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A mixed blessing? Using email for counselling and psychotherapy at a distance

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Abstract

A new area of practice and inquiry, online counselling and supervision, is developing in a range of settings and in a variety of formats. The purpose of this article is to inform practitioners and researchers about a recent study of student counselling in New Zealand. The study is based on counselling practice which uses the most common mode of delivery for online counselling at this time: asynchronous text-based email and synchronous chat. The article reports evaluative, descriptive research from a student counselling service which was the first in New Zealand to offer online therapy using email. The implications of the study are that some students who have traditionally not used face-to-face counselling are using online counselling and that some presenting issues are different in online therapy.

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Introduction

The clear advantages of counselling using email, including availability, accessibility, client convenience and reduced stigmatisation have been well documented as have some of the limitations of online practice (Rochlen, Zack & Speyer, 2004; Gackebach, 2007). Scepticism is beginning to move towards cautious enthusiasm for some practitioners and service providers as initial ethical doubts about online counselling are investigated and discussed (Bloom, 1998; Kraus, Zack & Stricker, 2004). Researchers are more circumspect (Day & Schneider, 2002; Reynolds, Stiles, & Grohol, 2006). This article will not cover the use of blogging, avatars, social environments and more 'cutting edge' developments in Internet therapy, fascinating though they are. Research is still lagging behind practice in this field, particularly research investigating the client's perspective (Chester & Glass, 2006). Using an evaluative study of online student counselling in a New Zealand university, this article aims to report the first stage of on-going research and to point out some of the risks as well as the benefits of using email for counselling and psychotherapy at a distance. The motives and experiences of the students using the online service (King, Bambling, Lloyd, Gomurra, Smith, Reid & Wegner, 2006) may be part of the next stage of the study.

Literature Review

Working with text-based 'writing therapy' is not new, although using a screen and the internet instead of paper is (Wright, 2002). Most modalities have introduced writing in various forms, such as unsent letters, dialogues and journaling. The Amsterdam Writing Group has moved into researching how online therapy using writing protocols can effect posttraumatic stress, depression and pathological grief (Lange, Schrieken, van de Ven, Bredweg, Emmelkamp, van der Kolk, Lydsdottir, Massaro & Reuvers, 2000). Writing can help people to clarify their thinking, express their feelings, externalise and explore their stories as well as confronting and challenging long-held views (Bolton & Wright, 2004). In an overview of recent research in online counselling, evidence of the way in which research into writing as therapy can sit alongside studies of counselling using email was reviewed (Wright, 2007). For some people, writing provides a vehicle of expression which is preferred over speaking. The development of the internet has extended the therapeutic uses of that vehicle in a number of ways, including self-help via online communities, computerised systems, such as Beating the Blues (www.ultrasis.com) and the use of email in therapy. This brief review of counselling using email is not intended to be scoping but indicates some sources of information for practitioners who might be interested in further reading and some specific research studies relevant to this article.

There is a gap in the New Zealand-based literature on student counselling using email. In the UK, the Association for University and College Counselling (a branch of the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy) was an early contributor to the literature. The website (<http://www.aucc.uk.com/links.html>) provides useful links and references to

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ethical guidelines. Professional associations and their publications are, like conferences, useful sources of up to date, practical information and research but access has traditionally been limited to members only.

In parallel with psychological therapies, a revolution in publishing is now taking place. Electronic journals, such as the one publishing this article, are flourishing and are able to provide open access, in some cases freely available, to the most recent research. The Journal of Medical Internet Research (www.jmir.org) is one example of a leading, peer-reviewed journal which provides results of studies conducted internationally. Previously, access to such information would typically be limited to those within the academic community where subscriptions to expensive journals would be one 'perk' of being a student or staff member. For practitioners and consumers of the psychological therapies, interested in the most current research into the Internet and common presenting issues such as depression, anxiety and stress, for example (Van Straten, Cuijpers, & Smits, 2008), the gap between research and practice is potentially diminishing.

The International Society for Mental Health Online (ISMHO) was formed in 1997 to promote the understanding, use and development of online communication, information and technology for the international mental health community (<http://www.ismho.org>). The website offers a bibliography of research papers including: 'Assessing a person's suitability for online therapy' and links to current debates in the field.

Special Issues of journals of counselling and psychotherapy, focussing on technology and its uses are emerging. Research from the USA, Australia, Europe and Israel, reported in a recent Special Issue of *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, for example, indicated positive findings about a range practices in online counselling ([http://www.bacp.co.uk/research/Counselling_and_Psychotherapy_Research_Journal_\(CPR\)/index.php](http://www.bacp.co.uk/research/Counselling_and_Psychotherapy_Research_Journal_(CPR)/index.php)).

Relevant to this article are the suggestions that young people in particular find accessing therapeutic services via email and text messaging acceptable and the Internet environment emotionally supportive (Hanley, 2006).

New text-books on online counselling and psychotherapy are appearing in the UK (Evans, 2008) and the USA (Gackenbach, 2007), sign-posting the 'coming-of age' of a new modality. For several years, the growing demand for services and for training in this relatively new domain of practice has frequently meant that online services have been based on pragmatism and on the need to respond to client demand rather than 'sound research' (Goss & Anthony, 2003). Client therapist alliance, the motives and experiences of clients and therapists who choose the Internet rather than face-to-face counselling, as examples, have been questioned but require further research.

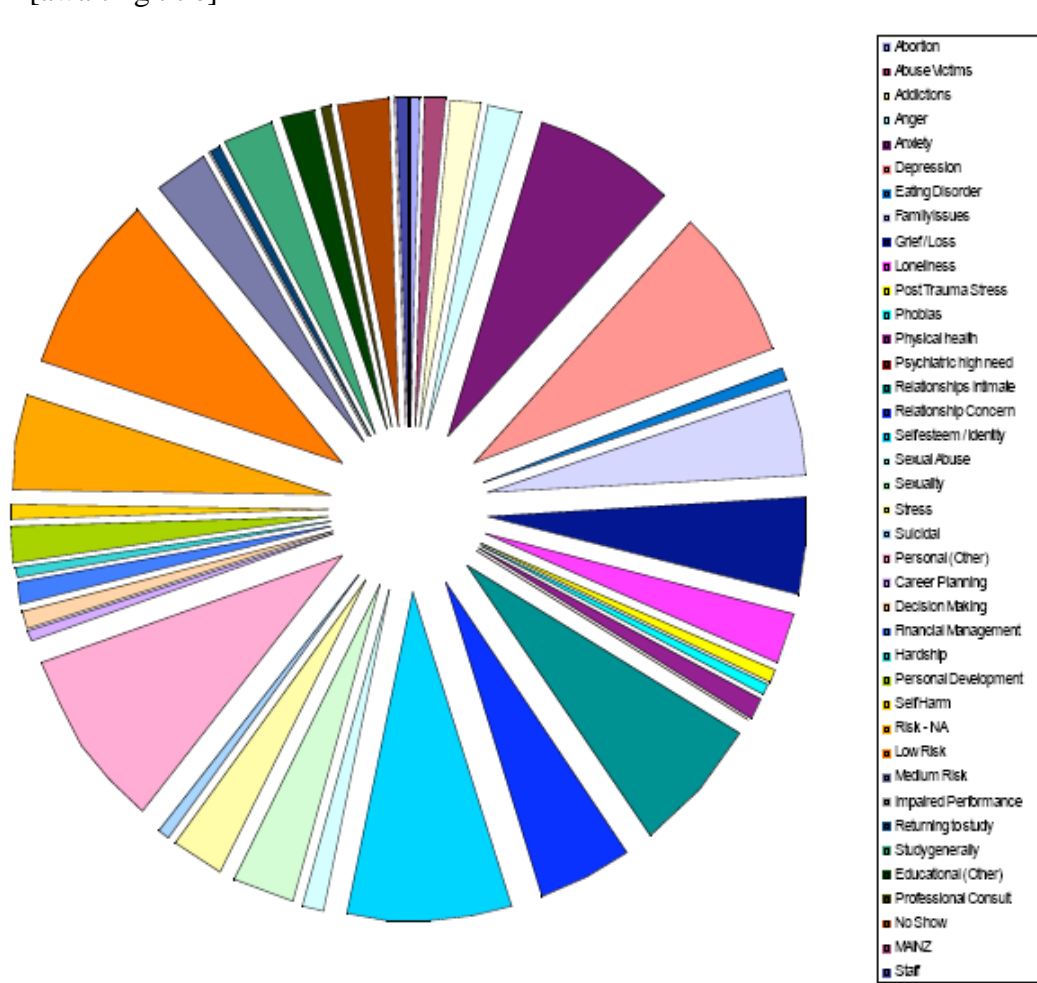
Wright, J., Gooder, D., & Lang, S. (2008). A mixed blessing? Using email for counseling psychotherapy at a distance. *Counselling, Psychotherapy, and Health*, 4(1), Counselling in the Asia Pacific Rim: A coming Together of Neighbours Special Issue, 54-63.

Student Online Counselling at AUT University

The following graphs attempt to represent the trends between 2006 and 2007 at AUT University plus any comments on differences with face to face counselling in the same setting over the same period.

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[awaiting title]



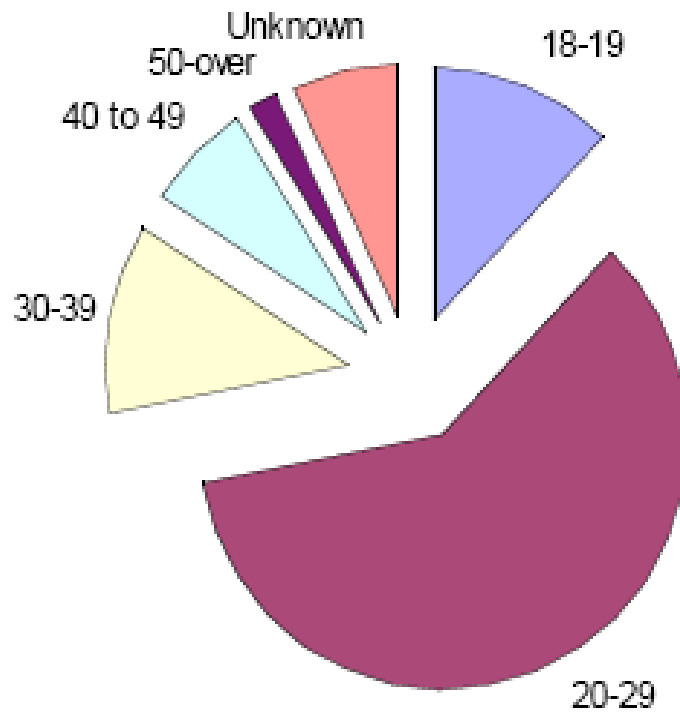
The top four presenting issues varied little from 2006 to 2007:

They were:

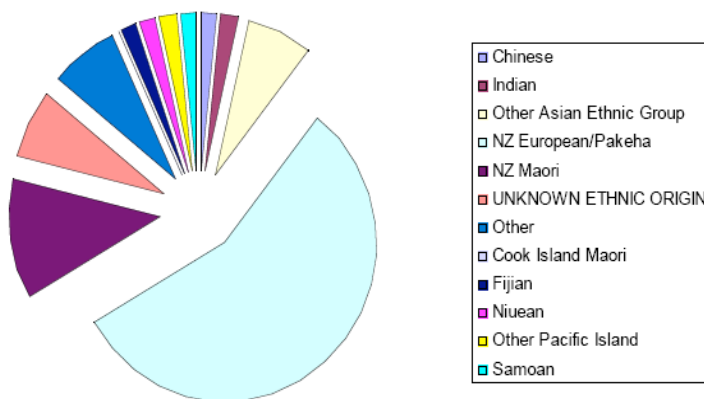
- o Relationships (more sexual issues in 2007)
- o Depression
- o Self Esteem / Identity
- o Anxiety

Age Distribution

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Ethnicity Distribution



- 2006 n = 57
- 2007 n = 74

European 49%
Asian 25%

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Pasifika 08%

Maori 07%

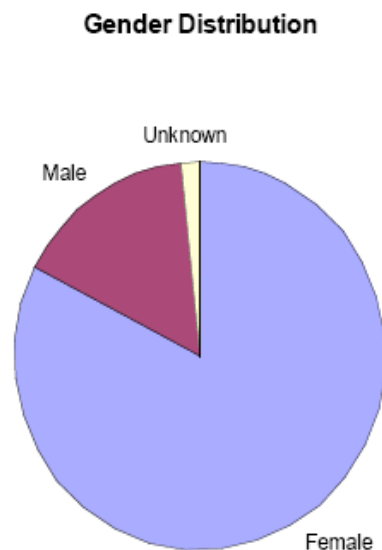
Unstated 11%

- **Asians presented in much higher proportion than in face to face counselling**

Gender Distribution

- 2006 n = 57
- 2007 n = 74

Males were more likely to present with issues of intimacy/sexuality than they do in traditional face to face counselling.



Implications

The aim of this article was not to report the most current developments in research into online counselling but to provide practitioners with an insight into using email in counselling, as illustrated by practice at AUT University. Given the dispersed population of New Zealand, it is perhaps surprising that there has not been a faster rate of development of online services in counselling and psychotherapy. The unmet demand for Broadband, even in the larger centres of population, has been one reason for this relatively slow growth of 'talking therapies' using the Internet. Only recently have

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Broadband connections become accessible, even to those households which can afford such services. Universities, with literate populations and easy access to fast, no-cost to students and staff Broadband connections are therefore an obvious site for online development of counselling services.

The finding that issues of intimacy and sexuality are more easily or readily discussed online, especially for men, introduces the wider issue of how the internet has extended the access to material of a sexual nature. This is a 'two edged sword' or mixed blessing. On the one hand the internet provides a means for therapists to engage with people's issues of a sensitive, intimate and sexual nature that puts people at ease and allows freer expression. Yet at the same time the internet is responsible for a boom in sex related problems and access to pornography. Carr's research (2006, cited in (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002) estimated that 18 million people in the United States of America accessed pornography on-line in the year 2000 and that this was a threefold increase on the previous year. Hence, whilst new communication technologies are able to offer help and support to people, it is also the case that the internet is part of the problem.

The mixed blessing which is cyberspace, provides people with easy access to sexual 'material'; provides a forum for the development of intimate relationships; fosters an ostensibly false illusion of anonymity (Branwyn, 1993, cited in (Cooper & Griffin-Shelley, 2002); and yet also provides the opportunity for people to be open and frank about their sex related 'issues'.

The internet and other new communication technologies provide increasingly novel means of accessing health services. For instance SEXINFO operating out of Oakland, California set up a text message service in 2006 that allows users to access information and obtain referrals to health professionals. Amongst a range of options they suggest users txt '1 if their condom broke'. Within six months of being launched over 4500 people were users of the service (Shareideas.org, 2008). Part of the appeal of the service appears to be the immediacy and anonymity that the technology allows. This ability to apparently conceal one's identity provides an attractive opportunity for the otherwise overly embarrassed client to find a way of exploring their issues with minimal shame. The phrase 'apparently conceal' is used because maintaining security of identities/data is extremely difficult. The use of 'https' (Wikipedia, 2008) provides very secure transfer mechanisms of data/text/images etc. but the security of the computer used at either end of the transfer is relatively easy to compromise. Like a chain with a weakest link, the home computer is highly vulnerable to being accessed. However this vulnerability appears not to deter many people from using these technologies.

Summary

The value of therapy online has encouraged various providers to adapt and use cyberspace as their therapeutic medium. The Albert Ellis Institute in New York began its Rational Emotive Behavior Therapy using the internet several years ago (Cooper, 2002), and iMovie is being used to help train counsellors by submitting videos of trainees 'in

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action' by a North American university (Liu & Abney, 2005). As initiatives of this type grow so the internet will provide a familiarity of users. The more conversant we become with the medium the more capable therapists become. The downside is that the problems created by new communication technologies may grow even faster. Indeed, the speed of change in the technologies which are enabling this innovatory shift in counselling and psychotherapy practice is such that this article will be out of date before it is written. This is a challenge for those 'older' counselling providers who may feel that keeping up to date means fighting a battle they can't win, and yet not to keep pace with change is to miss an opportunity to provide therapeutic interventions that meet the needs of the clients.

The Internet has raised 'self-help' to a new level and resources for those who choose not to work with any kind of psychological therapist have never been more easily accessed (Grohol, 2004; Norcross, J. C., J.W., S., Campbell, L. F., Smith, T. P., Sommer, R., & Zuckerman, E. L. 2003) nor more thoroughly researched (Van Straten et al., 2008). Such alternatives to traditional face-to-face therapy may also present a 'mixed blessing' to the counselling professions.

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