



MySpace, Your Space, Facebook and Blogs: Self-Disclosure on the Internet

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Psychologists have considerable professional disagreements as to what constitutes appropriate and inappropriate self-disclosure and the impact of self disclosure on the therapeutic process. Unethical self disclosure may be thought of as the deliberate disclosure of personal information intended to gratify the emotional needs of the therapist at the expense of the interests of the patients. The Google Factor (Zur & Donner, this issue) added a modern dimension to this historical debate. Many psychologists use MySpace and Facebook pages that provide the option to post pictures, videos, and links to friends, family and professional websites. Blogs encourage personal musings and insights that extend well beyond that typically found in professional writings or classroom presentations. The line between professional and personal disclosure has become increasingly blurred.

This rapidly evolving and growing area has been little discussed in the professional literature and was probably not anticipated in the current revision of the American Psychological Association Ethics Code. However increasingly questions are being asked about whether or how the Ethics Code applies to deliberate disclosures of information by psychologists on the Internet. The Ethics Code applies to “psychologists’ activities that are part of their scientific, educational, or professional roles as psychologists....

(T)hese activities shall be distinguished from the purely private conduct of psychologists, which is not within the purview of the Ethics Code (APA, 2002). When a psychologist creates a FaceBook page or Blog and identifies him or herself as a psychologist with a link to a professional website, the line between private and professional life has been blurred. These activities may no longer be “purely private” and psychologists may wish to consider the way that the Ethics Code applies to these pursuits.

Although the Ethics Code does not specifically discuss personal disclosures, the Ethics Code does offer some guidance regarding disclosures. Psychologists are encouraged in the Ethical Principles to be aware of the way in which their actions may affect the lives of others and to consider whether their influence can be misused. In addition, psychologists are asked to “promote accuracy, honesty, and truthfulness” (Principal C) and may not knowingly make public statements that are false, deceptive, or fraudulent (Standard 5.01). Psychologists

are also expected to have a basis for their opinions about others, and are generally not to offer professional opinions about persons they have not evaluated (9.01).

These guidelines may be readily seen to apply to information written in a professional or personal Blog when the author makes a decision to identify him or herself as a psychologist. However it is much less clear whether the Ethics Code does or should apply to a psychologist’s decision to post links to personal information such as family photos or videos. Although psychologists are expected to avoid or minimize harm when harm is reasonably foreseeable, the determination of what constitutes harm may vary depending on the professional services provided. Because there are no firm guidelines about self disclosure in the Ethics Code, each psychologist must consider the possible impact of personal information that is disclosed on the Internet. However the possibility that a client may become upset about information discovered on the Internet is probably not the sort of harm considered in the Ethics Code.

The use of the modifiers in the Ethics Code such as reasonable and foreseeable were included to allow psychologists to use professional judgment, to avoid unfairness, and to minimize the possibility of establishing an inflexible set of rules. It seems to be a purely private decision for a psychologist to post his wedding pictures or photographs

of her children at the beach, not actions that would fall under the purview of the Ethics Code.

Although it may be possible for a patient to do an Internet search and find his or her psychologist’s personal Blog or webpage, the important distinction is whether the psychologist has made a deliberate decision to identify as a psychologist. Psychologists should bear in mind that doing so may make the difference between professional and purely private activities. When identifying oneself as a psychologist on the Internet, take care to consider those aspects of the APA Ethics Code that may apply to any statements or opinions. Psychologists who establish a presence on the Internet would be wise to consider the impact on their clients and on their professional opportunities. As familiarity with technology and social networking sites increase, ever more patients and employers will be doing Internet searches. It may be wise to consider what you are willing to have people learn.

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