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Ethical Issues Associated with Information and Communication Technology in Counseling and Guidance

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Abstract

For more than 50 years, literature on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in counseling and guidance has presented ethical issues related to the development and use of technologies in practice. This paper reviews the ethical issues raised, organizing them into three categories: social equity, resources, and services. Career professionals' efforts to address these ethical issues are introduced via a discussion of ethical, credentialing, and accreditation standards. The article concludes with a call for additional standards development, training resources, and research to shape the use of rapidly changing technologies in ways that ethically and effectively enhance client services.

Keywords: technology, counseling and career guidance, ethical issues, professional standards

Introduction

Since the 1960's, the literature on the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in counseling and guidance has presented a mixture of potential benefits and limitations. Potential benefits often relate to enhancing efficiency, reducing costs, expanding the reach of resources and services to underserved client populations, and building new communities or social support groups. Chief among the potential limitations have been consistent concerns over potential ethical problems. Information and communication technology have evolved from batch processing of career assessments by mainframe computers and minicomputers, to local delivery of career assessments, information, and instruction on personal computers, to distance delivery of career assessments, information, and instruction on the Internet, along with distance service delivery and social media via the Internet. Ethical issues have evolved along with the development of the technology itself, with some issues relatively unchanged and other new issues emerging.

This paper discusses ethical issues raised across the ITC literature in counseling and guidance, organizing them into three categories: social equity, resources, and services. Readers are also introduced to career professionals' efforts to address these ethical issues through the development of ethical, credentialing, and accreditation standards.

Social Equity Issues

The Internet provides access to a vast array of career resources and services, allowing counseling and guidance "to transcend geographic and physical barriers" (Sampson, 1998, p. 216). Access to the Internet has increased dramatically due to decreasing technology costs and the world-wide availability of mobile communication networks. First, the costs of entry-level desktop and notebook computers have continued to decline, now reaching the level of a fully-

featured mobile phone. Second, smart phones and tablets, along with related software applications, have greatly expanded access to the Internet anywhere a mobile telephone signal is available. As a result, the proportion of individuals with Internet access has increased.

However, access is still not universal. Hooley, Hutchinson, & Watts (2010) noted that while the digital divide has lessened, it has not vanished. As of December 31, 2011, 33% of the world's population had access to the Internet (Miniwatts Marketing Group, 2012). With a global population in 2011 of almost 7 billion, this still means that around 4.6 billion people in the world do not have ready access to the Internet. Even in the most economically advanced countries of the world there are still individuals with little to no access to the Internet. Long waiting lines and time limits when a computer is available at a public facility, such as a public library, limits the ability of those with inadequate financial resources to access the career resources and services they need. Technology purchase costs and monthly Internet access charges remain a barrier for those in our society who are at greatest economic and social risk. This issue has been raised repeatedly since the early 1980's (e.g., Barak, 2003; Malone, 2007; Offer & Watts, 1997; Osborn, Dikel, & Sampson, 2011; Sampson, 1999; Sampson & Bloom, 2001; Sampson & Pyle, 1983; Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009;).

Beyond limitations of physical access to technology or inadequate financial resources, access to technology may be impeded by an individual's gaps in digital literacy. Hooley et al. (2010) describe digital literacy as the "combination of skills, attitudes, and knowledge" (p. 8) that provides a foundation for an individual to confidentially interact with technology-based content and services. Environment and culture greatly influence the development of digital literacy and the ways in which people engage technology.

Equity of access to career interventions is a social justice issue (Sampson, Dozier, & Colvin, 2011). As described by Bell (1997) the goal of social justice is “full and equal participation of all groups in a society that is mutually shaped to meet their needs,” and achieving such a goal “includes a vision of society in which the distribution of resources is equitable” (p. 3). Recognizing that some individuals have limited access to career resources due to limited financial resources, educational opportunities, or environmental exposure to technologies has clear social justice implications.

Resource Issues

Resources include assessments and information that individuals use to clarify their knowledge about themselves, their options, and their approach to decision making (Sampson, 2008). ICT-based resources are used both on a self-help basis and as part of face-to-face and distance service delivery. Ethical issues relate to the validity of the resources and the availability of user support when needed.

Quality of Assessments and Information Delivered on the Internet

Career assessments on the Internet vary greatly in quality (Barak, 2003). “Ethically and scientifically sound material coexists on the Internet with shoddy work that has not been evaluated at any level” (Clark, Horan, Tompkins-Bjorkman, Kovalski, & Hackett, 2000, p. 87). Oliver and Zack (1999) found that few websites provided evidence for the validity of the career assessments available, making it difficult for uninformed practitioners and the public to separate high quality assessments from poor or questionable quality assessments. There is no data available to show that this situation has changed in the decade that has passed since Oliver and Zack’s study was published.

Several specific validity-related problems exist. The first problem involves adapting traditional paper-and-pencil measures for delivery on the Internet without establishing the equivalence of the results obtained (Sampson, 2000; Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). A second related problem involves using test interpretations that have not been validated. An assessment with adequate evidence of validity can still have an invalid interpretation (Sampson, Shy, & Purgar, 2003). A third problem involves new career assessments that are designed exclusively for the Internet where the development process did not include establishing evidence of validity. As a result of these problems, both career practitioners and the public can have a difficult time selecting career assessments that measure what they claim to measure. A well-designed website with attractive graphics is no guarantee of quality (Sampson & Lumsden, 2000). The same would be true of a well-designed app on a mobile device.

Career information on the Internet shows similar variability in quality. Several factors can compromise the validity of information. First, the quality of the information presented on the Internet can never exceed the quality of the research used to create the data. While some poor quality information is the result of inadequate research, other invalid information is developed purposely to promote a predetermined point of view with the ultimate intention of influencing individuals' behavior through the choices they make. The problems range from subtly emphasizing the positive aspects of an occupation and downplaying the negative aspects, to blatant presentation of false data to reinforce stereotypes and promote discrimination. Also, the extensive and inexpensive data storage capacity of the Internet means that there is less incentive to remove out-of-date information. The provision of inaccurate information compromises individuals' ability to make informed decisions about occupations, education, training, and employment. Even if the data presented is accurate, poor presentation of the data limits its

usefulness (Osborn et al., 2011; Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009). Vuorinen (2006) noted that practitioners perceived an ethical problem to exist when individuals made decisions on the basis of faulty information.

Availability of User Support when Needed

Career resources (assessments and information) available on the Internet are used on both a practitioner-supported and self-help basis. Successful use of career resources is influenced by individuals' readiness for career decision making (Epstein & Lenz, 2008). "Generally speaking, readiness for career decision making reflects an individual's state of preparation for engaging in the learning processes necessary to explore and decide among various occupational, educational, training, and employment options" (Sampson, McClain, Musch, & Reardon, in press, p. 1).

Individuals with lower readiness for career decision making need more assistance in order to make effective use of career resources, while individuals with higher readiness need little or no support from a practitioner to use career resources (Sampson, 2008; Sampson, Reardon, Peterson, & Lenz, 2004).

Individuals with low readiness for decision-making tend to have: (a) higher anxiety about decision making; (b) less clarity and stability in their self-perceptions; (c) more negative expectations about their ability to make appropriate choices; (d) greater difficulty in thinking clearly about themselves and their options; and (e) more difficulty in answering assessment items and in evaluating the appropriateness of options based on a review of information. As a result, these individuals are more likely to make inappropriate use of resources on a self-help basis, as well as being more likely to cease using self-help assessments and information as a result of the difficulties they experience in understanding and using the resources. Additional specific problems that individuals with low decision making readiness may experience include: (a) being

aware a problem exists, but at the same time unaware of the specific needs they have; (b) having unrealistic perceptions of the ability of the Internet to solve their problems; (c) being overwhelmed with the huge amount of information that exists on the Internet; (d) having problems in linking information to specific needs; (e) being unsure of how to use the information they locate; and (f) being unsure of how to get assistance when they realize they need help (Osborn et al., 2011). Difficulty in using computer applications has also been noted in relation to reading disabilities (Haring-Hidore, 1984), limited verbal abilities (Chapman & Katz, 1982; Roselle & Hummel, 1988), and limited knowledge, confidence, and motivation (Dungy, 1984). With regard to assessment, Barak (2003) stated, “The ease of taking tests through the Internet and the lack of *a priori* suitability checks might contribute to the phenomenon of testing people who should not take a test in the first place” (p. 6).

Prior to the existence of the Internet, most career assessments and career information reference materials were accessed in settings where a career practitioner was often available to at least respond to questions about the use of the resource. Now, career assessments and information are available anywhere a mobile device can access the Internet. Easy accessibility is an asset for individuals with high readiness for decision making who can make good use of resources on a self-help basis. However, easy access to resources by individuals with low readiness for decision making can create problems when they subsequently experience difficulty in using assessments or information. This may be especially problematic given that many Internet websites do not indicate the circumstances when self-help use of assessments and information is inappropriate and when assistance from a practitioner is needed (Offer, Sampson, & Watts, 2001; Osborn, et al., 2011; Sampson & Bloom, 2001). Individuals may use Internet websites to obtain resources, experience difficulty in using the resources, and wrongly believe

that their problem cannot be resolved, when in reality counseling might have been helpful (Sampson, 1999). Internet website developers have an ethical responsibility to indicate when individuals may need to seek help from a career practitioner and how to access assistance (Prince, Chartrand, & Silver, 2000).

Service Issues

Service delivery at a distance uses e-mail, chat, telephone, videoconferencing, or multi-user virtual environments to reach traditionally-underserved individuals or persons who simply desire the convenience of remote help. The goal is to assist individuals to make informed and careful decisions about occupations, education, training, and employment (Sampson, 2008). Ethical issues relate to confidentiality, user privacy, and managing interactions in new contexts.

Confidentiality and User Privacy

Violations of confidentiality have been a problem ever since the first paper-based client case notes and assessments were stored in a practitioner's office. The subsequent addition of audio and video records created further opportunities for violating confidentiality. Creating, storing, and retrieving client case notes and assessments on the Internet exacerbates the confidentiality problem by increasing the opportunities for remote access to records. Using e-mail, chat, videoconferencing, and multi-user virtual environments to communicate with clients opens the door to further inappropriate access to client records. Career practitioners need to be vigilant in using appropriate security measures, such as frequently changing passwords and using data encryption for transmissions over the Internet (e.g., Barak, 2003; Osborn et al., 2011; Pelling, 2009; Sampson & Bloom, 2001; Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997).

In order for distance service delivery to be effective, individuals need auditory and physical privacy. Attempting to interact with a practitioner when there are consistent distractions,

or when there is a possibility of being observed, overheard, or manipulated by another individual during a counseling session, will limit client self-disclosure and compromise confidentiality (Osborn et al., 2011; Pelling, 2009; Sampson et al., 1997). Public access points, such as public libraries, pose similar problems.

Managing Interactions in New Contexts

Career services cannot be separated from the context in which they occur – the circumstances, events, and understandings that surround and contribute to the meaning of the client-career professional interactions. Decisions about what constitutes ethical interactions are inherently influenced by the context (Makela, 2009). As contexts in which career services are offered change (e.g., moving meetings from a physical office space to Internet-based communications), new ethical issues also emerge. This section uses distance service delivery and social media to demonstrate the ethical issues that arise when ICTs change the context of service delivery.

Distance service delivery. Distance service delivery allows a career practitioner to deliver counseling and guidance services through the use of e-mail, chat, telephone, videoconferencing, or multi-user virtual environments to individuals who may be underserved with face-to-face services as a result of geographic distances or a disability that limits mobility, or to serve individuals who may simply prefer the convenience of remote assistance (Sampson, 2008). However, distance service delivery is not effective for all persons. Some individuals have characteristics and circumstances that make distance service delivery inappropriate. Individuals who are highly anxious, severely depressed or dysfunctional are not appropriate candidates for service at a distance (Malone, 2007; Ravis, 2007). In addition, some individuals lack the computer skills required for distance access. Hooley et al. (2010) noted that the limited digital

literacy of some individuals remains a problem. These skills include the ability to express oneself in writing or the computer literacy needed to use e-mail, chat, videoconferencing, or multi-user virtual environments (Barak, 2003; Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009).

Practitioners providing face-to-face services in the community where they live are more likely to be aware of local emergency resources for clients in crisis than when clients experience a crisis in a distant community. Some client situations can result in harm to self or others, such as client disclosure that may harm him or herself, or that may harm another person (Ravis, 2007). This situation requires prompt action on the part of the career practitioner (Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009). Practitioners need to be aware of local referral sources for client emergencies when they are working at a distance (Sampson et al., 1997).

Practitioners providing face-to-face services are also typically aware of local conditions and events by simply paying attention to their local media as a natural aspect of daily life. This type of easily obtained contextual data is much more difficult to maintain when a career practitioner is serving individuals at a distance that may live in several different geographic areas. As a result, practitioners serving individuals at a distance may be unaware of circumstances in a remote geographic location that can have a significant influence on the individual being served, such as economic changes that impact employment (e.g., Bysshe & Parsons, 1999; Sampson & Bloom, 2001; Sampson et al., 1997; Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009; Watts & Dent, 2007). Multicultural issues can pose a similar problem. Since the cultural mix of clients may vary considerably by geographic region, career practitioners may not have adequate cultural awareness and skills to provide services to individuals in distant communities that differ from the clients they normally serve (Anthony & Jamieson, 2005; Malone, 2007; Ravis, 2007)

Effective provision of distance service delivery requires specialized knowledge and skills, which are included in the distance practitioner credentials identified later in this paper. Practitioners who lack these competencies may consciously or unwittingly provide inadequate service to individuals at a distance (Ravis, 2007). This problem is exacerbated by the fact that practitioner websites may provide little or no information on their credentials or specialized expertise. This lack of information makes it difficult for individuals to make informed judgments about choosing a practitioner that is most likely to meet their needs (Pelling, 2009; Sampson & Bloom, 2001; Vuorinen & Sampson, 2009).

Social media. Increasing numbers of individual practitioners and service delivery organizations are using social media resources, such as Facebook, MySpace, LinkedIn, and Twitter, to provide additional opportunities for interaction with and among individuals seeking assistance with career decisions (Kettunen, Vuorinen, & Sampson, 2012; Osborn et al., 2011). Social media can be used to both deliver and market services, and has been noted as a fast, efficient, inexpensive tool for expanding the reach of career services, while building community and social support among groups with similar interests and needs (e.g., Hooley et al., 2010; Van Allen & Roberts, 2011).

Despite these perceived benefits of social media, several characteristics of the online environment contribute to interesting ethical challenges. On one hand, some traditional commitments of the career services profession are difficult to uphold due to the public and remote nature of social media sites. On many social media sites, communications between clients and career professionals can be “witnessed by a broad, invisible audience of third parties” (Humphreys, Winzelberg, & Klaw, 2000, p. 495). The mere connection with a career professional on a social networking site can identify an individual as a client, thereby raising

confidentiality concerns (e.g., Tunick, Mednick, & Conroy, 2011; Van Allen & Roberts, 2011). Further, challenges to maintaining data security are inherent when communicating electronically via social media sites that are not owned or controlled by career professionals.

On the other hand, there is a considerable change in the nature of the relationship between career professionals and individuals seeking career services when using social media as opposed to traditional face-to-face interactions. First, the boundaries of who is influenced by the content of a social media site are not clearly defined (Bateman, Pike, & Butler, 2010) because individuals can move fluidly in and out of groups and groups may overlap or intermingle when “friends of friends” can view content. This can lead to a lack of clarity regarding who is a client, and what a client may expect from interactions with a career practitioner. Second, the Internet in general, and social media sites specifically, have drastically increased the amount of information that is readily available about individuals related to both their professional and personal lives. The ease of access to information creates opportunities for career professionals and clients to discover private details about each other, both in an intentional and an inadvertent manner, potentially leading to considerable changes in the working relationship (Tunick et al, 2011). This has left many scholars to express concern about the impact that social media is having on the increasingly blurring lines of career professionals’ professional and personal lives (e.g., Kettunun et al., 2012; Osborn et al., 2011).

Professional Standards

In response to growing awareness of the potential ethical problems associated with the use of ICT in counseling and guidance, professional organizations in the 1980’s began creating standards to further increase awareness of potential problems and to recommend guidelines for appropriate practice. Standards were created related to ethics, credentialing, and accreditation.

Please note that examples in this section are drawn primarily from U.S. professional associations and groups. Considerations of institutional, political, and cultural contexts are important when it comes to the application of professional and ethical standards. Readers are encouraged to reflection on how their own environmental influences interact with the development and implementation of standards and guidelines.

Ethical Standards

Ethical codes were created to educate professionals about conduct and standards of practice, as well as to protect and promote the welfare of those served by career professionals (Makela, 2009). Three approaches have been taken in developing ethical codes that deal with the use of ICT in counseling and guidance. The first approach incorporates elements of ICT use into relevant sections of a general code (such as confidentiality or assessment) or creates an additional section in the code, often entitled “technology.” This approach has been used for the ethical codes developed by the American Counseling Association (2005), the American School Counselor Association (2010), the International Association for Educational and Vocational Guidance (IAEVG) (1995), the National Board for Certified Counselors (2012a), and the National Career Development Association (NCDA) (2007). The second approach has been to create specialized standards that focus solely on ethical issues in the use of ICT in counseling and guidance. This approach was used by the National Board for Certified Counselors (2012b) and the International Society for Mental Health Online (2000) in establishing guidelines for distance services. The third approach is to include ethical issues related to counseling and guidance practice as one component of standards for the design and delivery of computer-based career resources. This approach was used for standards for operating computer-based career information systems (Alliance for Career Resource Professionals, 2012).

Ethical standards react to issues that emerge in practice and evolve to assist counseling and guidance practitioners with the challenges that they encounter (Makela, 2009). As such, they can be a step behind the most recent iteration of ICT. However, many ethical codes have kept up-to-date with technologies as they have become established (e.g., distance service delivery). Many of the changes to ethical codes related to the use of ICTs have been additions or slight modifications, as opposed to conceptual revisions. Although the service environments and clients' ways of accessing resources may have changed with the introduction of ICTs, the foundational ethical issues that concerned professionals thirty or more years ago are just as relevant today (Makela, 2011). Traditional issues such as confidentiality, availability of user support when needed, credentials of service providers, validity of assessments, and data security all emerge, with slightly different dynamics, in the ICT environment. This being the case, when an ethical standard document does not directly address the use of a specific ICT, counseling and guidance professionals should be encouraged to thoughtfully consider the implications of using that technology in terms of how the core ethical principles of their profession might apply to this new situation (Martin, 2010).

Credentialing Standards

Credentialing standards were created, in part, as a conceptual basis for voluntary professional certification. Certification granted by professional certification organizations in counseling and guidance have been established to recognize practitioners as having voluntarily met education and supervised clinical experience standards as set by the profession (American Counseling Association, 2012). Similar to ethical standards, credentialing standards have incorporated the use of ICT in counseling and guidance into both general and ICT-specific codes. ICT elements have been added to comprehensive competency standards as follows: (a)

Global Career Development Facilitator competencies from the Center for Credentialing and Education (CCE) (1997); (b) International competencies for Educational and Vocational Guidance Practitioners of the IAEVG (2003); (c) Career Counseling competencies of the NCDA (1997a); (d) Career Development Facilitator competencies from the NCDA (1997b); and (e) Career Counselor Assessment and Evaluation competencies of the NCDA and Association for Assessment in Counseling and Education (2010). More extensive knowledge requirements have been established for practitioners seeking certification that indicates specialized expertise in distance service delivery, including the Distance Credentialed Counselor from the CCE (2004) and the Distance Credentialed Facilitator, also from the CCE (2008).

Accreditation Standards

Accreditation standards are intended to ensure that students graduating from preparation programs have the necessary knowledge and skills to effectively practice counseling and guidance. Institutions use accreditation standards in designing curriculum and supervised practice. The most recent standards from the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (2009) requires evidence that graduate students understand the impact of technology on the counseling profession and understand appropriate use of technology in career information and planning. Given the general nature of the standards, preparation programs have considerable latitude in deciding how the standards will be met.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper has been to review and summarize ethical issues of using ICT in counseling and guidance, as well as to discuss what counseling and guidance professionals are doing to seek ethical practice within the evolving service contexts that technology creates. Certainly there is a cautionary tale to be told here of ethical pitfalls that emerge with the use of

new technologies. As can be gleaned from this review paper, current literature on ethics in ICT certainly leans in this cautionary direction. However, in practice, the challenges that ICT presents are complexly interwoven with a host of advantages that draw career professionals to embrace their use. There is great value in continuing to explore the advantages of ICT, alongside the ethical challenges, to seek a balanced presentation of issues and strategies for career professionals.

We also must recognize that ICT are becoming increasingly “commonplace” (DiLillo & Gale, 2011, p. 164) and an integrated part of our clients’ lives. As this occurs, it is essential for counseling and guidance professionals to understand these technologies and to actively and carefully consider if and how these technologies will play a role in client interactions. Ethical codes and standards must continue to “adapt and change through periodic revision in order to remain relevant and practical” (p. 32). Additional training resources, such as the case study on access to technology and Internet resources by Makela (2009), are needed to help ensure that practitioners understand the nuances in applying ICT standards to counseling and guidance practice. More research, such as the survey of services and compliance with NBCC WebCounseling standards by Heinlen, Welfel, Richmond, and Rak (2003), is needed to guide future revisions and the development of training resources. The extent to which the use of ICT in counseling and guidance fulfills its potential to expand and enhance client services depends in part on our ability to appropriately shape the use of rapidly changing technology within organizations and professions that may change more slowly.

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