

EMERGING ISSUES: THE CHALLENGE OF ELECTRONIC BOUNDARIES

Many boundary issues I have discussed have loomed large ever since the creation of the human service professions. Practitioners have always had to use their judgment concerning relationships with former clients, self-disclosure, clients' invitations and gifts, unanticipated encounters in the community, conflicts of interest, and so on. Yet practitioners should be vigilant in their efforts to identify novel and emerging boundary issues that previous generations of practitioners could not have anticipated. As I discussed earlier, among the most significant contemporary challenges involve practitioners' and clients' use of social media (for example, Facebook and Twitter) and electronic communications and services (such as online counseling, cybertherapy, telephone counseling, and email therapy). These electronic options have created previously unknown boundary and dual relationship challenges, particularly with respect to self-disclosure, privacy, confidentiality, and practitioner availability (Gutheil and Simon 2005).

Human service professionals would do well to develop comprehensive policies and guidelines that address relevant boundary issues. Discussing these with clients at the beginning of the working relationship can help avoid boundary confusion and misunderstanding. Kolmes (2011) offers a useful template that addresses policies concerning practitioners' use of diverse social media sites and services, including Facebook, Twitter, text messaging, email, Google and other search engines, business review sites, and electronic location-based services. Kolmes routinely informs clients that she does not accept friend or contact requests on social media sites such as Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Kolmes also informs clients that she will not search for them using search technology such as Google and Facebook unless there is a genuine emergency or crisis (for example, if the client is at risk of harm). In addition, Kolmes explains, she will use email only to arrange or modify appointments; clients are instructed to not use email to correspond about clinical matters.

Zur encourages practitioners to make the following disclosure to clients regarding their use of email, cell phones, computers, and laptops:

It is very important to be aware that computers, e-mail, and cell phone communication can be relatively easily accessed by unauthorized people and hence can compromise the privacy and confidentiality of such

MANAGEMENT

Names and Strategies

EXAMINED a diverse array of dual relationship and boundary issues, some that are relatively uncomplicated and some that are complex. Some involve practitioners who are motivated primarily by altruism, and some involve practitioners who violate clients' boundaries because of their personal pathology, emotional needs, or greed. Some boundary crossings are a constructive purpose, whereas boundary violations are uniformly destructive.

Given the remarkable variety, dual relationship and boundary issues have several key features. First, they contain the seeds of potential harm to clients. Although serious harm is not inevitable—except in the most egregious situations, such as sexual exploitation of a client—it is an ever-present possibility. Human service professionals must be vigilant in their efforts to minimize potential and actual harm to others.

Second, dual relationship and boundary issues pose risks to professionals and clients. At one extreme, practitioners who violate clients' boundaries exploit their relationships with them run the very real risk of losing their careers and destroying their career. Although some boundary violations occur and remain in the dark, many eventually come to light. Even less serious boundary crossings can sometimes trigger lawsuits and ethics complaints filed with licensing boards and professional associations, thus threatening the careers of even the most noble practitioners. Given these possibilities, it behooves human service professionals to understand and follow risk-management strategies—primarily to protect clients but also to protect themselves.