based platforms.

The Emergence of New Ethical Standards

Very recently, these dramatic changes in the ways that social work services, supervision, administration, and education are provided have led to major efforts to develop new ethical standards in social work. These efforts have occurred in three distinct, albeit related, domains: (1) practice standards, (2) regulatory and licensing standards, and (3) code of ethics standards. It is essential that today's social workers be thoroughly familiar with these significant developments to ensure that their practice complies with prevailing ethical standards.

Practice standards

In 2017, following unprecedented collaboration among key social work organizations in the U.S.—the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), and Clinical Social Work Association (CSWA)—the profession formally adopted new, comprehensive practice standards, including extensive ethics guidelines that focused on social workers' and social work educators' use of technology (NASW, CSWE, ASWB, & CSWA, 2017). Approved by these respective organizations' boards of directors, these transformational, comprehensive standards address a wide range of compelling ethical issues related to social workers' use of technology to provide information to the public; design and deliver services; gather, manage, and store information; and educate social workers. In short, these new standards constitute a sea change in social work practice, administration, and education.

Regulatory standards

Recognizing the profound impact that technology is having on social work practice, in 2013 the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) board of directors appointed an international task force to develop model regulatory standards for technology and social work practice. ASWB embarked on development of new ethics-related standards in response to demand from regulatory bodies around the globe for guidance concerning social workers' evolving use of technology. The ASWB task force included representatives from prominent social work practice, regulation, and education organizations throughout the world.

The task force sought to develop standards for social workers who use digital and other electronic technology to provide information to the public, deliver services to clients, communicate with and about clients, manage confidential information and case records, and store and access information about clients. The group developed model standards, including extensive ethics guidelines, addressing seven key ethics-related concepts: practitioner competence; informed consent; privacy and confidentiality; boundaries, dual relationships, and conflicts of interest; records and documentation; collegial relationships; and social work practice across jurisdictional boundaries. These model standards, formally adopted in 2015, are now influencing the development of licensing and regulatory laws around the world.

Code of Ethics standards

In 2015, NASW appointed a task force to determine whether changes were needed in its Code of Ethics to address concerns related to the use of technology. The last major revision of the code was approved in 1996. Since 1996, there has been significant growth in the use of computers, smart phones, tablets, email, texting, online social networking, monitoring devices, video technology, and other electronic technology in various aspects of social work practice. In fact, many of the technologies currently used by social workers and clients did not exist in 1996. In 2017, NASW adopted a revised code that includes extensive technology-related additions pertaining to informed consent, competent practice, conflicts of interest, privacy and confidentiality, sexual relationships,

sexual harassment, interruption of services, unethical conduct of colleagues, supervision and consultation, education and training, client records, and evaluation and research.

Ethical Guidelines: Emerging Consensus

It is compelling that emerging ethical standards pertaining to social workers' use of technology that are embedded in recently adopted model regulatory laws promulgated by the ASWB, the revised NASW Code of Ethics, and standards of practice developed jointly by NASW, ASWB, CSWE, and CSWA highlight a number of common core concepts and themes: provision of information to the public; designing and delivering services; gathering, managing, and storing information; collegial relationships; and educating students and practitioners. This cross-cutting pattern reflects emerging consensus thinking across key national social work organizations about current "best practices" related to social work ethics when practitioners use technology.

Provision of information to the public

Many social workers maintain websites that provide information to the public. Examples include practitioners who educate the public about various clinical symptoms (for example, mood disorders, addictions, anxiety, relationship conflict), community resources (for example, agency services, useful websites, self-help tools), and social policies. New ethical standards emphasize that when communicating with the public using websites, blogs, social media, or other forms of electronic communication, practitioners should take reasonable steps to ensure the accuracy and validity of the information they disseminate (Recupero, 2006). Social workers should post information only from trustworthy sources, having ensured the accuracy and appropriateness of the material. They should advertise only those electronic services they are licensed or certified and trained to provide in their areas of competence. Practitioners should periodically review information posted online by

themselves or other parties to ensure that their professional credentials and other information are accurately portrayed; they should make reasonable effort to correct inaccuracies.

These steps are especially important given the frequency with which people conduct Internet searches to obtain information about social workers, social services, and social policies. Social workers have a moral duty to protect the public and avoid providing them with misleading information that could cause harm. Also, practitioners should not create unscrupulous websites or online posts that are designed to exploit people financially, for example, encouraging them to purchase products and services that are unlikely to help them and may cause emotional, physical, or financial injury.

Designing and delivering services

Social workers who use technology to provide services should ensure that they have sufficient competence. According to a new standard in the NASW Code of Ethics (2017), "Social workers who use technology in the provision of social work services should ensure that they have the necessary knowledge and skills to provide such services in a competent manner" (standard 1.04[d]). This includes the ability to assess the relative benefits and risks of providing clinical services using technology; reasonably ensure that electronic services can be kept confidential; reasonably ensure that they maintain clear professional boundaries; confirm the identity of people to whom services are provided electronically; and assess individuals' familiarity and comfort with technology, access to the Internet, language translation software, and the use of technology to meet the needs of diverse populations, such as people with differing physical, cognitive, and other abilities.

Most jurisdictions have adopted the position that electronic practice takes place in both the jurisdiction where the client is receiving such services (irrespective of the location of the practitioner) and in the jurisdiction where the social worker is licensed and located at the time of providing such electronic services (irrespective of the location of the client). If the client and practitioner are in different

jurisdictions, social workers must now be aware of and comply with the laws in both the jurisdiction where the practitioner is located and where the client is located (ASWB, 2015).

Social workers have always understood their duty to explain the potential benefits and risks of services as part of the informed consent process (Barsky, 2009; Reamer, 2015). When providing social work services using technology, practitioners should inform the client of relevant benefits and risks. It is important for social workers to also consider clients' relationships and comfort with technology. Practitioners should consider clients' possible reluctance to use technology; difficulty affording technology; limited computer knowledge or fluency with technology; and the risk of cyberbullying, electronic identity theft, and compulsive behaviors regarding the use of technology (National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017).

Practitioners must also assess their own competence in the use of technology to deliver social work services. They should continuously learn about changes in technology used to provide these services (NASW, 2017).

The subject of professional boundaries in social work is not new. However, technological innovations have introduced new boundary-related challenges. New standards remind social workers to maintain clear professional boundaries in their electronic communications with clients (NASW 2017; National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017). Practitioners who use technology to provide clinical services should take reasonable steps to prevent client access to social workers' personal social networking sites and should not post personal information on professional websites, blogs, or other forms of social media, to avoid boundary confusion and inappropriate dual relationships (Gabbard, Kassaw, & Perez-Garcia, 2011; MacDonald, Sohn, & Ellis, 2010).

Social workers who provide electronic clinical services may have clients who encounter emergencies or crisis situations. Some crisis services may be provided remotely, but others may require in-person communication or intervention. Practitioners should take reasonable steps to identify the location of the client and emergency services in the jurisdiction. If the social worker believes that a client may be at risk (for example, having suicidal thoughts), the practitioner should mobilize resources to defuse the risks and restore safety. Practitioners should develop policies on emergency situations that include an authorized contact person whom the clinician has permission to contact (ASWB, 2015; NASW, 2017; National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017).

Gathering, managing, and storing information

A number of new ethics standards require that social workers, as part of the informed consent process, explain to clients whether and how they intend to use electronic devices or communication technologies to gather, manage, and store protected health and other sensitive information (ASWB, 2015; NASW, 2017; National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017). Practitioners should also explain the potential benefits and risks of using the particular electronic methods for gathering, managing, and storing information. Practitioners should periodically review the types of precautions they use to ensure that they are appropriate given recent changes and identified risks in the use of technology (that is, new forms of viruses, cyberattacks, or other potential problems).

Social workers who gather, manage, and store information electronically should take reasonable steps to ensure the privacy and confidentiality of information pertaining to clients. Practitioners should be aware that statutes and legal regulations may dictate how electronic records are to be stored and practitioners are responsible for being aware

of and adhering to them. Organizations in various practice settings may have additional policies regarding the storage of electronic communications.

Also, social workers should ensure that their means of electronic data gathering adhere to the privacy and security standards of applicable laws. These laws may address electronic transactions, client rights, and allowable disclosure (ASWB, 2015).

Collegial relationships

Social workers increasingly use technology to communicate with and about colleagues, in addition to using technology to serve clients. Practitioners may need to gather information about professional colleagues for a variety of reasons, for instance to find contact information to facilitate client referrals; determine client eligibility for services; determine the credentials and experience of colleagues; identify colleagues' policies and practices; and gather information in relation to a potential complaint or lawsuit concerning a colleague. New ethical standards suggest that when searching for information about a colleague online, social workers should take reasonable steps to verify the accuracy of the information before relying on it. To verify information, it may be appropriate to contact the original source of the information that is posted or speak directly with the professional colleague. It may also be appropriate to confirm the accuracy of the information by checking other sources (ASWB, 2015; NASW, 2017; National Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017).

Social workers should also pay attention to who is posting and monitoring information on the Internet. Practitioners should be aware of the laws and regulations in their jurisdiction about mandated reporting of colleagues if a practitioner discovers online information about a colleague that violates ethical standards. In such a situation, the social worker may have a legal obligation to report the colleague.

Social workers should think carefully about whether to use technology to search for personal information about colleagues. New standards implore social workers to avoid using technology to pry into colleagues' personal lives (National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017). Practitioners should respect the privacy of professional colleagues in relation to personal activities and electronically accessible information that is not relevant to their professional services.

Also, practitioners should adhere to strict ethical standards when they communicate with and about colleagues using electronic tools, draw on colleagues' professional work, and review electronic information posted by colleagues. For example, social workers should avoid cyberbullying, harassment, or making derogatory or defamatory comments; avoid disclosing private, confidential, or sensitive information about the work or personal life of any colleague without consent, including messages, photographs, videos, or any other material that could invade or compromise a colleague's privacy; take reasonable steps to correct or remove any inaccurate or offensive information they have posted or transmitted about a colleague using technology; acknowledge the work of and the contributions made by others; avoid using technology to present the work of others as their own; and take appropriate action if they believe that a colleague who provides electronic services is behaving unethically, is not using appropriate safeguards, or is allowing unauthorized access to electronically stored information (ASWB, 2015; NASW, 2017; National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017). Such action may include discussing their concerns with the colleague when feasible and when such discussion is likely to produce a resolution. If there is no resolution, social workers may need to report their concerns through appropriate formal channels established by employers, professional organizations, and governmental regulatory bodies; also, they should take steps to discourage, prevent, expose, and correct any efforts by colleagues who knowingly

produce, possess, download, or transmit illicit or illegal content or images in electronic format.

Educating students and practitioners

Many of the new technology-related ethics standards focus explicitly on social work education, including undergraduate and graduate education, staff development, supervision, and continuing education (National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017). The standards have significant implications for social work educators' efforts to comply with the Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (2015) that pertain to technology: "Social workers . . . understand emerging forms of technology and the ethical use of technology in social work practice" (p. 7). The standards focus on core issues related to competencies in the use of technology for educational purposes; academic standards and integrity; training social workers in the use of technology to serve clients; and social work supervision (practice-based supervision and field education).

New standards indicate that social workers who use technology to design and deliver education, training, and supervision must develop competence in the ethical use of the technology through appropriate study and training (Fange, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014; Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015). They must examine the extent to which education provided using technology enables students to master core professional skills and engage in appropriate education, study, training, consultation, and supervision with professionals who are competent in the use of technology-mediated tools for educational purposes (Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). Prominent research suggests a number of best practices for online teaching that should be reflected in social work education (Boettcher & Conrad, 2016; Ko & Rossen, 2017; Reeves & Reeves, 2008).

Social work educators who use technology should anticipate the possibility that some students will have special needs that require use of technology-based adaptive devices that enhance access (Georgia Institute of Technology, n.d.). Social work educators who teach online courses must take these factors into account and, to the extent feasible, incorporate reasonable accommodations (Duncan-Daston, Hunter-Sloan, & Fullmer, 2013; Fange, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014; Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015). The Universal Design for Learning Guidelines provide social work educators with state-of-the-art protocols to enhance accessibility of technology-based instruction (National Center on User Design for Learning, 2018). These guidelines address issues related to student engagement, perception, self-regulation, comprehension, language and symbols, physical action, expression, and communication.

It is especially important that social workers who teach students in remote locations ensure that they have sufficient understanding of the cultural, social, and legal contexts of the locations where the students and practitioners are located. For example, online instructors must keep in mind that state laws differ considerably with regard to exceptions to clients' confidentiality rights (e.g., mandatory reporting and duty to disclose confidential information to protect third parties from harm) and informed consent (e.g., minors' right to consent to treatment without notification of parents by social workers). Social work educators should be knowledgeable about the cultures of the students and the clients whom the students may be serving (Boettcher & Conrad, 2010; Fange, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, & Bogo, 2014; Sawrikar, Lenette, McDonald, & Fowler, 2015).

A significant component of social work's new ethics standards concerns training social workers about the use of technology in practice. Curricula that teach students and practitioners about ways to use technology must include state-of-the-art knowledge about effective and ethical use of technology (Goldingay & Boddy, 2017). It is especially important to address whether and when technology is an appropriate way to provide services, evidence of effectiveness, assessment

and outcome measures, and ways to accommodate clients' special learning needs and cultural diversity. Educators must teach about ways to develop protocols to evaluate client outcomes and to think critically about the potential benefits and risks of using technology to serve clients.

A number of new technology standards focus explicitly on social work supervision and field instruction (National Association of Social Workers, Association of Social Work Boards, Council on Social Work Education, and Clinical Social Work Association, 2017). Some social work supervisors and field instructors are communicating with supervisees remotely, either as supplements face-to-face meetings or exclusively remotely. According to new standards, social workers who use technology to provide supervision must ensure that they are able to assess students' and supervisees' learning and professional competence (Maidment, 2006). Supervisors and field instructors should take reasonable steps to ensure that they are able to assess students' and supervisees' learning and professional competence and provide appropriate feedback. Social workers who supervise remotely should acquaint themselves with guidelines concerning provision of remote supervision adopted by the jurisdiction(s) in which the supervisors and supervisees live and practice.

Conclusion

Social workers are making increased use of technology to deliver services to clients, communicate with clients, gather information about clients, communicate with and about colleagues, administer programs, and educate and supervise students and practitioners. The advent of technology—including Internet, text (SMS), email, video, and other forms of communication— has introduced novel and unprecedented ethical issues. It behooves social workers to be thoroughly familiar with emerging ethical standards. Essential knowledge in this digital age includes standards that are being added to licensing and regulatory statutes and regulations; professional codes of ethics; and practice guidelines.

Technology-related developments in social work are both unpredictable and fast-paced. Thus, social workers should be vigilant in their efforts to monitor noteworthy adjustments in pertinent ethical standards.

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