Episode 115 - Dr. Allan Barsky: Online Social Work with Individuals, Families, and Groups: Ethical Issues and Responses

[00:00:08] Welcome to in social work. The podcast series of the University of Buffalo School of Social Work at www.insocialwork.org. We're glad you could join us today. The purpose of in social work is to engage practitioners and researchers and lifelong learning and to promote research to practice and practice to research. We're in social work. I'm your host Peter Sobota. Thanks for downloading more than 300000 of our podcasts. We'd love it if you took a minute to tell us what you like or don't like about them and what you'd like to see us do next. If you're an educator and you are using our podcasts and your courses please let us know how. I know some of you are as I've seen them syllabi of their. So let us know. We'd be thrilled to hear from you. Welcome my name is Charles Syms and I'm your host for this episode in social work. We are all aware that online communication has exploded in recent years smartphones social media and the use of Internet based video interaction as well as a growing acceptance of these technologies is changing the way we interact and communicate with each other. Online education and video conferencing are expanding how we are educating training and meaning online self-help groups are already firmly established. Counseling and clinical supervision in the online environment are certain to be areas of continuing growth. Therefore professional social work will need to adapt and incorporate these emerging technologies our guest Dr. Allan Barsky holds a Ph.D. in JD and a MSW.

[00:02:03] He is a professor of social work at Florida Atlantic University and a chair of the National Association of Social Work. National Ethics Committee in this episode. Dr. Barsky discusses ethical and practice implications that should be considered when practicing in an online environment. Dr. Barsky was interviewed by Tony Guzman director of the University at Buffalo School of Social works online programs Hello my name is Tony Guzman and I'm the director of online programs at University at Buffalo School of Social Work here today to talk with the Dr. Allan Barsky. He recently presented at the view the APM 2012 conference on the topic of online social work with individuals families and groups. Ethical issues and responses to. Dr. Barsky.

[00:02:57] Thanks for joining us today to discuss this important and might I say a very timely topic. Great to speak with you. Well let's jump right to it. What do you mean by online social work. There's really no one term that everybody uses for the same thing. So when I talk about online souce work I'm talking about really clinical practice work with individuals families and groups where we're interacting directly with our clients using some sort of online interface so most people are familiar with programs like Skype but there's also some programs for voice over internet or video conferencing with clients that people can use. And so what are some of our potential benefits for using web based technology such as Skype or others while communicating with our clients. There's been a real big push in the last few years with all the new technology to make our services more accessible to people. And also sometimes it's at a cheaper cost.

[00:03:56] So for instance there's people who have disabilities perhaps mobility is an issue and it's difficult for them to come in for services. And this is particularly important for medical services physical mental health. I think was really ahead of us in terms of accessing services for clients. But if people have any sort of disability perhaps blindness or death for physical issues providing services over the Internet might make things a little bit more accessible to them. There's also a lot of mobility issues in the last 10 years or so since the U.S. has been involved in wars in Afghanistan and in Iraq. There's a number of people in the military who've needed services but they're not always in the same location. So they could be overseas or they could be on different bases here in the United States and so to ensure that there's continuity of services with the same mental health professionals providing services online has been a benefit to them as well. And so what does the

NASW code of ethics say about online social work. The NASW code of ethics really talks about all types of interaction and communication with clients. So there's not very much that particular to online social work. If you look at the section 1.07 there's a subsection that really talks about online technology and it tells us that we have to be extra careful when there is any sort of communication using technology actually says avoid any sort of identifying information. If you're going to use technology so a little bit behind the last major revision of the NSAW the code of ethics was 1996. We really haven't kept up there.

[00:05:39] There have been some other pronouncements by different organizations and standards that have been developed that take a little bit further. Are there other guidelines that social workers should consider when they're planning to conduct interactions through online technologies. Yes. And one of the things to look at is the standards of technology and social work practice put out by the NASW and also the Association of Social Work boards. So it goes a little bit further talking about the importance of making sure that whatever services we use are accessible. So we have to be culturally competent. We just provide services and technology and English that cuts out the number of people making search and taking advantage of the technology's ability to provide translation of services. It also talks though again the importance of confidentiality and in terms of competence. One of the things we have to look at is not just their competence to provide a certain type of counseling or therapy but what is our competence to using different types of technology and traditionally social work education really hasn't prepared students for how to use new and developing technologies. Well that brings up an interesting point. So in today's day and age where privacy and confidentiality are such hot topics and matters of concern for many people and many organizations. What are some of the major ethical issues that arise when workers use online or web based technologies to communicate with clients.

[00:07:10] One of the overriding concerns is client confidentiality and when you have a client who comes to your office and you can close the door you can assert that what you talk about between yourself and the client stays within the room and if somebody is going to take that information out of the room it's probably the client themself talking about it and it's their confidence. So they're really allowed to do that. On the other hand if we're using online services there's a number of issues in terms of confidentiality. First a lot of online programs are not necessarily secure programs so if somebody attempted to or wanted to intercept or listen in on conversations that they'd certainly be able to do that unless you've got appropriate encryption and other safeguards to make sure that nobody can access that information. In my role it confronts concerns that social workers have and rightly so in terms of misuse of technology. I wonder do you see similarities in some ways is not necessarily that you were around at the end of the telephone but in using just the phone conversation with a client. There there's same concerns so somebody possibly tapping into the line listening in and the word that it could be recorded and listened to by somebody else outside of the social worker and that client. That's a great point very valid and it's not just regular landline telephones but also cell phones so it's possible for those to be intercepted or I think you're suggesting when you're talking to somebody on the telephone or when you're doing a video conference online with a client who may not be aware of who's in the room when saying they think you're just talking to one person but there may be other people present or as you say it's possible for there to be somebody who's recording it. Now in the old days with landline telephones the recording would be an analog these days. The risk I think is a little bit higher because everything can be recorded and transmitted digitally.

[00:09:15] So it is something that you know somebody wants to share over the Internet can go international very easily. And so what are the chances are there are two things like record keeping informed consent to really ships evidence based practice. What other constraints exist out there sir maybe we'll take just one of them at a time in terms of documentation. Usually when we look at it from a legal perspective what's the client's record it's anything that's been recorded whether it's by

hand or old fashioned typewriters or digitally and so if you did have a recording digitally of your conversations with clients perhaps chat room conversations or email conversations or videotape conversations that would form part of the client's record. If you're in a field of practice where it's likely that the case may go to court my field is divorce and family mediation you have to know that there is the possibility that your information could be subpoenaed to court. Most clients wouldn't really expect that their entire conversations could be subject to review in court. It's a public court hearing like criminal court. There could be very embarrassing information that goes out to the entire public. Another issue might be say you're doing family work and if there is a separation or divorce can one person use information from that assessment to embarrass or prove their case in court if it does have to go to court later on. So they may want to be clear up front with clients and the informed consent process. What information can be used and how it can be used.

[00:10:52] I think you'd like to ensure that your clients are not recording your conversations unless there's specific reason and safeguards to do so. With things such as they become very prevalent that users are social workers as well as other professionals are using cloud services. How does that play into in terms of the asportation and record keeping. I think it's the same type of confidentiality as. There's no reason to say that we shouldn't put information on the cloud that we just have to make sure that there's proper password protection. Changing our passwords periodically having firewall systems knowing what your particular system for saving allows you to do in terms of protection. Nobody is expected as a social worker to be perfect but we should know what's the standards that are reasonably expected of social workers and other health and mental health professionals so if we have a certain way of protecting information now. But technology changes in two years. We need to keep up to date with that and use the best safeguards possible. Could you describe a situation in which ethical issues might arise for a social worker who is conducting clinical interviews online. So one example might be a situation where you are doing individual work and you're not meeting directly with the client and you may not even have very much information about the clients background or where they live or how to contact them outside of the use of the technology of using video conferencing. If during your counseling all of a sudden the client becomes suicidal or homicidal. If you don't have good information on how to contact them or how to contact the police or emergency services that could be an example of malpractice.

[00:12:46] So we need to make sure that when we're working online with clients that we've got some sort of backup system in case there is some sort of crisis. Let's take that now and change the situation in regards to haptics of online for couples or families started to address that a bit with let's say the worst case it might be another example of a typical situation there another situation might be domestic violence again if you're working with a couple it's really important to screen and make sure that when you're working together with that couples it's each of them is safe and is going to feel safe in your interaction with them. And also you're not setting themselves up for conflict and further violence afterwards. So if you were going to do some couples work they could be very important to meet individually. And I think because of the sensitivity around some of the issues and people's reluctance to talk about power and safety issues it might be preferred to at least have one individual session in person first before you started to do something online. And even if you did do something online just to make sure that you're aware that there's the possibility of things going on in the room that you may not be aware of the dynamics of working with the couple whose presence is in your room is quite different from the dynamics when they're together in one room in a different room perhaps even in a different city. And so moving on from the families would be types of ethical issues particular for online work groups. Again you might want to look at you know what types of groups might be most appropriate for online services.

[00:14:31] So I think if you're doing something psycho education you're providing information and getting general feedback from clients you're not digging too deeply into psychodynamic issues he might be better off situation. You can imagine that someone might want to have a group for people

who might be reluctant to come in person. So let's say that the gay and lesbian community wanted to have some sort of coming out group. You need to explore as you would with regular group. What are the relationships that people can have within the group process. What communication are ok and not OK and also what sort of communication and interaction are OK outside of the group. And again you really need to make sure that you've screened your clients and have a good sense of are they appropriate for the group or might there be some risks that you need to have them face to face or perhaps he needs to ensure that. Some other safeguards to make sure that they're safe from the other clients that they're working with are also safe sometimes in support groups or social groups that we might run. We actually would encourage people to meet outside of group. We know that there's lots of cyber bullying going on. We know that there's lots of people out there who are looking for people who might be in vulnerable situations. So we really need to make sure that if someone is in a group whether it's online or not but I guess here specifically online that it is appropriate for them and we have sufficient safeguards to ensure a good safe practice. Excellent. Will be your recommendations for any agencies that are using or considering the use of online technologies for communicating with clients.

[00:16:11] I think one of the things is to look for what the resources are out there to make sure that other people tried this. And what is their experience with that particular population that they might be dealing with to understand what the risks and the benefits are. And then to make sure that they really understand the technology they're using or have people that they can consult with and understand the ethical issues and the technology issues to make sure that they've got secure lines and clients needs are protected. I think as I stated a couple of times it really is important to make sure you've got some sort of safeguards in place for those emergency situations and backup in case things like technology go down. They might also be useful to do small rural plays within your agency rather than trying it out the first time with clients. Maybe you could actually try to do some counseling online between staff members so you get a good sense of how to use the technology. Just simple things like the tilt to the video camera can make a difference. Somebody might look very angry or very washed out and you might interpret that particular way but it might just be an issue of the lighting or camera angles or the quality of the video that you're using. And Dr. Barsky being a professor and we made this earlier in the episode today in bachelors of social work and masters of social work programs don't miss. So we have of course or within the curriculum emphasis of the online tools that tomorrow a social worker will be confronted with. What are things that can be done now to prepare the social workers short term and long term.

[00:17:54] I guess I'm looking at in terms of long term I would figure would be some type of update within our curriculums for the courses. But even short term or other ideas for long term type solutions one of the things is a number of courses are being taught online and not sure that professors are really modeling the best type of practice so perhaps we could begin with ourselves and it's true that when we have online discussions or online rural plays or group interactions that we also are using the technology as appropriately and safely as possible. I think one of the positives is younger people having grown up on different technologies and having smartphones in their pockets 24/7 a lot of people are getting more and more familiar with how to make use of the different technologies and more comfortable with it. But one of the things that we have to look at that maybe we didn't really talk about earlier is down reassumes and be very easy for me to do some facetime with my iPhone or whatever brand of cell phone to interact with my clients and I could say hey that's just brilliant regardless of where I am I can contact my client my client can contact me. But there's a number of issues just terms of confidentiality Am I in a place that nobody can overhear my conversation. If I lose my cell phone can somebody pick it up and find client information including phone numbers or email addresses on my cell phone.

[00:19:24] So there's a whole range of different issues that I think we give our students different case and samples and help them work through those cases samples they might be able to not just

learn what are the answers to particular problems but what are some thinking steps they really need to use in order to address any issue that might come up. Excellent. Dr.Barsky here I want to thank you for spending his time and wanted to give it up if you had any final thoughts to wrap up. So I think one thing that students and professors and practitioners can do is to look at what are some of the resources out there. So my work at the Council on Social Work Conference was with the two people from the National Association of Social Workers office Cherie Morgan and Dawn Habi and they've done a number of different projects trainings and gratings so there's a series of Law notes that the NASW has. So people want updated information to check out the NASW website. There's also in different fields of practice if you look at the Tele mental health or from the American Psychological Association or other groups. They also have some additional information on how to keep up with technology when we're communicating with clients. Very good. Thank you again for spending time on discussing this issue regards to online so for as well as ethical issues and responses. Appreciate your talking to us. Thank you for making this information available to social workers. You have been listening to Dr. Allan Barsky discuss the ethical and practice implications of online social work with individuals families and groups. We hope you have enjoyed it. I'm your host Charles Syms. Please join us again at in social work. Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work.

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