

Student Professional Ethics and Life Issues Case Studies

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Introduction

Students are faced with some challenges in their daily lives. It could be challenged at the workplace, at home, at school, or in relation to other people. Deciding on how to solve a certain challenge may be easy for some, and it may also be a big issue for others. The decision that an individual makes may depend on the knowledge the individual has concerning the issue or the character of the individual involved. Certain theories apply to the decisions that individuals come up with and how they come about. To understand some of the professional or life issues that students face and how to deal with them, we will look at two case studies of professional and life issues that students are likely to face.

Case 1

A graduate training faculty member is going through student applications and decides to search the names of applicants on popular Google sites among students like MySpace, to gather more information concerning them. Some of the applicants are not available on an internet search, whereas others' research presentations and papers appear. Also, the MySpace profile of one of the applicants appears. The profile contains highly sexualized and unprofessional photos. The faculty member uses the information and decides to reject the applicant.

The Psychological principle of Ethics and Code of Conduct provide limited information on online information posting and the use of the information ethically. However, some principles act as reasonable starting points (APA, 2002). When students decide on the information to post on the internet, and faculty members consider using such information in making academic decisions, the following principles ought to be considered:

- Beneficence (contribution to clients' and students' welfare)
- Nonmaleficence (avoidance of unintended or intentional harm to clients or students)
- Fidelity (establishing and maintaining trust relationships with clients or students)
- Justice (ensuring equitable treatment of students irrespective of their age, race, gender, and socioeconomic status)
- Autonomy (respecting and strengthening student maturity and independence)

As much as the given principles are important to care ethics, the unique issues that arise when

students post private content on the internet need thorough and close attention. About the current APA Ethics Code standards, the ethical dilemmas that concern student use of the internet include students' informed consent, preservation of the privacy of students, and respect for students' autonomy.

Privacy: confidentiality and setting boundaries

Privacy revolves around two areas; if student information on the internet can be considered confidential and if a student's private content that has been obtained from the internet can be used professionally. It is important, therefore, to understand confidentiality before establishing a kind of boundary between personal and professional.

Confidentiality and privacy

Understanding privacy in a legal concept is very paramount, as it specifies the one who is legally fit to release private data that is shared in a professional relationship like doctor-patient, lawyer-client, and therapist-client, and the idea that the information shared will remain private. The issue of whether faculty members can make use of students' private content obtained from the net depends on whether the information can be regarded as public or private (Behnke, 2007). Current guidelines (Principle E) call for acknowledgement of an individual's privacy from psychologists. However, the guidelines do not define privacy. The issue of privacy is subjective and can be expected under certain conditions. It is important to come up with a schema for determining privacy boundaries on the internet and the domain appropriate to make use of internet information in making academic decisions.

The Internet does not offer any privacy veil as any information that is posted on the Internet is considered public. In fact, the internet is a public instrument developed by the government as a military organizational structure component. Whatever is posted on the internet, however embarrassing or intimate it may be, goes through a public medium. Thus, it would be ridiculous to expect other people to avert their gaze. Moreover, every average person is now familiar with the internet. People are thus aware that it offers unregulated access to the communications of other people. Also, if one is uncomfortable with the kind of openness displayed by the internet, he/she is free to retain their anonymity and use a pseudonym.

Therefore, unrestricted internet information is a public event that doesn't acknowledge privacy. As a result, a faculty member is likely to come across such information and use it, as he/she may decide fit. However, there are unique situations that require more privacy acknowledgement (Behnke, 2007). A person in a public place may do things that are expected to be private. For instance, they whisper information that they consider private to their partner's ear. The whisper is a modest veil of privacy that prevents others from hearing the information. Thus, it is reasonable to say that guaranteed access to a student's secure website affords some expectation of privacy.

The issue of whether information obtained online concerning a student should be regarded as private or not can be resolved by applying the Utilitarian principles permeating the APA Ethics Code. Ethical costs that relate to the benefits of using or disclosing information ought to be considered. The extent to which information is considered private must balance with minimizing harm to other people and oneself. Disclosures should serve to protect the psychologist, client, or other people from harm.

Boundaries

Another issue regarding privacy is whether private information can be used for professional reasons. It is vital first of all to understand if it is appropriate to use information about a student obtained from a different source other than the Internet. For instance, if a person familiar with the student in the case above decided to provide the faculty member with photos of the student. The dilemma of whether or how to use such information professionally is similar, despite its source. The 2002 APA Ethics Code states the following concerning personal and professional boundary

“The Ethics Code applies only to psychologists’ activities that are part of their scientific, educational, or professional roles as a psychologist. ... These activities shall, therefore, be distinguished from the private conduct of psychologists, which is not within the purview of the Ethics Code.”

Psychologists are urged to refrain from activities that may have an impact on their professional competency. The Ethics Code on Standard Disclosure of Personal Information requires the non-disclosure of students’ personal information unless the information can be used to determine if the students are capable of professional performance or may be a threat to others. Therefore, information can be ethically used in certain situations and not in others. In the case given, the unprofessional photo is outside the Code of Ethics purview, assuming that it does not pose harm to other people or impinge on the competence of the student.

However, some people advocate for virtue ethics as a substitute for principle ethics. Virtue ethics focuses on self-reflection and character and advocates that a person’s character guides their thought in personal and professional realms (Brown & Krager, 1985). Some further suggestions on the importance of focusing on fitness and character in training programs, with discipline regarding personality adjustment, substance use, integrity, caring, psychological health, and prudence. APA Code of Conduct advocates for the respect of individuals’ privacy, but fails to state the boundaries of personal privacy regarding whether information from the internet can be considered confidential and the type of information to be treated as strictly personal. Faculty members thus act with caution and seek to minimize potential risks to students.

Informed consent

Are faculty members supposed to inform students of the use of Internet information? The Ethics Code on Informed Consent expects psychologists to provide informed consent to their clients and students

using understandable language. This means they must provide necessary information beforehand concerning the nature of the service and, later on, conclusions and results. There is a need to avoid deceptive information in advertising psychology graduate programs. The criteria that are used to admit students to the program focus on the application of the student, for example, GRE scores, transcripts, personal statements, and recommendation letters. As much as some faculty members may search for the applicants on the internet, very few get to that point. It is important to take into account the information that students may require to make informed choices and how to make internet posts.

The outcome of the student-advisor relationship should also be considered, especially regarding using information concerning students from the internet. Psychologists ought to establish a trustworthy relationship with whomever they work with. Informed consent procedures for obtaining and using information from the internet could be applied at the outset to avoid a trust breakdown in the relationship.

Autonomy

Availing students' personal information on the internet has increasingly become part of the social fabric of the lives of graduate students. Psychologists are expected to respect the rights of individuals. It is, therefore, crucial to respect students' autonomous rights to participate in internet activities like blogs, dating profiles, personal websites, and online journals (APA, 2002). As much as there is a need to respect the independence and autonomy of students, self-determination is limited by the social context of students. Unequal internet access leads to a situation where some applicants have information posted online while others do not. Psychologists have the responsibility to prevent unfair discrimination by culture, gender, age, religion, race, national origin, sexual orientation, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, language, and disability.

The issue of unfair discrimination arises concerning using information obtained from the internet to facilitate an applicant's acceptance to the program. For instance, in the case above, the faculty member may be pleased with an applicant whose research paper is published online as opposed to the one without any online information. If students are accepted into a program in such a manner that some areas of students may not be accessible, then the issue of discriminatory and unfair treatment arises. Graduate training programs, therefore, must decide how to use students' online information best. In fact, it is essential that training programs ensure nondiscrimination when selecting students for admission.

Graduate students should set policies for evaluating whether students can be looked up on the internet as a way of deciding if they are fit to be enrolled in the program (Behnke, 2007). Also, training programs should pay particular attention to the information that they advertise that will be used to evaluate applicants. Moreover, once a student has been admitted into the program, the faculty should discuss the risks of posting information on the internet and how it can be used within

the program. Lastly, faculty should consider the following guidelines when faced with a dilemma on whether and how to use students' information obtained online:

- How the information was obtained
- If the student has some expectation of privacy
- If the information bears on the competence of the student
- Benefits and costs of disclosing/using the information
- The implication of the relationship with the student
- How does the information bear with the social context of the student like age, gender, race, and

The guidelines offered do not offer an automatic categorization regarding the action to take, but rather, they offer a framework to help consider the factors that could influence how online information on students can be handled.

Case 2

A third-year medical psychology graduate student is attending to some clients through the hospital's program. One of his clients, who is a woman in her early 20s, finds his MySpace blog and profile and goes through it. She comes upon information that reveals the therapist's affair and resulting break-up with the girlfriend. The client terminates her sessions with the therapist based on the information and files a complaint with the hospital concerning the therapist's inappropriate behaviour.

As much as clients may be curious to look up information concerning their therapists online, one may wonder about the extent to which they may use the information that they gather. The internet has become prominent among graduate students and has infiltrated the psychology field. For instance, psychologists can use the Internet to offer school counselling, provide sexual education, promote decision making and promote mental health care through supervision and consultation. Moreover, the therapists' academic accomplishments, research publications, and achievements can be found on the internet. Therefore, the Internet has become vital in the field of psychology.

Graduate students' personal lives are subject to public scrutiny. Most young people use the internet to obtain information on health. Some of the internet searches extend to healthcare providers and doctors. Psychologists strive for beneficence when working with clients and minimal harm (Brown & Krager, 1985). Therefore, therapists should always consider the information that they place on the internet and its consequences on their clients and their treatment. They should always ask themselves if the disclosure will be made by clients if the clients will be negatively affected and if the disclosure threatens their credibility.

Canadian Code of Ethics for Psychologists states that the personal behaviour of a therapist becomes of concern when it undermines the trust of the public in the discipline. Therefore training programs ought to caution student therapists against placing very confidential information on the internet that could easily undermine their credibility or public trust in the profession. For instance, in the case

above, the student did not think of the implications of his disclosure or the possibility of client access to the information.

The client could have also gained access to such information through other means, such as a friend, but it is easier to get access using the internet than other non-internet sources. If the therapist had considered this, he would have been able to balance his wishes against professional wishes. Maintaining professional wishes calls for sacrificing personal choice and practising responsible online behaviour. The autonomy of the therapist may thus be restricted bearing in mind the impact on the client, the therapeutic relationship, the course of treatment, and public perception of the profession.

To be able to address the issue above, training programs and students have to incur some input in the matter (Brown & Krager, 1985). Students need to reflect on the impact of their disclosures on colleagues, clients, fellow students, and faculty. They should consider the following first:

- The benefits and costs of posting the information
- Probability of negative effect on clients, faculty members or classmates
- Effect of the disclosure on the therapist's relationship with clients, advisors, and classmates
- If the disclosure threatens the therapist's credibility or undermines the public trust in the discipline of psychology

Whenever possible, graduate students should make use of measures of privacy protection to protect private information that they may not wish to be discovered or used professionally. For instance, most popular sites allow users to limit access to their profiles to preapproved people. Also, most bloggers use a pseudonym to separate their online thoughts from offline life. In fact, 55% of bloggers admit to blogging under a pseudonym, compared to 43% who use their real names. As much as such restrictions limit one's total freedom online, they are sensible precautions to undertake to protect a person's privacy and prevent conflict in the future.

Conclusion

The internet has blossomed within the past decade, developing into a popular medium of communication. Of late, personal disclosures on the internet are rampant among graduate students, who view the internet as an important part of their everyday lives. In fact, research confirmed LiveJournal (an online personal journal service) to be the most popular website (20%) among university students. Due to the kind of importance accrued to the internet, it is important to understand the ethical concerns that are associated with the sharing of personal information on the internet like the use of informed consent, implications on an individual's work, autonomy consideration, and privacy protection. Graduate students, faculty members, and graduate programs must address such ethical concerns in the context of the internet as a student's social and personal forum.

The Code of Ethics, therefore, can be used as a roadmap to navigate ethical issues which may arise in

the internet era. As much as the Code of Ethics is limited in a way, like not touching directly on online issues or not defining privacy properly, its purpose is not to provide specific guidance on every situation that may arise in a psychologist's life (APA, 2002). In fact, the Code of Ethics guards against some rigid rules that may get outdated easily. Also, the Code of Ethics pertains to all psychological roles across various contexts, like postal, person, internet, telephone, and other electronic transmissions. In cases where professional and personal collide; the Code of Ethics can be used as a guide in decision-making. Therefore, the standards and principles of the Code of Ethics are sufficient and applicable to present-day online issues, when applied thoughtfully. Students and faculty have the responsibility of determining the potential ethical dilemmas that may arise from internet disclosures.

Psychology graduate programs should pay particular attention to the matter to decrease potential harm to applicants, clients, student-advisor relationships, and students. The faculty must sensitize students on the implications that internet disclosure can have on the public's view and trust in the profession and their professional roles. In fact, it is thus considered important to remember that professionalism comes with certain obligations and responsibilities. For instance, in rural practice, psychologists have to consider the impact of their behaviour on the public view of them as representatives of the psychology profession. Furthermore, there is a need for graduate programs to discuss the proper handling of online information, which will lead to informed consent procedures by students. Such measures will reduce the number of ethical issues and allow for personal growth and safe socialization on the internet by the students.

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