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Article 64

Social Networking Websites and Counselors-In-Training: Ethical and Professional Issues

Nadine A. Hartig, Krista P. Terry, and Amber M. Turman

Hartig, Nadine A., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Counselor Education at Radford University. Nadine has experience in community mental health, school, and college counseling settings. Her research interests include counseling with children, clinical supervision and training, and trauma counseling.

Terry, Krista P., is an Assistant Professor of Instructional Technology in the Department of Leadership and Educational Studies at Appalachian State University. Krista has been in the instructional technology field in both administrative and teaching positions for the past decade. Her many research interests are based on the effective use of technology in a variety of teaching and training contexts.

Turman, Amber M., is a Graduate Student in the Department of Counselor Education at Radford University. Amber has experience in crisis stabilization and community mental health. Her various research interests include counseling young adults and the interpersonal relationships of young adults.

Introduction

Social networking websites, such as Facebook and MySpace, have grown in tremendous popularity, particularly amongst current college and graduate students (Buckman, 2005). Facebook was created in 2004, and now, according to the most recent statistics listed on Facebook itself, there are more than 500 million active users, 50% of whom log in daily (Facebook statistics, 2010). On the Facebook website, people connect by asking to be a friend to another online participant. The recipient of this request has a choice to accept or decline the friend invitation. The average Facebook user has 130 friends (Facebook statistics, 2010).

Facebook has become ingrained into the culture of most teenagers and students and, during the past few years, adults have followed suit. Being connected through the Facebook network offers many enticements to users, such as being able to reconnect with former friends, share pictures and other information with your list of friends, and join groups with others that share common interests or beliefs. However, the immense size of the network and the complexity of its many capabilities bring with it many challenges and potential issues.

The issue of privacy is one that has garnered much attention during the past few years, even as recently as May 2010, when a reported glitch allowed users to see information that was supposedly private (Wortham, 2010). The issues of privacy therefore lie both with potential technological issues as well as with the ability of users to enact settings and manage their profile/information accordingly. For instance, many students may be under the impression that their sites are secure and private; however, this is not the case unless the student activates certain privacy settings. Without the privacy settings activated, the general public, which includes faculty, staff, and alumni, have access to the student's page.

It is fairly common for users to not enact these settings and choose to maintain a public profile, leaving themselves vulnerable in a number of areas. For instance, an increasing number of universities are browsing social networking websites in an effort to obtain information about student misconduct (Read, 2006). Employers are also browsing websites to investigate job candidates (Read, 2006). As a result, students face ethical issues (e.g., surrounding display of professionalism, dual relationships, etc.) with consequences that may follow them into their futures.

The advent of these websites has created issues for college campuses. One issue, according to Lipka (2007), is that professors are a growing group of users, and this has created its own set of ethical dilemmas for universities. Universities may not have clearly defined boundary guidelines for professors to use and as a result, professors who ask to befriend a student invite a host of power discrepancies into an already vague relationship. A student may not feel comfortable accepting a professor as a friend, but may feel obligated to do so for the sake of his or her evaluation in a course. Also, a student may ask a professor to be a friend, and the professor may risk hurting the student's feelings by maintaining a professional boundary. Or, a professor may accept and risk creating an unfair power dynamic in his or her class.

The above mentioned privacy and ethical issues have begun to arise in several professional settings. For instance, a current study that investigated the impact of online social networking with medical professionals, found that not only are medical students active on Facebook, but that some also maintain public profiles. Within the subset of public profiles, instances were discovered in which the user was posting information that would not usually be disclosed in the doctor-patient relationship (Thompson et al., 2008). One of the outcomes of the study was a recommendation that medical educators examine how they can teach about professionalism in the online social networking context.

Counselor Training: Specific Issues

The counselor training field is one which shares these concerns over professionalism and others which are even more problematic due to the nature of the counseling relationship, which is already fraught with boundary issues (Webb, 1997). Boundaries are a potentially difficult concept to teach counseling students, and social networking websites blur boundaries in a completely new electronic format. Potential problems with blurred boundaries in this format include clients discovering personal information about their counselors, forming dual relationships if counselors are also network friends, and counselors-in-training declining friendships without hurting their clients' feelings.

To date, there has not been any research done on the impact of social networking websites on counselor training. Also, there has not been any formal policy outlined for counseling programs with regard to students' social networking website usage. Two ethical cases and discussion on the potential ethical issues are outlined in this article.

Case One

A counselor-in-training (CIT) has a social network website account (e.g., Facebook, MySpace). She maintains this account to stay in contact with new and old friends. She has appropriate, yet personal, pictures on her account (e.g., her with friends, family, and pets). She has not activated the built-in privacy settings; therefore, her profile and all information contained therein are publicly accessible and viewable to anyone with a Facebook account. The CIT is also an orientation leader on campus and has served in a variety of leadership roles.

The CIT began counseling with a sophomore undergraduate student in her individual counseling practicum. After two counseling sessions, the CIT realized the client was listed as a friend on her account. The client requested to be a friend a year ago when she found the CIT's information on an orientation list. They had minimal interpersonal contact prior to the practicum. The client wanted to demonstrate popularity by having large numbers of friends on her site; the CIT has large numbers of friends on her account, as she has accepted all people who request her as a friend.

During supervision, the CIT shares this information with her supervisor. She is not sure what to do as she already began a counseling relationship with the client. The CIT understands this is a potential dual relationship, however, she is concerned the client will be hurt or confused if she discovers the CIT has "unfriended" her. She doesn't want to reject the client as a friend even if there is not a real friendship between them.

Ethical and Professional Issues

Professional boundaries within the therapeutic relationship are at the core of this counselor-in-training's dilemma. Dual relationships span a continuum of very harmful (e.g., sexual dual relationships) to little potential for harm (e.g., a student who has a social networking website and has accepted a potential client as an electronic "friend"; Moleski & Kiselica, 2005). On the one hand, the counselor-in-training is worried about fostering a dual relationship, albeit one that is electronically contrived with little to no intimacy. On the other hand, she is worried about the client feeling abandoned, or at least rejected by her ending the electronic connection.

In addition, the counselor-in-training is facing the boundary issue of how much personal information to share with her client(s). Her account may contain information about her feelings and process of becoming a counselor, which could impact the client and the therapeutic relationship. Her account contains personal information about her significant other, her parents, and her social engagements. This is perhaps more information than she would disclose in a counseling face-to-face interaction with a client.

Interventions

The 2005 *ACA Code of Ethics* outlines that "[c]ounselor educators make every effort to ensure that the rights of peers are not compromised when students or supervisees

lead counseling groups or provide clinical supervision” (F.6.e.). Herlihy and Corey (2006) also remind counselor educators that in the case of dual relationships between students, the rights of the clients are maintained first and foremost, and that problematic dual relationships are intentionally avoided. While it is unlikely that the client’s rights will be infringed upon in the case previously mentioned, it is possible that the client may perceive the friendship as something more than the CIT’s perception. This creates a potential power differential and dual relationship within the counseling relationship, and this perception could be problematic for both client and counselor. For example, the client may feel that since they are friends on the social website, he or she may be able to consult with the counselor outside of the counseling setting. The counselor stands to lose rapport with the client when she must assert that counseling matters must stay within the counseling session.

Boundary issues span a wide continuum and, as a result, pose a teaching challenge to counselor educators. Herlihy and Corey (2006) advocate for teaching students to critically think through and manage multiple boundary issues within their relationship dilemmas. In this case, the CIT would be encouraged to think through the possible ramifications of each intervention. For example, if she keeps the client as a friend, she risks a dual relationship. If she removes the client as a friend, she risks hurting the client’s feelings. A conversation with the client explaining the conflict seems appropriate and necessary. Having a counselor educator assisting the CIT with this conversation is both a valuable teaching moment and a necessary part of supervision.

How do counseling programs prevent this from becoming a problem? Higher education institutions are currently divided on how to handle the influx of issues inherent in the use of these sites. These issues include cyberstalking, misuse, censorship, and use of site information in disciplinary actions (Lipka, 2007; Read, 2006). In response to these growing issues, some campuses have begun restricting social network websites use from university computers. Others feel it is inappropriate to censor students and their computer use (Read, 2006). Counseling programs may handle all of these issues and more, as they are responsible for the well-being of their students, but they have an added burden of ensuring the clients that are seen by their students are provided ethical care and services. They are also responsible for ensuring that their students become ethical and professional counselors. As a result of these demands, Herlihy and Corey (2006) recommend “[i]nstitutions and programs within institutions... develop clear and explicit standards regarding potential dual relationships between students and educators” (p. 67). They also recommend that programs have “[w]ritten, operationally defined procedures... for avoiding conflicts of interest in monitoring and enforcing institutional standards regarding dual relationships” (p. 67). In light of these recommendations, programs are well within their rights and obligations to clearly outline expectations of student conduct on social networking websites. Expectations might include keeping profiles professional, removing any controversial material, asking students to be cautious of who they accept as their friends, encouraging students to use their privacy settings, and informing students that it is their responsibility to inform supervisors of any potential dual relationship, regardless of how innocuous it may seem (Lipka, 2007; Read, 2006).

Case Two

A CIT has a computer social network account that he uses to stay connected with his undergraduate friends. On his account, he has very personal pictures of himself, including pictures of himself consuming alcohol and of his significant other in a swimming suit. The student is placed at an agency for his internship. Part of the employment and internship policies of the agency are to review an applicant's personal website(s). Upon discovery of the CIT's website, the supervisor requests the CIT change the pictures on his account; however, the CIT refuses stating that this is his personal account, and he is not doing anything illegal in any of the pictures. He feels that it is unfair for his counseling program or the internship agency to censor his personal life.

Ethical Issues

In addition to boundary issues mentioned in the first case, this case also includes the ethical issue of the counselor-in-training's personal factors that may limit his ability to exhibit a professional demeanor to his clients. While it is true that the CIT is not depicting himself in an illegal manner, the supervisor's concern is that he is depicting himself in an inappropriate manner should his clients have access to this website. The CIT's resistance to making this change, in addition to his lack of understanding that this could be problematic for him and his clients may indicate that he is struggling with understanding the importance of professional ethics.

This situation is also difficult because the ethical dilemma does not involve the CIT's on-site clinical behaviors or professional behaviors. CITs may understandably feel judged for something that is not part of their course or counseling program. Herlihy and Corey (2006) concur that:

[e]thical quandaries sometimes arise when instructors become aware of personal problems or limitations of students through a non-graded experiential component of the course. If instructors raise their concerns with these students in a way that leads to a negative evaluation or an administrative action, students may feel that their trust was betrayed, no matter how carefully instructors have explained in advance any possible repercussions. (p. 59)

They also remind us that counselor educators and supervisors are called to be gatekeepers and should not ignore concerns about students, even those discovered outside of class.

Interventions

The interventions described in the first case would apply to this case as well. In addition to those interventions (i.e., an outlined policy, assisting the student to work through the boundary issues), it is appropriate to assess the student and determine if personal factors are impinging on his ability to be a counselor (Herlihy & Corey, 2006). If it is determined that the student does have personal issues, for example, with substance use or with maintaining appropriate boundaries with clients, remediation would be necessary for the student to continue in his program of study (Baldo, Softas-Nall, & Shaw, 1997).

If it is decided that the student is not dealing with personal issues that would interfere with his abilities, it is appropriate for the department and/or supervisor to help the student decide the professional manner the student should present to his clients. In the

same way that a CIT would be asked to remove pictures of a personal or inappropriate nature from an office he or she was seeing clients in, a CIT may be asked to remove pictures from a social networking website that a client may be able to access. Being role models during personal time is something many professionals, including counselors, must deal with. This can be a difficult and lonely lesson for new professionals.

As in the first case, prevention is key in avoiding these situations. A clearly outlined policy describing the appropriate use of social networking sites, including dual relationships, content on sites, and site traffic is a recommendation for counseling programs. Students should be required to view the policies of an internship site at the beginning of internship and then discuss any discrepancies with both on-site and faculty supervisors to avoid future complications. Providing this guidance to students upfront is essential in helping them understand the expectations of their online behavior, and in an effort to avoid censoring their social material at a later time in their program.

Faculty Usage. Perhaps the greatest intervention is for counseling faculty and supervisors to be good role models. Counseling supervisors modeling appropriate behavior both sends a clear message to CITs on the importance of maintaining boundaries within counseling relationships, and it teaches them how to navigate through difficult situations (Webb, 1997). Therefore, it is important that counselor educators and supervisors who utilize social networking websites follow the same expectations outlined for their students: utilizing privacy options, not befriending students or potential clients, and only posting professional material.

Conclusion and Suggestions for Future Research

Social networking websites have become commonplace throughout the world. With the population of Facebook users in particular growing exponentially, it is logical to assume that this type of communication technology will only grow and permeate more areas of our professional, academic, and personal lives. In an effort to assist counselors-in-training with maintaining ethical and professional boundaries with clients, it is essential that counseling programs include expectations and guidelines for use in their program's policies. On a related note, internship sites need to communicate policies with students at the beginning of internship. It is also important for faculty to model appropriate social network behavior.

As social networking websites are a relatively new concept, there are many areas of research that need to be explored within the context of counseling and counselor education. One avenue that needs to be explored is the frequency and severity of problems as a result of dual relationships on social networking websites. Another issue that needs to be researched is the impact social networking websites have had on the supervisory relationship. Additionally, researchers may be interested in evaluating the emotional and psychological impact of the ever growing list of restrictions placed on counselors and other helping professionals to maintain boundaries with clients and communities. Lastly, it would be useful to research if the recommendations outlined in this article have a successful impact on counselors-in-training maintaining ethical and professional boundaries with their use of social networking websites.

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