The Use of Telepsychology in Clinical Practice: Benefits, Effectiveness, and Issues to Consider

Nicole Godine, Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, MD, USA
Jeffrey E. Barnett, Loyola University Maryland, Baltimore, MD, USA

ABSTRACT

The use of various technologies in the practice of psychology has increased greatly in recent years in concert with increases in the use of these technologies in the lives of most individuals. E-mail, text messaging, chat rooms, and the Internet have greatly changed how many individuals communicate and maintain relationships. The psychotherapy relationship is no exception. The scope and practice of telepsychology, the use of the Internet and other technologies in the provision of psychological services, is reviewed along with relevant research that supports their use in the treatment of a wide range of conditions and disorders. Clinical, ethical, and legal issues and challenges are addressed and recommendations for the effective and appropriate use of these technologies in psychological practice are provided.

Keywords: E-mail, Internet, Technology, Telehealth, Telepsychology

INTRODUCTION

The advent of the digital age and the ever-increasing number of advances in technology have affected the lives of Americans and the practices of psychologists in numerous ways. Many individuals now communicate wirelessly and almost instantaneously, accessing all kinds of information from almost anywhere in the world as a result of advances in the Internet, cell phones, and communication and information technology. Psychologists use these technological advances to enhance their professional lives, to improve the quality of care that patients receive, and even to provide mental health services directly to clients.

This paper provides a comprehensive review of the use of technology in psychology (termed “telepsychology”) for both practitioners and researchers alike. Topics include the defini-
tion of telepsychology and a discussion of how technology can be used in practice; additionally, the benefits and effectiveness of telepsychology are discussed, along with ethical, clinical, and legal issues that are important for both practice and research. The goals of this paper are twofold: 1) to provide an overview of the field of telepsychology, including definitions, a discussion of benefits, and a summary of recent empirical work in telepsychology; and 2) to point out major issues (ethical, clinical, and legal) for practitioners and researchers to consider in the use of telepsychology.

DEFINITIONS

The provision of health services through various technologies is termed “telehealth”, something Nickelson in 1996 describes as “the use of electronic information and communication technologies to provide and support health care when distance separates the participants” (p. 444). Telehealth can be divided into subcategories depending on the type of health service being provided. For instance, telemedicine, telepsychiatry, telehospice, and behavioral telehealth all fall under the broad category of telehealth (Kinsella, 2005; Nickelson, 1996; Shore, Brooks, Savin, Orton, Grigsby, & Manson, 2008).

Behavioral telehealth is probably the most applicable form of telehealth to the profession of psychology. Nickelson defines behavioral telehealth as “the application of any telehealth technology to the broad range of clinical, forensic, and educational behavioral services” (1996, p. 447). Yet, this definition may include psychological services provided at a distance, education on behavioral health, or almost anything to do with behavioral health, so for the purposes of this paper the term telepsychology is used. Telepsychology refers to the use of modern telecommunication and information technologies to provide and support mental health care when distance separates the participants.

TECHNOLOGIES USED IN PRACTICE

Mental health services can be delivered by e-mail, real-time chat, telephones, videoconferencing, cell phones, and websites (Grohol, 2003; Smith & Allison, 1998; Stamm, 2003; VandenBos & Williams, 2000). Synchronous modalities of communication, in which participants communicate in real time, include online chat, telephones, cell phones, and videoconferencing. Videoconferencing is a “technological procedure that allows individuals to see and hear each other on a computer monitor or video screen in real time” (Germain, Marchand, Bouchard, Drouin, & Guay, 2009, p. 42). It is different from real-time chat, telephone conversations, and cell phone conversations in that videoconferencing allows users to view and speak to each other in real time, whereas chat, telephones, and cell phones only allow the users to speak to each other (not view each other) in real time. Asynchronous forms of communication, in which there is a delayed response time, include e-mail, websites (which might be simply informational, or might offer contact with a mental health professional through e-mail), and text messaging via cell phones.

Historically, the telephone has been the most widely-used form of telepsychology. In fact, in professional practice it is considered an essential communications tool, and its use in practice is nearly universal (VandenBos & Williams, 2000). Its ubiquitous presence in America makes it an easily accessible means of communication and service provision between professional and client. As the use of the telephone for service provision became more and more popular, psychologists began looking at other modes of communication with the idea of expanding and enhancing service provision using new technologies (Maheu & Gordon, 2000). With these new technologies and means of communication, telepsychology began to take off at a speed paralleled only by the rapidity of new technological innovations.
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