

Episode 110 - Dr. Kathryn Chernack: Social Media Use and Social Work Practice: Boundary and Ethical Considerations

[00:00:08] Welcome to living proof a podcast series of the University at Buffalo School of Social Work at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. We're glad you could join us today. The series Living Proof examines social work research and practice that makes a difference in people's lives. 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 in your courses please let us know how. I know some of you are as I've seen them on course syllabi out there. So let us know. Go to our Web site at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu forward slash podcast and click the Contact Us button. We'd be thrilled to hear from you the holiday season is a time for great activity for Buffalo's vibrant arts community. From holiday performances in our downtown theater district zone center for the arts to our many regional and community arts groups and high profile shows from our own Buffalo Philharmonic Orchestra. Social workers are frequently teased for hour let me say this delicately lack of sophistication with technology but the fact that many of us are embracing all forms of it can't be denied. Even if we aren't our clients and the rest of the world certainly are. In this podcast our guest Dr. Kathryn Chernack discusses the utilization of social media in the professional and personal lives of social workers applying the NASW code of ethics as a guiding framework.

[00:02:00] Dr Chernack discusses the opportunities and challenges of practice with the use of this medium. She offers practical recommendations and guidelines for real world situations including the use of Facebook Twitter blogging managing friend requests from clients and using media and google it to access information about clients. There are a lot of practical strategies and information discussed here for both newbies and experienced social media users. Dr Kathryn Chernack is a licensed clinical social worker in New York state and a board certified diplomat and clinical social work. Dr. Chernack has 30 years of experience working in nonprofit and public agencies as an administrator clinician Quality Improvement consultant and field educator. Currently Dr.Chernack is the clinical director for the community residential programs for SCO family of services. She also maintains a private practice. She is the chairperson of the National Association of Social Workers. New York State chapter Ethics Committee she has presented numerous workshops on social work ethics and ethical decision making. Dr. Chernack was interviewed by telephone by Steven Schwartz Ph.D. candidate an affiliate research associate at the UB School of Social Work and at the Research Institute on Addictions here in Buffalo. Dr. Chernack wishes to note that the views expressed in this podcast are not reflective of the agencies or the professional associations she is affiliated with. I'm Steve Schwartz a research associate at University of Buffalo School Social Work. Here with me to talk about boundary and ethical considerations for social media use by social workers is Dr. Kathryn Chernack. Dr. Chernack thanks for joining us today. Thank you for having me. How would you like to frame the discussion today for our listeners now.

[00:03:59] I think that it's important for us to consider our online presence and to be able to look at the challenges that our online presence poses for us. So the question that I want to frame today's podcast is for us to consider how our online presence complements or conflicts with our professional selves and how did you first become interested in ethics and social media. I've been involved in social work ethic Felsher work ethics education for many years as a member of the New York State chapter of NASW Youth Ethics Committee. I have a longstanding interest in professional athletics and the way in which social workers make ethical decisions through the youth. As social media developed and uses internet technology also developed I became interested in the way in which social workers need to adapt our traditional ways of working ethically to be able to work ethically in an electronic environment and certainly social media is a big part of our

lives these days. What do you say are the challenges related to social media news for social workers. Some of the major challenges related to social media use by social work include practicing in a technologically confident manner maintaining professional boundaries in what is virtually boundaryless electronic environment. Another challenge relates to protecting privacy and certainly an additional challenge relates to ensuring confidentiality of clients and consumers that we work with. Can you give us some examples common ethical issues that relate to these challenges you talk about. Well I'd first like to talk about the challenge of being able to practice in a technologically competent manner.

[00:06:05] One of the core values of the social work profession is confidence and one of the ethical principles that shaped by the core value of confidence states that social workers need to practice within areas of confidence and develop and enhance their professional expertise. And this core value and ethical principle also extends to how we practice using technology and what I have encountered through the years is that social workers by virtue of being part of a society where use of the Internet is so pervasive sometimes jump into using social media without fully understanding some of the pitfalls of using certain social media platforms. For instance social workers may encounter situations where they have not established clear privacy settings when they're using their Facebook and therefore unintentionally may disclose personal information or convey information about themselves that they would ordinarily convey in an office setting. So our code of ethics requires that we become competent in emerging technologies and in doing so we need to become fully aware of all forms of technology and social media. Do you have a specific recommendation about privacy settings in something like Facebook. Well I could give you an example of a clinician who encountered a problem using Facebook because she didn't fully understand privacy settings. She had started a Facebook profile and was late one night posting a comment and had done so after having an argument with her husband and what she posted was that she was so angry at him that she felt like snuffing him with a pillow while he sleep with them. And moments later she got a message from her husband sister in law saying that she had posted this comment to her wall and in doing so made this information public.

[00:08:33] The twist to all of this is that this colleague works as a marital therapist so had posted something very private that she certainly did not want anyone but her friends to see but had misunderstood how the privacy settings worked on her Facebook and had basically disclosed information in a way that she wouldn't in an office setting let's say so in terms of understanding the technology before venturing onto a social media site. Social workers should understand fully what the privacy settings are for each of the platforms and also understand the differences between social media sites. For instance Twitter is an open platform and if somebody say a social worker is on Twitter they should understand that whatever they tweet is instantaneous within seconds distributed worldwide and open for anyone to see. Whereas certain settings on the social media site like Facebook would enable somebody to create some shield of privacy does that mean the social worker should not be on Twitter at all. Well that's a very good question that's a question that the individual social worker would need to answer for him or herself. I think it depends on what type of practice somebody has. Whether or not they would be using Twitter as a platform for professional reasons and would therefore be tweeting about either research article or resource information or something of a professional nature if somebody would. To use Twitter for purely personal reasons then it would be important not to link that twitter account to a professional e-mail or to be able to disclose that your professional relationship. What are the most common issues that comes up that I know you've talked about is how do you manage when a client wants to friend you on Facebook.

[00:10:48] That is a question that all professionals struggle with in general and think these days most social workers would say that they would never accept a friend request from a client or a potential client. However I have also encountered situations where social workers in an effort to engage perhaps the user or as somebody who has an online presence and is seeking to have some

contact may consider a friend request that creates a rather slippery slope for a social worker because Facebook is purely used as a social networking site and by establishing a connection to a client through Facebook. There's the potential not only for blurring of boundaries and for confusion on the client's part about whether or not this is a social relationship or professional relationship. It also creates a situation where others on Facebook or social workers' friends on Facebook would be able to infer that a particular person may be a client and therefore issues of confidentiality and privacy would also be violated. So in answer to your question about whether and not a social worker should consider a friend request from a client. Ethical standards relating to boundaries and what relationship privacy and confidentiality are certainly the standards that should guide a social worker in making a decision about a friend request what recommendations to have about how a social worker could say no to such a request and deflect the request to cross the channel. Again a very important question to consider and I think that if a person professor author thinks back to how they may respond to a social invitation that may be offered an office setting let's say how a social worker might politely decline an invitation to a client's party or a client's event.

[00:13:15] That way of responding also should guide the social worker in the social media environment to politely decline and to explain the reasons why. Another approach and one that I certainly recommend is that at the point of intake or the point of engaging a client in the helping relationship that certain social media policy should be discussed and whether somebody working as a private clinician or working as an office or an agency environment. It would be important to have established social media policies. We have the question of whether or not somebody could accept a friend request is already discussed from the beginning of that health installation. These are examples of clients in some ways making inquiries into the private lives of their therapists. What experience or advice do you have about therapists using search engines for client information such as Googling Arlight the question would be whether or not it's ethical to use search engines such as Google for to review somebody's Social media use such as Facebook to gain information about a client. Here again the code of ethics the NASW code of ethics offers some guidance. We could look towards standards that relate to privacy and confidentiality which talk about only soliciting information about a client that is necessary to that process. That one has established with the client so searching information on Google or looking at a person's Facebook is essentially going beyond information that a client may wish to share. Standard one point seven of the NASW code is ethics which pertains to privacy and confidentiality that social workers should respect client's right to privacy and that social workers should not services pry that information from clients unless it's essential to providing services.

[00:15:37] So one question make the is there any compelling reason to search for information about a client is the reason for a search because you're curious about what a person's life may be. Is it because you're motivated to fulfil some kind of personal curiosity. Where do you routinely do this on all your clients. The main question is whether or not you are seeking to get private information that a client wants them that we share. I have two examples that I'd like to offer. One was a situation that I encountered in my private practice where a woman who sought help from me was traumatised not only by her husband's death but by the fact that there was a lot of media attention to the circumstances of his death and this was both in the print media and in electronic media. And when she approached me to establish her first appointment she had mentioned the horrific deaths and had talked about her anger at the type of attention it brought to her and to the family. Now she had asked me if I had seen any of the reports on what had happened to her husband and I did not. And why did it piqued my curiosity. I chose not to go and look up her husband's obituary or to look at her Facebook page to see what she may have shared about the death. The cards I was guided by that standard 1 point 0 7 in the code of ethics that related to privacy and confidentiality.

[00:17:29] I chose to wait till the first session I had with this woman and spoke to her about her experience and learned from her that she really did want me to look at what had been in the media

about her husband and so with her permission I did so before the next session and in doing so was respecting the timing in which she wanted to share information and the way in which she wanted to share information. The other example that comes to mind is when clinicians or practitioners feel that because the situation may be deemed an emergency or a situation where there may be a life threatening incident that they feel that it would be the ethical thing to do to conduct a search either of a person's Facebook or looking at any kind of Twitter activity that a person may have generated and an example of that might be a social worker working in an emergency room let's say a psychiatric emergency room where a individual comes in who has some suicidal ideation or has expressed some desire to hurt themselves in some way. And in that case I have heard social workers say that they would use any form of social media to see that getting information about that person's risk for the harm so it's a matter of looking at the code of ethics looking at taking that standard and sometimes making a decision based on the severity and the urgency of the situation that we should always be guided by standards and the code of ethics. And by legal and regulatory standards when we make these kinds of decisions it must be difficult sometimes in supervision to distinguish between clinicians rationale for wanting to find information and a rationalization for what's called lurking just curiosity. How might supervision be used to deal with issues of ethics in the social media.

[00:19:49] Supervision can be used to help identify what the purpose of using that particular form of social media might be and looking not only at the client situation but also helping to supervise the identify any personal curiosity or personal issues that that may motivate them to want to do these kinds of searches with any form of ethical decision making. There's a process that takes place. So it would be important to be able to identify what the issue is to be able to look at what the ethical standards and legal and regulatory requirements may be and to see where they may or may not conflict with one another and then to establish in some way the higher ethical value in making a decision. So the supervisor could help the supervisory go through a process of ethical decision making either by using one of the established models of ethical decision making or by taking supervisory through the process of reflecting on his or her own values and issues and being able to look at what standards would guide the process in making a decision. What role would agency policies have in this. So have you come across agency policies that deal with use of social media more and more agencies are developing social media policies and more and more agencies and organisations have a presence on social media sites. There has been a move towards the old website format where it's a static display of information that is needed. The two agencies use of social media platforms to be able to communicate with consumers and shareholders and to create an interactive way of reaching out to people in the community. And because of this. Agencies have recognised the need to develop social media policies.

[00:22:11] Some of the agencies post their social media policies online. Some policies are quite extensive and just want to point out that the New York City Department of Education in the month of May came out with some extensive guidelines for its social media policy to supply personnel and their assistance. Some agencies had very simple social media policies in terms of what staff can and cannot do in their professional roles. Using social media. It becomes a little bit more difficult to provide guidelines for staff in their personal use of social media because agencies really can't control what staff does in this personal use of social media. Agencies can only provide guidelines for appropriate practice so that boundary issues and confidentiality issues are deserved. What her the kind of elements that would be social media policy for agencies. If you could speak to something I know you've talked about is the use of testimonials an agency social media policy should look at how staff interact with consumers and stakeholders online. So that means that a need to preserve confidentiality not to engage in providing personal information or a protected health information. For instance when using an agency social media platform some agencies and organizations will not permit staff to post comments on an agency's Facebook page because they don't want to have staff interacting with consumers in that medium. Other policies encourage some

interaction. It really depends on the nature of the agency and policies that may work for the let's say New York City Department of Education may be different than policies that may work for a local. Why. We're a community program. One of the cautions that people have talked about is criticizing your employer on social media.

[00:24:34] Do you have any feelings about that and how that may conflict with some of the ethical code and social work which talks about the appropriate ways in which to resolve conflicts with your employer. One of the standards in the NSW code of ethics pertains to commitment to employers and standard that I can just quote is three point nine B which says that social workers should work to improve employing agencies policies and procedures. And the advocacy and effectiveness of these services. So those were code of ethics suggests that we should work with our employers in ways that would improve services and improve the effectiveness of doing so. Posting a comment on a social media site is not the most effective way of being able to improve policies or procedures on behalf of clients. And while an employer can't necessarily sanction an employee for posting something about their job and their personal social media if a employee does want to post they need to be extremely mindful of not using any kind of client information even if it's disguised client information because the identity of a person could be inferred just by the very nature of the setting in which somebody works. So if a employee is posting on their social media they should make it very clear that they are not speaking on behalf of the organisation and that they should be very clear not to post anything that might be considered breach of a client confidentiality and privacy. Some social workers work in very specific settings where they may have a client population that is so small where the network of consumers all know each other.

[00:26:42] So even posting something about the kind of day a social worker had at their job could create a situation where other consumers would know the person that they're talking about or the setting that they're talking about and therefore create a situation where a social worker would be in violation of confidentiality and privacy standards are there any other kind of common ethical issues that you file on social media that we haven't spoken about well the types of issues are quite poor. We've talked a little bit a death Facebook and I've only briefly mentioned Twitter. Twitter is certainly a very fast rising platform. They have many more users that can be found on Twitter these days. One of the issues that come up in terms of social workers and clients is a question about whether or not social workers should follow their client on Twitter and just to briefly touch on that. It's strongly recommended that social workers don't engage in that kind of process with clients for one confidentiality could be compromised by creating a visible professional relationship and secondly it may invite clients to interact with you on Twitter which is a non-secure medium. If a client were to interact with a social worker on a platform such as Twitter that question that comes up is whether or not those tweets and that Twitter stream would be part of a client's legal record. And the other piece that comes up is once you start the process of following somebody on Twitter. Are you creating an expectation that you would be responding to their tweets and say worst case scenario somebody tweets that they're feeling suicidal and you miss that communication. What does that mean for that social work relationship.

[00:28:52] So there are concerns about professional viewing content that client post on Twitter. For many reasons do you have any experience or comments about social worker as a blogger. Blogging could be a very useful tool. Social workers are able to use that for a variety of professional reasons. Social workers may want to blog about a particular area of expertise some may want to blog about developing resources or the need to provide services in a particular way. If a social worker is blogging as a professional then it would be important to keep it professional. And I think that most social workers understand the difference between blogging about say an article they just read on depression and blogging about what they ate for breakfast. So the use of a blog can be quite appropriate in social work. One thing to keep in mind when blogging is to decide whether or not you want to enable comments to your blog. And it would be important to very carefully consider the

question of whether or not you want comments to your post. The cost by inviting comments you might be encouraging clients to reveal themselves as clients and in that case there would be issues of confidentiality and privacy that would be compromised. So a blog could certainly be a useful tool but like any tools we had at our disposal the implications of blogging need to be carefully considered. Well we've talked about a range of things. Do you have any final thoughts for social workers about how their online presence complements or conflicts with their professional selves. Well I think that there's a number of useful guidelines that we could keep in mind when posting in effect some words to post by.

[00:31:04] Keep in mind that as Google notes Google has a long memory. And as Twitter also notes you are what you tweet. So we need to remember that everything online is discoverable and that if we can't show it to our mother if we can't show it to a judge we probably shouldn't be posting it. There are some recommendations that I would like listeners to keep in mind. We need to be able to use the highest privacy settings when we're using social media. We need to control who views our content and periodically check for changes in privacy settings. Some platforms require that you opt out of certain features and that people have found that sometimes they're in situations where they say Facebook just create a new feature. And if you don't opt out of it you suddenly in a situation where maybe more information is available than you would like. So periodically check for changes in privacy settings check yourself online periodically. So Google yourself to see what others are viewing about yourself. Contact with clients and include discussion about social media policies and policies regarding social networking as well as contact through other electronic methods. It would also be important to always keep in mind that you need to be professional when posting on agency or professional social media sites or when writing let's say in a blog and essentially in order to practice ethically in a social media environment. We have to be able to adapt the traditional social work skills that we have to meet the demands of a professional role in the electronic age.

[00:33:01] And that means that we have to obtain training and consultation for ethical issues regarding social media use. We need to be able to become technically competent in ways that we need to become competent in all social work practice and I would just like to say in conclusion that in order to maximise the benefits of using social media we need to know what to use when to use it and how to use it in accordance with professional ethics and by doing so we need to remain alert to the ways in which our online presence complements or conflicts with our professional services. That was a wonderful summary thank you very much it's been a great pleasure speaking with you when we look forward to further discussions with Dr. Chernack on this topic. Thank you very much. You've been listening to Dr Kathryn Chernack discuss social media and social work ethics are living proof Hi I'm Nancy Smyth professor and dean at the University at Buffalo School of Social Work. Thanks for listening to our podcast. For more information about who we are our history our programs and what we do we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.buffalo.edu. At UB we are living proof that social work makes a difference in people's lives.