The Experience of Online Counseling

Shane Haberstroh
Thelma Duffey
Marcheta Evans
Robert Gee
Heather Trepal

In this qualitative study, the authors outline the experiences of 5 research participants who engaged in online chat-based counseling sessions. Participants discussed their experiences related to technological barriers, connecting with their counselor, interacting without visual or verbal feedback, receiving counseling in a personal space, and the flow and pace of the online sessions. The authors provide recommendations for the implementation of online counseling, including discussion of the limitations and benefits of this type of therapeutic conversation.

When clients do not perceive core therapeutic conditions to be present, counselors can become ineffective in facilitating growth and change (Hill & Nakayama, 2000; Sexton & Whiston, 1991). With the advent of online counseling services as a creative and innovative therapeutic medium, counselors are now considering how therapeutic conditions can be fostered in an online environment (Evans & Hawkins, 2002; Rochland, Zach, & Speyer, 2004). Given the increasing availability of the Internet as a counseling resource, numerous counselors have engaged in the delivery of both synchronous and asynchronous online interventions (Heinlen, Reynolds-Welfel, Richmond, & Rak, 2003; Maheu & Gordon, 2000; Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997). In this article, we explore the experiences of research participants who engaged in chat-based synchronous online counseling. This analogue study supplements the modest but growing literature base (Mann-Layne & Hosenhil, 2005) related to online counseling by illustrating the perceptions of individuals who personally experienced an online therapeutic relationship.

Shane Haberstroh, Thelma Duffey, Marcheta Evans, and Heather Trepal are affiliated with The University of Texas at San Antonio and Robert Gee is affiliated with Texas Tech University. Correspondence regarding this article should be sent via e-mail to shane.haberstroh@utsa.edu.
The Internet as a Clinical Medium

A growing body of literature has begun to explore the Internet as an environment for addressing a variety of clinical issues and research suggests that meaningful working alliances can be established online (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Leibert, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006). Leibert et al. found that clients rated online counseling favorably, but satisfaction scores were lower than estimates for clients attending face-to-face sessions. These authors found that missing nonverbal communication was attenuated by the anonymity afforded by online communications, and suggested future research focus on therapeutic alliance variables with heterogeneous populations.

The Internet is purportedly evolving into an accessible, convenient vehicle for addressing body issues and somatic concerns (Tate, Wing, & Winett, 2001), creating a safe therapeutic space for women struggling with eating disorders (Zabinski, Celio, Wilfley, & Taylor, 2003; Zabinski et al., 2001), attenuating the severity and frequency of chronic headaches (Strom, Pettersson, & Andersson, 2000), and providing relief for persons suffering from insomnia (Strom, Pettersson, & Andersson, 2004). These results may be due, in part, to the therapeutic aspects of writing about emotions. An established body of research suggests that writing during times of physical and social distress provides clients with a vital avenue for emotional healing (Penn, 2001; Soper & Von Bergen, 2001). Accordingly, research has established a quantitative link between written expression of emotions and increased physical health (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Penn, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997). Given that online counseling is an interactive form of therapeutic writing, interventions delivered in this environment may combine the power of the written word with therapeutic conversations.

In summary, some studies indicate that Internet counseling, especially when combined with cognitive behavioral approaches can be used with a variety of clinical presentations (Christensen, Griffiths, & Jorm, 2004; Kenardy, McCafferty, & Rosa, 2003; Lange, Van De Ven & Schrieken, 2003; Rassau & Arco, 2003; Richards, Klein, & Carlbring, 2003). In this study, we build upon the work of several articles (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Leibert et al., 2006) related to client’s perspectives of online counseling. A review of the literature found that many studies (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Kenardy et al., 2003; Leibert et al.) utilized post hoc methods of interviewing participants and collecting data. This study contributes to the literature by exploring and documenting the process of analogue online counseling as participants experienced this phenomenon. This way of collecting data allowed the researchers and participants opportunities to process, understand, and document reactions to online counseling in an in-depth manner as they naturally emerged (Berrios & Luca, 2006).
METHOD

Beginning counselor education students served as clients, while counseling interns enrolled in an advanced counseling internship course served as counselors in this study. The central research question (Creswell, 1998; 2002) posed to participants was “What is the experience of receiving online counseling, from a client’s perspective?” Because we investigated the perspectives of various individuals about a common experience, descriptive phenomenology framed and guided the research inquiry (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994; Moustakas, 1994). The research task was to transform the participants’ narratives into themes that illustrated the essence of their experiences (Moustakas). Finally, we followed the guidelines for preparing counseling-related manuscripts as outlined by Choudhuri, Glauser and Peregoy (2004). Choudhuri et al. suggested that qualitative manuscripts provide succinct descriptions of (a) background theory and research, (b) data collection methods, (c) research setting, (d) data coding procedures, and (e) how the data inform the interpretations and conclusions of the study.

Participants and Setting

Seven counselor education graduate students (Table 1) enrolled in an introduction to counseling class at a large southwestern university participated. These individuals volunteered to receive supportive online counseling for optional course credit, and we recruited them for the study after they attended a 15-minute presentation on the project. Interested students signed an Institutional Review Board approved informed consent form for research participation. We informed the interns, serving as counselors in the project that the clinical focus of the sessions was to explore personal growth and development experiences in an online environment. In addition, we screened participants from involvement in this project if they reported currently dealing with any serious psychological, psychosocial, or clinical issues. No participants reported struggling with these issues.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Racial/Ethnic Background</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Sex</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dianne</td>
<td>African American</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charles</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>Male</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jennifer</td>
<td>Latina American</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary</td>
<td>Asian American</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nancy</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rachel</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pauline</td>
<td>European American</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>Female</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Finally, we provided participants with contact information for local community agencies if they needed professional services during the course of this study.

**Procedures**

Beginning counselor education students received online counseling services from advanced counseling internship students after we provided access to the counselor intern’s Web site. The counselor interns and students had no previous knowledge of each other. Furthermore, the counselor interns were directly supervised by credentialed supervisors who provided weekly face-to-face supervision sessions specifically for this research project. We regularly contacted all participants involved with this research study and provided multiple layers of oversight.

We designed the counseling Web sites with the WebCt software platform. This product allowed for confidential, password protected, conversations and contained built-in chat and e-mail communication tools (Slencak, 2000). Furthermore, participants only provided their first names, and no other identifying information was stored on the Web server. Finally, we asked the participants to engage in five, one hour, synchronous, online counseling chat sessions with their assigned counselor intern.

**Data collection.** The first phase of data collection consisted of a one-hour focus group. The lead author developed and used a structured interview form to encourage a systematic method for collecting the data (Patton, 2002). In the next phase of the study, the lead author met with the participants for three 30 to 45-minute, semi-structured interviews. Interviews were scheduled during the beginning, middle and end of the online counseling sequence. As with the focus group, and interview guide, the lead author began the interviews with the grand tour question (Patton, 2002), “What has been your experience with online counseling so far?” Additional questions on the interview guide prompted participants to consider some strengths and weaknesses of online counseling and to compare this experience with face-to-face conversations. Further, participants maintained reflective journals where they discussed their experiences with this project.

We recorded the interviews and focus groups on digital videotape. Finally, we designed a research database utilizing the Microsoft Access and Excel software programs to store, coordinate, document, and query the data gathered during this project.

**Coding procedures.** Data analysis included reflexively evaluating the major themes as they emerged (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The themes reported in this article matured from the spontaneous observations
recorded in the field notes, into general open codes, and finally into refined themes summarizing the participants lived experiences (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002). For example, initial open codes and field notes evolved from observations about how the participants generally rated the online experience (e.g., convenience, frustration, technical complications) into more sophisticated analyses as reported in this article.

**Validation procedures.** In qualitative research, it is essential to triangulate the results coded by the researcher to reduce bias and encourage the transparency of findings (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002). As such, in addition to reviewing the results with the participants, an external evaluator (Patton) reviewed and commented on all aspects of the study. This doctoral degreed clinician, supervisor, and qualitative researcher received access to the transcribed interviews, coding paradigms, and the interview guides. In our discussions with this individual, we explored how the study limitations (i.e., the use of counseling students and non-naturalistic aspects of the study) posed issues with transferring these results to other settings.

**RESULTS**

The research database included a considerable amount of text gathered during the interviews and from submitted reflective journals. By and large, participants discussed themes related to (a) technical obstacles, (b) reflections of the counseling process, (c) relating in a nonverbal environment, (d) communicating at a slower pace, (e) the convenience of online counseling, and (f) interacting from a personal space. Related to each major theme, our participants often shared contrasting views and experiences, providing multifaceted and rich descriptions about relating online. In these results, we assigned pseudonyms to the participants to protect their confidentiality. Two participants, Charles and Jennifer, did not participate in counseling sessions; however; when asked, they both agreed to participate in research interviews. Discussing his hesitancy, Charles stated:

> We never did really connect. Well, he called and I called back and he said something about 9 o’clock and I thought it was going to be the next day or next night. So I guess for me it was establishing some kind of first communication. I just never did make that.

Jennifer shared that she had issues with trusting this type of communication after agreeing to participate. She questioned, “Who are you really talking to? You haven’t seen this person, who are they really? You know. Are they who they say who they are?” For both of these participants
initial communication with their counselor and trusting the process seemed to be key elements. In addition, as we discuss in the limitations section, these participants were not personally seeking counseling services, which may have influenced their motivation to participate.

**Technical Obstacles to Online Counseling**

For some, technical complications appeared to discourage several of the participants from fully interacting online, Dianne shared:

> The first time we met, it was really frustrating because of the technology. We were both there. We were both excited. Not only was it technology, but me being not so technologically advanced either. I think there was one time when the server was down. We had barely started talking and the server shut me out. And another time, I didn’t realize I had pressed return like a hundred times and the computer was going wacko.

Reiterating a sense of frustration and “hassle” related to technological issues, Mary elaborated:

> Something was wrong with our line. I was supposed to meet her in like half an hour and I wasn’t able to, and she like waited like 15 minutes. But I couldn’t get online, so I finally go online like an hour and a half later, and I emailed her and told her what happened. I thought it would be a lot easier. I think it’s, to me, it’s a hassle.

Both Mary and Dianne experienced technical problems outside of their control in this environment. These barriers interrupted establishing the fledgling counseling relationship. However, others reported few problems with logging on and communicating via the chat rooms.

**The Online Relationship: Counseling Process**

Rachel compared online counseling with a previous counseling experience and reported:

> I think it has to do with the fact that I am an introvert and don’t like talking about myself very often, but for some reason while I was talking with Tanya [counselor] I didn’t feel self-conscious about what I was going to say about myself. I felt like I had shared some things about myself and some concerns about my future and that I felt relieved to share that.

Pauline reported:

> I felt really good when that session was over, even though that issue wasn’t resolved. So I’m excited to continue with it. I think I really liked it because I knew that person was totally objective. And was really just able to give honest feedback and ask questions that maybe I hadn’t thought about regarding that situation. It was just a really good experience for me.
Alternatively, Nancy discussed how text communication differed from face-to-face interactions:

She would say, “Tell me more about that,” and almost online it almost feels patronizing like, “we have 30 more minutes, let me see what else I can squeeze out of her.” But in person, when my professor does that, it doesn’t seem that way. It was a different feeling with the exact same question.

However, during the course of this study, Nancy was also able to provide a comparison between online and face-to-face approaches:

I was actually impressed with the fact that it felt about the same. I didn’t really feel as big of a difference as I thought I would. I expected face-to-face counseling to be a lot better than Web counseling. I think that breaking the ice takes a little longer online, but we have now gotten pretty comfortable. I do enjoy it. I like the middle of the week e-mails I get from her. You know what I mean, times between sessions. That actually makes me feel “thought of” a little more than being escorted in and back out in an hour.

Reactions to establishing an online counseling relationship varied among the participants. Some participants found this environment unsatisfying, while others received benefits and had a positive experience.

Relating Online without Verbal and Visual Feedback

The participants interacted in an environment devoid of visual and auditory feedback. Participants varied in their trust of this communication forum. For some, online communicating alleviated interpersonal pressure and encouraged self-reflection, as Rachel shared:

Actually, it took the pressure off of having to come up with something right then. Because when somebody is sitting there, you’re sitting there thinking, “Okay I have to say something right now.” And when you’re typing, they don’t know if you’re typing. It could just be taking a while, they don’t know. So I think it took some pressure off.

Nancy felt safer, especially when disclosing potentially embarrassing topics:

It was little bit more comfortable, in a sense, talking to her. Because I know I never have to meet her. If I had something real big to talk to somebody about, that might be the way. Sometimes it’s harder to face somebody when you have somebody looking at you. It makes it a little easier when you have that computer to look at and not somebody.

However, without seeing her counselor’s responses, Pauline wondered how her counselor was reacting to her statements:

I guess I’m kind of nervous that the person on the other side is going to be going, in their mind, “Oh my God, this is the craziest person in the world!” and typing, “Oh that just
sounds so normal.” They’re like laughing at you, but you don’t see that because they’re typing in the right answers.

Similarly, Dianne explored how relating online limited necessary interpersonal feedback:

I like to look at a person’s face. Feel their body language. You can tell what a person thinks about you. You don’t have that element. You’re almost apprehensive. I’m real good at writing. We all know from writing papers in undergraduate school that you can write a bunch of stuff and make it sound that you’re really passionate.

Mary followed Dianne’s speculations:

Online you can’t really interpret. It’s just words, verbatim. Who knows if that’s actually the way I’m feeling about it. And even with a seasoned professional, I don’t think she would have been able, because online you can block it off. In one-on-one, it would appear a lot more emotional.

To summarize, interacting online alleviated pressures to respond quickly and served as a less threatening outlet for sharing embarrassing topics. However, some participants found that the missing interpersonal cues limited their self-expression and level of trust.

**Pacing of the Online Sessions**

Given that the participants and counselors communicated via text, the pace of the sessions was considerably slower than face-to-face conversations. Mary found the sessions became “jumbled” when she took too long to respond to her counselor:

The only thing I hate about the online thing is the typing, because a lot of the answers that I submit are actually shortened because I don’t want to take the time out to type it. And when I am taking the time, she’ll ask another question. So it’s just jumbled. Because if you pause to type out your response, she’s just thinking that it’s quiet. So, she’ll ask a question to keep the conversation flowing, but I’m actually trying to type a response and then I have to type another response.

Pauline remarked how the time lapse between responses could be frustrating and create ambiguity in the sessions:

It just took her awhile to get it all out. So on the other end, is she really typing something? Or is she waiting for me to respond? That initial is a little strange, but once we got started, it was back and forth and so it wasn’t that bad. It was a little frustrating when I knew she was responding to what I was saying, but she maybe was writing a little more than she had before. Having to wait was a little frustrating.
However, Pauline found that the space between responses allowed her more time to construct a thoughtful response:

I kind of like in the fact that typing in my response, it gives me a minute to think about what I'm going to say, and organize it. Whereas just back and forth, sometimes it’s hard to come up with the words, and you stutter, and you pause. Whereas in typing you just put down what you want to say.

To summarize, the slower pace of the sessions seemed to encourage deeper reflection for some participants. However, for others, the slower pace appeared tedious and hampered self disclosure.

Convenience of Online Counseling

Several participants commented on the convenience of online counseling. This theme was especially relevant for Nancy, who lived in a rural setting:

I find myself wanting to do the web counseling more because it takes less time, and it takes less out of me. It’s easier to get on the computer than to get ready, go into town, park, find the office.

Rachel found that online counseling was potentially beneficial for those whom access to traditional services was limited. She hypothesized online counseling was especially helpful for, “People who can’t get to traditional counseling either because of disability or illness or a disorder.”

Relating from a Personal Space

Counseling via the Internet has the power to expand the sessions into different locations. Many participants found that interacting from a private, personal space was relaxing, while allowing for in vivo clinical opportunities. Pauline and the counseling intern embraced this opportunity and processed her feelings as they naturally occurred. Pauline further described that receiving counseling from her personal space was comfortable:

It actually made it very comfortable for me. I really liked it. I got up that morning and took a shower and was still in my robe, and my hair was wet, and I was able to sit down and have a counseling session. Whereas if I went to an office, I would be very concerned about my appearance, especially for that initial meeting. Making sure I was dressed appropriately, and I had my makeup done and my hair was done.

Similarly, when interacting from her home, Dianne was able to attend to family business:
I was telling her, because I was at home, I have an 18-month-old son. And at one time he was hanging on my leg and pulling me and she never knew that. And I've learned basically that I can tune him out, but had we been in person she would have been way distracted by him.

Concerning a shortcoming associated with interacting from home, Nancy reported, “Well it would be real easy to be distracted. Like, have the TV on, or, not taking this as serious as if you were sitting in a room one-on-one.” Although communicating from a personal space was seen as safe, and potentially offered unique clinical opportunities, distractions could occur, reducing the client’s full attention to the session.

**DISCUSSION**

As the Internet and computer technologies evolve, the counseling profession must continue to reflexively evaluate the role and scope of online counseling services. Our results represent experiences from a small analogue study, and it is important to recognize that our findings may not be transferable to clients seeking online services. Keeping this main limitation in mind, we discuss the implications for mental health counselors and counseling programs.

We identified several limitations that influenced the scope and transferability of the findings from this study. Primarily, the participants were graduate student volunteers who received course credit for their participation. Their perspectives may not fully represent the experiences of clients who seek online counseling. Given that the participants were graduate counseling students, they may have a positive bias toward counseling in general. In addition, because of the small nature of the sample, the results reported in this manuscript may not represent what others might experience. Further, one participant engaged in a marital counseling session while participating in this project. This activity allowed for comparison between the two modalities and may have affected how this participant discerned unique therapeutic benefits from different approaches. Finally, another participant had previously experienced counseling, and reported her previous experiences as unhelpful. Clearly this participant’s previous experiences and biases to counseling may have impacted her experience. Thus, it is essential that research continue to discern differences between personal variables, timing of interventions, and environmental factors when exploring online counseling. Future qualitative research may yield additional findings uncovered from clients who present in other settings and with other clinical issues.

Clinically and theoretically, online counseling parallels therapeutic writing or journaling in many respects. Similarities between the two
approaches include the reflective nature of writing and the use of written media as an intermediary for communication. A significant body of research (Campbell & Pennebaker, 2003; Penn, 2001; Pennebaker, 1997; Soper & Von Bergen, 2001; Ulrich, & Lutgendorf, 2002) has found that clinically focused writing helps clients with a variety of psychological and physical concerns. Specifically, Ulrich and Lutgendorf reported that clients improved when they wrote about both emotional and cognitive reactions to stress and trauma. In fact, participants who wrote about emotions only reported feeling worse over time. Within this framework, it would seem important that counselors ask clients to process both thoughts and emotions in online settings. Online counseling offers a unique forum for written interaction between a professional and client that can focus on the cognitive and emotional qualities of clinical issues. Future research could compare how journaling differs from online counseling.

With regard to our sample, problems with technology and the technical abilities of the participants were the most immediate and apparent barriers to establishing an online relationship. These issues may underscore the importance for counselors to provide several alternate means of communicating with their clients during technical failures. Furthermore, our findings illustrate that online counselors need to evaluate their client’s level of technical competence. Perhaps, as part of standard intake procedures, online counselors could provide an assessment of technical skills and offer self-paced online tutorials to educate potential clients about the process of Internet counseling.

Examining the dynamics of the online relationships, we found that some participants experienced a productive and supportive counseling relationship, while others did not. In analyzing the differences between participants, we speculate that online counseling may be helpful for individuals who are comfortable with technology and communicating via e-mail and chat rooms. Similarly, other researchers have reported discrepancies among clients regarding their attitudes of online counseling (Rochlen, Beretvas, & Zach, 2004). These authors found that individuals tended to rate face-to-face services more positively than online counseling, and women valued face-to-face counseling more favorably than men. Thus, counseling via text may offer a supportive, reflective experience for some, but may be limited in assisting clients who desire face-to-face relationships. Consistent with recommendations made by Rochlen et al., we recommend that future research focus on client variables, expectations, and values regarding perceptions of online counseling relationships.

Correspondingly, the Code of Ethics of the American Mental Health Counselor’s Association (AMHCA, 2000) requires that potential online counseling clients are aware of the limitations of online counseling,
assessed for their appropriates for services, and referred to local agencies when appropriate. Other ethical issues also emerge for clients when participating in online counseling services. For example, Young (2005) found that clients were concerned about the privacy of their counseling sessions and worried about being caught or having an actual full transcript of the counseling session intercepted. Thus, online counselors should clarify and discuss their privacy policies, and remain aware that clients may not believe their privacy is fully protected. As such, counselors should have access to local referral resources for their clients.

As to benefits, distance-based counseling approaches could prove helpful for home-bound people with disabilities, clients who relocate and want to remain in contact with their counselor, clients who travel, and those who live in rural areas. Having a counselor virtually sitting with them in their home or office opens possibilities for creating *in vivo* therapeutic opportunities for clients.

Another salient issue to consider in evaluating the feasibility of technologically facilitated counseling is its application within a diverse society (Barnett, 2005; Chester & Glass, 2006; Mallen, Vogel, & Rochlen, 2005). Chester and Glass found that many online counselors delivered services to clients from different cultural and regional settings, cautioning online counselors to be aware of local customs and practices. We recommend ongoing qualitative and quantitative discovery of themes and best practices for productively using Internet technology with heterogeneous groups. For example, disadvantaged members of the U.S. society experience limited access to affordable personal computers and Internet service. National reports indicate that individuals from economically disadvantaged backgrounds use computers and the Internet at lower rates than the majority population (United States Department of Commerce, 2002; 2004). Furthermore, Mallen et al. suggested that older individuals may not be familiar with current technologies and be less comfortable accessing online services. Given the potential for productive online counseling opportunities for clients and the goal of making broadband access more available, further research could explore how technology can be used to reach and empower individuals with economically and culturally diverse needs.

Technological advancements have the potential to profoundly impact the field, broadening its scope, practice, and range of creativity. With appropriate conditions in place, online counseling may show promise for providing a practical, therapeutic alternative or adjunctive resource to face-to-face counseling for some populations. As a result, a continuing need exists to examine client perceptions of this process.
REFERENCES


