



The Ethical Use of the Listserv: Privacy and Professional Conduct

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The use of email listservs for discussions amongst colleagues has increased dramatically over the past few years. The CPA listserv has been running for a little over a year, and has nearly 900 members who subscribe and receive regular emails. Many psychologists also subscribe to listservs hosted by APA Divisions and other specialty groups.

Despite the vast proliferation of these listservs, there are few published articles that discuss their ethical use. Although the CPA listserv is moderated, there are no specific guidelines for ethical participation. Other listservs have moderators, and some have applied specific rules for the publication of clinical materials. Dr. Stephen Behnke, the Director of the APA Ethics Office, recently wrote an article on the subject of listservs (Behnke, 2007). He noted that although the APA Ethics Code does not specifically address the use of the internet, the Ethics Code applies to all the professional activities “across a variety of contexts, such as in person, postal, telephone, Internet, and other electronic transmissions.”

It must be the starting point for this discussion to consider the question as to whether participation on the CPA or similar professional listserv constitutes a professional activity. The Ethics Code does not apply to purely private activities. It is my belief that participating on a psychology listserv where one identifies as a psychologist should be considered a professional activity. Section 5.04 of the Ethics Code notes that “When psychologists provide public advice or comment via print, internet, or other electronic transmission, they take precautions to ensure that statements (1) are based on their professional knowledge, training, or experience in accord with appropriate psychological literature and practice; (2) are otherwise consistent with this Ethics Code.”

A review of postings on the CPA listserv suggests that most postings fall within a few categories; requests for referrals or consultation, information about professional opportunities and seminars, and discussions about issues of professional interest. The CPA listserv has hosted discussions on such diverse topics as recordkeeping, privacy and multiple relationships. If the Ethics Code applies to the postings of participants on professional listservs, then participants should carefully consider the relevant standards and principles. For example, many of the CPA listserv postings involve requests for referrals. Typically the poster provides some information about the case and the reason for the referral. Section 4.06 of the Ethics Code states that “psychologists do not disclose confidential information that reasonably could lead to the identification of a client/patient.”

In practice, this means that only a minimal amount of information should be disclosed when requesting a referral for a patient. General information should be substituted for specific details whenever possible. Requesting a referral for a 43-year-old, white male patent attorney who is recently divorced, in a custody dispute with his attorney spouse with three young children ages 7, 9 and 13 might be “too much information.” Instead, the request could be phrased as referral for a “mid 40s professional involved in a high conflict divorce.” Interested parties should be asked to contact the requestor for more details. The use of a professional listserv for clinical consultation is complex, and the space allowed for this article does not allow for proper discussion. Those interested in this topic are referred to Dr. Behnke’s excellent article referenced below.

Regardless of whether the listserv is used for promoting seminars, workshops, books or discussing professional issues, psychologists must ensure that any comments posted do not misrepresent the facts, relevant research or the basis for conclusions. While a listserv can be a place for heated discussions on complex topics, any statements made must be based on professional knowledge unless clearly stated as a personal opinion. Even when expressing a personal opinion, psychologists must remember that the Ethics Code still applies to the posting, and comments must be consistent with all relevant principals and standards. In addition to the rules of “Netiquette,” psychologists “do not engage in unfair discrimination based on age, gender, gender identity, race, ethnicity, culture, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, disability, socioeconomic status, or any basis proscribed by law.” Strong opinions and diverse perspective on professional listservs make them useful and lively, but psychologists must not forget that it is a professional forum, not a private communication between friends. 

References

- American Psychological Association Ethical Principles Of Psychologists and Code of Conduct (2002)
- Behnke, S., (2007). Ethics and the Internet: Requesting clinical consultations over listservs. *Monitor on Psychology*, Vol. 38, No. 7, P. 62. Available on the Internet at <http://www.apa.org/monitor/julaug07/ethicsrounds.html>

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