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Counselors-in-training students' attitudes towards online counseling

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study which aims to find out 15 counselors-in-training students' attitudes towards e-counseling. In order to determine their attitudes, an interview schedule which consists questions exploring their attitudes towards online counseling as counselors and clients was developed. The data collected through semi-structured individual interviews were subjected to qualitative data analysis. The results showed that none of the counseling trainees has adequate information and education on the field of online counseling. Although they have some concerns, all participants have positive views about online counseling, and they think it is high time online counseling was incorporated into counselor education in Turkey.

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Keywords: Online counseling; counselors-in-training; counselor education.

1. Introduction

It is not surprising that the discipline of counseling has been affected by the developments in technology. The more the technology improves, the more the helping professionals need to utilize new technologies. Internet is one of the brand new technologies that affect the field of counseling psychology. With the advancement of the use of internet applications, online counseling has been a common phenomenon for all counselors. Throughout the world, online counseling services have been provided and expected to increase in the future.

The continuously growing practice of online counseling, which is defined as “asynchronous and synchronous distance interaction among counselors and clients using e-mail, chat, and videoconferencing features of the Internet to communicate” (National Board of Certified Counselors [NBCC], 2001), has become popular among counselors and clients.

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Online counseling is also known as Cyber Counseling, Online-Therapy and Internet Counseling, (McCrickard & Buttler, 2005; Cook & Doyle, 2002; Pollock, 2006). Online counseling is already helpful in many areas like marriage and family counseling (Pollock, 2006), tobacco-cessation program (Mallen, Blalock & Cinciripini, 2006), depression (Christensen, Griffiths, & Jorm, 2004) and anxiety disorders (Kenardy, McCafferty, & Rosa, 2003).

There are several studies that examine clients' attitudes toward online counseling. For example, high school students told that it would be good to contact with a school counselor online when they need help (Lunt, 2004). In an empirical study that examines 48 e-clients' attitudes towards online counseling, Young (2005) found out that clients want to use online counseling because of the anonymity and the convenience online-counseling provides. However, in a qualitative study which investigates the experiences of 5 participants who engaged in online chat-based counseling sessions, it was revealed that although some of the participants had a productive and supportive counseling relationship with their online counselors, others could not (Haberstroh, et al. 2007). In another study which compares online counseling and traditional face to face counseling, clients were found to be pleased with their online relationships and treatment, but they were not as satisfied as clients who made use of face to face counseling (Leibert, et al, 2006).

Online counseling is advantageous in terms of geographical limitations, time constraints, homebound people due to disability or agoraphobia, people with unusual employment schedules, finding specialists regardless of geographical location, cost effectiveness and flexible scheduling (Pollock, 2006). However, the use of online counseling has also brought some concerns to the helping professionals and to the clients. Ethics is the first and the most vital concern about online counseling. Helpers and the clients have worries about professional relationship, legal issues, privacy, professional liability, duty to warn or protect, duty to report child abuse and neglect, duty of non-abandonment, duty to refer, consent, confidentiality, competence, managing emergencies (Khelifa, 2007). In addition, as online counseling is done via electronic utilities, some technical obstacles such as power breakdown, internet connection failure or computer malfunctions are expected. The other concerns are about not having the therapeutic alliance between the counselor and the client, missing verbal and nonverbal cues during the counseling session, slow paced communication and connecting from home.

The invent of internet has not only increased the chance of reaching more clients, but it also has increased education and training opportunities of counselors (McCrickard & Buttler, 2005). As it is the case for other occupations, counseling professionals have to be educated about how to use internet effectively in their profession. In order to present more opportunities in online counseling for counseling trainees, integrating online technologies into counseling curricula is a wise and inexpensive way. In a study which aimed to determine the effectiveness and relevance of on-line communications in counseling curricula, a number of online exercises were inserted into the arrangement of an introductory graduate counseling course in human development. The results of the study show that the counseling students who willingly used online learning exercises considered this training worthwhile, and online experiences had a positive effect on their motivation for counseling careers (Lundberg, 2000).

2. Method

This is a qualitative study which aims to assess 15 counselors-in-training students' attitudes towards e-counseling. Individual interviews were the main data collection method and the data were analyzed through qualitative data analysis. The details of the study method are explained in the following parts.

2.1. Participants

A total of 15 registered master or doctorate counseling students took part in the study. The subjects of the study were purposefully selected among registered students of the Psychological Counseling and Guidance Program at METU. All the participants were females, and their age varied between 22 and 34. Seven of them were master degree students and eight of them were doctorate students. Six of the participants had undergraduate degree of psychological counseling and guidance; three of them had early childhood education undergraduate degree; two of them had psychology undergraduate degree; and the rest had maths education, chemistry education and English language teaching undergraduate degree. Only two of the participants had taken an elective online-counseling course during their undergraduate education, and none of them had ever got online help.

2.2. Data collection instrument

Individual interviews were the main data collection method. A semi-structured interview schedule was used for the data collection. To ensure reliability, the data were presented in a descriptive way with low-inference, and the researcher got assistance from opinions of a counseling expert during the data analysis.

2.3. Data collection and analysis procedures

The individual interviews were carried out at the researcher's office or a small-size seminar room in a one-month period. Each interview was about 20 minutes and was recorded with the consent of the interviewees. When the data collection was done, the interviews were transcribed verbatim and were subjected to content analysis which involves identifying coherent and important examples, themes, patterns in the data (Patton, 1987). A table which contained all the analyzed data gathered from the participants was prepared. As the conceptual frame of the study was already ready, predetermined encoding technique was used in the arrangement of the table (Yıldırım & Şimşek, 2006).

3. Results

The views of the participants were organized as *attitudes as counselors*, and *attitudes as clients*. Each aspect is discussed in a detailed way below.

3.1. Attitudes as counselors

Online counseling was not the first preference for almost all participants, and they stated they would make use of online counseling if they had no chance of face to face counseling. Some of the participants also said they would use online counseling as an adjunct to the traditional counseling. In other words, if the counselor or the client could not attend some of the meetings due to some reasons like going abroad, illness or severe bad conditions, they would prefer online counseling in order not to hamper the sessions. In addition, some noted that the first meeting would begin *vis a vis*, and then, the counselor and the client would together decide on whether they would continue the sessions online.

Although some participants assumed all types of problems can be dealt with online, the majority of them thought that online counseling is best suitable with guidance not with counseling. Career counseling, procrastination, problem solving, time management, increasing awareness, treatment of addiction problems are some issues they stated. Almost all of the participants believed that online counseling is not proper with severe problems like depression, trauma, emotional distress, bereavement, divorce, break-up, suicide and behavioral disorders.

Among the concerns that counseling trainees had about online counseling, the loss of nonverbal (mimics, tone of voice, facial expressions, eye contact, head nods, body language) was the main one. They suppose that in the online session, they would miss meaningful nonverbal as they did not have the opportunity to see the client's body completely. The novice counselors were also concerned about ethics, trust, confidentiality, security, therapeutic alliance, reliability, technical malfunctions, pacing and empathy.

According to the results, none of the participants was educated about online counseling. Yet, all of them were eager to learn more about online counseling by getting courses or participating in workshops and seminars. They felt that the modern world of technology necessitates knowing about technological advancements like online counseling; if they were competent, they would be able get in touch with more people who need help. Moreover, all the 15 participants agreed that online counseling can be effective to help people although it would not be as effective as traditional face to face counseling.

When they were asked to associate online counseling with something, about all the participants emphasized that it is something imaginary and artificial like a fake flower, a mysterious hand that helps, a dream, an education cd, a fake ornament or a short cut. This shows that the participants view online counseling as a fantastic tool that helps the counselor when she experiences some difficulties in the traditional counseling sessions.

3.2. Attitudes as clients

When they considered getting online help as clients, the counseling trainees felt more positive. They stated that receiving online help from a counselor who does not know them would be invaluable since most of the time they would also need help as counselors. When it was asked for what type of problems they would desire to make use of online counseling as clients, the answer of the participants was the same with the problems they would deal with as

counselors. Namely, they would prefer to employ online counseling for their guidance needs not for their counseling needs. The cliental worries of the participants were identical with the ones mentioned before. In other words, they had concerns about the loss of nonverbals, ethics, trust, confidentiality, security, therapeutic alliance, reliability, technical malfunctions, pacing and empathy.

4. Conclusion and Discussion

The results of this study indicated that none of the counseling trainees had adequate information and education on the field of online counseling. If they were to choose between face to face and online counseling, their first preference would be face to face counseling because of their worries about online counseling. However, they were willing to attend workshops or take courses about online counseling because they believe that knowing about online counseling would enhance the opportunities of helping more people. In addition, they pointed out that online counseling would be an effective way if it could be combined with the face to face counseling as an adjunct.

The results of this study showed that online counseling is a neglected area of counselor education in Turkey, and in fact, none of the counseling departments of universities offers online counseling courses. Yet, it is clear that there is no way for the contemporary counselor to escape from the advances internet provides. Thus, counseling departments of Turkish universities should start to teach counseling students about online counseling and its applications. In addition, more studies are needed to develop online counseling practices in Turkey.

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