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Research Article

Shaping E-professional identities: Towards an understanding of the impact of social media experiences on the professional development of social work students.

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Abstract

The paper draws on a small research project involving first year undergraduate social work students at University, focusing on 'how students understand the use of social media and social networking sites (or SNS) within the context of a professional identity'. The literature identifies the significant focus on ethics, highlighting professional boundaries and the challenges of maintaining appropriate conduct in online situations. However, recent SNS research in the UK has begun to promote the benefits of SNS both in academic study and in direct practice. The main findings of this study highlight the significant use of social media across participants' personal, social-role and professional domains, and the importance of ethical and values-based judgements that individuals were developing in advance of undertaking social work training. Nevertheless, other attitudes expressed by participants suggest the complexity of ethical, social-role situations and professional expectations generated by social media use were neither fully recognised nor understood. For educators, the paper proposes a more nuanced understanding of students' roles is warranted, along with on-going support in the use of social media and professional identity.

Introduction

This study is based upon a small-scale research project involving six social work students in a focus-group setting investigating how social work students understand the use of social media within the context of professional identity. All those taking part had a breadth of care work experience before coming into University, with some continuing to work part-time in a paid or voluntary capacity. The small-scale

nature of the study presents a number of limitations to claims of generalised insights, not least the notions of the representativeness of participants and the reliability of the data gathering and analysis methods (Gray, 2014). However, a brief account of the research methods used and the ethical measures that were undertaken will be provided in order to establish a basis for determining research rigor.

SNS can be defined as a range of general communication processes and specific electronic tools that are based in the virtual online world of the internet, allowing individuals to construct profile identities in public or semi-public electronic platforms (Boyd and Ellison, 2008); these include tools such as blogs, micro blogs and popular websites such as Facebook, Instagram and LinkedIn (Ayres, 2011).

SNS use has grown significantly in recent years becoming an indispensable and influential part of many people's lives in areas such as leisure pursuits, shopping (Earnst and Young, 2011), and also for important sources of health and medical-related information for people with chronic diseases (Oh and Cho, 2015), and more specifically in relation to the provision of health and social care work (Aase, 2010; Anderson and Guyton, 2013; LaMendola, 2010; McKendrick, 2014; Westwood, Taylor, and McKendrick, 2014) and social work education (Kilpeläinen, Pääkkönen, and Sankala, 2011; Mukherjee and Clark, 2012). This has been partly driven by the use of Smart Phones and Tablets (Kimball and Kim, 2013) and advert-funded business models (Linklater, 2014) that have revolutionised and mobilised communication possibilities away from the traditional, static sites of the office/ home computer or laptop.

Whilst the growth in the use of SNS and the potential for developments in a number of health and welfare practice areas has largely been welcomed in , for example, personalisation (Ayres, 2011), it has not arrived without critical examination. For example, it has generated questions about the constitution of online professionalism (Cain and Romanelli, 2009; Megele, 2012). Importantly, other health and social care academics and professionals have identified a number of concerns about the maintenance of professionalism within SNS (Anderson and Guyton, 2013), highlighting the blurred distinctions between personal and professional domains and the lack of over-arching policies from professional bodies for SNS use. Moreover, according to Fuchs, any discussion of social media needs to be placed within a theoretical perspective that takes in power and class; it is not just what social media is and does, but who controls the functions and form of social media that are fully rooted in the business imperatives of profit generation (Fuchs, 2014).

Helpfully, Anderson and Guyton chronicle the changing nature of communications between professionals such as social workers and service users, reporting the challenges to the traditional modes of understanding boundaries and ethical practice through the increasing use of the internet and SNS. There are possibilities of increased self-disclosure by clinicians and the potential for changes to the client/clinician relationship, particularly where professionals offer online advice or guidance (Anderson and Guyton, 2013). These changes have led to what some commentators suggest is the blurring of public

and private domains (Ballantyne, Duncalf, and Daly, 2010) with the potential for ethical violations (Fang, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, and Bogo, 2014).

Whilst it is possible that professionals could refrain from using SNS for fear of blurring professional boundaries, Cooner suggests this may not be practical, helpful or even possible and that for social work educators there is a responsibility to develop social work students who are able to engage with social media, practising in a manner that recognises for example, matters of confidentiality, public confidence and personal and professional boundaries (Cooner, 2014). In addition, a number of commentators emphasise the need for practitioners to be fully cognisant of digital technology in order to understand the issues that arise from its use and subsequently, manage their own use of SNS in personal and professional domains (Gutheil and Brodsky, 2008; McBride, 2011).

Recently in the UK there have been the beginnings of work with social work students on the use of SNS as a professional development tool by focusing on a range of teaching and learning skills such as blogging (McKendrick, 2014), the use of Facebook in skills development (Cooner, 2014) and book groups as a means of reflection (Taylor, 2014). In particular, the work by Westwood has highlighted the possibilities of using blogs as a tool for critical reflection on values (Westwood, 2014), while Thackray places more emphasis on students, "engaging in online communities and using social media in the development of personal professional and social networks- community building requires participation" (Thackray, 2014, 14).

In England and Wales the Health and Care Professions Council (HCPC) are responsible for the registration health and social care professionals and more specifically, for the governance of social work training in England. Although there are expectations to abide by the Guidance on Conduct and Ethics for Students (Health and Care Professions Council, 2012) in matters of communicating effectively with service users and maintaining high standards of personal conduct, there is little that can help students or educators in determining whether it is appropriate for students to accept a service user 'Friend Request' (a Facebook function) for example (Cooner, 2014).

Research conducted by Jent, Eaton, Englebert, Dandes, Chapman and Hershorin explored the ethical challenges faced by health practitioners, and although focusing on another professional group, the findings can be insightful for social work educators. Their results suggest a high proportion of health practitioners did not believe that patient SNS posts were private and that they would not inform them that their SNS had been accessed, even when the nature of the information might mean that a follow-up action needed to be taken (Jent et al., 2011) (such as contacting parents or the police). Other research highlights the possibility of over-familiarity that SNS use encourages, and that the ease of contact meant that service users could re-initiate a connection through Facebook, leaving the social worker conflicted

and possibly anxious about personal safety and professional responsibilities (Mishna, Bogo, Root, Sawyer, and Khoury-Kassabri, 2012).

Professionalism, E- professionalism and professional identity

The development of social work students' understanding of ethics and SNS use can be viewed within a perspective of E-professionalism, which suggests that the professional behaviours and attitudes have their origins in the practice world, but beyond this are understood in terms of the additional responsibilities and attention to contexts that the virtual world demands (Cain and Romanelli, 2009). This view presents SNS as acting only in the form of a conduit (as the term media suggests) through which professionalism is demonstrated. However, this is not universally accepted. Others see E-professionalism as involving the online persona of professional based on the meaning of their online activities and interactions with others (Megele, 2012). Moreover, if definitions and understandings of E-professionalism online go beyond viewing it as merely an extension of the expectations of professionalism in practice it will, in part, depend on whether there is a sound understanding of what constitutes professionalism and professional identity in the first instance.

Unsurprisingly, a number of queries are posed about the nature and identity of social work as a profession per se (Mackay and Zufferey, 2015), due to its hierarchical structures and restricted autonomy (Etzioni, 1969 in Bowles, Collingridge, Curry, and Valentine, 2006; Higham, 2006; Thompson, 2007). Others have highlighted the inconclusive nature of professionalism (Gallway and Compton, 1984, in Higham, 2006), or the lack of a depth in a specific knowledge-base (Flexion 2001, in Fargion, 2008 214). Thus, if there are unclear or mixed conceptual understandings of social work as a profession, or that the status and practice of social work is grounded in quasi-professional terms, then it should be no surprise that understanding professionalism within the use of SNS may present profound challenges for both students and experienced practitioners alike. In addition, there are a number of other critical arguments which undermine social work's claim of professional status, too lengthy to detail here but are effectively covered elsewhere in the social work literature (Bowles et al., 2006; Higham, 2006; Thompson, 2007).

Background to the study

Through the induction process at University students are provided with information on a wide range of matters that relate to the course content, the expectations on professional conduct and various codes of ethics and social work values. Until recently, the discussions on student conduct largely focused on the disclosure of criminal offences or civil court matters. In 2014, following a session on social work and social media use, an evaluation of the induction was undertaken with students. The results indicated a need for more detailed guidance on the use of social media and professional expectations, particularly since in the preceding four or five years there had been growing anecdotal concerns raised by the staff team about students' use of SNS, in relation to 'readiness for direct practice' (British Association of Social Work, n.d.).

Purpose of the research

The study was directed towards first year social work students and how they understand the use of social media in the context of their emerging identity and understanding of professionalism. The study's aim was to add to the body of knowledge regarding social media use by moving towards an understanding of an experiential, meanings-based perspective, rather than attempt to impose predefined constructs of professional behaviours onto activities taking place within SNS.

Ethics

All elements of this study have followed a clear ethical pathway in establishing the grounds for engaging with and explaining the purpose of the study with participants. Ethical permission for the focus group was granted by the University Ethics Panel, satisfying the need for anonymity, data security, confidentiality, consent and withdrawal. All participants were invited to contribute to the study in a voluntary capacity, and also gave their written permission for direct quotes, and more general results to be presented and published where opportunities arise.

Methods and methodology: sampling and procedures

The study engaged with a cohort of seventy first year undergraduate social work students, inviting them to participate in a focus-group to discuss their experiences of SNS use. Six students responded to the request, confirming their wish to participate in the study; five women and one man, with a mix of ages from eighteen up to thirty eight. All of the participants had experience of work in social care settings and voluntary work, and all but one were daily users of social media.

The Interview was audio recorded and transcribed by me highlighting significant statements, structural and descriptive (Creswell, 2013). A summary was then passed back to participants for checking with the intention of addressing matters of bias (Gray, 2014).

The convenience, non-probability sampling approach provided opportunities for drawing out data-rich insights from participants' work, study, voluntary roles and personal experiences, but sampling limitations exist, not least the unrepresentativeness of participants of the wider population (Barbour and Schostak, 2005) and matters of "information and credibility" (Miles Huberman, 1994, cited in Punch, 2014, 162). However, a well-structured focus group approach does allow for a great deal of informal social interaction between participants (Silverman, 2014), potentially unearthing deeper understandings of phenomena using group dynamics (Punch, 2014). Moreover, Smith (2004, cited in Smith, Flowers and Larkin 2009) sees the use of focus groups as an appropriate interpretive phenomenological approach to data gathering, providing opportunities are given for participants to tell their stories, speak freely and

reflectively and to develop their ideas and express their concerns at some length. This is not without significant challenges for the researcher in that opportunities to use silences and pauses in conversations in order to facilitate thought and reflection can be filled by others who have similar or contrasting insights. Additionally, using participant-talk as data from focus groups does not result in an unproblematic or true account of events and behaviours (Smith, Smith, and Larkin, 2009), but does place an emphasis on establishing participant accounts of phenomena.

Findings

Regularity of use

The regularity of SNS by focus group participants use is broadly in line with previous research and evaluation studies (Cooner, 2014; Miller, Parsons, and Lifer, 2010; Mishna et al., 2012). One participant using SNS infrequently suggested they are more cautious about its use in personal, work and study capacities. However, those students describing themselves as daily users, whilst expressing some ethical and practical concerns about using SNS in work and study domains, did not suggest these would impact on the frequency of use.

Changes in how SNS is used in relation to growing in an understanding of professional responsibilities

There was a clear sense from some participants that expectations of their own image and behaviour had increased in-line with developing a sense of professional responsibility. Participants reflected upon their current position on a professional course, but also drew upon work and voluntary based experiences to make links between their own previous use of SNS and observations on colleagues' behaviours.

I use Facebook now very differently than what I would have put on there, three or four years ago; the language that you use, the things that you talk about is probably... more appropriate for what I am doing now.

Participant 2

Control and powerlessness

Though many aspects of SNS use is clearly within the control of the individual, participants were very aware that some areas of SNS had the potential to be problematic for them. Two perspectives illuminated the types of challenges: the first one being self-created problems stemming from personal behaviours and interactions with others in a closed network; and the second being, the actions and behaviours of friends' posts perceived as problematic by employers or others in positions of authority.

The three comments below highlight the issue of both self-control while using SNS, and the inherent difficulties of using SNS relation to what others post.

I am opinionated, and I don't want to use that forum to put it across (laughs). I think it would just be eh, it would open flood-gates, and I sort of got to control that, let's say. Participant 4

Outside of this course and work, I try to maintain a professional, professionalism and, professional identity, but (pause), when alcohol's involved you become (pause) uninhibited really and that can take you to be complacent. Participant 3

Obviously you got to be careful online aren't ya? And you've got no control over it whatsoever, and that could be detrimental, and you know you've got no control. Participant 1

Using SNS- Personal, political and professional identities: possibilities and threats

Participant 3 used the expression `daunting` when thinking about the possibility of having to become more familiar with social media in a professional context. In using social media infrequently one participant expressed uncertainty about how they could maintain their professional image using SNS, yet they also felt that not using or fully grasping SNS would act as a barrier in working with service users in future work roles.

Well, I want to go into child protection, so I've got to make sure that I cover all bases. I am also aware that I have got to be very careful, because that's how you present your social life.
Participant 4

Research by Mishna et al, (2014) offers an insight into the potential ambivalence of this respondent regarding SNS use. On the one hand there are a range of concerns about friends and family uses of social media and how this might jeopardise the professional image or future employment prospects, yet conversely there is the recognition of respecting the needs of service users who might want to communicate in ways that are most helpful to them involving social media. This respondent's comments also found little resonance in US research which suggested that although students understand that their SNS use might be viewed by future employers, their posts did not reflect this understanding through a corresponding change in online behaviours (Miller, Parsons and Lifer, 2010).

Whilst discussing how SNS was used, some participants noted the importance of seeking out particular knowledge/news and opinion sources (such as Twitter feeds from Owen Jones/Peter Tatchell, online news sites such as the Guardian and BBC, and professional journals such as Community Care online) that reflected their emerging professional identity. In addition to the sourcing of specific interest pieces participants were confident that others in their network of family, friends and fellow student peers would also find the pieces interesting. Twitter feeds about events or news items were often re-tweeted with comments to offer additional opinions to highlight a particular viewpoint of the Tweeter. Respondents also suggested they were aware that their choice of SNS resources and social commentators carried personal, political and professional weight, but also that their own comments were important in order to re-enforce or challenge the views expressed on Twitter.

Other participants placed more emphasis on interpersonal exchanges with others in the friendship and study networks at home, work and University. In part, these exchanges were linked with tasks, problem solving and knowledge development in relation to academic work, allowing participants to continue University activities and extend classroom-based learning into private study time. Other exchanges often involved catching up on missed work or clarification of points relating to course-work or submissions.

I only do it because of what I gain from here, so like for example somebody might put that they are struggling with something and I would make a comment, and I have learned so much from that. Participant 2

Outside academic study, participants commented upon opportunities to connect with both local and national groups in terms of community involvement and political activism. These actions provided a means of supporting vulnerable service users indirectly by advertising local events and raising awareness about/money for health related support groups.

It is National Children's Day, where there are opportunities to change your Facebook profile and share stories about being undiagnosed. So in that sense, by the end of today, I will get everybody that's on my Facebook page seeing the issues that are shared. And even with one post, there's a better understanding of what it's like to be a parent of a child with disabilities. Participant 5

SNS behaviours and domain specific rules: ethics/values

Participants discussed the issue of looking at the SNS of others with particular reference to Facebook. They understood that what might be acceptable in a personal capacity might not be so welcomed in work-settings, or may call into question their commitment to professional values. Comments also suggested there was a `correct way` to understand and use SNS, but acknowledged this was unwritten, and in any case some felt anything posted on a `public forum` was open to public scrutiny since the person posting it wanted it to be viewed otherwise it would not be there.

But surely that's why it's there, for you to look at! Participant 2

The point on online access to patient SNS use was highlighted by Jent et al (2011) in their research. They noted a significant number of student health care providers did not grasp both the clinical (the effect upon provider/patient relationships) and ethical (informed consent; boundaries) implications of their actions, largely because their own experiences of being "immersed in the use of the internet" (p. 419).

All participants expressed views about the challenges of negotiating both personal and professional values when using SNS across any domain of work, personal, study and voluntary roles. These involved general concerns about online content such as pornography and graphic violence, but also about how the use of SNS by family and friends could impact upon maintaining a professional image. This last point generated the most concern for the participants because some had friends or family members whose online activity/sharing was at times unhelpful, or positively problematic in the comments and up-loads that were passed around SNS.

My Friend, he's got mental health issues due to his 'em, tumour. And I just think I don't want to get him off my Facebook page because he was a very, very good friend. So do I unfriend him because of his behaviour, or keep him because of his lack of understanding? Participant 3

I have even unfollowed people who I think they would consider themselves as my friends and I have had to apologise to them, because I know what they are doing with their life don't I don't need to see it. Participant 2

...and eventually I just messaged him back and I said look, I can't talk to you anymore, it's not professional of me. I want to let you know that I hope you're doing well and everything. Thank you so much for your time. I'll leave it there. Participant 6

Learning experiences: Identity; reflections; boundaries; utilising learning from other experiences, pre and current training, voluntary and paid

Participants were able to identify and reflect upon experiences of SNS use that were problematic in relation to paid or voluntary work. Participants reported witnessing colleagues being disciplined following complaints involving historic depictions and descriptions of their private lives that were not in keeping with their current responsibilities. There were also comments made about friends whose posts involved humour regarding drug use, which had subsequently attracted negative feedback by prospective

employers at interview. What was interesting was the response to these insights from the participant who made changes to their privacy settings;

There's someone I know went for an interview and when they got there, coz they got like a confession for a joke he had written 'professional weed smoker', and they said to him when he was at the interview, you can't be writing things like that. I know he meant it as a joke, like, you can't represent someone when you are putting it out in public. I just like closed off all my access (to Facebook) and made it a lot more private, but...mm. Participant 2

The use of SNS in voluntary roles was also highlighted where 'Friend Requests' from children were turned down as a matter of policy. The participant clearly understood her responsibilities towards the children as a role-model, and the boundaries that this created, but this had attracted negative responses from the parents and children concerned.

I've had friend requests (from seven and eight year olds) and obviously I have declined them, but then they are coming back at you, like everyday requesting, and to the point we had to issue a policy as adults we can't. It's not that we don't like the child, it's the fact that sometimes, and even though you try your hardest, you might put something that's inappropriate to that child. You've got to act as that role model. Participant 5

This respondent acknowledges the challenges of being a role-model for children and that as such, there were responsibilities placed upon adults to keep certain matters away from children's gaze. However, whilst this respondent appears to recognise the significance of managing 'Friend Requests' from children, there is still some way to go in terms of understanding the ethical importance of dealing with SNS communication requests. Devi points out that beyond the concerns expressed by this respondent, there are also concerns regarding the nature of exchanges with others which might result in the need to report problematic behaviours despite the lack of agreement into what might constitute a professional online relationship (Devi, 2011).

Participants also commented upon social media in light of their own values and how these chimed with the interests and values of others. Not only did some participants feel they gained a great deal from the debates and news stories offered by social commentators such as Owen Jones, but as part of their professional identity around social work they felt it important to share these interests with others of a shared identity.

...I enjoy following Owen Jones, and there are agencies out there putting things on that you can share with people. So I think, you know, if it's interesting to me, I imagine it's got to be interesting to others. I am generalising, but if it's interesting to me regarding my values and beliefs, then I imagine it's got to be interesting to other people as well with similar values and beliefs in social work. Participant 3

Discussion

How SNS is used appeared to link with both positive and negative experiences in work, study and personal domains. This can be no surprise. For some participants the process has led to a change in the focus of SNS use from seeing it as a way of keeping in touch with friends and family, to using it as a means of establishing professional identity and networking on an academic and professional level with others. These experiences provided virtual places to develop professional identities that in part are distanced from the judgements of family, former colleagues and current friends. Other participants placed more emphasis upon negative or challenging SNS experiences, and how this led to a reduction in their SNS use, a greater understanding of the need for increased privacy settings and more awareness of their own online posts and activities. In some instances changes came about through observing the problems friends and colleagues got into online. Unhelpfully, this form of learning may place barriers around the potential for future learning in SNS use if students are not then offered the opportunity for reflection in a professional context. Interestingly, none of the participants reflected upon either the professional guidance or the social media instruction provided by the University at the beginning of the course as a catalyst for change.

Where participants continued to work in paid or voluntary care roles alongside their social work studies, the use of SNS provided possibilities for the development leadership skills linked with an emerging professional identity. These emerging skills were evidenced in an ability to separate out appropriate behaviours in work and family/social roles and acknowledge the responsibilities in the relationships with service users. However, for some participants fully understanding and acting in a manner that reflected the higher expectations of social work values, and to some extent the higher level of responsibility and visibility that the social work role will bring, was not fully formed. Worryingly, as the research by Jent et al (2011) highlights, the immersion of students in SNS over many years may erode certain ethical principles in matters such as seeking consent to access personal information, or establishing boundaries within the professional relationship.

Professional identity curation

Vicarious learning in online environments can bring both benefits and challenges for students and educators in terms of identifying and establishing the requisites of an appropriate professional identity. Participants observed the actions of potential role-models online which was helpful, but there were many comments from participants that indicated a sense of apprehension about their future use of SNS based on observations of employers' responses to inappropriate or questionable online behaviours of friends and colleagues. Comments highlighted a fear of not securing a job in a particular practice area, or subsequently breaching professional codes of behaviour in their personal use of SNS. There were also some anxieties about working with service users if the relationship moved from a real-world setting into

an online domain, either unwittingly through contact request (in Facebook for example), or through exchanges on social network platforms (such as Twitter). This has been referred to as the “slippery slope, where developing professionals are unable to identify and maintain professional boundaries” (Anderson and Guyton, 2013, 116; Gutheil and Brodsky, 2008). However, rather than retreat into defensive, uncritical practice there are benefits in supporting social work students when it comes to organising their personal online selves in combination with the developing sense of professionalism as Cooner (2014) has identified.

Unhelpfully, this last point regarding views on the use of social media as a dichotomous separation may miss the issue of those students having both paid and/or voluntary work running in parallel with their training. Personal domains, meaning home/family life, and then professional domains, the spaces where the attendant values and behaviours commensurate with their professional studies lie, may miss the opportunity to identify, discuss and refine students’ understanding of ethical and professional responsibilities (as in an emerging professional identity). This dual-identity/two hats perspective (as expressed by Participant 3) may cause difficulties for students where appropriate and acceptable uses of social media in care work or voluntary settings become problematic in professional roles that carry more responsibility. Additionally, the concept of ‘two different hats’ can be problematic, since there are attendant risks in attempting to separate various work/home/student role-responsibilities given the potential reach, longevity, visibility and availability of social media to an invisible audience (Fang et al., 2014). As one lecturer on the induction session (noted above) suggested, ‘Two hats, perhaps, but only ever one head’.

Empowerment and identity

Participants indicated some understanding of the link between their emerging professional identity, ethical behaviours and values that underpin SNS use. However, there were some indications that understanding certain aspects of professional identity; what ought to be done with service users (treating people with respect, maintaining confidentiality) was not always linked with what ought not to be done (for example, side-stepping matters of privacy/informed consent when viewing service user SNS posts). This must generate the questions, ‘What can the use of SNS do in terms of creating or circumscribing the establishment of empowering, ethical approaches to practice, and how will this shape the identity of practitioners in attempting to work in partnership with service users’?

Conclusion

This paper outlined a small scale project providing some insight into how social work students at one University understand the development of professional identity through the use of SNS. Much of the literature provides a focus on ethics and policy and how practitioners from a range of health and social

care professionals can maintain appropriate boundaries and acceptable behaviours online. Other research in the UK has begun to move beyond providing policy guidance by utilising the strengths of social media in educational terms and at the same time, giving students opportunities to recognise the limitations and challenges for field use. The findings from this research suggests students are able to draw on a wide range of pre and concurrent University experiences in identifying both good and problematic behaviours. In some instances participants' comments provided clear links between ethical standpoints and values-based practice, but what also stood out were remarks by some respondents suggesting their online behaviours have the potential to undermine notions of confidentiality and consent where service users are concerned. Further research can examine students in practice situations to develop a greater understanding of how the use of SNS impacts professional identity development and the implications for engagement and partnership work with service users. There is also scope for further investigation into how the use of social media might impact upon relationships between service users and practitioners, both in terms of the initial engagement with service users and then within the on-going nature of support work and social work interventions.

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