

**Early Experiences of Counsellors Providing an Online Counselling Service in the
Republic of Ireland.**

Student: Guinevere Moloney

Student Number: 1143818

Supervisor: Niall Hanlon

Research Project Coordinator: James Brunton

Social Science

Dublin Business School

**Early Experiences of Counsellors Providing an Online Counselling Service in the
Republic of Ireland.**

Guinevere Moloney

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Supervisor: Dr. Niall Hanlon

Head of Department: Dr. J. Brunton

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Abstract

CONTEXT:

Online Counselling is a new method of counselling within the Republic of Ireland, the aim of this research project was to explore the Early Experiences of Online Counsellors providing an Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland.

METHODS:

A qualitative design was used for the research. Five participants were interviewed, one interview was conducted face-to-face and four via telephone, data was then transcribed and results were established via thematic analysis.

RESULTS:

Results encompassed the overall experience of the online counsellor in the Republic of Ireland ranging from flexibility, duty of care, client characteristics, common presenting problems, ethical and professional framework, continual development, clarity, appealing qualities, lack of support and awareness and finally therapist skills.

CONCLUSION:

This study highlights some of the issues encountered in providing an online counselling service in the Republic of Ireland, a number of practical and ethical issues emerged from within the data, it was felt that difficulties working in the online environment were perhaps furthermore frustrated by a lack of ethical and professional framework as well as supports for the counsellor. Practical concerns were that of promoting the counsellors services as well as raising awareness that the service is available for users to access, these practical and ethical

concerns may be attributed to the infancy of this service in the Republic. This research adds to the current research available whilst highlighting the particular concerns mentioned in relation to raising awareness of online services existing in the Republic.

TITLE: Early Experiences of Counsellors providing an Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland.

Introduction to the Literature on Online Counselling

A brief history of therapy and the Internet

The Internet has become an intrinsic part of modern life, the result of visionary thinking by people in the early 1960s who saw great potential in allowing computers to share information on research and development in both scientific and military fields. Increased access and use of the Internet has revolutionised work tasks in hundreds of occupations. The field of psychotherapy is no exception, although online counselling is a recent development. Tape recorded self-help approaches and computer programs which mimic person-centred therapists were experimented with during the 1970s (Lang, Melamed & Hart, 1970; Weizenbaum, 1976). The practice of counselling is typically considered to involve the counsellor and client sharing the same physical space. However, this is changing with a small, but growing group of practitioners conducting at least part of their practice online (Murphy & Mitchell, 1998).

Changing health seeking behaviours

According to research conducted by the online Microsoft press center (Microsoft 2006), communication methods changed considerably during the period of 1996-2006, they highlighted that in 1996 over 24 per cent of the population in the UK owned a computer in comparison to 62 per cent in 2006, with 48 per cent having access to the World Wide Web in 2006 compared to a mere 6% in 1996. The Quarter 4 2009 Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) market report indicates that Internet broadband subscriptions in Ireland have reached 1,443,350, with a household penetration rate of 57.9% (in Quarter 3 2009) - a 28 percentage point increase in three years (ComReg Market Report Q4 2009). These figures are significant in illustrating the growth and potential growth of those interacting via an electronic medium.

eTForecasts Market Research Report conducted similar research but their focus lay on the yearly PC sales for PCs and mobile PCs in the USA and six regions of the world from 1990 to 2014. Results showed that in 2010 the worldwide sales of mobile PCs are projected to reach almost 170M units—up from 28.5M mobile PCs ten years ago. In the next five years mobile PC sales will be over 264M units—a compound annual growth rate of nearly 13%. These figures could be conservative if netbook PCs exceed expectations.(etforecasts 2010)

Mobile PCs are gaining market share and will account for over 56% of worldwide PCs sold in 2010—a more than tripling from 17.2% in 1995. By 2014 the sales of mobile PCs are projected to account for over 68% of all PCs sold. This illustrates the ability of mental health services provided via the Internet such as online counselling to reach clients whom are socially isolated in small or large communities throughout the world.

The worldwide number of Internet users surpassed 1.59billion in 2008, up from only 2M+ in 1990, 45M in 1995 and 430M in 2000. Worldwide yearly increase in Internet users is 140M to 145M in the next five years, which means the 2B mark will happen in 2011 or 2012.(etforcasts 2009)

According to Gary G. Bennett and Russell E. Glasgow the dramatic increase in Internet access has been a parallel increase in the use of the Internet as a platform for the delivery of public health interventions across a wide range of conditions and population segments, for example, The Samaritans alone responded to an overwhelming 36,500 e-mails in the year 2000, increasing to 72,000 for the year 2002, and 184,000 for the year 2006 (Samaritans, 2004, 2007).

As growth in computer usage and technology expands, traditional routes for accessing support will naturally be facilitated by engaging with clients via computer mediated counselling, this movement is accelerating further by the demand from clients as the younger generation of today and tomorrow whom are already familiar with, and favour electronic communication naturally progress into the age bracket of the counselling and support user group (Evans).

A report conducted by MORI poll finding (2001) showed that over 60 per cent of Internet users would seek help for problems associated with their mental health online. However, it is important to note that many individuals may still remain wary and question how ready the mental health profession is for such developments (Alleman, 2002).

Traditional Counsellors views

Counselors, like many other professionals, are being faced with the dilemma of whether or not to encompass the use of technology in their everyday work. Preliminary reviews of literature on existing counseling and technology, revealed existing controversies, as well as practical verses philosophical concerns with incorporating modern technology into counseling. As with all debates there are seemingly underlying assumptions held by advocates and opponents of technology in counseling are reviewed and discussed. According to an article written for the Journal of Technology in Human Services, 22, 1-24., tolerance of dual approaches to applying technology in counseling will best permit the counseling field to progress. (Abney, P. C., & Maddux, C. D. (2004)

It is not however anticipated that traditional psychotherapy will one day become obsolete. Throughout the literature, no one is suggesting that online therapy is better than working with

a therapist face-to-face. In fact, it is generally agreed that it will never replace the unique experience of forming a continuing face to face relationship with a psychotherapist. It is however a very effective way of reaching people whom would not be getting help any other way. Many people simply cannot, or will not seek help from a therapist in person for a variety of reasons. (Langas)

Online Counselling is said to be extremely beneficial for a number of reasons; Rochlen, Zack and Speyer (2004) note that it is convenient and increases access for clients, the client may feel safer and thus disinhibited by the online environment, e-mail provides a meditative 'zone of reflection', writing is therapeutic, individuals report feeling close to others they meet online (this has been described by Lombard & Ditton [1997] as 'Telepresence'), and it provides immediate access to internet-based resources.

Guidance for Online Counsellors

Throughout my preliminary research I encountered text books suggesting guidelines for good practice in for establishing and maintaining an online counselling service, this also seems to suggest that there is currently a need for this information for professionals in the field who wish to extend their services to the Internet medium. There is literature focusing on expression solely through text. Written techniques such as emoticons (☺), acronyms (lol=laughs out loud), abbreviations (u=you), and emotional bracketing (Murphy & Mitchell's 1998) these emoticons are all noted to add depth to the experience of online relationships that are created. In such instances the words and key strokes create a mental representation of the individuals involved and facilitate the creation of relationships of a sufficient depth to produce positive change (e.g. Anthony, 2000a; Suler, 2004).

Resistance to Online Counselling

Critics of Online Therapy are skeptical feeling that all the fundamental principles of the traditional therapeutic relationship are lost and feel wary of new modalities of therapy.

‘without a high level of skill ‘therapeutic interactions may be reduced to mere advice giving when face-to-face interactions are translated to the electronic medium’ (p.68) Pelling and Renard (2000)

There are many aspects of the online therapeutic relationship that trouble some and one main concern would be the physical distance between counsellor and client.

Lago expresses this in the form of the following paradox: ‘I have connected deeply with you psychologically and emotionally on my computer, yet still remain isolated from you in every physical sense (no vision, no sound, no touch). It is very personal and not personal at all’ Lago (1996) (pg.288).

Literature on the benefits of Online Therapy

A study conducted by Barak et al. (2008) researching the effectiveness of Internet-based psychotherapeutic interventions provides a comprehensive summary of 92 studies involving 9764 clients. The review concludes that online work is moderately effective, with an overall mean weighted effect size of 0.53. Barak and his colleagues remind the reader that this effect size is ‘quite similar to the average effect size of traditional, face-to-face therapy’ (p.109). The finding of this study suggest that online practice can be efficient and of much benefit to certain clients. The qualitative literature on the online therapeutic alliance supports the possibility of creating good quality relationships online.

Interest is continuing to grow in using telecommunications technologies as a primary treatment medium for the delivery of mental health care, offering the Client anonymity, affordability, convenience and comfort in a time.

Griffiths (2001) focuses on the advantageous side of online counselling highlighting its potential to reach out to those might not otherwise seek counselling, to gain confidence in the ability of counselling to assist them with their problems. According to Robson & Robson it is also possible that online counselling contributes to easing a sense of isolation, when other sources of support are some distance away (Robson & Robson, 2000).

Since 1994, The Samaritans of the United Kingdom and Republic of Ireland, in association with Befrienders International, developed an addition to the emotional support offered, an e-mail counselling service as an additional way through which people could contact for support. In the first 24 hours, the branch received 37 contacts. After realising its success it is now a vital link of The Samaritans service in terms of facilitating people in crisis and those contemplating suicide, the level of response indicates that the internet as a medium of therapy is proving beneficial.

Writing Therapy

“Writing has been known to be psychologically beneficial since the apollo was the god was poetry and healing , the ancient egyptians knew that writing held much power, writing is different from talking and holds a power all of its own, according to writing cures it can allow an exploration of cognitive, emotional and spiritual areas otherwise not accessable and express elements of ones self otherwise inexpressible, this very act of creativity tends to build motivation for life ,self confidence and feelings of self worth.” Bolton further states that an

understanding of writing as a therapeutic practice can enhance therapists skill and knowledge.
(Gillie Bolton, Writing Cures)

The benefits of expressing feelings and thoughts in text format, at a distance, and outside a face-to-face encounter are also supported by Wright (2002). This supports the view that writing as a form of therapy is a natural rather than forceful addition to traditional therapies available as well as extremely beneficial for the client as a way of developing thinking and awareness.

According to (Graham et al., 2000), consumer demand for alternatives to the 'talking cure', the traditional, individual, face-to-face, 50-minute hour of counselling and psychotherapy, is indicated both by anecdotal reports of the use of chat rooms and 'online therapy'. In contrast to this view Rogers (1961) sees textual relationships as an unintentional way in which we may harm our clients is by keeping them in the past. Any counselling relationship is a forever changing process, when the communication medium of counselling is solely textual, there is a risk of locking clients in their past by always being reminded with it in the form of the written word.

A recent survey by the Maudsley Hospital in London 62% of participants when asked about their preferences for the delivery of self-help psychotherapies wanted access to self-help therapy via paper-based formats, but 91% of these same respondents wanted access via some form of computer based system such as the Internet.

The history of using client writing in a therapeutic setting, mostly, but not exclusively, associated with cognitive and behavioral approaches, is long. It could be argued that 'writing therapy' has also been re stimulated by the development of narrative approaches (McLeod, 1997).

The Continued Growth of Counselling Online

There is still much debate about the appropriateness of providing counselling in an environment where the counsellor and client do not share the same physical space as well as the effectiveness of this method. (Rochlen, Zack & Speyer, 2004). However the proliferation of Online Counselling services continues to gain momentum worldwide.

According to Jane Evans 2009, Online counselling and computer related personal services with continue to grow. More and more people across the globe are connected and are becoming more comfortable purchasing both goods and services over the Internet.

The Federal Government in the US are currently sponsoring a series of online therapy Demonstration projects for a total grant award of 6 million dollars divided up between four providers. This shows that there is significant confidence in online therapy as a viable alternative to traditional face to face counselling. (Evans et al, 2009)

Griffith 2001, focuses on the distinct advantageous aspects of the phenomenon, highlighting the potential for online counselling to gain confidence in the ability of counselling to assist them with their problems and to help people who might not otherwise seek counselling. It is also possible that online counselling contributes to easing a sense of isolation, when other sources of support are some distance away (Robson & Robson, 2000).

The future of Mental Health Care and the Internet

According to Derek Richards, Trinity Mental Health, a unique feature of online delivery is that the Internet can facilitate community and therefore allow counseling interventions to act therapeutically for an online community of users.

The goal of counselling is to alleviate the distress, anxiety, and concerns that clients can present. Counselling attempts to return a client to pre-crisis functioning and in doing so build on a client's strengths and help improve overall functioning (Mallen, Vogel, Rochlen, & Day, 2005).

In the online counseling context, the level of disclosure by clients to the counselor can be remarkable (Alleman, 2002). According to (Alleman, 2002; Yellowlees & Brooks, 1999).

The expansiveness of technology in people's lives has been noticed by mental health professionals. Further, it is predicted that the increasing growth and prevalence, as well as the demand of users, will solidify technology as an integral aspect of healthcare into the future thus the expansion of these services is said to be eminent.

Advantages and Disadvantages of Online Counselling

There are many concerns voiced in relation to online counseling, some of which I have touched on earlier such as lack of verbal and visual cues such as expressions and silences, pauses, we generally tend to read people not only by what they say but also by their body language, however this is not to say that the Online environment cannot be a place where influential and healing therapeutic relationships can be formed. For example, Sigmund Freud, one of the most influential figures in psychology counselled certain clients solely through the written word via exchanges of letters. Freud also used a certain methodology in his treatments where by his client would lay back on a couch, thus removing visual contact entirely.

Fenichel et al. (2002, ¶ 36) note that “Freud’s psychoanalytic technique was designed to foster the very disinhibition which naturally occurred online”

The increasing prevalence of mental health difficulties among young people is of major concern in Australian society (Sawyer et al., 2001). It is calculated that by the age of 18, one-in-four teenagers will have at least one major episode of depression (Kessler, Avenevoli & Merikangas, 2001). These symptoms are exacerbated as many feel too ashamed to seek help. Boys are said to be less socialised and seek less help than girls (Rickwood et al., 2005).

Findings of a study conducted by King et al. (2006), measured the experiences and motives of young people who choose the Internet as a mode of counselling rather than telephone or face-to-face counselling services. Service users of the ‘Kids Help Line’, a free and confidential 24-hour telephone and online counselling service provided via a synchronous text-based chat service developed in Australia for ages five to eighteen, 39 of these individuals were participants for the study. The participants were separated into five groups and discussed their experiences. In all five cases, participants reported the online counselling environment to be less intimidating on comparison to traditional forms of counselling. King et al. (2006)

The participants made statements such as “if I talk to them in person the counsellor will think I’m weird” (p.172) and as “counsellor can’t tell if I’m crying” (p.172). Overall participants felt less intimidated and found the experience less scary, however some concerns were voiced in relation to the ability of the counsellors really knowing what’s going on with the participants’ feelings or emotions via text, adolescents generally reported feeling more emotionally vulnerable in FTF or telephone exchanges. The authors cite the beneficial aspect of privacy as being a highly significant factor in online counselling appealing to adolescents.

Some research comparing the effectiveness of online with face-to-face counselling has shown no difference in effectiveness between the modalities, however King et al. (2006) whilst noting the distinct advantages effectiveness of the Kids Help Line counselling services for many clients also noted that online counselling had less session impact and alliances than telephone counselling.

Young (2005) presents evidence to support this theory that anonymity a main factor that makes adolescents seek online counselling. King et al. (2006) conclude that web-based mental health services will play a significant role in the mental health and well-being of young people in the future.

Wellman and Haythornthwaite (2002) argue that the absense of social cues in online counselling can make it easier to communicate about issues of an emotional nature, creating an illusion of privacy, thus perhaps decreasing a client's perception of interpersonal risk.

Other studies such as that by Carlbring and Anderson of Internet-based treatments found positive outcomes in the treatment of various psychiatric conditions such as posttraumatic stress symptoms, depression and social phobia as well as positive results for treatment of panic disorder and eating disorders, obesity, and stress. Generally, these programs have relied on cognitive behavioural methods.

A recent article by Dr Greg Mulhauser (counselling resource 2010) discusses the challenges posed by this form of communication such as lack of facial expressions and non-verbal cues which are taken for granted when we communicate in person. He states that the same statement can have many meaning and we rely on other aspects of a person's expression to

interpret fully the meaning of their conversation, the absence of this dimension can pose concerns for certain practitioners when considering the online environment as a place for the therapeutic relationship to develop. The author also lists lack of physical presence and computer related concerns such as equipment and internet service failures as well concerns relating to confidentiality and privacy concerns.

Confidentiality and Ethical Standards

Research conducted by Dave Robson and Maggie Robson, looked at Ethical Issues in Internet Counselling, they noted that Counselling is usually in one of two forms, the first being exchange of electronic mail messages in which there is some delay between responses and secondly, in private chat rooms where speed is limited only by typing ability. According to Robson there are a number of ethical and practical difficulties associated with counselling via the Internet and which are not currently addressed in many codes of practice, they also stated that issues such as Autonomy - an ethical principle that includes the right of client to act as an autonomous agent as long as their choices do not infringe on the rights of other is affected when communication is via the Internet, for example in order to protect a client if in danger of harming oneself or others it may be necessary to abandon autonomy and break confidentiality of the client for their own safety but in a virtual environment this is a very difficult task due to the greater degree of anonymity and the abstract nature of communication.

Robson also notes other areas of concern such as Beneficence, Beneficence is the principle that involves acting to enhance client well-being. The possibility of enhancing a client's well-being may be reduced when the communication is at a textual level. In order to undertake the risky business of exploring self, the client (and counsellor) must feel physically and psycho-

logically safe (McGuinness, 1989). For example physical safety refers to the safety of the client, a client whilst typing on a computer may be overseen or found out typing about his or her abuser if in an abusive situation and be open to more abuse or physical harm if this were to happen whereas in a traditional counsellor setting the likelihood of this occurrence would be very small.

(Rogers, 1957), argue that where the relationship between the client and the counsellor is paramount, the use of computer communication would make the establishment of such a relationship extremely difficult and therefore compromise the beneficence that can be offered. Rogers (1961) Beneficence is the principle that involves acting to enhance client well-being.

The US, National Board for Certified Counsellors have proposed guidelines for counselling over the Internet (Bloom, 1998) and this sparked a debate to whether such a medium is appropriate for counselling. Critics feel that it was legitimising an unknown area too quickly and have raised a number of concerns (Morrissey, 1997).

The British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy produced guidelines (Anthony & Jamieson, 2005; Goss, Anthony, Jamieson, & Palmer, 2001) for online mental health service delivery, including online supervision, and concluded that practitioners could no longer ignore the influence of new technologies, also highlighting that there is a need for further research in the area. (Richards 2009)

While online counseling holds the potential to provide high quality mental health and wellness care, it also represents a vehicle through which consumers can access counselors

who are unlicensed, unregulated, and who may or may not have the training and education that is essential to ethical practice (Alleman, 2002; Robson & Robson, 2000).

A survey conducted a survey and online counselling sites were examined to determine the types of services offered and their associated fees, as well as the characteristics and qualifications of the service providers, and compliance with the ethical standards for online counselling of the American National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC). Heinlen noted that compliance with NBCC standards was poor with less than one quarter of 136 websites indicated the use of encryption to ensure the security of communication. Encryption software protects client confidentiality by transforming the data into a form unreadable by anyone without a decryption key. The privacy of online clients was not well protected. Heinlen et al (2003).

Currently there are no guidelines with the Republic of Ireland that are specific to Online Counselling however this has been recognised as an issue and accrediting bodies such as the Irish Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy are currently in the process of developing a ethical and professional framework for Online Counselling.

Rationale For Present Study

Individuals differ radically from one another in the degree to which they are willing and able to express their emotions, it seems to be a positive thing that the many avenues of expression and support are being explored such as Online Counselling and should not be undermined or compared to another medium of therapy as each holds its own unique ability to relate to a certain individuals needs as well as facilitate those needs at a certain time that might not otherwise be accomplished. Technology has allowed this to happen, the ability to reach out to

those in isolation mentally or physically seems to be a great gift to our generation. These initial thoughts sparked my interest in the area of Online Counselling.

Aims of Study

The purpose of the present study is to provide a more complete and current picture of “The experiences of Online counsellors providing a Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland”.

The area of online communication is very interesting as it is becoming a very central part of our everyday lives, more and more people are connecting with friends online and using the Internet as a primary source for communication as well as support, technologies are also changing the way we look at the Internet such as audio visual equipment, changes like these suggest that even over a 5-year period online counselling services may have evolved. This research was designed to explore the experiences of counsellors offering online services, the characteristics of online clients, the appealing qualities of the online counselling, challenges it poses for counsellors as well as associated ethical and professional issues.

Whilst Online Counselling appears to be very popular and well established within the UK, US and Canada, the concept appears to be still new and contentious in Ireland, this study seeks to experiences gain understanding of the experience of Online Counsellors in the Republic of Ireland, in this sense I would hope to add to the existing literature in this area as well as identify gaps in the current literature available that need to be addresses within this profession as well as gain knowledge encompassing the overall experience of the online counsellor in Ireland.

For the purposes of this study, the definition of online counselling is drawn from the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy’s Guidelines for Online Counselling and

Psychotherapy Goss *et al.*, 2001) which refers to ‘. . . text-based communication over the internet either by email or by Internet relay chat (IRC)’ (p. 1).

Methods

The study was designed to investigate the experiences of counsellors providing an online counselling service. The methods used in this study were semi-structured interviews. The topics addressed in this chapter include:

- (a) a restatement of the specific research questions;
- (b) the participants,
- (c) an explanation of the instruments used in the study;
- (d) a description of the procedures and
- (e) an explanation of the data analysis procedures.

Online Counsellors were sought who had experience of providing an online counselling service in the Republic of Ireland. Five participants were qualified and practicing counsellors and psychotherapists. Participants were interviewed either by phone or face-to-face using semi-structured interviews. The interviews were tape-recorded and the data transcribed. A thematic analysis was then carried out of the data. This method was chosen as it reflected the researchers priorities in terms of enabling the development of an organic, evolutionary research process in terms of researching themes and sub themes as they emerged from the data.

Research Questions

The research questions addressed in this study were as follows:

1. When did you establish your online counselling service?
2. How many clients are face-to-face/telephone (if any)?
3. How many Clients are purely online?
4. What are the main/common presenting problems?
5. What are the Client Characteristics of those whom are most like to access your service?
6. In your experience what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?
7. Is there currently a ethical and professional framework for online counselling in Ireland?
8. Do you charge a fee for your service?
9. What are the core issues that must be carefully evaluated by counsellors providing this service?
10. In your experience what is the most challenging aspect of providing this method of counselling? (as opposed to traditional methods)?
11. Are there support services available for online counsellors in Ireland?

12. If needed, are there supervision resources available while practicing Online Counselling?
13. Have you experienced resistance to establishing this form of counselling? If so from whom?
14. Have you experienced resistance to Online Counselling from other professionals in the field?
15. Is there specialist advanced training for provision of therapy via chat systems/online?
16. Does the change of conversation from verbal communication skills to text based require the development of new skills?
17. Do you ever feel your text has become misunderstood?
18. Have you ever heard of Online Presence-forms of Online Expression?
19. Is it difficult to establish and maintain a therapeutic dialogue online?
20. Do you believe that a therapeutic healing empathic relationship can be fully formed using text only?
21. What do you see as being the potential problems with Online Counselling?

Participants

The total number of participants in the present study was five. The five participants were asked 21 questions one face-to-face and four via telephone interview. The participants were selected through a process of researching current counselling services in Ireland. Participants were selected after emailing and contact via telephone. The participants agreed to participate as they were interested in reading the outcome of the current study, all participants were between the ages of 35-50. All participants were qualified counsellors and psychotherapists practicing in the Republic of Ireland.

Data Analysis

The data analysis procedures incorporated several prominent features as guidelines, analysis was based on data interpretation and writing. Coding procedures were used to reduce the information into categories, patterns and themes (Creswell, 1994; Tesch, 1990). The analysis involved six steps: the interviews were transcribed and read several times in order to identify meaningful segments of the data, the data was then selectively coded by identifying themes that emerged as the transcripts were read; the encoded data was then categorised by moving from individual “mini” themes to more general themes. Global themes and sub-themes were then conceptualised into statements and descriptive categories, the data was analysed using individual case analysis and later cross case analysis constituting a descriptive analytical framework of analysis.

This descriptive process demonstrates how analysis of the raw data from interview transcripts and organisational documents progressed toward the identification of overarching themes that captured the early experiences of online counsellors providing a online counselling service in the Republic of Ireland as described in their own words by participants in the study.

This approach complemented the research questions by allowing the tenets of social phenomenology to be integral to the process of deductive thematic analysis while allowing for themes to emerge direct from the data using inductive coding. The coding process involved recognizing seeing an important moment and encoding it seeing it as something prior to a process of interpretation (Boyatzis, 1998).

The equipment used to record the interviews was a PearlCorder s701 Microcassette recorder hired from Dublin Business School Library, the interviews were transcribed verbatim.

Procedure

Participants were researched online and then recruited through contact made via email a letter of request to participate, the participants were then contacted by telephone. When a participant agreed to take part in the research, they were sent an email with attached letter of request from DBS as well as confidentiality of interviews outlined.

Upon conducting interviews, the researcher introduced herself and explained the informed consent form and confidentiality of the data. The researcher then interviewed the participants. The audio-taped sessions lasted as long as the participant wished to speak, with the range being 20-80 min. 21 Research questions guided the interview. Follow-up questions were asked to clarify any unclear or ambiguous answers. After the interviews were concluded, all researchers and participants were thanked for their contribution and time. The researchers answered any further questions and provided information about how they could be contacted.

Finally, the researcher kept a process journal during the entire data collection and analysis procedures, to capture developing themes.

Ethical Considerations

The sample group consented prior to participating in the current study. The participants were free to withdraw at any time and were informed that they had the right to not answer any question. The Participants anonymity was protected. All participants of the current study were treated with dignity and respect and were thanked for their valued contribution.

Results

With the acknowledgement that this may only be one interpretation of results that have been found, I will begin to discuss the significant themes that emerged from the data collected.

The data that was collected with regards to the current research question Early Experiences of Online Counselling in the Republic of Ireland produced 6 major themes. The interview data was initially coded and grouped into a thematic structure which was thought to reflect common patterns emanating from the data.

The main themes that remained prevalent across all the participants data were as follows:

Flexibility;

Duty of Care;

Client Characteristics;

Common Presenting Problems;

Ethical and professional Framework;

Continual Development;

Clarity;

Appealing Qualities;

Lack of Support and Awareness and

Therapist Skills Needed.

Flexibility

Flexibility was seen as a major asset of online counselling, Participant-4 saw that it was affordable and provides anonymity and flexibility, Participant-1 agreed with this theme but illustrated this theme through use of different words.

Participant-1: I suppose the qualities that I find and that the clients find is that they can do it at their own pace. Every week they can do gradual and eh suggest their own pace, its their own choice.

Similarly Participant-3 illustrated the theme Flexibility by saying he felt it was convenient and the client has control over when they wish to communicate as well as well as emphasizing the lower cost of the counselling session itself, Participant-4 also emphasised the affordability of Online Counselling whilst Participant-5 discussed the appealing qualities as disinhibition;

Participant-5: If an individual is not ready or willing to go to a face to face counsellor,

Duty of Care

The theme of Duty of Care was an extremely important factor in the participants experiences of providing an online counselling service spanned across all sets of Data, each participant felt a strong duty of care to his or her clients, sub themes such as confidentiality and the safety of the client were extremely important to the participants and surfaced throughout the interviews.

Participant-4 further talks about Confidentiality, which was an overarching theme which was encompassed mainly in Duty of Care presents itself here:

Participant-2: Also anonymity, remember people in our service were not completely anonymous, as professionals we have a clinical a duty of care, so we were able to track everyone, but within the system people were identified by username, it could be anything, you know so among other registered users they were only known by their username, but clinical staff could follow up who they were if we wanted to follow up anything in emergencies for example

Participant-5 discussed the risk involved with online counselling as well as Client safety as a main priority in this form of counselling.

Client Characteristics

Client Characteristics differed across the interviews but still remained a theme within the data, the client characteristics of Participant-1 were 30-50 age bracket, characteristics of Participant-3 were 20-35 but not exclusively and Participant-4 were between age profile 25-40 and finally Participant-5 stated that Client Characteristics were unknown due to the anonymous nature of the online counselling service provided.

Common Presenting Problems

Common presenting problems also varied across the data, Participant-1 saw her clients common presenting problems as mainly relationship difficulties.

Participant-3 presenting problems were similar to those of Participant-4 and Participant-5 which were panic disorder, Generalised anxiety disorder and sexual addiction, Participant-3's was also depression addicton and concerns about anxiety, where as Participant-1 differed in that the participant stated the common presenting problem as being relationship difficulties,

Participant-2 stated that the presenting problems would be the same as face-to-face counseling.

Ethical and Professional Framework

Ethical and professional framework was a theme across the data also, the theme revealed that there is currently no ethical or professional framework for online counselling in Ireland but that it is a work in process. For example Participant-3 states the following;

Participant-3: there is yeah, there isn't in Ireland at the moment, myself and my colleague are actually working on one at the moment. The IACT the Irish Association of Counselling and Therapy doesn't have any guidelines in relation to online counselling so we started working of the BACP the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, their guidelines are well established for online and we actually did our training through the person who designed those guidelines.

Participant-4 further states:

Participant-4: There isn't with IACP at the moment, there are no ethical Guidelines, personally speaking we did our training in the UK.

This theme throughout the data represented the current experiences of Online counsellors in providing this service, a sense of the struggle is represented in many ways in the lack of framework and supports surrounding this form of counselling and although as put by Participant-3;

Participant-3: the profession does tend to be conservative in its outlook generally. It would be more inclined to be resistant than exacting, however, having said that in fairness they IACP has em agreed to formulate some guidelines around online counselling so they do recognise that it is something that is going to happen one way or the other in Ireland, because it has happened in other place so like all these things there will be some resistance but people will come to see it as another way of providing the service just like telephone counselling is ye know.

A subtheme which emerged from this theme was “acknowledgement for the need of ethical and professional framework for online counselling” by organizations such as the Irish Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy. This is very welcomed by Online Counsellors as Participant-2 explains further;

They’d be very welcome, because we’re behind on other countries in this regard, even the UK, our nearest, our neighbours, they already have established ethical and professional guidelines in, in eh the accrediting bodies same with the American Psychological Association, the Canadian Psychological Association.

This theme illustrated that Ireland is very much so behind with regards to providing these frameworks even though we are currently in the developing process of such guidelines.

In some cases lack of supports for Online Counsellors that are specifically tailored to the online counselling environment was sometimes a sense of frustration felt by the participants.

As Participant-1 states as follows;

Participant-1: to be honest, I haven’t got a lot of negativity, but I would say that I haven’t had alot of positive feedback either from anybody. You know I think that people have just left me alone.

Although participants utilised their support systems for their face to face counselling and adapted that to the online environment, there is still a big difference in both environments as well as the skills that are needed to counsel in both face to face and online. This is where the theme continual development emerges, Participant-2 states as follows;

Participant-2: yeah, that's really important, and there are a few agencies that do that including securecounselling.ie which is the company that I'm involved with. And I think that if em any counsellors, therapist, or even coaches, ye know, they need some level of training of working in the online environment, in synchronous communication and substitute of that or asynchronous communication and the associated subtleties of that, it's really important, because there is a difference.

Continual Development

Continual Development was a theme encompassed in all interviews, the counsellors felt it was a very important aspect of their counselling in terms of skill and delivery of their service, all Online Counsellors acknowledged the challenges and additional skills needed for online counselling such as familiarity with technology which was explained by Participant-3;

Participant-3: eh, I think so yeah, as I said earlier there's no point, there's no point in the client being familiar with online chat if the therapist isn't ye know, em if you're probably familiar with Instant Messenger and Facebook yourself, so there are ways of communicating feelings, and there are ways of emphasising particular words and phrases online, the use of emoticons, different coloured texts and all those kinds of things, ways of communicating online are covered in the training that provides, so there is that emphasis on that specialised way of working online.

Participants 1, 2 and 4 and 5 also emphasised the need of new skills that one can learn and develop to use text based communication more effectively in the therapeutic context.

Participant-5: New skills are essential in conveying warmth and tone ...

Clarity

Clarity was a main theme that emerged within all the sets of data analysed, Clarity between the counsellor and client as well as Clarity in terms of clarification of words, meaning, expectations and also clarity in terms of confidentiality. Participant-1 expresses this as follows;

Interviewer: Do you ever feel like your text has become misunderstood?

Participant-1: No, because I always ensure that the 'em that the client, like I have, I would have spoken to them and said just to be sure if anything look for clarity.

For all participants Clarity was deemed a very important and necessary aspect of providing clear communication patterns in order to understand one another and the presenting issues clearly. Participant-4 further states;

Participant-4: Yes I do, em and in your training you would always be thought to seek clarification em and the use of graphics and emoticons , the use of chatting is always a way to check things out and I think thats what your training is about,to use the technology in a way that will allow you to be in a different space than the client.

Appealing Qualities of Online Counselling

Another theme which emerged across all four sets of data was Appealing Qualities of online counselling as well as a sub theme which was distinct advantages of technology use for counselling for people with body image issues and eating disorders as well as social phobias and those whom suffer a disability. Participant-2 talks about the appealing qualities of online as opposed to face- to-face counselling as follows;

Participant-2: there are some distinct advantages to using technology for counselling. I think distance, the distance between eh the client and counsellor that also improves anonymity, because alot of clients there issue is that they're seen in front of somebody, so to present that in face-to-face can be very challenging, I'll offer an example, take for example individuals with eating disorders, body image issues, they don't want to present face-to-face, so the potential of using technology is huge ...

Participant-5 also noted that many of her clients present with eating disorder issues so this evaluation by Participant-2 is also echoed in other participants data.

A Sub Theme emerging from Appealing Qualities were the benefits of Writing Therapy; stating Online Counselling allows for the benefits of this form of therapy to occur naturally, the participant also discusses the potential of online counselling to meet the needs of individuals whom may not otherwise access a counselling service as well as the flexibility it offers.

The other thing is, em, some people find writing of benefit to them. Now there's a whole body of research on the therapeutic benefit of writing, writing stuff down. So IRC counselling em builds on that you know, it allows for example the client to synchronous/asynchronous communication ... the client to write down , there's a guy called John Furher who spoke about this in terms of being a zonal reflection in terms of some ways like this, once the client starts writing down their problems we immediately start to get a

different perspective on it, even before they get a reply from the counsellor, the therapy starts before they get a reply – potentially its beneficial as well, especially for people with busy lives etc. also, you don't have to be in an office or a geographical location, you can do this from home or from work or wherever.

Interviewer: and it's good for disabled people in that sense?

Participant-2: in that sense it's excellent, as it increases access to populations such as the disabled or like populations like those who are deaf, essentially, you know or with other disabilities

Participant-3 felt the appealing qualities much like Participant-1 and Participant-2 experience were flexibility, convenience, not having to leave ones home, and control over when to communicate as ;

Participant-3-are the main hooks if you like.

Participant-1 and Participant-4 saw flexibility/level of convenience as well as affordability and anonymity to be the appealing qualities of online counselling.

Lack of Support and Awareness

Lack of Support and Awareness around online counselling developed as a theme across all the data also but particularly with the data of Participant-1 and 3, Participant-3 also stated the difficulty he has in promoting his service and raising a level of awareness within people's consciousness that the service exists, he felt that people would be willing to use online counselling if they knew about it. Participant-1 similarly felt a level of lack of support

throughout her experience of providing the service, she felt that it was not a business that was booming by any means and perhaps this links up with Participant-3's frustrations. For example, Participant-3 emphasised the problems around raising awareness around online counselling as potentially the biggest problem for online counselling, he states as follows;

Participant-3: Maybe the biggest problem we have encountered is to try and raise awareness around the whole service and to try and to try and embed it in the consciousness of people so that when people think of counselling, or that they want some counselling, they would consider online it would be another thing they would consider whereas, at the moment when people think of counselling, they tend to have an idea of going into a room and sitting down with another person it hasn't seeped into the consciousness to the same extent, there isn't awareness out there that there's such a service, that you can actually do counselling online em so maybe that would be one of the problems, it will take a bit of time to embed itself but also maybe as well some resistance from ... within the profession that might actually frustrate the progress, that's just a guess, I haven't actually experience that as I say, but I think that would be reasonable to expect that it would happen somewhere along the line.

Therapist Skills

The theme Therapist Skills surfaced quite alot within the data, the participants felt that the level of healing that takes place within an online session depends a lot on the level of skills the therapist themselves hold in establishing and maintaining a therapeutic dialogue; Participant-3 states the following;

Participant-3: I think again, it depends on the skills of the therapist, just like in face-to-face work, I mean a therapeutic relationship is something that isn't always easy to establish and

maintain, but a skilled therapist whether they're working face-to-face or whether they're working online em will be able to do that and maintain that relationship and do good work in it.

Participant-2 further illustrates this theme;

Participant-2: The professional would to a large degree facilitate the conversation in terms of the maintenance of dialogue, just like they would in face-to-face.

Participant-2 felt that maintaining a therapeutic dialogue depended on how giving the client is. Participant-4 felt that making a connection with clients online was certainly more difficult than face-to-face counselling.

The final theme discussed is a subtheme that emerged from Duty of Care which was is Safety of Clients. Participant-1 discusses this theme,

Participant-1: That would be an issue that 'em you know the person is safe within themselves, not with me, within themselves are they safe, are they safe am 100% sure that they are, like if you're face to face with a client you would be able to see if they were or not. With email or chat it's not easy to see how they're reacting to their own emotions and how they're feeling on the night because you cannot see them.

This concludes the thematic analysis of the data presented in the Current Research.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore the experiences of Online Counsellors providing an Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland, the counselors spoke of their experiences with providing this service which encompassed the following, client characteristics, presenting issues, advantages of this method of counselling, disadvantages as well as challenges with providing this service, personal challenges such as lack of supports and guidelines surrounding the delivery of online counselling in the Republic of Ireland as well as therapeutic benefit of writing therapy. These aspects of providing an online counselling service were discussed drawing from the experiences of the individual counsellors interviewed.

Benefit of Writing Therapy

Participant-2 stated the therapeutic benefit of writing therapy, the benefits of expressing feelings and thoughts in text format, at a distance, and outside a face-to-face encounter are also supported by Wright (2002). This supports the view that writing as a form of therapy is a natural rather than forceful addition to traditional therapies available as well as extremely beneficial for the client as a way of developing thinking and awareness. Murphy and Mitchell (1998) also describe a counselling service they have developed on the Internet. They see the availability of the transcript of the sessions to both the client and the counsellor as a particular benefit. They argue that clients can re-read the transcripts of sessions and see how far they have changed. They can also use the transcripts to see how they may have approached a particular problem if it arises again.

Although these advantages appear to support counselling via the Internet, there are ethical difficulties that also need to be addresses this was a theme which was identified also within

the current research. Writing down and phrasing your problems, emotions and thoughts is considered as an essential part of the therapy process although in research conducted by JOANN ORAVEC - 2000. Oravec states that having the ability to write and reflect on ones text can be both a benefit and a drawback. Both counsellor and client benefit from the opportunity to re-read what is being said, the words are the vehicle for the counselling and can be focused on without other distractions. However, re-reading text also allows for changes in meaning as the text flows continuously (authoritatively) without the pauses and hesitations of normal speech. Magnification can distort the meaning and undermine the working alliance when client and counsellor do not appear to understand each other. Oravec (2000).

Duty of Care - Client Safety and Confidentiality issues

Autonomy is an ethical principle that includes the right of client to act as an autonomous agent as long as their choices do not infringe on the rights of other. However, autonomy does not necessarily imply unlimited freedom. Many codes of practice would support the contravention of client autonomy through the breaking of confidentiality in the case where a client is threatening to kill or cause harm to somebody or themselves. This agreement is usually reached through negotiation resulting in the client's realisation that the counsellor needs to break confidentiality because they care about the welfare of the client. The Internet relationship is one that is particularly isolated in ways as both client and counsellor may be separated from normal support networks and contacts. In such circumstances, it would be more difficult for the counsellor to resolve the issue of assaulting autonomy and breaking confidentiality. (Robson & Robson, 2000).

Participant-1 especially voiced her concern with regards to this issue when she stated that she would have concern for the clients safety within themselves and went on to say that lack of visual and verbal cues can make it especially difficult when attempting to analyse the clients emotional state or to make a decision to subjugate client autonomy which can often occur during a session when the counsellor becomes concerned for the safety of the client or of others. Participants-1, 2, 3, 4 and 5 all placed confidentiality as well as safety of their Clients in the highest regard whilst it also became clear that this can pose as quite a challenge; Previous research by Rogers (1961) offers further insight 'where the relationship between the client and the counsellor is paramount, the use of computer communication would make the establishment of such a relationship extremely difficult and therefore compromise the benefice that can be offered. Rogers (1961)

Due to the greater degree of anonymity that a client may hold in online counseling, this can pose as a concern for online counsellors whilst also appearing to be one of the main hooks attracting clients to this form of counselling as they can communicate with the counsellor anonymously, using e-mail services or via chat systems which hide the sender's identity. If the counsellor becomes concerned about the client's welfare, then it may not be possible to assist the anonymous client in locating support services or to call on local support for the client. This presented itself as an issue for the counsellors within the data collected.

Appealing qualities of Online Counselling

The appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling were discussed by all of the participants, participants agreed that the appealing qualities of this form of counselling were

Flexibility and convenience as well as Anonymity , affordability and client control over the pace and time of sessions. These attributes of Online Counselling were acknowledged in previous research; for example in research carried out by Derek Richards ,the paper reports on the use of the online counselling service at Trinity College Dublin, including its uptake and usage, the issues and benefits of online counselling to students, the results also highlights the benefits of increasing accessibility and flexibility.

Anonymity is reinforced by research conducted by Hand et al. (2009) pointing out the possible use of the Internet as an anonymous and private way for perpetrators of violence to seek help.

Research conducted by Elly Robinson (2009) also highlights these benefits increased accessibility, for example, for rural and remote persons, people with a disability, people with agoraphobia, people who are relocating but want to work with the same therapist, fast-paced lifestyles, unusual employment hours as well as Anonymity, privacy, convenience. Robinson also states that disinhibition and internalisation allows for core issues addressed more quickly, matters expressed more freely, this point was made throughout the current research.

Participant-5 noted the disinhibition that can occur online, previous research also focuses on disinhibition Suler,J, (2001) that can occur in an online environment, Disinhibition is thought to enable core issues to be addressed more quickly, matters expressed more freely. (Suler 2001) however Participant-5 also noted that;

Participant-5; sometimes an online environment can lacks spontaneity and the nuances of traditional counselling can be sometimes compromised.

There is limited evidence in the literature regarding the appropriateness of online therapy for particular individuals. Studies indicate, however, that people experiencing problems associated with emotions, thoughts and behaviours, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, panic disorder, anxiety and other stress disorders may be well suited to online therapies (Barak et al., 2008).

Participants across the data agree with this research and stated that depression, anxiety, social phobias and stress disorders were suited to Online Therapy, Barak et al. (2008) concluded that online therapy was particularly effective for treating anxiety and stress, with lasting effects, and on average is as effective as face-to-face interventions.

Participant-5 stated however that some psychological conditions are not suitable for online counselling and in those cases she would suggest the client see a face to face counsellor, Conley Tyler & McPherson, 2006; Syme, 2004 came to the same conclusion that both client and therapist need to be suited to this form of counselling.

Participant-5 also stated that in some cases where social anxiety is an issue Online counselling might not be the best option as the client is not facing their fears, their fears are becoming facilitated so in those cases it would be more beneficial for the client to seek traditional face to face counselling.

Further research needs to be carried out in this area to see if this is a plausible statement, more research is needed on Clients and Therapist experiences of counselling sessions in an online environment. Such as how comfortable and suited to online counselling counsellors are and also how beneficial are the results for the client. Participant-5 notes that not all therapist are suited to this form of counselling

Challenges posed by Online Counselling

The Participants of the current study felt that the challenges posed by Online Counselling were mainly linked with issues of Duty of Care, Client Safety, Confidentiality issues, Clarity in the online environment, lack of awareness around Online Counselling such as promotion and awareness that the service exists as well as skepticism towards online Counselling. Participants felt that lack of awareness can create a sense of fear within the profession, fear of new technologies which may leave traditional therapists in fear that they will become obsolete and unable to work in the online environment because of lack of skills, participants stated that online counselling is not in any means a replacement for face to face therapy but more of a extra feature of Counselling in general. They also recognised that whilst resistance is perhaps expected in some senses that once the profession is informed that they will be more likely to accept that Online Counselling is a symbol of growth within the overall profession and it is here to stay, at present an ethical and professional framework is being established by the IACP for Online Counselling specifically It is argued that professional bodies must take a lead in resolve these ethical dilemmas and offer proper safeguards to the clients, professional and ethical guidelines were a very welcomed attribute by professional interviewed.

Continual development was another theme which emerged within the present Data the Counsellors felt that in order to fully utilise the online environment in providing therapy one needed to be trained in that specific environment. Participants reiterated the importance of training and sub themes emerged under this such as Clarity. One of the participants stated the importance Online Trainers place on Clarification of words and meaning as well as what is expected of both Counsellor and Clients. Participants described the use of emoticons and

different color texts in order to enhance the online relationship with clients this mirrored previous research by Zevlin

“...with clients, I find that even the basic smiley and winkie go a long way toward preventing misunderstandings and establishing and maintaining a positive therapeutic relationship.” E. Zelvin, personal communication (2003)

Ethical Issues

Participants in the current study voiced their opinion with regards to possible ethical dilemmas and concerns over risk and client safety as well as the appropriateness of online counselling for individual clients, some authors, previous research has however drawn attention to the specific characteristics of the online environment that make it a safer alternative than face-to-face.

Confidentiality

Whilst many of the participants discussed issues of importance with regards to confidentiality in an online environment it may be important to point out that research conducted by Chester and Glass (2006), notes that no situation that is risk-free in face-to-face therapy, filing cabinets may be left unlocked or walls may be thin. In fact, online communication has particular safeguards that can be used, for example, email interception security risks can be virtually eliminated by the use of encryption (Chester & Glass, 2006; Santhiveeran, 2004).

Conclusion

Counselling via the Internet is a service that is already being offered in the Republic of Ireland. This paper researched The Early Experiences of Online Counsellors of providing an Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland. A number of practical and ethical concerns emerged from within the data, it was felt that difficulties working in the online environment were perhaps furthermore frustrated by a lack of ethical and professional framework as well as supports for the Counsellor. Practical concerns were that of promoting the counsellors services as well as raising awareness that the service is available for users to access. Continual Development and training for Online Counsellors emerged as an important feature to participants whilst providing an online service, participants had undergone specialist training or else were intending to further develop their online skills. Duty of care to clients was also a theme that gained a lot of presence throughout the data as well as importance in clarity. Flexibility and anonymity were two of the main appealing qualities of online counselling that spanned throughout all sets of data.

In noting the potential issue facing online therapy providers, one also can't but acknowledge how technology can complement and improve service provision in the mental health field, the benefits of online therapy outweigh the negatives when you realise the potential that technology has offered us today to reach out to those who need support.

Limitations

Upon reflecting on the current research the researcher takes into consideration that online counseling is at a very early stage in its development in Ireland, the number of practitioners are limited and the level of take-up is relatively low.

The interviewer had never before met any of the participants, this may have indirectly affected the study in a positive way as sometimes people can be more honest with strangers than those that are extremely familiar to them. The researcher felt the study was important as in the current environment we live in, people need support as everything seems more extreme than before such as recent cases of bullying and suicides as well as people feeling mentally isolated in some cases the internet can be not only a support but a life line. If the potential of online counselling was fully utilised in the Republic of Ireland, it is possible that it could have a positive impact on the well being of many.

Important ramifications of the research

Results of the current research were drawn from reflection of the overall experiences of the counsellors in providing this service, findings were mainly consistent with previous research but in some instances the research surfaced themes which were previously unreviewed such as lack of support and awareness of online counselling in the Republic of Ireland. The research highlighted the difficulties that counsellors may have in promoting their service and also in creating awareness that the service exists, this is a significant practical part of the counsellors overall experience in providing an online counselling service in the Republic of Ireland.

Implications for future research

Promotion and Awareness of Online Counselling services may be a potentially very important theme and a basis for further research. Another potential area of further research and in which the current study could be extended would be traditional counsellors views towards Online counselling and modern technology. It would be interesting to gain insight into the traditional counsellors views of how modern technologies will influence traditional counselling practices in the long term, whether they see it as being a efficient or inefficient form of counselling. Also, another possible area for further research may be confidentiality and the online environment - ways to counter the perceived potential risks associated with this form of counselling.

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Appendix 1 - Interview Transcripts

Interview 1

Interviewer: em when did you establish your online counselling service Participant-1?

Participant-1: eh, I established my online counselling service eh, what year am I em 10, eh
2008

Interviewer: 2008, how many clients face-to-face and telephone if any?

Participant-1: eh none face-to-face

Interviewer: OK, how many clients are purely online clients?

Participant-1: eh, I would have had, just approx now, I wouldn't have researched that information properly, I can email that kind of question back to you, I would say about 20.

Interviewer: about 20 – that's perfect, since about 2008?

Participant-1: yes.

Interviewer: that's perfect, what are the main presenting problems of your clients?

Participant-1: would be female em with relationship difficulties

Interviewer: relationship difficulties, would that be family relationships and personal relationships?

Participant-1: yeah.

Interviewer: OK and what are the client characteristics of those that seek out to use your service?

Participant-1: it would be female

Interviewer: would they tell you their age?

Participant-1: I'm hazarding a guess, but it would be the 30-50 age bracket.

Interviewer: OK, perfect, thanks, in your experience, what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?

Participant-1: I suppose the qualities that I find and that the clients find is that they can do it at their own pace. Every week they can do gradual and eh suggest their own pace.

Interviewer: is there anything else you would like to say on that?

Participant-1: it has that flexibility, that they can eh ... , email counselling especially they can take their time, they can write over a couple of weeks or a couple of days and get a response.

Interviewer: is there any ethical or professional framework for online counselling in Ireland that you know of?

Participant-1: em , there is, I know that there is online counselling have an ethical framework, but I'm not 100% sure.

Interviewer: OK, no problem, do you charge a fee for your service and if so, how much per session for online counselling?

Participant-1: I do charge a fee, but it varies. I charge €25 for email counselling, a person would get an initial response, em it's like an intake form, secondly they would mail back their presenting issues and I would respond asking questions for clarity, it may take one mail or two mails, they get one long mail, overall they get two mails.

Interviewer: OK, alright, is the fee negotiable depending on the clients?

Participant-1: it's not negotiable, but I think there's flexibility there for the client because, at the end of, I determine then when the next fee is due.

Interviewer: what are the core issues that must be carefully evaluated by counsellor providing this service in your opinion?

Participant-1: the confidentiality has to be established at the outset, that's the first email, em I would set that out, but it would be my responsibility, if they were to harm themselves or anyone else, that's when I would breach the confidentiality, so I make sure from my first email that the client is aware of that.

Interviewer: in your experience what are the most challenging aspects of providing this method of counselling as opposed to traditional methods?

Participant-1: it's a difficult, it's a difficult form of counselling because when you're face to face with clients you can see reactions and you can hear the reactions, you can evaluate the impact of the question on the client, in online counselling you ask the question and sometimes you're being too elusive or the client mightn't be 100% happy that you've asked that question, the bond initially mightn't have been built up, so basically you could ask one of those, so that's very challenging.

Interviewer: are there support services available for online counsellors in Ireland?

Participant-1: not specifically for online counselling, but I get supervision and I just bring the client issues in the same as if I would if it was just counselling.

Interviewer: you've just answered the next question; I just wanted to ask you if there were supervision resources available?

Participant-1: not specifically now for online, so I want that to be very clear, what I've been doing, I mean the supervisor is aware that I'm doing online counselling, but I'm bringing the issue the same as face to face counselling.

Interviewer: have you experience resistance to online counselling and if so, whom from?

Participant-1: to be honest, I haven't got a lot of negativity, but I would say that I haven't had a lot of positive feedback either from anybody. You know I think that people have just left me alone.

Interviewer: do you feel that's a barrier when you try to establish professional work and you don't really have any support as such.

Participant-1: I do face to face counselling as well and that's where I tend to get my support from you know, it's it's grand because I'm again again it's not a business that's booming at all by any means.

Interviewer: when you say you do face to face counselling and that's where you get your support from, would you just kinda translate whatever questions you had or something from an online environment, you know, if you needed help on something you'd get support that way, is that what you mean?

Participant-1: from my supervisor?

Interviewer: yeah , exactly.

Participant-1: yes, yes, o yeah, yeah, it's all very the same, supervision is the very same. You're bringing the issues, your thoughts to the table about what's going on for the clients, it's the very same.

Interviewer: is there any specialist advanced training or therapy for counsellors online or do you just transfer your knowledge from your traditional face to face counselling?

Participant-1: what I did was I transferred my knowledge from traditional face to face counselling, but I am, I have been tuned in, am and its something that I'm considering doing this year for my continual development , there is training I think in Dublin, I think there's someone doing it in Dublin, I haven't done it, but it's my next

Interviewer: step. OK. And does the change of communication skills from verbal to text based require the development of new skills in your opinion? Like what did you find challenging?

Participant-1: well, you need to be able to type fast.

Interviewer: OK

Participant-1: You need to be 'eh mindful and careful of what you're reading

Interviewer: OK and how to interact with it, is that what you mean kind of?

Participant-1: Yes, you just need to take your time, it's a more difficult form of counselling there's no doubt.

Interviewer: OK, I think you've just answered the next question as well, 'cause i was just going to ask you 'em did you ever feel that your text had become misunderstood, something that you had said?

Participant-1: No, because I always ensure that the 'em that the client, like I have, I would have spoken to them and said just to be sure if anything look for clarity.

Interviewer: OK

Participant-1: I'm finding it difficult because I can hear it being repeated back to myself

Interviewer: OK, sorry, just one second, OK – is that better

Participant-1: Yeah, that's better,

Interviewer: is that alot better

Participant-1: yeah

Interviewer: OK, 'em OK actually, I just have one or two more questions 'em. 'oh, is it difficult to establish and maintain a therapeutic dialogue?

Participant-1: 'em ... not really, depending on how giving the client is

Interviewer: OK, alright, do you believe that healing empathetic relationships can be formed using text only counselling?

Participant-1: No

Interviewer: OK and why would that be?

Participant-1: I think that 'em text counselling would, it's method of getting the person over a difficult stage.

Interviewer: OK

Participant-1: I think that myself, I would always recommend, if I thought there was an issue going on I would always recommend to see a GP or see a counsellor face to face ... if I thought , if I thought that the client was not responding well to either email or chat counselling.

Interviewer: OK , that's great, I think you've kind of answered the next question as well , I was just going to ask you what do you see as the potential problems in online counselling?

Participant-1: that would be the issue that 'em you know the person is safe within themselves, not with me, within themselves are they safe, are they safe am 100% sure that they are, like if you're face to face with a client you would be able to see if they were or not. With email or chat it's not easy to see how they're reacting to their own emotions and how they're feeling on the night because you cannot see them.

Interviewer: OK, that's very good, and 'em ok that's it.

End of interview

Interview 2

Start of interview 11:48.

Interviewer: so when did you establish your online counselling service?

Participant-2: the service was established approximately 4 years ago

Interviewer: OK

Participant-2: that's when we setup what's known as the (name removed) mental health portal, there's a couple of services, including the provision of online psycho education, online peer support and the third service is then the online counselling service, asynchronous, meaning it's time delayed, it wasn't live. Similar to email.

Interviewer: Do you remember what year it was?

Participant-2: it would have been ... 2006

Interviewer: ok, so how many clients are face-to-face or telephone if any?

Participant-2: telephone? Well the (name removed) mental health portal was operated as a counselling service in (name removed) so there would have been about 500 face-to-face clients, no-one by telephone, but then on-line counselling, 40-50 per year.

Interviewer: ok, thank you so you said 40-50 purely online per year

Participant-2: yes, but let me tell you the model, as it would be a little bit different from what we would consider usual in face to face, essentially a client could write a submission into the counsellor in through the portal, the counsellor would then read that submission and write a reply, and then both the original submission and the reply would be posted live to the website, so all registered user of the site potentially had access to that reply and submission, so it acted on one level as a reply to the individual, but secondly, potentially as education and therapeutic to other users. That's the model we used.

Interviewer: and what are the main common presenting problems?

Participant-2: well in research i carried out on the use of the online counselling service there's no difference in the issues presented by individuals using the online counselling service and face-to-face.

Interviewer: o'h right, that's interesting

Participant-2: yes, it is, it's very interesting. No difference.

Interviewer: because, i thought it might be online associated problems, like online addictions

Participant-2: No, in the research I did there was completely no difference in the presenting issues

Interviewer: ok, What are the client characteristics of those who are most likely to access your service?

Participant-2: well in the research i did on the online internet portal, there's essentially no difference between those would access face-to-face counselling and those who would access online counselling. In terms of gender, in terms of age etc. However, that's a very specific population of students, but in further research i did, certain key themes were identified which would support someone using the service as opposed to face-to-face, principal among them is the sense of pace and control of the counselling in the clients hands, they could go whenever they wanted to write in a submission. They could go and access that when they wanted to

and reply to it if necessary. Also anonymity, remember people in our service were not completely anonymous, as professionals we have a clinical a duty of care, so we were able to track everyone, but within the system people were identified by username, it could be anything, you know so among other registered users they were only known by their username, but clinical staff could follow up who they were if we wanted to follow up anything in emergencies for example

Interviewer: yeah, ok

Participant-2: there were no characteristics that stand out in terms of type of client

Interviewer: in terms of males or females

Participant-2: none as yet, none as yet, no and i don't know of any research that says a certain type of personality is more likely than another

Interviewer: in your experience what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?

Participant-2: there are some distinct advantages to using technology for counselling. I think distance, the distance between eh the client and counsellor that also improves anonymity, because alot of clients there issue is that they're seen in front of somebody, so to present that in face-to-face can be very challenging, i'll offer an example, take for example individuals with eating disorders, body image issues, they don't want to present face-to-face, so the potential of using technology is huge, i know of a couple of studies in Scotland by Susan Simpson and her colleagues who use video conferencing technology to work with eating disorder clients and the client had control at all times over whether the counsellor could see them on their screen. So again, a huge step there. The other thing is, em, some people find writing of benefit to them. Now there's a whole body of research on the therapeutic benefit of writing, writing stuff down. So IRC counselling em builds on that you know, it allows for example the client to synchronous/asynchronous communication ... the client to write down ,

there's a guy called John Fuhrer who spoke about this in terms of being a zonal reflection in terms of some ways like this, once the client starts writing down their problems we immediately start to get a different perspective on it, even before they get a reply from the counsellor, the therapy starts before they get a reply – potentially, potentially, em in terms of computer mediated, again em you have the potential for not just synchronous but also asynchronous or delayed again that's usually beneficial to people because with synchronous its similar to face-to-face you have to be at a place at a certain time, it's like an appointment, you schedule, whereas with asynchronous, you don't have to schedule, you can do it more in your own pace and time. So that's beneficial as well, especially for people with busy lives etc. also, like i was saying there, you don't have to be in an office or a geographical location, you can do this from home or from work or wherever

Interviewer: and it's good for disabled people in that sense?

Participant-2: in that sense it's excellent, as it increases access to populations such as the disabled or like populations like those who are deaf, essentially, you know or with other disabilities

Interviewer: or socially isolated people?

Participant-2: absolutely, phobias, think of social phobias, those who don't go outside the door, there you go

Interviewer: em yes, ok, so is there an ethical or professional framework in Ireland that you know of?

Participant-2: well I know this, one of the largest, the largest accreditation body of counselling and therapy in Ireland is the AUCT are currently developing guidelines for online counselling, outside of them, there doesn't exist within the guidelines of different agencies standards in this area as yet. They'd be very welcome, because we're behind on other

countries in this regard, even the UK, our nearest, our neighbours they already have established ethical and professional guidelines in, in eh the accrediting bodies same with the American psychological association, the Canadian psychological association, in addition to all of those though, there is an over-arching organisation called the international association for mental health online, now some people in Ireland are members of that, they do have ethics, ethics and practice guidelines in existence at the moment.

Interviewer: right, em, do you charge a fee for your service?

Participant-2: the service is free to students, much like any other college service

Interviewer: and what are the core issues that must be carefully evaluated by counsellors providing this service in your opinion?

Participant-2: the counsellors ... number one among the priorities I think would be that there would be a recognition, that while this is online counselling, it's online counselling in a new medium, new modes, and there is a requirement for training there, there is definitely a requirement for training because, you can use text quite effectively for example to communicate, we know that in general , but then there are other things you can incorporate into text, to help and advance in terms of emotional expression, meeting the needs of clients, also, just general technical things like emoticons they're used for example, you know they're particular to the technology, so training is definitely needed ... for counsellors online, another thing of course, a thing that comes up in terms of working online em is duty of care in terms of privacy, how do you make an assessment of a client that they're suitable, how do you then screen them continually, in terms of their risk and ye know, there has been alot of debate around this, and I think, I think that if you're in a relationship with a client, online or offline, the same skills are required to make an assessment, you're basing you're assessment on the questions you're asking the client and the answers they're giving and that's the best you can

do, and then based on your assessment you act on it, whether be it to terminate the relationship, whether it be to advise a client on a certain course of action.

Interviewer: so in your experience what are the most challenging aspects of providing this method of counselling?

Participant-2: one, one, one ehh one, one eh, one big challenge is for counsellors in general, and I've heard this from a number, and is dependent on the model I described earlier, the asynchronous model, and that is, that counsellors on receipt of a client submission, if it's a once off and often they are, so they are like single sessions, it can be very difficult to get a feel for the person, ye know, just from one text, ye know, really get a feel for the person, like if they were sitting in front of you, you'd get more of a chance or an opportunity to do that, so that's a challenge. It's not something that's a challenge that can't be overcome, it might also be a challenge that represents an anxiety on the part of counsellors in trying to reply accurately, than really the client trying to get a sense of them

Interviewer: ok right, i'll just go onto the next question now, are there support services available for online counselling in Ireland?

Participant-2: well a key support service for counsellors in general is that they're under supervision., for the work they're doing, that should continue on, if they're working online , in future we'll see perhaps, counsellors who work online, who also supervise other counsellors who work online, there are particular details of online that differ from face-to-face, so that will happen in time. I know for example, in Canada, in America and the UK and some parts of Europe they have that situation already, where some counsellors have trained, extra training in online counselling, and further training in online supervision, and now provide supervision to beginning counsellors

Interviewer: like traditional counsellors?

Participant-2: exactly, exactly

Interviewer: you've answered the next question there as well, i'll just ask you just a couple of these, em have you experienced any resistance to online counselling? And if so from whom like?

Participant-2: well i know for example, when i was trying to introduce online counselling and the whole online mental health portal in (name removed), that did meet with quite a bit of resistance from other professionals throughout the university, for a whole host of reasons, including risk reasons, you know that it's not possible to do this in terms of, you know there's risk issues particularly around eh eh clients using it and how to protect against risk and also a general lack of understanding on the part of alot people in terms of what was being proposed in terms of bringing things online, or fear of technology , technology in its own right, which i would have perceived and tried to counter against by explaining, by really being clear with people on what was being proposed, what was being looked at, what will happen etc. and then of course the more you think about it and the more you work it out, all the what ifs the better it is because, like we did alot of that in terms of what if and then thought about that and then constructed a solution. It's really organisation, they have to think about the what if scenarios, in terms of the framework, but it's also prevention as well, so they have points of possible scenarios.

Interviewer: so i think you answered the specialist training

Participant-2: yeah, that's really important, and there are a few agencies that do that including (name removed) which is the company that i'm involved with. And i think that if em any counsellors, therapist, or even coaches, ye know, they need some level of training of working in the online environment, in synchronous communication and substitute of that or

asynchronous communication and the associated subtleties of that, it's really important, because there is a difference

Interviewer: does the change of communication from verbal communication to text based require the development of new skills

Participant-2: precisely and that's precisely what i meant in terms of training, there are new skills that one can learn and develop to use text based communication more effectively in the therapeutic context

Interviewer: do you ever feel that your text has become misunderstood?

Participant-2: that can happen, part of the training in this would be em that you have kind of a housekeeping message that you send to your client, which would be the first part of communication, and in that you'd always be clear with clients, that anytime you don't understand what i'm saying or you feel you want clarification on it – you ask. You open up those doors immediately. Similarly from a counsellors perspective. I might describe some situation and might leave you wondering about what exactly is being asked or and you need to go back to the client to ask for clarification.

Interviewer: and have you ever heard of online presence, forms of online expression

Participant-2: yes i have, there's a group in Italy that do a bit of work on this em in terms of presence, and why i don't know a whole lot about it, it's that sense of being able to em em pick up someone as if they're in front of you, i know, if you think about presence, and virtual presence, it's similar to eh years ago when people wrote pen pals, wrote text and two relations that maybe never met, but through the relations that they formed in text, they were able to pick each other up, through the presence in their text and expression,

Interviewer: get a good vibe for the person

Participant-2: get a real good sense of who this person is or similarities and obviously they have, ye know over time i think ... over time, but Giuseppe Riva and his college have done work on that, that's where you'd find more

Interviewer: I'd be interested to look up that, so is it difficult to establish and maintain a therapeutic dialogue

Participant-2: well going back now to the model we were using, the asynchronous model , em the question is a little askew with regard to that it would be more associated with synchronous, but similar to face-to-face i would say why would it be, i mean you have a professional sitting in the room with a person, or a person at one end of the line with a client at the other and the professional would to a large degree facilitate the conversation in terms of the maintenance of dialogue, just like they would in face-to-face.

Interviewer: ok, right, do you believe that therapeutic healing, empathetic relationship can be fully formed using text only counselling?

Participant-2: the simple answer is yes, and any research that has been done in terms of the working alliance or the relationship online has been positive in online counselling in a variety of forums, ven in research i've done myself looking at em delivering treatments online where one is therapist lead it also shows there that users perceive that therapeutic alliance to be present, so they pick up on the existence of a empathic therapeutic presence

Interviewer: and they benefit from it fully

Participant-2: you'd hope they benefit from it and certainly their outcomes would be good

Interviewer: and what do you see as being the potential problems in online counselling?

Participant-2: i think again going back to , misunderstandings are one; assessment, make an accurate assessment of clients and what might be happening, happening for them, the integrating continual assessment, because that will change from week to week em i think also em a potential problem and it's not just to do with online, but maybe it's em magnified

online is when a clients just starts one session and maybe leaves ye know why they dropped out you might not have any other way of contacting them etc. unless you've contracted that with them ,so i think there's a but those things can be worked out by the therapist with the client and it might be things for counsellors to think about in terms of a practice in online counselling because of the difference in nature

Interviewer: what if a person said they were suicidal or something like that, what steps, would it be similar steps you'd take in traditional ...

Participant-2: yeah eh i think there should be a protocol laid out by an organisation or an individual previous to even starting online counselling em you know that protocol should be known to them, what would they do if ... it's the same in face-to-face you know, if i've a client in front of me who declares to be suicidal, who declares a plan what do i do? I should know that in advance of ever ... and the same in online. It's partly to do with training certainly, but it should be in existence, so when the situation arises, what to do, like what i said earlier it's part of training, but also part of what if, what if, what if ... to go through those scenarios, or potential scenarios and develop solutions.

Interviewer: ok, thanks, thanks for your time – so you're talking about securecounselling.ie

Participant-2: they're the only company in Ireland are all trained in online counselling as well as their own specific therapeutic training where the members/directors of the company have spent the last 5-10 years working in mental health research and development particularly in online and use of technology a wide variety of experience there, written extensively about it and presented nationally and internationally and they are also the only ones now from that background providing three services: online counselling, consultancy in technology and mental health and training. They've developed a full training course for online counselling.

Interviewer: and the course itself , do yo have

Participant-2: it's on the net no, it would be simply accredited by secure counselling we are waiting for the IACT to establish the guidelines, the ethical and practice guidelines and we've helped with that in one way or another and then hopefully they will be able to accredit individual courses for additional professional training in online counselling, but at the moment that doesn't exist.

Interview 3

Interviewer: ok so Participant-3, when did you establish your online counselling service?

Participant-3: it started last august, that's august of '09

Interviewer: august of '09, so how many clients have you had face-to-face, telephone if any?

Do you do that as well?

Participant-3: now when you say face-to-face and telephone

Interviewer: yah

Participant-3: well I would also work with people face-to-face, I have done for a number of years, so the online was something we decided to start up as a unit separate to that

Interviewer: ok, so how many clients do you think would be purely online roughly?

Participant-3: eh, I think since we started it's been a pretty slow take u, we kind of expected that, the problem we see at the moment is not so much that we're offering eh a different kind of service, but it's a very new kind of service in Ireland as well

Interviewer: OK

Participant-3: eh and the struggle for us really is that people aren't very much aware of that, so people aren't seeking out online counselling specifically, because they're not aware it exists, but people will use it if they come across it in a Google search or that kind of thing em so I would say since August, we have probably worked with upwards of 25 to date.

Interviewer: what are the main common presenting problems online?

Participant-3: em again I think you would find that it would be pretty similar to what you would find in traditional face-to-face counselling: depression; addiction and concerns about anxiety, the would be the three main ones.

Interviewer: and what are the client characteristics of those most likely to access your service?

Participant-3: em I think you're probably looking at a younger kind of age bracket, between the ages of 20 and 35, em I think because of the way it operates we would target the service at people who are familiar with that way of communicating, comfortable communicating online, whether it be instant messaging or social networking, that kind of thing, so younger people but not exclusively of course.

Interviewer: and in your experience, what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?

Participant-3: well I think what appeals to people is that is convenient for a start, someone doesn't have to leave the house, they don't have to travel anywhere and depending on which service they choose, we offer email and instant messaging, so if they choose email for example well then they control when they can communicate, they don't have to be anywhere at a specific time or a specific place, they communicate when they want to anytime day or night and the cost as well, it would be a lower cost than the average face-to-face, they would be the main hooks if you like.

Interviewer: is there an ethical and professional framework for online counselling that you are aware of?

Participant-3: there is yeah, there isn't in Ireland at the moment, myself and my colleague are actually working on one at the moment. The IACT the Irish Association of Counselling and Therapy doesn't have any guidelines in relation to online counselling so we started working of the BACP the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, there guidelines are

well established for online and we actually did our training through the person who designed those guidelines.

Interviewer: ok, very good and do you charge a fee for your service?

Participant-3: we do yes

Interviewer: ok and what are the core issues that must be evaluated by counsellors providing this service?

Participant-3: what we do is, when somebody eh eh em contacts us we have a registration form before they can start, so someone would need to fill out the registration form online and send it to us, the main, one of the main em ... that we wouldn't have a history and someone could be struggling with a severe issue or mental health issue eh or we wouldn't recommend online counselling for someone that was actively suicidal we would think face-to-face counselling would be recommended in those circumstances so, I've just answered your question there, they're the two main concerns we would have initially, so we would suggest sometimes to somebody that maybe online counselling wouldn't be appropriate for them.

Interviewer: ok and in your experience what are the most challenging aspects of providing this method of counselling?

Participant-3: well like I said a few moments ago, because it's a very new way of providing the service the biggest challenge at the moment is to try and educate people that such a service exists, I think there are lots of people who would be happy to avail of it, if they knew it was there, it's very hard to promote an online service, because obviously you're trying to promote it online that's eh that can be a difficult task, but i think there are very specific aspects of online counselling that would differ from face-to-face there are different skills required there are different ways of communicating that are important and would be important for anybody hoping to provide the service, that's where the training would come in

so there are specific things to be looked at in training, and training would be important for anyone looking to get involved, quality training.

Interviewer: ok, alright and are there support services available for online counsellors in Ireland?

Participant-3: there really isn't anything available that i'm aware of for counsellors, do you mean supports as in ?

Interviewer: yeah, supports as in supervision resources yeah

Participant-3: there really isn't at the moment eh Interviewer, as I said a couple of times it's a very new way of providing counselling and it's really in its infancy in Ireland at the moment once ..., it's a much more established way of doing things in the US and the UK, but we're em em lagging behind at the moment, we're just about catching up , now I know one of the universities provide an online service for their students, i think it was trinity?

Interviewer: i actually spoke with the guy that was working on that yeah

Participant-3: and i think that crosscare are looking at providing some kind of limited online counselling as well

Interviewer: right

Participant-3: so things are changing a little bit, but there aren't ... i'm only aware of one other person doing this myself, that's a lady in (city removed), i don't know if you came across her, did ye?

Interviewer: yeah, i actually spoke with her as well

Participant-3: I can't remember her name, I've never spoken to her ... we came across her when we set the whole thing up during the summer there, so i'm not aware of any reports the IACP doesn't have any guidelines around it, which means they don't have that many people doing it, myself and (name removed) are also on a committee, and IACP committee which is

charge to em setup some em guideline around the whole thing. But in terms of support – there isn't.

Interviewer: and have you experience resistance to online counselling from other professionals in the field?

Participant-3: em I haven't experience outright hostility to it, but I have experienced certainly, probably scepticism would be a fairer way to put it, that alot of people would be sceptical of it, but i think em what you're also met with is that you can't really provide a therapeutic service, there can't be a therapeutic relationship unless it's face-to-face and that's a reasonable enough concern, but of course evidence would show that it is possible to do that ye know it's it's established in the US and the UK and I've done it myself ehm although it's different it certainly is possible to establish a therapeutic relationship, but in terms of the profession, the profession does tend to be conservative in its outlook generally. It would be more inclined to be resistant than exacting, however, having said that in fairness they IACP has em agreed to formulate some guidelines around online counselling so they do recognise that it is something that is going to happen one way or the other in Ireland, because it has happened in other place so like all these things there will be some resistance but people will come to see it as another way of providing the service just like telephone counselling is ye know.

Interviewer: exactly, yeah, yeah, that's a good point, is there a specialist advanced training for the provision of therapy via chat systems online?

Participant-3: well, the training we did was through em ... counsellors ... of the top of my head onlinecounselling.co.uk a lady called Kate Appleby em Kate Appleby has written several books around online counselling, counselling through new technologies and that kind of thing em absolutely, if anyone wants to think of doing it, traditional face-to-face training

won't be enough, they would need to do extra specialised training em, around the provision of an online service.

Interviewer: ok and does the change of communication from verbal to text based communication require the development of new skills in your opinion?

Participant-3: eh, I think so yeah, as I said earlier there's no point, there's no point in the client being familiar with online chat if the therapist isn't ye know, em if your probably familiar with instant messenger and facebook yourself, so there are ways of communicating feelings, and there are ways of emphasising particular words and phrases online, the use of emoticons, different coloured texts and all those kinds of things, ways of communicating online are covered in the training that my colleague provides, so there is that emphasis on that specialised way of working online.

Interviewer: do you ever feel that your text has become misunderstood?

Participant-3: em ... em, my instinctive answer to that is yes, purely it has to have, I can't think of any particular examples of that happening off the top of my head, but I'm sure it has, but then again , that has often happened to me in face-to-face as well, but it's simply a matter of clarifying what yuo may have meant or what was intended but these kind of things are inevitable, they're not a hurdle that can't be overcome.

Interviewer: ok, and have you ever heard of online presence?

Participant-3: online presence, the phrase doesn't mean anything to me.

Interviewer: I was just wondering, I just read somewhere about something somebody was talking about, I don't know much about it myself, I just thought I'd ask you, maybe you might have heard about it. It was just some Italian, it was just about developing presence online, where you just don't even notice that the person isn't in the room y'know

Participant-3: again I think, for anyone that uses the Internet and uses online messaging services and email online, we all get to a place where we have a sense that we are actually

communicating directly with a person, we're not typing words onto a screen, there is that sense that there is somebody responding ehh listening and responding to what we're saying to them, but I think that sort of covers ...

Interviewer: yeah, I think that covers it

Participant-3: when I sit down at a computer, I don't simply have a concept that I'm simply typing words onto a screen there is that sense that I am communicating to a real person

Interviewer: I know, I know OK, and em is it critical to establish and maintain a therapeutic dialogue?

Participant-3: em ... do you mean online of course?

Interviewer: yeah, online

Participant-3: I think again, it depends on the skills of the therapist, just like in face-to-face work, I mean a therapeutic relationship is something that isn't always easy to establish and maintain, but a skilled therapist whether they're working face-to-face or whether they're working online em will be able to do that and maintain that relationship and do good work in it

Interviewer: ok, very good, just one other question, do you believe a therapeutic healing relationship can be fully formed using text only?

Participant-3: I do yeah, do you want me to elaborate?

Interviewer: yes please, it's up to yourself!

Participant-3: I think it can, what we always have to be aware of in these things and again, online counselling is not meant to be em a kind of replacement for face-to-face counselling we don't see it like that at all, we see it as an add-on, an extra piece and other way of delivering a service who may not be in a position to em either may not be in a position to avail of face-to-face counselling or who may not choose to avail of face-to-face counselling. Ye know, in Ireland there is still alot of stigma attached to counselling and therapy em it can

make people feel ashamed or embarrassed about going to see a therapist, an online service can offer a way around that, so they don't see it as a kind of instead of rather than an additional piece, and of course if you're working online with someone, it's not the same quality of experience as a face-to-face experience but nevertheless, there are ... there's enough going on in the dynamic to allow for good communication for a therapeutic relationship to be established and for healing to take place

Interviewer: very good, and the final question is, what do you see as the potential problems for online counselling?

Participant-3: um ... em I don't know, I'd like to see it the other way around, I think it's a very exciting time for this kind of approach, I think it's only going to get stronger and more established as time goes on you know online has with everything, I mean pretty much every other service is provided online nowadays em ...

Interviewer: so you don't really see any problems with it?

Participant-3: i'm just trying to rattle my brain, maybe the biggest problem we have encountered is to try and raise awareness around the whole service and to try and to try and embed it in the consciousness of people so that when people think of counselling, or that they want some counselling, they would consider online, it would be another thing they would consider whereas, at the moment when people think of counselling, they tend to have an idea of going into a room and sitting down with another person it hasn't seeped into the consciousness to the same extent, there isn't awareness out there that there's such a service, that you can actually do counselling online em so maybe that would be one of the problems, it will take a bit of time to embed itself but also maybe as well some resistance from ... within the profession that might actually frustrate the progress, that's just a guess, I haven't actually experience that as I say, but I think that would be reasonable to expect that it would happen somewhere along the line.

Interview 4

Interviewer: ok i just want to ask you when did you establish your online counselling service?

Participant-4: we established ... do you need the exact time:

Interviewer: roughly, it doesn't have to be exact

Participant-4: about a year ago

Interviewer: ok, alright and how many clients would you have had purely online

Participant-4: well i have had, only about 7

Interviewer: ok

Participant-4: we're very busy with our private practice, so we've had to take a step back with the online. We haven't really pushed it yet really at all

Interviewer: ok and how many clients would you have in your face-to-face practice, roughly, about?

Participant-4: about 50 at the moment

Interviewer: 15 is it? Did you say 15 yeah?

Participant-4: 50 yeah.

Interviewer: and what are the main common presenting problems in your online counselling?

Participant-4: em, the online, i would have panic disorder, i would have generalised anxiety disorder, the main ones ... i would also have sexual addiction.

Interviewer: sexual addiction as well, ok that's great and what are the client characteristics of those whom are most likely to access your online service?

Participant-4: ehm .. as an age profile?

Interviewer: yeah, as an age profile

Participant-4: i would say age profile .. oooh ... between 25 and 40

Interviewer: and would it be mainly males, females or a mix

Participant-4: i would say a mix

Interviewer: a mix, ok, and in your experience, what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?

Participant-4: em sorry give me that again

Interviewer: in your experience, what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?

Participant-4: eh i would say it's more affordable, i would say it provides anonymity if that's something somebody is looking for, it provide em it also provide a level of convenience in that people don't have to leave their home

Interviewer: em, perfect, thanks, i'm just wondering is there any ethical and professional framework for online counselling?

Participant-4: there isn't by the IACP at the moment, there are no ethical guidelines, personally speaking we did our training in the UK and we would be very well aware of the International Society for Mental Health and their guidelines and as a company and as professionals we would operate within those standards

Interviewer: ok, that's great and em do you charge a fee for your service?

Participant-4: do i charge a fee?

Interviewer: yeah a fee

Participant-4: yes we do. We definitely do.

Interviewer: and how much would that be do you mind me asking?

Participant-4: it would vary depending on the kind of package, for the basic standard cost is 55 euro per hour and it might take me three sessions in all.

Interviewer: ok and what are the core issues that must be evaluated by counsellors providing online service?

Participant-4: the core issues would have to be the emotional wellbeing of the client, confidentiality, so in many cases the core issues are the same of that you have to be aware of doing face-to-face work

Interviewer: ok, very good

Participant-4: there'd be extra obviously em you'd have to extra care that the person you're dealing with would be familiar with the use of online and you'd need a good sense of what kind of emotional state they're in.

Interviewer: ok and in your experience what are the most challenging aspects of providing this method of counselling?

Participant-4: most challenging ... ehm ... i would say the ability to mesh therapeutically and form a relationship, to make a connection

Interviewer: OK

Participant-4: with the client would be one of the most challenging ones.

Interviewer: ok, are there any support services available for online counsellors in Ireland?

Participant-4: there aren't in Ireland, but there are in the UK, there's an organisation setup to provide support and supervision for online .. for people who work online, but not in this country as of yet.

Interviewer: ok, alright, you don't know the name of the organisation in the UK by any chance?

Participant-4: em let me just think ... give me 10 seconds to think about that one ..

Interviewer: is it just the kind of regulatory body over there?

Participant-4: no, it's not, there's an organisation setup by the lady who would have trained myself and my colleague and they have the therapy institute online or something, the institute ... i don't want to get it wrong, i could send you a link for that.

Interviewer: ok, thanks a million, so if need are there supervision resources for those practicing online available in Ireland?

Participant-4: eh ... there ... again, my supervisor would work online with me, so it's not something that's easily and readily available as of yet, but I think it's getting there

Interviewer: ok

Participant-4: certainly I have available to me ehm a method of doing supervision online , whether it be for my online work or my face-to-face work.

Interviewer: ok, and have you experienced any resistance to online counselling from anyone, like other professionals in the field or

Participant-4: eh i would say, I haven't directly to my face, but I'm aware of a reluctance within the, within the counselling and psychotherapy profession to move in this direction, I think it's slow, it's much slower than in other countries

Interviewer: ok em very good and is there specialist advanced training for provision of therapy via chat systems online?

Participant-4: is there specialist and advanced?

Interviewer: yeah, is there an advanced online training that you need to do, or do you just kind of em

Participant-4: are we talking about in this country or ?

Interviewer: I'm talking about in Ireland?

Participant-4: not in Ireland, there's not at the moment, there isn't any specialist or advanced training em available yet

Interviewer: and does the change of communication for verbal skills to text based skills require the development of new skills in your opinion?

Participant-4: absolutely,

Interviewer: do you want to elaborate or just kind of

Participant-4: emm, i just think it's it's a way of communicating that a therapist would not be used to, they would be used to taking their cues as to how their client is emotionally, they would be used to taking that face-to-face and i think when you're using computer mediated technology you have to develop, you have to get into a different mindset, to interact with the client in a different way and absolutely new skills are needed to do that, if you hadn't done that training they wouldn't be in comfortable in that territory

Interviewer: and do you ever feel that your text has been misunderstood, like something that you've said?

Participant-4: yes, i do. Em and in your training you would always be taught to seek clarification em and the use of graphics, the use of emoticons, the use of chatting is always a way to check things out and I think that's what your training is about, to use the technology in a way that will allow you to be in a different space than the client

Interviewer: ok and em one or two more questions, thanks em ... is it difficult to establish and maintain a therapeutic dialogue?

Participant-4: i do, i do think it's a bit more difficult, to be honest, i'd have to say, i do, i think it's a little bit more difficult, i don't think it's as easy as making a therapeutic connection with somebody face-to-face.

Interviewer: and do you believe a fully healing therapeutic relationship can be formed using text only?

Participant-4: i think that depends as well on the client, certain clients that we're finding coming through are in much more, in much more familiar territory dealing online than we would have previously seen and i think that once a client is in comfortable familiar territory, i think it's easier then and that's ... certainly when both parties in the relationship are familiar and comfortable with keyboards and text communication.

Interviewer: and what do you see as the potential problems in online counselling, that's the final question there?

Participant-4: em I don't see any potential problems, I see ... well the only potential problem might be confidentiality and if em let me think how I'm going to put this ... potential problems ... I think certain boundaries have to be established, I think once the boundaries of confidentiality and encryption and various things like that, the client feels fully protected in text communication, I think that would be one of the biggest problems a counsellor would need to iron out

Interviewer: ok alright

Interview 5

Interviewer: so when did you start your online counselling service?

Participant-5: well it was before i started working here, I think it was 2005

Interviewer: 2005, ok and how many clients are telephone/face-to-face if any?

Participant-5: how many, what do you mean?

Interviewer: How many clients are telephone/face-to-face if any, do you have any clients that would be face-to-face or telephone?

Participant-5: Oh yeah, yeah, most of our clients are face-to-face, we don't have any telephone clients

Interviewer: and for the clients that are online, would you be able to give me a rough figure of how many are online?

Participant-5: em the service we have, I'd be able to get that for you now, eh I'd say about 20-30 per year

Interviewer: ok, that's perfect, and what are the main common presenting problems?

Participant-5: emmm, stress and depression I would say, there's a wide variety, there's all kinds of problems, but they'd be the ones that come up again and again, eating issues, eating disorders

Interviewer: and body image issues

Participant-5: yeah

Interviewer: and what are the client characteristics of those who are most likely to access your service in terms of male/females?

Participant-5: the online service is anonymous actually, so we don't know eh unless they mention it in their email, some of them do, we don't know if they're male or female, it's a once off service, it's not a you know an ongoing counselling, one email from them and one reply from us

Interviewer: OK, not problem, in your experience what are the appealing qualities of computer mediated counselling?

Participant-5: em I think it's a disinhibiting effect in that alot of students aren't ready, aren't willing or don't feel able to come to face-to-face counselling where the online ye know, alot of it can be spur of the moment, it can be middle of the night, ye know they can just send in an email and don't have to have someone in a room looking at them, I think that's the main thing.

Interviewer: OK, thanks, is there an ethical and professional framework surrounding online counselling?

Participant-5: yeah, we'd a, we use the BACP one, I don't know if there's one in Ireland, but we use the British BACP guidelines to try our best to use that ethical framework.

Interviewer: and what are the core issues that must be evaluated by counsellors providing this service in your opinion?

Participant-5: well same as face-to-face I suppose, there's always issues of risk but that's eh but that's more serious in online because you don't have the student in front of you, so you need to be sure that you can get in touch with them if you need to and then you just need to make sure that online counselling is appropriate for them, because some people you're dealing with their issues are more suitable for face-to-face, that needs to be made clear to them if that's the case.

Interviewer: and in your experience what are the most challenging aspects of providing this method of counselling?

Participant-5: em I think it's that you miss out on all the non-verbal communication and all the kind of spontaneity of a face-to-face session, instead of it being spontaneous what you write to them and what they write back is well prepared and rewritten probably and a bit more perfect in the way it's written, but you miss out on all the nuances of it because of that, you can't really see and you miss out on tone, and tone of voice and all those things that you have to kind of guess

Interviewer: like the verbal individual cues type thing?

Participant-5: yes

Interviewer: OK and are there support services available for online counsellors in Ireland?

Participant-5: em not that I'm aware of, not sure specifically for online counselling, just the same supports you have for regular face-to-face work

Interviewer: have you experienced resistance to online counselling from any other professionals in the field?

Participant-5: o'h definitely alot of our counsellors wouldn't be very fond of it, wouldn't want to provide it themselves, eh they see it as a lesser version of face-to-face counselling also it mightn't suit them particularly, you have to be someone that enjoys writing and ye know eh ye know uses language in a certain way, they might object personally in that they

don't want to do it, but some people might object in that it's not what counselling is about, it's about two people in a room having a relationship, so yeah definitely there's resistance.

Interviewer: OK, is there specialist advanced training for provision of therapy via chat systems online?

Participant-5: eh yes, there is, I haven't done one for chat, live chat systems, I've done training for just online counselling through email type messaging systems, but we don't provide live chat here so, but there is training available

Interviewer: and in Ireland there's training or would you go to the UK?

Participant-5: because it's online you can really do it anywhere, I know the UK provide it and the training I did was from Canada, but it's pretty easy to do training, you know with trainers from a different country because it's all online anyway.

Interviewer: does the change of communication from verbal communication to text based require the development of new skills in your opinion?

Participant-5: absolutely, definitely em, if you're not skilled at writing or you don't like writing I don't think it suits you anyway, but even if you are skilled or are keen on it, you do need to develop new skills, in terms of getting tone across, conveying warmth, trying to build relationship skills through text em which definitely does take some practice.

Interviewer: like clarity in your text and that?

Participant-5: well you do have to be particularly clear and make sure there's no ambiguity and actually alot of checking-in beyond, like is this what you meant and come back to me if I'm not getting it or if there's more, so there has to be alot more checking in, you have to be very clear in what you're saying.

Interviewer: do you feel your text has ever become misunderstood?

Participant-5: yeah, you have to make sure it's not, I can't think of any example where it has happened, but if you do try and make sure it doesn't, it could happen and you wouldn't know

it, they just take something that you didn't mean and you don't find out. That's the problem with it being online, you might not know.

Interviewer: is it difficult to establish and maintain a therapeutic dialogue?

Participant-5: em it is difficult I think, because em you can't see them and they can't see you, the email counsellors would say that there is, but I don't know if there is that connection as in a human connection between two people, it's very easy for someone to just stop emailing, it's probably easier than not turning up to an appointment, you just don't reply and that's it em you get that in face-to-face counselling as well, I don't know if it's comparable or more so, but it's definitely something that you need to very deliberately attend to, in face-to-face counselling it just kind of happens naturally

Interviewer: do you believe that a fully healing, therapeutic relationship can be formed using text only counselling?

Participant-5: I do think so, I do, I don't think it's eh, I think if someone has a choice between face-to-face and email, for the most part they should choose face-to-face, I don't think they're equal, I think that online is good for people who aren't going to face-to-face, I do think there is a lot of potential for a therapeutic relationship to develop and for healing to take place.

Interviewer: OK, what do you see as the potential problem in online counselling or with it?

Participant-5: I think it can attract people who's issues aren't necessarily exacerbated by online counselling, but are facilitated if someone is socially isolated or someone has difficulty opening up, then in a way they're being facilitated along that course by not meeting someone face-to-face and by avoiding certain issues em.

Interviewer: so it's kind of like you think face-to-face counselling would be better in the sense you're more resolving your problems better

Participant-5: only for certain problem, I mean if you're, but if the problem is to do with social anxiety or feelings about being exposed or vulnerable, then I think the online counsellor would have a responsibility to work towards face-to-face counselling 'cos otherwise it's kind of playing into the problem of doing it all through email and avoiding the social contact, there is a vulnerability in face-to-face counselling, so ..

Interviewer: OK

End of interview.

Early Experiences of Online Counsellors providing an Online Counselling Services in the Republic of Ireland

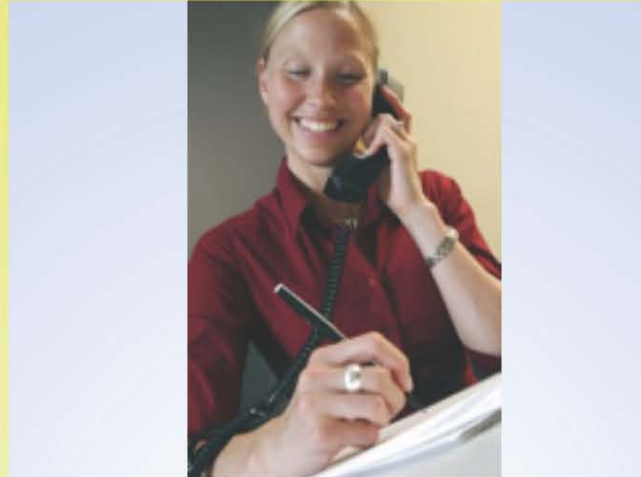
Student Name: Guinevere Moloney **Student Number:** 1143818 **Supervisor Name:** Dr. Niall Hanlon

Abstract

Online Counselling is a new method of counselling within the Republic of Ireland, the aim of this research project was to explore the Early Experiences of Online Counsellors providing an Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland. A qualitative design was used for the research.

Introduction

This study highlights some of the issues encountered in providing an online counselling service in the Republic of Ireland, a number of practical and ethical issues emerged from within the data, it was felt that difficulties working in the online environment were perhaps furthermore frustrated by a lack of ethical and professional framework as well as supports for the counsellor. Practical concerns were that of promoting the counsellors services as well as raising awareness that the service is available for users to access, these practical and ethical concerns may be attributed to the infancy of this service in the Republic. This research adds to the current research available whilst highlighting the particular concerns mentioned in relation to raising awareness of online services existing in the Republic.



Method

Five participants were interviewed, one interview was conducted face-to-face and four via telephone, data was then transcribed and results were established via thematic analysis. All participants were active online counsellors in the Republic of Ireland.

Results

Results encompassed the overall experience of the online counsellor in the Republic of Ireland ranging from flexibility, duty of care, client characteristics, common presenting problems, ethical and professional framework, continual development, clarity, appealing qualities, lack of support and awareness and finally therapist skills.

Discussion

This research aimed to explore the experiences of Online Counsellors providing an Online Counselling Service in the Republic of Ireland, the counselors spoke of their experiences with providing this service which encompassed the following, client characteristics, presenting issues, advantages of this method of counselling, disadvantages as well as challenges with providing this service, personal challenges such as lack of supports and guidelines surrounding the delivery of online counselling in the Republic of Ireland as well as therapeutic benefit of writing therapy. These aspects of providing an online counselling service were discussed drawing from the experiences of the individual counsellors interviewed.

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