Messages from Cyber-space

Therapy on the Internet

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This is a three part series that addresses a quickly emerging area of social work practice — psychotherapy on the Internet. Our first installment addresses basic Internet culture and values. These may or may not conflict with social work values. Second, confidentiality is acknowledged as a key component of normal social work intervention. An important question emerges, What about confidentiality and the Internet?

In part two, we examine the concept of confidentiality as a misnomer and important technical actions that must be addressed to comply with the NASW Code of Ethics. In our third installment, we address the question, “what’s happening now?” That is, how are current psychotherapists offering services over the Internet, what kinds of services are being offered, and what are the implications for social work private practitioners.

Internet Culture and Values: Part I

One of the most perplexing problems facing the use of the Internet and social work practice is the issue of ethics and confidentiality. The hallmark of appreciating ethics on the Internet is acknowledging that most ethical principles in traditional social work intervention are applicable to intervention on the Internet. However, experience teaches us that a new technology brings forth a totally new set of circumstances in which traditional ethical standards may not apply. We are faced with a major question which has not been addressed: Which circumstances are applicable to traditional ethical standards and which have little or no applicability? The Internet community is an emerging new society. We are beginning to see journals that exclusively address “Internet Culture” see Infobahn: The Magazine of Internet Culture. Among sociologists and anthropologists, we learn that each society has its own unique social norms by which inhabitants establish patterns of acceptable behaviors. Social norms provide the foundation for the development, direction, and understanding of values and ethics within a social structure. In completing research among cultures that are radically different from one’s own, anthropologists immerse themselves in the culture in order to gain an appreciation for social norms. Without first appreciating social norms, one cannot understand social ethics. Thus, to truly comprehend Internet ethics, one must experience it. Reading about it is not adequate. Two important points are the basis for our understanding of social norms. These are: a) regulating appropriate behavior, and b) variation of social norms.

First, norm patterns regulate appropriate behavior. That is, these rules provide direction on how to interact in prescribed circumstances. For example, facial expressions and tone of voice are commonly used as devices to deliver social sanctions when norms are violated. In cyberspace, facial expressions and voice do not exist. As a result, Interneters must immerse themselves in the culture in order to gain an appreciation for social norms. Without first appreciating social norms, one cannot understand social ethics. Thus, to truly comprehend Internet ethics, one must experience it. Reading about it is not adequate. Two important points are the basis for our understanding of social norms. These are: a) regulating appropriate behavior, and b) variation of social norms.

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Emotion</th>
<th>Meaning</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>:-)</td>
<td>The smiling face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>;-)</td>
<td>The winking face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>The unhappy face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-(</td>
<td>The cross face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-\</td>
<td>The undecided face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-o</td>
<td>The shocked face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-&amp;</td>
<td>A tongue-tied face.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>:-#</td>
<td>Lips are sealed face.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Hundreds of emoticons can be found on the Internet. New ones are being created and they are becoming more sophisticated in their meaning. Often times joking or sarcasm cannot be clearly articulated in the printed word. Thus, emoticons become an important aspect of communications and provide social sanctions for violation of Internet social norms.

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A constantly re-emerging problem of utilizing social sanctions to regulate ethical behavior appears in the arena of advertising. One legal myth on the Internet is that advertising is not permitted. Clearly, the prohibition of advertising on the Internet is false. Congressional intervention allowed advertising on the Internet in 1991. However, social norms of advertising are spelled out everyday on the Internet. For example, within News Groups like REC.MUSIC.MAKERS.MARKETPLACE that have been especially established for selling and buying, flame wars have emerged when retail stores have advertised. The particular music store that involves itself in such advertising does more damage to itself than good. It is not uncommon for violators of advertising norms to be flooded with anonymous E-mail to the point of making their network address impossible to use. Flame wars are another avenue for the delivery of social sanctions.

We see periodic flame wars on the listserv SOCWORK because of advertising. A common pattern of norm sanctions is often observed: an author will advertise a professional or academic book on SOCWORK. At least one outraged subscriber will express profound distress with such an effort. Invariably a third party will enter the discussion and conclude that the information regarding the monograph is important for his/her work. We will read comments like, “This is not an advertisement but rather a publication announcement.” The flame dies down until the next announcement of a newly published book. A new set of subscribers dispute the identical discussion. Position vacancies fall into the same category. Such advertising must be articulated as “announcements.” Again there is no law prohibiting such advertising, it is an issue of acceptable social norms on the Internet.

Flame wars are ensued not merely for advertising, but for a wide range of reasons. The flame war is the primary method for the delivery of social sanctions over the Internet. A great deal is written about Internet flame wars. Although insight into the psychodynamics of such wars are critical for therapy on the Internet, almost nothing is written on this subject. Hill offers some of the greatest insights into groups dynamics that purposefully attempt to start flame wars in his 1995 article entitled Bigfoot! (see Infobahn volume I, issue I, pages 40-45). He is able to uncover some of the psychosocial dynamics of the process and how violations of Internet ethics are sanctioned when flame wars are futile. Clearly, further research is required in this area.

Norms and corresponding social sanctions vary from one society to another. For example, in the Mid-East it is considered proper to belch at the dinner table to indicate appreciation for the meal. In the West, belching is considered crude. Unlike other major social structures, the Internet does not have physical or geographical boundaries. The borders of the Internet are the limits of cyberspace — infinity. Thus, regardless of one’s physical or geographical social structure which embraces a unique set of social norms, the Internet embraces an additional set of norms by which we are expected to comply during our interaction in cyberspace. The President of IBM and an aborigine in Australia comply with the same Internet norms.

This social situation is new to social work. We are taught to appreciate other cultures. While practicing on the Internet, we are required to be part of the culture.

In reviewing literature regarding the ethics and the Internet, two broad themes appear. These are: a) Application of preexisting ethical and legal principles; and b) The lack of application of preexisting ethical and legal principles. These themes represent opposite sides of the same coin.

People, including lawyers, seem to forget that general ethical and legal principles exist and these are applicable to the problems and issues of the Internet. For example, David LaMacchia was charged with one count of conspiracy to commit wire fraud. As an MIT student, he established an electronic bulletin board system [BBS]. Some of the users had uploaded copyrighted software on the BBS, while other users freely downloaded the material. Clearly, such conduct is a violation of copyright law. However, could LaMacchia be held responsible? The court had to rule NO. If a library patron violates copyright law, the librarian cannot be held responsible. Thus, the general principles of copyright law apply to the BBS on the Internet.

Our present NASW Code of Ethics has applicability for the Internet. Section B addresses the issue of “Competence and Professional Development.” Two themes appear dominant. First, a social worker must be timely in one’s intervention tools. This ethical mandate suggests that social workers must make an effort to be computer literate, which includes use of the Internet.

Second, one must not exaggerate one’s knowledge of an intervention system. Briefly, keep up to date, and do not falsify what one knows about the Internet.

Another key aspect of the NASW Code of Ethics is the issue of confidentiality. Efforts made to keep hard copies of mental health information secure must be translated to mental health files that are transmitted over the Internet. NASW has adopted a policy statement entitled, “Confidentiality and Information Utilization” which states that the NASW Code of Ethics “are insufficient guides.” Although the statement was approved by the NASW Delegate Assembly in August of 1993, it too is an insufficient guide. The policy statement notes that confidentiality has become more problematic with the advent of computers, but does not specifically address issues relative to the Internet, nor offer technical guidance. Social workers must rethink ethical standards relative to computer technology — and soon!

Under some circumstances, general ethical and legal principles are not applicable to Internet interaction. As a result, the Internet Society has been very concerned and is in the process of drafting a code of ethics. The themes of the document are “cooperation” and “enlightened self-interest.”

In part II of this series, we address the issue of “Confidentiality as a Misnomer.” Part I lays the foundation for understanding that in Internet therapy, we are ethically required to go beyond the concept of confidentiality that we have been taught in our professional training.