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# "Let us Talk to People, not to Computers": Obstacles for Establishing Relationships and Trust in Social Workers' Online Communities of Practice

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**Abstract.** The paper studies social workers' online communities of practice and presents the perceptions of their members about such online communities' potential for establishing relationships and trust. The interviewees expressed three main clusters of reasons for why relationships and trust cannot be properly established and sustained through online communities of practice. These reasons involve general hostility to computer-mediated communication as an arena for relationship development, the non-computerized professional environment of social workers, and particular features of the communities that were studied.

Keywords: communication, online communities, communities of practice, trust, relationships

## 1 Theoretical Background

This paper investigates the following questions: how do social workers use online communities of practice, and do they perceive of these communities as venues for establishing relationships with peers, mutual accord and trust?

A number of theories have addressed the potential to establish relationships and trust through computer-mediated environments. The 'first wave' of such theories found that Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) could not sustain elaborate forms of relational development and support as Face to Face (FtF) communication does. For example, the Reduced Cues (or 'cues-filtered-out') theory implies that communication media possess sets of characteristics that correspond to distinct levels of richness. Richer communication media support more cues and help yield higher levels of social presence. Arguably, higher levels of social presence result in greater attention to the presence of others and greater awareness of, and conformity to, social norms [1-3]. The relative absence of cues in CMC leads to reduced awareness of the social environment, reduced opportunities for social control and regulation, reduced concerns for social approbation and decreased adherence to social norms.

Later theories, such as Social Information Processing (SIP) theory [4,5] recognize that continuing communication enables the development of the normative conditions

for cooperation in CMC, even if cooperation is established slower than in face-to-face communicative environments. Repeated interaction involves continuous and mutual reception and verification of cues, and people find ways to adapt to the limitations of the medium and reduce uncertainty [5,6]. Consequently, cooperation increases over time, and converges to rates observed in FtF communication [5,7]. Indeed, it may take longer for accord and trust to be established and sustained in computer mediated environments, but time and richness of the environment can assist in achieving accord and trust in a smoother fashion.

The SIDE theory (Social Identity Model of Depersonalization Effects; see [8-10]) manifests a third theoretical sphere. Along with SIP theory, SIDE theory emphasizes the social context of CMC. However, SIDE theory shows, perhaps counter-intuitively, that the social context of communication may be especially salient, and the influence of social norms particularly effective, with the relative absence of information about people. When a CMC environment is characterized by a salient sense of group membership, the lack of other cues leads to a stronger influence of social norms on behavior and to compliance with situational norms. While CMC indeed blocks a range of interpersonal cues, it often leaves some group-level social cues intact. Research demonstrates that in such circumstances, group membership becomes situationally relevant and people are more likely to adapt to the situational norms.

While the earlier literature surveyed above suggests a uniform effect of technology over behavior, later literature demonstrates a differential effect of online interactions on trust and relationships, according to different personality types. For example, the work of Amichai-Hamburger [11,12] demonstrates that introverted character types may benefit more from using the Internet than extroverted types. The Internet also yields great potential in assisting those who suffer from social anxieties and are afraid of exposing themselves to others. Such people can encounter protected environment online, in which they have better control over the communication processes and are more comfortable to expose their “true selves" [13,14]. Thus, in addition to environmental variables that affect the ability to establish accord and trust online, personal characteristics matter as well.

Arguably, the uses and effects of online communities of practice may also vary across practices. For example, it is likely that workers in the hi-tech industry will be more open towards developing relationships and trust online than members of other professions who do not use computers regularly; similarly, older professionals who worked most of their lives in non-digital environments may find it harder to navigate through online relationships than younger, “digitally native” professionals. In reference to social workers’ communities in particular, in the only published case study that we could locate, Leung et al. describe one social workers’ online community of practice as a source of empowerment and solidarity for its members, which enables them not only to acquire information and knowledge but also to frame a collective identity [15]. Still, Eaglestein et al., in writing about the informational needs of social workers, argue that many potential obstacles exist for social workers to enjoy the benefits of online communities of practice, due to concerns such as breaching patients’ confidentiality online, damage to the therapeutic connection, and even lack of

technological knowledge and misuse fears that may hinder social workers' optimal utilization of such online environments [16].

Lastly, in addition to the variables concerning personality and profession, the design of the forum can also make a difference in terms of its success in developing trust. For example, anonymity may promote a more open discussion and thus yield a greater quantity of contributions. At the same time, anonymity is also the primary factor that undermines the deliberative potential of the platform. Other key design factors involve synchronisity or lack thereof, rules, and moderation style [17,18].

### 1.1 Research Setting: Social Workers' Online Communities of Practice

The current study takes a fresh look at the potential that online communities of practice yield to establish relationships and trust, by analyzing the case of social workers' online communities of practice that were established by the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services.

The communities of practice studied represent a unique case in Israel, whereby a governmental ministry established online forums to enable interaction between its workers and the broader community of practitioners. Such communities may have many advantages in terms of exposing local knowledge, improving knowledge circulation and even supporting professional acquaintance and solidarity between workers [19]. At the same time, they can disseminate employees' open criticism of their supervisors and damage working relations within the office, as well as generate criticism of the employing agency's work and routines, among other risks. As a result, governmental ministries tend to avoid providing platforms for such interaction among workers [20]. Nonetheless, with the rise of social networking platforms, an increasing number of Israeli governmental bodies are offering more opportunities for direct online interactions amongst workers, as well as between employees and citizens. The communities of practice that are studied here, which were established already in 2006, can be seen as pioneers of this phenomenon.

In establishing these professional networking communities, the Ministry intended to provide a new platform for knowledge exchange and circulation, mainly for social workers who did not have similar arenas. Unlike many other professions whose work is computer-based, many of the social workers who take part in the communities spend their days in the field, dealing with people from low socioeconomic strata who often live under harsh circumstances. In this sense, many of the social workers, including the people who were interviewed for this study, refer to themselves as "people persons" – as opposed to those who spend much of their work-day in front of a computer screen. Hence, the provision of Internet-based communities of practice for such "people persons" yields some interesting research questions.

The Ministry employees who initiated and supervised these online communities of practice were aware of the importance of face-to-face meetings, in addition to the virtual encounters between community members. When the communities were established, a dilemma surfaced regarding whether face-to-face meetings should be carried out. Such meetings would clearly facilitate social and professional links between community members and provide opportunities to form new relationships and

strengthen trust. On the other hand, physical meetings may not be accessible to community members who are unable to participate for reasons of distance, cost, disabilities or other barriers. Hence, it was ultimately decided to limit the interaction to the online realm, without a face-to-face component [21].

Since 2006 when the communities were established, 9,000 members have enrolled into one or more of the 31 communities concerning topics such as Domestic Violence, Adoption, Juvenile Delinquency, Mental Disabilities, and other administrative forums in which regulation and ethics are discussed. All communication in the forums is identified, using members' real names. The forum is based on a standard web platform (see Fig. 1 below), where discussion is threaded and latest comments appear first, pushing down earlier comments. The discussion in Figure 1 focuses on legalizing the use of Marijuana for patients with post-traumatic stress disorders.

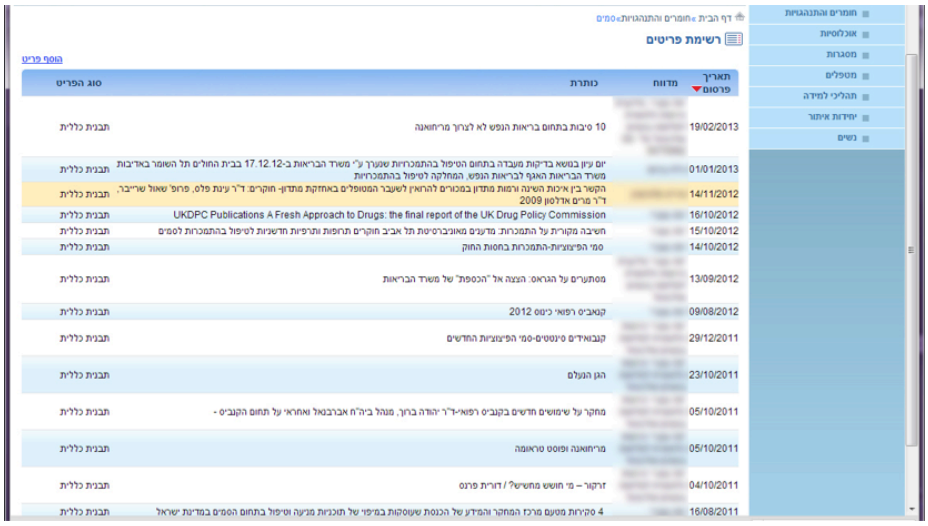


**Fig. 1.** A screenshot of the Addictions community portal

In the current study, we investigate whether online community members perceive the communities as places where they can establish relationships and trust. We hypothesize that community members perceive their computerized interactions as a sphere in which relationships and trust can be created and sustained. The online professional communities studied conform well to the environments in which the SIP and even SIDE model works best, in that they are composed of people who handle the same issues and are familiar with one another over time to a certain degree – online and even offline.

## 2 Methodology

The paper is a part of a larger project that analyzes the content of the online communities of practice of the Israeli Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, as well as their perceived effects on their members.

For this purpose, a twofold research methodology was applied. First, we undertook a content analysis of all the available materials – 7,248 posts altogether from the establishment of the communities through mid 2012. Second, 71 semi-structured interviews were conducted with community members. Based on data received from the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services, members were sampled according to their levels of engagement – number of logins to the community, as well as number of times that they contributed content. Interviews were conducted by five interviewers across Israel, and the average length of an Interview was some 45 minutes. Interviews were transcribed and analyzed using a thematic-interpretive method [22]. The findings in the paper below are largely based on these interviews.

## 3 Findings

Our findings demonstrate that 76% of community members enrolled were lurkers, who never initiated a discussion or contributed to an existing discussion thread. An additional 21% initiated or responded to a discussion thread between once and ten times. These findings correspond to what we know from past research about the high percentage of lurkers that characterize many online communities [23,24].

According to the content analysis, the majority of posts comprised either requests for assistance (22.1%), provision of assistance (42.1%), or both (2.6%). 3.4% included messages of support. 39.3% of the posts had references to professional assistance, 25.7% included references to organizational assistance, and 6.4% to academic assistance. Note that when an answer is made public in the community, not only the person who asked the question but also the entire community benefits from the answer, including lurkers who read the comments but do not post themselves [24,25]. These data suggest that communities function as a platform for collaboration and mutual assistance, at least for the people who actively participate in them, and possibly for a large chunk of lurkers as well.

Hence, it seems that while not many members actively participate in creating content for the communities, those who do provide a high degree of mutual assistance and support that both benefits the contributors and may also spill over to benefit the lurkers as well. So do community members indeed perceive their online communities as a realm for establishing relationships and trust, and more generally, do they perceive of the Internet – the technical platform of their communities – as hospitable for creating relationships and trust?

### 3.1 Hostility to CMC Arenas as Relationship-Supporting Environments

Contrary to our hypothesis, most the people interviewed expressed the view that Internet forums and the Internet in general are not useful for and actually hinder the establishment of relationships and trust, for a variety of reasons. Social workers interviewed very frequently stated that it was difficult for them to "connect" to the virtual community platforms because face-to-face meetings were irreplaceable and computer-mediation generates a “cold” and "alienated" environment.

Interviewee 1 is a passive participant in the community Juvenile Delinquency, does not read the posts and does post herself. She states that

[g]enerally, I am not a technological person, I don't do chats or post comments. I am a person who needs to speak [with the others party]. Being in front of a computer is very difficult for me…I keep saying I am a social worker! Let me talk to people, not to computers.

Interviewee 2, a member of the Addictions community, says,

maybe this is because of my advanced age, but I really don’t understand how one can have a sense of belonging to something on the Internet…let’s talk about work issues, why do we need the forum for that? Why do we need the Internet to get closer to one another as human beings…why those emails? Pick up the phone – let’s talk as humans.

Interviewee 3, a member of a community concerning Mental Disabilities, notes the need for an unmediated human connection: "I am interested in some response, some verbal interaction. I am not able to fully connect to the electronic world…” Interviewee 4 argues that "[online interaction does] not replace friendship. It's not instead of acquaintance. It cannot replace a peer discourse that we sometimes generate amongst ourselves."

This latter interviewee expresses the dichotomy between the perceived functioning of a typical social worker and the computerized world. She implies that technology can harm the connection created throughout a long process of relating to her patients. In reference to this issue, Interviewee 5, a member of the Domestic Violence community, notes that while she occasionally posts a comment concerning a dilemma she might have, but she always prefers to ask people face-to-face, as "even a phone call is better than a forum…I like [a] personal touch with people much more." Yet, even the phone is not an ideal communication device for a social worker, in this interviewee’s opinion.

Interviewee 6, from the Family Courts community, states that, "I handle myself much better in a human, not text-based environment… [online contact is] not like sitting with people and carrying out a dialogue, getting support and feeling the 'softness.'" Interviewees complained that the online connection hinders their ability to express emotions, grant and receive support – essential elements in this profession. For example, Interviewee 3 notes: "I think that in our world, most people don't get support through this media…we are people persons, and I don't think that the Internet can do the job…" The online forum seems to provide an inferior arena in particular for expressing emotions than face-to-face conversations do. One of the highlights of the community is the support that it provides to its members, but according to mem-

bers' perceptions, it seems that an emotional message is difficult to convey in text when the physical dimension is absent.

Interviewee 7, a member of the Juvenile Delinquency and Addictions communities who posts frequently, expresses similar concerns. "Generally, I would not go to some Internet forum to ask a question even if I get an immediate online response…this is not my medium." Interviewee 8, from the Addictions community, says that

This medium has many features that are inferior to face-to-face conversation. A little more of the personal contact, the intonation that allows you to fully understand what was said and reduce misunderstandings […] I prefer to get my support from someone I am personally acquainted with. It's much better to talk to people that I know than [to those that] I don't know.

Interviewee 9, from the Addictions community: "I feel uneasy to address a crowd that I don't see. I need to look at people in the eyes." Interviewee 10, from the Developmental Cognitive Disabilities community, echoes a similar concern, "I am not of the Facebook era, I don't like it, it's not the same. I mean I don't like all this publicity…I personally like…arenas in which people sit and talk, and meet."

Cues that are manifest in gestures, body language and tone in face-to-face communication are generally missing from computer-mediated communication and jeopardize the process of asking for and receiving support, according to the interviewees. These cues reflect what is being said "between the lines," the subtext of the conversation that is necessary to understand the wider context of the written words.

Interviewee 11, a member of Juvenile Delinquency and Social Resilience, was asked about the forum as a source of support. She answered:

Recently, we had very complex issues here, and needed to support some workers… only when we sat together in a closed room, just us talking, only then could we truly ventilate. We can ventilate in writing, but it's not for real. Because [the situation that we need to address] is very emotional. I think it gets lost when it's on the computer, including what you can express and what others can give you. The emotional support you can get one-on-one, or even in a group, is much greater than in a text-based forum… addressing the cases we run into is very difficult, and our emotional needs cannot be fully fulfilled, in my opinion, in the forum. In any forum. It's not that this particular forum does not fit, no forum would.

### 3.2 The Professional Environment of Social Workers and the Use of Online Forums

Many of the interviewees noted not only a general preference for FtF over CMC, but also stressed that additional factors related to the social work profession lead to a perception of the Internet as an arena ill-suited for social workers. Factors mentioned involve the way in which the profession is taught in universities and practiced in workplaces (this factor was expressed by a small number of interviewees but was in the subtext of quite a few other interviews), as well as the types of relationships formed with clients. Some interviewees said that they initially chose to become social workers despite the low wages that are typical of this profession because they felt that they needed a "human touch" and the opportunity to develop interpersonal relations

through their work. They felt more comfortable interacting with a person facing them, whereby his or her gestures can be seen and tone of voice can be heard. Many perceive computer-mediated environments to produce obstacles in the professional discourse.

Interviewee 12, from the Community Work community, argues that social workers usually do not use the Internet while at work. She notes:

We are still a bit technophobic…we are social workers…we don't do communication, computer science… although I am a forum member for five years, I still feel like I am in the dark. I don't always know how to use it, and where to look for what I need to find.

She also says that "the connection to the Internet is very new to social workers, first of all because in many municipalities, there even isn't an Internet connection in the department of social services."

Another practical concern involves the fears of breaches of patients' privacy and confidentiality. Interviewee 13, who belongs to the Youth at Risk and Addictions communities, argues that "I consult many groups, but not this group. This group is too large for me and there are too many holes through which things can 'leak.'"

Interviewee 14, of the Community Work community, says, "it sounds a bit strange to me to write such things on the Internet…this is awkward, because its open and everyone can see [the posts]."A, a member of the Youth Law community states that, "I don't feel the need, and I also don't feel comfortable in terms of privacy and secrecy. …it seems to me too much…I prefer consulting someone face-to-face…although these are colleagues, it is open on the Internet." Interviewee 3, a member of the community concerning the Mental Disabilities, argues, "I don't think that people can really bring up real hardships and dilemmas in such a large-scale forum with many people. This contradicts everything we studied in the university." Critically, she notes that it is not only how the profession is practiced, but also how it is studied in the universities, that increases the tension with technology.

Interviewee 15, a director of a mental institution, describes her concerns regarding technology and hints at the fact that the Internet does not forget: "it's all there until eternity, just stays there. I think people who don't understand that [they are] are irresponsible…there is no delete [button]…you wrote it, it stays there…that's why I don't like this thing…this Internet."

Seemingly, one dominant factor in determining access to and use of communities was age. Most of the interviewees who associated their age with suspicions from and dislike towards technology, were classified as lurkers. According to a survey from 2009 [26], the average age of community members is 43, and ages range between 21 and 77. The largest age group is 30-39 (33%), a quarter of members are between ages 40-49, and another full quarter at the ages 50-59. Among the interviewees in the current study, the average age was 44.

Most likely, the older social workers found it more difficult to think of the communities of practice as a site for bonding. But even a 45-years old interviewee, who has been a member since the communities were established but writes very little, describes herself as highly suspicious of the online realm, and thinks of the Internet as

"dangerous". Throughout the interview, she emphasized that her online behavior is cautious and driven by concerns. She herself associates this behavior with her age.

Interviewee 16, from the Families in Judicial Disputes community, who is 62 years old, only replied to messages she read in the communities twice in her three years of membership, although she entered the forum during this time period 170 times. She describes the linkage between her age and level of involvement as follows:

I am not one of the people who open their eyes in the morning and go straight to the computer, I don't have, for example, Internet on my cell phone, I am not subscribed to Facebook…I think this is due to my age and…I just did not grow up with this tool, and with all the need and the joy and the progress…if I have alternatives, I'll use them.

Interviewee 17, a 57-year-old member of the Domestic Violence community, argues that people in her age group do not use the computer frequently, and use other tools to get updates. "I forgot the password…I am not a computer junkie," she says.

### 3.3 Features of the Particular Forums

So far, we addressed obstacles for establishing relationships and trust that are either related to general hostility towards the Internet and preference for FtF as a medium for forming relationships and trust, or else involve social workers' professional environment, which is perceived as "inhospitable" to new technology. The third cluster of reasons for perceiving the online communities as unreceptive for forming relationships and trust has to do with the specific character of the online forums that host these communities.

One complaint by a relatively small number of interviewees, addressed the asynchronous character of the forums. Interviewee 3, from the community concerning the Mental Disabilities, noted: "I don't have the patience to wait for people's replies. If I am interested in something, I will call someone and ask [her]." Interviewee 18, from the Juvenile Delinquency and Domestic Violence communities, concurs: "I don't like the fact that I need to wait until I get a reply. I prefer to chat."

Other complaints involved the forums' text-based nature and the need for a more graphical and interactive user interface. Interviewee 19 argues that "we are not all 'Shakespeares' in writing… When one is not eloquent and may have spelling mistakes, this may deter her from participating."

A number of interviewees raised the need for a more graphical and interactive user interface. Interestingly, the number of interviewees who complained about the lack a more "Facebook-like" interface, and the number of people who expressed fears from technology, was similar.

When asked what was missing in the forums, Interviewee 4 replied: "mostly, the ability to see each others' faces." Interviewee 20 describes the communities as "very schematic, dark, not vivid… something must be done with the graphical interface!" Interviewee 21 agrees: "I think that other forums are conducted in a friendlier, clearer, novel fashion…This seems like something that was created ten years ago and not upgraded since." Interviewee 22 argues that

A ‘Facebook-like’ interface would have made the forums much nicer… even at the level of professional attachment… suppose that each [member] had his name, profession, where he works, and additional details… like in Facebook, when you suddenly see a picture in some chat.

Another interviewee says:

If a technology like Skype were used, it may have been different because you could see faces, or consult like an online supervision – I know such things exist. But right now, it’s pure textual discussion, you write 5, 6, 10 sentences, it’s not like… it’s not enough.

### 3.4 Trust and Mistrust

We have discussed above the clusters of factors that explain why community members feel that online forums fail to enable them to develop relationships and trust. Nearly all social workers interviewed argued that for a variety of reasons – general mistrust and recoil from technology, factors associated with social workers’ professional environment and training, and even the particular designs of the online communities’ interfaces – they felt that the forums were not a good tool for developing relationships and contributing information. How do these circumstances affect the creation of trust?

In online communities, trust is a crucial factor. Each participant must believe that the information in the community is reliable and that he or she can trust the person who provided this information. Mistrust can result in abstaining from participation. Also, community members must believe that other members act for the interests of the entire community and that they have the knowledge and capability to do so [27-29]. Yet despite the theoretical significance of such trust, in line with the issues described above, users argue that it is very difficult to establish such trust in a system that is built on virtual connections.

Interviewee 23, from the Youth Law community, notes that

[Even when] I appreciate people based on their reactions in the forum, when I don’t know them in person, I can still never fully trust them. In spite of everything, you don’t know them…there are people I know personally in the forum, in which cases I'll take what they say.

According to this interviewee and others, face-to-face familiarity increases the level of trust even as the discussion moves online. The interviewees expressed their concerns regarding “not knowing who the writer really is.” In the Ministry of Social Affairs and Social Services’ online communities, anonymity is not an option, and any post is accompanied by the first and last name of the writer; yet according to members’ perceptions, such identification does not equate actual acquaintance and generates insecurity. Interviewee 24, from Community Work, explains why she makes little use of the communities: "it's more difficult for me, this whole Internet 'thing', talking to people that I know who they are but don't really know them…I prefer direct contact." She also notes that a stronger social presence is needed to generate trust.

One possible way to overcome the obstacle of lack of physical contact is to organize face-to-face meetings and conventions [30]. Indeed, interviewees expressed a need

to "at least know who is sitting on the other end". Interviewee 25, in the Youth Law and Community Work communities, says that “it may be a good idea to organize once in a while a conference about the communities of practice, to expose me to the personalities who use the communities…so I can see them in person, and not only through the computer.”

Interviewee 24 says that "it seems very important to me to implement common study groups or peer groups so we know who the partners are [for the online discussions] … Because the messages includes the name [of the person who posted them], but we don't know who this person is." Interviewee 25 gives an example of how face-to-face familiarity can contribute to future communication:

One of my positive memories is of a course that was for all the social workers who work with people under arrest…we work a lot with each other over the phone, and this interpersonal contact made a lot [of impact after the course ended]. It also made our contacts better and generated more trust.

Only a few interviewees expressed the opposite notion, i.e. that the interactions in the online communities support and enable trust more easily than other forms of communication do. Yet all interviewees viewe the key building blocks of trust as relationships that continue from the online communities to the professional realm outside them. For example, Interviewee 26, from the Youth Law community, says,

When we need to [transfer files] from town to town, we pick up the phone and you hear, it's X, and it's someone name you already saw in the community and maybe you've even corresponded with…it breaks obstacles and make conducting a dialogue much easier. Because…it’s like we know each other.

Interviewee 27, from the Autism, Developmental Cognitive Disabilities and Toddlers with Special Needs communities, explains that

There is a mother of an autistic child who regularly posts a diary like a personal column. I read it all the time…we met in real life when she came to consult with me…it was very funny to learn that I know her and learn from her.

But just as building trust can be prolonged and difficult, breaking it online can be immediate and disastrous for community members. Two examples demonstrate this. A veteran social worker and member of the Children at Risk community, relates an incident in which a divorced social worker was allowed to join the community:

Once there was a discussion in which a father who did not have custody of his children started to intervene and cursed the professionals…if there is a client in there, than it's not a professional community anymore, and then even in this place where I can feely express myself in front of my colleagues, I cannot do it anymore…it's always going to be like that. I can never know who really watches the discussions, there is no way for me to know…for me it was a sort of intrusion…they'll have to rebuild the trust that was compromised.

Hence, it seems that the communities’ designation as closed membership by invitation only does not contribute adequately to the sense of intimacy, and although entrance is granted to professionals only, the concern that transgressors might enter always exists. Monitoring for such cases is much more difficult online than offline.

Thinking of these communities as arenas of assistance and support can demonstrate why a breach of trust can be devastating. Interviewee 28, of the Youth Law community, notes:, writes:

We had a crisis in the forum, one of the social workers was arrested… on misdemeanor charges regarding a boy that he acted as the caregiver for… This guy was very, very active in the forum and everyone was shocked.

The manager of the community to which this social worker belonged describes the same case from her perspective:

We experienced a betrayal…the guy was very, very active in the discussions, and also uploaded a lot of materials to the community… it's like, you know, we are in a closed community, the closed discussion of professionals, we act like protectors and suddenly the offender comes from among us; he came from inside our house.

In referring to this incident as no less than a betrayal, the interviewees demonstrate the high expectations they had regarding mutual sincerity and the ability to trust one another. When the bonds are so strong, the damage may be severe, and the restoration of broken trust may be very difficult. Of course, such cases occur in offline-based communities as well. But in absence of contextual cues, with a better control of the communication and an enhanced ability to expose only very particular sides of one's personality that the Internet offers, such betrayals of trust can be, arguably, more difficult to trace.

## 4 Discussion and Conclusions

Online communities of practice utilized by government ministries are a rare species. The communities of the Ministry of Welfare Services have been established to improve information disclosure and dissemination, as well as to enhance the familiarity of professionals with one another and the sense of solidarity between them. Based on existing theories such as SIP and SIDE, we had initially hypothesized that community members would perceive their computerized interactions as a place where relationships and trust are generated and sustained. The embeddedness in a common professional background and the acquaintance over time, might arguably have made these communities of practice a hotbed for developing relationships and trust.

Yet, contrary to our hypothesis, the predictions of the "Reduced Cues" theory seem to provide a much better fit to the picture portrayed by this study's interviews. With few exceptions, interviewees argued that the communities do not serve as a fertile ground for cooperation, but rather fail to produce accord and trust. Indeed, in their perspective, the physical dimension is necessary to support the trust that forms online, and in absence of the physical dimension there would be very little chance of developing relationships online.

Subjects provided three clusters of explanations regarding why online communities do not generate relationships and trust. One cluster involved general mistrust and dislike of technology and the Internet in particular. It seems that the character of people who use those communities, some of whom declare themselves to be "people persons" who feel much more comfortable in face-to-face settings than in computer-

mediated environments, may provide context for the prevalence of such negative attitudes towards technology. Moreover, age may be a factor as well, as such attitudes seem to be more prevalent among older social workers.

Another cluster of reasons involves the professional environment of the social workers. Aside from the seeing predisposition people who choose to be social workers have against technology (especially among older social workers), their education, socialization to the profession and daily dealing with patients and workplaces all hinder the sense that online forums are a hospitable environment for developing relationships and trust.

The third cluster involves characteristics of the particular forums that were studied – for example, the absence of options for a synchronous and more immediate communication, and the graphical environment that seems too basic to some who dislike technology in general, but prefer environments such as Skype and Facebook, which offer richer and more immediate interactions.

Note that these findings are surprising, given the vast literature that argues that online environments similar to the one found in our study can gradually become no inferior to FtF environments in terms of forming relationships and trust; notably, see Rheingold's early study [31] of the rich relationships formed online through the WELL community, which was purely text-based. This is also surprising in light of the rich discussions that do take place in the communities, as well as the significant layers of assistance and support that were located using content analysis.

It seems that a lot of the difference between our findings and earlier findings may be a result of the character traits of social workers, many of whom declare themselves eager to have "human touch" and perceive computer-mediated discussion to disable the development of emotions, support, sense of belonging and trust. At present, the environment in which social workers are trained and work also does not seem to support familiarity with the Internet and Internet-based forums as professional tools.

Still, younger "digitally native" social workers seem better able to adapt to the online communities of practice. Future studies should look at the transformation of the profession to a more technological realm, which seem to many to be unavoidable. Moving online communities to richer environments such as Facebook may assist this process, and Facebook groups of social workers may be an interesting arena for additional future studies. It would also be interesting to compare the social media usage patterns of social workers and other therapeutic professions with those found in online communities generated for other professions.

At minimum, it seems that the conclusion derived from our study is that research about relationship formation and maintenance, participation, collaboration and trust in online communities of practice should be sensitive to the practice of the professionals who use them. Scholars should be hesitant to generalize their findings from one particular online community of practice to all such communities. Researchers should keep in mind that people who practice different professions can behave very differently in the communities of practice that they use and have very different expectations from these professional forums.

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