



UTILIZING TELEPSYCHOLOGY AT SCHOOL: NEW CHALLENGES AND CONCERNS

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Abstract:

Today, the development of telepsychology and the use of technology as a means of service and ongoing care was considered as a potentially feasible and effective alternative or as a complement to the psychological services provided by experts in various fields or in emergency situations. The following text presents the theoretical and empirical data on the forms and main types of telepsychology and then highlights the benefits and potential challenges of providing distance mental health services in the field of education and in different population groups. This trend creates new conditions and gives another impetus to the future, development and evolution of school psychology in Greece. In particular, the effort to connect theory, research and practical application at many levels, alternatively or complementarily through the use of new technologies marks this dynamic process of change focusing on the multifaceted needs, rights and care of members of the educational community.

Keywords: telepsychology, distance mental health services, school

1. Introduction

The provision of distance support services, such as psychological-counseling support dates back to the 1970s-1980s. The online support groups created at that time were the first form of remote support (Santhiveeran, 2004). As early as 1997, the American Psychological Society and in 2001 the British Psychological Society had formally established rules of ethics that referred to the ethical practice of online counseling. The importance of defining objective criteria and guidelines, as well as a process protocol, which will determine the effectiveness of intervention programs in terms of achieving the short-term and long-term goals of distance psychological services in the field of psychological care, is therefore emphasized.

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At the same time, the internet provides more than one platform and possibilities or applications for communication. The psychologist can be actively present and involved in the conversation with the person in need of care (eg via email exchange, live chat, live video conference, meeting the person may be looking for ways to help themselves (eg participating in online empowerment, support groups, mutual aid communities, self-help guides), as well as individual or group counseling through a dedicated forum. In mental health, discussions are held with the aim of sharing experiences and externalizing emotions (Godine & Barnett, 2013; Lee, 2010; Stokes, 2016; Sucula et al., 2012).

Therefore, the expanded role of technology in the provision of psychological services and the constant development of new technologies can be useful resources in the practice of psychology, as they present unique opportunities, thoughts and challenges in practice. Technology offers the opportunity to increase the access of people seeking care to psychological services. Recipients of mental health services, limited by their geographical location, medical condition, mental health, financial constraints or other barriers can access high quality psychological services through the use of technology. Telephone and online therapy / counseling is also indicated in those cases where treatment is abruptly discontinued due to external conditions, such as the current time due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Telepsychology has the potential to bring about dynamic changes in the provision of psychological services not only to those who are in remote locations or have mobility problems, but also to those who prefer more flexible and direct access to psychological services (Holländare, Andersson, & Engström, 2010).

As it seems, telepsychology offers opportunities for well-trained professional psychologists, not only to increase their effectiveness, but also to expand the range of their services and enrich their practices (Eonta et al., 2011). However, telepsychology requires the introduction of innovations in undergraduate and postgraduate study programs of students, psychologists, guidelines from relevant professional and scientific associations, as well as new approaches to insurance coverage, regulating the professional activity of psychologists and finally a variety of institutions and settings, such as schools, universities, hospitals, prisons, camps, nursing homes, community centers, private companies, etc. (Eby, Chin, Rollock, Schwartz, & Worrel, 2011).

Although the use of the World Wide Web looks very promising for the provision of individual or group mental care services, there is clearly a strong disagreement among experts regarding the ethical practice of psychotherapy in an interactive, digital environment. The main issues that arise are the following: know-how and dealing with logistical problems, difficulties in the assessment process, communication of verbal and non-verbal messages, crisis management, safeguarding therapeutic alliance, protection of personal data, accessibility for individuals with disability, the age restrictions and the observance of the limits in relation to the space, the time and the dynamics of the relationship and finally the training and the supervisory process of the psychologist.

In particular, a study by Cipolletta and Moocellin (2016) explored the views and preferences of 289 Italian psychologists regarding the various aspects of online

counseling provided through email, chat, forum and video conferencing. One of the main results of the survey was that only 18.3% of the respondents had previous experience with online counseling. Overall, the majority of psychologists (62.6%), although positive about online counseling, considering video conferencing as a suitable means of providing psychological services, nevertheless expressed several reservations and concerns about the provision of diagnosis and therapeutic interventions through technology. The results also highlighted a number of ethical issues.

In addition, a recent survey by Mendes-Santos, Weiderpass, Santana and Andersson (2020), which surveyed the views of a total of 1,077 members of the Portuguese Psychological Association regarding psychological interventions online, found that 37.2% of members was familiar with internet interventions and 19.2% had the necessary training to work in this field. 29.6% of participants reported having used some form of digital technology for care in the past. More specifically, they had mainly used the telephone services (23.8%), e-mail (16.2%) and SMS (16.1%), while more rarely they had used the interventions via internet. It was also found that psychologists had a positive attitude mainly towards the combination of lifelong and remote therapeutic intervention. Lack of relevant knowledge and training were identified as the main obstacles to be overcome, thus emphasizing the need to promote awareness and training initiatives to ensure the successful implementation of psychological interventions online. Therefore, it has become clear that, as technology is constantly making changes in our daily lives, the practice of psychology is equally important, with the result that psychologists need individual empowerment and familiarity with the possibilities of new technologies and the adaptations required. In particular, telepsychology requires a redefinition of how psychologists think about standards of care, risk management, and how they perform psychological services within the realm of ethical, legal, and professional boundaries (Martin, Millan, & Campbell, 2020). However, the establishment of a telepsychology practice should be based on the available guidelines and standards of the American Psychological Association (APA, 2013), including the following: Ethical Principles of Psychologists and Code of Ethics (APA Ethics Code 2010) Record Keeping Guidelines (APA, 2007), intercultural practices (e.g. United States, Canada and Australia) that have emerged in the clinical field, with a particular emphasis on the interdisciplinary approach (Colbow, 2013; Hilty et al., 2017; Maheu et al., 2020; van Houwelingen et al., 2016). Thus, it will be crucial to identify best practices, systematic descriptions, process standards, and skills in a way that facilitates the practice and exchange of resources, applications, and knowledge about telepsychology in different fields of action (Giaouri, 2020).

2. Literature Review

The emergence over the last 35 years, of the important role of educational institutions in the provision of mental health services to members of their community, enables the design and implementation of prevention programs, dialectical counseling and

cooperation, as well as timely intervention and direct access to care (Myers, Valentine, & Melzer, 2007; Nelson & Bui, 2010).

In particular, online digital platforms are sources of mental health knowledge for adolescents and young people, as they allow young people to have uninterrupted access to information related to mental health and its promotion. Additionally, they contribute to initiatives, not only to receive help, but also to offer it through a network of mutual support, which includes peers, parents and teachers under the supervision of mental health professionals.

The use of technology as a means of service has been characterized as a potentially feasible and effective alternative or as complementary to face-to-face services. The literature on telepsychology (Slone, Reese, & McClellan, 2012; Yellowlees et al., 2008) has, however, paid less attention to children and adolescents than to adults. There is also a range of research on the use and effectiveness of technological tools in the provision of psychological services (Myers, Valentine, & Melzer, 2007; Zirkelback & Reese, 2010). Although the current research on telepsychology is very encouraging, further qualitative research is needed, especially for its use in children and adolescents (Yellowlees, Hilty, Marks, Neufeld, & Bourgeois, 2008). Nelson and Bui (2010) even suggested that the use of telepsychology may be more acceptable in this age group, as young people use technology more often for social connection.

Specifically, Slone, Reese and McClellan (2012) in a critical review of research tried to evaluate the current empirical data on the effectiveness of providing psychosocial interventions with different technological means in children and adolescents. They pointed out that research on telepsychological services in children and adolescents has yielded mostly positive therapeutic results for a number of psychological services related to the use of video conferencing, internet and telephone.

In contrast, other research suggests that telepsychology services have not yielded different results compared to face-to-face services (Glueckauf et al., 2002; Nelson et al., 2003). Other research has also shown that internet and telephone services are both equally effective and have yielded similar results compared to face-to-face services (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009). However, few studies have included evaluating the relationship with the client (King et al., 2006; Norcross & Lambert, 2011), as well as measuring the degree of satisfaction with distance psychological services. The ability to develop relationships and connections with clients was one of the concerns of telepsychology compared to face-to-face services. In addition, the personality, the interpersonal style of the psychologist, the possibility of utilizing technology in the therapeutic approaches that are more attractive or popular seem to influence the therapeutic relationship mainly with children and young people.

Internationally, more and more school psychologists are working in a digital school environment providing a counseling program through the use of technology and providing distance counseling with the same standards and professional ethics that apply to natural school environments (Corey et al., 2015). Mental health counselors also work with all stakeholders to ensure equality, the removal of barriers, access and success for all students, either by providing remote counseling both synchronously and

asynchronously (Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). Osborn, Peterson, and Hale (2015) found that the practices of school psychologists in the digital environment can provide new contexts and unique experiences.

Particularly, in this new environment, school psychologists provide programming to encourage active involvement in the digital school through special counseling platforms and applications, to ensure that students can access the digital tools needed to make the most of their potential. Students participate in digital school for a myriad of reasons. Some reasons that are often mentioned in the relevant literature (Currie, 2010; Fischer et al., 2018; Reynolds & Maughan, 2014) are the following:

- *Dealing with physical and mental health problems that lead children to need to participate in a smaller and safer environment.*
- *They cannot attend school, as they face serious health or disability problems.*
- *They prefer a smaller environment, smaller class size or the ability to be alone.*
- *They face problems of bullying in the school environment.*
- *A least restrictive environment is required.*
- *More personalized learning support is needed.*
- *It is necessary to implement an enriched curriculum with acceleration for gifted children.*
- *Differentiated teaching is required.*
- *Participation in sports activities or performing arts at a professional level.*

Mental health counselors working with students in the digital school environment should:

- *Adhere to the same ethical guidelines that follow in the school environment.*
- *Recognize and be aware of the challenges and limitations of distance school counseling.*
- *Implement procedures for students that should be followed in both emergencies and situations where the school psychologist is not available.*
- *Recognize and try to reduce the limitation of the school psychologist's confidentiality in the digital school, which may include unwanted viewers or other recipients of services.*
- *Educate students on how to participate in the distance counseling process to minimize and prevent possible misunderstandings that may arise due to lack of verbal cues and inability to understand body language or other visual cues.*
- *Educate students about appropriate behavior, which they should demonstrate in the online environment and using digital literacy as a tool to empower them.*
- *Incorporate thematic units that address both academic, professional and social / emotional areas.*

In general, distance school counseling, although it utilizes the possibilities provided by technology for the provision of counseling services, does not in any way replace the physical individual or group contact at school. It would be a serious omission not to emphasize that, one of the potential benefits of a service such as telepsychology in the field of education is the increased access to care for people with physical health problems or disabilities, providing appropriate facilities for use and communication, accessible multimodal material from appropriate digital tools, devices and Assistive Technology services. More specifically, telepsychology can provide (APA, 2013b; Robertson, 2018):

- *Better access to quality care and personalized counseling support to meet needs.*
- *Removing barriers to accessing mental health services.*
- *Flexible scheduling of support teleconferences.*
- *Alternative and augmented interpersonal communication.*
- *Awareness and development of skills related to intercultural reciprocity and language sensitivity.*
- *Use of sign language through video presentations for deaf people.*
- *Increased access to specialist scientific staff for people with disabilities for further evaluation and support.*
- *Possibility to provide additional services of telemedicine, distance education and vocational guidance counseling.*
- *Better access to geographically remote, rural areas or areas that do not have adequate mental health resources.*
- *Increased access for people with concomitant psychosocial adjustment problems or post-traumatic stress disorder or agoraphobia - or for those who have difficulty attending a face-to-face session.*
- *More direct and frequent communication and cooperation with the family or caregivers of these people.*
- *Create a plan for dealing with emergencies and having contact with more specialized providers of support, care or protection in the community.*
- *The intervening period cultivates the empowerment of the individual and the reflection of the therapist.*

However, concerns are often raised that include issues such as: the signed responsible declaration by the parents, privacy and confidentiality, impersonal services, insufficient technological equipment, lack of support staff, the familiarity and accessibility of people with disabilities to new technologies, the reliability and validity of assessment results, intercultural readiness, the integrity of practices and the effectiveness of providing telepsychology services to children and young people (Scaini, Belotti, Ogliari, & Battaglia, 2016), as well as dominant attitudes and perceptions of seeking help for mental health issues.

The use of telepsychology services in children also raises the issue of the need for mediation and the existence of 'helpers' in the room with them, who will help manage or address issues of adjustment or behavior that may arise. Choosing assistants is an incredibly complex process. This can lead to disruption of psychological services through various actions by assistants, such as providing feedback to a parent based on observing a teleconference or providing guidance on completing a clinical evaluation or diagnostic test. This, of course, raises serious questions about the reliability and validity of the results. Additional factors should be considered to maintain integrity during the distance assessment test, including other persons who may be in the child's personal space and the level of distraction observed during the administration of an assessment scale. In addition, to ensure high quality internet connections, broadband coverage, speed, image clarity and clear audio quality must also be taken into account (Giaouri, 2020; National Association of School Psychologists, 2017).

Undoubtedly, it is important to pay special attention to the way in which the data received through telepsychology services are shared between the contracted school psychologist and the school community. The use of social networking sites - such as Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, etc. - and smartphone applications are not usually considered part of telepsychology. However, many school psychologists use social media to discuss issues related to customer service. This could lead to a breach of the privacy of children/adolescents and inappropriate disclosure of information. In addition, there is a growing use of applications to complement services, such as monitoring a student's mood over time or measuring student behavior. These applications have relatively little oversight and no recognized control over what is done with the data collected or whether the appropriate security protocol is used with the data generated (Giaouri, 2020; National Association of School Psychologists, 2017) .

From all the above it is obvious that the provision of distance psychotherapeutic services creates special challenges, as it makes it extremely difficult to intervene in the crisis, especially in cases of emergency psychiatry (e.g. self-injury, violent and aggressive behavior, suicidal ideation, psychogenic anorexia, use of toxic substances or other manifestation of psychopathology). These cases seem unsuitable for management in an online psychotherapy setting, as they pose a risk to human life. Clearly, the practice of online counseling has serious limitations in emergency management, while initially it is necessary for each patient to obtain basic contact details such as: address and telephone number of the family, an emergency person and a mental health center in the area where the person resides. It is necessary for a school psychologist to responsibly assess the severity of an incident, which, although interested in online treatment, still requires individual, face-to-face treatment or referral for appropriate care and even hospitalization.

Nevertheless, research on the use of telepsychology counseling models in schools is still relatively small. However, available research shows that online counseling is effective and can provide the necessary assistance to school educators and parents (Bice-Urbach & Kratochwill, 2016; Fischer, Collier-Meek, Bloomfield, Erchul, & Gresham, 2017). At the same time, trainee psychologists in their early career schools are given the opportunity to be supervised by university and experienced school psychologists, even when working in remote areas or areas that have only one psychologist on the school staff or no one at all. In particular, tele-surveillance has not been extensively investigated, as in other areas, but early research indicates that it is effective, provided that all required safeguards and ethical standards are implemented (Chapman, Baker, Nassar-McMillan & Gerler, 2011; National Association of School Psychologists, 2017).

Therefore, it is important, in times of multiple psychosocial problems, emergencies, but also difficult practices in the way of physical contact and communication, to have responsible scientific support of both teachers and students and their families, ensuring confidentiality cooperation, sensitive personal data, but also the privacy of personal contact information of members of these services (McEwen et al., 2020). In any case, for the effective implementation of the above, the technological capability (technological equipment, internet connections) and the knowledge

(appropriate training, certification of skills) of parents, students and employees must be ensured and supported by the educational service. The provision of safe and quality distance mental health services.

3. Conclusion

Despite criticism and skepticism coming mainly from mental health professionals rather than clients, it seems that there has been a tacit acceptance that telepsychology, and in particular online counseling, is an inevitable branch of the clinical field, reflecting changes in the way people connect and access services due to wider changes in society. Future research could indeed focus more on the development of telepsychology in different age groups and specific populations (see McCord, Bernhard, Walsh, Rosner, & Console, 2020 review). However, this should also include focusing on different types of arrangements and adaptations in settings such as schools, pediatric care facilities, nursing homes, community structures, auxiliary living facilities and hostels for refugees, people with disabilities or people who experienced traumatic psychological experiences etc. Impact assessment as well as training in these areas would be consistent with the skills development model in psychology (Rodolfa et al., 2005) and could also advance the field of specialization in the practice of telepsychology (Gonzalez et al., 2019; Dopp, Wolkowicz, Mapes, & Feldner, 2017; McCord, Saenz, Armstrong, & Elliott, 2015; McKay et al., 2013).

Finally, it should be noted that today more and more people are interested in the practice of telepsychology either alone or in response to incentives from organizations and institutions to address more demanding, urgent and complex emerging needs for psychological support. Telepsychology undoubtedly affects the field of psychological services and has brought significant opportunities to improve care, as well as increase access to care.

Conflict of Interest Statement

The author declares no conflicts of interests.

About the Author

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