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Article 66

Face-to-Face Supervision of Online Counselors: Supervisor Perspectives

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Many people seek professional help online (Fox, 2006; Horrigan, 2001). As the demand for Internet counseling grows, supervisors may work with counselors who provide online counseling. In fact, numerous counselors currently offer online counseling services and have been doing so for nearly a decade (DuBois, 2004; Sampson, Kolodinsky, & Greeno, 1997). To respond to this new medium for clinical practice, the American Counseling Association established procedures for distance counseling in the 2005 *Code of Ethics* (ACA, 2005), and has been at the forefront of identifying issues and best practices for cybercounseling and learning (Bloom & Walz, 2005). However, there is a lack of research to guide clinical supervisors about overseeing online practice. As such, there is a clear need for investigation into this supervision modality. Thus, this article explores the experiences of two counselor supervisors who oversaw the online counseling work of graduate counseling interns.

Brief Review of Online Counseling Services

Clinical Applications of Online Counseling

Despite some concerns about the clinical appropriateness of online counseling, the Internet has become a potent counseling medium (Cook & Doyle, 2002; Leibert, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006). In fact, the number of online counseling providers has traditionally been expected to steadily rise (DuBois, 2004; Sampson et al., 1997). Online counseling has helped clients with mood, eating and psychosomatic issues (Strom, Pettersson, & Andersson, 2000; Strom, Pettersson, & Andersson, 2004; Tate, Wing, & Winett, 2001; Zabinski, Celio, Wilfley, & Taylor, 2003; Zabinski et al., 2001). Furthermore, authors found that the pace of the online sessions and a counselor's lack of

access to their client's nonverbal language created ambiguity in sessions and required a different set of counseling skills (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008). As broadband technologies become commonplace and streaming video and audio evolve, (U.S. Department of Commerce, 2004) online counseling services may be best delivered via multimedia and text based technologies. As clients and counselors begin to communicate via streaming video and audio, some of the limitations of text only communication may be alleviated.

Standards and Ethics

Over the past decade, the counseling profession has been a leader in establishing certifications and ethical guidelines for online counseling practice (ACA, 2005; Center for Credentialing and Education [CCE], 2010). For example, the DCC is a national certification that professional counselors can earn to demonstrate core distance counseling competencies (CCE, 2010). Nevertheless, ethical and legal issues may continue to complicate counseling delivered at a distance. For example, each state has counselor legislation and practice acts that determine the scope and activities of professional counselors. There is considerable variation among state counseling boards with respect to the legal practice of online counseling (Haberstroh, 2009). Once the legality of online counseling is verified, ethics require counselors screen potential online clients for appropriateness related to their technical, emotional, and cognitive capacities for online counseling (ACA, 2005). Supervisors should be informed about the relevant legal and ethical codes in their state of practice. Supervisors should also evaluate their supervisee's online work via ethical codes and online practice recommendations (ACA, 2005; Haberstroh, 2009).

Given that supervision strategies for online counselors are in their infancy, much research is needed to guide supervisors in their work related to overseeing online practice. Furthermore, there is little literature to guide supervisors in this supervision modality. Thus, the purpose of this study was to report about the experiences of supervisors who provided face-to-face supervision for online counselors. To explore the perceptions related to this experience, we designed this study to answer the question (Creswell, 2007), "What is the experience of supervising online counselors?"

Method

This study explored the experiences of two supervisors who agreed to participate as clinical supervisors for online counseling interns. The data collection, analysis, and reporting strategies used descriptive phenomenology as the guiding theoretical framework (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). Accordingly, we sought to understand the participant's experiences and present them in a way to accurately communicate their meaning and essence (Moustakas, 1994). The work of Choudhuri, Glauser and Peregoy (2004) guided the organization of this manuscript.

Participants and Setting

One 39-year-old Caucasian male and one 52-year-old Caucasian female supervisor participated in this study. Each supervisor was an independently licensed counseling practitioner and was experienced and academically trained in clinical

supervision. Both participants worked at a mental health and substance abuse treatment agency located in a medium sized urban community in the southwestern United States. After discussing the project and answering any questions, the supervisors signed an IRB approved consent form to participate in this qualitative study. The participants were identified by the pseudonyms Lucy and Jack, and they agreed to facilitate weekly individual face-to-face supervision for master's level counselor interns working as online counselors.

The counselor interns were advanced master's students who received optional course credit for providing five online individual counseling sessions to volunteer clients via secure chat rooms. The counselor interns agreed to participate in a research study about their experiences related to facilitating online counseling (Haberstroh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan-Fleming, & Gee, 2008). Similarly, the volunteer clients were incoming graduate students who elected to receive personal growth and wellness online counseling for extra credit in an introduction to counseling course. They also agreed to participate in a study about their experiences as reported in Haberstroh, Duffey, Evans, Gee, & Trepal, 2007.

For this project, WebCt software housed a password-protected website. The counselor interns each had their own WebCt counseling site. On this website, counselors and clients were identified by their first names and last initial, and no other personal or identifying data was stored online. Furthermore, prior to beginning this project, both counselors and clients signed consent and release forms that explained the purpose, scope and limitations of this project. In addition, to avoid dual relationships between counselors and clients, the counselors and clients verified they did not know each other personally or as fellow students. Finally, the counselors agreed to meet with their assigned supervisors for weekly supervision sessions specifically for the online counseling project.

Procedures

Data collection. A structured interview form was developed to inquire about the participant's supervision experiences (Patton, 2002). The form included a general question asking, "What has been your experience with supervising online counseling?" Other questions on the form prompted discussion about the counselor's clinical skills, comparisons of supervision of online counseling to traditional counseling, and ethical or procedural issues and observations. The interviews were recorded the sessions on digital video tape and transcribed using a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet. The tapes and data in were held in secure private storage.

Coding and triangulation procedures. We followed Moustakas' approach to analyze phenomenological data. First, the data was organized into clusters of meaning. After further analysis, the codes evolved into textural and structural descriptions of the experience of supervising online counselors. In qualitative studies, scholars recommended researchers provide readers with an overview of the data analysis process (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002). To encourage accuracy and transparency in qualitative research, several triangulation strategies were employed (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002). Specifically, a qualified external auditor reviewed the anonymous transcripts, codes, and materials used in this study (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002). In addition, the participants were invited to review the coding of their responses and offer feedback and clarification about the findings. Finally, field notes were used during the

study to document themes and categories as they emerged (Choudhuri et al., 2004; Patton, 2002).

Results

Expectations, Surprise, and Transformation

Lucy approached the project with some hesitation but reported experiencing a transformation as a result of her participation. She shared:

I went in with a lot of doubts because of my inexperience, because of my questions about the whole nonverbal mechanical sort of thing. I think those have abated a great deal. The experience was a lot more positive than I would have anticipated. It's kind of like I got my hoped for self instead of my feared self. And that's really neat. It's fascinating; I'd like to do some more of this. I don't know if I want to be the therapist though. It would be interesting for me to see how I compensate in real intuitive affective things.

In contrast, Jack noticed online counseling supervision was not quite as different as expected. He reported, "My experience being a supervisor was not much different than a face-to-face counseling, because the client was not there either way. When I supervise other counselors, the client's not there." Each of these supervisors may have expected different kinds of experiences and, perhaps, their initial concerns were abated to some extent. As we explored their experiences further, it appeared that the personal characteristics and skills of their supervisees were critical in their evaluation of the supervisees.

Supervisee Characteristics

Not surprisingly, personal qualities and empathic capabilities of the online counselors were central in the supervisory sessions. Both Lucy and Jack commented that their supervisees communicated these qualities in session and in the supervisory relationship. Describing optimal online counselor attributes, Jack shared:

It would be the same as any other medium, someone who genuinely cares. Somebody who can see through what is going on with the client, and not having their own needs met in the relationship with the client. Someone who can be in the muck with the client versus someone who is a step above or a step up.

Jack outlined that an effective online counselor should be able to empathize and relate to the client, practice within ethical boundaries, and provide needed insight and solutions for a client's situation. Likewise, Lucy shared that maturity, stability, and a strong sense of ethics were evident in her supervisee. She indicated that these qualities helped facilitate effective online counseling and clinical supervision. She recalled:

It's been extremely positive partly because I feel like Beverly [pseudonym] and I have been such a good match. I'm disappointed that I didn't have at least one other that I could compare. She and I have so many similarities that it was very easy to do all kinds of questions with. She's

also experienced enough and thoughtful enough to where she brought up questions herself, which was really helpful. Because I've never done anything online myself as client, as a therapist, as a supervisor, or anything. She had observations of her own about that experience that were really helpful and again, I don't know if I had had another student that was very different from her that the experience would have been different. But I think the fact that she's mature and stable and all those good things probably made the whole experience for me and her and probably the client really a notch above what I kind of went in expecting.

These reports from the supervisors underscore the necessity for online counselors to be self-reflective, mature, and caring about their clients. With these factors in place, the supervisors in this study were seemingly encouraged that good care was being delivered online.

Supervisee Counseling Skills

In many ways, these counselors were pioneering the process of online counseling with the oversight of experienced counselor supervisors. As such, the supervisors were able to discern which kinds of skills seemed to work best online, and could compare their supervisee's performance with others under their guidance. Specifically, Jack was able to evaluate two of his supervisee-participants. From their transcript responses, he analyzed the level of empathy and clinical effectiveness of each supervisee. He recalled:

The quality of one counselor's sessions compared to the other counselors sessions, just in the transcripts that they presented, I could tell that one of them was certainly much more engaged or much more invested in what she was doing in trying to help her patient. Either that or she had much, much better skills than the other counselor that I supervised. One of the counselors that I supervised, it was really enjoyable working with her, because the quality of her responses to the patient online. Open-ended questions, really on target, it seemed like, because the client responded in such a way that it seemed that she was really hitting the point. I guess she empathized is what I'm trying to say. It seemed that as if she was truly empathizing, in print. And it seemed to flow more naturally than the other one.

Clearly, Jack evaluated one supervisee-participant as being more empathic and invested than his other supervisee-participant. We detailed the specific factors and elements that distinguished these two supervisees from each other:

One counselor seemed to be holding true to reflective counseling. Open-ended questions, reflecting content, reflecting affect, reflecting behavior, cognitions. While the other counselor was carrying on more of a conversation [suggesting an informal conversation with her client]. Then again, that might be related to counselor skill. However, the counselor that seemed to be just carrying a conversation, if I remember correctly, has been working in the field for a long time, and that might just be poor habits. With the other, I don't know how long she has been working in the field, but she was just more conscientious about her technique.

Jack's observations underscored the assumption that online counselors can communicate empathy through text counseling, but they must be conscientious about how they phrase their responses. A conclusion can be drawn that counselors who are mature, empathic and are skilled at writing their perceptions may have an aptitude for this type of work. Further, when counseling online, professionals should approach these relationships with some formality and with skills they learned in graduate counselor training.

Ethics Related to Online Counseling

Effective ethical practice of online counseling occurred when counselor-participants recognized both the general and situational ethics of their practice. Jack discussed the transferability of standard ethical practice into the online environment, and he believed the general ethical principles for counseling were applicable to this format:

I would say that one of the most important things would be the ethical, the five guiding principles in understanding the total ethical ramifications of being an online counselor because it is so new. Just the guiding principles in general, do no harm, do good, no dual relationships. But just that stuff would be important just knowing the ethical standards for that... Fidelity, doing what you say you're going to do, and responsibility.

Jack was conscious of establishing standards of care to online counseling because of the novelty of this modality. He suggested that beneficence, fidelity, and non-maleficence (ACA, 2005) would serve as guidelines for evaluating online practice.

Absence of Body Language and Nonverbal Expression

Both supervisors discussed their reactions to supervising counselors who related to their clients in a nonverbal environment. Jack noticed the absence of nonverbal and body language was not as critical to the therapeutic process as some would assume:

I think for counselors who aren't as skilled, I think they probably do miss [wish for] a lot of that [nonverbal data]. Like Sandra, it was more of a chit-chat. I think that probably counselors who aren't as skilled try to rely on nonverbals [sic] more to see what's going on. I think nonverbal is a very important part. I don't think it was as critical to the process as some would think.

Lucy agreed and reported:

It's not as impersonal as you would have assumed and that to me is a big, big shift. I assumed an impersonal basis to this and I found that you could overcome that, which is really neat. It's going to be interesting to see how those of us who are a little older adapt and how quickly all the people who are younger than us are just going to pass us by just immeasurably.

These supervisors found that online counseling could be facilitated in a personal and meaningful way. However, Lucy did wonder how she would accommodate her style to online work:

Again, I rely a lot on nonverbals for me to do the therapy end of things. By computer, I would have to be tracking language. I know that if I form a

therapeutic alliance over time, I start hearing certain language from my clients. Because of what I stress in terms of interventions, I'd have to be very careful to track that, but as a clinician or supervisor are you going to read all those transcripts, if you are doing this for a living? We'd have lost for me probably close to 30% of what I felt was my effectiveness. I tend to be intuitive, feelings based, I read body language better than most, and I count on that as part of the process for me. I think probably what would have happened is we'd have had to find a way to include those sorts of things that Beverly [supervisee] did with a client. A way of saying, "Wait, I'm thinking. What do you mean by that?"

Lucy believed she would have lost "30%" of her effectiveness in the online environment and would have had to compensate for this liability. Lucy further suggested the use of software to aid the clinician identify key phrases from the client's text.

Discussion

Counselors and supervisors have considerable opportunities to incorporate communication technologies in their clinical practice. However, procedural, ethical and clinical oversight is critical to the effective delivery of professional online counseling. This article explored the perspectives of two supervisors during their first experience with supervising online counseling. During this project, they shared insights about how effective online counseling was delivered. Specifically, online counselor's personal and relational developmental levels combined with skillfulness in communicating empathy and understanding via chat seemed to define effective online counseling.

Implications for Supervision Practice

Several implications emerged from this study. Supervisors who work with online counselors in face-to-face settings should facilitate counselor's empathy, clinical skill effectiveness, and responding abilities. It would be important to read transcripts and look for relational connections between the client and counselor. It is also important for counselors to communicate a relationship that is warm and professional rather than conversational. Communicating these therapeutic aspects in writing requires special skills, but it appears empathy can be translated online. Supervisors must also assess counselor's work in context; informal conversations may be of value in context if there is therapeutic value in the connections made. Supervising online counselors, particularly when reviewing transcripts, was not entirely different from supervising counselors who provided face to face counseling. However, providing online counseling might present new challenges for skills for the counselor. It is important for supervisors to assess how online counselors (a) communicate empathy, (b) understand their client's story, (c) respond to challenges, and (d) evaluate their own effectiveness.

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