

WHAT CHARACTERIZES THOSE WHO ARE WILLING TO PROVIDE ONLINE COUNSELING?

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Abstract

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for online counseling to preserve therapeutic processes that have begun face to face and to provide service to others in need during lockdowns. Previous studies have already indicated the benefits and effectiveness of online counseling. However, there is a lack of research concerning the therapist's characteristics who is the best fit to conduct online counseling. Therefore, this study is focused on several precursors of openness to provide online counseling: preference to communicate emotions online, identification of emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling, innovative behavior, creativity, and future problem-solving thinking skills. The question at focus is which constructs would be found contributive to students' openness to provide online counseling. The sample was 277 undergraduate students (future counselors) who filled out questionnaires. Data were analyzed using Partial Least Squares Structural Equation Modeling. Our findings pointed to the centrality of students' preference to communicate their emotions online in explaining their openness to conducting online counseling. This study might help encourage students' openness towards providing online counseling. In addition, the current investigation may help pinpoint the adjustments curriculum designers should address to better reflect the intensive changes within the counseling field that necessitate transferring face-to-face skills to online settings.

Keywords: *Creativity, future thinking, innovation, online counseling, higher education.*

1. Introduction

The outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated the need for online counseling to preserve therapeutic processes that have begun face to face and to provide service to others in need during lockdowns. Previous studies have already indicated the benefits and effectiveness of online counseling. However, there is a lack of research concerning the therapist's characteristics who is the best fit to conduct online counseling. Therefore, this study is focused on several precursors of openness to provide online counseling: preference to communicate emotions online, identification of emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling, innovative behavior, creativity, and future problem-solving thinking skills.

2. The aims of the study

The questions at focus are which constructs would be found contributive to students' openness to provide online counseling. The hypothesis were:

H1: Students who prefer communicating their emotions online (Preference for Online Social Interaction) would tend to see more emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling (Perceptions of Online Counseling) and would be more open to conduct online counseling.

H2: Students who tend to see more emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling (Perceptions of Online Counseling) would be more open to conduct online counseling.

H3: Students who report exhibiting innovative behavior would be more open to conduct online counseling.

H4: Students who perceive themselves as creative (Perceived Creativity) would tend to see more emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling (Perceptions of Online Counseling).

H5: Students who tend to be aware of future problems and ways to solve them (Awareness of Future Problems) would perceive themselves as creative and report exhibiting innovative behavior.

3. Methods

3.1. Sample

Data were gathered from 277 Israeli third-year undergraduate students (future counselors). The mean age of the participants was 24.90 years ($SD = 6.20$), and 81% were females. The distribution regarding ethnicity was: 59% Jewish students; 39.5% Arab (Muslim, Druze, Christian, and Bedouin) minority students, and 1.5% depicted their religion as “other”.

3.2. Measurements

Preference for Online Social Interaction (Peter & Valkenburg, 2006). The measure includes three items on preference to communicate through the internet on personal issues rather than face to face. Each of the statements was measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of the scale yielded a satisfactory result: $\alpha = 0.95$.

Openness to Conducting Online Counseling (Teh et al., 2014). The participants were asked to respond to a single item, ‘How would you rate your openness to conducting online counseling?’ They were asked to select their answers from the following options coded on a 4-point scale: (1) “I think online counseling is not for me,” (2) “open, but with major reservations,” (3) “open, but with minor reservations,” and (4) “completely open.”

Perceptions of Online Counseling Factors. This eight-item scale (Teh et al., 2014; Centore & Milacci, 2008) was designed to measure the participants’ belief that the following components of therapy can be provided by online counseling. Each of the statements was measured on a 5-point Likert scale. The internal consistency result was $\alpha = 0.90$.

Perceived Creativity. The *Short Scale of Creative Self (SSCS)* was used to assess this variable. This 11-item scale (Karwowski, 2011, 2014) was used to measure the student’s belief s/he is creative and the belief that creativity is an essential element of her/his overall self-description. Each of the statements was measured on a 6-point Likert scale. The internal consistency of the scale was satisfactory: $\alpha = 0.93$.

Awareness of future problems. Based on the theoretical framework surveyed above, this scale was constructed for the purpose of the current study. This six-item scale corresponds to the six steps of the FPS program (Torrance & Cramond, 2002). The Cronbach’s alpha result was equal to 0.86.

Innovative Behavior. This 10-item scale was originally designed by De Jong and Den Hartog (2010) to measure innovative work behavior. The items were scored on a six-point Likert-style format scale. The Cronbach’s alpha result was equal to 0.88.

4. Findings

Preference for Online Social Interaction exerts a positive effect on Openness to Conducting Online Counseling and Perceptions of Online Counseling. Hence, students who preferred communicating their emotions online also acknowledged more emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling and were inclined towards openness to conducting online counseling. H1 was confirmed.

Perceptions of Online Counseling increased the levels of Openness to Conducting Online Counseling. Meaning, participants who tended to see more emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling were found more open to conducting online counseling. H2 was approved.

Innovative Behavior positively contributed to Openness to Conducting Online Counseling. Hence, students who report exhibiting innovative behavior reported being more open to conducting online counseling. H3 was corroborated. Perceived Creativity increased the extent of Perceptions of Online Counseling. Thus, students who perceive themselves as creative tended to see more emotional expressiveness advantages in providing online counseling. H4 was approved. Finally, as speculated in H5, both Perceived Creativity and Innovative Behavior were positively informed by students’ Awareness of Future Problems.

5. Discussion and conclusion

This study might help encourage students’ openness towards providing online counseling. In addition, the current investigation may help pinpoint the adjustments curriculum designers should address to better reflect the intensive changes within the counseling field that necessitate transferring face-to-face skills to online settings.

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