

This article was downloaded by: [University of Alberta]

On: 01 December 2014, At: 19:56

Publisher: Routledge

Informa Ltd Registered in England and Wales Registered Number: 1072954 Registered office: Mortimer House, 37-41 Mortimer Street, London W1T 3JH, UK



British Journal of Guidance & Counselling

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/cbjg20>

The ethical practice of Web C ounseling

John W. Bloom^a

^a Counselor Education Program, Butler University, Indianapolis, IN, 46208, USA

Published online: 16 Oct 2007.

To cite this article: John W. Bloom (1998) The ethical practice of Web C ounseling, British Journal of Guidance & Counselling, 26:1, 53-59, DOI: [10.1080/03069889808253838](https://doi.org/10.1080/03069889808253838)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069889808253838>

PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE

Taylor & Francis makes every effort to ensure the accuracy of all the information (the "Content") contained in the publications on our platform. However, Taylor & Francis, our agents, and our licensors make no representations or warranties whatsoever as to the accuracy, completeness, or suitability for any purpose of the Content. Any opinions and views expressed in this publication are the opinions and views of the authors, and are not the views of or endorsed by Taylor & Francis. The accuracy of the Content should not be relied upon and should be independently verified with primary sources of information. Taylor and Francis shall not be liable for any losses, actions, claims, proceedings, demands, costs, expenses, damages, and other liabilities whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with, in relation to or arising out of the use of the Content.

This article may be used for research, teaching, and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproduction, redistribution, reselling, loan, sub-licensing, systematic supply, or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden. Terms & Conditions of access and use can be found at <http://www.tandfonline.com/page/terms-and-conditions>

SYMPOSIUM

The ethical practice of WebCounseling

JOHN W. BLOOM

Counselor Education Program, Butler University, Indianapolis, IN 46208, USA

ABSTRACT *The emergence of on-line counselling services for addressing problems ranging from poor self-esteem, stressful relationships and addictions raises serious ethical concerns in this new electronic venue. A number of ethical considerations are discussed. The evolution of the National Board of Certified Counselors' Standards for the Ethical Practice of WebCounseling is described.*

Introduction

WebCounseling™ is defined here as the practice of professional counselling that occurs when client and counsellor are in separate or remote locations and utilise electronic means to communicate with each other. That there even is such a practice called WebCounseling evokes strong, emotional responses within the counselling profession from progressives and traditionalists alike, who are concerned about mostly real but sometimes 'virtual' ethical considerations.

Traditionalists who may not yet have found their computer's 'on-off' switch may be amazed to find out that significant numbers of credentialed counsellors as well as uncredentialed charlatans are offering a wide variety of counselling services locally, as well as between states and internationally, over the Internet. Sampson *et al.* (1997) quantified this fact, having used the search engine 'WebCrawler' to find 3,764 home pages containing the word 'counseling'. Randomly, 160 sites were selected for observation and analysis. Of the 160 sites, 72 (45%) were accessible and related to the counselling profession. Of the 72 sites, four (6%) offered on-line services for a fee in e-mail or chat format, 52 (72%) advertised services, products or publications, and 16 (22%) offered free mental health or education-related information.

More progressive practitioners may know of the existence of such electronic services, but question their efficacy. The even smaller number of those actually doing WebCounseling may be divided into one faction which has no awareness of the myriad of ethical considerations generated by WebCounseling, and another faction which has worked meticulously to practice as ethically and as legally as current knowledge and technology permits.

Paving the highway

As a board member of a professional certification board, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) based in Greensboro, North Carolina (USA), I have been both concerned and excited about the possibilities presented by WebCounselors™ and WebCounseling. I also accepted the directive of the NBCC Board of Directors to form a WebCounseling Committee to investigate the practice of WebCounseling and to develop a strategic plan for addressing concerns identified by the committee.

The committee was established in early 1996 and quickly formed a listserv on the World Wide Web (www) so that committee members could share information gleaned from their experiences on the Internet. Committee members include primarily US counsellor educators, some graduate students, and one WebCounselor, Dan Mitchell, a graduate of the CACREP (Council for the Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs) approved master's degree program at the University of British Columbia in Vancouver, Canada.

Without doubt, Mitchell and his partner, Lawrence Murphy, have gone farther than any other WebCounselors known to me in their attempts to offer professional, ethical services and to address the many concerns raised by professionals and the public alike. Their technology efforts (which can be seen on the www at <http://www.therapyonline.ca>) attracted the attention of President William Clinton, and they were invited to exhibit their program at the presidential inaugural in January 1997.

Areas of ethical concern

Sampson *et al.* (1997) have identified eight areas of ethical concern which should be considered in light of the delivery of electronic mental health and career counselling services, distance counselling supervision (Casey *et al.*, 1994), the electronic advertising of counselling services and counsellor education programmes, school guidance programmes, and hotlinks to a plethora of counsellor and client resources. The eight areas are:

- *Confidentiality.* The possibility exists for breach of confidentiality of client information that is transmitted electronically over computer networks.
- *Validity of data delivered via computer networks.* The effectiveness of software used as homework in counselling depends in part on the validity of the information presented.
- *Inadequate counsellor intervention.* Effective client use of computer applications is influenced by counsellors providing appropriate pre-screening, introduction, and follow-up of computer use.
- *Misuse of computer applications by counsellors.* A potential exists for incompetent use of computer resources by inadequately trained and/or overworked practitioners.
- *Lack of counsellor awareness of location-specific factors.* A potential lack of appreciation on the part of geographically-remote counsellors of location-

specific conditions, events and cultural issues that impact upon clients may limit counsellor credibility or lead to inappropriate counselling interventions.

- *Equality of access to Internet and information highway resources.* Although computing cost-performance has improved dramatically over time, average hardware costs and network access charges still remain out of the financial reach of millions of users.
- *Privacy concerns.* In order for counselling to be effective in a home setting, clients will need auditory and physical privacy in order to facilitate self-disclosure and ensure confidentiality.
- *Credentialing.* Data on current Internet counselling applications reported earlier indicates that some service providers either do not report or do not have a credential traditionally regarded as necessary for independent practice (Sampson *et al.*, 1997, pp. 209–210).

However, the most perplexing area is that of offering counselling over the Internet without the advantage of face-to-face contact. Many critics question this practice, citing traditional counselling theories which are highly critical of counsellors who cannot and do not attend to client visual cues, the apparent dangers of offering WebCounseling services which cross jurisdictional lines, and the lack of efficacy studies addressing this area. Duncan (1997), a counsellor educator at the University of Wyoming, is one of several who speaks in favour of a cautious approach:

‘... I am very uncomfortable with NBCC going forward in this manner. This is essentially like certifying primal scream therapists in the 60s without any research or evidence to validate or invalidate such a new procedure ... While it would be great for everyone to be required to be certified, we have a long way to go before we reconcile the issue of cross-state licensure violations, duty to warn procedures, etc. ... I really believe we are all caught up in an enthusiastic frenzy of Internet fever and have yet to approach the issue like real scientists.’

Chapman (1997), of the Counseling Center at LaSalle University, urges conservatism, but not too much:

‘Our discussion regarding counseling and the Internet continually gravitates towards the concerns that client personal issues and a counselor’s treatment of them will be the only way in which the Internet can/should be used in the counseling profession. I disagree. While I am in accord with the comments that have been posted regarding the problems of confidentiality via this medium and the appropriateness of a “wait and see” attitude, I believe there may be aspects of counseling, in addition to therapy, that lend themselves to this technology in the delivery of service to clients.’

Chapman then goes on to describe how he posted a copy of an e-mail to students in his graduate course in addictions, instructed them to explore learning about blood alcohol levels and other issues via a Web site he had discovered on the subject, and

suggested that this could be used as 'homework' with a client where alcohol and BAL issues were a focus of counselling.

Other professions on the highway

Medicine and psychology are two other professions that have joined the attempts of the counselling profession to address ethical concerns. Marlene Maheu, chair of the American Psychological Association's Task Force on Online Psychotherapy, has been conducting an on-line research study of views of Internet users regarding possible violations of the APA Code of Ethics (see http://www.cybertowers.com/cgi-bin/ethics_forum.cgi). Maheu has also been monitoring the ethics discussions in the medical profession:

'There are a number of nationwide trends in telehealth that have been developing rapidly, and without our participation. The legal race among states wanting to pass telemedicine acts has already been won by California. Its Telemedicine Development Act of 1996 was signed into law last September, and will be enacted this July (1997). The California law defines and regulates the practice of telemedicine on a state-wide level for the first time. It not only restricts California telemedicine services to practitioners licensed in California, but also requires insurance carriers to reimburse providers for its delivery, including HMO's and Medi-Cal. It amends four major state codes to add telemedicine as normal part of healthcare services' (Maheu, 1997).

Other organisations are considering similar actions. The Ethics Committee of America's National Career Development Association has already developed a draft of such standards (Pyle *et al.*, 1997).

Where are we going?

By the time this paper appears in print, the answer to this question may be much clearer. For the moment, the National Board for Certified Counselors is considering carefully the following actions:

- establishing a Code of Ethics for the practice of WebCounseling;
- establishing an International Registry for WebCounselors;
- designing a model webpage for WebCounselors.

The NBCC WebCounseling Committee also has an initial draft of standards (Bloom, 1997). Examples of standards being considered are that members of the proposed WebCounseling Registry™ will:

- have reviewed pertinent legal and ethical counselling codes for possible violations emanating from the local practice of WebCounseling (these in-

clude local and state and provincial statutes as well as the codes of professional membership organisations, professional certifying associations, and state or provincial licensing boards);

- follow all relevant ethical codes for the practice of professional counselling;
- have informed clients of the use of encryption methods to help ensure confidentiality of communications between WebCounselor™ and Web-Client™;
- have informed WebClients if sessions are being supervised, the credentials of the supervisor, and if and how session transcripts are being preserved by the supervisor (supervision occurs at the WebSupervisor's™ geographical location; counselling occurs at the WebCounselor's geographical location);
- have informed WebClients™ that WebCounseling relationships have the potential of generating strong feelings between WebClient and WebCounselor;
- follow appropriate procedures regarding the release of information before sharing client information with other referral sources (because of the relative ease with which e-mail messages can be forwarded to formal and casual referral sources, WebCounselors must resist this temptation);
- have informed clients if, how and for how long electronic session transcripts are being preserved;
- have maintained appropriate decorum in the preparation of their homepage (as homepages become easier and easier to construct, the temptation exists to add pictures of home, family, favourite fishing holes, etc.; such self-disclosure on the part of the WebCounselor needs to be kept in proper perspective);
- have provided hot-links to Web sites of all appropriate certification bodies and licensure boards;
- have encouraged clients who wish to maintain records of sessions to do so in a confidential manner;
- if doing research, have followed appropriate ethical guidelines;
- have informed clients of limits of confidentiality, both real and electronic;
- if counselling a minor, have obtained written consent;
- have taken steps to address the issue of impostor clients and impostor counsellors, such as the use of a code word, number or graphic with clients;
- have informed the client of the names of all staff and colleagues who might have easy access to the counsellor's computer and thus possibly to the counsellor's records;
- have contacted NBCC/CCE or their state or provincial licensing board to obtain the name of at least one WebCounselor On Call™ (WebCOC) within the client's geographical location; further, have contacted that individual to determine that counsellor's willingness to serve as a WebCOC (in person, over the phone or via e-mail) should that client need emergency counselling services;
- are aware of the extent of the coverage provided by their liability insurance while providing WebCounseling services from the counsellor's geographical location;

- in addition to providing the clients with at least one WebCounselor On Call, have encouraged their clients to accept the responsibility for keeping the phone number of at least one back-up community counseling or law enforcement agency close at hand;
- have discussed with their clients procedures for contacting the WebCounselor when he or she is off-line: this means explaining exactly how often e-mail messages are to be checked by the WebCounselor;
- have mentioned at their Web sites those presenting problems they believe to be inappropriate for WebCounseling: these might include sexual abuse as a primary issue, violent relationships, suicidality, eating disorders, and psychiatric disorders that involve distortions of reality;
- have developed an appropriate assessment or intake procedure to use with WebClients;
- have explained to clients the possibility of technology failures, such as what to do when an e-mail message is lost in cyberspace; also, when the WebCounselor gives instructions to WebClients to call if problems arise, the WebCounselor discusses matters such as the appropriateness of the client calling collect (when the call comes from the other side of the world), differences in time zones, etc.;
- has explained to clients how to deal with time delays from the time an e-mail message is sent to the time an e-mail message is returned;
- have explained to clients how to cope with potential misunderstandings arising from the lack of visual clues from client or counsellors.

Conclusion

The National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC) Board of Directors continues to examine both sides of the issue while gathering additional data from those already involved in the practice of WebCounseling and those who have personal and professional opinions about such practitioners. NBCC as well as its Council for Credentialing and Education (CCE) and its Research and Assessment Corporation for Counseling (RACC) are all vitally interested in WebCounseling issues.

References

- BLOOM, J. (1997). *NBCC/CCE Standards for the Ethical Practice of WebCounseling*. Greensboro, NC: National Board for Certified Counselors WebCounseling Committee.
- CASEY, J.A., BLOOM, J.W. & MOAN, E.R. (1994). Use of technology in counselor supervision. In L.D. BORDERS (Ed.), *Counseling Supervision*. Greensboro: ERIC Clearinghouse on Counseling and Student Services, University of North Carolina (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 372 357).
- CHAPMAN, R. (1997) [chapman@lasalle.edu]. *Re: WebCounseling*. In NBCC-webcounseling [NBCC-webcounseling@Virginia.edu], 27 January.
- DUNCAN, D. (1997) [dmduncan@uwo.edu]. *Re: WebCounseling*. Private e-mail message to John Bloom [JBloom@butler.edu], 17 February.
- MAHEU, M. (1997) [drm@cybertowers.com]. *Telemedicine and telehealth on the immediate horizon*. Posting to multiple recipients of the list netpsy [netpsy@sjuvml], 17 February.

PYLE, R., HOWLAND, P., KOLODINSKY, R., NILES, S., PALMER, R. & SAMPSON, J.P. JR. (1997). *Proposed Ethical Standards for the Delivery of Career Counseling Services over the Internet*. Alexandria, VA: National Career Development Association Ethics Committee.

SAMPSON, J.P., JR., KOLODINSKY, R. & GREENO, B. (1997). Counseling on the Information Highway: future possibilities and potential problems. *Journal of Counseling and Development*, 75, 203–212.

(Accepted 25 August 1997)