

RESEARCH REVIEW: MIND WHAT YOU POST

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Welcome to the first research column, which will highlight reports of research studies into life online, online therapy and methodological issues related to online research. In this edition, I will mention just one study that reveals an intriguing aspect of online life: the habits of people in maintaining a social networking presence online seem accurately to reveal aspects of their personality – a hot topic for any therapists who have an online life outside their professional persona.

Social networking is commonplace and continues to grow. It has been estimated that 1 in 12 of the entire world's population - men, women and children - now have a Facebook profile [see <http://www.facebook.com/press/info.php?statistics> for more details] with the average Facebook user being connected to 130 others. Applications like Foursquare may allow people you don't even know to track you down in bars, cafés or even your home [Hickman, 2010] and there are increasing numbers of alternative social networking opportunities.

Therapists who practice online and also use social networking sometimes fall foul of dangers they may not have predicted. You may be careful not to post anything but the most professional of statements - but your acquaintances and friends may not realise the importance of saving your blushes. That party you attended where you let your hair down in your teenage years may re-emerge quite possibly without your knowledge, let alone consent and reveal you in a way quite different from the image you would want to project to colleagues, let alone clients, and those too

may become part of your public, or semi-public, Internet presence while removing them can be a difficult task.

It is not only what others may post about us that can be revealing. What we say about ourselves is just as important. A study by the Universities of Mainz (Germany) and Texas (USA), reported in the journal *Psychological Science* (Back *et al.*, 2010), has shown that people tend accurately to reflect their real selves in designing their online presence, revealing aspects of their personality. Many people might expect a little creative manipulation of one's image by use of a photograph from a few years ago, or a description of a happy and successful approach to life that is not the whole story. But this does not seem to be as much the case as might be thought.

The study compared personality traits such as openness, extroversion, conscientiousness and agreeableness, as recorded by both the individual themselves and a small group of their close friends, with ratings generated by the researchers after examining the person's Facebook profile. The match between the researcher's guesses and the actual personality test scores was not exact but was significantly higher than would be expected by chance. The exception was assessment of neuroticism, which varied more greatly, but which is in any case difficult to assess accurately.

So therapists who have an online life should be aware that anyone who comes across their profiles may be getting a real insight into who they are beyond what they have deliberately chosen to present. We reveal our real selves, it seems, rather than an idealised version and furthermore our personality traits are open for others to judge. Genuineness and transparency in therapy are desirable, of course, and seem to be present to a greater degree online than we might

have guessed. Your clients, friends and colleagues who access your information are likely to be getting to know the real you.

The content may not only be of interest to your employer, colleagues and acquaintances but also to your current and prospective clients. Eventually, most practitioners will have among their clientele a few individuals whose interest in information about their therapist is not entirely benign, appropriate or respectful of boundaries. At the very least, you are likely to be ‘checked out’ and information will be used in ways you cannot directly influence.

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