Training therapists to work effectively online and offline within digital culture

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The speed at which technology evolves, and therefore the speed at which online mental health services evolve and the training required to keep up with them, has become a real concern for the profession. The need for training in transferring face-to-face skills to the online environment has been recognised for some years by leading professional organisations as not only desirable but also essential. In addition, there is an increasing need to keep abreast of digital culture and the type of online environments that clients inhabit. This applies to counsellors and therapists whatever space they are using to deliver services, which may be in the traditional face-to-face consulting room or using tools that enable therapy at a distance, such as the Internet.

Keywords: counselling training; online counselling; technology; cross-cultural issues

Introduction

The speed at which technology evolves, and therefore the speed at which online mental health services evolve and the training required to keep up with them, has become a real concern for the profession. The need for training in transferring face-to-face skills to the online environment has been recognised for some years by leading professional organisations as not only desirable but also essential. This view has developed over time since the early 2000s in particular by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) from stating that it 'may be required' (Goss, Anthony, Jamieson, & Palmer, 2001) to it being 'strongly recommended' (Anthony & Goss, 2009).

In addition, there is an increasing need to keep abreast of digital culture and the type of online environments that clients inhabit. This applies to counsellors and therapists whatever space they are using to deliver services, which may be in the traditional face-to-face consulting room or using tools that enable therapy at a distance, such as the Internet. There is no doubt that the 25+ years that the World Wide Web has existed has had a huge impact on the way we communicate, both for work and for personal reasons. To ignore the impact of this on the profession of counselling and psychotherapy as a whole – and indeed its related professions such as coaching, guidance or peer support – is to rashly assume that these professions can continue as they have traditionally done.

This article sets out to examine three main themes that the profession faces as it moves forward into the digital world we now inhabit, both as practitioners and as clients seeking help with mental health issues. These are:

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- The issues that affect mental health in the digital world which clients bring to sessions (living in the new cyberculture).
- The importance of global education in the development of a profession moving online.
- The importance of training for practitioners who wish to provide online counselling and psychotherapy.

Background

Providing online training for online therapy is a relatively young part of the profession, certainly younger than online therapy itself, and therefore literature on it is scarce. Derrig-Palumbo and Zeine (2005, p. 124) cites the Case Study Group of the International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) as having been a useful way of training, using online forum software to discuss cases and learn from each other as peer supervisors in 2000. The American Counseling Association produced a useful textbook, including chapters around 'cyberlearning' (Bloom & Waltz, 2000). Stofle (2001, p. 41) acknowledges the lack of formal training on the topic many years ago, and recommends self-directed learning via conferences and self-directed study, as well as peer-case conferences such as that of ISMHO. Hsuing (2002, p. 133) acknowledges the importance of training on the topic emerging over the following years.

Anthony and Jones (2003), pioneers of online training services launched in the UK shortly after Stofle's book was published, presented the results of a small ($n = 17$) qualitative piece of research gathered from their respective online training services at a UK BACP research conference. The purpose of this was to see if online training was perceived to be as effective as face-to-face training. Results showed that this was widely the case overall and in the case of 'tutor support', actually better.

In 2007, ReadyMinds published on Distance Counseling with detailed information on their Distance Counselling Credential (Malone, Miller, & Walz, 2007). Evans (2009) notes the importance of training in relation to seeking knowledge about global variations in licencing laws (p. 161), and Jones and Stokes (2009) provide a useful checklist of questions for practitioners to ask of themselves in choosing an appropriate course for their needs (p. 138). The most up-to-date literature on the topic of training specifically for online therapy are chapters in Anthony and Nagel (2010) and Anthony, Nagel, and Goss (2010), where the topic is discussed in depth.

The author has been a trainer of practitioners in working online for over 15 years, from offering introductory workshops in an in-room capacity in the late 1990s to developing sophisticated online training that allows for one-to-one student feedback and ongoing peer support through e-learning platforms, encrypted forums and social media connection in the mid-2010s. These trainings have developed from the early days of when text was the only real feasible way to deliver mental health services (mostly email and chat) to today's online capabilities through Voice over Internet Protocol and videoconferencing software.

Over the last few years, and with particular reference to the emergence of Web 2.0 technologies and social media in particular, the author has become aware of an increasing need to not only educate and train today's practitioner in how to deliver online services, but also the importance of sharing information about how we can empathise best with the clients who come to us with mental health issues that are intensified by living online. Examples of these are: cyberbullying; cyberinfidelity and its outcomes; self-trolling (an online form of self-harm); 'catfish' relationships [posing online as someone who is not

the reality to maintain a (usually) romantic relationship]; online grooming of children; and Munchausen by Internet (posing as someone with a serious health condition, also Munchausen by Proxy by Internet, posing as someone with a dying relative or partner, for example).

What is very clear is that training therapists to work effectively online or offline is an ever-changing beast. Courses need to be updated constantly to keep up with the new issues that emerge for clients on a seemingly daily basis, and the wealth of information that practitioners need to be aware of – ethically, practically and theoretically – is both overwhelming and confusing.

It is also becoming increasingly clear that traditional core trainings that most current practitioners have had are simply out of date. That is not to say that they are any less valid of course – core training is always necessary whatever the theoretical orientation adopted. But without an update to *include* the concept of cyberculture as a separate culture, and also the theories around human behaviour as it appears in an online environment, we are training a core of practitioners simply unprepared for the realities of our current society. This includes all the mental health issues that accompany what has become an integral part of everyday life for the generations already with us and those to come – the impact that online communication and participation have on our ability to cope with the day-to-day reality of our lives.

Working effectively within digital culture

Core training as a counsellor or psychotherapist is deemed a prerequisite for training as an online practitioner and rightly so. However, the issues that clients face having grown-up within or having experienced the societal shift from a pre-Internet/mobile life to an online life have been neglected when considering the need for appreciation of the psychology of online behaviour. It can be argued that online therapy or guidance is not a theoretical orientation in itself, and therefore why would graduates be expected to undertake further training in how to do it. However, this attitude neglects to take into account how many postgraduate trainings are available to work with client groups such as adult survivors of sexual abuse; those with eating disorders; or deep depression caused by unemployment and poverty, as examples. My point is that the digital culture – known as cyberculture (Anthony & Nagel, 2013) – creates its own issues which increasingly affect all client groups and is therefore worthy of postgraduate training to work across those client groups effectively.

The author and her associated trainings at the Online Therapy Institute and Metanoia Institute are known not to promote the use of technology for the sake of using technology. In fact, my opinion goes further in educating practitioners who using technology within services itself remains unnecessary if the therapist is not comfortable with that way of working and cannot find a congruent online presence (that offering only face-to-face services and advertising such services offline is fast becoming such an out-of-date concept is not the remit of this article).

Understanding cyberculture and the psychology of online behaviour, including core themes such as the disinhibition effect (Suler, 2004) and the concepts of online presence and fantasy (Anthony, 2000), is fast becoming a prerequisite for empathy with one's clients. The media tragically reminds us daily of how young people are affected by how and why others treat them online, often leading to suicide, and without current and future practitioners knowing how and why this behaviour happens and its outcomes, we are producing a profession that simply cannot connect to clients at a basic level. This level of

education for potential graduates of counselling and psychotherapy not only needs to happen within core training, but it also requires a constant updating of the fast pace of how new technologies bring new issues.

As illustration, a new concept of online behaviour has become apparent – that of self-trolling. This form of self-harm is when a person sets up an alternative online identity to abuse themselves publicly (Winterman, 2013), with a recent study discovering that 10% of a student population in Massachusetts had done so (Englander, 2012), a figure that seems only too likely to grow. An ability to understand why clients would self-harm online, alongside a knowledge of what online platforms are used to do so (knowing what Ask.fm, MySpace or Facebook are, for example), is vital in being able to help our clients towards better mental health whether our services are delivered online or offline.

The importance of global education within a profession moving online

In addition to being able to work effectively within a digital culture, understanding that the developed world is shrinking in terms of communication is also desirable and increasingly necessary. However, this alone brings complicated ethical and legal considerations that apply in many ways, showing that being able to work with a client in a different country does not necessarily mean that we are legally or ethically able to do so. There is no central database of what is allowable country by country, and while this is yet to be tested in a court of law it is our remit as professionals to remain as up to date as possible in a global capacity as to 'where' we may practise. For example, in some countries there is a clear distinction between what is counselling and what psychotherapy is and they are not considered interchangeable as they are in the UK. In addition to the basic concept of 'what' is being practised where, there are the legal stipulations that exist in pockets around the world such as in America where mental health licences apply state by state and geographical borders prevent crossing into other states to practise.

From an education point of view, it is important to share such information to protect vulnerable clients and indeed increasingly vulnerable practitioners. Unregulated services, such as within the UK, look very different when actual laws [such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)] are in place in another country. Where once we were able to trust our knowledge of laws and ethics within our own geographical barriers as part of our core training, we are now required to know those of all the countries in the world when approached by an international client.

One of the joys of offering online training is that it attracts practitioners from all over the world, and collates them in one place to share information about their own particular legal and ethical protocols. In an online training such as that of the author, students are present from many countries including Australia, Europe, America and even the 'newer' post-war countries such as Kosovo. In this way, we are able to educate each other as peers as to what is allowed and what is not. As the future of the profession takes place increasingly online, this concept of global co-education becomes increasingly important.

As illustration, the training of Kosovan students is particularly interesting, since not only is the Internet and the concept of online mental health support relatively new, counselling and psychotherapy itself is a new profession but they also effectively have a blank slate to get mental health provision right. By undertaking education projects from colleagues in the UK face to face, the policy-makers learn not only from our expertise as a country who has spent the last 15 years examining the impact of online services based on 100+ years of therapeutic practice but also from our mistakes in attempting to do so. By undertaking online training in offering such services, they are educated by their

worldwide peers in addition to that. Each country is no longer in its own bubble of therapeutic provision, we have the opportunity to learn from each other globally.

Online training for online practitioners

The author's own early experience in giving face-to-face workshops about online mental health led her to implement online training for those wishing to offer online services as early as possible, since the concept of offline training for online work was incongruent. Education about online services in an in-room workshop capacity remains an important part of the overall approach to online provision of mental health services, but it is not until the postgraduate practitioner is able to train experientially in the environment in which the future counselling and psychotherapy will take place that the true understanding about cyberculture and how to work therapeutically with a client online becomes a reality in being an effective practitioner.

According to Lehman and Berg (2007), the use of blended technologies helps to better fulfil specific learning objectives; create course efficiency; provide flexibility; and can appeal to different situations, content, and learning styles. These elements of the different ways of imparting training in being an online practitioner, such as e-learning platforms; the ability to upload and download documents; live webinars; experiential exercises such as taking part in chat rooms and virtual environments such as Second Life; modelling of the therapeutic relationship via emails, simulated chats and recorded audio and video sessions; student support forums; clinical supervision forums; and online assessments and tests, all make for a dynamic training while immersed in the environment within which future practice will take place.

The argument for postgraduate training in online therapy and guidance rests on that very point: core training rests on being immersed in the face-to-face environment on which it is assumed future practice will occur. However, we are not in a position to make that assumption any more, since we can assume that the Internet as part of our day-to-day life and work is unlikely to disappear. The huge rise in online support, online therapy and coaching and online supervision – whether via email, chat, telephone and audio, videoconferencing, virtual reality or any combination of those and more – demonstrates what a huge responsibility the profession has in making sure our profession has kept up with the client. What each practitioner needs to ask of himself or herself is 'my client is online – am I online in a sufficient capacity to treat him or her effectively?'

By way of illustration, the following two quotes from students of online therapy show how an effective training can impact on professional life both online and offline:

> I am more aware of my own strengths as a person online and I feel more confident and willing to counsel across, through or beyond cultural differences that include not just other countries but the cyber world as a dynamic and changing culture within its own right. This course has been a personal transformative experience for me both culturally and therapeutically. It has been a transitional process.

> I never thought I knew how to do internet counselling but I have become aware of aspects that I simply hadn't considered. I've also had experiences that I'd never had before – entering a chatroom, answering a client's email (therapeutically, that is), and 'sitting in' on two internet counselling sessions. In many ways, this experience has not only developed my understanding about internet counselling but has also enhanced my thinking about face-to-face counselling.

Conclusion

This article examined three main themes that the profession faces as it moves forward into the digital world we now inhabit, both as practitioners and as clients seeking help with mental health issues.

In summary, these were:

- The importance of understanding how cyberculture impacts on clients lives and therefore their mental health needs, creating a need for empathy around living online in order to understand client issues in the modern world that are brought into therapeutic sessions.
- The importance of seeking and providing education in a global capacity to ensure we are working ethically and legally.
- The importance of online training for practitioners who wish to provide online counselling and psychotherapy (currently) on a postgraduate basis.

At the time of writing (April 2014), online training to be an online practitioner is only just entering the academic world, albeit again on a postgraduate certificate basis. However, core training will reach a tipping point in which undergraduates of the profession – the future therapists and counsellors – will be asking their trainers just how traditional practice face-to-face fits into the real world where clients are turning to Google before they turn to their General Practitioner when depressed or anxious. There will also come a point at which 'online therapy' is no longer a term we use – all therapy will be just that, therapy, whether delivered online or offline.

In the meantime, with the majority of current practitioners remembering a time when the Internet did not exist in any popular capacity and we were not all seemingly plugged into our technological devices for a large proportion of our time, the need for training in cyberculture and/or online practice remains an important topic. The need for training in the delivery of online services as part of core training is a debate only just gaining ground (Richards & Viganó, 2013). It seems likely, however, that this will be led by the future trainees of the professions of therapy, guidance and counselling – just as the debate about the need for provision of online practice was led by the clients 15 years ago.

Notes on contributor

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