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Digital Natives or Digitally Naïve? E-professionalism and Ethical Dilemmas Among Newly Graduated Teachers and Social Workers in Ireland

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In a study which examined how newly qualified teachers and social workers conceptualize and incorporate asynchronous technologies in their professional and private spheres, variation in active participation on social media among the participants reflected a spectrum of opinions regarding the implications of online interaction for new professionals. The extent to which online interaction can overlap with ethical expectations attaching to professional roles is an emerging topic in the research literature. This study focused on the activities and experiences of newly qualified professionals. In this article, ethical issues are examined in three categories, namely formation, maintenance, and ending of online relationships.

KEYWORDS asynchronous technology, e-professionalism, ethics, social media, social work, teaching

John Donne meditates that "no man is an island" (Alford, 1839, p. 574). Humans are social by nature, dependent upon social interactions and human relations. However, modernity is increasingly dictating that these interactions and relations be digitally reflected and individually maintained through social media and social networking sites. Despite the positive aspects of these new communication tools for postmodern relationships, both private and professional, like any new tool, professional teachers and social workers need to exert caution in relation to the obvious (and not so obvious) issues that

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encroach upon e-professionalism and ethical decision making regarding personal disclosure, relationship building and communications with students and clients alike.

This study reports on the findings from a subset of focus group interviews from an on-going study that is examining the conceptualizations and experiences of new teachers and social workers, working in Ireland, with asynchronous communication, including how they find such activity interacts with their newly acquired professional identity. The interview data gathered to date reveal the knowledge, attitudes, perceptions, and experiences of the target group regarding their personal and professional usage of, and interactions with, asynchronous technologies (including but not exclusively Facebook, Blogs, Twitter, LinkedIn, Podcasts, Wikis, YouTube, Instagram, and Tumblr). The findings illuminate the extensive use of asynchronous technologies on a regular basis by many, although not all, new professionals. The study also reveals interesting insights into the ethical problems, in the context of these technologies, which when they arise must be negotiated and traversed by those in professional roles.

This article describes the types of ethical issues experienced by new professionals in their contact (direct and indirect) with the online world and explores the ethical perspectives that new professionals draw on in dealing with the formation, maintenance, and ending of relationships/friendships in an online context.

PROFESSIONALISM

The postmodernist perspective on professionalism and professionalization reveals the socially constructed and fluid nature of professional identity (Witkin, 2002). From this perspective, expertism and its hierarchical, powerful claim to exclusive knowledge has been dislodged in favor of frameworks which acknowledge the existence of different, sometimes contradictory, theories, practices, and realities within a range of specializations. Beijaard, Meijer, and Verloop (2004) also draw attention to the absence of an agreed definition of the term "professional identity" and how this absence then poses problems for the advancement of research on this topic. Nonetheless, the institutionalized processes of education, qualification, and recognition of specialist skills continue as the main system used by society to identify those who can lay claim to deep level knowledge of particular topics. In many specialisms, including teaching and social work, only those who have achieved a recognized level of education and practical experience, are deemed eligible to become members of their respective professions. The constructed nature of this type of professional production line may be open to debate but it continues as the dominant process in which people transition into particular professional disciplines to become fully fledged members. Through this

process members of the profession identify with others in their collective and thus acquire an individual and group professional identity. As Wiles (2012) discovered from her research, definitions of the term professional identity may vary but more easily identified will be commonly held understandings within any profession of the traits associated with membership of that particular profession. Measures of professional competence and readiness to become a full member of a profession usually require the individual to display attainment of an agreed level of skills, knowledge, and values, which have been assimilated during the educational process.

Common to the collective identity of a range of professional disciplines, teaching and social work included, is a shared set of values and principles, often articulated by codes of ethics, practice, or conduct. Essentially, such codes lay out the moral basis on which the actions and reasoning carried out by members of those professions will rely, and codes offer a means for a profession of displaying to the public at large the basis on which members of the respective professions may be trusted to carry out their work to the highest standards. As Burkholder (2012) points out, professionalism is more than a set of technical competencies. It includes personal attributes related to how the professional enacts their role. Regarding the value base of professional behavior, professionals across all disciplines are expected by society to be trustworthy, nonjudgmental, reliable, and safe to confide in. The obligation to protect the client from harm, or further harm, straddles all professions and it is the cornerstone on which expert disciplines rest their societal mandate.

Taking on a professional identity involves signing up, sometimes literally, to acceptance of the values and ethics associated with the profession in question and committing to upholding the reputation of the profession at all times. By extension, the individual is signaling a commitment to upholding and nurturing their own professional identity and reputation, without which it will be difficult to practice within their chosen profession or to retain public confidence and endorsement.

PROFESSIONAL BOUNDARIES

Cooper (2012), distinguishing between personal and professional boundaries, reminds us of the special nature of relationships between professionals and clients or service users. Such relationships arise from the need of one person for a service from another, and they usually occur within the context and confines of the particular service agency in which the professional is located, but nonetheless they are human encounters and, therefore, carry the full range of emotions that surround any form of interaction between two or more people. Ethical codes of conduct and/or practice across a range of professions, as mentioned earlier, typically set out the accepted parameters or

boundary rules that are expected of professionals in their interactions with clients or service users. Behavior codified in this way usually includes respect for client confidentiality and role boundary management so as to uphold and protect the privacy and dignity of clients. In this context, codes often indicate the importance for professionals of refraining from dual relationships, such as sexual or business relationships, with current or recent clients.

Although ethical codes are sometimes criticized for tardiness in keeping up to speed with the changing professional landscape of practice (Banks, 2003) and for not adapting their content quickly enough in response to innovations in the respective professional fields, it is less often the case that ethical codes across a whole range of professional disciplines are short-footed simultaneously and found to lack any guidance on a major social phenomenon. However, it appears that the codes of ethics across many disciplines are playing catch-up with developments in the online world, particularly in the area of online social relationships. Although widespread online interaction and communication is now commonplace, it is the case that many professional codes of ethics, worldwide, do not explicitly address online interactions as a context or setting for ethical issues and, further still, fail to recognize the unique features of online interaction, and how these features can, by their nature, attract particular boundary and ethical issues for different professional disciplines. It is possible, due to the paucity of research on the space where social media and professional lives intersect, that not enough is known about the pros and cons of online activity by professionals to inform the development of acceptable norms of professional netiquette. This small study, it is hoped, can contribute to knowledge on this topic.

PROFESSIONALISM AND NEW TECHNOLOGIES

The emergence of new technologies thrusts many professions into new territories of potential interaction with service users and the rest of society. Teaching and social work, like many other professions, have realized the potential benefits of new technologies for their members and also for improved service delivery (Eckler, Worsowisz, & Rayburn, 2010; Hill & Shaw, 2011; Long, 2013; McCormack, 2013). In general, technology has been embraced, subject to available resources, within classrooms, health services, and social services. The increased access to information, global communication, assistive technologies, and social contact has proven powerfully liberating for countless individuals, groups, and communities and these benefits are recognized and promoted by both of these professions and many others. In addition, in educational contexts in particular, social media and social networking have become increasingly vital modes of communication, especially among school and college-level students (Anderson, Fagan, Woodnutt, & Chamorro-Premuzic, 2012). Sheldon (2008) reports 93% of students in a college setting

were found to be active Facebook members. Furthermore, Harris (2008) found that Facebook had overtaken e-mail as the primary means of communication for students. Different studies have identified a range of functions for which social media are used by students, including organizing social events (Raacke & Bonds-Raacke, 2008) and building friendships (Sheldon, 2008). Smaller proportions of students report using social media as an aide to their education (Hew, 2011) or to interact with their teachers (Madge, Meek, Wellens, & Hooley, 2009). Karl and Peluchette (2011) report that students would rather befriend their mother or employer on Facebook than their teacher. In contrast, research evidence points to an increasing interest by teachers in using social media as a platform to enhance their teaching or their contact with students (Harris, 2008; Sheldon, 2008).

However, interactive and communication technology comes in many forms, and has a range of features which differ from one form to another. This article is concerned with asynchronous technologies, and seeks to explore what implications might exist for new professionals who use it. Asynchronous communication, by its nature, changes the process and texture of human interaction and in itself it requires new forms of social knowledge and social skills which may not always be immediately intuitive. It also changes the way in which online users may experience information giving and information receiving, what LaMendola (2010) refers to as the "flows" of information. Information posted online can be disseminated rapidly through an invisible chain of online contacts and search facilities. Also, anyone using interactive technologies is leaving a digital footprint of sorts, but those who are communicating with friends and networks on interactive technologies are also potentially donating information into a bottomless sea of potential viewers. For professionals, keen to preserve their reputation as individuals worthy of their professional identity, disclosure online can be helpful or destructive, depending on how that online communication is conducted or how compatible their digital footprint is with the professional identity they wish to preserve.

This article records the range of ethical issues identified by a set of research participants who took part in an ongoing study of new professional's usage of digital communication technologies. The next section briefly describes the methodology utilized in gathering the data reported here and the sections that follow highlight key points found within the data and discuss their implications.

METHOD

Guided by the ethical principles and protocols of the British Psychological Society (2009), the Psychological Society of Ireland (1999) and the British Educational Research Association (2004), ethical approval was granted for this study by the Research Ethics Committee of the School of Education at the host institution.

The data used for this article is drawn from two focus group interviews conducted as part of an ongoing study with new professionals from the teaching and social work disciplines. The convenience sample (Stewart, Shamdasani, & Rook, 2007) of voluntary participants was separated into their respective disciplines and a focus group was conducted with only social workers and a second focus group with only teachers. The focus groups followed the guidance in the literature on focus group composition and moderating (Krueger & Casey, 2009; Morgan, 1997, 1998; Swift, 1996) and analysis (Bertrand, Brown, & Ward, 1992; Knodel, 1993; Krueger & Casey, 2009; Pole & Lampard, 2002). Convenience sampling was used to recruit participants who shared a set of common characteristics including current employment in their respective fields, availability and willingness to participate in the study, and located within commuting distance to the university. Attention was also paid to identifying a set of participants with sufficient difference in terms of characteristics such as current job role, age, gender, and date of qualification in their respective professions. Each group comprised of three participants and while this was initially regarded by the researchers as a likely limitation of the study, the focus group interviews yielded dense amounts of data and the small size of the groups appeared to aid rather than hinder the depth of discussion and debate. A set of guide questions, themed into clusters, was used in both focus groups but when necessary free flowing conversation was encouraged by the moderator in order for new or emerging ideas to be discussed or expanded. The researchers noted the deep level of personal disclosure contained in the interview discussions and considered it possible that the small group size in each interview contributed to feelings of safety and trust in the participant group.

The data was transcribed and thematically analyzed using Template Analysis (Crabtree & Miller, 1999; King, 1998). The data was read repeatedly by the two principal researchers who also listened to the recorded interviews and cross-checked their analysis for agreement as well as for contradictions. A coding template which summarized the a priori themes was produced, and in a hierarchical manner, the template allowed for the meaningful organization of both broad and specific themes. A considerable volume of data was produced by these two interviews alone and this article focuses only on reporting the findings that relate to the ethical issues and concerns raised by the participants regarding usage of asynchronous technologies.

FINDINGS

The findings presented here concentrate on what was revealed in terms of ethical issues related to online interaction by new professionals. In this regard, the findings can be categorized into issues related to the formation of online relationships, the maintenance of these relationships, and the endings of such

relationships. Before outlining in more detail the issues relating to these three categories, the information revealed within the data regarding extent and level of usage is presented.

Extent and Level of Online Interaction

The two professions central to this article, teaching and social work, are both located within the spectrum of human services but carry very different societal roles and obligations. Nonetheless, in terms of extent and level of online interaction closely similar findings emerged from the two focus group interviews.

Within each of the focus groups a wide variation of usage among the participants was reported, ranging from those who claimed little or no interest, knowledge, or activity online to people who openly and enthusiastically embraced all technology as a good thing. The category of people reporting low usage included one member who described themselves as "Neanderthal" in terms of their technology usage and knowledge. However, as the focus groups progressed, it emerged that even those who initially claimed low or inadequate knowledge of technological communication, had a higher level of knowledge and history of usage than their initial self-descriptions would suggest. The "Neanderthal" used Linkedin (although reluctantly), engaged in online interactive teaching and was conversant with many of the issues regarding blogs, Web sites, and cyberbullying that were covered within the focus group discussion. In the other group, it also became clear that the person reporting current low usage had in the past been more active on certain social media sites but had made a conscious decision to revert to a mainly offline persona.

The active users within both groups reported high volume usage across a wide variety of asynchronous communication sites at a frequency of approximately once per hour, sometimes more often. In the middle of these two extremes, the other participants reported ongoing usage of asynchronous technologies but only as a tool of convenience and mainly to keep up to date with friends or professional contacts. In terms of focus group construction, this wide variation of usage among the participants proved useful for stimulating dialogue and debate as there was sufficient homogeneity between the interviewees arising from their professional identity but equally wide variation on the issue of usage of asynchronous technologies, thus producing the variation within each group so crucial to a successful focus group methodology. The following sections concentrate on the findings that emerged regarding issues related to online relationships.

Ethical Issues Related to the Formation of Online Relationships

The question, revisited repeatedly but never resolved in both focus group interviews, asked should professionals interact, befriend, or generally

communicate with current, previous, or potential clients/service users online. There was considerable debate about this across both focus groups, and polar opposite positions emerged between those who were completely against online interaction between professionals and clients and those who saw benefits or acceptability in such a scenario.

The focus group discussions include reference to certain potential benefits from online interaction and communication with clients, pupils, and other categories of service users. Some participants highlighted the now pervasive use of asynchronous technology, particularly among young people, and saw it as a necessity for professional service providers to engage fully with this new social cyberspace in order to understand and contribute to the development of these new forms of social interaction in society. The teacher's group, in particular, referred to the prosocial modeling that teachers could provide for young people in relation to online behavior and netiquette.

Those opposed to accepting clients, service users (including students, child, or adult) as online friends, followers, or network members were concerned with the boundary blurring this could potentially cause. In particular, they raised concerns about the possibility that online communication could distort or change the nature of the professional-client relationship and interfere with where it naturally begins and ends. They also raised the question about the extent to which it was appropriate for personal information to be shared within a professional relationship. Being able to see personal information, photographs, or videos of people, be they professionals or clients, some felt would bring too much information of a personal relationship into the professional-client sphere. They also flagged the potential invasion of privacy that this would create for the professional, the client, or both and they felt any factors that threatened the confidentiality or privacy of either party was unhelpful and potentially destructive for those involved.

The opposed-to-online-contact subgroups which existed in each focus group were also concerned with perceptions within the wider society. One example of this which arose and was debated at length in the teachers' group was the issue of primary or second level students befriending their teachers on Facebook. Some participants were unsure of the connotations that could attach to adult teachers befriending small or large numbers of young people on Facebook and they wondered about the wisdom of such an action. They also wondered if parents would be happy if they knew that a teacher would approve a pupil's request to become a Facebook friend or Twitter follower or other form of online acquaintance without first obtaining parental permission. They suspected that many parents, naïve to digital communication, were most likely unaware that teachers and pupils engage in this type of online relationship building. In the teacher group, the agreed view was that such teacher-pupil relationships were widespread and increasing. The social workers' group was less aware of widespread initiation by social workers or their clients of online friendships although all were aware of examples where either

a client had invited a social worker to become a friend or where an existing friend had become a client. They had fewer examples of social workers initiating the online relationship by inviting clients to become friends.

However, a related example discussed at one point in the group was the issue of clients becoming followers of the employing agency's Facebook page and then using the comment box facility to continue communication with the agency regarding their particular situation, possibly after the professional service from the designated professional had ceased. There were a number of concerns about this including the possibility that agency Facebook pages are often unmonitored at weekends and if a client left a distressed message on it that it might not be picked up or noticed in time to avert a crisis or tragedy. There was general agreement that social workers would be advised not to initiate online relationships with clients but there was mixed reaction regarding how to handle a situation where a friend, follower, or network member became a client.

Ethical Issues Related to the Maintenance of Online Relationships

The maintenance of an online relationship where one party became the client of the other, after that relationship was already established, was debated strongly within the social worker group with boundary blurring and the spectrum of dual relationships being the main concerns. While some members felt that it would require considerable powers of social dexterity to conduct a personal friendship with someone online while simultaneously offline being in a professional service-provider role with them. Others felt more confident that these issues could be managed if the professional was open with the client about how they would interact online while simultaneously in the professional-client relationship offline. The concern by some about blurring and the consequent risk to client confidentiality was countered by others who indicated that delisting a friend on Facebook or LinkedIn, for example, carried a powerful social online message and would directly draw attention (and questions) to the relationship between the two people concerned. The concerns raised by participants centered on how the act of unfriending another person might be interpreted in an online environment because often it signals or is a consequence of a serious rift or disagreement between the two parties. Invariably, some participants suggested, it would lead to comments and questions by other actors in the online social network and paradoxically might draw more attention rather than less to some change in the relationship between the two people involved. This might, in turn, jeopardize more seriously the confidentiality and privacy of the client than might happen if the professional actively managed the dichotomous relationship, in the context of the best interests of the client.

The intricate web of relationships that online contact can create was highlighted. Sharing information with friends or followers may result in an

unintended dissemination of that information to a wider audience, which may contain other professionals or clients. While not seeking each other out actively, the spectrum was raised of professionals and clients finding out personal information about each other through this type of information flow across the Internet. In both groups, the participants who were active online communicators viewed this aspect of online communication as a reality to which one must adjust. Their position was that access to one's online information simply goes with the territory and anyone active on social media sites needs to accept that in the online world the whole point is for information to spread, and not to be contained. Any expectations of being able to contain information posted online was regarded by them as naively unrealistic and that lack of information or understanding on this point regarding how the internet works lay at the heart of many people's concerns about online communication.

For others, the ease with which information could spread beyond the intended recipients was exactly the basis for their concerns about professionals being active online. They felt professionals, particularly new professionals, might be unaware of the pitfalls involved in sharing information or comments in online forums which could compromise their professional identity. They worried about the reputational damage that might result from photographs, blogs, or exchanges which in any way exposed the professional as someone whose private time behavior was incompatible with the traits or characteristics expected of them in their professional role.

Ethical Issues Related to the Termination of Online Relationships

In terms of the social fallout from the termination of an online relationship, the participants in both groups had much to say. Both interviews contained discussions about the public nature of online relationship termination and how difficult it can be for the rejected person to deal with this type of rejection due to its often sudden, public, and negative characteristics. One group had already raised the problem of rating individuals or endorsing them and the feelings of rejection this could cause within groups or between two people if someone was not happy with the ratings or the endorsements. However, in both focus groups the participants were quite vocal on the topic of termination of relationships and it was clear that the emotional impact of unfriending or delisting a contact can be extreme, deeply hurtful, and very public. If it is the professional who is unfriending the client, perhaps because they are concerned about boundary management, then, it was suggested, they may be causing more injury to the client than any potential role boundary blurring might inflict. The groups tossed these issues around but found it hard to agree or reconcile the divergent opinions that emerged on when and how a professional would or should terminate an online relationship with a client or student.

The social workers, in particular, were concerned about how best to then manage a situation where a client came into the professional's network or came too close, perhaps as an online friend of an online friend. They viewed this scenario as still relatively rare. On the other hand, the teachers suggested widespread friending, following, and network joining among teachers and their students. Both groups agreed that clearer profession-wide guidelines were needed on this and many other technology issues.

DISCUSSION

Despite the emergence recently of some policy and procedures documents within the professional discourse in the human services (see, e.g., American Psychological Association, 2013; Teaching Council of Ireland, 2012) aimed at helping professionals deal with the interface between their professional role and online communication, it is not clear the extent to which newly graduated "digital natives" from the "always-on" generation (Belsey, 2004) perceive or understand online communication as an arena where they may unwittingly encounter ethical issues relevant to their professional role. Despite the positive aspects of current and emerging digital technologies (Costabile & Spears, 2012), it is argued that the ambiguous nature of current guidance for these professions, and the paucity of attention to such issues in human service education and training, leaves new graduates unequipped and unsupported to navigate the complex legal, professional, and personal issues that accompany these new forms of electronic communication (Kirwan, 2012). The lack of research attention to such issues leaves educators without an evidence base upon which to develop research-informed curriculum content and postqualification training relevant to this topic. This in turn leaves professionals, and new professionals in particular, without comprehensive guidance and education on how best to reconcile their online and professional identities.

The results of this study are directly interpreted for educators in the fields of teacher training and social work education, involved at both initial and continual professional development levels. The findings highlight the need to develop programs that encourage the development of confident and competent e-professionals who can mediate the complexities intrinsic to active netizenship and appropriate netiquette (Bondolfi, 2013). The dynamic environment within which teaching and social work professionals work, both on- and off-line, and the choices they must make regarding the appropriate use of asynchronous technologies, further highlights the need for those involved in human service agencies to constantly review the guidance and advice that is issued to *all* workers involved in this area.

A final point arising from the findings, relevant not only to the extent and level of usage of social media, but also to the related ethical dimensions,

is the divergence between the findings in this study about contact between teachers and students online and the findings of Karl and Peluchette (2011). Although the sample in this study is small, it exposes a further nuance in the issue of teacher–student online communication. In the present study, the data suggests that teacher–student online contact is pervasive (contradicting Karl & Peluchette, 2011), but also that it is recreational in the main and not being driven for academic purposes by either group (aligned with Karl & Peluchette, 2011). This particular finding highlights the need for further investigation of this particular phenomenon, especially in the context of the reported need for stronger ethical guidance regarding online relationships with client groups for teachers, social workers, and other professions.

CONCLUSIONS

It is concluded that difficulties, at individual and profession-wide levels, will arise if a skill set or knowledge base remains underdeveloped which will equip professionals to navigate their way through the complexities of online communication and its overlap with their ethical obligations. Ideally, this knowledge development will commence during the initial professional education process. Already many disciplines are playing catch-up on this topic and it is increasingly clear that professional codes of ethics, practice, and conduct need refreshing and revising in light of the upsurge in digital communication. Further research is required so that those involved in leading professions or educating the coming generations will be better equipped to identify and advise on the ethical dimensions of online communication in the professional context.

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