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A qualitative investigation into the online counselling relationship: To meet or not to meet, that is the question

KATE DUNN*

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Abstract

Background and aim: Online counselling, as a psychotherapeutic approach, provokes debate amongst practitioners and researchers concerning its efficacy and validity. This reflexive study extends existing research into the nature of the online counselling relationship when it is conducted asynchronously (by email) and explores the possibility this approach may facilitate both online and face-to-face therapeutic engagement. Method: Semi-structured interviews were conducted electronically with ten former email counselling clients of a university counselling service and six counsellors delivering email counselling in other higher education settings, to explore, in depth, their experiences of the online therapeutic relationship and its impact on the counselling process and outcomes. These were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Findings: Four areas of focus emerged relating to: (1) the importance of the structure and processes involved; (2) their impact on thinking and feeling; (3) their impact on self and relationships (within and outside counselling), and (4) changes that followed email counselling. Having ‘time to think’ within the asynchronous exchanges, the anonymity and disinhibition afforded by the online medium, the creation of transitional space and the rich use of metaphor, visualisation and imagery all contributed to a sense of empowerment and relational depth for individuals who might have otherwise avoided seeking help. This led to positive change in many cases and for some, facilitated subsequent face-to-face counselling. Implications: The findings support the provision of counselling and therapy online and particularly its integration within existing face-to-face services.

Keywords: online counselling; email; therapeutic relationship; interpretative phenomenological analysis; higher education; students

Introduction

Background

There is a wide body of evidence supporting the effectiveness of addressing emotional difficulties through writing (Bolton, 2009; Etherington, 2000; Pennebaker & Francis, 1996). This study explores the link between this long-established therapeutic practice with contemporary computerised text-based communication. Whilst technologies have evolved that enhance and accelerate modes of communication, fundamental human drives for relatedness and mutual understanding have endured. In the world of psychotherapy and counselling, technological approaches have developed relatively slowly and are sometimes viewed with suspicion and fear, but there is increasing interest in discovering whether online interventions may, in fact, offer innovative opportunities for the development of unique client/counselor relationships. Here, this idea is explored through a detailed qualitative exploration of one particular online approach, where counselling takes place asynchronously through the exchange of therapeutic emails.
Critics of online counselling raise concerns about whether it is ethical and effective (for example, see Robson and Robson, 2000). Early studies presupposed that online therapy must reproduce closely all elements of face-to-face relationship. Murphy and Mitchell (1998) suggested the need for ‘compensatory skills’ to make up for the lack of physical presence. Fenichel et al. (2002) however, described as a myth the idea that online principles are the same as offline principles and proposed that ‘online clinicians search for principles that will inform us about what combinations of text, sight, sound, and virtual presence are therapeutic for which people’ (p. 12).

Researchers looking beyond the structural limitations of online counselling have uncovered unique creative potential here. Hanley (2009) refers to the concept of ‘telepresence’ as a ‘central factor in . . . developing relationships of appropriate depth’ (p. 259) in his study of the use of an online service for 11–25 year-olds. Telepresence is defined by Rochlen, Zack, and Speyer (2004) (from Fink, 1999) as ‘the feeling (or illusion) of being in someone’s presence without sharing any immediate physical space’ (p. 272). Suler (1997) suggests that text-only talk may cut through distracting and superficial aspects of the person and connect psyche to psyche in a more direct way. Chester and Glass (2006) and Pelling (2009), whilst recognising potential in concepts such as these, remind us that the challenges for practitioners and clients are considerable.

The counselling relationship face-to-face and online

Extensive research stresses the central importance of relational factors when determining the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic intervention (see Cooper, 2008). This study views face-to-face and online-counselling relationships not as separate and distinct, but as variations of the same phenomenon, and suggests that in some cases one form of relationship may facilitate, complement and/or enhance the other.

A number of studies have investigated the online therapeutic alliance and findings are varied but generally positive. Hanley and Reynolds (2009) reviewed quantitative research into outcomes and alliances within text-based therapy using measures such as the Working Alliance Inventory (WAI) and found that five major studies, involving a total of 161 clients, show similar ratings in text-based therapy to face-to-face studies.

Some studies have carried out more detailed exploration of the nature of the online therapeutic relationship (e.g. Anthony, 2000). Roy and Gillett (2008) describe a single case-study where email communication enabled a 17-year-old female client with severe and enduring depression, who had previously been unable to form an alliance through face-to-face contact, to engage effectively with a psychiatrist. They proposed that a status shift was enabled between psychiatrist and client due to the time and control gained by the client in asynchronous exchanges. Fletcher-Tomenius and Vossler (2009) conducted a qualitative exploration of the nature of trust and relational depth in the online relationship with counsellor participants and identified important factors, including anonymity, which influence and may enhance trust.

Suler (2004) has written about the ‘disinhibition effect’ that may arise when communicating remotely, where people say or do things more openly and with less restraint in cyberspace than in face-to-face environments. What impact does this have on the psychotherapeutic alliance and is this affected by having previously met or subsequently meeting in person? Cook and Doyle (2002) found disinhibition to be the theme discussed most by client participants in their study, who welcomed the freedom to express themselves without embarrassment or fear of judgment. They identified potential in varying communication approaches and called for further research in this area (p. 103).

Walker (2007) reviewed the existing provision of mental health treatment online and urged further exploration of client experiences in online counselling, writing, ‘It is vital to access those silently suffering often extreme distress who desperately need services that do not exist and who rarely find a voice through research projects’ (p. 60). Evans (2009) emphasised the need for further research in the area and in particular into the potential for computer-mediated relationships to sit alongside face-to-face services, supporting Chester and Glass (2006) who called for further research to explore the therapeutic advantages of combining face-to-face and online treatments.

This study asked both clients and counsellors about their experiences of online counselling relationships and considered these factors. It approached those who may have been ‘silently suffering’ and, prior to engaging in online counselling, failing to access existing services. Clients’ views
have been under-represented in the existing research and attempts are made here to address this.

**Background to the study**

The study was carried out in a university counselling service where email counselling has been offered as an online intervention of choice since 2007. It elicited the help of students who had used this intervention, asking them for detailed feedback about the nature of their experiences.

The research approach is phenomenological, relational and interpretative. The methodology, Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA), as detailed in Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009), is committed to detailed and systematic examination of how people make sense of life experiences, through rich immersion in the material. Its ontological position views ‘reality’ as situated within the meanings given to experiences as described by individuals and involves the detailed examination of such lived experience from perspectives of both researcher and researched, seen here as ‘co-researchers’. The process is inductive rather than deductive, seeking to construct rather than deconstruct ways of understanding experience.

The study was small in scope and set out to investigate whether the asynchronous delivery of counselling by email in this specific online situation had an impact on the relationship between counselor and client that differed in any way from other therapeutic relationships. It also sought to explore the motives of this client group in seeking online counselling and whether or not these altered during and/or after their online experience.

**Method**

**Participants**

Former online counselling clients of the university service and counsellors working online in other university services were recruited for participation in the study. (Experiences of online counselling colleagues were sought to triangulate and extend the findings of the reflexive elements of the study.)

Clients who had completed a contract involving at least three email counselling exchanges more than a year earlier were informed about the study (29 in total). Fourteen expressed an interest and 10 subsequently completed the full interview process. Some had engaged only in online counselling and others had, at some stage, also engaged in some face-to-face contact with their online counsellor.

Counsellor participants were recruited through an introductory email sent to university counselling services identified from their websites as offering online counselling; six participated in the study. All had been working as student counsellors (face-to-face) for at least 10 years, had completed a recognised training course in online counselling before working online and had at least two years experience of online work. Further details of all participants are given in Tables Ia and Ib.

**Procedure**

The use of email interviews in qualitative studies is relatively new but offers some advantages as well as challenges. Meho (2006) believes that it replicates some of the features also identified as being potentially facilitative in the process of online counselling, such as anonymity, disinhibition and the ability to complete the interview in a familiar environment.

Client participants remained anonymous to the researcher through the allocation of a code number for their correspondence which was mediated through a research assistant. Participants were supplied with details of both internal and external support systems to contact in the event of any distress arising from participation in the study and were informed of their right to withdraw at any stage. Informed written consent was obtained from participants. All correspondence, including the interviews themselves, took place by email, replicating the medium in which the counselling had occurred.

All were sent an initial standardised questionnaire which asked open-ended questions about their

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<tr>
<td>F2f meeting with email counsellor</td>
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</table>
experiences. This explored preconceptions about face-to-face and online-counselling relationships and their actual experiences of both, where applicable. A second questionnaire was individualised for each participant. It encouraged elaboration of specific points already made and changed the frame of the engagement to more closely replicate the ‘conversation with a purpose’ described by Smith, Flowers, and Larkin (2009, p. 57). All data were encrypted and password-protected to ensure confidentiality.

Data analysis

As the data were already in computerised form, traditional transcription and verification by participants was unnecessary. Questions and responses were transferred verbatim into data tables for different levels of analysis. In IPA, processes aim to move ‘from the particular to the shared and from the descriptive to the interpretative’ (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009 p.79). Initially, each individual transcript was examined line-by-line and semantic content and language use were responded to intuitively and phenomenologically, staying as close as possible to the participant’s explicit meaning and noting descriptive, linguistic and conceptual features of what was said. Emergent themes were noted.

Next, attention was concentrated more directly on the researcher’s notes, whilst at the same time holding in mind themes shared across the participants’ transcripts. Sub-themes emerged for each participant and these were clustered. As this was a relatively large sample for an IPA study, a shift was then made to reflecting across all participant responses (as suggested by Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009), noting patterns and connections and identifying recurrent themes which were then grouped under super-ordinate headings. Finally, the analysis returned to the original transcripts in order to revisit each individual experience (illustrating the part-whole relationship of the hermeneutic circle).

**Ethical considerations**

The project received ethical approval from the Faculty of Health and Social Sciences at the University of Brighton in April 2010. It felt important to take a reflexive research position, although this presented considerable ethical dilemmas and challenges. McLeod (2003) writes about such ethical dilemmas and states that ‘practitioner studies are necessary if research is to become alive and relevant for counsellors’ (p. 174). Close attention was paid throughout to the BACP Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy (Bond, 2004) and specifically paragraph 3.5, which applies to research by a practitioner providing a counselling or therapeutic service. Etherington (1996, 2001, 2004a, 2004b) has written extensively about reflexive research and the heuristic method of enquiry employed that results from a social constructionist and postmodern ontological attitude.

**Reflexive statement**

The research is reflexive and practitioner-based. The author/researcher had experienced a profoundly deep sense of relationship with many online clients and this prompted curiosity about their subjective experiences and those of other email counsellors. A reflexive research journal was kept throughout the entire process, monitoring the development of ideas relating to the delivery of the specific online practice in this context and informing interpretations of subsequent data.

**Results**

The results of the analysis are shown in Table II. Four main areas of focus emerged, with recurrent

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<td>No. of years counselling experience (+ online experience, where specified)</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>10(4)</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>29(4)</td>
<td>12(2)</td>
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<td>Ever meet email clients f2f?</td>
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themes clustering within these categories. The categories provide an overview of the most-frequently arising topics when participants considered their experiences of email counselling generally and considered significant factors that impacted on the therapeutic relationship. They fulfil Smith, Flowers, and Larkin’s (2009) requirements that each should be ‘a construct which . . . applies to each participant.

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<th>Participants</th>
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<td><strong>Focus on Situation and Process in email counselling</strong></td>
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<td>Inhibition/disinhibition</td>
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Note: ✓ = mentioned occasionally ✓✓ = mentioned frequently

Table II. Results (themes).
Focus on situation and process in email counselling

Within this category, sub-themes included: the ability to conceal oneself or hide; anonymity and inhibition/disinhibition; boundaries; location; fantasy versus reality; the impact of ‘a permanent record’; formality/informality; the application of technology and use of text and image. Some made comparisons with earlier face-to-face counselling.

The sense of ‘being hidden’ within email counselling helped overcome pre-existing barriers for some:

I think I was interested in it because I could hide behind a computer screen. In a way it gave me the confidence to tell the truth without really having to take responsibility for it. I guess it reminds me of a confessional; you can say your deepest sins and nobody will judge you. I know council [sic] is supposed to be the same but email just gives you that little bit of distance that protects you. (R5)

The image of the confessional used here is striking and suggests that shame and fear of judgement (themes explored more fully in category two) were mitigated for this client by the presence of the computer.

This idea was reflected by online counsellors:

I have worked with clients who would not have been able to voice their issue face-to-face but can write it down when there is not someone looking at them . . . I have worked face-to-face with a student and transferred to online because they didn’t feel safe in voicing the issues face-to-face and wanted to do it more remotely . . . (COR6)

‘Disinhibition’ as a phenomenon is described frequently in existing studies of online counselling. R9 experienced this during her counselling:

The email counselling helped me talk about a wider variety of things that I probably wouldn’t have felt comfortable talking about in person. . . . I would have hidden a lot of details and that would have made me feel more like I was complaining about nothing and wasting people’s time. (R9)

R5’s powerful image of the computer screen (which also becomes metaphorically significant for her) takes up this theme:

I think that it may have had an impact on not wanting to speak face-to-face with someone but only because I know how freely I can speak over text. I think saying to someone what I needed to say meant that I actually had to form the words in my mouth and force them out. Whilst when I type I just have to think them and there they are just on a screen not in someone’s mind yet. (R5)

Where do email counselling clients situate the counselling relationship – is it in the room with them or with the other person, contained on the screen or simply out in cyberspace? Location is a theme that recurred in several transcripts:

. . . I think the fact that I knew (my counsellor) was just up the road . . . made me feel like I could meet her if I wanted to . . . (R1)

. . . I am unaware even of the room or time of day. I love this entering into a place where I am walking around and thinking about someone else’s world, with time to explore what’s important without distraction. (COR5)

Email counselling service guidelines stress the importance of boundary-setting, security and confidentiality. Participants reinforced the significance of these factors in ensuring the effectiveness of the engagement:

. . . the consistency and reliability of the email exchange times . . . was very helpful. (R1)

I liked the guidance that was given about writing for . . . an hour, this was helpful and realistic. (R1)

One major preconception I had before the counselling started was the idea of privacy but the password protection on every word document solved any privacy issues. (R8)
The use of text formatting and method of delivery was important:

... the way [my counsellor] responded to my emails was perfect. She wrote between my paragraphs, addressing each issue as I had raised it, then I could do the same for my reply. It helped to see clearly as issues were addressed and clarified. (R1)

Similarly, emoticons and other text enhancements sometimes substituted for the lack of visual cues:

I think I used a lot of emoticons in my emails such as smiley faces, sad faces etc and this was probably a good indication of how I was feeling at the time of writing. I had a tendency to use ellipses a lot when I was thinking to indicate to my counsellor that it was a difficult subject that we were broaching and that it was taking me time to think through my feelings in relation to the topic. (R2)

Indeed, the presence of visual cues had been a deterrent for this client when considering face-to-face counselling:

I was nervous enough when emailing my counsellor and am not sure if I would have been able to be so open and honest when faced with a person sitting in front of me taking account of my every twitch and body language. (R2)

Having a permanent record of what occurs was described by some as a particular benefit:

One of the best things about email counselling is that you can read back over the reply again and again. This helped me and I did it a lot. I would read them at different points throughout the week and in various different frames of mind. I think as a result I was able to get a lot more out of this counselling than previous face-to-face counselling. (R1)

One of my clients has said they value having the written record to refer to after we have ended. I think that, potentially, this could be a particularly valuable aspect of online counselling. (COR1)

This category sets the scene and context for the three that follow.

Focus on thinking and feeling whilst contemplating or engaged in email counselling

Before engaging in online counselling, many potential clients described the shame that had previously prevented them from seeking help:

When I went to face-to-face counselling I was quite young and did not really know what was happening, let alone having any preconceptions. I do feel that people generally look shamefully on people who need counselling, like they can’t deal with their problems on their own. And prior to signing up ... there was an element of shame in myself, for this same reason. (R1)

I have been surprised how severe the symptoms of many clients have been: very isolated, severely depressed and/or anxious ... they seem full of shame and fear and cannot face direct relationships in person. This has meant the Service is now offering counselling to students who would never have made contact before. (COR1)

The asynchronous delivery of email counselling emerged as a critical feature. Having ‘time to think’ was discussed widely and in detail. It helped clients to feel that they presented themselves authentically:

The additional time allowed me to consider what was being said and what my rational response should/could be. I have a tendency in life to snap and say the first thing that comes into my head when during confrontation (something which I imagine face-to-face counselling could feel like sometimes). I could read the question and the response and take time to really think about my reaction. (R2)

R3 found this helpful as a self-monitoring tool:

When you have a long time to think about your answers to questions, you may have one thing running through your mind one day, but then another day something good would happen and distract you from what you previously thought. (R3)

This was a feeling shared by online counsellors too:

I generally look forward to reading a response in a different way to the anticipation I feel before a
client arrives in my room. I think this is because I feel under less pressure to respond in the moment. (COR2)

Focus on self and relationship in and out of counselling

I think clients are often desperate to find someone that they can trust and talk to and they are used to talking internally. Perhaps online work can feel like a natural extension of that so that they feel more trusting of this than anything else. (COR6)

Considerations of self and relationship feature frequently in these engagements. Regularly recurring themes here included: self-awareness and self-disclosure, autonomy, locus of control and choice; power and judgement; mutuality, collaboration and trust. Participants provided a wide range of ideas in response to being asked about ‘meeting or not meeting’.

Heightened self-consciousness and low self-confidence were frequently cited as the predominant reason for seeking online rather than face-to-face counselling:

I think I had a problem with asking for help – at the time I often felt like whenever I talked to someone about how I felt, that they would think I was just moaning or attention seeking. I think the online counselling attracted me because I thought it would indicate to me whether I was worthy of talking to someone and getting help, or if I was just moaning about nothing. (R9)

Is it possible that the relationship felt almost like a half-way house between internal reflection and external sharing?

As far as i was concerned i was talking to a robot with no emotions. However, after a while i started to see my online counsellor as a person and it made me feel better. I felt she honestly cared about me and my problems and i felt better about counsellors in general which made me feel more comfortable meeting someone in person. (R12)

For many, the perceived positions of counsellor and client at the start of the relationship, in terms of autonomy, power and locus of control, were crucial. This was linked to a fear of feeling disadvantaged or disempowered by a face-to-face relationship with a professional:

The idea of E-Counselling felt different because if my issues were made light or or if i was told that i was overreacting…i could just ignore the advice if i wanted to and not reply. I guess it has to do with a feeling of having more control over the counselling and the directions it would take. (R2)

Mutuality, collaboration and trust featured prominently in participants’ descriptions of their experiences of online relationships.

It felt equal, she never patronised me or was overly sorry for what had happened to me. It never felt like she pitied me or thought I was as damaged as I thought i was. (R5)

Trust and acceptance comes as they reveal more and more sensitive information about themselves. (COR 4)

The question of meeting in person and what this might mean for both client and counsellor participants was carefully considered:

If the material warrants a referral to face-to-face then I will suggest this but would not see the client myself. I think fantasies and transferences have built up and would get in the way of the work for some time at the beginning. Best have a fresh start. (COR4)

COR5, who had been working for less time online, shared these views but described a gradual shift as her experience grew:

As I got more confident in working with the transference online, I’ve come to realise that such disturbances in the transference could just become part of the work. (COR5)

Some clients actively sought a meeting, for a variety of reasons:

I thought it would make us seem closer, and make the time communicating through emails more worth it for both of us. I met the counsellor at the last session and this strengthened the relationship, as I now had a face to put to the emails. (R3)
R8 reflected on the fact that she did not meet her email counsellor saying:

Even though I did not meet with my counsellor, I still feel now that I would meet up and have a face-to-face meeting. If I had met my email counsellor, I think ultimately it would have made the relationship stronger. If I had the chance, I would consider face-to-face counselling after emailing the counsellor a few times. (R8)

For some, meeting meant challenging their constructed mental image of the counsellor:

...I had a visual image of her and seeing her made me realise I had been picturing her completely wrong! It made me giggle how wrong I had got it but it didn’t change anything that I thought about her. She was a big help and seeing her in person made no difference to that. (R12)

COR2 wrote movingly about her experience of moving from face-to-face to online work with one client:

I worked with one client online who I had initially worked with for a year face-to-face. She had experienced a terrible ordeal and was severely traumatised. Throughout the year we worked face-to-face she found it excruciatingly difficult to speak about what had happened to her but also felt a strong need to talk about it. When we began to offer online counselling I offered her the chance to use it and she leapt at the opportunity. She had another year of online counselling and was able to speak fully about what had happened and she made a lot of progress during that year. (COR2)

**Focus on change through email counselling**

Clients and counsellors identified changes resulting from email counselling and these could be defined as behavioural, emotional, relational or involving the development of new insight. Many described email counselling as signifying a period of transition:

The email counselling helped me as it made me think about things and understand my feelings a bit more. Soon after the counselling, I met some great friends at university and my personality and my life changed dramatically, which I’m sure the counselling contributed to. (R9)

I ... had some face-to-face counselling after email counselling. I used email counselling when I was new to living alone and was still put off with the idea of meeting face-to-face. Then by my third year of living alone my confidence had grown and felt ready to deal with someone in person. (R12)

**Discussion**

Existing research indicates that the delivery of counselling online presents both challenges and innovative opportunities. This study, whilst limited to a homogenous and self-selecting group of clients and counsellors, looks in depth at phenomena that have been identified as particular to this approach and identifies motives, reflections and experiences of individual clients and counsellors which lie at the heart of the online encounter. It reinforces and extends existing research by looking at particular implications for relationship change. This study focuses on a unique use of ‘time’ within the asynchronous counselling encounter which affects transference and countertransference processes, often enabling otherwise-avoided engagement.

‘Time to think’ emerges as a critical theme differentiating this counselling approach from others, offering unique potential. Through targeted engagement with strongly-defended clients, the study attempts to reach Walker’s (2007) group who are ‘silently suffering often extreme distress.’

The participants here describe the inhibiting nature of shame and fear of engagement. The anonymity and protection afforded by the computer and cyberspace appear, for some, to surmount this. This transitional ‘space’ (Winnicott, 1971, 1990) between client and counsellor offers increased choice and control over when and how to engage. What is particularly exciting here is that for some, a sense of growing curiosity about relationship and an emerging trust develop, which feel unique to the situation. The sense of mind-to-mind meeting, free of distracting visual cues and embarrassing scrutiny (echoing Suler, 1997), allows participants to experiment, to disclose things that usually remain hidden and to reflect on responses in their own time, at their own pace, and with the opportunity to return and re-experience the actual dialogue as often and whenever they may choose.

Disinhibition may prompt a shift in preconceptions about face-to-face encounters, generating courage and curiosity. This subsequently leads some
clients to seek out opportunities to test out their new-found ability to vocalise about themselves in a way they have previously avoided. To be able to accept and welcome a ‘good enough’ (Winnicott, 1964) ‘flesh-and-blood’ counsellor following an online therapeutic relationship represents a powerful psychotherapeutic shift.

**Implications for practice**

Schultze (2006) urges that the goals for online psychotherapy should not be concentrated in increasingly sophisticated technology but in a well-considered understanding of where special gains are to be made. This paper strongly supports that suggestion. The use of webcams and sophisticated synchronous communication aids may counteract many of the advantages identified here, particularly ‘time to think’, heightened imagery and fantasy, increased autonomy, control and empowerment.

Whether or not it is helpful for email clients to have an opportunity to meet with their counsellor in person poses an interesting question. This study suggests that, for some, this meeting may offer opportunities for a profound development of the psychotherapeutic process.

Earlier studies of working alliance ratings in online counselling (Hanley & Reynolds, 2009) showed similarities to face-to-face studies; this study suggests online clients may feel increased control and choice over how and when to engage, which appears to sustain and develop the alliance and, in some cases, facilitate later face-to-face relationship. What is quantitatively similar may hold exciting qualitative differences, which could be explored further.

Online counsellors cautioned that face-to-face counselling relationships should not be seen as a universal goal, indicating the merits for some in preserving the transference of the online engagement, which may nonetheless go on to impact on other face-to-face relationships outside counselling. For counsellor and client to move from face-to-face to email counselling is an area which invites further research. Equally, it might be fruitful to further consider the possibilities of mixing approaches simultaneously, perhaps offering asynchronous, planned email contact between face-to-face appointments, where clients may express difficulty in talking about certain areas that they nonetheless wish to share in some form in counselling.

**Limitations**

This study targeted a particular client group who may be particularly suited to online approaches, comprising predominately young people who are familiar with technology and with providing textual accounts of thoughts and ideas. There is considerable evidence that online counselling is effective for young people not only because of their technological expertise but also because it might create developmental opportunities at a time of transition (Hanley, 2009). Students are mostly at Erikson’s (1965) ‘young adult’ life-stage where the developmental crisis is situated in intimacy versus isolation, whose challenge is directly acknowledged and addressed here. Further research is needed that elicits the views of client groups other than a student population.

The respondents to the study may comprise a biased sample in that they largely indicate positive feelings about email counselling. Within the context of the study, this was perhaps unsurprising and suggests a shortcoming that could be addressed in future research, which might aim to explore the phenomenology of those who fail to engage in online therapy or who reject it as an idea.

Reflexivity inevitably limits any findings here primarily to the researcher’s own practice; however, by engaging other counsellors in the same study, broader ideas have emerged which may be applicable to a wider field. Clients expressed the importance of their voice and opinions being reported in such a way and this may encourage other researchers to extend such work.

I conclude with R8’s words:

... It is amazing to see how someone’s word can make an impact, even if it is just through text.

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References


Biography

Kate Dunn is a senior counsellor at the University of Portsmouth, having formerly worked as a teacher across a wide range of age groups, and also as a facilitator, project manager and service co-ordinator in health and social care settings. She has a special interest in online counselling and in the therapeutic benefits of writing about emotional difficulties and trauma.