

Article 14

Using Technology Creatively to Empower Diverse Populations in Counseling

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Abstract

There are many new technologies and ways that technology can be used with clients to enhance the counseling process (Jerome & Zaylor, 2000); however, there is very little research exploring the use of these technologies beyond distance counseling, computer mediated therapy, or Web therapy. This paper is intended to provide the reader with a basic guide to the new technologies and their uses to empower clients. Barriers, ethics, and techniques will be discussed.

In the field of counseling, the use of technology has been well documented; however, the focus has been primarily around Web-based or online counseling (Fukkink & Hermanns, 2009; Grohol, 1999; Hanley & Reynolds, 2009; Jerome & Zaylor, 2000; Kaplan, 1997; Lintvedt, Sørensen, Østvik, Verplanken, & Wang, 2008, Murdoch & Connor-Greene, 2000; Reimer-Reiss, 2000; Roy & Gillett, 2008) computer-mediated therapy (Ahmed & Boisvert, 2006; Kállay & Miclea, 2010), or distance counseling (Centore & Milacci, 2008; Mahler & Meier, 1993; McAdams & Wyatt, 2010; Riemer-Reiss, 2000). Conducting therapy in an online environment is an important application of technology to consider, but there are also many new technologies and ways that technology can be employed with clients to enhance the counseling process (Jerome & Zaylor, 2000). Counselors are well versed in utilizing technology for the purpose

of keeping records, scheduling and keeping track of appointments, and communicating with clients about scheduling. However, there has been little attention paid to the uses of technology in the one-on-one setting with clients as it relates to the client's goals, overall treatment plan, and how the client can maximize the benefit of therapy outside of the session. Additionally, there has been little attention paid to the use of technology when it comes to advocacy or social justice issues in counseling.

In the ever changing world of technology, counselors should examine the ways that new technologies can be applied to enhance the work they do (Castelnouvo, Gaggioli, Mantovani, & Riva, 2003). There are a plethora of opportunities to work with clients beyond the standard methods while using new and innovative tools that are readily available. In this article, we will focus on how interactive media and audio and visual technology can be used to help clients become empowered and also to engage in advocacy efforts. The Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) defines using interactive media as, "communication technologies to facilitate electronic communities, networks, and interactivity, and to encourage information sharing, collaboration, and creativity" (CDC, n.d.). These technologies often are already a part of the day to day world of the clients, particularly younger individuals. In order to maximize benefits to clients, practitioners should consider ways to make use of these technologies to facilitate change for clients and communities. However, with each new technological intervention, the ethical considerations need to be weighed carefully along with potential barriers.

Cultural Importance of Using New Technologies

The social world has changed. According to Johnson (2011, p. 10), "more than 500 million people are on Facebook, 200 million are on Twitter, and billions watch YouTube videos every day." Social engagement, emotional expression, and intimacy definitions have shifted with the expansion of our communication to social media formats. Our clients may have both online and offline friends that have enriched their social context. Clients' social groups have also expanded from the immediate community to global networks. They may attend online gatherings over leaving their homes. They may receive news via online newspapers, ezines, blogs, and social networking sites. Conversations and information sharing happen in an instant. There is no waiting for a TV program, newspaper, phone call, or meeting. According to Villagran (2011), clients and patients are more informed than they ever have been which leads them to be more likely to become engaged in therapy and move towards helpful solutions if they are approached with collaborative opportunities to use their voice. Not only will they always have more knowledge about their context than counselors will, but they also will likely have already gathered information regarding their symptoms and possible diagnoses and treatments (Hanley, 2011). Additionally, no matter what format is used or how useful the communication or therapeutic tool is, it will only work for the client if it is adapted to meet them as a person and is responsive to their therapeutic needs.

As counselors, it is imperative to match our skills and competencies to embrace the new social context of our clients, not only as individuals, but also as members of a global community. While perhaps many counselors would argue that technology has impacted relationships negatively by putting machines in between people, thus necessitating a level of distance, the reality is that many relationships today are built and

maintained via interactive media such as the Internet, cell phone, or text message (Nunez, 2009). If counseling is concerned with relationships, then counseling must be concerned with how technology facilitates relationships.

In order to more fully engage the whole client, counselors must include in their work an understanding of not just the client's whole social world, but also the institutions with which the client interacts. Modern technologies give individuals more access to these institutions, and therefore counselors can engage interactive media as a means to help clients become empowered. Certain technologies make it more possible than ever to advocate "with" our clients or for clients to advocate for themselves, as suggested in the American Counseling Association (ACA) Advocacy Competencies (Lewis, Arnold, House, & Toporek, 2003). As Johnson (2011) stated, it is essential for counselors to increase their technological skills, or evolve as the population does, or our skills could become outdated in the modern culture. Villagran (2011) noted that there has been an increase in interactive technology and media tools that can be used to allow clients to connect to others struggling with similar issues and to allow clients to asynchronously communicate with counselors and/or clinicians. This may provide specific benefit to members of marginalized or disenfranchised groups, especially when they are disconnected from their communities, or in the case of multiple identities that are marginalized or oppressed, when members of a particular group have few within their local community who also hold a similar second identity (e.g., Asian and Gay). Using interactive media with marginalized or disenfranchised populations may allow them to connect to others in ways they may not have been able to face-to-face (Hanley, 2011). Villagran noted that though many from disenfranchised populations may have limited access to some technologies, there are some interactive media that can be promising when doing research, such as social media networks, microblogging (Twitter), mobile applications (Apps), online support networks, and blogs. The use of these technologies may extend beyond the parameters of research to also be useful in fostering therapeutic interactions in counseling.

To examine the ways that interactive media can be employed with marginalized or oppressed groups, this article uses a feminist, multicultural, social justice perspective. To this end, we have used some of the goals and interventions of feminist therapy to organize our interventions. Specifically we will be considering the ways technology can be used to help clients become empowered, in one-on-one interventions and to help clients advocate for themselves and others with similar concerns through utilizing interactive media.

Empowerment, Access, and Participation

Counselors should foster empowerment as a therapeutic goal both within direct and indirect services, with the ultimate goal of encouraging growth and developing strengths, knowledge, and abilities for increasing numbers of clientele, to the point that they do not require the assistance or guidance of a counselor or other comparable service provider. Empowerment is the course of action by which individuals, groups, and broader systems that are comparatively powerless, disenfranchised, or marginalized (a) increase awareness of the power dynamics at work in their life context, including institutional and social barriers, (b) develop the skills and capacity for gaining some reasonable control

over their lives and life context, given the constraints of their environments, (c) recognize areas in their lives where they can begin to exercise individual control as well as areas where they need to begin building allied support to confront institutional barriers, (d) do the above without infringing on the rights or freedoms of others, (e) while actively supporting, encouraging, and developing the empowerment of others in the community (Toporek, Lewis, & Crethar, 2009).

When developing approaches to help our clientele become more empowered, there are two key constructs of social justice in which counselors should focus: equitable access and equitable participation. Equity is the fair distribution of resources, rights and responsibilities to all members of society (Crethar, Torres Rivera, & Nash, 2008). Access is the ability for individuals, family systems, and broader societal systems to make use of services, resources, information, power, and knowledge critical to community and self-determination and healthy development at all levels (Crethar et al., 2008). This principle is based on the belief that society is just, only when all of its members have *equitable opportunity to succeed*. People within marginalized groups often experience systemic barriers that systematically undercut their ability to access the resources, knowledge, services, and power that would allow them greater control over their lives. Seeking ways to help clients become more empowered, counselors should focus their energy in helping individuals develop awareness, knowledge, and abilities necessary to access various forms of technology that improve their overall wellness.

Participation refers to the right and ability of all people in society to be consulted on and contribute to decisions that impact their lives as well as the lives of other people in their systems and contexts (Crethar et al., 2008). When individuals are denied the opportunity to participate in policy that affects them, it lessens the likelihood that human service agencies will take into account the cultural outlooks, perspectives, and contextual challenges that exemplify the lives of people these agencies purport to serve. As counselors work with clients on increasing equitable access to technologies, they can also gain more equitable participation in their contexts and systems with a louder voice.

Theory

In this article, the authors have chosen a feminist, multicultural, social justice perspective to frame the discussion of creating empowerment for those whose voices are limited in the dominant culture. While technology could be incorporated into any theoretical framework in working with the clients, the authors believe that the potential for technology to promote the empowerment of marginalized, oppressed, or disenfranchised clients is worth noting. Specifically, technology provides a means for clients and counselors to engage in advocacy work on multiple levels at a fairly low financial cost, and this can be particularly empowering for clients who encounter difficulties in using more traditional means of advocacy. Additionally, technology can improve the ease of interventions and also help clients to be more engaged in the process in interventions such as bibliotherapy or homework, which can help empower clients to be in charge of their own healing process.

Feminist theory fits well with working with multicultural populations because of the social justice nature of feminist theory. There are many types of feminist theory, however, most share common principles (Corey, 2008). In this article, we borrow heavily

from a socialist feminist viewpoint for two reasons. First is that while socialist feminist theory is concerned with gender, it does not hold gender as the only important identity, nor does it argue that patriarchy is the sole source of power (Corey, 2008). Here we apply feminism as a framework for looking at power differentials, oppression, privilege, and how social justice ties directly to individual's struggles. Secondly, socialist feminist theory is concerned with transforming institutions of power and relationships to provide more equitable access and participation by all members (Corey, 2008). The level of advocacy will vary based on the client's interest in participating as well as how these systemic issues relate to their difficulties; however, they can provide opportunities for empowerment when appropriate. Additionally, advocacy work on a systemic level is also important to the role of the counselor because it has the potential to lessen suffering of entire populations, not just individuals or small groups.

A main goal of feminist theory is to help clients become empowered in tackling their difficulties (Corey, 2008). Feminist therapists strive to be aware of power differentials not only between therapist and client, but also to help clients understand the ways power and oppression have affected them in their lives and how they relate to their struggles. Another goal of feminist therapy is to help clients to engage and alter the power differentials in their social relationships and in their interaction with institutions (Corey, 2008). When using technology, it is important to consider the ways in which clients can engage with the power structures in their lives. Voice is a huge component of power, and technology can lend access to polyvocal spaces, help one develop voice, and level the playing field with institutions of power. An important consideration, however, is to ensure that when technology is integrated into the counseling process that clients do not lose power in the relationship. This could happen if individuals do not have access to technologies, if the cost of doing so adds burden, or if their skill level places them at a disadvantage. In any of these situations, counselors should devise interventions that ameliorate these challenges. From a feminist, multicultural, social justice lens, we will discuss potential barriers, ethical considerations, the intake process, and provide some concrete examples of how technology can be used to empower individuals.

Addressing Barriers

Prior to using technology with clients, it is important to review potential barriers for clients. While technology is readily available for many clients, some clients may have issues with access. Technology can be expensive, and for some clients, things like Internet access and home computers are not a reality. While some clients may have access to public libraries or other sources, it is also important to consider those who live in rural settings or clients who may be unable to expend the time and energy required to access public sources because of work, childcare, or other reasons. When assessing for access to technology, it is important to not assume that clients have access and to ask questions in ways that do not convey that one "should" have access. In addition to having access, it is also important to glean whether or not the individual has privacy in their use of technologies, particularly in interactive medias. For example, in abusive relationships, utilizing technology may actually put the individual at risk if they are seeking out support or advocating for themselves in a forum that is monitored by the abuser. While children or adolescents may also be monitored in their use of technology by their caregivers, this

may or may not be a barrier to certain uses. In any event, the specifics of each situation should be discussed and understood prior to using such interventions.

While we know that generally younger generations are becoming more well-versed in technology, for older generations, sometimes the use of technology can actually cause feelings of disempowerment if they lack skills or understanding. Individuals may feel embarrassed about what they don't know, so assessing for the client's level of skill or knowledge needs to be done in a compassionate manner. Additionally, in the case where the client may need assistance to understand or use specific technology, counselors can consider ways to integrate it more into the actual sessions rather than have clients working on their own outside of sessions. This will allow clients to gain skills they did not have previously that may benefit them in other areas of their life, such as work and their social life.

It is also important to determine if any accommodations are needed for the client in the use of technologies. Again the client should be made to feel comfortable discussing these issues with the counselor, and therefore the rapport between the counselor and individual may be especially important when assessing for particular barriers to using technologies. Making accommodations accessible to clients and openly discussing these options with all clients is imperative.

Additionally, counselor competence with technology is an important issue and could be the source of barriers to effective use of technology within the therapeutic relationship. While most counselors must use certain forms of technology to conduct their business, counselors may feel behind the times when it comes to new developments in technology, such as using social media. This may be especially true when working with youth, as they generally tend to adapt more quickly to technological changes. It is important that counselors do not rely on clients to teach them to make use of particular technologies, but that they are prepared to use them before bringing these interventions into the session. To not do so could impact the client's perception of the counselor's ability to help them through their difficulties. Additionally, it is important that counselors' skills in using technology do not so far outpace the client that it increases the hierarchy between client and counselor. As with any intervention, counselors should be aware of the power differentials and be prepared to address them as necessary.

Interactive media and technology will only be as useful to the client if they are able to engage with the counselor. Creative techniques can create a window to the client's unconscious that may not be as quickly available through talk-based counseling alone (Nunez, 2009). This may create a pace in counseling that may feel uncomfortable for a client (Hunberger, 1984). Technology should not be the focus of the therapy, but should elevate the experience of interventions or create connections through distance that would not be possible otherwise (Castelnuovo et al., 2003; Grohol, 1999; Maheu & Gordon, 2000). Technology can also lead to distance between the therapist and client. The therapeutic relationship needs to be strong with a high level of trust already created with the client before engaging in interactive media techniques or before citing and interpreting information received from them (Hanley, 2011). Counselors must measure the client's readiness for the depth that could be created using these interventions. In addition to the barriers mentioned here, there are also ethical considerations which counselors should consider when using technological interventions.

Ethics

Barnett and Scheetz (2003) stated that the documentation of ethics codes and legal statutes has fallen behind technological growth. In this article we will specifically address the ethics of potential uses of technology in therapeutic interventions. We will also discuss the ethical codes that are applicable to the use of technology in counseling in general. Here are some specific ethics codes that are particularly relevant (ACA, 2005).

A.2.a. Informed Consent: Counselors need to always ensure the client determines the level of involvement they have with technology in counseling. Counselors who intend to use technology regularly may want to include some language about this in their informed consent documents.

A.1.d. Support Network Involvement: Counselors should consider how technology may be employed to enhance the inclusion of a client's support network. When the client's primary supports are not located nearby, technology may bring access that would otherwise be impossible. When the client's cultural identity includes an invisible status (e.g., LGBTQ or certain disabilities), online communities may be the primary source of support for a client related to that particular identity.

A.4.a. Avoiding Harm: Counselors should consider potential negative outcomes of the use of technology and minimize the use of technology where clients are at risk of being harmed. This is particularly important when considering online use for children and adolescents, though it applies to all clients.

A.6.b. Confidentiality and Advocacy: Counselors need to ensure that any advocacy efforts, especially those that utilize technology to connect to a broader social community, are done with the client's understanding and consent and limit the potential for breaking confidentiality.

B.1.c. Confidentiality: This is probably the most important ethics code to consider when utilizing technology because of the possibility for information to be seen by others, particularly in using the Internet and a computer. Clients and counselors should discuss the limits of any technological intervention when it comes to maintaining their confidential information. When clients choose to use social media or other technological interventions in counseling, clients should be encouraged to only share what they feel comfortable sharing and to limit what they share where appropriate.

A.12. Technology Applications: This section of the ethics code contains specific information about how counselors may intervene using technology. While the focus of this section is on distance online or web-based counseling and maintaining electronic records, counselors should familiarize themselves with this section in order to think ethically about any use of technology in counseling.

Other ethical considerations: While not specifically addressed in the ethics code, using certain technologies in counseling requires the counselor to specifically lay out what their professional boundaries will be with each new technology with the client. Specifically, some technologies can increase the client's access to the counselor if the counselor engages in the technologies outside of the scheduled appointment with the client. While there are times where this may be a powerful intervention, counselors are warned against opening the lines of communication too much.

Creative and Empowering Technological Interventions

Intake Assessments

In order to use interactive media with clients, the first step is to gain an understanding of the client's current use, access, knowledge, and skills. In typical intake assessments done by most agencies, technology is not an area that is included. However, gathering this information can help to gain a fuller picture of the client's world. Assessing for the client's skill level and current use of technology can also provide the counselor with valuable information about how technology can be included in treatment planning. The authors believe the following questions would be helpful in any intake assessment, and that there are some questions that may be beneficial to ask clients belonging to specific populations. Counselors can determine whether some questions could be added to intake forms or if they are questions to keep in mind during initial intake interviews with clients. The methods of intake vary from setting to setting, and counselors should take time to consider how best to integrate assessment into their process.

Sample questions for intake assessment:

What are the types of social media you use? (Facebook, MySpace, Goodreads, Twitter, etc.)

How much time do you spend on the computer in a typical week?

Do you have access to a computer in your home?

Do you have access to the internet?

What types of technology do you use for entertainment? (e.g., video, audio, YouTube, Netflix, Hulu)

How do you maintain your privacy in your use of technologies?

Who do you socialize with in an online format only?

What steps do you take to stay safe online?

Does anyone monitor your use of the computer?

How would you describe your comfort level with using the computer?

How would you describe your skills for using technology?

Is there anyone who helps you when you encounter an unfamiliar area of technology or a problem?

How do you typically feel when using the computer or going online?

Bibliotherapy

Bibliotherapy is a particularly useful intervention tool to help clients gain knowledge and awareness around their difficulties and to promote healing (Allen et al., 2012). Two resources that can be used to make bibliotherapy more interactive and accessible for the client are Goodreads and devices or mobile applications such as Nook or Kindle. Goodreads is a social media Web site that allows individuals to track what they are reading, recommend books to one another, and to make comments on what they have read. Counselors could maintain an account where they share resources with a

particular client; however, they would want to be careful to sign up in a way that maintains the client's confidentiality. Also if the counselor has multiple clients using something like Goodreads, then the counselor may want to have multiple accounts, and not mix those accounts with ones where they also have personal contacts. If the counselor does have a single account this way, it would be important to consider how to address this with the client to ensure informed consent and appropriate boundaries.

Nook and Kindle (either the device or mobile application) allow for individuals to access reading materials without going to a store and purchasing a book. Often books are also cheaper on these applications, making them more accessible. In addition to using books for bibliotherapy, counselors can find and share useful Web sites with clients, where information may be more easily digestible. A caveat to consider is for the therapist to carefully investigate the sources for such sites to ensure the quality of the information clients are gaining access to.

Audio Devices

Counselors may want to consider ways to use audio devices such as MP3 players in their work with clients. While counselors in training commonly use audio and video recording to gain supervision and to evaluate their work, clients are not often encouraged to make recordings of their sessions. However, there may be specific ways that doing so could benefit clients. For example, the counselor and client could record specific sections of their work together so that clients could have access to them outside of the sessions. For example, you may work with clients on a strengths building exercise that they could listen to outside of the session. Another example might be if you use any sort of guided imagery or relaxation exercises with clients; if clients record it, they would have access to it outside of the session for their personal use.

Visual Images

Pictures, portraits, drawings, and even video give clients a visual media that is a metaphor for their struggles, life, and identity. Visual media and self portraits allow them to define the self by separating the image from what we perceive as positive and negative to allow for future healing (Hunberger, 1984; Nunez, 2009). Flickr, Photobucket, Instagram, YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook are full of both true and metaphorical self portraits that individuals choose to represent their identity. The images represent how the individual is, would like to be, or would not like to be. The venues listed above allow the user to receive feedback on these images and connect to others who have similar self-representations.

The uses for visual images to create empowerment in therapy are endless. A striking example is in the use of photos to represent a clients struggle to see the truth in their identity as a part of the overall culture. Many writers discuss the power of bringing images into the therapy room and sharing them with the counselor. However, imagine the potential for healing if the images were prescribed to create therapeutic impact. Imagine the impact images could have for a woman with anorexia who received feedback on a photo on a photo share Web site or who could see her true size for the first time in a image of just a small section of her arm or leg while receiving feedback from others in the online community. The therapeutic impact of the use of images in therapy to create empowerment and a stronger sense of self are endless.

Wikipedia and Web Sites

Some technologies give access to polyvocal information or allow users to shape information in a way that can be cathartic for clients. An example of this would be in using tools like Wikipedia or Urban Dictionary or creating Web sites, where information can be shaped by users. This is particularly important for populations such as Intersex, Genderqueer, or Transgender individuals, who can influence the ways their identities are understood from the inside to dispel common myths. Correcting misunderstanding and definitions can be a particularly powerful way to shape and define one's own human experience for marginalized populations.

In addition to shaping information, individuals now also can use the Internet to shape policy, put pressure on corporations to change practices, or to create visibility. The possibilities for these are endless, but sites such as www.care2.com, www.facebook.com, www.change.org, or creating one's own Web site, allow opportunities for counselors to work with clients in creating systemic change that will empower clients and potentially change their lived experiences.

Blogs

Therapeutic writing has long been discussed as a viable form of intervention in therapy (Thompson, 2004; Wright & Chung, 2001). Murray and Segal's (1994) research suggested that the emotional and intellectual catharsis felt in face-to-face communication was similar to that felt after written communication. Historically, these interventions have taken the form of daily journals and/or creative writing. With a blog, individuals are able to write out their thoughts, emotions, and opinions to make connections and achieve catharsis; but they are also able to share the finished product with the online community. Anthony (2004) noted the power of clients being able to share journal entries and to be able to receive feedback from individuals from the online community. Another positive of blogs is that they are free and there are several different venues available (e.g., www.blogger.com, www.livejournal.com, www.wordpress.com). Individuals can even microblog in 140 characters or less at www.twitter.com.

Blogs offer many therapeutic opportunities. The simplest assignment to start with is simply reading a client's blog if they offer, and providing encouragement in the session, or, if granted permission, providing feedback on the blog (Anthony, 2004). The client leaves this exchange feeling cared about, even between sessions. This also gives the therapist opportunity to alter future assignments to increase the connection of the individual to that portion of the online community while increasing empowerment. Any additional feedback from other readers of the blog can be used to enhance the therapeutic environment when in face-to-face sessions.

Conclusion

The research on the use of current social technology in counseling practice has been limited in scope to this point. There are many ways that new technologies could be employed to promote client empowerment, facilitate healing, and to allow for greater connection in the therapeutic relationship and outside of it. This article focused on a few ways that technology could be used in a therapeutic setting and the ethical considerations in doing so. While interactive medias could be used with any group, the authors believe

that technological interventions could provide even added benefit for use with marginalized or oppressed groups. The authors encourage counselors to begin to delve more deeply into the use of technology and to investigate the efficacy of such approaches in research.

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