

THE NATURE OF THE THERAPEUTIC RELATIONSHIP WITHIN ONLINE COUNSELLING

Abstract

The nature of the Online Therapeutic relationship is one that has previously been thought to be untenable by the Counselling industry due to the lack of the bodily presence and therefore the subtlety that accompanies voice, body language and congruence of the spoken word. This study sets out to explore three main research questions through Online interviews with seven Online Counsellors and one Online client. These were: how do they perceive their relationship as therapeutic, how do they compensate for the lack of visual and auditory clues, and whether the typed word can convey the sort of therapeutic intervention that may be called Counselling. The results were analysed from a relationship model point of view, specifically the I-You (or core) relationship. The results yielded four main themes as being essential to the Online relationship for it to be considered therapeutic: rapport via the client's mental constructs of the world; presence – the perception that a mediated session is non-mediated; the openness that takes place when communicating over the Internet; and the quality of the written communication/knowledge of "netiquette". Two further findings were issues of fantasy about the person you are in communication with, and an understanding of the opportunity and anonymity the Internet affords from a client perspective. The study concludes that from a relationship model stance, the Online relationship between client and Counsellor is therapeutic and may be considered Counselling through a medium-led, text-based orientation.

Introduction

As the Internet reaches more and more of the population, the phenomenon of conducting Counselling Online has recently been recognised by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy as a growth area within the United Kingdom. Whether the Online relationship can be considered as therapeutically “valid” has been questioned by members of the profession, in that the notion of a relationship lacking the nuance of body language and other sensory input being therapeutic for the client is considered untenable. The British Association for Counselling Special Report into Online Counselling (September 1999) poses the question “can Counselling by e-mail and/or other modes of computer-mediated therapy, ever have a therapeutic effect?” From the body of work conducted previously, the belief that such a relationship can be therapeutic has emerged, yet study of what this relationship may consist of, and how it may be perceived as therapeutic, has been missing.

My position is that the relationship between Counsellor and client is a mutual journey of respect, genuineness and empathy (Rogers and Stevens, 1967, cited in Clarkson and Pokorny, 1994 : 40). It is this that is the crucial element for a positive outcome from the process of conducting and receiving Counselling. This is with specific reference to the “I-You” Relationship (Buber 1970, cited in Clarkson, 1990), where the Counsellor and client participate in a here-and-now genuine professional encounter, working with each other for the client’s human growth through resolution of his or her problems. The question of whether this type of relationship is possible in Cyberspace emerged from a concern that Online Counselling was actually taking place, and this was challenging my concept of traditionally “being” in the Counselling room with my client experiencing a “real” (I-You) relationship.

This study concentrates on the possibility of the I-You relationship existing within a text-based, medium-led form of Counselling. That a relationship exists is taken as read – the use of the Internet for synchronous and asynchronous communication between two people defines it as such. However, the claim that such a relationship can be therapeutic is examined here. When face-to-face with my client, their body language and physical actions (crying, for example) will tell me

when it is appropriate to simply be with them on a mutual basis when they are distressed. Or, in the knowledge of my client's feelings because of the tone of voice or facial expression, I know when it is appropriate to intervene with insight, within the trust and genuineness of the therapeutic relationship. When the client's communication is reduced to text, the question of whether the Counsellor can understand his or her emotion correctly is crucial to the possible emergence of a therapeutic relationship.

It is recognised that any hypothesis about the success of Online Counselling that relies on the opinions of Online Counsellors and clients is likely to be supported. As stated, it is my belief that successful Counselling relies on a therapeutic I-You relationship existing, as is likely to be the case with the participants. Therefore, the research questions to be examined are:

- ?? How do Online Counsellors and clients perceive their relationship to be therapeutic?
- ?? How do Online Counsellors and clients compensate for the lack of visual and auditory clues within the relationship?
- ?? Can the typed word convey the sort of therapeutic intervention that may be called Counselling?

This research contributes to the growing UK study of Online Counselling and attempts to answer these questions to understand better why Counsellors who have trained in the skills of face-to-face Counselling feel that it is appropriate to embrace a text-based medium for the purpose of Counselling.

Literature Review

Suler (1997a) proposes that for some people "Sights and sounds are but extraneous noise that clogs the pure expression of mind and soul". Taking this in a Counselling context, it may be hypothesised that the therapeutic potential of such a setting (Fink 1999 : 7), without the possible physical bias or limited access that exists in the world of face-to-face Counselling, is huge. In removing the physical aspect of the Counselling, the pure expression of mind and soul may be communicated effectively, bypassing the defences of Counsellor and client. Clarkson (1990) cites Guntrip (1961) as believing that it is only

when the Counsellor and client have bypassed each other's defences that true psychotherapy happens. In light of my own experience of online relationships, I recognise that having communicated over the Internet I have an actual memory of a conversation with a person, not a piece of text. Acknowledgement of this means that Suler's "sights and sounds" do exist over the Internet – the important point for this study being that they are a visual and auditory recollection created by the person experiencing the communication. This leaves discovering if this representation of a text communication has a positive place in the potential therapeutic relationship. It poses the hypothesis that clients may attach a fantasy of the "best fit" of a Counsellor for them and their recovery.

Brice (2000) recognises the value of containing a client within breaks in the face-to-face process via e-mail. He identifies the use of "speech words" in order to describe the contact within e-mail. This supports the hypothesis of online interaction taking place as a conversation, not text. This indicates how possible it may be to fulfil the core conditions of face-to-face Counselling (Rogers, 1951, cited in Mearns & Thorne, 1988: 15). By close attention to descriptive language, the visual and auditory representation is supported by kinaesthetic representation. Therefore, it may be the case that this way of intentionally writing in a therapeutic manner ("when you told me that, I felt..", "when you said that, I could see that.."), may be perceived as Counselling, as the research question poses.

Studies of Online Counselling show that new methods of communicating emotion (in the face of no bodily presence) are essential. This relates to the client indicating their emotional state via the written word, instead of relying on the Counsellor being able to see the facial and bodily indications. Suler (1997b) demonstrates the importance of being more expressive, subtle, organised and creative in communicating. The implications of this for this study were to discover how this is done when in a possible therapeutic relationship. Mitchell & Murphy (1998) also note the importance of developing compensatory skills in the absence of the physical presence. My own experience of what is known in Internet circles as "netiquette" – a way of talking in shorthand and using symbols to indicate emotion – meant that it was important to discover not only what is and is not appropriate in Online Counselling for the Counsellor,

but also what is used to compensate for the lack of body language by the client in distress.

Grohol (1999) indicates that a similar level of communicative ability is important. Relating this to King's (1999, cited in Fink, 1999 : 237) examples of how descriptive language shows the Counsellor the client's view of the world dictates the need to understand how a rapport can grow into a therapeutic communication. An ability to picture the client's experiences may demand a similar level of cultural experience. It may also be the case that assumptions are made about the client's ability to communicate on a similar level based on the fact that s/he is computer literate.

Criticism of Online Counselling centers on the possibility of transferring face-to-face interaction to the computer. This results in statements such as "therapeutic interactions may be reduced to mere advice giving when face to face interactions are translated to the electronic medium" (Pelling & Renard 2000). In challenging Internet communication, Pelling and Renard (2000) feel that the basic Counselling skills are unable to translate to online work, or that it requires greater "level of skill or degree of effort". Laslow, Esterman & Zabko (1999) identify that research into Online Counselling is indeed based on face-to-face theory - that is, trying to translate face-to-face Counselling methods to the computer screen. This is an assumption of needing to transfer offline skills as opposed to developing or extending them. In the face of anecdotal evidence supporting the efficacy of the method, this study sets out to discover what new Counselling skills are required. Previous analysis of the method includes not only individual work but also group work, piloted by Colón (1999) in 1994 with an online community called Echo.

Suler (1999) points out that growing theory about Online Counselling is being defined by the medium, as opposed to the mental health issue defined by the client. This is certainly the case for this piece of research – it is a study to discover how the I-You therapeutic relationship may be possible over a computer-mediated session, rather than whether a particular theoretical orientation (in this case the I-You relationship) is a valid theoretical stance. Suler (1998) has also written about transference reactions towards computers from a Psychodynamic standpoint, which may have implications for future research into Online Counselling from a different theoretical perspective.

Stofle (1997) suggests that caution with Online Counselling because of ethical issues may leave unwilling face-to-face clients without any resource for help. Online Counselling within the UK is growing, and the need for research and guidelines is now recognised (Lewis, 1999). Stofle (1997) also explores the ethical and practical considerations of Online Counselling and identifies two levels of competency needed to conduct it, the first in being competent as an off-line practitioner and the second as having Online skills. Goss et al (1999) advise scepticism for both the client and counsellor when considering using the Internet, and demands a UK definitive stand on the industry's position. The National Board for Certified Counsellors has standards in place for "webcounseling" (NBCC 1999), as does the American Psychological Association (APA 1995). A British Association for Counselling working party of which the author is a member, for drawing up UK guidelines is being set up at the time of writing this paper.

Method and setting up of the project

Procedure and considerations

The America On-Line (AOL) search engine was used to access sites that offer Online Counselling, since that is the preferred ISP of the researcher. When researching via the Internet, the sheer scale of it means that it is important to impose some boundaries. Therefore, while there are many search-engines available on the World Wide Web, I imposed an AOL-only boundary to avoid getting flooded with the sites available on different search engines. From the many sites available worldwide just on the AOL search-engine, 43 were selected as offering the sort of Counselling pertinent to the study. This meant that they were general practice sites, rather than specific problem-orientated sites, such as for alcohol or marital problems. They also excluded sites offering video-conferencing, as it was felt that this could cloud the Counsellor's perception of working Online in a text-based situation.

A website (www.onlinecounsellors.co.uk) was set up to recruit to the project. This was important, since it meant that potential participants

could feel that they had an option to “test the water” without committing to an e-mail discussion about taking part. Receiving unsolicited e-mail is a bugbear of being Online, and therefore the point of the site was to assure people of the author’s authenticity and to inform them of what the research was trying to achieve without them feeling harassed. It was simple, without flashing banners, advertisements, or hyperlinks to other “sites of interest”. A copy of the site is included in the appendices with a copy of the original e-mail sent to recruit participants.

Participants

The Online Counsellors were e-mailed with an invitation to visit the website, which outlined the purpose of the study, information about the author, reasons for researching Internet Counselling, level of commitment and a “get involved” interactive form. Of these, seven Online Counsellors accepted and were recruited to take part. The Counsellors’ Online interaction varied from a one-off exchange of e-mail to long-term (4 years) synchronous communication. They were based in the UK, the USA, Australia and China. All had an off-line caseload as well as their Online clients. Six Counsellors were male, one was female; an imbalance noted as a possible limitation of the study. It was hoped that a similar number of clients could be recruited, but finally one Online client was recruited via information given by her Counsellor about the website, which s/he visited and then submitted the “get-involved” form.

Data sources

E-mails were exchanged to set up convenient times for the Counsellors to be interviewed, and despite time differences, only one was actually conducted late at night Greenwich Mean Time (one participant supplied the author with an Online worldwide clock, which eased confusion regarding time zones). Technical considerations had to be assessed. It was agreed that if either party were “bumped” off-line, the other would simply wait for them to reconnect. In one case, the interview was conducted via e-mail because of technical problems.

Online interaction takes longer due to “lag”, the pause between exchanges in synchronous communication. Therefore this affected the length of the interview and was taken into consideration. However, the

participants dictated the length according to their own commitments, and they varied from one hour to 2 ½ hours.

A facet of the study was to conduct the interviews solely over the Internet, in order to examine the interaction Online experientially. The relationship between Counsellor and client was under examination, but also that of the participant and researcher, as a baseline for the Online relationship itself. Therefore, all e-mails prior to the interview were also considered a data source. When searching the World Wide Web for Counselling sites, all picture-enabling software was blocked so that any photographs of the Counsellor were not viewed. This created a pure text-talk environment during the interviews, unaffected by any bias the researcher may have as a result of the participant's appearance. This heuristic approach to a "dialogue and mutuality" (Moustakas 1990 : 117) enabled a creative method of exploration of the Online relationship process.

The semi-structured interview was constructed from issues raised in previous research, and four were completed via an "Instant Message" system (AOL), two within a private AOL or ICQ chatroom, and one via e-mail (due to technical difficulties on the day). All interviews were logged electronically, backed up, and printed. All participants were given ownership of the interview (i.e. they could log it themselves) and also assured that the finished study would be available to them. All participants chose their own identifier (screen-name) to protect their confidentiality. All logged interviews and e-mails are password protected.

An important ethical issue arose when considering contacting clients of Online Counselling, due to confidentiality and boundaries. All the Counsellor participants were consulted on this, and most felt unable to directly approach their clients without breaking boundaries. However, one Counsellor posted a banner advert on his own Counselling website about the study, and one Counsellor felt that he could discuss it with one of his long term clients. This raised an ethical question about interviewing both a Counsellor and a client about their relationship with each other, and so special attention was paid to avoiding specific discussion about issues raised by either when interviewing the other person. This client, with footnote clarification as requested in one case, has further approved all quotes used in this study.

Data analysis

The analysis consisted of two approaches. To explore the research questions, the interviews were studied for themes connecting the Counsellors' experiences of being Online in a therapeutic relationship, and the client's experience was examined for similar traits from a different perspective. Secondly, the researcher's own experiential reactions to the Online relationship were explored and taken into account as the basis of an Online Relationship.

The interviews took place in a three-week period in March 2000, with the client interview being the final one. The interviews generated fifteen hours of data, which was then subjected to an open coding system (Struss & Corbin, 1990, cited in Morrow & Smith, 1995), generating 88 points of interest in relation to the research questions. From these points of interest, 14 subheadings were found (see Table 1), qualifying as a subheading by being mentioned in *at least* four of the interviews. These issues were then grouped under six main umbrella headings, distilling the data into the main themes as being mentioned by all of the interviewees.

Secondly, a self-reflective approach to the author's relationship with each of the participants was studied throughout and considered in relation to the emerging themes. This included not only emotional response to e-mails, but also in the event of no e-mail when one was expected. This was done to gain insight into the reactions of Online users to events such as possible misunderstandings or technical problems, and the effect these could have on the relationship. Again, the differences between a client/professional relationship and a professional/professional relationship were analysed, with specific attention to the e-mails sent before and after the interview as the relationships developed. Also included was experiential material such as free-association and analysis of screen-names, in order to explore the emerging theme of fantasy.

Results

Main theme	Subheading	No. of codes
Rapport		
	Entering the client's mental constructs	7
	Channels of communication open	5
	Common things form a trusting bond	4
Presence		
	Telepresence/Co-presence	4
	Definition of "real" relationship, not computer mediated	4
Openness		
	Issues of level of revelation/speed of	8
Written communication		
	Time to think increased/rewriting	5
	Netiquette and text-talk	7
	Issues of keeping record of session	6
	Issues of attachments/homework/access	7
Fantasy		
	Visual representation system	8
	Issues of lack of body language	6
Opportunity/ Anonymity		
	Internet offers access	8
	Internet offers anonymity	4

Table 1.

From the interviews, six major themes emerged as being essential to the online relationship between client and Counsellor for them to consider it to be a therapeutic I-You relationship. These were:

1. Rapport via the client's mental construction of the world
2. Presence – the perception of a mediated session being non-mediated
3. The openness that takes place when on the Internet (bypassing defences)
4. The quality of written communication
5. Fantasy about client and Counsellor (absence of bodily presence) via visual, auditory and kinaesthetic representation
6. An understanding of the opportunity and potential anonymity that the Internet affords

Discussion of main themes

Rapport

The rapport between Counsellor and client in cyberspace is developed not by reacting to another person's physical presence and spoken word to interpret a person's state of mind, but by entering the client's mental constructs via the written word. This skill is vital for the relationship to be considered a therapeutic one; it is an empathetic device to show warmth, genuineness and unconditional positive regard. The rapport between Counsellor and client grows with the work being done, as it does face-to-face.

In this way, and importantly, the consistency of the mode of communication can indicate vital changes or aberrations in the client's mental state, replicating interpretation face-to-face of, for example, a client telling you that he "is OK" while looking distressed. On the part of the client, the consistency (congruence) of the Counsellor's communication is also vital.

"What you can do is follow their way of communicating. In speaking it could be tone of voice and pauses, but on screen it would be the spacing, the pauses, the type of words they use, etc."

This intentional way of looking at and responding to the written material allows the Counsellor to empathise and respond in an appropriate manner. This gives the client a sense of support, being understood, and not being alone in a situation where they have been unable to seek (or gain) face-to-face help. In the I-You relationship, it is this mutual existence that facilitates the recovery of the client.

"I would attempt to gain rapport by entering into their model of the world if necessary - you know like - would it be OK if the little green man told you to do something nice for a change?"

The client's neurolinguistic processes are examined closely by the Counsellors in order to make sense of the client's world:

“So if I can find out... how you represent, and reproduce that in my behaviour/language, we get some good rapport flowing just like old friends”

Intentional writing to plug into the client’s maps of their world involves written skills that evolve with the client, and would not be apparent at first. This may be likened to an assessment or intake session in the face-to-face Counselling scenario. One Counsellor explains:

“I’d call it “opening the channels of communication” in a psychic (NOT spiritualist) sense. Getting ready to work. Turning the radio on first so you can then get a signal.”

KA: “Just like an assessment session face-to-face?”

“Absolutely, but with the added pizzazz of structured deliberate rapport skills”

Summary

The concept of the rapport growing between the two parties in the Online Counselling session via entering the client’s mental constructs of the world demonstrates the possibility of the Online relationship being therapeutic, since this form of communication is empathetic, warm, mutual and genuine. It is used to compensate for the lack of body language by close attention to the client’s use of text and responding to it in a similar way, therefore using the typed text to counsel a client.

Presence

The rapport between client and Counsellor within the I-You relationship is facilitated by the sense of presence (or co-presence, or telepresence). This is a concept examined by Lombard & Ditton (1997 : 10). For them, presence is “the perceptual illusion of non-mediation”. In taking this concept, the media used (in this case the computer and keyboard) is unimportant and you are interacting with another person in a separate space during synchronous communication. Using the Internet, this is called Cyberspace (“we are together”). In the case of e-mail intervention, the concept of presence becomes “you are here”.

“Oh I fully feel that you are talking to ME.. not the computer.. I think especially when we create a chat room like this and not do anything else while chatting.. that creates a real relationship”

This concept of presence creates the possibility of an I-You relationship from the start of the Counselling contract (and was also experienced by the researcher and participant while conducting the interviews, as the above quote shows). The interaction with another person through a keyboard is a social action, which can take the form of a letter in the case of e-mail, or a conversation in the case of synchronous communication. Putting this into a Counselling context, we can see that the Counsellor’s action can be perceived as a therapeutic interaction for the client, as it is when a client enters the Counsellor’s consulting room. With respect to the mutuality of the I-You relationship, it may even be more beneficial as the two people travel together to a mutual and neutral ground.

This interaction, particularly in the case of synchronous Counselling, applies not only at the time but also in retrospect:

“When I recollect a session, I don’t think of a computer screen”

The actuality of the client-counsellor communication online is experienced and remembered as having taken place in “real-time” with the notion of a physical presence, despite knowing very little about the other person.

Summary

With regard to the research questions, the concept of presence allows a therapeutic relationship to be as actual as a face-to-face one. This allows the typed word to convey a therapeutic interaction as real as any in the consulting room, and therefore may be considered to be Counselling.

Openness

It is recognised from previous research (Suler, 1997; Colon, 1999) that communication online creates an experience, which is much more “open” than off-line, and this is replicated within the Counsellor’s and client’s interpretation of the therapeutic relationship. This not only facilitates the mutuality of the relationship, but also makes for the work to be an honest representation of the client’s situation; where face-to-face a client’s guilt or shame may prevent them from being able to communicate effectively:

“People tend to tell you things they’d hesitate about when face to face”

This factor aids the therapeutic process, and is probably best explained by the client:

“Because you’re not in the same room it’s hard to read body language, which is why I feel I can speak so much more open and honest than if I am in the same room, because hey... I can be in my pyjamas and he won’t know, I can have my dinner, or a drink, or something next to me that I can be sipping on, I can get up and pace...in other words, I can be as comfortable as I want to be”

The client also points out that the more open the Counsellor is about him/herself, the more s/he is open to share. This self-revealing online works to aid the visual representation, and therefore the presence, of the person you are in communication with, and also is important in demonstrating the congruence and genuineness of the Counsellor.

Summary

This openness is considered by the participants to be an advantage of Online Counselling as a therapeutic factor, as it allows the client to be honest with their feelings without being ashamed or embarrassed. The level of self-revelation also compensates for the lack of a bodily presence because it allows the participant’s imagination to represent it.

Quality of written communication

There are two factors about the written communication to be considered. The first is regarding compensating for the lack of visual and audio cues, and the second is the understanding of how the Internet facilitates forming a different type of Counselling contract from the more conventional face-to-face 50-minute weekly session.

1) Compensation for the lack of bodily presence

As well as being able to read and write, synchronous communication requires a certain typing ability, although this need not be the case with e-mail. Having an adequate standard of written communication is important, along with a certain knowledge of how clients use the Internet in general ("netiquette" – see Stoffle's comments in Suler 1999, Chat Transcript January 24th). This is facilitated by having more time to tune in to the other person's construction of the world and consider the response, particularly in the case of e-mail. A lyrical narrative individual style, reflecting the personality, is essential for the concept of presence, as well as providing a stimulating therapeutic forum for the client's feelings. It is also the basis for being able to reflect and emulate the client's world, creating a forum for the rapport, and therefore the therapeutic process, to take place.

Using text to reflect individuality as a person and Counsellor, as well as considering the client's worldview, is essential to the client's perception of his or her Counsellor. The Counsellor has to reflect his or her genuineness in the written word. Writing to conceal an aspect of the Counsellor's self, for example suppressing a sense of humour at an appropriate moment, does not facilitate the rapport or the condition of presence, and as the Internet communication is for the most part silent, knowledge of what is appropriate netiquette is important. Within a Counselling context, this is less extreme than in a straightforward chatroom environment, but the smiley :o) is used by both Counsellor and client to indicate a smile, and typing in capital letters is still seen as SHOUTING. Other net shorthand is defined by client preference, and includes LOL (Laugh Out Loud):

“If I am upset about something, it would show on my face and if we were sitting in the same room you could see it, but online I’d have to do something like :o(or <<sigh>> or <<crying>>”
(author’s emphasis)

An awareness of “lag”, the time taken for the words to cross the Internet (usually a few seconds after the send icon is clicked), should be acknowledged as this can make for responses overlapping. Not allowing for this can be compared to not allowing the client to develop his or her thoughts and continue a theme face-to-face by allowing a period of silence. This period of lag also gives the luxury of having more time to consider the appropriate response or consider the meaning of the client’s words. The use of dots can define a continuing sentence, such as (fictional example):

SEBSHUN295: when I came back from France he’d taken a new job...
SEBSHUN295: ...and so he left me anyway <<sigh>>.

Without the use of the dots, the Counsellor would be halfway through a response before realising that a second, important piece of information was being sent that could change the appropriate response required. These conventions of Internet communication require the new Counselling skill of working with text to be learnt if the typed intervention is to be considered therapeutic.

Thinking about what you are writing and reshaping it to reflect exactly what you mean to say is a luxury that Online Counsellors and clients have. This is also true for reflecting upon what the correspondent has written, and therefore being able to tune into the meaning behind the words considering what is known about the person’s mindset. This is a case of reacting purely to meaning and not being distracted by possibly misleading visual clues (the client laughing while imparting a devastating experience, for example). For the client, this is also a passage to understanding the self, seeking the truth about their feelings when presented with them in black and white on the screen:

“It forces you to REALLY think about what you want to say and communicate without the aid of visual clues. I think that, in and of itself, can create self-discovery”

“Dealing with conflict or challenge in this medium is interesting... when you have time to think how to present it, it can go much easier than when it just gets said in a session”

2) Changes available to the Counselling contract

The ease and speed of the communication method (as opposed to other forms of working with text) also helps the client at the moment of crisis to share it with his/her Counsellor and for the Counsellor to help the client without waiting for the weekly face-to-face session. Boundaries and the therapeutic contract should be considered here to avoid intrusive email from both parties.

“I like that if I am carrying something around or think of something else for the client I can just sit down and write it out and it is done.. I don't have to wait until the next session, and the same with them”

This also helps face-to-face clients to feel contained and supported between sessions, and makes room for the time in a face-to-face session to be better utilised:

“I do encourage my face to face clients to use email during the week. If I have given them a “homework” assignment, to report back to me on a daily basis how it is going.. also to use it to fill me in on stuff so we don't spend the whole time in the session just catching up”

This client has time to process the work, to consider what has been said and the impact that this will have on them. In a face-to-face session, this may be blurred by tone of voice or mannerisms of the Counsellor, and also by initial reactions such as anger. When working with the written word, there is time to ponder over the meaning and consider what it means. They also have a verbatim record of what has been said, and are able to return to it, reconsider what happened, and gain a better insight into the meaning. This process may also be cathartic for the client, allowing them to keep a journal in the form of emails, and sometimes answering their own questions about their lives and thoughts having seen it in writing.

“You have a response you can sit with, that for a while you don’t HAVE TO respond right away. So once a client gets back to you.. they have maybe processed it a bit”

There are methods of looking at the client’s material differently when it is before you on the screen or on paper. The use of punctuation by a client is a consistent personal style, similar to mode of speech or phraseology. By paying attention to this style, and any inconsistencies within it, a better picture of the client’s state of mind is available. Removing the punctuation can give insight into what is happening for the client, changing the narrative to indicate where s/he will find reasons for their depression.

“Sometimes if you take the punctuation out of something it reads tellingly too”

Inconsistencies within the client’s typing and also their choice of substitute words (Freudian slips occurring through the fingers) may also be utilised as an indication of thought processes. These unconscious indications again aid the Online Counsellor in understanding the process and the client’s representation of the world.

“If a typo is out of character because a person normally types OK, then it may be significant”

“If they substitute words on a regular basis I would pay attention to that”

Summary

This section answers the second research question of what textual techniques are used to compensate for the lack of bodily presence. This involves two pieces of knowledge – the skill of netiquette and an understanding of the changes that are possible to the Counselling contract in light of a fast efficient communication process. It is worth noting here that the client also has this textual understanding, which contributes to the Counselling being media led. An important implication of this is that the client is defining the text intervention as being

therapeutic as defined by the Internet conventions that exist, and such an implication requires further research.

Fantasy via visual representation

While in communication with another person on the Internet using text, there is usually no information about their physical appearance or tone of voice, although some Counselling websites do have images of the Counsellor. This section of the discussion is based on the subjective author-participant experience as well as the results, and it is acknowledged that this needs further research, as there may be an issue of interpretation of the meaning of “fantasy” and “visual representation” and whether they may be considered the same concepts. As a hypothesis, it is stated at the start of the Literature Review as the client being able to develop a fantasy of the Counsellor that is the “best fit” of the type of Counsellor he or she wants. It is presented here in response to the second research question regarding compensation for the lack of bodily presence.

The visual, auditory and kinaesthetic representation system of the client compensates for the absence of the physical body within Online Counselling by creating a physical body in the client’s mind. The visual and auditory experience of the Counsellor and client exists in the person’s imagination, but the client may attribute meaning to their experience of it in a way that allows them to accept the therapeutic intervention more readily than in a face-to-face situation. This study is lacking in that we only have the experiences of one client, and this theory is based on the Online Counsellor’s interviews (and the heuristic involvement of the author). The lack of bodily presence or tone of voice means that the recollection of the session has nuances that would not have been apparent in a face-to-face session, because it is the client’s perception of the words that fit their ideal of the Counsellor. The client creates this in accordance with the same constructs of the world that facilitate rapport.

“people are not just unique because of their bodies and experiences...but also how they think, how they represent their world inside themselves”

The attribution of a fantasy of the other person can mean that the therapy can move beyond such factors as “first impressions” or bias about a Counsellor. The client can picture and hear the Counsellor in whatever way suits him or her best for their therapeutic growth, a

fantasy that can be modified to contain any material the Counsellor chooses to share about him/herself. The client, however, while acknowledging that this visual fantasy occurs, would consider the presence of the fantasy as being unimportant:

“I often think of what people look like by the way they talk on the computer...”

“I didn’t really care what he looked like because I knew what his heart was like...and that was the most important thing¹...”

“But I guess if you can’t get past the physical appearance, you never get to know what the heart is like”

This visual representation (client’s fantasy) of the suitable Counsellor and their warmth and genuineness will be incorporated into the picture of the Counsellor as a whole being. This is where “seeing the Counsellor’s heart” as well as an appearance (whether the real one or not) becomes a Gestalt experience (Perls et al, 1951, cited in McLeod, 1993: 86-87) which could bring the therapeutic relationship into a more genuine experience than some face-to-face relationships. One Counsellor puts it thus:

“It’s a bit like the original Freudian dogma: an invisible blank slate therapist upon whom the client projects his or her issues”

Summary

It is recognised that this theme of Online Counselling demands further research, due to lack of client material. However, the results offer a hypothesis for this research as a theory of how the lack of bodily presence is compensated for in the experience of the Counsellors and the author. The theme of fantasy was evident in the results but should be treated with caution as a given part of the overall picture of Online Counselling.

¹ The client has asked the author to clarify that this comment refers to a time prior to him/her actually seeing a photo of his/her Counsellor.

Opportunity/Anonymity

The Internet offers a valuable service for people who, for various reasons, feel unable to meet a Counsellor face to face. An awareness of this, and the specifics of the significant reason(s) for not seeking face-to-face Counselling can be considered as significant by the Online Counsellor. A client whose sense of shame prevents him or her facing a Counsellor will have quite different reasons for seeking Online Counselling from those of a wheelchair user, for example. For many it is the entry into face-to-face Counselling having developed enough via Online Counselling. This can be important for the client whose problems would be better dealt with by a specialist in that area.

“I have [had face-to-face therapy] since...and that was because I have grown so much from Online therapy. I would not have been able to do that before”

An understanding of people who are not suitable for Online Counselling and being able to assess this is required. The anonymity of the Internet gives huge scope for people with mental health problems to project their problems with one click of the mouse. A Counsellor whose extensive site includes a lot of information for potential clients to help themselves before entering into Counselling was targeted by a woman whom he referred to the site where relevant information was easily accessible:

“She wrote a mail back that simply said “my reply” and nothing else (alarm bells). She had attached a file to her mail...no indication of content. Would you open it?”

Having an awareness of computer viruses being prevalent in such files, he wrote back and explained that he never opened unsolicited files and could she tell him what it contained. The torrent of abuse that followed meant that the Counsellor had no choice but to block her mail for seven days. The initial recognition of an Internet user who behaves without an awareness of (or without consideration of) netiquette is a good indicator of a person unsuitable for Online Counselling.

Being able to recognise disorders over the Internet is an important skill at the assessment level, and contracts may be drawn up as using Online Counselling as an route to face-to-face help - a condition of the

Online Counselling taking place. This is particularly important when face-to-face intervention, such as requiring medical treatment for a disorder, is required.

“Well, after a while I recognised he had an addiction problem and probably [had] attention deficit disorder. I did tell him and supported him and he did go to [face-to-face] Counselling and get on some medication which is helping”

The advent of the Internet also has implications for potential clients who are concerned about the concept of having Counselling as a social stigma. The client's possible concept of having Counselling as meaning that the client is mentally ill is lessened by the client's self referral. The view of the Internet revolutionizing access to information globally makes its appeal huge, and this in turn reflects on the modern-day view of Counselling. It also means that potential clients can find out about the possibility of receiving Counselling without ever having to face a referral system of Doctors, Psychiatrists or Clinical Psychologists, for example. Potential clients can “test the water” and find out what to expect from a Counsellor, both online and off-line.

“I think it will encourage people who have never had therapy to feel better about it and maybe see someone in their area”

Summary

The understanding of the appeal of the Internet for receiving Counselling should not be underestimated, from the considerations of either anonymity or access. If this medium is the only way for potential clients to gain help, then the use of the typed word to administer therapeutic intervention may be better than no intervention at all. This is an important issue for future research.

Conclusion

Three research questions were posed in this study of Online Counselling: how Counsellors and clients perceive the relationship as therapeutic, how the lack of visual and auditory clues are compensated for, and whether the typed word can convey the sort of therapeutic intervention that may be called Counselling. The work was undertaken in view of a relationship model that considers the mutual therapeutic journey between Counsellor and client to be the most important facet of the process, specifically the I-You relationship. Therefore, to conclude that the Online Counselling relationship may be considered therapeutic means that the relationship should contain all the facets of the I-You face-to-face relationship, including compensation for the fact that client and Counsellor are not face-to-face.

The results yielded six main themes. Four of these - rapport, presence, openness and compensation for lack of bodily presence through written communication - are presented as fulfilling the I-You therapeutic relationship. The rapport that grows through entering the client's mental constructs of the world fulfils the concept of the relationship being a mutual journey of trust, empathy and genuineness toward the client's personal growth. This is facilitated by presence, the concept that client and Counsellor meet in a space outside the computer and keyboard, having a "real" relationship with each other. The openness that the Internet affords contributes to the relationship being honest, and bypasses some of the defences that the client and Counsellor have as well as issues of the client's shame. The quality of the written communication compensates for the lack of bodily presence via conventions of the Internet called netiquette, and also makes for an intentional way of working with text to be therapeutic, so that from a relationship model point of view this may be called Counselling.

The results also yielded two further themes. The first of these was the issue of fantasy about the Counsellor and client, and whether this may be considered a form of compensation for the lack of bodily presence through visual and auditory representation. Because of the limitation of only having one client interview, this is proposed as an issue for future research rather than concluding that this contributes to an I-You therapeutic relationship. The last theme was that of the opportunity and

anonymity that the Internet supplies, as a consideration of a means of having (getting to) a therapeutic relationship online.

Apart from there needing to be further research around the fantasy aspect of the results, there are wider implications arising from the study. It is acknowledged that a relationship model was used to define a therapeutic relationship, rather than another theoretical orientation. For instance, further Psychodynamic study of transference issues would be interesting, or a study of the use of e-mail to fulfil homework tasks for a Cognitive-Behavioural orientation. Narrative Therapy could also be facilitated well by the use of the Internet. Also, further research is needed into whether this form of Counselling is efficient in comparison with good face-to-face therapy, or telephone Counselling. A third area that requires study is the hypothesis that the client defines the intervention as therapeutic via Internet conventions of text, and the Counselling is therefore media led. This raises ethical issues of the suitability of the method for many clients.

In conclusion, the therapeutic I-You relationship can exist online through e-mail and Internet Relay Chat. The Counsellors and client perceive their relationship to be therapeutic through the first four findings. The lack of visual and auditory clues is compensated for and there may be an added concept of fantasy that facilitates this. From a relationship model point of view, this therapeutic intervention through typed text is Counselling, led through the medium of computer and Internet.

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