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Miriam Stevens
Social Workers' Experiences
Related to Online Dating: A
Descriptive Study

ABSTRACT

This descriptive, mixed methods study was undertaken to explore social workers' experiences related to online dating. This study aimed to describe social workers' attitudes and approaches to online dating, determine the type and frequency of ethical and clinical issues that social workers may encounter in the course of online dating, learn how social workers are addressing these issues, and determine the extent to which there is a need for guidance and policies related to online dating as a social worker.

Using availability and snowball sampling, data was collected from 577 social workers and social work students using an online survey composed of multiple choice, yes/no and short answer questions. The survey asked about the participants' demographics and their experiences with online dating, including reservations/misgivings, how their social work profession impacted their use of online dating, and if they had encountered a client in the course of online dating.

The findings of this study showed that many social workers are concerned about encountering, or have encountered, a client or a client's relative in the course of online dating. These social workers are not always sure of how to proceed professionally and ethically. Furthermore, participants' social work profession often impacted their decisions and experiences related to online dating.

Social Workers' Experiences Related to Online Dating: A Descriptive Study

A project based upon an independent investigation,
submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Social Work

Miriam Stevens
2016

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

As online dating increases in popularity among the general population of the United States, more and more social workers are likely to be using this form of social media. Very little is known about social workers' use of, and experience with, online dating. Social workers' use of online dating raises unique clinical and ethical dilemmas that are as of yet unaddressed by current social work ethics and guidelines. This descriptive, mixed methods study aimed to gain a sense of social workers' attitudes toward and experiences with online dating, including the clinical and ethical dilemmas they encounter, how they are addressing those issues as they arise, and to what extent there is a need for more specific guidance and education related to these issues in the field of social work.

While there has been some research into social workers' use of social media and the ethical and clinical issues that arise as a result, at present there have been zero studies of social workers' use of online dating. Clinicians from psychology and psychiatry have written about the emerging issues related to clinicians' use of online dating, and in doing so, have called for the development of guidelines and policies to address these issues. At present, only one study of mental health clinicians' experiences with online dating exists. That study consisted of interviews with only six psychologists-in-training.

This study used an online survey distributed via social work social media sites and e-mail to obtain the responses of 577 social workers and social work students across the United States. Participants were asked to respond to quantitative and qualitative questions that elicited participants' demographic information and their attitudes toward,

and experiences with, online dating, including what, if any, clinical or ethical dilemmas they had encountered. Questions were designed to elucidate the attitudes and experiences unique to social workers including any misgivings or reservations they had related to online dating as a social worker, and how they may have approached online dating differently because of their social work profession. Participants were specifically asked if they had searched for or encountered a client, client's relative or another significant person in the life of a client in the course of online dating, and if so, what resulted.

The intent of this study is to contribute to our understanding of the unique experiences of social workers who date online, including how their social work profession impacts their use of online dating. The findings will, hopefully, raise awareness of the clinical and ethical dilemmas that social workers might encounter in the course of online dating and how social workers navigate those issues as they arise. This information may lead to the development of further studies of these issues and the development of guidelines and policies to aid social workers in navigating their online dating experience in a way that is loyal to both their personal and professional identities.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

This literature review focuses primarily on research that sheds light on recent rates of online dating in the United States, popular opinions about online dating, and how the use of online dating by social workers is a relevant issue in social work education and practice. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section provides recent online dating statistics and trends in the United States including the rate of online dating among adults and the remaining stigma associated with online dating. The second section discusses the social work ethics that are most relevant to social workers who online date. The third section summarizes the literature on social workers' use of social media and draws parallels between that and online dating. The fourth section discusses the scant literature that exists on clinicians' use of online dating and summarizes the sole study that has addressed therapists' experiences with online dating.

Online Dating Statistics and Trends

Statistics specific to social workers and online dating do not currently exist, but there are some statistics on the use of online dating by the general population of the United States. Since online dating originated in 1995, the number of Americans who have used an online dating website has continued to steadily increase (Best & Delmege, 2012; Pew Research Center, 2013). Contributing to this steady rise was the addition of dating applications or "apps" for use on mobile devices and the growing abundance of different online dating websites or apps that are free or for fee, target specific audiences, or advertise unique methods of connecting romantic partners.

The most recent national study of online dating among American adults was conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2015. The results of this study indicate that 15% of all American adults have used an online dating website or app (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 2). In 2013, just 11% of American adults reported having used an online dating website or application, providing concrete evidence that online dating is on the rise (Pew Research Center, 2013, p. 2). Online dating among 18-24 year olds has almost tripled since 2013, overtaking adults ages 25-34 as the age group most likely to have used online dating (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 2). As of 2015, the percentage of each age group of American adults that had online dated were as follows: 27% of 18-24 year olds, 22% of 25-34 year olds, 21% of 35-44 year olds, 13% of 45-54 year olds, 12% of 55-64 year olds and 3% of American adults age 65 or older (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 2). Given that 66% of social workers enter the field before age 35, these are important statistics to consider when educating and training new social workers (Center for Health Workforce Studies [CHWS] & NASW Center for Workforce Studies [NASW CFWS], 2006, p. 9).

In 2015, 41% of American adults reported knowing someone who online dated, and among American adults who had a college degree, this rate was even higher at 58% (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 3). This indicates an increasing likelihood that online daters might coincidentally encountering mutual acquaintances in the course of online dating. This is particularly likely among professionals like social workers, for whom the minimum educational requirement to practice social work is a bachelor's degree. Social workers who encounter a client, the relative of a client or another significant person in a

client's life might require guidance around how to navigate the complex ethical and clinical dilemmas that may result.

The 2015 Pew Research study also looked at the rate of online dating among White, non-Hispanic Black, and Hispanic Americans. They found a higher percentage of White Americans use online dating at a rate of 16%, with Black non-Hispanic Americans online dating at a rate of 14% and Hispanic Americans having the lowest rate at 12% (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 8). Differences in the rate of online dating among Americans living in urban, suburban and rural communities were also examined. Urban dwelling Americans online dated at the highest rate, 17%, while rural dwelling Americans online dated at the lowest rate, 12% (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 8). Americans living in suburban communities online dated at a rate of 14% (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 8).

Stigma. Since its inception, online dating has had to battle the stigma with which it is associated. A 2012 critical analysis of psychological research on online dating reviewed the existing literature on attitudes toward online dating and found that the results of a number of studies found that "online dating was assumed to be for 'nerds,' 'the desperate,' and the 'socially inept'" (Finkel, Eastwick, Karney, Reis, & Sprecher, 2012, p. 11). They also found that there were a number of "perceived risks associated with [online dating], including the possibility of encountering a sexual predator or 'psycho'" (Finkel et al., 2012, p. 11).

While it continues to steadily decrease, stigma related to online dating endures among American adults who both have and have not online dated. In 2015, 24% of American adults who have not online dated felt that "people who use online dating are

desperate," and 16% of American adults who had online dated agreed (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 4). Furthermore, while 80% of American adults who have online dated believed that "online dating is a good way to meet people," only 55% of American adults who have not used online dating agreed (Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 4). This stigma may influence a person's decision to online date, particularly if they are in a profession like that of social work, wherein clinicians are careful about maintaining a particular professional reputation.

Social Work Ethics

Social workers are bound by the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) Code of Ethics, and other standards such as the NASW and Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB) Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice. However, neither of these guidelines directly addresses the use of online dating or social media. The NASW and ASWB Standards for Technology and Social Work Practice are geared towards social workers who are providing services via technology, not their personal use of technology (NASW & ASWB, 2005).

Despite there being no direct guidance from the NASW or ASWB about the use of online dating in the social work profession, parts of the NASW's Code of Ethics are particularly relevant to the topic of online dating as a social worker (2008). The NASW's Code of Ethics states that it is unethical for a social worker to have a sexual relationship with clients, former clients, "clients' relatives, or other individuals with whom clients maintain a close personal relationship" (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). Furthermore, it is unethical for social workers to form dual or multiple relationships with clients. A dual relationship is "when social workers relate to clients in more than one

relationship, whether professional, social, or business," and they "can occur simultaneously or consecutively" (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). There is the potential for forming a dual relationship when a social worker encounters a client or someone known to a client through an online dating platform, just as there is if they encountered such a person in the "real world." It is important that when such an encounter occurs, social workers act with regards to these ethical guidelines and "consult with knowledgeable colleagues and supervisors," especially if they are unsure of how to best proceed (Reamer, 2006, p. 82).

While "in most cases, what social workers do in their private time is their own business," they are ethically bound to "not permit their private conduct to interfere with their ability to fulfill their professional responsibilities" either through their "affiliations" or their "illegal or unethical conduct in their private lives" (National Association of Social Workers, 2008; Reamer, 2006, p. 82). This could apply to online dating if, through online dating, a social worker's affiliations or illegal or unethical conduct in their private lives is revealed to clients. There are varying levels of privacy and privacy settings from one online dating website and application to another. Some dating websites ask participants to answer questions about their sexual history and interests and their use of drugs and alcohol. If this information were to be seen by clients, there is the potential for that information to interfere with social work practice. This situation can leave a social worker who wants to online date caught between competing interests – increasing their chances for the best possible match on online dating platforms and decreasing their chances of a client learning private information about them that could impact that professional relationship.

As this is an emerging issue, it may not have occurred to social workers, particularly new social workers, that they may encounter dilemmas such as these by participating in online dating. Furthermore, they may not have thought through how they would respond if such an event occurred. The NASW code of ethics states, "continuing education and staff development should address current knowledge and emerging developments related to social work practice and ethics" (National Association of Social Workers, 2008). The topic of online dating in the social work profession is just one such emerging topic.

Social Work and Social Media

There are many similarities between social media and online dating – both generally involve creating an online profile containing personal information such as geographic location, hobbies and interests, pictures, and written statements. As a result of these similarities, parallels can be drawn between the use of these two technologies by social workers. While, to date, nothing has been written specifically about online dating and the social work profession, there have been a handful pieces written about social workers' use of social media. These articles discuss various ethical and clinical dilemmas that may occur when social workers use social media. These dilemmas include communicating with clients through social media, searching for clients on social media, and clients learning personal information about a social worker through social media that the social worker would not normally disclose to clients (Dombo, Kays, & Weller, 2014; Voshel & Wesala, 2015).

A number of these articles called for organizations and agencies to create guidelines and policies regarding social workers' use of social media, specifically

addressing best practices for maintaining professional boundaries (Dombo et al., 2014; Fang, Mishna, Zhang, Van Wert, Bogo, 2014; Kimball & Kim, 2013; Voshel & Wesala, 2015). They also stressed the importance of incorporating the discussion of social media, and the potential ethical and clinical dilemmas that may arise from its use, into social work education and supervision (Fang et al., 2014; Voshel & Wesala, 2015).

Perspectives from Other Mental Health Fields

To date, social workers have not written about the topic of online dating and the social work profession. However, a psychiatrist and psychologist have written briefly on the topic in their respective fields. Berlin (2014), a psychiatrist, explained, "Although other social media may include information about romantic status, the goal of online dating is to develop romantic relationships, and therefore it speaks directly and explicitly to a very private, very personal side of the human experience" (p. 935). Furthermore, "online daters who are most successful are those who include in their profile self-disclosing pictures and detailed personal information," so "it is very hard to have the type of discreet online profile that you wouldn't mind a patient seeing" (p. 936). Berlin notes that some online dating websites and applications target specific sexual orientations or are known for people seeking sex versus a relationship. As a result, a client encountering a clinician through these particular dating platforms would immediately gain intimate knowledge about them, even without viewing their profile. Berlin raises concerns that clients might intentionally or inadvertently find a clinician on an online dating site, and that the information they discovered there could constitute an "excessive self-disclosure" (2014, p. 936). Berlin argues that clinicians "can no longer promise to give our patients and their families therapeutic space protected from our excessive disclosure while

concurrently protecting the individual rights of therapists to use online dating," and goes on to provide recommendations for minimizing unintended disclosure through online dating platforms (2014, p. 936).

Kolmes (2013), a psychologist, writes of similar concerns and recommendations. In tandem with Berlin, Kolmes explains, "there is literature focusing upon the challenges of running into clients or trainees in the offline world, but online personal ads can reveal a lot more intimate information to those who stumble onto your profile" (2013). Kolmes elaborated that unlike encountering a client in person, with online encounters, "there is also the additional possibility that if a client doesn't tell us they saw our profile, we may never know it was seen by them, and we won't know how it affected them" (2013). The recommendations provided by Kolmes (2013) and Berlin (2014) caution mental health professionals to de-identify your profile, to be thoughtful about the photos you post or not post a photo at all, to consider whether you would want a client to see something before posting it to your profile, to be preemptive about discussing how extra-therapeutic encounters (including online) will be handled, and to never initiate or respond to contact with a client via an online dating website or application, but instead respond in your next session, and include a discussion of professional boundaries.

Psychotherapists who use the Internet to date. At the time of this writing, there existed only one study specifically about mental health clinicians' experiences with online dating. Sedgeley's 2013 psychology dissertation summarized the results of interviews with six psychodynamic psychologists-in-training who were online dating. In addition to gathering demographic information, these interviews addressed the participants' experiences with online dating including personal and professional boundaries, clinical

concerns and ethical considerations. The results of the study indicated that participants had concerns about encountering clients or clients encountering them, but that their worries had, to their knowledge, never come to fruition. In the event such an encounter occurred, participants worried there would be issues related to professional boundaries, the therapeutic relationship, ethics, and professionalism. Despite these reservations, the participants reported they chose to online date anyway, and they gave little thought to those concerns when crafting their profiles. The participants struggled to name the exact ethical issues involved and reported they avoided discussing their concerns with supervisors. The study also found that participants experienced embarrassment and shame related to their use of online dating, and they were concerned about stigma or judgment from others, or that they may be going against professional expectations or ethics by online dating. Overall, the participants seemed to desire guidance around how to ethically and professionally approach online dating as a clinician (Sedgeley, 2013).

Summary

Online dating is becoming increasingly popular in the United States, especially among young adults. A number of mental health clinicians have noted the emerging clinical and ethical issues inherent in our growing use of technology and the need for guidance surrounding its use. While most of the social work literature addresses issues related to clinicians' use of social media, a couple of clinicians from other mental health fields have raised similar concerns about online dating. These clinicians argue there is a clear need for guidance as online dating increases in popularity. However, there is only one study providing data about clinician's use of online dating to back up their reasoning. That study is limited to the experiences of six psychodynamic psychologists-in-training.

This study aims to increase that body of data by surveying a large sample of social workers about their experiences online dating, or lack thereof, in order to gain a better sense of the how social workers are approaching online dating, how frequently they are encountering ethical and clinical dilemmas and how they are managing those dilemmas as they arise.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

This mixed methods, descriptive study is an exploration of online dating within the social work profession. The purposes of this study were to 1) describe social workers' attitudes and approaches toward online dating; 2) determine the type and frequency of ethical and clinical issues that social workers may encounter in the course of online dating; 3) learn how social workers are addressing these issues; and 4) determine the level of need for further discussion of these issues in social work education, supervision and professional development. Given the lack of research related to online dating in the social work profession, this study aimed to gather information that could begin to describe this emerging phenomenon and its impact within the field of social work. Thus, this study is best categorized as descriptive research or research that gathers data to "defin[e] and describ[e] social phenomena of interest" (Engel & Schutt, 2013, p. 18). Descriptive research "does not involve connecting theory and data," but instead "proceeds only to the stage of making empirical generalizations based on those data" (Engel & Schutt, 2013, p. 48).

Mixed methods in the form of quantitative and qualitative questions asked via online survey were used for several reasons. Quantitative questions collected demographic data to determine the reach of the survey and the diversity of respondents. Quantitative questions also collected frequency data in order to begin to describe the type and scope of clinical and ethical dilemmas encountered by social workers in the course of online dating. Qualitative questions built upon the quantitative data, providing participants the opportunity to voice their attitudes toward and experiences with online

dating in order to gain a more nuanced picture of online dating in the social work profession. The qualitative questions also provided opportunities for participants to provide information about aspects of online dating in the social work profession that the researcher failed to anticipate. In summary, the quantitative data from this study provided initial statistics on this phenomenon, while the qualitative data added depth and insight into these statistics.

Sample

Participants were eligible to participate if they were 1) a social worker enrolled in or graduated from a BSW or MSW program; 2) currently practicing social work in the United States (including BSW and MSW students who were completing their internship/practicum/field work in fulfillment of their degree); 3) literate in English; 4) had access to a computer and the Internet; and 5) possessed the computer skills necessary to navigate an online survey. Before completing an informed consent and proceeding to the survey, participants were first asked to complete a yes/no screening question to determine if they were eligible to participate (Appendix A). Given the anonymity of the survey, it was not possible to verify the accuracy of participants' response to this question. Furthermore, unless they contacted the researcher for clarification, participants were left to independently interpret the eligibility requirements as described.

This study chose to isolate the experiences of social workers and social work students, as opposed to all mental health care professionals, in order to limit the scope of the study to the field of social work. While there are many similarities between social work and other mental health care fields, there are also aspects of social work and social work education that are unique. While there has been one exploratory study of online

dating among psychologists-in-training, there have been no previous studies of online dating solely within the social work profession. Thus this study surveyed only social workers and social work students in order to conduct research that was unique, not too broad in scope and might contribute to the field of social work.

Recruitment

In accordance with federal regulations and the SCSSW's policies that govern research involving human subjects, the Smith College School for Social Work (SCSSW) Human Subjects Review (HSR) Committee approved this study, including the survey instrument and all recruitment and informed consent documents prior to any recruitment was conducted for this study. The informed consent can be found in Appendix B. The complete survey instrument can be found in Appendix C, and the recruitment documents can be found in Appendix D. The SCSSW HSR Committee's approval letter can be found in Appendix E. After the SCSSW HSR Committee approved this project, the researcher chose to switch the survey software used for the study from Survey Monkey to Qualtrics. The researcher submitted an HSR protocol change request to the SCSSW HSR Committee, and the use of Qualtrics was subsequently approved. The SCSSW HSR Committee's protocol change approval letter can be found in Appendix F.

Participants were recruited using a combination of availability and snowball sampling. These sampling methods were used in order to obtain a large sample in a short period of time. The use of these non-probability sampling methods limited the researcher's ability to ensure a representative sample, and thus the generalizability of the results. However, non-probability sampling methods were still useful in this case because, as the first of its kind, this study is a "preliminary, exploratory study" (Engel &

Schutt, 2013, p. 123). Engel and Schutt (2013) explain, "availability sampling is often appropriate in social work research—for example, when a researcher is exploring a new setting and trying to get some sense of prevailing attitudes" (Engel & Schutt, 2013, p. 124). Such is the case in this study, which intended to explore and gain a preliminary sense of the nature and scope of online dating in the social work profession. Snowball sampling, "is useful for hard-to-reach or hard-to-identify populations for which there is no sampling frame, but the members of the population are interconnected" (Engel & Schutt, 2013, p. 126). It is not easy to obtain a sampling frame of social workers in the United States without expending significant time and resources to do so. Given the limited time and resources of the researcher as well as the preliminary and exploratory nature of this study, it was determined that non-probability sampling methods would be adequate for the purposes of this study.

Participants were recruited via posts made to the researcher's personal LinkedIn and Facebook pages as well as to the LinkedIn and Facebook groups of multiple social work organizations (LinkedIn: National Association of Social Workers – NASW's Official Group, Network of Professional Social Workers-NPSW, Social Work Network, Smith College School for Social Work; Facebook: Smith SSW Alums, Smith Social Workers Speakeasy, Smith College School for Social Work Class A'15). These social work social media groups, with large, national memberships, were used with the hope of obtaining a more diverse and representative sample of social workers from throughout the United States. Emails were also sent to a handful of the researcher's personal contacts in the field of social work. The recipients of these emails were carefully selected based on their attendance at or graduation from different graduate schools of social work or their

location in different parts of the United States with the hope of increasing the geographic reach of the survey. The texts of these posts and emails can be found in Appendix D. As a result of these recruitment efforts, 577 participants completed the survey.

Ethics and Safeguards

Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to read an informed consent that described the following: purpose of the study, study procedures, risks/discomforts of participation, benefits of participation, confidentiality, lack of payments/gifts, participant's right to refuse or withdraw, and participant's right to ask questions and report concerns. Information about participant confidentiality, withdrawal procedure and risks/benefits to participation as provided in the informed consent are summarized below. The full text of the informed consent can be found in Appendix B.

Confidentiality. Participation in this study was anonymous. No information about the identity of participants was collected or retained. The Qualtrics survey software did not retain IP addresses or other identifying information from survey participants. Instead, each set of responses was assigned a random identification number for the purposes of organizing and storing the data for analysis.

Once the survey was closed, the completed responses were downloaded to an Excel spreadsheet for analysis. All research materials including participant consents, responses, and analyses will be stored in a secure location for three years according to federal regulations. All electronically stored data will be password protected. In the event that materials are needed beyond the three-year period, they will be kept secured until no longer needed and then destroyed.

Withdrawal procedure. Participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time prior to completion of the survey. Due to the confidentiality measures, once a participant had completed the survey there was no way to distinguish their responses from the other participants' responses. Thus, it was impossible to withdraw their responses from the collected data once their survey had been submitted. Participants were instructed that in order to withdraw they could simply choose to close the survey at any time prior to submitting their response to the final question. Qualtrics automatically retained incomplete surveys. However, surveys that were incomplete were manually removed from the data set prior to downloading the Excel file for analysis.

Risks/benefits. The SCSSW HSR Committee determined that there were no potential risks or discomforts to participation in this study that might require the provision of resources or referral to services following completion of the survey. However, participants were informed that participation in this study may bring up various feelings in regard to their decision to or not to use online dating websites or applications and/or their experiences dating online, including any professional dilemmas they may have encountered while online dating. Following completion of the survey participants were provided with the option of following links to the website for the NASW ethics consultation hotline and/or an article about online dating as a clinician (Kolmes, 2013; NASW). The text of this final page of the survey can be found at the end of the survey in Appendix C.

The informed consent made clear that participants would not receive any financial payment for their participation. However, participation allowed participants to share their unique perspective on online dating in the social work profession, and participants might

gain insight into this topic by way of their participation. Furthermore, the field of social work might benefit from the information they provide by strengthening the existing body of knowledge about online dating in the social work profession.

Data Collection

Data was collected using an anonymous online survey containing both quantitative yes/no and multiple choice questions and qualitative short-answer questions developed by the researcher (Appendix C). In addition to demographic questions and general questions about the participants' experiences with online dating, participants who had online dated concurrently with their social work practice were asked specific questions about whether they had encountered a client, a client's relative or another significant person in the life of a client, in the course of online dating. These questions were inspired by previous literature and the researcher's personal knowledge of social work colleagues who had, or feared they would, encounter a client or client's relative in the course of online dating.

The survey consisted of 36 questions, but not every participant was shown every question. Each participant was asked the first 11 demographic questions, but the ensuing questions were displayed to each participant based on their responses to previous questions. For example, if a participant responded in a previous question that they were not a licensed independent social worker, they were not asked, "How many years of experience do you have as a licensed independent social worker?" Similarly, in the questions related to online dating, if a participant responded, "No," to the question, "Have you ever used an online dating website or application?," they were not directed to questions such as "To your knowledge, has a client ever learned that you were online

dating?" (Appendix C). The very last question, "Is there anything else you would like to add? This could include anything you would like to add that wasn't addressed by the survey, what you thought of the survey, etc." was a short-answer question asked of every participant in order to provide participants with an opportunity to discuss something related to online dating and social work that the researcher failed to address in the survey. The complete survey can be viewed in Appendix C.

Responses were gathered via anonymous online survey in order to encourage participants to answer openly and honestly, without fear of judgment or other consequence. This was important given that online dating continues to retain some stigma. Additionally, clinical and ethical issues related to online dating and social work are new and unexplored, so participants may not be secure about the decisions they have made related to online dating and their professional identity as a social worker. The researcher hoped that guaranteeing anonymity might encourage greater participation and candor.

Data Analysis

The aim of this descriptive study was to provide a preliminary snapshot of the phenomenon of online dating in the field of social work rather than to prove or disprove a hypothesis about online dating. With this in mind, the quantitative data collected was summarized using frequencies and by crosstabulating the demographics of the participants who had online dated versus those who had not. As previously mentioned, given the use of non-probability sampling, and the exploratory nature of this study, the results of these crosstabulations cannot be generalized to the greater social work community, but they can point to avenues for further research.

Qualitative data in the form of short-answer responses was analyzed using a general inductive approach because it is an approach "commonly used in health and social science research and evaluation" (Thomas, 2006, p.238). Thomas (2006) explains, "the primary purpose of the inductive approach is to allow research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant, or significant themes inherent in raw data" (p.238). This approach is consistent with the goals of this descriptive study. Rather than prove any particular hypothesis about the phenomena of online dating in the social work profession, this study aimed to gain an initial sense of the phenomena by summarizing the experiences of the participants surveyed in this study.

The following procedures of the general inductive approach, as outlined by Thomas (2006), were followed when analyzing the participants' short-answer responses: 1) Reading and re-reading – the short-answer responses were closely read multiple times to gain familiarity with the range of responses; 2) Categorization of themes – themes were identified and categorized into "upper-level" or more general categories and "lower-level" or more specific categories; 3) Refinement of themes – themes were reviewed for repetitiveness and previously overlooked distinctions to create categories, and where appropriate, subcategories. In doing so, the study might determine areas of future investigation related to this topic. In the case of the qualitative data, content analysis was used to delineate and summarize the themes found among participants' short-answer responses with the goal being to "understand, interpret, and represent the meaning" of those responses (Steinberg, 2004, p. 120). In conducting content analysis of the qualitative data, the short-answer responses to each question were read and re-read to

discover themes. Common and uncommon themes were then summarized and are presented in the findings section.

Discussion

The findings of this study demonstrated that social workers' attitudes toward online dating vary greatly, but that there are real clinical and ethical dilemmas that can occur when a social worker online dates. The results also revealed that many social workers are unsure of how to balance personal and professional priorities when engaging in online dating, highlighting the considerable impact of the social work profession on one's personal life. These results indicate a clear need for guidelines and policies related to online dating in the social work profession.

Issues of bias and limitations. The use of non-probability sampling resulted in bias in the methods of this study. First, the use of the researcher's personal contacts and social media sites, in addition to social media sites that are specific to SCSSW, may have resulted in greater participation by Smith students, alumni and faculty. This in turn may have affected the number of psychodynamically-oriented clinicians who participated in the survey because SCSSW trains social workers in psychodynamic clinical social work. There may be other characteristics that are more common within the SCSSW community that are not as obvious, but that also impacted the results of the survey. There may also be specific characteristics that are more common among the members of the various social work organization social networking sites to which the researcher posted about the survey. Without a random sampling of social workers and social work students in the United States, the results of this study cannot be generalized to those populations.

The use of non-probability sampling also left room for the participants' biases to impact the study's results. Because participants were recruited solely via online forums such as social media and email, those who learned of the survey were more likely to actively use the Internet, and thus, more likely to have engaged in online dating. Furthermore, while the posts and messages requesting participants for the study made clear that participants were desired regardless of their experience with online dating, potential participants could have seen that the study was about online dating and assumed that if they had never online dated they were ineligible to participate, or that they had little to contribute. Meanwhile, participants with online dating experience may have been more motivated to participate because they had information they wanted to share about their experiences. All of these factors combined may have led to a greater number of responses from social workers who have experience with online dating versus those who do not.

A further issue of bias can be found in the fact that certain survey questions were developed based on the researcher's personal knowledge of social work colleagues' experiences with online dating and the issues they encountered. Some of these questions assumed that certain phenomena exist within the experiences of social workers who online date. Additionally, while the last question asked participants to comment on anything the survey failed to address, important issues related to online dating and the social work profession may have been missed, or their importance diminished, while other issues were highlighted by the researcher's bias.

A significant oversight on the part of the researcher was to create the survey with only clinical social workers in mind while failing to then limit the eligible participants to

clinical social workers. This is in large part due to the researcher's bias as a clinical social worker educated at a graduate school that focuses on clinical social work. As a result a number of the questions asked in the survey failed to account for non-clinical or macro social workers, and it is now impossible to distinguish between the survey responses of clinical social workers and non-clinical or macro social workers.

Similarly, the survey did not ask about participants' relationship status. As a result it is not possible to separate the participants who have not online dated because they are married or in a long-term monogamous relationship from those who have not online dated for other reasons (not interested, safety concerns, stigma, etc.). These are important differences in perspective to consider and are worthy of future research.

Generalizability. The results of this study cannot be generalized to the greater social work community because of the previously mentioned researcher bias and the use of non-probability sampling. However, as an initial, exploratory study, the findings of this study maintain some value. The topic of online dating among social workers had not been previously investigated, and while the results of this study cannot be generalized, they can be used to inspire and inform future research on this topic.

Implications for practice/future research. While the survey results cannot be generalized to the greater social work community, the results establish that mental health clinicians' concerns related to encountering clients or clients' relatives in the course of online dating are well founded. The results also shed light on a conflict, experienced by many social workers, between personal and professional priorities. Additionally, this study's findings highlight a number of ways in which the social work profession has an impact on social workers' personal lives. These results point to areas of further

investigation. For example, some participants reported that they have chosen not to use online dating because of concerns about encountering a client in the course of that process. Additionally, some participants reported that they had encountered clients in the course of online dating. These topics deserve further research as well as suggest that social work education, supervision and professional development might be enhanced by its inclusion of discussion or even guidance on the topic of online dating as a social worker. Just some of the questions that were inspired by this study and that might be addressed by future research or in social work education, supervision, and professional development include: To what extent is it reasonable, or necessary at all, for social workers to sacrifice their personal lives for their profession? When considering the risk of encountering clients in the course of online dating, are social workers concerned with ethical violations? Harming client-therapist rapport? Judgment or stigma? A combination of these factors, or something else entirely? When a social worker encounters a client in the course of online dating, how should they proceed with regard to ethics and best clinical practice? Have certain actions been found to be helpful or harmful in this situation? This study served to create more questions than answers, but it draws attention to important topics within the field of social work, and just some of the emerging issues resulting from the ever-increasing presence of the Internet in our daily lives.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Introduction

There were 577 respondents to the study survey, which included multiple-choice, yes/no and short-answer questions. The first section of this chapter outlines the demographic data and is divided into two sections: general demographics (gender, age, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, community size, and region of the U.S.) and social work demographics (client population, work setting, type of direct services, theoretical or treatment orientation, level of social work education, licensure, supervision provided, and teach social work). Following the demographics, the quantitative data on participants' use of online dating is described under the following headings: used online dating, reservations or misgivings, concurrent with social work practice, impact of social work profession, searched for a client or other, encountered a client, encountered a relative or other, and client learned of online dating. That section is followed by a section describing the findings of the crosstabulations of participants' responses to the demographic questions, and their response to the question of whether they had ever online dated. The last section presents the data from the qualitative responses to the short-answer questions.

General Demographics

Gender. The majority of participants were female (88%, n=506). Nine percent (n=54) were male, and 2% (n=12) were genderqueer. The remaining 1% were trans male (n=3), gender non-conforming (n=1) or did not identify with the provided gender categories (n=1). The participant who did not identify with the provided gender categories chose not to describe their gender in the textbox provided.

Age. Participants age 25-34 years old made up the majority at 39% (n=226). Fourteen percent of participants were 18-24 years old (n=82), 18% were 35-44 years old (n=106), 15% were 45-54 years old (n=87), 10% were 55-64 years old (n=56), and 3% were 65-74 years old (n=18). Less than 1% were 75 years or older (n=2).

Sexual orientation. The majority of participants were straight/heterosexual (78%, n=447). Eight percent of participants were bisexual (n=47), 7% were gay/lesbian (n=42), 5% were queer (28), and the remaining 2% selected "None of the above" (n=5), pansexual (n=5), or asexual (n=3). Of the 5 participants who selected "None of the above," three chose not to write in a sexual orientation, one identified as "fluid" and one identified as "heteroflexible."

Race/ethnicity. The majority of respondents were White or European (79%, n=456). Seven percent of participants were Black or African American (n=40), 6% were biracial, multiracial or mixed race (n=35), 4% were Hispanic or Latino (n=24), the remaining 6% selected "None of the above" (n=10) or were Asian (n=7), American Indian or Alaska Native (n=2), Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (n=2), or Middle Eastern (n=1). Of the 10 respondents who selected "None of the above", two chose not to write in their race/ethnicity and the remaining identified as "Black and mixed race," "Jewish," "Latino, American Indian, White," "mixed Native American/European ancestry," "Punjabi," "South Asian," "White Latina," or "White/Ashkenazi."

Community size. Approximately three quarters of participants lived in a community that was suburban or larger. Twenty-eight percent of participants responded that they lived in a suburban/urban community (n=160), 25% lived in an urban

community (n=144), 23% lived in a suburban community (n=130), 15% in a rural/suburban community (n=88), and 9% in a rural community (n=54). One participant chose not to respond to the question.

Region of the U.S. When participants were asked in what region of the United States they lived, approximately one quarter each reported being from New England (22%, n=129) and the Great Lakes region (21%, n=121). Eighteen percent of participants were from the Mid-Atlantic (n=105), 16% were from the Southeast (n=93), 9% were from the Far West (n=50), 6% were from the Southwest (n=34), 4% were from the Plains (n=22), and 4% were from the Rocky Mountain region (n=21). Less than 1% were from a United States territory (n=2).

Social Work Demographics

Client population. Participants were asked to describe the client population with which they worked by selecting all that applied out of the following categories: children, young adults, adults, older adults, families, couples, or they could select "Other" and describe the population(s) with which they worked. Fifty-nine percent of participants worked with adults (n=343), 49% worked with young adults (n=284), 44% worked with children, 35% worked with older adults (n=200), 38% worked with families (n=220), 14% worked with couples (n=82), and 8% selected "Other" (n=46). Responses from the 46 participants who selected "Other" to describe the population(s) with which they worked, fell into the following categories: adolescents/teenagers/youth, victims of domestic or sexual violence, people with developmental or cognitive disabilities, clients with co-occurring diagnoses, people in a mental health setting, students, cancer patients, communities, organizations, refugees, clients living with HIV, clients in a medical

setting, all ages/populations, or they responded that the question did not apply to them because they did not provide direct services (administrators, educators, policy analysts, or unemployed at the time of the survey, for example).

Work setting. Participants were asked in what kind of setting they worked and could select all that applied from the following categories: out-patient clinical or center (25%, n=142), government agency (15%, n=89), private practice (13%, n=75), in-home or home-based (12%, n=67), primary or secondary school (10%, n=60), in-patient (9%, n=50), college/university (8%, n=48), group home or residential (7%, n=42), intensive out-patient or partial hospitalization (6%, n=34). If these categories did not apply, a participant could select "Other" and describe the setting(s) in which they worked (22%, n=126). Responses from the 126 participants who selected "Other" to describe the setting in which they worked fell into the following categories: community (outreach, resources, center), non-profit mental health or social service agency, acute care, emergency department, advocacy, full continuum of care, assisted living/nursing home, hospice, rehabilitation, child care, foster care/adoption, child welfare, consulting, criminal justice system, employee assistance program, education, health/medical care, insurance, homeless services, forensics, for-profit, intakes, government (local, state, national), long-term care, managed care, program development, prevention, non-profit, domestic violence, disaster recovery, grant writing, job training/assistance, personal assistance service, rape crisis center, therapeutic community, veterans affairs, refugee assistance, wilderness, college preparation program, or in school or unemployed at the time of the survey.

Type of direct services. Participants were asked about the direct services they provided and could select all that applied of the following categories: individual therapy, case management, group therapy, family therapy, couples therapy, or they could select "Other direct work with clients" and describe that work in the textbox provided. Of the 570 participants, 59% provided individual therapy (n=339), 54% provided case management (n=311), 35% provided group therapy (n=204), 26% provided family therapy (n=152), 11% provided couples therapy (n=63), and 18% selected "Other direct work with clients" (n=105). Responses from the 105 participants who selected "Other direct work with clients" fell into the following categories: non-direct work (administrative, policy, macro, etc.), advocacy, assistance with accessing services (care, housing, employment, etc.), coordination of services, adoption services, mediation/dialogue facilitation, education/prevention/supportive counseling or programming, assessment/screening, referrals, discharge planning, behavioral consulting/management, investigations/forensic work, clinical supervision, child welfare, community capacity building/engagement/organizing/integration, consultation, crisis intervention, daily/independent living support, end of life/hospice/palliative work, hospital/medical social work, employment or school counseling, supervision/support services, or wraparound services.

Theoretical or treatment orientation. Participants were also asked to describe their primary theoretical or treatment orientation in a textbox and the results were coded into 10 categories: cognitive behavioral therapy (29%, n=169), psychodynamic (17%, n=100), solution-focused/based (brief) therapy (4%, n=24), systems theory (2%, n=14), motivational interviewing (2%, n=13), strengths-based (2%, n=11), dialectical behavioral

therapy (2%, n=11), other (the participant's treatment or theoretical orientation was listed by fewer than 10 participants) (20%, n=117), none (the question was left blank or it was not applicable to the participant for example they are a non-clinical social worker, educator, administrator, researcher, macro, or still in school/undecided) (17%, n=97), or multiple treatments or theoretical orientations were listed by the participant (4%, n=21). The treatment or theoretical orientations that were listed by fewer than 10 participants include: relational, existential-humanistic, brief psychodynamic, sanctuary model, play therapy, trauma-focused cognitive behavioral therapy, trauma-informed/focused/based/sensitive, psychotherapy, eye movement desensitization and reprocessing, recovery oriented, self-efficacy theory, collaborative problem solving, family systems, behavior(al) therapy, crisis intervention, eclectic, emotionally-focused therapy, infant mental health, generalist, psychoanalytic, humanistic, integrative, somatic experiencing, post-modern humanistic, wraparound, person-centered model, narrative therapy, problem-solving training therapy, empowerment model/perspective, attachment, rational emotive behavior therapy, interpersonal psychotherapy, grief/hospice, applied behavioral analysis, existentialism, experiential, internal family systems, client-centered, structural, evidence-based practice, social learning, attachment regulation competency, case management, integrative psychotherapy, post-modern collaborative, behaviorism, psychoeducation, task-centered practice, crisis theory, mindfulness, reunification, reality, relational-cultural, family therapy, recovery model, biopsychosocial, developmental, problem-solving therapy, person-in-environment, individual placement services, adventure therapy, environmental systems, hospital elder life delirium prevention, intellectual and developmental disabilities, service facilitation, individual-based

adjustment, sustainable community development, community organizing, attachment-based therapy, multicultural, and integrated care.

Level of social work education. The highest level of education achieved by the majority of participants was an MSW (63%, n=366). Nineteen percent of participants were current MSW students (n=112), 9% were current BSW students (n=50), 4% had their BSW (n=25), and the remaining four percent of participants were current DSW/Ph.D students (n=11), had earned their DSW/Ph.D (n=11), or chose not to respond (n=1). Participants who had achieved a MSW or higher were asked three additional questions about whether they were independently licensed, whether they provided supervision, and whether they taught social work at the undergraduate or graduate level.

Licensure. The 389 participants who had achieved a MSW or higher in the field of social work were asked how many years they had of independently licensed experience. Fifty-five percent were licensed to independently practice social work (n=215). Thus, independently licensed social workers made up 37% of the total sample.

Years of licensed experience. The 215 participants who responded that they were independently licensed to practice social work, were asked how many years of experience they had as a licensed independent social worker. Of the 215 participants who were licensed to independently practice social work, 40% had eleven years or more of licensed experience (n=85; 15% of the total sample). They were followed by 26% who had 1-2 years of licensed experience or fewer (n=56; 10% of the total sample), 20% who had 3-5 years of licensed experience (n=43; 8% of the total sample), and 14% who had 6-10 years of licensed experience (n=31; 5% of the total sample).

Supervision provided. The 389 participants who had achieved a MSW or higher were asked if they provided supervision to any of the following populations: social work students, social workers who were not yet independently licensed, independently licensed social workers, a peer supervision group in which they were not the only social worker, or none of the above. Participants could select all that applied. Of the 389 participants who had achieved a MSW or higher, 58% selected "None of the above" (n=226; 39% of the total sample), 28% supervised social work students (n=107; 19% of the total sample), 21% supervised social workers who are not yet independently licensed (n=82; 14% of the total sample), 14% participated in a peer supervision group in which they were not the only social worker (n=56; 10% of the total sample), and 12% supervised independently licensed social workers (n=46; 8% of the total sample).

Teach social work. The 389 participants who had achieved a MSW or higher were asked if they taught social work at the undergraduate or graduate level. Nine percent taught social work at the undergraduate or graduate level (n=34; 6% of the total sample). One percent of those 389 participants chose not to answer this question (n=4). The remaining 90% did not teach at the undergraduate or graduate level (n=351).

Online Dating

Used online dating. All participants were asked if they had ever used an online dating website or application. Of the 577 participants, 58% of participants responded, "yes," they had online dated (n=333), leaving 42% who responded "no" (n=244). The 333 participants who responded that they had online dated were then asked some follow-up questions about online dating.

Reservations/misgivings. The 333 participants who had online dated were next asked if they had any reservations or misgivings about online dating. Of those 333 participants who had online dated, 72% had reservations or misgivings about dating online (n=239). This left 28% who did not (n=94).

Concurrent with social work practice. The 333 participants who had online dated were asked if their use of online dating was concurrent with their social work practice. Of the 333 participants who had online dated, 72% did so concurrently with their social work practice (n=238; 41% of the total sample). This left 28% who did not (n=95; 16% of the total sample).

Impact of social work profession. The 333 participants who had online dated were asked if they did anything differently while online dating because of their social work profession. Of those participants, 39% did something differently in the course of online dating because of their profession as a social worker (n=130). This left 32% who did not (n=108), and 29% who chose not to answer the question (n=95).

Searched for a client or other. The 333 participants who had online dated were asked if they had ever searched for a client, a significant person in the life of a client or none of the above. Of those 333 participants, 1.5% had searched for a client (n=5; 1% of the total sample), and less than 1% had searched for a significant person in the life of a client (n=1). This left 69% who had searched for neither (n=231), and 29% who chose not to answer the question (n=96).

Encountered a client. The 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application were asked if they had ever encountered a client while doing so. Of those participants, 5% responded, "yes," they had encountered a client while online

dating (n=18; 3% of the total sample). This left 66% who responded "no" (n=220), and 29% who chose not to respond (n=95).

Action taken. The participants who had encountered a client were asked what action, if any, they took following the encounter. They could select all of the following that applied: took no action, discussed it with a supervisor, discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer, called the NASW ethics consultation hotline, discussed it with the client, or they could check "Other" and describe the action they took. Of the 18 participants who had encountered a client in the course of online dating, 44% took no action (n=8), 28% discussed the encounter with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer (n=5), 17% discussed it with their supervisor (n=3), 17% discussed it with the client (n=3), 6% called the NASW ethics consultation hotline (n=1), and 50% took some other form of action (n=9). The other action(s) taken by these 9 participants were: avoided the client online and blocked the client in various ways to prevent further encounters.

Encountered a relative or other. The 333 participants who had online dated were asked if they had ever encountered the relative of a client or another significant person in the life of a client. Of those participants who had online dated, 3% had encountered a relative or other significant person in the life of a client (n=10, 2% of the total sample). This left 68% who had not (n=228), and 29% who chose not to answer the question (n=95).

Action taken. The participants who had encountered a relative or other significant person in the life of a client were asked what action, if any, they took following the encounter. They could select all of the following that applied: took no action, discussed it

with a supervisor, discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer, called the NASW ethics consultation hotline, discussed it with the client, discussed it with the client's relative/significant person in the client's life, or they could check "Other" and describe the action they took. Of the 10 participants who had encountered a relative or other significant person in the life of a client, 70% took no action (n=7), 30% discussed it with a supervisor (n=3), 30% discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer (n=3), 10% called the NASW ethics consultation hotline (n=1), 10% discussed it with the client (n=1), 10% discussed it with the relative or other significant person in the life of a client (n=1), and 30% took some other form of action (n=3). The other action(s) taken by these 3 participants were: blocked the relative or significant person in the life of the client, or that the action they took varied depending on the nature of the encounter.

Client learned of online dating. The 333 participants who had online dated were asked if, to their knowledge, a client had ever learned they were online dating. Of those participants who had online dated, 3% responded that, "yes," to their knowledge, one or more clients had learned they were online dating (n=11; 2% of the total sample). This left 68% who had not, to their knowledge, had a client learn they were online dating (n=226), and 29% who chose not to respond (n=96).

Action taken. The participants who responded that a client had learned they were online dating were asked what action, if any, they took. They could select all of the following that applied: took no action, discussed it with a supervisor, discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer, called the NASW ethics consultation hotline, discussed it with the client, or they could check "Other" and

describe the action they took. Of the 11 participants who had a client that learned they were online dating, 55% discussed it with the client (n=6), 36% took no action (n=4), 27% discussed it with a supervisor (n=3), 18% discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer (n=2), none consulted the NASW ethics consultation hotline, and 18% took some other form of action (n=2). The other actions taken were to close that online dating account or that they were generally very open with clients that they used online dating.

Crosstabulations

Crosstabulations of the responses to "Have you ever used an online dating website or application?" and the demographic categories of age, gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, highest level of social work education, theoretical/treatment orientation, independent licensure status, years of independently licensed experience, teach social work status, community size, and geographic region were run. Crosstabulations of the responses to "Have you ever used an online dating website or application?" and the demographic categories of client population, work setting, direct services provided, and clinical supervision were not run for a number of reasons. Some of these demographics questions proved to be less relevant due to the failure to distinguish between clinical and non-clinical or macro social workers, for example the responses to the question about direct services provided. In addition, all of the demographic questions that were not used in the crosstabulations allowed respondents to "check all that apply," so it was not possible for the researcher to distinguish between respondents who selected one of the options versus respondents who selected multiple options (and which multiple options, at that). This rendered the information from such a crosstabulation less useful, so those

crosstabulations were not pursued. The results of the crosstabulations that were run were as follows:

Age. At 44%, nearly half of the 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application were 25-34 years old (n=148). They were followed by 35-44 year olds at 20% (n=65), 45-54 years olds at 15 % (n=51), 18-24 years olds at 12% (n=40), 55-64 years olds at 7% (n=24), and 65-74 years olds at 1% (n=4). Less than 1% were 75 years or older (n=1).

Looking within each age group, more than half of the 25-34 year olds, 35-44 year olds and 45-55 year olds surveyed had online dated. Nearly half of the 18-24 year olds and 55-64 year olds surveyed had online dated. The full results were as follows: 66% of the 226 respondents who were 25-34 years old had online dated (n=148), 61% of the 106 respondents who were 35-44 year olds had online dated (n=65), 59% of the 87 respondents who were 45-54 year olds had online dated (n=51), 49% of the 82 respondents who were 18-24 year olds had online dated (n=40), 43% of the 56 respondents who were 55-64 year olds had online dated (n=24), 22% of the 18 respondents who were 65-74 year olds had online dated (n=4), and 50% of the 2 respondents who were 75 years old or older had online dated (n=1).

Gender. The majority of the 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application, were female (88%, n=290). Nine percent were male (n=30), 3% were genderqueer (n=9), and 1% were trans male (n=3). Less than 1% were gender non-conforming (n=1), and the one participant who selected "None of the above" had not online dated (n=0).

Looking within each gender group, more than half of the participants in each gender category had online dated. This excludes the "None of the above" category since the one participant who selected that option had not online dated. The full results were as follows: 100%, or all three, of the trans male participants surveyed had online dated, the sole gender non-conforming participant had online dated (100%, n=1), 75% of the 12 genderqueer participants had online dated (n=9), 57% of the 506 female participants had online dated (n=290), 56% of the 54 male participants had online dated (n=30), and none of the participants who selected "None of the above" had online dated (0%, n=0).

Sexual orientation. The majority of the 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application were straight/heterosexual (73%, n=244). Nine percent were gay/lesbian (n=30), 8% were bisexual (n=27), 7% were queer (n=24), 1% selected "None of the above" (n=4), and 1% were pansexual (n=3). Less than 1% were asexual (n=1).

Looking within each sexual orientation category, more than half of the participants in each category had online dated. This excludes those participants who were asexual, of whom only one third had online dated. The full results were as follows: 86% of the 28 queer respondents had online dated (n=24), 80% of the 5 participants who selected "None of the above" had online dated (n=4), 71% of the 42 gay/lesbian respondents had online dated (n=30), 60% of the 5 pansexual respondents had online dated (n=3), 57% of the 47 bisexual respondents had online dated (n=27), 55% of the 447 straight/heterosexual participants had online dated (n=244), and 33% of the 3 asexual respondents had online dated (n=1).

Race/ethnicity. The majority of the 333 participants who had used online dating were White or European (79%, n=264). Six percent were Black or African American

(n=20), 5% were biracial, multiracial or mixed race (n=18), 4% were Hispanic or Latino (n=14), 2% selected "None of the above" (n=8), 2% were Asian (n=6), and 1% were Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander (n=2). Less than 1% were American Indian or Native Alaskan (n=1), and none were Middle Eastern (0%, n=0).

Looking within each category of race and ethnicity, more than half of the participants in each category of race/ethnicity had online dated. This excludes the Middle Eastern category because the one participant who identified as Middle Eastern had not online dated. The full results were as follows: 100% of the 2 Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander participants had online dated (n=2), 86% of the 7 Asian participants had online dated (n=6), 80% of the 10 participants who selected "None of the above" had online dated (n=8), 58% of the 456 White or European participants had online dated (n=264), 58% of the 24 Hispanic or Latino participants had online dated (n=14), 51% of the 35 biracial, multiracial or mixed race participants had online dated (n=18), 50% of the 40 Black or African American participants had online dated (n=20), 50% of the 2 American Indian or Alaska Native participants had online dated (n=1), and the sole Middle Eastern participant had not online dated (0%, n=0).

Community size. Of the 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application 31% lived in an urban community (n=104). Another 25% lived in a suburban/urban community (n=83) and 21% lived in a suburban community (n=71). Fourteen percent of the participants who online dated lived in a rural/suburban community (n=48), and 8% lived in a rural community (n=27).

Looking within each community size, at least half of participants from each community size had online dated. Almost three quarters of the urban participants had

online dated. The full results were as follows: Seventy-two percent of the 144 urban participants had online dated (n=104), 55% of the 130 suburban participants had online dated (n=71), 55% of the 88 rural/suburban participants had online dated (n=48), 52% of the 160 suburban/urban participants had online dated (n=83), and 50% of the 54 rural participants had online dated (n=27).

Region of the U.S. Of the 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application, 23% hailed from New England (n=78). They were followed by 20% who hailed from the Mid-Atlantic (n=68), 20% who hailed from the Great Lakes region (n=68), 14% who hailed from the Southeast (n=48), 7% who hailed from the Far West (n=24), 7% who hailed from the Southwest (n=23), 4% who hailed from the Rocky Mountain region (n=14), and 3% who hailed from the Plains (n=9). Less than 1% hailed from a United States Territory (n=1).

Looking within each region of the U.S. more than half of the participants from each region had online dated, except in the Far West (48%) and Plains (41%). The region with the highest rate of online dating among this study's participants was the Southwest at 68%. The full results were as follows: 68% of the 34 participants from the Southwest had online dated (n=23), 67% of the 21 participants from the Rocky Mountain region had online dated (n=14), 65% of the 105 participants from the Mid-Atlantic region had online dated (n=68), 61% of the 129 participants from New England had online dated (n=78), 56% of the 121 participants from the Great Lakes region had online dated (n=68), 52% of the 93 participants from the Southeast had online dated (n=48), 50% of the 2 participants from a U.S. Territory had online dated (n=1), 48% of the 50 participants from the Far

West had online dated (n=24), and 41% of the 22 participants from the Plains region had online dated (n=9).

Treatment or theoretical orientation. Of the 333 participants who had used an online dating website or application, 29% reported their treatment or theoretical orientation was cognitive behavioral therapy (n=98). Another 21% fell under the other treatment or theoretical orientation category (n=71), They were followed by 18% who were psychodynamically oriented (n=59), 17% who did not report a treatment or theoretical orientation or practiced non-clinical or macro social work (n=55), 4% who reported multiple treatment or theoretical orientations (n=14), 3% who reported a solution-focused orientation (n=10), 3% who reported a systems theory orientation (n=9), 2% who reported a motivational interviewing orientation (n=7), 2% who reported a strengths-based orientation (n=5), and 2% who reported their treatment or theoretical orientation as dialectical behavioral therapy (n=5).

Looking within each treatment or theoretical orientation category, more than half of the participants with each treatment or theoretical orientation had online dated, except strengths-based (46%), dialectical behavioral therapy (46%) and solution-focused (42%). The single treatment or theoretical orientation with the highest rate of online dating among the participants in this study was systems theory at 64%. The full results were as follows: 67% of the 21 participants who reported multiple treatment or theoretical orientations had online dated (n=14), 64% of the 14 participants who used systems theory had online dated (n=9), 61% of the 117 participants who fell under the other treatment or theoretical orientation category had online dated (n=71), 59% of the 100 participants who were psychodynamically oriented had online dated (n=59), 58% of the 169 participants

who used cognitive behavioral therapy had online dated (n=98), 57% of the 97 participants who did not report a treatment or theoretical orientation, or were non-clinical or macro social workers, had online dated (n=55), 54% of the 13 participants who used motivational interviewing had online dated (n=7), 46% of the 11 participants with a strengths-based orientation had online dated (n=5), 46% of the 11 participants who used dialectical behavioral therapy had online dated, and 42% of the 24 participants who had a solution-focused orientation had online dated (n=10).

Level of social work education. The highest level of education in social work earned by the majority of the 333 participants who had online dated was an MSW (66%, n=219). This was followed distantly by current MSW students who made up 20% of the participants who had online dated (n=65). Seven percent of the 333 participants who had online dated were current BSW students (n=23), 3% had their BSW (n=11), 3% were current DSW/Ph.D students (n=12), and 2% had their DSW or Ph.D (n=11).

Looking within each level of social work education, participants in this study who were working towards their DSW/Ph.D online dated at the highest rate at 83%. They were followed by participants with an MSW at the rate of 60%. The full results were as follows: 83% of the 12 participants who were current DSW/Ph.D students had online dated (n=10), 60% of the 366 participants who had an MSW had online dated (n=219), 58% of the 112 participants who were current MSW students had online dated (n=65), 46% of the 50 participants who were current BSW students had online dated (n=23), 46% of the 11 participants who had a DSW/Ph.D had online dated (n=5), and 44% of the 25 participants who had a BSW had online dated (n=11).

Licensure. Of the 333 participants who had online dated, 36% were independently licensed to practice social work (n=120). Looking within the licensure categories, of the 174 participants who were not licensed to independently practice social work, 66% had online dated (n=114). Among the 215 participants who were independently licensed to practice social work, 56% had online dated (n=120).

Years of licensed experience. Of the 333 participants who had online dated, 12% had 11 years or more of experience as a licensed independent social worker (n=41). They were followed by 11% who had 1-2 years of experience or fewer (n=35), 7% who had 3-5 years (n=24), and 6% who had 6-10 years (n=20). This left 36% who were not licensed to practice social work independently (n=120).

Looking within these categories 65% of the 31 participants with 6-10 years of experience as an licensed independent social worker had online dated (n=20). They were followed by 63% of the 56 participants with 1-2 years of experience or fewer who had online dated (n=35). Fifty-six percent of the 43 participants with 3-5 years of experience had online dated (n=24), and 48% of the 85 participants with 11 years or more of experience had online dated (n=41).

Teach social work. Of the 333 participants who had online dated 6% taught social work at the undergraduate or graduate level (n=20). Of the participants who taught social work at the undergraduate or graduate level, 59% had used an online dating website or application. This left 41% who had not online dated.

Short-Answer Responses

This section contains the findings from the responses to the 10 short-answer questions posed in the survey. Not every participant was asked every short-answer

question, based on their responses to previous questions. For example if a participant responded "No" to the question, "Did you have any reservations or misgivings about online dating?" they were not asked, "What reservations or misgivings did you have about online dating?" Short-answer questions were designed to provide participants with the opportunity to expand on their responses to yes/no or multiple-choice questions in order to gain a more complete and nuanced perspective of participants' experiences and attitudes related to social work and online dating. This study sought to learn about only the attitudes and experiences with online dating that might be specific to social workers. However, in order to decrease bias, at times, broad questions were asked about participants' experiences or attitudes related to online dating, and as a result the responses yielded data that was not necessarily applicable to the purposes of this study. Only the responses that were directly related to social work are fully summarized in these findings.

Have never online dated. The 244 participants who responded that they had never used an online dating website or application were asked why not and 233 of those participants chose to respond. There was a range of responses, the most common of which was that the participant was already in a monogamous partnership. Only four respondents said that they chose not to online date for reasons related to their social work profession (2%). Two of these respondents were concerned about personal information that they would not normally share with clients being available to them on an online dating platform:

I have considered it, but have been concerned due to my profession. The information could potentially be viewed by clients or their families.

The other two other respondents chose not to online date because they did not want to encounter colleagues. Both of these respondents specifically mentioned that the idea of colleagues learning they were online dating made them "uncomfortable." Neither of these respondents explained what about a colleague learning they were online dating made them uncomfortable:

The first time I went to sign up I saw several people that I work with on the site. I was not comfortable with them seeing me utilize this form of dating.

Reservations or misgivings. The 239 participants who indicated that they had reservations or misgivings about online dating, were asked to describe those reservations or misgivings. Of those 239 participants, 226 chose to respond to that short-answer question. Forty-four of these responses mentioned a reservation or misgiving related to their social work profession (18%).

The majority of these 44 respondents were concerned with encountering a client, client's relative or supervisee (n=40). In addition to being concerned with encountering clients, 6 of these respondents were also worried about encountering colleagues. While many respondents did not elaborate beyond "encountering clients" or "concerned that I will find my clients or be recognized by clients," some became more specific about their concerns, mentioning boundaries, conflicts of interest, transference, the therapeutic alliance, dual relationships, and how their use of online dating would be received by clients and colleagues:

Most of my reservations had/have to do with privacy and the possibility of me seeing a client or a client seeing me on the dating site. I worry about how such unintended disclosures might affect the therapy.

[I'm] fearful that clients will discover my online dating profile and learn more about me than is "appropriate" or "ideal" for preserving the therapeutic alliance and transference.

I'm concerned that clients will come across my profile and it will disrupt my relationship with them or effect my business reputation.

It would be awkward if a client or a client's parent ran into you via online dating sites. How might I be judged by peers or clients if they came across me on a dating website[?]

Three of the respondents were concerned they would encounter someone who was mentally ill. Two of these respondents did not explain why this was a concern to them. However, one participant explained they were specifically concerned about "potentially encountering mentally ill people who seek personal relationships with therapists." This issue was also raised in the responses to the later questions about what participants did differently because of their social work profession, and what they would like to add that had not been addressed by the survey.

Two respondents reported that they had concerns about staying safe when online dating. Both explained that these concerns stemmed at least in part from hearing about their clients' scary experiences with online dating. One of these respondents explained:

[I'm] fearful of meeting dangerous people, being stalked, no doubt because I've heard too many scary stories in the media and my practice.

Not concurrent with social work practice. The 95 participants who responded that their use of online dating was not concurrent with their social work practice were asked why. While the overwhelming majority responded that their use of online dating occurred before their social work career and that they were now in a relationship or no longer interested in online dating, 11 respondents cited reasons related to their social work profession (12%). Eight of these respondents said their use of online dating was not concurrent with their social work practice (or social work education, in the case of BSW and MSW students) because of the demands of social work education and practice:

When I entered an MSW program, I just decided that I didn't have time for dating, but I do plan to try after graduating.

Too much energy to put into [online dating] that I would rather direct towards my clients.

I took time off from [online dating] to focus on my career.

Three respondents cited concerns that they would encounter clients as a reason for not online dating concurrently with their social work practice. Some of the concern about

encountering clients was related to privacy, while some was related to social work ethics. Two of the respondents explained their concerns about encountering a client in the following way:

I began to question how much privacy I could have by posting my picture online with clients and their families potentially having access to it.

Concerned with ethical dilemmas: any form of dual relationship

It is important to note that there was some confusion among participants as to the meaning of this question. Ten participants provided an answer in which they either asked whether they had understood the question properly, interpreted "concurrently" to mean that they used online dating while at their place of work or in their work with clients, or they provided an answer that did not make sense based on the question asked.

Did differently because social worker. The 130 participants who indicated that they had done something differently while online dating because of their profession as a social worker were asked what they had done differently. Almost half of the participants mentioned being more careful about the information and photos they shared and their privacy settings on the online dating websites or applications they used (44%, n=57).

Three of these participants described their process in the following ways:

I do not fill out many sections of [the] profiles, and what I do fill out is general and non-identifying information. I do not indicate my alcohol/substance use history or practices.

I posted more professional appearing photos of myself.

I do not disclose my sexual orientation openly. I've hidden answers to my sex life and substance use after becoming a social worker

Another 26 participants responded that they did not disclose or hesitated to disclose that they were a social worker while online dating (20%). Most of these responses simply said "I was general about my profession," or "I did not disclose my work," without elaborating as to why they chose not to disclose that information. However, a handful of respondents were more specific that they did not disclose their profession because they did not want to be stereotyped or they did not want to find themselves in the position of providing what one respondent called "free therapy." Three of these respondents explained it like this:

It's difficult telling people you are a therapist...it seemed intimidating. I made sure to note that I wouldn't be psychoanalyzing my dates.

I did not tell people that I worked in Sexual Assault/Trafficking and Domestic Violence. If I did, it was either met with sad faces, or people feeling the need to tell me their own experiences.

[I] don't like saying [I'm] a social worker because [of] the 'taking away children' stereotype. [I] also don't want to hear about medications, diagnosis, or treatment history of potential dates.

In contrast, two participants reported that they openly discussed their profession with potential partners they met through online dating. These two participants reported that they were in the habit of explaining to potential partners the possibility that they would at times experience "social fatigue" or "compassion fatigue" due to their work. They felt it was important to make a potential partner aware of the significant demands of their profession.

Of the 130 participants who said they did something differently while online dating because of their social work profession, 27 participants felt they "screened" and "analyzed" profiles for particular characteristics more than people in other professions might (12%). Ten of these participants described that they screened for "red flags," or they carefully "analyzed" the profiles and responses of potential dates, but they did not elaborate on exactly what those red flags were or for what they were analyzing the profiles. For example, this is how two participants explained their process:

[I] looked for potential red flags.

I analyzed every word I read in the profiles.

Another six participants mentioned specifically screening out potential dates for mental disorders and symptoms. Some of these participants mentioned screening out symptoms in general and others named specific symptoms or disorders they were screening out. For example two of these participants described their screening process in the following way:

I looked for signs of personality disorders in the profiles I read.

I was acutely aware of various attitudes, symptoms and problematic behaviors that any of the dating prospects had.

Another six participants reported that they screened out potential dates based on whether their values and politics were a match. All six of these participants referred to what would be considered progressive values and politics and many specifically mentioned the importance of sharing social justice values. Two of these participants described their screening process in the following manner:

I am being more careful about social justice issues and making sure what I value isn't in conflict with theirs or vice versa

One way that I filtered out potential love interests was based on their social justice views. Individuals who were bigoted or conservative-minded weren't considered.

Another four respondents reported that, because they were a social worker, they asked more questions. When they described the types of questions asked, they appeared similar those asked in a new therapy client intake. Two of these respondents described their process in the following way:

I asked more questions up front about people's past. Their history with drugs and exes and length of time from last relationship. Their feelings regarding their exes. I questioned family ties and issues.

Asked in depth questions to learn about an individual's upbringing and environment.

Of the 130 participants who responded that they did something differently while online dating because of their social work profession, 22 reported making efforts to avoid encountering clients and clients' family members. Many of these participants did not elaborate as to how they avoided clients and clients' family members while online dating, but some described what they did. Their efforts to avoid encounters with clients and clients' family members include looking outside of the community in which they worked (for example, providing a nearby zip code instead; n=4), not using location-based applications at all (n=2), or turning off location-based apps when at work (n=2).

Of the 130 participants who responded that they did something differently while online dating because of their social work profession, 12 participants said that they were more aware of or cautious of their safety in the course of online dating (9%). Some of these participants did not describe exactly how they were more cautious, while others did. Those participants who did, described efforts including searching for potential dates on criminal databases, meeting potential dates in public, and avoiding giving out identifying information such as their exact place of employment or their home address.

Of the 130 participants who responded that they did something differently while online dating because of their social work profession, 7 mentioned their empathy and listening skills as factoring into their style of online dating. Some of these respondents viewed these qualities and skills as beneficial to their online dating experience, others expressed that they were unhelpful and still others remained neutral. Three of these

respondents described how these qualities impacted their online dating in the following ways:

Talked with people longer than I would have otherwise, or gave a 'chance' to people who would not normally fit within my dating criteria (i.e. people with kids or who are unemployed/underemployed). I think I would often try to help people feel less awkward during dates by carrying the conversation, acting interested, or asking lots of questions, when I should have conveyed that I was not interested in them.

I do more listening than talking. I really try to figure out who this person is.

[I'm] more likely to engage deeply in the other person's emotional experience initially

Searched for client or other. The 6 participants who responded that they had searched for a client, clients' relative or other significant person in the life of a client, were asked why and five of them chose to respond. Three of these participants responded that they had searched for a client, clients' relative or other significant person in the life of a client in order to block or avoid them in the course of online dating. One participant reported that they searched for younger clients from time to time because of concern about something that client or client's guardian said they had posted. Finally, one participant searched for a client's profile out of curiosity, explaining: "[The client] had talked a lot about [their] ad and I wanted to see what [they] had said."

The 6 participants who responded that they had searched for a client, clients' relative or other significant person in the life of a client were also asked what happened as a result of that search or those searches, and 5 chose to respond. The three participants who had searched in order to block or avoid one of those people responded that they were able to block them, they chose not to use that particular dating website, or they were unable to find them. One of those participants also mentioned that the client they searched for later showed them their online dating profile in a therapy session. The participant that searched for clients' profiles out of concern reported that they were often unable to find them. The participant who searched out of curiosity reported that "nothing much" had occurred as a result.

Encountered a client. After the 18 participants who had encountered a client while online dating completed the multiple choice question about the action they took following the encounter, they were asked to describe more fully what happened. Seventeen respondents chose to write something. However, the majority of their responses simply echoed their selection(s) on the multiple-choice question as was summarized earlier in this chapter. Among the few who chose to elaborate further, there were a variety of responses. One respondent explained that the client they encountered was no longer active, but did not elaborate. Another specified that they removed any identifying photos from their profile as a means of avoiding recognition by that or other clients.

Two respondents spoke with colleagues, but they came to very different conclusions following those conversations. One came to the conclusion that it was "unavoidable seeing clients online" and they chose to "not engage and block them if

possible," but otherwise continue using the dating website or application as before. The other respondent reported that after discussing the event with colleagues they chose to remove their profile from that dating website or application entirely. These respondents did not have any contact with the client beyond seeing that a client was using the same dating website or application.

Another three respondents were contacted directly by current or former clients through an online dating website or application. One of these respondents did not describe the contact that took place, one described the encounter as a message from a former client that "was friendly and perhaps only mildly flirtatious," and a third respondent reported multiple instances of being contacted by clients, sometimes in greeting and other times to ask them out. All three reported that they responded to the contact (either through the website or application or, if they were still seeing the client, in their next session) by explaining their professional boundaries. The respondent who received a message from a former client described consulting with their supervisor and a colleague, and thinking carefully through the client's intention and the most appropriate response. They further reported that their response appeared to be effective, as they did not receive further messages. The respondent who had experienced multiple encounters reported consulting a supervisor each time and also explained:

It is standard practice for me to introduce the topic of how clients want to handle unexpected interactions outside of the office...this is usually discussed in the first or second session so it is no surprise to them when a discussion follows an encounter outside of the office.

Encountered a client's relative or other. The ten participants who reported that they had encountered a relative of a client or another significant person in the life of a client in the course of online dating were asked a multiple-choice question about what action if any they took, and then they were asked to describe more fully what had occurred. Eight of those participants chose to do so. Four of those responses simply echoed their response to the multiple-choice question – that they hadn't taken any action, blocked the person or avoided contact. One reported they were matched with the cousin of a client, deleted that connection and told a "peer." However, it was unclear if they spoke with a friend or a social work peer, and they did not describe the conversation that was had.

Another respondent described circumstances in which the partner of a client viewed their profile (unbeknownst to the social worker who did not recognize that it was the client's partner), and the client brought it up at the next session. The social worker processed the event with the client and consulted with a peer supervision group. However, the client ultimately decided to terminate. Another respondent described the following scenario:

I started to see a person I met online and it was working well until I had a family session with a client and it turned out the guy I was seeing was his brother. I talked with the brother and discussed limitations. Spoke with client about possible breach of confidentiality and ended relationship.

Finally, one respondent described a situation in which the father of her client's children asked her out via an online dating website. This respondent consulted her

supervisor who left it up to the respondent to either "ignore the situation or confront [him] head on." The respondent chose to ignore him and to not bring it up with the client, even when the client brought up her awareness of his use of multiple online dating sites in a session. The respondent further reported, "I closed that online dating website account soon after, and even reviewed/set stricter privacy settings on other social media sites."

Client learned of online dating. Of the 11 participants who reported that a client had learned they were online dating, 8 chose to elaborate further on what occurred. One participant reported they discussed it with the client and that the client would no longer be able to see their profile, but they did not elaborate on exactly what was discussed. One simply stated they "blocked the individual from access to my information." One respondent denied the profile belonged to them. Another respondent reported they were open about the fact that they online dated explaining:

In fact one of my clients gave me the suggestion of the dating site that I eventually met my husband through. I don't see why I would have or should have had to keep that fact confidential or secret from my clients?

Two respondents reported that they explained their professional boundaries and that they could not engage with clients through social media or online dating websites. Another respondent described that they "rolled with the punches" when clients in a milieu setting found out they were online dating and "mainly, joked about it" while explaining professional boundaries. Finally, one participant described how they would respond in the following way:

If a client mentioned seeing that I was on a dating site we would discuss any feelings they had about it (i.e. that I was dating or what it was like to know about me in this way.) This was only discussed if a client raised the issue or, when the client didn't when it appeared that not discussing it would interfere with the therapy.

Anything else to add. The final question of the survey asked if participants had anything else they wanted to add that had not been addressed by the survey or if they wanted to provide feedback about the survey. It is important to note that due to an unknown glitch in the survey, not all participants were asked this question. While it is unclear exactly how many of the 577 survey respondents had the opportunity to respond to this question, the survey collected 126 responses. Of those 126 responses, 37 said they had nothing else they wanted to add or simply wished the researcher luck with the project (29%).

Encountering clients or colleagues. Twelve respondents to the final question expressed worry about encountering clients or the family members of clients. Some of these respondents described the great lengths they went to in order to avoid such an encounter and others described how this concern dissipated over time as they did not experience such an encounter. Some of the participants reported that they came to accept that they might run into a client or the family member of a client, while others chose to terminate their online dating account(s) because of this concern. Three very different responses to this issue were as follows:

The last thing I hope to do is run into a client, that would be mortifying, although the way that I have come to terms with that is to say 'yes, I am human too' to that fear. Luckily, this has not happened and I hope it stays that way!

The online dating approach was difficult to continue, such as other forms of social media. I did not want to allow my clients into my personal life, so I closed my online dating profile and changed the name on my IG and FB accounts, as a precaution. I haven't had a client reach out to me via social media as of yet. However, preventive measures are always the best.

One of the dating websites was a kink site that could have proved very costly to me if I had been discovered by a current client at that time. I withdrew from that website completely.

One participant reported they were more concerned about encountering someone they knew professionally than a client while another reported they accidentally went on a date with a colleague from "a sister agency." Because of the brevity of their responses, it was unclear what exactly they were concerned about when encountering a colleague through this medium.

One participant's response expressed multiple themes that came up in other responses to this and previous questions. This response expressed that there was stigma in online dating. It also expressed concerns about the potential for encountering people one

knows, including clients. In addition this participant provided the dual perspective of a social worker and client. Their full response was as follows:

I saw my former therapist's profile online and felt bad for her because I wouldn't want to be in her situation. I did not learn anything I should not have learned about her life as she had a very brief profile stating that she was a therapist and would only answer questions in private messages, which I thought was a great way to handle it. I am glad that I am in a relationship now (with someone I met in a more traditional way) and do not need to have a current profile.

Eight participants provided theories as to why they had not yet encountered a client or client's relative in the course of online dating. Of these 8 participants, 2 suspected it was because they lived in a larger community. Another two of these participants felt working with a client population of a significantly different age than they had protected them from such an encounter. Another two of these participants reported using online dating very briefly. Finally, one participant felt it was less likely they would encounter a client because they used a particular online dating website that was not usually used by people of the same socioeconomic status as their clients.

Ethics. There was disagreement among respondents about the ethics of online dating as a social worker. Some respondents stated their belief that online dating did not conflict with social work ethics, while others expressed concern that online dating could result in unethical interactions with clients. One participant felt it was unrealistic to expect social workers to put aside their personal lives for their profession, and another two participants were unsure of what the ethics of online dating might be. Finally one

participant described a situation in which they felt there had been a clear violation of ethics. These differing views are reflected in the following responses:

I found [online dating] to be an effective and efficient way to meet a wide variety of people, and did not feel it in any way conflicted with my personal or professional ethics as a social worker.

I think it would be unethical to discuss anything with a client in relation to a professional's dating life.

Some of our professional ethical guidelines are overly rigid and unrealistic. I can imagine that young, single [social workers], especially those living in smaller communities, may have difficulty complying with the guidelines and creating a satisfying social/love life. [I] would like to know whether stumbling across a client or clients relative on a dating site would be considered unethical. Even if the social worker did not mean to and did not act upon it

One of my dates noted that he found his therapist on an online dating website...we broke up and he's dating her now. Eek.

Attitudes toward online dating. Twenty-one respondents to the final question reported a positive view of online dating. Of these 21 respondents who expressed a positive view of online dating, 10 added they would use online dating if they were single,

9 shared they had met their partner through online dating and 2 reported they had clients who had met their partner through online dating.

Nine participants reported mixed or negative attitudes toward online dating. Four of these participants reported concerns about the safety of online dating. Two of these respondents reported being disappointed with online dating and as a result no longer used it. Two reported that they prefer to meet people in person and one participant reported they had a "negative experience" with online dating, but did not elaborate.

Social work identity. Five respondents to the final question reported that their identity as a social worker impacted their online dating experience in varying ways. One of these participants reported, "occasionally I would get messages from folks that poured their hearts out, noting they did so because I had mentioned I was a social worker." In contrast, another participant reported, "once an individual finds out that I am a social worker, they tend to stop talking, and it results in very few dates with individuals." Two respondents felt that the qualities they possessed that help make them a good social worker, could have a negative impact on their online dating experience. They explained two different scenarios as follows:

I find that I over filter people; for example, I saw a person wearing a sobriety pin and that excluded him for me. I was honest with him and he was appreciative of my honesty. He thought it was pretty weird that I picked that out of his picture, but that's what we do as Social Workers...we notice everything about a person.

I believe the only reason I stayed [with a partner met through online dating who "turned out to be a recovering alcoholic" and had PTSD] was because of what

makes me a social worker and my desire to help especially those who have fell through the cracks.

In contrast, one participant felt like their social work characteristics were helpful to their online dating experience. That participant described having multiple, positive, long-term relationships through the use of online dating. They credited their profession, explaining, "I think my values/social work ethics in general probably led to better results.

Study feedback. Many of the respondents to the final question provided feedback or suggestions for improving the study. Ten respondents expressed their interest in or approval of the topic. Five respondents praised some portion of, or the overall design of, the study. Three respondents pointed out the researcher's failure to account for non-clinical or macro social workers. Two respondents suggested it would have been beneficial to ask about participant's relationship status in the demographics section. One respondent reported being unsure of what was and was not included under online dating websites and applications. Finally, one participant felt it was "too early to gauge the impact of online dating."

Many respondents brought up other related topics that this or future studies could explore. Some of the recommended topics of study were directly related to online dating including how social workers are talking to clients about their client's use of online dating, how different online dating websites and applications are perceived by social workers and others, how social workers navigate the varying levels or types of privacy offered across different online dating websites and applications, and surveying supervisors about their experiences guiding supervisees who are online dating. Two

respondents pondered the idea of creating an online dating website or application specifically for therapists. Additional recommended topics included investigating other ways social workers have formed romantic relationships such as relationships formed through social media that is not specifically designed for dating, dating through the personals section of newspapers, and long-distance relationships. Finally, three participants suggested doing a similar study, but that focused on social workers' use of social media rather than online dating.

CHAPTER V

Discussion

This exploratory study sought to 1) describe social workers' attitudes and approaches toward online dating; 2) determine the type and frequency of ethical and clinical issues that social workers may encounter in the course of online dating; 3) learn how social workers are addressing these issues; and 4) determine the extent to which there is a need for further discussion of these issues in social work education, supervision and professional development. This chapter will discuss the results and draw comparisons with previous research. Overall, social workers' attitudes, approaches toward, and experiences with online dating varied greatly. While only a small number of social workers encountered ethical and clinical dilemmas, many participants were concerned about this possibility, some even choosing not to online date because of those concerns. The findings of this study highlighted the need for ethical and clinical guidance from the field of social work related to online dating as a social worker. This guidance is needed to assuage social workers' concerns and avoid serious ethical and clinical dilemmas.

This chapter is divided into six sections. The first section will discuss how the demographic data of the participants in this study who have online dated compares to national data on online dating. The second section will draw comparisons between the attitudes and experiences expressed by the participants of this study and previous literature, including the concerns raised by mental health clinicians in psychiatry and psychology and the findings from the previous study of psychologists-in-training by Sedgeley. The fourth, fifth and sixth section will discuss the implications of the results of

this study for social work practice, the strengths and limitations of this study, and recommendations for future research respectively.

Demographics of Online Dating

The use of non-probability sampling makes it impossible to draw a realistic comparison between the demographics of the participants in this survey who had online dated and the general population of American adults who have online dated. The numbers in this study were biased toward participants who had online dated. For example, according to the Pew Research Center, a higher percentage of adults within the age group of 18-24 had online dated at a rate of 27% (2016, p. 2). In the present study the percentage of participants age 25-34 who had online dated was highest at a rate of 66%, more than twice the percentage found in the Pew Research Center study (2016, p. 2).

This bias of non-probability sampling is also evident when we compare the race and ethnicity demographics of the Pew Research Center study and this study. The Pew Research Center study distinguished between only three racial and ethnic categories (White, Black non-Hispanic, and Hispanic), rather than the eight categories in this study. Comparing the three racial and ethnic categories that both studies have in common, there is, again, a major difference, with more than half of this study's participants within each of those categories having online dated, while in the Pew Research Center's study, only between 7% and 15% of participants within each racial or ethnic category had online dated (2016, p. 8). In both studies, White participants online dated at the highest percentage. However, in the Pew Research Center study, Black non-Hispanic participants had the next highest percentage, while in this study, Latino or Hispanic participants

reported online dating at a higher rate than Black or African American participants (2016, p. 8).

The Pew Research Center study also collected data on the percentage of American adults from rural, suburban and urban communities who have online dated, while this study used five categories of community size (rural, rural/suburban, suburban, suburban/urban, or urban). Again the percentages of participants who had online dated in each of this study's community size categories were more than quadruple those percentages from the Pew Research Center study (2016, p. 8). However, despite this difference, the present study echoed the Pew Research Center study's findings that higher percentages of urban and suburban dwelling participants had online dated than rural participants (2016, p. 8). This finding makes sense given that urban and suburban communities have higher populations and thus have more potential matches via an online dating platform that someone might not know or meet otherwise. This finding especially makes sense for social workers who may feel encountering a client is less likely in an area with a larger population.

Participants' Attitudes and Experiences

Stigma and safety. The results of this study support previous findings that online dating is still stigmatized among American adults, with some people viewing those who online date as "nerds," "desperate" or "socially inept" (Finkel et al., 2012, p. 11; Pew Research Center, 2016, p. 4). Both participants who had, and had not, online dated reported concerns that if they online dated, people they knew personally or professionally might learn about it, and "judge" them for it, or it might harm their "reputation." As in the findings of the Pew Research Center study, in this study, participants' opinions were

mixed about whether online dating was "a good way to meet people" with participants feeling strongly for, strongly against and unsure (2016, p. 4). As found in previous studies, many of this study's participants expressed concerns about safety and the "perceived risks associated with [online dating]" (Finkel et al., 2012, p. 11).

Comparison with psychiatry and psychology literature. The concerns discussed by clinicians in psychiatry and psychology about the potential ethical and clinical dilemmas that may occur as a result of online dating were supported as being valid concerns by the findings of this study. Similar to concerns raised by Berlin (2014), participants who wanted to use online dating websites or applications that targeted a specific sexual orientation or sexual interest were worried that a client learning of just their presence on those particular dating platforms would immediately know intimate information about them. As a result a number of participants in this study chose not to use those particular online dating platforms. As discussed by Berlin, this raises the question of where the lines should be drawn between providing "our patients and their families therapeutic space protected from our excessive disclosure" and "protecting the individual rights of therapists to online date" (Berlin, 2014, p. 936).

Both Berlin (2014) and Kolmes (2013) expressed concerns that therapists might encounter clients or vice versa in the course of online dating and that this could result in "excessive self-disclosure" and other consequences to the therapeutic relationship (Berlin, 2014, p. 936). This study provides foundation for their concerns with its findings that social workers do occasionally search for, encounter or have a client learn that they are online dating, and that social workers also sometimes encounter clients' relatives in the course of online dating. In some cases these searches or encounters have appeared to be

harmless, while others have led to significant ruptures in the therapeutic relationship, including termination. The results of this study also begin to shed light on how social workers are responding when such an encounter occurs. While many are consulting with supervisors or peers and thoughtfully processing such an occurrence with clients, just as many appear to be taking no action at all.

A number of participants in this study expressed uncertainty as to the ethics and professionalism of online dating as a social worker. Different participants expressed different views about what was and was not appropriate in the course of online dating. These findings underscored Berlin (2014) and Kolmes' (2013) call for guidelines and policies from professional organizations regarding clinicians' use of online dating. In concurrence with the specific guidelines suggested by Kolmes (2013) and Berlin (2014), many of the participants in this study described efforts to de-identify their profile, be thoughtful about what content, including photos, they posted to their profile, preemptively discuss with clients how extra-therapeutic encounters will be handled, and respond to clients' online communications offline and in-person, including a discussion of professional boundaries.

Comparison with the Sedgeley dissertation. Like Sedgeley's (2013) study, this study found that many participants had concerns about encountering clients or clients encountering them in the course of online dating. If such an encounter occurred, participants from both this and Sedgeley's study were worried about issues related to professional boundaries, the therapeutic relationship, ethics, and professionalism. Furthermore, like the participants in Sedgeley's study, participants in the present study

raised concerns about ethics, but did not name the particular ethical codes they felt applied.

Unlike the Sedgeley article, the findings of this study revealed that concerns about encountering clients are valid. While the psychologists-in-training from Sedgeley's study had not encountered a client while online dating, participants in this study had, and in doing so, those participants experienced dilemmas related to the client-therapist relationship, ethics, and boundaries. While the participants in Sedgeley's study reported that despite their concerns, they did nothing differently in the course of creating their online dating profiles, many of the participants of this study reported making some effort, and in some cases, extensive effort to avoid encountering a client while online dating.

The participants in Sedgeley's study reported avoiding discussing their concerns related to online dating with their supervisors. While this study did not ascertain whether the participants consulted supervisors about online dating before an encounter occurred, it did find that some participants consulted with their supervisor following an encounter. As previously mentioned, participants in this study felt there was stigma attached to online dating. This echoes the embarrassment and shame related to online dating that was expressed by the participants in Sedgeley's study. This stigma associated with online dating is important to note because it could impact whether or not a social worker chooses to consult with a supervisor or mental health provider peer preemptively, or in the case they encounter an ethical or clinical dilemma, in the course of online dating. Both Sedgeley's participants and a number of participants in the present study expressed a desire for guidance around how to ethically and professionally approach online dating as a clinician.

New Findings

There were a number of unique findings gleaned from the responses of participants in this study. Most notable were the ways in which participants described how their social work identity, characteristics or skills impacted their online dating experience. Some of these participants described their social work identity and characteristics as having a positive impact on their online dating experience, but more often than not, these participants reported they had a negative impact. For example, many participants noted that they did not disclose, or hesitated to disclose, their profession while online dating. While some of these respondents did so to de-identify their profile and avoid client encounters, others were concerned about attracting people interested in "free therapy" or being negatively stereotyped.

A number of participants described how the demands of their work impacted their dating life. More than one participant was no longer online dating because they did not feel they had the time or energy due to the demands of their work. Still other participants reported they felt it was necessary to warn potential partners of the demands of their work, including the potential for exhibiting compassion fatigue.

A few participants felt that their social work skills helped them navigate online dating and romantic relationships more effectively. However, more participants reported that their social work skills got in the way, for example overanalyzing the profiles of potential dates, or giving a chance to someone they were not actually interested in out of sympathy. Still other participants found that their clients' experiences with online dating (ranging from clients who got into dangerous situations to clients who met their partner through online dating) impacted their decisions around online dating. This study's

findings provide initial evidence that the social work profession can have significant impact, both negative and positive, on one's personal life, including online dating. This situation points to the need for greater supervision around self-care and determining reasonable personal and professional boundaries.

Limitations

This study had many limitations that make generalizing its findings to all social workers impossible. The results of the study indicate that the use of non-probability sampling biased the findings significantly, resulting in greater participation from social workers who have online dated. Because participants were recruited solely via online forums such as social media and email, those who learned of the survey were more likely to actively use the Internet and thus more likely to have engaged in online dating.

Furthermore, participants who have online dated were more likely to choose to participate in this study because they may have felt it was more relevant to them, or they may have been more certain that they met the eligibility requirements. There is also likely a bias towards social workers in the researchers immediate social network, including the researcher's graduate school, given that participants were recruited via social media groups of which the researcher was a member, including groups specifically for members of the researcher's graduate school community.

Further limitations are found in the design of the study's survey. Due to the researcher's bias, the survey failed to account for non-clinical or macro social workers, making some of the questions irrelevant to those participants. The survey also did not ask participants about their relationship status, so it was not possible to separate the responses of the participants who have not online dated because they are married or in a long-term

monogamous relationship from those who have not online dated for other reasons (not interested, safety concerns, stigma, etc.).

Implications

Despite the inability to generalize the findings of this study to the wider social work community, as the first of its kind, this study has important implications for social work education, practice and research. The findings show that social workers are encountering clinical and ethical dilemmas in the course of online dating, and that these dilemmas can sometimes result in serious consequences to the client-therapist relationship. This study lends support to the voices of those members of mental health professions calling for official standards and policies to guide clinicians in their use of online dating. This study also highlights the significant impact of the social work profession on one's personal life. It raises questions about the extent to which one's social work profession can or should dictate one's personal decisions and where lines between the personal and professional should be drawn. This study points to a need for all of these issues to be better addressed by social work education, supervision and professional development.

Future Research

Given the limitations of the use of non-probability sampling, it is hoped that future research might use probability sampling to gather reliable statistics on the use of online dating among social workers. The exploratory nature of this study resulted in more questions than answers. As recommended by participants, future research might look at how clinical supervisors are addressing online dating with supervisees, how social workers are supporting clients in online dating, and how social workers navigate the

varying levels or types of privacy across different online dating websites and applications. The researcher hopes that future research will examine how social workers are avoiding and addressing ethical and clinical issues related to online dating, and what strategies have been effective, in order to develop best practices. Perhaps most importantly, research into clients' experiences and perspectives on these issues is vital to understanding the full impact of client-therapist encounters on online dating platforms.

Conclusion

This study explored social workers' attitudes toward and experiences with online dating. The findings of the study demonstrated that social workers' attitudes toward online dating vary greatly, but that there are real clinical and ethical dilemmas that can occur when a social worker online dates. The study also showed that many social workers are unsure of how to balance personal and professional priorities when engaging in online dating, and highlighted the significant impact of the social work profession on one's personal life. The findings of this study indicate a clear need for guidelines and policies related to online dating in the social work profession and further discussion of these issues in social work education, supervision and professional development.

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Appendix A

Survey Welcome Page and Eligibility Question

Welcome to the "Social Work and Online Dating Survey." This brief, 15-20 minute, survey explores online dating in the social work profession. The protocol for this study has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (SCSSW HSRC). The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations. Thank you for your interest in my thesis research. In order to determine if you are eligible to participate, please complete the question below.

With sincere thanks,

Miriam Stevens
Smith College School for Social Work
mstevens@smith.edu

Do you qualify to participate in this study?

- Yes, I am a social worker who is enrolled in or has graduated from a BSW or MSW program, and I am currently practicing social work in the United States (including BSW and MSW students who are completing their internship/practicum/field work in fulfillment of their degree). Please click the "Next" button that will take you to the Informed Consent page.
- No, I do not meet the aforementioned criteria for this study. Please click the "Next" button to exit the survey

If no, directed to disqualified page:

Unfortunately, you do not meet the inclusion criteria to participate in the survey. Thank you very much for your interest and willingness to participate. Please exit the survey by clicking "DONE."

Miriam Stevens
Smith College School for Social Work
mstevens@smith.edu

Appendix B

Informed Consent

Smith College 2015-2016

Consent to Participate in a Research Study Smith College School for Social Work • Northampton, MA

Title of Study: Social Workers' Experiences with Online Dating: A Descriptive Study

Investigator: Miriam Stevens, Smith College School for Social Work, (xxx) xxx-xxxx

Introduction

- You are being asked to participate in a research study of online dating in the social work profession.
- You were selected as a possible participant because you are a social worker who is enrolled in or graduated from a BSW or MSW program, and you are currently practicing social work in the United States (including BSW and MSW students who are completing their internship/practicum/field work in fulfillment of their degree). Participants must also be literate in English, have access to a computer and the Internet, and have the computer skills necessary to navigate an online survey.
- We ask that you read this form and ask any questions that you may have before agreeing to be in the study.

Purpose of Study

- The purpose of the study is to gather information about how social workers approach online dating and the potential clinical dilemmas that social workers engaged in online dating may encounter.
- This study is being conducted as a research requirement for my master's in social work degree.
- Ultimately, this research may be published or presented at professional conferences.

Description of the Study Procedures

- If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to do the following: complete a survey that includes demographic, multiple choice and open-ended questions about your thoughts and experiences related to online dating in the social work profession. The survey should take no more than 15-20 minutes to complete.

Risks/Discomforts of Being in this Study

- The study has the following risks: Participation in this study may bring up various feelings in regard to your decision to or not to online date and/or your experiences dating online, including any professional dilemmas that you may have encountered.

Benefits of Being in the Study

- The benefits of participation are that your responses to the survey will allow you to share your personal and unique perspective on your experience and you will have the opportunity to gain insight into the topic of online dating in the social work profession.
- The benefits to social work/society are that your feedback may help social workers navigate online dating in the future and will strengthen the existing body of knowledge on online dating in the social work profession. It may also lead to further research and the development of programs and curriculum to address the unique dilemmas encountered by social workers who use online dating platforms.

Confidentiality

- This study is anonymous. I will not be collecting or retaining any information about your identity.

Payments/gift

- You will not receive any financial payment for your participation.

Right to Refuse or Withdraw

- The decision to participate in this study is entirely up to you. You may refuse to take part in the study *at any time* (up to the point at which you submit your anonymous survey) without affecting your relationship with the researchers of this study or Smith College. Your decision to refuse will not result in any loss of benefits (including access to services) to which you are otherwise entitled. You have the right not to answer any single question, as well as to withdraw completely up to the point at which you submit your anonymous survey. If you choose to withdraw, I will not use any of your information collected for this study.

Right to Ask Questions and Report Concerns

- You have the right to ask questions about this research study and to have those questions answered by me before, during or after the research. If you have any further questions about the study, at any time feel free to contact me, Miriam Stevens at mstevens@smith.edu or by telephone at (xxx) xxx-xxxx. If you would like a summary of the study results, one will be sent to you once the study is completed. If you have any other concerns about your rights as a research participant, or if you have any problems as a result of your participation, you may contact the Chair of the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Committee at (413) 585-7974.

Consent

- By checking "I AGREE" below, you are indicating that you have decided to volunteer as a research participant for this study, and that you have read and understood the information provided above. Please print a copy and save it for your records.
- By checking "I DO NOT AGREE" below, you will be exited from the survey.

I AGREE

I DO NOT AGREE

Appendix C

Survey

Demographic Questions

1. How old are you?

- 18-24 years old
- 25-34 years old
- 35-44 years old
- 45-54 years old
- 55-64 years old
- 65-74 years old
- 75 years or older

2. How would you identify your gender?

- Female
- Genderqueer
- Gender non-conforming
- Intersex
- Male
- Trans female/Trans woman
- Trans male/Trans man
- None of the above (Please state): _____

3. How would you identify your sexual orientation?

- Asexual
- Bisexual
- Gay/Lesbian
- Pansexual
- Queer
- Straight/heterosexual
- None of the above (Please state): _____

4. Which of the following best describes your race/ethnicity?

- Biracial, multiracial or mixed race
- American Indian or Alaska Native
- Asian
- Black or African American
- Hispanic or Latino
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- White
- None of the above (please state): _____

5. What is the highest level of education you have completed **in the field of social work**?

- Current BSW student

- BSW
- Current MSW student
- MSW
- Current DSW/Ph.D student
- DSW/Ph.D

6. How would you describe your client population? Please check all that apply.

- Children and families
- Young adults
- Adults
- Older adults
- Other (please describe): _____

7. In what kind of setting do you work? Please check all that apply

- College/university
- Government agency (DCF, DSS...)
- Group home or residential
- In-patient
- In-home or home-based
- Intensive out-patient or partial hospitalization program
- Out-patient clinic or center
- Private practice
- Primary or secondary school
- Other (please describe): _____

8. How would you describe the community in which you live?

Rural	Rural/Suburban	Suburban	Suburban/Urban
Urban			
1	2	3	4
	5		

9. In what region of the United States do you live?

- New England (Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont)
- Mid-Atlantic (Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, New York, and Pennsylvania)
- Great Lakes (Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Ohio, and Wisconsin)
- Plains (Iowa, Kansas, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota)
- Southeast (Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, Virginia, and West Virginia)
- Southwest (Arizona, New Mexico, Oklahoma, and Texas)
- Rocky Mountain (Colorado, Idaho, Montana, Utah, and Wyoming)
- Far West (Alaska, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Oregon, and Washington)

- United States Territory (American Samoa, Guam, Northern Mariana Islands, Puerto Rico, U.S. Virgin Islands)

10. Which of the following do you provide? (please check ALL that apply)

- Individual therapy
- Group therapy
- Couples therapy
- Family therapy
- Case management
- Other direct work with clients (please describe):

None of the above

11. What is your PRIMARY treatment or theoretical orientation? Please only list ONE.

Example #1: Cognitive Behavioral Therapy

Example #2: Psychodynamic

(Question #12 will only be asked of participants with their MSW or DSW as determined by question #5.)

12. Are you licensed to independently practice social work?

Yes – Directed to questions #13 – 15

No – Directed to "Online Dating Questions" #16-24

13. How many years of experience do you have as a licensed independent social worker?

- 1-2 years
- 3-5 years
- 6-10 years
- 11 years or more

14. Do you provide clinical supervision... (please check ALL that apply)

- to social work students?
- to social workers who are not yet independently licensed?
- to independently licensed social workers?
- as a member of a peer supervision group?
- None of the above

15. Do you teach social work at the undergraduate or graduate level?

- Yes
- No

Online Dating Questions

16. Have you ever used an online dating website or application?

- Yes
- No – Directed to: 16.a. Why have you never used an online dating website or application? _____

Then directed to the final page of the survey where participants can choose to "Submit" their answers.

17. Was/Is your use of online dating concurrent with your practice as a social worker?
- Yes
 - No – Directed to: 17.a Why has your use of online dating not been concurrent with your social work practice?

Then directed to the final page of the survey where participants can choose to "Submit" their answers.

18. Did you have any reservations or misgivings about dating online?
- Yes – Directed to: 18.a. What reservations or misgivings did you have about dating online?

No

19. Have you ever searched for the dating profile(s) of... (please check ALL that apply)
- a client?
 - a client's relative or another significant person in the life of a client?
- If either or both of the above boxes is checked, directed to: 19.a Why did you search for the online dating profile of a client, their relative or another significant person in the life of a client?

19.b. What occurred following your search for the dating profile of a client, their relative or another significant person in the life of a client?

None of the above

20. When dating online, did you do anything differently because of your profession as a social worker?

- Yes – Directed to 20.a. When dating online, what did you do differently because of your profession as a social worker?

No

21. While dating online, have you ever encountered a client?

- Yes – Directed to: 21.a. After encountering a client while online dating, did you do any of the following? Please check ALL that apply.

- Took no action
- Discussed it with a supervisor
- Discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer
- Called the NASW ethics consultation hotline
- Discussed it with the client

Other (please explain):

21.b. Please describe in detail the occurrence(s) in which you encountered a client while online dating, what action was taken and what resulted:

No

22. While online dating, have you ever encountered a relative of a client or another significant person in the life of a client (friend, mentor, etc.)?

Yes – Directed to: 22.a. After encountering a relative or another significant person in the life of a client while online dating, did you do any of the following? Please check ALL that apply.

- Took no action
- Discussed it with a supervisor
- Discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer
- Called the NASW ethics consultation hotline
- Discussed it with the client
- Discussed it with the client's relative/significant person in the client's life
- Other (please explain):

22.b. Please describe in detail the occurrence(s) in which you encountered a relative or another significant person in the life of a client while online dating, what action was taken and what resulted:

No

23. To your knowledge has a client ever learned that you were online dating?

Yes – Directed to: 23.a. After a client learned you were online dating, did you do any of the following? Please check ALL that apply.

- Took no action
- Discussed it with a supervisor
- Discussed it with a social work peer or other mental health provider peer
- Called the NASW ethics consultation hotline
- Discussed it with the client
- Other (please explain):

23.b. Please describe in detail the occurrence(s) in which a client learned that you were online dating, what action was taken and what resulted:

No

24. If there is anything else you would like to add, please do so below: (This could include anything you would like to add that wasn't addressed by the survey, what you thought of the survey, etc.)

Thank you very much for your time! **Please click DONE to make sure your responses are counted.**

If you would like to know more about online dating as a clinician, the following link may be of interest to you:

<http://drkkolmes.com/2013/07/16/clinicianpersonals/>

If you would like to learn more about the NASW ethics consultation hotline, please follow the link below:

<https://www.socialworkers.org/nasw/ethics/consultation.asp>

With sincere thanks,

Miriam Stevens
Smith College School for Social Work
mstevens@smith.edu

Appendix D

Recruitment Messages

Seeking social workers and social work students for my master's thesis
The link below is to a brief, 15-20 minute, survey that explores online dating in the social work profession. I am looking for social workers (who are either enrolled in or graduated from a BSW or MSW program) to participate regardless of their experience with online dating. Please help me collect as many responses as possible by taking the survey and passing it along to your social work colleagues and classmates.

LINK HERE

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (SCSSW HSRC). The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Miriam Stevens
Smith College School for Social Work
mstevens@smith.edu

Hello (Name of Person),
I am conducting research for my Master's Thesis that explores online dating in the social work profession. I am looking for social workers and social work students (who are either enrolled in or graduated from a BSW or MSW program) to respond to a brief, 15-20 minute, survey regardless of their experience with online dating. Please help me collect as many responses as possible by taking the survey and passing it along to your social work colleagues and classmates.

LINK HERE

This study protocol has been reviewed and approved by the Smith College School for Social Work Human Subjects Review Committee (SCSSW HSRC). The data collected from this study will be used to complete my Master's in Social Work (MSW) Thesis. The results of the study may also be used in publications and presentations.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration,

Miriam Stevens
Smith College School for Social Work
mstevens@smith.edu

Appendix E

Human Subjects Review Committee Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

December 2, 2015

Miriam Stevens

Dear Miriam,

You did a very nice job on your revisions. Your project is now approved by the Human Subjects Review Committee.

Please note the following requirements:

Consent Forms: All subjects should be given a copy of the consent form.

Maintaining Data: You must retain all data and other documents for at least three (3) years past completion of the research activity.

In addition, these requirements may also be applicable:

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of the study (such as design, procedures, consent forms or subject population), please submit these changes to the Committee.

Renewal: You are required to apply for renewal of approval every year for as long as the study is active.

Completion: You are required to notify the Chair of the Human Subjects Review Committee when your study is completed (data collection finished). This requirement is met by completion of the thesis project during the Third Summer.

Congratulations and our best wishes on your interesting study.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee
CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor

Appendix F

Protocol Change Approval Letter



School for Social Work
Smith College
Northampton, Massachusetts 01063
T (413) 585-7950 F (413) 585-7994

December 15, 2015

Miriam Stevens

Dear Miriam:

I have reviewed your amendment and it looks fine. The amendment to your study is therefore approved. Thank you and best of luck with your project.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Elaine Kersten'.

Elaine Kersten, Ed.D.
Co-Chair, Human Subjects Review Committee

CC: Jean LaTerz, Research Advisor