

404: Human Connection Not Found?

Bethany Watters, McKenzie Miller, Matheo Pasley, Greg Royal, Marci Culley Ph.D.
Department of Social Sciences, College of Coastal Georgia, Brunswick, Georgia

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Cyber ethics, also known as computer ethics or internet ethics, is a branch of applied ethics that examines the moral, legal, and social issues arising from the use of computer and information technologies.

Over the last year, there have been multiple high profile incidents involving AI chatbots and their use in clinical practice. The ones to prompt a response from the APA include the cases of a 17 year old boy in Texas being encouraged to murder his parents after conversing with a chatbot that claimed to be a licensed therapist, and a 14 year old boy in Florida committing suicide following the same path, talking to an AI chatbot that claimed to be an experienced therapist.

Following these cases, the APA stated that there are no AI chatbots permitted to be used in the context of therapy as their current unregulated use presents multiple ethical issues. But there are a few self-care and CBT chatbots train apps are allowed to be prescribed alongside traditional methods of therapy

Ethical Concerns

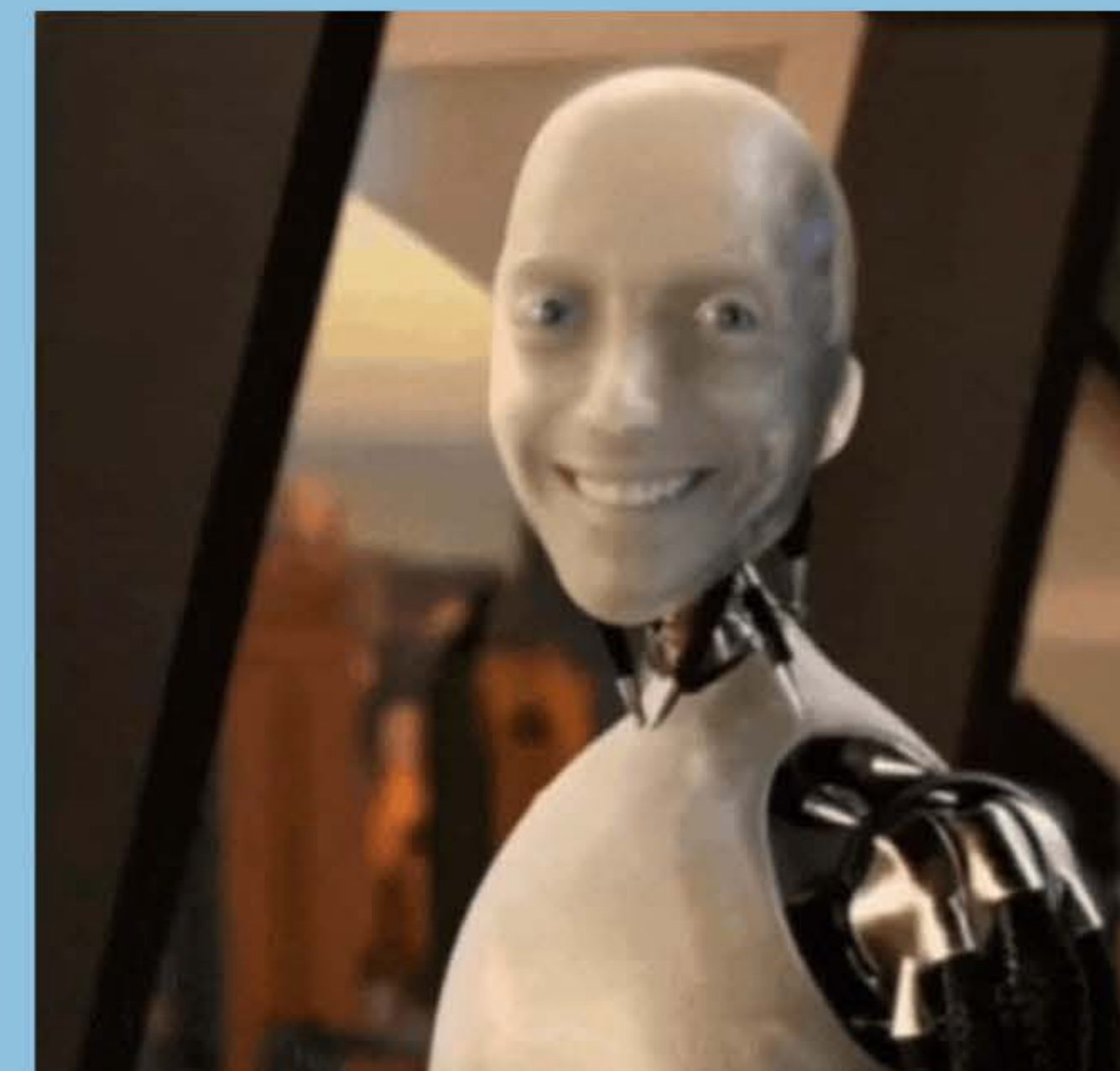
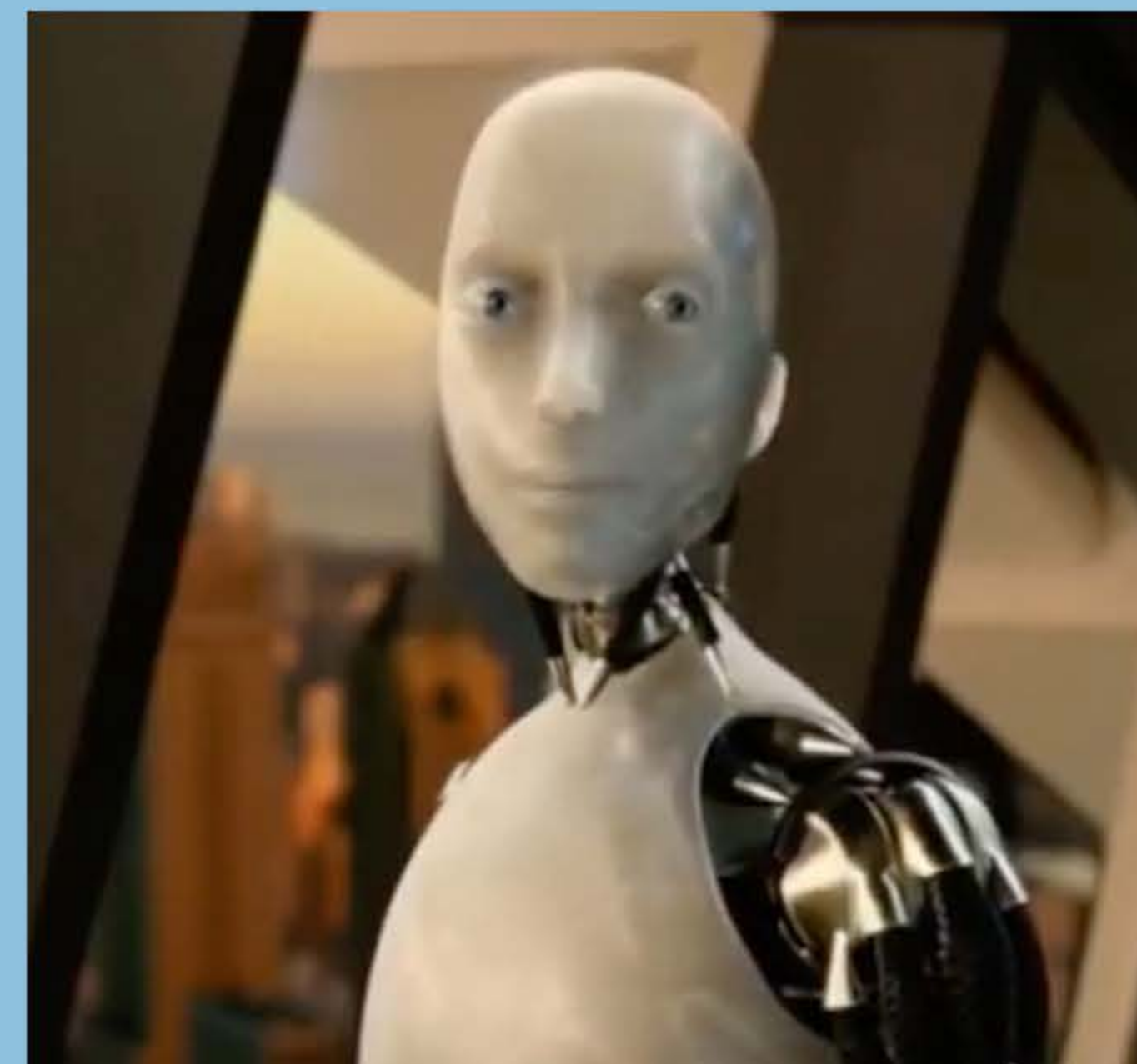
There are a myriad of ethical concerns related to the use of AI in clinical and administrative contexts. And while the APA does not have any specific standards or procedures on the use of AI in administrative tasks or clinical procedures outside of general guidelines and common sense advice, it is still important to pinpoint and address the concerns of psychologists on this issue.

- Privacy, Data collection & Use in AI Training, Innate Ignorance/Inability to Naturally Correct Itself and consent are all major themes that arise when discussing the ethical concerns around using A.I in therapy.

Relevant Standards - 2.01(a), 2.01 (b), 2.01(c), 2.01(e)

The Growing Role of Artificial Intelligence in Therapy

- AI can provide a feeling of connection in a more accessible and quicker form. But, the downfall to using AI in place of a therapeutic need is it lacks human connection. Researchers Zimmerman, Janhonen, and Beer in their report note, "AI does not have personhood, or the ability to think or experience emotion (2023)." AI often relies on feedback directly from users and developers to provide answers or advice. This makes AI limited in the range of their own feedback, which does not provide full support for someone in therapeutic need.
- Even with this shortcoming, AI is still rising in popularity as a stand-in for therapy. This opens the opportunity for, "these human/AI relationships have the potential to interfere with or even decrease the number of human/human relationships.
- All in all, AI can be an accessible alternative to combat loneliness and gain understanding of one's emotions. BUT since it lacks different components that help better mental health (empathy, human connection, etc.), it should not be used as a replacement for professional help (of any practice). In-person treatment should still be sought out primarily to receive treatment, with AI being used more an addition to your experience.
- In the US, we had the *Executive Order on the Safe, Secure, and Trustworthy Development and Use of Artificial Intelligence and the AI Bill of Rights* passed by the Biden Administration in 2024. As of this year, due to the Trump Administration revoking the executive order on AI, there is currently no federal legislation on AI and AI development.



Empathy Concerns

In occupational therapy, the use of empathy—known as the "therapeutic use of self"—is crucial for building trust and managing relationships with clients. Empathy helps therapists connect on both emotional and cognitive levels, and research shows it's a strong predictor of client improvement in psychotherapy, regardless of the approach used.

While empathy remains a core element of traditional therapy, its role is being questioned in today's increasingly digital world. Studies show that clients still respond better to empathy-based human therapy than to interactions with AI. People tend to use more negative language and express more anger when engaging with AI chatbots, which are often seen as emotionless. However, some individuals find it easier to open up to AI because they don't fear judgment.

Despite this, AI therapy has limitations. Clients often feel a disconnect, and current AI struggles to adapt to individual therapy styles or apply up-to-date practices, leading to outdated or ineffective guidance. As AI therapy evolves, empathy remains a vital component that it has yet to replicate effectively.

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