Practice Matters

Practice Matters was created as an educational resource for social workers in Newfoundland and Labrador. It is intended that this resource will generate ethical dialogue and enhance critical thinking on issues that impact social work practice. Practice Matters is provided for general information.

E-Professionalism
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Social work is one of the largest health professions in Newfoundland and Labrador with over 1500 social workers employed in diverse areas of practice across the province. As a profession, social workers are accountable to a code of ethics and standards of practice, and strive for ethical behavior and professionalism in their practice. The Social Work Dictionary (2014) defines professionalism as "the degree to which an individual possesses and uses the knowledge, skills, and qualifications of a profession and adheres to its values and ethics when serving a client: (p. 338). Social workers not only have ethical responsibilities to clients, but are also committed to communicating with our colleagues, other professionals, and community members with ethical integrity.

The internet and changing landscape of digital technology is challenging the way that we think about professionalism in social work practice. E-professionalism is a term that encapsulates professionalism within the parameters of on-line technology. Megele (2012) notes that "e-professionalism goes beyond on-line communication. It involves the online persona of an individual based on the meaning of their online postings and interactions, including blogs, images, videos, tweets and more." McAuliffe & Chenoweth, as cited in McAuliffe (2014) defines e-professionalism as "the development of an on-line persona that is congruent with the values and ethics of the professional and portrays use of self in a way that is respectful and demonstrates professional integrity".

The purpose of this edition of Practice Matters is to explore e-professionalism within the context of social work practice, and to consider some of the ethical and practice dilemmas facing social workers in this digital age.

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Scenario 1

George has been a private practitioner for 20 years. He is professionally esteemed in his community and by his social work colleagues. Recently George decided to join Facebook so that he could keep in touch with his family. He also added a number of his social work colleagues as friends. One of his colleagues noticed that George "liked" a Facebook page that contained derogatory comments about people living in poverty. His colleague was very upset and wondered how to talk to George about his concerns.

George has a right to his personal opinions and values. The challenge is when one's personal values and opinions conflict, or are perceived to conflict, with one's professional values and ethics in the public domain. In analyzing this particular case scenario, the following excerpts from the CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005) would be relevant:

- "Social workers respect the unique worth and inherent dignity of all people and uphold human rights" (p. 4).
- "Social workers oppose prejudice and discrimination against any person or group of persons, on any grounds, and specifically challenge views and actions that stereotype particular persons or groups" (p. 5).
- "As individuals, social workers take care in their actions to not bring the reputation of the profession into disrepute" (p. 6).

Facebook is a public forum. While it is recommended that individuals set their privacy settings to the highest level, this does not guarantee that one's postings and comments are private. Clients and employers are also users of social media and may seek out information on professionals through the internet. Therefore, social workers should be mindful of posting anything on line they would not want an employer, client or colleague to read. This includes "liking" Facebook pages/events, posting links to sites that contain discriminatory or inappropriate content, or joining causes on Facebook that may not be in keeping with the values and ethics of the profession.

There are many types of internet self-disclosure (i.e., purposeful and planned, inadvertent or accidental, and unavoidable) (Zur, 2011; Zur, Lehavot, Williams and Knapp, 2009). While it is not clear at this point whether George intended to like this Facebook page and understood the nature of the material being portrayed on this site, it could be categorized as self-disclosure. Therefore, some of the important considerations would include:

- Was this self-disclosure intended or accidental?

- Does the "liking" of this Facebook page give an accurate portrayal of George's personal values and opinions? If so, how does this conflict with his professional values and ethics?
- If this action was unintended, how might George address this issue?
- How might this action impact on the perception of George as a professional social worker by his clients and colleagues?
- How might the community react?

It appears that one of George's colleagues is upset by George's linkage with the Facebook page. It would not be advisable for George's colleague to initiate a conversation with George about his concerns through Facebook. It would be helpful for George's colleague to consult the NLASW publication *Guiding Framework for Social Workers Concerned about the Professional Practice of a Colleague* (2012) to identify next steps in addressing his concerns.

Scenario 2

Jane has been working intensively with a couple regarding relationship issues. The couple is married with three young children. Realizing that the marriage is over, the couple informed Jane that they would be separating. The mom asked to see Jane privately for her anxiety issues. During one of their sessions, the client informs Jane that she is still very angry with her husband and will do anything to keep the three kids from their father. Jane believes that both are excellent parents and feels that the wife is being unreasonable. Jane is also worried about some of the accusations the wife is making against her husband. One night at home, Jane updates her Facebook profile indicating that she is feeling frustrated about her work with a couple who is separating, noting that the mom is being selfish and not acting in the children's best interest. She is worried about the impact of a long custody dispute on the children. She makes a comment that perhaps the children would be better off with their father. She proceeds to generalize about her concerns regarding children who are the victims of parental choices and actions.

This case scenario raises some interesting questions:

- Does this posting impact on client confidentiality and privacy?
- How might the mother react if she were to read this Facebook post?
- How might the father react?
- How might Jane's colleagues and/or employer respond?

- Is Jane creating a blend between her personal and professional life? Has a professional boundary been crossed?
- Whose needs are being met?
- Would Jane share a similar perspective if asked to share her professional opinion as part of a child custody assessment?
- How might other potential clients perceive Jane's practice and level of professionalism?
- How might this impact on the social work profession generally?

While the social worker in this scenario may be feeling quite frustrated and angry with her client, it is important to question whether this level of professional disclosure on a personal social networking site is appropriate. Generally everything posted on the internet is permanent. Therefore, it would be prudent on the social worker to reflect on her personal and professional boundaries and her tolerance for risk as these boundaries intersect.

One's professional reputation can be diminished with the click of a button, and it is important that as social workers, we consider the impact (real, potential or perceived) of our written words on our clients, colleagues, employers and the profession. In thinking through the complexities of this situation, Jane may want to consult the CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005) and *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005), the NLASW *Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice* (2012), and the CASW document *Social Media Use and Social Work Practice* (2014). These documents outline best practice guidelines for social workers in the use of technology and social media in professional practice.

Following are some excerpts from the CASW *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005) that would be important to consider:

- Social workers maintain the best interests of clients as a priority, with due regard to the respective interests of others (1.1.1)
- Social workers limit their involvement in the personal affairs of clients to matters related to service being provided (1.1.4)
- Social workers take care not to discuss confidential information in public or semi-public areas… (1.5.6)
- Social workers distinguish between actions and statements made as private citizens and actions and statements made as social workers, recognizing that social workers are obligated to ensure that no outside interest brings the profession into disrepute (7.1.8)
- Social workers avoid conflicts of interest that interfere with the exercise of professional discretion and impartial judgement. Social workers inform clients when a real or potential

conflict of interest arises, and take reasonable steps to resolve the issue in a manner that makes the clients' interests primary. In some cases, protecting clients' interests may require termination of the professional relationship with proper referral of the client to another professional (2.3).

Social workers need to be attuned to issues pertaining to client privacy and confidentiality when posting on-line. Kolmes (2009), as referenced in the NLASW *Standards for Technology Use in Social Work Practice* (2012), notes that even if client information is posted without disclosing a person's name, age or ethnicity, given the nature of the public forum, this may not be enough to protect privacy and confidentiality. In addition, perceived breaches of client confidentiality may be just as harmful as actual breaches. It is therefore recommended that social workers avoid posting client information on personal social media sites.

Social workers frequently use peer consultation in the resolution of ethical and practice dilemmas. Jane may find it beneficial to consult with a colleague or supervisor to discuss the questions noted above and to seek other ways of expressing her work frustrations. Jane may also want to consider her relationship with her client and whether her views and frustration with the client may also be impacting the social worker-client relationship. Given that the social worker-client relationship is the key factor in therapy success, Jane will need to consider whether she will discuss her concerns with the mother to ensure that the client receives the highest quality of care possible and to preserve the integrity of the relationship.

The ethical issues highlighted in this discussion are not specific to social media use. Only the medium has changed. Robb (2011) notes that, "professionals need a road map to help navigate the sometimes foggy intersection between ethics and social media". Social workers have many resources at their disposal as noted above to think through these ethical complexities as it relates to social media use and to foster continued learning and growth.

Scenario 3

Brittany frequently provides field instruction to BSW students at her agency. She thoroughly enjoys being a mentor for her future social work colleagues. During a recent field instruction session with a student, the student informs Brittany that the class has a Facebook page where they share learning from their field placements. During the conversation, the student asks Brittany if she uses Facebook. Later that night, the student sends Brittany a Facebook friend request to join her personal Facebook page.

This scenario will likely become more frequent as on-line communication and relationships expand and grow. The CASW *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005) outlines the ethical responsibilities of social workers who provide field instruction to students. The ethical responsibilities relevant to this case scenario include:

- Social workers endeavor to provide instruction based on the most current information and knowledge available in the profession (3.5.2)
- Social workers foster in social work students' knowledge and understanding of the social work profession, the *Code of Ethics* and other appropriate sources of ethical practices (3.5.3)
- Social workers inform students of their ethical responsibilities to agencies, supervisors and clients (3.5.5)
- Social workers do not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with students in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the student. Social work educators and field instructors are responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries (3.5.9)

While there are many benefits to social media use in social work practice, this particular case scenario highlights some of the ethical issues to which social workers and social work students must be attuned related to client privacy and confidentiality, competency in practice, and integrity in practice. There are two issues highlighted: 1) class Facebook page and 2) the friend request. Reflecting upon the following questions may be helpful for Brittany and her student.

- Should Brittany seek out information on the class Facebook page from her student?
- Would it be appropriate for Brittany to search for the class Facebook site without her student's knowledge?
- What type of information is being shared on the site and is it appropriate? Is there a possibility that client related material is being discussed? What about internal agency discussions and decisions?
- If the student informed Brittany that the on-line discussion is limited to social work theories and therapeutic approaches, would this change the discussion?
- Does the school of social work which the student is attending have policies pertaining to social media use in field education?
- If Brittany were to access the postings and become concerned about the contents, what are some of the ethical considerations? Would Brittany have an obligation to discuss this with the student? How might Brittany involve the school?
- How should Brittany respond to the student's request to be Facebook friends? What are some of the ethical considerations?

- How might the field instructor/student relationship be impacted if Brittany and her student became Facebook friends? How might the social worker feel about her student having access to her personal Facebook page and knowing details about her private life?
- What resources are available to assist the social worker?

Initially, Brittany may be concerned that her student and her classmates are inadvertently sharing client information on the Facebook site. Therefore, one of the first steps is to understand the type of information that is being shared and to have a discussion with the student. This would be a great learning opportunity to reflect on ethical standards. The CASW *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005) states that "social workers do not disclose identifying information when discussing clients for teaching or training purposes, unless the client has consented to such disclosure" (p. 8). Students in field internships are expected to adhere to the *Code of Ethics* and must take the initiative to critically reflect on the use of social media in practice. However, it is the ethical responsibility of the field instructor to ensure that students are aware of best practice standards and agency policies regarding the sharing of client information. As noted in the discussion above, even if a client's name, age and ethnicity are not used, these precautions may not be enough to protect client confidentiality and privacy.

Now that Brittany has information about the class Facebook page, the onus is on her to openly address this issue with her student, with the appropriate contacts at the school of social work which her student is attending, and with her employer. A question that may need some clarification is who is monitoring or evaluating the class site on an on-going basis? It would be reasonable to expect that the students, field instructors and school staff will come together to have a conversation about the ethical considerations in having a class Facebook page to discuss field placements and to develop some practice guidelines if the use of Facebook is continued. This will also be important in helping the students to learn how to navigate the ethics of social media use in social work practice and become more competent in their practices. Critical thinking is a key skill and competency in social work.

The issue of becoming a Facebook friend with an individual student will also require more thought and critical reflection. As noted in the CASW *Guidelines for Ethical Practice* (2005), "social workers do not engage in any dual or multiple relationships with students in which there is a risk of exploitation or potential harm to the student. Social work educators and field instructors are responsible for setting clear, appropriate and culturally sensitive boundaries" (p. 16). An on-line social relationship between a field instructor and social work student would be considered a dual relationship. Given that Brittany is in a position of power and must evaluate the student, it would be advisable for Brittany

to decline the Facebook friend request and to take this as an opportunity to model ethical decision-making in social work practice.

Summary

Social media use will continue to grow and transform with the expansion and introduction of new social media platforms. There is no doubt that social media use has great benefits. With regards to social work practice, social media use can be beneficial in expanding professional communication. Yet, as social workers we must consider the impact and use of social media within the parameters of the CASW *Code of Ethics* (2005), particularly as the professional and personal use of social media intersect.

This edition of Practice Matters is intended to explore e-professionalism in social work practice. It is anticipated that the focus taken will generate continued dialogue, debate, and critical reflection.

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