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# Online Relationships and the Role of the Human Service Practitioner

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## Abstract

Online relationships are an increasing phenomenon in our contemporary society. While many individuals experience successful online relationships, there are clear physical, emotional, and financial risks to meeting a partner online. This manuscript addresses the nature of online relationships and the potential consequences of engaging in an online relationship. Given the large number of individuals who seek out the internet for a potential partner, human service practitioners are in an ideal position to work with clients engaging in relationships online. This manuscript also discusses different strategies and interventions that human service practitioners can employ when working with clients involved in online relationships. These interventions align with the Human Services Professional Standards, namely the Skills Standards and the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) Ethical Standards. Recommendations for future research are also included in this manuscript.

**Online Relationships and the Role of the Human Service Practitioner**

In the past decade, as the internet has become a prominent tool for daily use, it has also become a conventional vehicle for meeting and forming romantic relationships. Half of the current population that regularly uses the internet has utilized an online dating website to meet a potential partner (Valkenberg & Peter, 2007). Furthermore, recent reports indicate that more than one-third of those married from 2005 to 2012 met online (Cacioppo, Cacioppo, Gonzanga, Ogburn, & Vanderweele, 2013). In spite of the success of online dating, there are also inherent risks to meeting an individual online (Internet Crime Complaint Center, 2011).

One illustration of this came during the spring of 2013. Media outlets reported that the University of Notre Dame Heisman Trophy candidate, Manti Te'o, was a victim of an online hoax. According to the reports, Te'o fell in love with a young woman from Hawaii, Lennay Kekua, who eventually passed away from Leukemia. However, months later Manti learned that Lennay never existed and he was a victim of an elaborate internet hoax (Claire & Hamilton, 2013). In a separate incident in 2006, 13-year-old Megan Meier committed suicide after her online boyfriend, Josh Evans, broke up with her (Steinhauer, 2008). In reality, the profile was an internet hoax and Josh never existed. While these stories gained mass media attention nationally and internationally, the stories of Manti Te'o and Megan Meier are not unique. Thousands of individuals across America report

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victimization from an online relationship (Internet Crime Complaint Center, 2011).

## Consequences of Online Relationships

Data shows that many individuals experience successful relationships that began online (Cacioppo et al., 2013). However, the consequences of participating in an online relationship are widespread. This section will discuss the psychological, physical, and financial consequences of online dating.

### Psychological Consequences

Because internet relationships rely on online communication, misrepresentations in the relationship often occur, even if they are unintentional (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher 2012). When creating an online profile one may tend to describe her or his ideal self rather than her or his true self. Online daters also tend to focus and highlight their most positive qualities instead of giving a comprehensive presentation of their inherent flaws (Ellison, Heino, & Gibbs, 2006). If the partners later meet face-to-face, there is a strong risk of disappointment, confusion, and sadness when discovering these previous misrepresentations (Couch, Liamputtong, & Pitts, 2012).

Intentional misrepresentations are a common occurrence in online relationships and are a strong concern of those seeking an online relationship (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008; Couch et al., 2012). Because they are not face-to-face with their potential dating partner, people using the internet to form romantic relationships may feel a sense of liberty to lie (Zimbler & Feldman, 2011). In a study by Toma, Hancock, and Ellison (2008), 81% of online daters lied regarding their physical characteristics while engaging in an online relationship. Men appear to lie most about their level of income and height while women lie most frequently about their weight and physical build. In terms of age, statistics show that this lie is common for both men and women (Online Dating Statistics, 2013). While both men and women appear to lie about themselves online, women report that they lie regularly as a self-protective mechanism in order to feel safer and more secure (Whitty, 2002).

Additionally, individuals may use a fake profile to lure a potential mate (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008). Our contemporary culture uses a slang term, “catfish”, to describe individuals who pretend to be someone they are not online by posting false information, such as someone else’s picture (Palmer, 2013). Victims of “catfishing” experience a host of psychological consequences. Many victims, feeling fooled and angry, turn their reactions inward. This inward experience may also lead to self-loathing and depression. Additionally, many victims feel humiliated, especially if others learn about their experience. (Weilenman, 2013). Furthermore, this

experience may influence how the victims view relationships in their lives and many may display a loss of trust in others and oftentimes withdraw and isolate from their family, friends, and/or colleagues (Christensen, 2013).

**Financial Consequences**

In addition to the concerns with lying and misrepresentation in online dating the anonymity of an online relationship provides a dangerous vehicle for criminals who may be looking to solicit money or other resources from their victims. Oftentimes the scammer is a resident of another country. She or he most commonly targets women who are widowed, divorced, and are over the age of 40 (Internet Crime Complaint Center, 2011). These "sweetheart scammers" will work to develop a relationship with their victim over the course of several months (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2012). Then, the scammer may describe a tragedy in her or his life or her or his family member's life. The scammer may then ask the victim to send her or him money to help resolve this problem (US Department of State, 2013). In 2011, the Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3) received approximately 5,600 complaints of romance scams. Individuals ages 40-59 accounted for 63% of complaints filed. Overall, financial losses totaled $50.4 million and individual losses totaled approximately $8,900 per victim.

**Physical Consequences**

Health safety issues may likewise be a concern with online dating relationships. For example, online daters can meet potential partners in a timely manner and often quickly engage in sexual activity. In a study done by Padgett (2007), 30% of the female participants were sexually active during their first face-to-face meeting and 77% reported not using a condom during this meeting.

The internet also gives individuals access to a wide network of potential sexual partners. For example, Grinder is a geosocial networking application geared towards gay, bisexual, and bi-curious men. This application allows the user to locate other men within close proximity. When individuals nearby are located, the user can tap on another user's picture to chat and share one's specific location. Users interact with this application largely for sexual "hook-ups" and casual encounters (Wortham, 2013). This practice may result in a higher risk of sexually transmitted infections (Couch & Liamputtong, 2008).

In addition to the risks associated with sexual activity, physical harm, trauma, and even death can result from an online relationship. In 2013, media outlets reported that an Australian woman, found dead in South Africa, was believed to be a victim of an online scam. According to the reports, the woman traveled to South Africa to meet her online partner and sent more than $100,000 ahead of meeting him (Powell, 2013).

As indicated above, the potential consequences of online relationships are widespread. Human service practitioners are in an ideal position to intervene with clients who are engaging in online relationships. Thus, this manuscript will focus on the strategies that human service practitioners can utilize when working with individuals involved in online relationships, particularly individuals who are victims of problematic online relationships.

## Role of the Human Service Practitioner

The majority (73%) of mental health professionals in direct practice have worked with a client who had some type of challenging or problematic online experience (Wells, Mitchell, Finkeihor & Blease, 2006). Yet, in spite of this increasing phenomenon, researchers know little about how to work effectively with individuals engaged in online relationships (Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Robert & Drew, 2012). In fact, online relationships may be difficult for human service practitioners to understand fully. Practitioners will likely have their own assumptions and beliefs about those who are involved in online relationships. It is therefore imperative that all human service practitioners who are working with clients in online relationships are aware of these assumptions and potential biases (Mitchell, Becker-Blease & Finkelhor, 2005). Furthermore, practitioners working with this population are encouraged to be void of judgment and consistently employ empathic understanding with clients. If clients feel judged, it will likely impede the client-helper relationship.

In the following section, strategies for working with clients engaging in online relationships are included. These strategies align with the Human Services Professional Standards. The development of professional standards can take many forms (Neukrug, 2013); two specific standards addressed in this section are the Community Support Skills Standards (CSSS) and the National Organization for Human Services (NOHS) Ethical Standards (National Organization for Human Services, 1996; Taylor, Bradley, & Warren, 1996).

## Skills Standards

The Community Support Skills Standards (CSSS) serve as the national set of competencies for the field of human services. Of the 12 defined Skill Standard Competences, we highlight three in this section; (1) Education, Training, and Self-Development (2) Assessment, and (3) Community and Living Skills and Supports (LaLiberte & Hewitt, 2013).

### Skill Standard 1: Education, Training, and Self-Development

A human service practitioner within the Education, Training, and Self-Development Skill Standard Competency successfully identifies areas for self-growth, pursues educational and training resources, and shares

knowledge willingly with others (Neukrug, 2013). This section will address the importance of participating in online relationship training and supervision for the human service practitioner.

**Training and supervision.** The increase of online relationships results in a number of unique issues and concerns for human service practitioners. While human service practitioners work regularly with clients in online relationships, most know little about best practices with this particular population. In fact, less than 15% of mental health professionals have received any specific training for working with clients who have had problematic online experiences (Wells et al., 2006). Thus, it is imperative that human service practitioners seek out the training and supervision needed to assist their clients best.

In order to increase knowledge and awareness, practitioners are encouraged to immerse themselves in the professional literature and attend workshops or conferences specific to this topic (Wolak, Finkelhor, Mitchell & Ybara, 2008). Additionally, agencies should distribute handouts or brochures on the topic of online relationships and should hold regular in-service trainings on the topic. Primarily, trainings might aim to eliminate the negative stigma, misunderstanding, and discomfort associated with individuals engaging in online relationships.

In addition to training and education, supervision and consultation are equally important. Regardless of the population, human service practitioners should never work in isolation (Neukrug, 2008). Because of the great deal of complexity surrounding online relationships, practitioners should schedule regular supervision sessions to consult with colleagues and supervisors.

**Skill Standard 2: Assessment**

The Assessment Skill Standard Competency states that the human service practitioner should be knowledgeable about assessment practices, both formal and informal (Neukrug, 2008). This section includes information on how to integrate online relationships into intake interviews as well as the necessity of assessing for risk factors with individuals who engage in online relationships.

**The intake interview.** Human service practitioners are often the intake interviewers who initially gather information with clients (Craigen, 2009). The purpose of an intake interview is to collect information that will help practitioners assess client needs. Typically, intake forms utilized in helping interviews are designed to compile information relevant to client demographics, presenting problems, history of past problems, suicidal ideation, etc. (Kanel, 2008). Intake documentation frequently omits questions about the nature of relationships, particularly online relationships (Wells et al., 2006). However, relationships are enormously important to individuals and have a significant impact on one's emotional and physical

well-being (Dineley-Johnson, 2011). Thus, practitioners may garner valuable information by making this topic a standardized question on intake forms. Questions on a form or in an interview may include but are not limited to:

- Describe important relationships in your life.
- Tell me more about the nature of the important relationships in your life.
- Discuss the role, if any, that the internet plays in your relationships?

If practitioners are not able to include questions about online relationships in a standardized fashion, information can emerge early on with discussions of presenting problems (Wells et al., 2006). For example, practitioners may ask about the client's internet use, behavior on the internet, and former experiences with online relationships.

**Assessing for risk factors**. While not all online relationships are problematic, there are legitimate risks associated with online relationships (Wolak et al., 2008). Thus, human service practitioners are encouraged to continually screen for risk factors and potential risk taking behaviors. For example, when working with a client it may behoove the practitioner to ask her/him about each important relationship and support in the client's life. If the practitioner learns that the relationship is virtual/online, then it is the practitioner's responsibility to assess thoroughly for potential risk factors associated with this online relationship (Wolak et al., 2008). The following questions might assist the practitioner in the assessment process:

- Is the client aware of the potential risks related to this relationship modality?
- Has the client spoken to this person?
- Has the client seen the person either virtually through Skype or through another internet-based "live" medium like Face Time?
- Has the client met this person face to face?
- What is the nature of the relationship (e.g., friendship, romantic relationship)?
- What information is being shared online (e.g., dialogue, texting, photographs, "sexting" etc.)? Would any of this information put the client at risk?
- How much time does the client dedicate to this relationship (is it to the exclusion of all other relationships, etc)?
- What are the client's plans as far as meeting with the online partner? What will this first meeting look like?

- Has the client ever felt threatened or intimidated by anyone he/she met online?

The aforementioned questions are simply a starting point and do not represent an exhaustive list of questions to ask clients. However, these questions allow the practitioner to paint a picture of the potential risks associated with the clients' online relationships.

If the client has engaged in the relationship for a significant period and has not seen (virtually or in person) her/his partner's face or heard her/his partner's voice, there is a good possibility that the relationship could be a scam/hoax (US Department of State, 2013). Additionally, human service practitioners can explore the potential risks and consequences associated with "sexting", sharing provocative images through a text message or the internet (Lounsbury, Mitchell, & Finkelhor, 2011). Finally, if the client plans to meet someone he/she is corresponding with online it is important to talk about different safety precautions. These include meeting the person in a public location (i.e., never in a private location and never at the client's home or apartment), and notifying a family member or loved one of when and where he/she plans to meet this individual (Match.com, n.d.).

While much of this section has focused on assessing risk factors to protect clients from harm, clients may actually be inducing harm on others knowingly or unknowingly. Thus, it is important to assess whether the client is using the internet in an abusive way (i.e., stalking, harassing, creating false profiles, etc.). If clients are creating a false persona to meet individuals online (aka, "catfishing") it is likely that they are using this fictitious profile to escape the real world by creating an identity that embraces confidence, strength, physical beauty, and other qualities the individual wishes to possess (Lohmann, 2013). Thus, in order to assess for this risk the human service practitioner could ask clients to discuss how they portray themselves to others online and to what extent it differs from the way they present themselves to others in face-to-face interactions. Additionally, research indicates that most internet-related sex crimes involve adult men who use chat sites, e-mail, and instant messaging to meet and seduce under-age adolescents into sexual encounters (Wolak et al., 2008). For human service practitioners, it is critical to assess if the client is engaging in illegal behaviors, especially with minors. For example, the practitioner may ask the client about the nature of her/his interactions online, who she/he prefers to communicate with online, and if she/he truly knows the age of online contacts. Lastly, it may be helpful to ask the client, "What would I find in your browser history if I looked at your computer today?" (Lohmann, 2013).

**Skill Standard 3: Community and Living Skills and Supports**

A human service practitioner with the Community and Living Skills and Supports Competency has the ability to match supports and interventions to the unique needs of her/his client (Neukrug, 2013). This section will address specific therapeutic interventions with clients engaging in online relationships as well as effective responses to internet hoaxes.

**Therapeutic interventions**. When harm happens to clients psychologically, physically, or financially, human service practitioners are in an ideal position to respond to the needs of their clients. The following vignette illustrates the role that human service practitioners can play in promoting coping skills in their clients:

***The case of Samantha.*** Samantha is a 19-year-old woman living in Boston, Massachusetts. She makes an appointment at a human services agency and is interested in enrolling in a social skills training group that the agency offers for young adults. In the initial intake, Samantha reveals that for nine months she has been dating Jeremy, a 20-year-old, from Richmond, Virginia. Samantha reports that this is her first "real boyfriend". They talk on the phone every night, text throughout the day, and interact on Facebook. Samantha has several pictures of Jeremy but has never met seen him in a live setting (through Skype, FaceTime, etc). Samantha is not concerned with this lack of face-to-face communication because Jeremy reports that he has not been able to afford a computer but plans to buy one in the future. They also have plans to meet each other in person after cancelling a prior meeting when Jeremy got sick with the flu and was unable to travel. A few weeks later, at the social skills training group, Samantha appears distraught and very saddened. She shares that she received a phone call from a woman a few days prior. Apparently, the phone call was from Jeremy's wife who found Samantha's phone number on her husband's phone. She reveals that "Jeremy" is in fact a 58-year-old man named Jim. Jim lives in Massachusetts with his wife and three children. Apparently, Jim's wife discovered that Jim created this fake profile using pictures of an unidentified young male and had been communicating with several women under this guise. Samantha appears devastated from this news.

Although fictional, the vignette of Samantha is not a unique story. An increasing number of individuals are victims of internet hoaxes. When responding to clients who are victims of internet hoaxes like the one shared above, human service practitioners are encouraged to focus on building a positive alliance and trust with their clients. Without a strong relationship, change and healing is not likely to occur. Furthermore, human service practitioners are encouraged to become aware of developmental issues with their clients (Wolak et al., 2008). Some clients may be able to take perspective and evaluate the totality of situations including their role in the event. Yet, other clients may have a difficult time taking perspective and as

a result may have many negative consequences from these situations (Wolak et al., 2008).

After an internet hoax like the case of Samantha, clients may experience feelings of shame, guilt, anger, or embarrassment. Furthermore, they may blame themselves for not recognizing that they were being duped (Christensen, 2013). Thus, helping grieving clients to express these feelings in a positive and healthy manner will be beneficial. Clients may also be grieving the relationship that they had with "the person who did not exist." In fact, clients may go through the stages of grief similar to the loss of a loved one in death. This is a difficult reality; however, it is important for practitioners to validate the client's grief process. Telling clients that she or he "will get over it" or that "time will heal" may be demeaning (Altmaier, 2011). According to Altmaier, the best response may be "I'm sorry. Tell me more about it" (p. 40). Connecting clients with grief groups and encouraging bibliotherapy may also help move the client toward healing.

Family and friends often exacerbate clients' reactions by a lack of understanding and empathy. For example, family or friends who tried to warn their loved one might feel betrayed or angry towards the client. Additionally, family and friends may not understand the lying or duped positions their loved one chose (Christensen, 2013). Thus, human service practitioners may benefit from working with the entire family to promote understanding, healing, and empathy.

**Ethical Standards**

The NOHS Ethical Standards are another important professional standard in the field of human services (Neukrug, 2008). In regards to online relationships, human service practitioners are encouraged to respond to their clients in an ethically sound manner (National Organization for Human Services, 1996). In this section, we address the issue of confidentiality and working with minors.

**Confidentiality**. Some internet relationships are successful, others may fail, and still others may not only go wrong but they may also cross particular legal or criminal lines (Mitchell, Wolak, Finkelhor, Jones, 2012). In instances where the practitioner feels that her/his client is at risk to harm others, she/he must break confidentiality. The issue of confidentiality occurs within the human service practitioner's responsibility to clients, specifically in NOHS statement 3 and 4 (National Organization for Human Services, 1996):

Statement 3 says human service professionals protect the client's right to privacy and confidentiality except when such confidentiality would cause harm to the client or others, when agency guidelines state otherwise, or under other stated conditions (e.g., local, state, or federal laws). Professionals inform clients of the limits of confidentiality prior to the onset of the helping relationship.

Statement 4 says if practitioners suspect that danger or harm may occur to the client or to others because of a client's behavior the human service professional acts in an appropriate and professional manner to protect the safety of those individuals. This may involve seeking consultation, supervision, and/or breaking the confidentiality of the relationship.

If a human service practitioner learns his/her client has concrete and believable plans to exploit or physically harm a particular person, the practitioner has a responsibility to protect the potential victim from a client's dangerous or violent behavior. Also referred to as "duty to warn and protect", the practitioner is responsible and must (a) report this threat to the local authorities and (b) attempt to ensure the person identified in the threat is also notified (Hays, Craigen, Knight, Healey, & Sikes, 2009). Human service practitioners are also encouraged to be aware of issues of confidentiality with sex-related crimes. Unfortunately, sex offenders often utilize the internet to locate minors in order to exploit them (Malesky, 2007). Malesky found that 80% of the child sex offenders he surveyed utilized online chat rooms to locate their victims. For example, social networking sites and applications like Grindr assist predators in accessing information (e.g. pictures, locations, interests) about victims (Mitchel et al., 2010). Human service practitioners are mandated by law to break confidentiality if they learn that their clients are engaging in behaviors that have harmed or will harm children. In addition to the responsibilities associated with a duty to warn and protect, the practitioner must also alert child protective services (Smith & Segal, 2013).

**Minors.** This issue of confidentiality is further complicated when the client is a minor. For example, there are many documented cases where adults exploited and preyed upon minors, etc. (Mitchell et al., 2012). If this is the case, it is important to be aware of the resources available. The following website is available to practitioners and the overall general population to report online victimizations, including incidences of child pornography: http://www.cybertipline.org. Practitioners should also be aware of the following website: http://www.ic3.gov/default.asp. This website is The Internet Crime Complaint Center (IC3). The IC3 is a partnership between the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) and the National White Collar Crime Center (Wolak et al., 2008).

Just as adults, minors may also pursue relationships online. Adolescents may be particularly vulnerable to online predators due to curiosity and guardians should monitor their need for attention (Berliner, 2002) and, therefore, their use of the internet closely. In fact, human service practitioners are encouraged to discuss with guardians the importance of regularly monitoring their child's internet practices. Additionally, human service practitioners can encourage guardians to employ computer-based parental control tools or computer software. Parental control tools can limit

access to certain cites, words, and/or images. Furthermore, there are software programs that block the child's ability to share personal information online, in chat rooms, or via email correspondence. Additionally, monitoring tools do not block access but they notify parents of websites that their child has visited (OnGuardOnline.gov, 2011).

## Future Research

Online relationships are commonplace in contemporary society, yet in spite of this increasing phenomenon, there are few studies about how to work effectively with individuals involved in online relationships (Burrow-Sanchez, Call, Robert & Drew, 2012). The lack of available research on the topic translates into a number of human service professionals with inadequate training about the topic of online dating. Furthermore, many practitioners are unaware of the potential psychological, physical, and financial ramifications of online relationships (Wells et al., 2006). This manuscript is expository in nature and includes a review of the related literature. It serves as a beginning step to inform human service practitioners and educators about this increasing phenomenon; it is not a comprehensive review or an empirical research study.

However, our field sorely needs more research on this topic. Future research might involve both qualitative and quantitative methodological approaches. For example, qualitative investigations regarding the experiences and perceptions of human service practitioners working with clients in online relationships would be helpful. In contrast, an additional qualitative study could investigate clients' experiences and perceptions of working with human service professionals around issues of online relationships. For example, what do clients perceive as helpful and unhelpful practitioner strategies? In addition to qualitative designs, a quantitative study could survey human service practitioners about how often and to what extent they address issues related to online relationships with clients.

## Summary

The internet is becoming an increasing milieu for relationships. Human service practitioners will likely encounter individuals who are involved in an online relationship. While not all online relationships are problematic, there are risks associated with these types of relationships. Thus, human service practitioners are in an ideal position to work with clients who are engaging in online relationships. The responses and interventions that human service practitioners take should align with the professional standards, particularly the Community Skills Standards and the NOHS Ethical Standards.

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