Understanding the Psychological State from Facebook Profile: A Qualitative Study on Ethical Awareness

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Abstract

The main aim of this study is to examine the prospective psychological counselors' awareness about the ethical considerations of using Facebook as a psychological counselor. 30 second year and 30 fourth year Turkish students studying in Cyprus participated in the present research study. Self-report was used as the data collection technique. Thematic analysis was used to analyze the qualitative data based on the main themes. In addition, the qualitative data was supported with quantitative data with frequencies. The findings revealed that although second and fourth year students indicated similar reasoning for each theme, the frequencies were different. Mostly, there are differences in second and fourth year students' thoughts about the usage of Facebook. The research findings also revealed that although fourth year students are more aware of the ethical considerations and outcomes of unethical practice, the ethical issues should be more emphasized in the counseling classes.

Keywords: Facebook, counselor, ethics, social networks, counseling

In recent years, internet technologies have the pioneering role in communicating and socializing of the human beings (Erkoç & Erkoç, 2011). Internet technology usage has shown a noticeable increase in recent years. The main reason of this increase is probably the usage of social networking sites such as MySpace, Twitter, Facebook and LinkedIn. Social networking sites exist and are being used more frequently because humans are social beings and they need to communicate with others in order to continue existing. Social networking sites are defined as the web based services which provide people with the opportunities to create an open or semi open profile to connect, share various information, create groups, discuss different views, create new friendships and sustain present friendships with others who have a profile on the same networking site (Boyd & Ellison, 2007; Wang, Moon, Kwon, Evans & Stefanone, 2010; Joy & Katherine, 2008). Recently, the most widely used social networking site is Facebook (Toprak, Yıldırım, Aygül, Binark, Börekçi & Çomu, 2009; Korkmaz, 2013). Facebook has more than 950 million users in the world and more than 31 million of these users are from Turkey (Socialbakers, 2013 as cited in Aktürk, Çelik, Şahin, & Deniz, 2014). This social networking site allows its users to share their personal information such as gender, birth date, place of birth, religious beliefs, and hobbies, favorite music and movies, contact information, education, friends, photos and videos. In addition, users of this site update their statuses and check updates of their friends' profiles. In a recent study, Toprak et al. (2009) found that the basic reasons for using Facebook are finding friends, checking others' profiles, sharing music, video, photos, playing games, gathering social, political groups and spread ideologies.

Some studies show that the internet usage is considerably high among university students than other age groups and that this usage influences other areas such as academic success, interpersonal relationships, coping strategies and psychological distress (Chen & Peng, 2008; Göker, Demir, Doğan, 2010; Al-Gamal, Alzayyat & Ahmad, 2015).

American Counseling Association (ACA) Code of Ethics aim at promoting ethical attitudes, behavior and judgments by clearly expressing ethical principles, standards and values and by developing and implementing methods to help psychologists monitor their professional attitudes and behavior (ACA, 2005). Simply stating, the code of ethics promote acting beneficial for the client while also preventing harm. In this respect, it is clearly indicated in the ACA Code of Ethics and Conduct that counselors' primary responsibility is to respect the dignity and to promote the welfare of clients. Therefore, counselors act to avoid harming their clients. Specifically, it is clearly indicated at code A.5.c. that 'counselor-client

nonprofessional relationships with clients, former clients, their romantic partners or their family members should be avoided, except when the interaction is potentially beneficial to the client.' (ACA, 2005, p. 6). This is connected with the code A.4.b., which states that 'counselors are aware of their own values, beliefs, attitudes, and behavior and avoid imposing values that are inconsistent with counseling goals.' (ACA, 2005, p. 5) In addition, codes also indicate that the counselors do not discriminate against clients, students, employees or other research participants in a manner that has a negative impact on these persons.

The client-counselor relationships are also taken into consideration in the form of dual relationships in the code of ethics. These types of relationships can be sexual or nonsexual. For example, counselors' management of self-disclosure to clients, relationship with former clients and relationships with clients in rural areas may release non-ethical cases (Brownlee, 1996; Campbell & Gordon, 2003; Reamer, 2012). For example, counselors may face with some challenges while using social networking sites such as Facebook. Counselors may receive friend requests from their current or former clients which ask to be friends on this social networking site. Accepting such requests from former or current clients on social networking sites may lead to boundary confusions and risk clients' confidentiality and privacy (Reamer, 2013). If the counselor accepts the friend request of the client, this may help the client learn a great deal about the personal information such as family, political views, relationships, religious beliefs, social activities etc. This in turn leads to complex transference and counter-transference issues in counselor-client relationship. In addition, social workers who choose not to accept a client's 'friend request' on Facebook may unintentionally cause the client to feel a deep sense of rejection.

When these ethic codes are considered several questions raise about being a Facebook friend with the client such as 'is it ethical to accept a client as a Facebook friend?' or 'does using Facebook as a counselor harm or benefit the client while sharing personal information?' This is a debatable question since everyone has the right to share their personal information on the internet and counselors have to meet the requirements of ethical codes which state keeping the distance with the client about non-professional relationships is important. Facebook allows its users to change the privacy settings and there are some studies which show that Facebook users do not show indifference to their privacy settings (Öngün & Demirağ, 2014). However, for counseling profession, it is very important not to disclose and to keep personal information private.

For these reasons, the main aim of this study is to examine the prospective psychological counselors' perspectives and awareness about the ethical considerations of using Facebook as a psychological counselor. Therefore, the following research questions were used;

1. Would you accept your client as your Facebook friend? Why?

2. What are the benefits and harms of sharing your personal information as a psychological counselor on Facebook?

3. What would you do if you discovered that there is a difference in what your client told you during the sessions and what she/he has shared on Facebook?

Method

Research design

In this research, qualitative research design was used. Qualitative data analysis was used in order to gain a deeper understanding of participants' views, reasoning and experiences about the ethical considerations of using Facebook as a social networking site as prospective psychological counseling practitioners. In addition, quantitative data analysis including frequencies was also used in order to support qualitative data.

Data collection technique and analysis

Self-report was used as the data collection technique to explore the understanding of prospective psychological counseling and guidance practitioners' views about the ethical dilemmas and conduct throughout the counseling processes. The data was analyzed through thematic analysis by concentrating on matrix strategy. Basic themes that are accepting the client as a Facebook friend, benefits and harms of sharing your personal information as a psychological counselor and the act of counselor in a specific ethical dilemma were remarked to provide credible research findings and discussion.

Research process and ethics

Second year and fourth year university students studying at the department of Psychological Counseling and Guidance in Cyprus were chosen as the participants of the present study. The reason behind choosing the specific two years of study is because students in the second year of study haven't taken the course of 'Ethics' whereas fourth years have. In

this way, it would be possible to see the effectiveness of the knowledge about ethical reasoning in psychological counseling. Therefore, 30 second year and 30 fourth year students participated in the present research study. Informed consent forms were given to participants to be signed in order to exhibit their willingness to participate in the study. Then they were given the self-report forms to write their views about the questions. The students were informed that they should not write their names and that privacy will be kept during the research so that self-reports are more objective.

<div align="center">Results and discussion</div>

Research findings were driven based on themes in relation to research questions which were about accepting the client as a Facebook friend, benefits and harms of sharing your personal information as a psychological counselor and the act of counselor in a specific ethical dilemma. The findings for each theme were summarized in tables and were discussed in relation to current literature under main themes.

Accepting the client as a Facebook friend:

The first theme was about the prospective psychological counselors' views about accepting the client as a Facebook friend (See Table 1). Self-reports of participants (N=60) revealed 3 sub-themes indicating that they would accept their clients as their Facebook friends and 7 sub-themes indicating that they wouldn't.

Table 1
Accepting the Client as a Facebook Friend

	Yes (n=19)	No (n=11)
Second Year	- Closeness - Communication - Gathering information	- Personal life - Trust issues - Ethical concerns
	Yes (n=7)	No (n=23)
Fourth Year	- Closeness - Communication - Gathering information	- Harming the process - Need for face to face communication - Keeping the distance - Ethical concerns

Specifically, 19 second year students indicated that they would accept to be friends with their clients. The reasons which they pointed out were being closer to the client,

communicating better and easier and the chance to gather more information about the client. The second year students remarked why they would agree to be friends in many ways:

'…because we need to be in touch all the time'

'…because sometimes there may be things that I might want to ask'

'I can gather more information about my client from his/her Facebook profile'

'I think this will make my client feel closer and open himself/herself easier'

'I can understand my clients' psychological state from his/her wall; from a photograph or status update'

'…then I will have a chance to help my client immediately'

'The client will feel closer when he/she follows my personal life'

'I would want my client to follow me from Facebook so that she/he can know my personality better'

'We can communicate better from Facebook'

'I believe my clients will feel closer when I accept the friend request'

On the other hand, only 7 fourth year students said that they would agree to be friends with their clients with the same reasons; being closer to the client, communicating better and easier and the chance to gather more information about the client. They reported their views in several ways:

'I would accept my client to keep the genuineness between us'

'…to remind the session dates and times'

'…to keep the communication ongoing when the sessions terminate'

'I would follow what my client shares and likes'

'because I would feel closer with my client'

When self-reports of the second year students were analyzed, the results indicate that 11 of them would not agree to be friends with the reasons of not wanting to have their clients within their personal lives and emergence of several ethical issues. These were remarked in such ways:

'I wouldn't agree to be friends because this may cause political or cultural biases about my personal life'

'No because this would cause trust issues between us'

'I don't think it is ethical'

'I don't want my client to be in my personal life'

On the other hand, 23 fourth year students reported that they would not agree to be friends with their clients because they think that it would harm the process of therapy, face to face communication is better, they should keep the distance with the client and for several ethical concerns.

'I wouldn't agree because I believe that face to face communication is better'

'…this would affect our sessions in a bad way'

'…may cause prejudices about me, and this will influence the therapy'

'There should be some distance between me and my client'

'I don't want my client to learn a lot about my personal life'

'It is not ethical to be in a personal relationship so close with the client'

'No, because it isn't ethical'

'The relationship should be face to face'

'This would influence the healthiness of the therapy process.'

'I don't believe that it will have a benefit for the client through the therapeutic process.'

'I don't want to impress the client with my own thoughts and opinions'

'The client may get me wrong when she/he sees what I share and may get it personal'

These findings of this theme are consistent with the previous research findings in that students would agree to be Facebook friends with their clients to be closer, to share and gather information and to communicate better as Torak et al. (2009) indicated. However, the participants who reported that they would not accept to be Facebook friends with their clients show consistency with previous study findings in that they would prefer to keep their personal information private (Öngün & Demirağ, 2014).

In summary, both second and fourth year students remarked that they would agree to be friends with their clients because they think this would make the relationship closer, ease their communication and that they would have a chance to gather more information about their clients. Although the sub-themes emerging from the self- reports of second and fourth year students look the same, the difference lies in the number of responses. That is to say that only 7 fourth year students indicated that they would accept the friend request, whereas this number is 19 in second years. The reason of this result may be that fourth year students who took the 'Ethics and Legal Issues' course are more aware of the ethical outcomes of accepting a friend request of a client may cause.

Benefits and harms of sharing personal information

The second theme was about ethical benefits and harms of sharing personal information as a psychological counselor through Facebook. The findings of self-reports for this theme are shown in Table 2. The analysis of the second year students' reports revealed one main sub-theme (trust issues) under the heading of harms and 3 sub-themes (sharing thoughts, effecting positively, caring) under the heading of benefits. On the other hand, self-reports of the fourth year students show that there are 4 sub-themes (breaching confidentiality, harming the wellbeing, bias, harming genuineness) under the heading of harms and 2 sub-themes (Sharing information, effecting positively) under the heading of benefits.

Table 2

Benefits and Harms of Sharing Personal Information

	Benefits (n= 28)	Harms (n=2)
Second Years	-Sharing thoughts -Effecting positively -Caring	- Trust issues
	Benefits (n=12)	Harms (n=18)
Fourth Years	-Sharing information -Effecting positively	- Breaching confidentiality - Harming the wellbeing - Bias - Harming genuineness

Specifically, 28 second year students reported that as a psychological counselor, sharing their personal information through Facebook can have benefits because they will be able to share their thoughts with their clients, they will be able to effect the clients positively

with their posts and they will show their clients that they care for them more. They remarked these thoughts in several ways:

'I will be able to share my own thoughts and views with my clients'

'This will help me affect my clients in a positive way through posting positive things'

'It is beneficial because I will be able to care for my client's environment closer'

'We can affect the client's psychology positively'

'We can have a chance to spread our thoughts to everyone'

'This enables us to help our clients in psychological issues'

'We can show them that we care about them'

'If it is about useful information, it is beneficial for them'

'Social networking helps us share our personal information with our clients and show them we care about them'

On the other hand, only 2 second year students reported that sharing personal information through Facebook can be harmful for the therapeutic process because this may influence the trust issues negatively. Specifically, they remarked their views in these ways;

'Trust may be influenced negatively if we share an opinion that the client does not agree'

'The client may not trust us if she/he thinks that our post is about him/her'

There are 12 fourth year students, who reported that sharing personal information as a psychological counselor through Facebook is beneficial for the therapeutic process, said that it is beneficial because they will be able to share their thoughts with their clients and that they will be able to affect clients positively. They remarked their thoughts in such ways:

'It is always useful to share information'

'….to affect the client in a positive way'

'Beneficial because we can reach to our clients with our thoughts'

'It is ethical and there is no harm in sharing personal information'

'We can support our clients' thoughts with our personal posts'

'Positive posts about us is beneficial for their psychological wellbeing'

On the other hand, 18 fourth year students reported that sharing personal information through Facebook can be harmful for the therapeutic process. They remarked that sharing personal information may lead to breaching of confidentiality, it can mistakenly harm the wellbeing of the client, it may cause to biased thoughts about the counselor and that it may harm the genuineness of the relationship between client and the counselor. Specifically, they remarked their thoughts in these ways:

'It is not ethical if the post is something about the client's life'

'Harmful if the posts are about our personal lives'

'This may lead to breaching of confidentiality and the client may be offensive'

'The process is affected negatively if either side reaches to personal information about each other'

'This may harm the process and the wellbeing of client'

'The seriousness of the process is affected negatively; we should not contact our clients personally in any way'

'I think it damages the genuineness of the relationship'

'If the client has a different point of view, this may cause biases'

'May cause prejudice about us and this will affect the therapeutic process negatively'

The findings of this theme are also in line with previous research findings. As Reamer (2013) indicated if clients learn a great deal about the personal information of the counselor such as family, political views, relationships, religious beliefs, social activities etc. this may lead to complex transference and counter-transference issues in counselor-client relationship. Therefore, the findings of this theme also indicate that fourth year students are more aware of the harmful outcomes of sharing personal information with the client on Facebook as a friend.

The act of counselor in a specific dilemma

The final theme was about the act of counselors in a specific dilemma. The participants were asked to write what they actions they would take if they encountered with information different than what the client has told while looking at the Facebook profile of the client. The findings of self-reports are shown in Table 3. It can be seen that there are four sub-themes both in the second years' and fourth years' actions. These sub-themes are

terminating the therapeutic process, talking about the inconsistency during the process, losing trust for the client and not reflecting anything to the client.

Table 3

The Act of Counselor In a Specific Dilemma (With Frequencies)

	Terminating the therapeutic process	Talking about the inconsistency	Losing trust	Not reflecting anything
Second Years	4	15	7	4
Fourth Years	3	11	1	15

It appears that both the second and fourth year students reported the same actions to be taken when they face with a situation different than what the client has told during the therapeutic process. Specifically, they remarked their views in these ways:

'I would definitely tell my client that I learnt and immediately terminate the sessions'

'I would talk about the inconsistency'

'I would ask my client why she/he has lied to me and I would not judge without learning'

'I understand that my client is not a reliable person'

'I would lose trust in my client'

'I wouldn't show my client that I know'

'I respect and do not ask about it'

'I lose my motivation in the therapy and lose trust'

'I would explain the harms of this situation to the therapy sessions'

'I would explain that she/he should not do it again'

'I would try to ask the same topic without letting the client know that I know about it'

'We should talk about the inconsistency'

'I definitely would not confront the client with this!'

'I try to make the client trust me more'

'It would be better to leave it to the client to tell or not'

These findings show that most of the fourth year students would prefer to keep the inconsistency private while most of the send year students would prefer to bring up this

inconsistency issue during the therapeutic process. Choosing the latter, would possibly create a trust issue between the client and counselor since there is an implication of lying. If the counselor tries to ask the client whether the information learnt from Facebook is true of the one that she/he told the client, this confrontation may harm the therapeutic process and the client as well. Therefore, as the ethical code A.5.c of ACA indicates 'counselor-client nonprofessional relationships with clients, former clients, their romantic partners or their family members should be avoided, except when the interaction is potentially beneficial to the client.', any information gathered from out of therapeutic process would harm the client-counselor relationship (ACA, 2005). The findings of this theme indicate that although most of the fourth year students would not share this inconsistency, the number of the ones which would talk about this issue in the therapeutic process cannot be ignored.

Conclusion

The main aim of this research was to examine the prospective psychological counselors' perspectives and awareness about the ethical considerations of using Facebook as a psychological counselor. The findings about the ethical considerations of psychological counselors' usage of Facebook as a social networking site indicate that while some prospective psychological counselors are well aware of the ethical guidelines, some are not. Mostly, it can be said that fourth year students are more aware of these guidelines. The reason for this finding is probably that fourth year students took the course of Ethics and Legal Issues in Counseling. For example, in the first theme which was about accepting the client as a Facebook friend, although the sub-themes both years indicated were similar, the number of the fourth year students was more. In the second theme, second year students were very poor in identifying that sharing personal information as a psychological counselor may harm the therapeutic process and they indicated that this is a beneficial situation. Finally, the findings of the third theme which was about the actions they would take as a psychological counselor in a specific ethical dilemma, indicated that second year students mostly preferred trying to talk about the inconsistency whereas fourth year students preferred not to tell anything about the situation to the client.

In summary, the findings show that fourth year students who have taken the Ethics and Legal Issues course are more aware of the outcomes of using Facebook as a psychological counselor. Specifically, they would not prefer to accept their clients as their Facebook friends, they think that sharing personal information on Facebook will harm the process and they

would prefer to stay silent if they discover a fake information about what their client has told them.

One limitation of this research study is that the participants were from Turkish culture. This may be an important issue since Turkish people are more willing to share with others and accept requests from others than people from western cultures. Therefore, similar studies can be done in western countries to see if culture is an important variable in the perspectives of ethical issues in using Facebook as counselors. In addition, findings of this study are limited to Facebook usage. Athough Facebook was chosen for the present study since the mostly used social networking site was indicated as Facebook in previous studies (Toprak et al, 2009; Korkmaz, 2013), future studies may focus on other social networking sites such as Twitter. Finally, since the participants of the present study are psychological counseling and guidance students, other studies can be carried out using participants from other social work areas.

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