

HOW INNOVATION DRIVES INCLUSION: OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES OF ONLINE PSYCHOLOGICAL INTERVENTION

Diletta Mora¹, Damiano Girardi², Natalia Grinko³, & Alessandro De Carlo⁴

¹*Department of Human Studies – Communication, Education, and Psychology, LUMSA University of Rome, Rome (Italy)*

²*FISPPA Section of Applied Psychology, University of Padua, Padua (Italy)*

³*Department of Nervous Diseases, Psychiatry and Medical Psychology, Bukovinian State Medical University, Chernivtsi (Ukraine)*

⁴*Preventive Medicine and Hygiene, Department of Cardiac, Thoracic, Vascular Sciences and Public Health, University of Padua, Padua (Italy)*

Abstract

The current pandemic has had a huge impact on people's psychophysical health with repercussions on the job dimension, leading to high levels of dissatisfaction and fear for the future.

Online interventions have become very popular especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, in fact many psychologists and patients switched from face-to-face to online sessions to continue their psychological therapies. The scientific literature has shown strong evidence for online psychotherapy, with this application being used both as an alternative to traditional healthcare and as an enhancement of face-to-face treatment. Many studies highlight that online therapy, and the quality of therapeutic alliance seem to be equivalent in both modalities.

There are additional barriers such as public stigma, cultural and language barriers, geographic isolation in rural areas and social isolation, particularly in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and online psychology interventions allow inclusion as they enable to involve many people who need psychological support, as well as to continue the psychological paths interrupted by the pandemic.

A study was conducted to specifically analyze the implications that online psychology has on today's society. Through a structured interview, 23 psychologists were questioned with the aim to investigate different thematic areas relating to online psychological interventions. A qualitative analysis was conducted using the Atlas.ti software.

All participants were part of a platform specifically designed for the provision of psychological services, managed by a structure registered with the NHS. One purpose of the study was to investigate psychologists' perceptions of online psychology rather than traditional therapy.

Some limitations comprise the small sample of psychologists which may not be generalizable to the population at large. Further, another limitation is related to the digital divide – the cultural bias inherent in accessing the Internet and all information and services that exist online as well as the lack of awareness of how the Internet can be used in a functional way.

An interesting future discussion for counseling psychologists may be explored: blending online therapy into regular face-to-face sessions. In fact, the scientific literature shows that the combination between these two modalities has potential in secondary mental health care.

The existing literature and the study we have conducted methodically highlight the social responsibility of the intervention, which has an impact on the society and is consistent with the key objectives of the 2030 agenda.

Keywords: *Online psychology, Covid-19, psychological intervention, innovation, traditional therapy.*

1. Introduction

Since 11 March 2020, everyone's life has radically changed because of Corona Virus: people have started working from home and interpersonal relationships have declined, forcing people to interact almost exclusively through a screen.

In this alarming situation, mental health was severely affected (Kahdemian et al., 2021). During pandemics, people experience stress and anxiety and psychological disorders more frequently. In fact, it is

estimated that between one third and one half of people may have psychiatric problems in these situations (Liu et al., 2020; Ko et al., 2020).

The demand for psychological support has become increasingly urgent precisely when this need has been hampered by restrictions imposed by governments around the world. In this scenario, online psychology can play an inclusive role as it allows to reach a greater number of people. Innovations in web technology offer promising prospects by providing adequate care timely and efficiently, often through online psychology programs (De Carlo et al., 2019; van der Vaart et al., 2014).

2. Online psychological support

Since the beginning of the Covid-19 pandemic, people have started to avoid face-to-face interactions and the need for psychological support has increased. In the case of psychologists, advice from professional associations around the world has encouraged professionals to continue psychotherapies with patients by using the online modality (Cataldo et al., 2021; De Carlo et al., 2019). The advantages and concrete strengths of an online approach highlighted by the scientific literature include reduced costs, improved access to underserved patient populations, continuity of a psychotherapeutic relationship after a patient has moved away. Different systematic reviews and meta-analyses have shown that online psychological treatments for depression often are as effective as face-to-face ones (Sharry et al., 2013; Newman et al., 2011; Andersson & Cuijpers, 2009). Other aspects that seem to prove online therapy equal to traditional therapy are: 1) the virtual space where therapy takes place: traveling to the therapist's office can be as stressful and anxiety-inducing as "having to be seen" by other people because of the still very present public stigma. Patients mostly participate in the session from their homes and the home environment, thanks to its familiarity, probably helps the patient to feel more comfortable both in initiating therapy and in being honest and open with the therapist (De Carlo et al., 2019). Online therapy tends to provide more eye contact than in-person psychotherapy; 2) the patient's sense of control: with online therapy the patient experiences greater physical and psychological control of the session; in general, the treatment appears to be more "patient-centered"; 3) the option of using a "blending therapy" model combining in-person therapy and online sessions, especially for patients with high levels of anxiety (phobic patients, patients with autism spectrum, or trauma patients). The integration of these two modalities, after the establishment of a therapeutic alliance, may be a valid approach to therapy (Kocsis & Yellowlees, 2018).

3. The study

A total of 23 participants took part in the present study. All professionals were Italian, had received specific training in the use of the platform, and had experience of online support. The present study aims to analyze, through a qualitative analysis, the perceptions of all psychologists engaged in online intervention on a dedicated technological platform. Specifically, the study-objectives were:

- Analyzing – using qualitative tools – the perceptions of psychologists engaged in online intervention.
- Exploring the methodology used during the interventions, the patient's relationship with the psychologist, the differences between online and face-to-face interventions.
- Investigating the degree of user's satisfaction.

Online psychological interventions provided through technological platforms have made it possible to give continuity to the paths started before the pandemic, have offered psychologists the opportunity to reach people in their offices / homes and to initiate specific and relevant interventions throughout the pandemic.

4. Method

A structured interview was created and carried out via Zoom. All interviews, lasting 40 to 50 minutes, aimed to investigate psychologists' perceptions of online psychology.

All interviews were carried out with the collaboration of a platform specifically designed for psychological services, managed by a health facility, and registered with the NHS. Each interview was divided into 4 parts aimed at investigating different thematic areas: methodology; relation; technology; proposals for actions and developments.

Qualitative data analysis was performed using Atlas.ti, a software to support the content analysis. Content analysis is a qualitative research technique that allows to "extract" useful information and meanings from a set of written documents as well as count the "occurrences" or how many times a word

and / or concept appears in the documents. The content analysis generally follows a series of cyclical phases:

- After a first reading of the interviews, the categories of analysis are defined.
- Based on the categories that have emerged, a theoretical phase of redefining those categories is carried out.
- The new redefined categories are applied again to the texts to obtain a set of categories that clearly represent the contents of the texts.

5. Data analyses, interpretation, and results

5.1. Methodology

This category had the objective of appreciating, for example, how psychologists managed the online interview, the duration of the session, the main differences between online and traditional sessions.

"So, I'll tell you the truth, initially I wasn't much in favor of it because I didn't think there could be effective results. Then in 2019 I started doing it out of necessity, because I had this opportunity and I realized that it actually has the same effectiveness as the sessions that are done in person. "

As regards the area of methodology, professionals believe that online sessions help the patient to feel more comfortable (N=7¹), as well as facilitate him/her from a logistical point of view as he/she does not have to physically go to the professional's office (N=5). Conversely, online interventions can encounter internet connection problems (N=3) and may involve difficulties for the professional in grasping the patient's non-verbal language (N=14).

The online mode has also been found to make psychology more accessible than that carried out in person (N = 10); the online setting is more effective (N = 9) and increases the possibility of intervention (N = 9).

The professionals interviewed report how problems related to anxiety and stress (N =13) are frequent among their patients, followed by problems of interpersonal and couple relationships (N = 12), discomfort related to the Covid-19 pandemic (N = 8), as well as depressed mood and loneliness (N = 7).

5.2. Relations

This category had the aim of ascertaining what the nature of the patient's relationship was like, if it was possible to establish a therapeutic alliance, and if the patients appeared to be satisfied.

"I notice that online there is less shyness, and, for example, it happened to me with a guy who told me he had never gone to a psychologist because he had many doubts and decided to start now, yes because he needed it, but also because he felt safer online. "

As regards the area of relations, high satisfaction with the online intervention is observed (N = 21) and the fact that technology facilitates the relationship between psychologist and patient (N = 8).

5.3. Technology

This category of questions was aimed to detect any strengths and weaknesses that psychologists had found in the use of the platform and technology.

"Moreover, the platform is designed with a simple operation, however, like everything new, it has to be learned."

As regards the area of technology, the advantages and disadvantages associated with it have emerged. There is a need to improve the operation of the platform to avoid technical problems that may arise during the session (for example malfunctioning or connection issues). Reduced non-verbal communication emerges again (N = 8). Among the advantages linked to the technology, the greater flexibility of the online intervention is highlighted (N = 17) and the higher number of users who can be reached through this method (N = 5).

5.4. Proposal for actions and development

This category had the objective of asking for suggestions for implementations to be made to the platform

"From my point of view, there should be a more autonomous management by the professional as regards appointments and payments for single sessions because most users want to pay after each session ..."

¹The number indicates the frequency with which the dimension emerges.

As regards the last area – proposal for actions and development – professionals desire to improve the app from a technical point of view to acquire greater autonomy in managing appointments with patients, as well as implementing notifications reminding them, for example, of when appointments are scheduled (N = 8). As can be seen from the responses, a strong predominance of positive attitudes emerges both on the content of the services and on the online platform. Online psychology is considered an effective and flexible method, which allows professionals to engage a greater number of patients and patients to carry out the session from their own home without having to move, reducing time and costs. Furthermore, technology is perceived as a facilitator of the relationship between psychologist and patient.

6. Limitation

Online interventions also raise questions related to cultural conditions, in fact in an increasingly mobile world, online psychological intervention can give psychologists the ability to keep in touch with patients who would normally get lost because of their moving elsewhere. An example would be students who move to university or people who travel frequently for work and who, with online interventions, would be able to stay in touch with their therapists from home instead of finding new ones. However, one limitation is related to the digital divide – the gap between demographics and regions that have access to modern information and communications technology and those that don't. This issue suggests how online psychology interventions could be improved even for disadvantaged populations who need psychological support (Mallen et al., 2005; Hoffman, Novak, & Schlosser, 2000). Another limitation could be the size of the sample which is limited to a small number of psychologists (N=23) and may not be generalizable to the entire population. Nevertheless, the results already obtained suggest that this area of intervention and this protocol have a potential that should be further investigated and replicated in broader contexts.

7. Future development

An interesting future discussion for counseling psychologists may be explored. Blended therapy refers to the combination of face-to-face and online interventions. The results of a study highlight that some practical parts of the therapy could be carried out in an online environment, while the discussion of thoughts, feelings, and difficulties are still better done face-to-face. One of the main advantages in blended programs is the flexibility to support patients in their treatment; however, it requires commitment, willingness, and skill from therapists who should learn how to use the online mode in a stimulating way and should be able to tailor therapy to individual patients (Becker et al., 2013). In addition, combination therapy offers the opportunity to improve patient self-management and to increase the effectiveness (cost) of therapy, while providing the support that patients need.

8. Conclusion

The results of this study are in line with scientific literature. Online psychology seems to encourage inclusion of users for two main reasons: first, it allows users to overcome the stigma, still present, of physically going to the psychologist; second, as highlighted in the technology category, it allows to reach a greater number of users. Among them, those who have had to stop the psychological path due to the pandemic and those who, without the help of technology, would have likely not approached a psychologist. The information that emerged from the study has value both for developing the service with a view to a better customer experience and for improving the working conditions of online psychologists on the platform. Indeed, a strong predominance of positive attitudes has emerged both in the content of the services and in the online platform with respect to potential general and platform criticalities. Furthermore, the existing literature as well as this study highlight the social responsibility of the intervention, which has an impact on society as well as being consistent with the key objectives of the 2030 Agenda, one of which focuses on health and welfare.

References

- Andersson G., & Cuijpers P. (2009): Internet-based and other computerized psychological treatments for adult depression: a meta-analysis. *Cognitive Behavior Therapy* (38), 196–205.
- Becker. M., & Jensen-Doss A. (2013). Computer-assisted therapies: examination of therapist-level barriers to their use. *Behavior Therapy* (44), 614–624.

- Cataldo, F., Chang, S., Mendoza, A., & Buchanan, G. (2021). A perspective on client-psychologist relationships in videoconferencing psychotherapy: Literature review. *JMIR Mental Health*, 8(2), e19004.
- De Carlo, A., Dal Corso, L., Benevene, P., Vicente Castro, F., & Corbo, M. (2019, June). *Organizational Psychology and Technology: ethical, legal and practical issues related to active listening and work-related stress monitoring in Italy and Europe*. XXVI Congresso de Psicologia – INFAD, Salamanca.
- De Carlo, A., Mora, D., Di Sipio, A., & Girardi, D. (2021, settembre). *Essere psicologi online*. [Be an online psychology]. XVIII Congresso Nazionale AIP Associazione Italiana di Psicologia, Verona.
- De Carlo, A., Mora, D., Rapisarda, S., & Ranieri, L. (2021). Nuove tecnologie di ascolto-sostegno & recovery-formazione. Psicologia online e Realtà Virtuale. [New listening-support & recovery-training technologies. Online Psychology and Virtual Reality] In N. A. De Carlo, & I. Maccani (eds), *Codice Smart Working*. [Smart Working code]. (130-148). Trento: SEAC.
- García-Morales, V. J., Garrido-Moreno, A., & Martín-Rojas, R. (2021). The transformation of higher education after the COVID disruption: Emerging challenges in an online learning scenario. *Frontiers in Psychology*, (12), 196.
- Hoffman, D. L., Novak, T. P., & Schlosser, A. (2000). The evolution of the digital divide: How gaps in Internet access may impact electronic commerce. *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication*, (5), 233-245.
- Khademian, F., Delavari, S., Koohjani, Z., & Khademian, Z. (2021). An investigation of depression, anxiety, and stress and its relating factors during COVID-19 pandemic in Iran. *BMC Public Health*, 21(1), 1-7.
- Ko CH., Yen CF., Yen JY., & Yang MJ. (2006). Psychosocial impact among the public of the severe acute respiratory syndrome epidemic in Taiwan. *Psychiatry and Clinical Neuroscience*, 60(4), 397-403.
- Kocsis, B. J., & Yellowlees, P. (2018). Telepsychotherapy and the therapeutic relationship: Principles, advantages, and case examples. *Telemedicine Journal and E-Health*, 24(5), 329-334.
- Liu., Gayle A., Wilder-Smith A., & Rocklöv J. (2020): The reproductive number of COVID-19 is higher compared to SARS coronavirus. *Journal of Travel Medicine*, 76(1), 1-4.
- Mallen, M. J., Vogel, D. L., & Rochlen, A. B. (2005). The practical aspects of online counseling: Ethics, training, technology, and competency. *The counseling psychologist*, 33(6), 776-818.
- Mautong, H., Gallardo-Rumbea, J., Alvarado-Villa, G., Fernández-Cadena, J., Andrade-Molina, D., Orellana-Román, C., & Cherez-Ojeda, I. (2021). Assessment of depression, anxiety, and stress levels in the Ecuadorian general population during social isolation due to the COVID-19 outbreak: a cross-sectional study. *Bmc Psychiatry*, 21(1), 1-15.
- Newman G., Szkodny E., Llera J., & Przeworski A. (2011): A review of technology- assisted self-help and minimal contact therapies for anxiety and depression: is human contact necessary for therapeutic efficacy? *Clinical Psychology Review*, (31), 89-103.
- Parikh, S. V., & Huniewicz, P. (2015). E-health: an overview of the uses of the Internet, social media, apps, and websites for mood disorders. *Current opinion in psychiatry*, 28(1), 13-17.
- van der Vaart, R., Witting, M., Riper, H., Kooistra, L., Bohlmeijer, E. T., & van Gemert-Pijnen, L. J. (2014). Blending online therapy into regular face-to-face therapy for depression: content, ratio and preconditions according to patients and therapists using a Delphi study. *BMC psychiatry*, 14(1), 1-10.
- Sharry J., Davidson R., McLoughlin O., & Doherty G (2013). A service-based evaluation of a therapist-supported online cognitive behavioral therapy program for depression. *Journal of Medicine Internet Research*, 15 (6):e121.
- Stoll, J., Müller, J. A., & Trachsel, M. (2020). Ethical issues in online psychotherapy: A narrative review. *Frontiers in Psychiatry*, (10), 993.