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# Status Updates, Tweets, Texting (& Sexting?!): Ethical Interdisciplinary Practice in the Cyber Age

Robert S. Wright, MSW, RSW

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# Who is Robert Wright?

- Social work clinician/administrator
- Clinical training at & employee of Washington State Penitentiary.
- Former executive director, Child & Youth Strategy
- Registered social work private practitioner (NS, NB)
- Clinical member of the Association for the Treatment of Sexual Abusers (ATSA)
- Former race relations coord. -Dartmouth District School Board
- Author: *Dual Relationships: Examples of the Limitations of Ethical Proscription*

# What are Dual Relationships?

- Dual relationships occur when professional helpers have more than just a helping relationship with a client
- Most professional associations warn against them for fear that clients will be exploited in the non-helping relationship
- This prohibition is built on two ideas:
  - That a professional helper has a primary responsibility to their client and must always act with integrity
  - That the power imbalance in the helper/client relationship makes equal relationships between client and helper difficult

# Absolute Prohibition?

- Absolute prohibitions against dual relationships have proven unrealistic. APA even lifted the ban on sexual relationships between psychologists and former clients
- A 2007 poll of UK Psychologists found that attitudes towards sex with former clients have been changing

Type of Relationship	Never	Rarely	Sometimes
Sex with current client	99.8%	0.2%	0.0%
Romantic dinner once work terminates	94.3%	5.2%	0.5%
Sex one year after termination	91.5%	7.8%	0.7%

# Growing Acceptance of Dual Relationships

(Kitson & Sperlinger, 2007)

**Table 2.** Participants' ratings on how professionally appropriate they think it is for a hypothetical clinical psychologist to carry out the behaviour described in each of the following scenarios, presented in hierarchical order according to the mean, from scenarios rated as least to most professionally appropriate

	Mean (SD)	% Never 1	% Rarely 2	% Sometimes 3	% Often 4	% Always 5
29 Have a sexual relationship with a current client	1 (0.00)	99.8	0.2	0	0	0
36 Have dinner with a client in a quiet, romantic restaurant soon after the therapy work together had finished	1.06 (0.26)	94.3	5.2	0.5	0	0
10 Have a sexual relationship with a client in the year after treatment has finished	1.09 (0.31)	91.5	7.8	0.7	0	0
11 Provide therapy to one of their friends	1.28 (0.59)	78.5	15.6	5.2	0.7	0
38 Provide therapy to a current trainee clinical psychologist on placement in their agency	1.46 (0.74)	66.7	22.4	9.2	1.4	0.2
33 Develop a business relationship with a former client	1.61 (0.69)	49.9	39.7	9.7	0.7	0
5 Accept as a referral the wife of one of their colleagues	1.63 (0.79)	55.2	28.7	14.5	1.7	0
21 Go to lunch with a client, soon after the course of therapy had finished, in a non-intimate, crowded and open restaurant	1.74 (0.78)	44.4	40.1	13.2	2.1	0.2
15 Accept as a referral the husband of one of the reception staff they work directly with	1.80 (0.83)	44.6	33.5	19.6	2.4	0
19 Treat a member of the administration staff who works in the same service as them	1.83 (0.91)	44.6	33.5	16.5	5.0	0.5
25 Become social friends with a former client	1.85 (0.75)	34.4	47.8	15.8	1.9	0
37 Agree to treat their brother's boss	1.86 (0.85)	39.6	38.4	19.0	2.4	0.7
20 Continue with a business venture after discovering one of the main people involved would be the wife of one of their clients	1.88 (0.80)	34.5	46.8	14.9	3.8	0
26 Continue to see a client whom they learn is romantically involved with one of their friends	1.88 (0.82)	36.0	44.1	16.1	3.6	0.2
35 Continue to work with a client once they realize they work directly with their wife/husband/partner	1.93 (0.86)	36.3	38.6	21.8	2.8	0.5
6 Accept as a referral a client married to a trainee clinical psychologist who is doing a placement with someone in the same service	1.93 (0.87)	37.6	35.2	24.1	2.8	0.2

# Boundary Crossing vs Violation

- One important distinction in understanding dual relationships
  - Boundaries may be crossed without being violated
  - “. . . a boundary violation happens when a social worker is involved in a dual relationship that is exploitative, coercive, manipulative or deceptive. Not only are boundary violations aggressive in nature, but a potential conflict of interest which could harm clients or colleagues is possible (Johner, 2006).”

# The Cyber Age



- The cyber age has brought additional dynamics to considerations about dual relationships
- Today, increasing numbers of people have some kind of online presence. This presence may be static or dynamic, from simple posting of information to online, real-time social interaction.
- Two questions have been raised about this:
  - What kind of online presence is appropriate for helping professionals
  - What kind of online interaction is appropriate between helping professionals and their clients (Devi, 2011)

# Scenario 1

- A physician assistant posted photos on Facebook showing him holding a syringe at a man's neck. The caption read: "When you can't start a line in a junkie's arm . . . Go for the neck!"



# Questions



- Is the online presence appropriate for a helping professional?
- What are the ethical problems if this online presence is seen by a client?
- Would a helping professional's employer have cause to discipline them for this?

# Scenario 2

- A helping professional is on facebook posting pictures from a recent family vacation when a former client sends a friend request. The client is a 20 something year old adult who was a child when the helping professional had a long term working relationship with the family. The helping professional accepts the request.

# Questions



- Is the online interaction appropriate for a helping professional?
- What are the ethical problems if this online interaction occurs between professional and a client?
- Would a helping professional's employer have cause to discipline them for this?

# Scenario 3

- A helping professional is an avid online gamer (think World of Warcraft), and plays regularly with a group of online friends, some that are known in real life, some not. A new player joins the group and plays with them for 2 months before finding out that the new player is the spouse of a long term client of the helping professional. They have no contact in real life, and their online chat is limited solely to game play.
- The helping professional continues gaming with the new player after learning this new information.

# Questions



- Is the online interaction appropriate for a helping professional?
- What are the ethical problems if this online interaction occurs between professional and a client?
- Would a helping professional's employer have cause to discipline them for this?

# Scenario 4



- A single helping professional has an online presence on a dating site (Match.com, Lavalife, Plentyoffish, gay.com)
- For discretion's sake the helping professional does not have pictures online, but regularly chats with individuals who have similar interests. After developing a friendly online relationship with one particularly interesting contact, the two decide to meet at an intimate restaurant to share a meal. Cell phone numbers are exchanged and texting occurs to arrange details of the meeting
- Upon meeting the two realize that they had been in a professional helping relation for over a year. The relationship terminated 5 months ago.

# Questions



- Is the online/real –life interaction appropriate for a helping professional?
- What are the ethical problems if this online/real-life interaction occurs between professional and a client?
- What can a helping professional do to avoid/minimize such situations?
- Does the type of site matter?
- Would a helping professional's employer have cause to discipline them for this?

# Towards Ethical Practice



- There are no perfect answers to ethical queries
- Helping professionals must keep abreast of changes in society and the practice setting that bring new ethical challenges
- Regular conversations in team settings can help to raise new challenges and develop practice setting expectations
- Employers must be aware of the multi-cultural, multi-generational context of the practice settings
- If you would be afraid to share any of these scenarios with your colleagues your practice setting may not be safe enough for the kind of collegial practice necessary to keep everyone safe

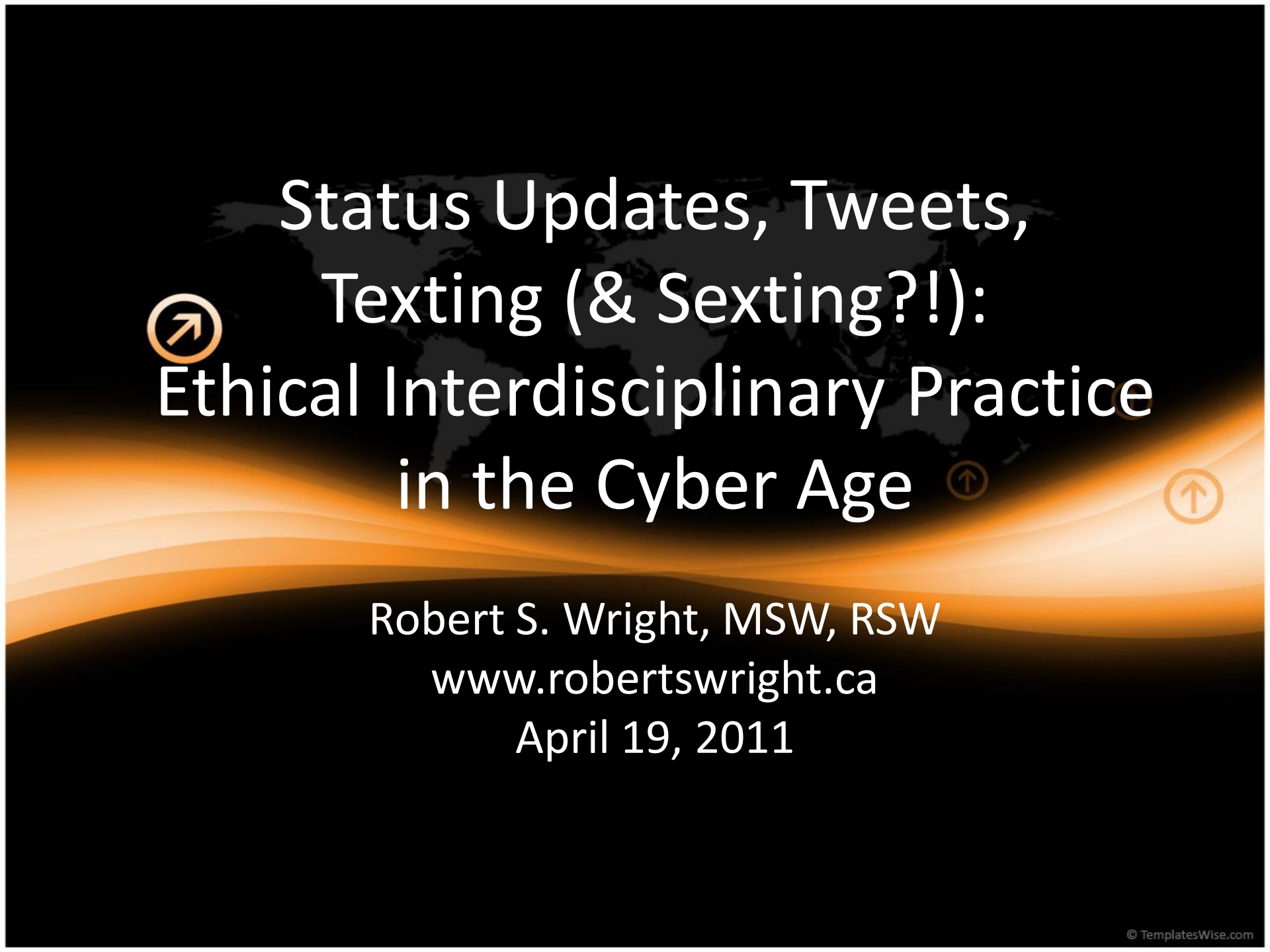


# Other Questions?



# Resources

- Devi, Sharmila (2011). Facebook friend request from a patient? *The Lancet*, 377, 1141-1142.
- Johner, R. (2006). Dual relationship legitimization and client self-determination. *Journal of Social Work Values and Ethics*, 3, (1).
- Kitson, Cathy & Sperlinger, David (2007). Dual relationships between clinical psychologists and their clients: a survey of UK clinical psychologists' attitudes. *The British Psychological Society*, 80, 279-295.
- Wright, Robert S. (2006). *Dual Relationships: Examples of the Limitations of Ethical Proscription*. Unpublished paper available from the author.

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