

Care and Counselling in Virtual Spaces

*This is an excerpt from the interview exploring “Digital technologies in the counselling professions: the past, present and future” with Dr. Terry Hanley¹, moderated by Dr. Zehra Erşahin².

** The interview is available at <https://youtu.be/9zx2kJObn68>. Please be mindful of sharing the link, as the video is restricted only to the attendees of the Seminar.

Zehra: Good Afternoon everyone. This is Dr Erşahin, the clinical lead of the Spiritual Care and Counselling Department at the Social Sciences University of Ankara.

We welcome you to the SIPCC's 32nd International seminar on intercultural and inter-religious pastoral care and counselling. The lecture of today is about our experiences of care and counselling in virtual spaces. And we have a pioneering figure in integrating technology into counselling practice in the UK.

We welcome Dr Hanley, who is the Associate Director of Research (impact) for the School of Environment, Education and Development and a Reader in Counselling Psychology within the Manchester Institute for Education. It's an honour to have him here with us, not only for his expertise but also as a colleague and everlasting supervisor of mine. Thank you for joining us Terry.

Terry: Well, thank you for having me.

Zehra: So, today's lecture will be about whether, and to what extent the concept of virtual spaces could help us in making room for superdiversity in care and counselling. I'd like to start with asking what really brought you to the online counselling area, why did you get interested in online counselling?

Terry: Yeah, that's a good question. Particularly as my background; so my background was working as a counsellor and a psychotherapist with children and young people, and lots of my work was very creative.

So, it involved using artwork or kind of play in some ways to engage people in therapeutic conversations. So, the idea of doing it all online or using technology seemed a little bit strange. And what happened in the organization I worked for was that someone mentioned,

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technology, young people and mental health in the same funding application. And for some reason I was asked to develop an online counselling centre. So it all happened a bit accidentally.

Terry: And I wasn't very interested in, particularly to start with. And so, and it didn't fit with my understanding of therapy. So, I had to fix the chip and try to understand it more. I spent a lot of time just chatting to people online before offering any therapy, just to understand what this world was like.

And in the end, I guess two things happened. One was that I developed, lots of relationships with people that were kind of quite deep. So, we had some very interesting conversations. And then the organization, the young people in the organization started emailing service. And even before we knew it, we were almost having to offer online therapy of sorts.

So, I guess that personal experience, alongside the professional experience kind of meant that I had to understand this world that we're getting involved with someone.

Zehra: I understand where your interest comes from. When did you start really getting into this world?

Terry: I think about the organization, it would have been about the turn of the century so about 1999-2000. And when we started developing the service. And since then, I've been involved in researching or working with organizations that have been offering online therapy since.

I wonder if at this point, it might be useful for me to just talk a little bit about some of the history of online counselling.

Zehra: That would be very helpful, thank you.

Terry: Yes. So I will just share a few slides. So I will talk through a few slides about what I see to be the history or the past of online therapy before moving into the present and the future. And I would ask you, Zehra, if you would also contribute, if maybe in between each of those sections, we could have a little bit of a conversation around some of those areas.

Zehra: I would be delighted to.

Terry: So in terms of the past, and this links with some of my own previous experience - I guess counselling and psychotherapy, have they do have a relationship where people have always used technology in some way to enhance what we do.

And I use this image in my training of Manchester with students to reflect the way that Carl Rogers, so one of the pioneers of humanistic psychology, integrated technology into his work. So in 1942, this book counselling and psychotherapy was published, and the second half of this book is a recording of his work with clients, and he used a machine, not unlike

this one - to record his sessions so he could then reflect upon how he was working on, and we may be able to do it better.

And I think we often think about therapy as not being technological, but I think even people like Carl Rogers were using quite intrusive technologies within that work.

And this was from 1943 so this is a quote about Carl Roger's experience of using this recording equipment, and he notes: "At the end of the data gathering period, approximately 100 interviews have been recorded. Many of these were partially spoiled as a result of apparatus breakdown and defective cutting styli. And since the research called for recordings of entire interviews, could not be used."

So, I won't repeat the whole thing, but I guess that it highlights some of that technological problems they were having at that point in time, which I think reflects number of people's more contemporary experiences, we will talk about Covid in a little while, but of really integrating technology into our current practices.

And I put this image on because if anyone wants to try using one of these recordings from recording devices from the 1930s, they're still available on eBay, probably quite expensive. It would be interesting to see what it would be like I'm sure our students would moan if we ask them to record a little.

But then other advances and developments, not everyone views the use of technologies in advance in therapy, were some resources so I guess during the 1960s. If you search Eliza in Google, there is a very rudimentary chat device that follows Person Centred Counselling rules. It is quite funny to play with and it is still available. So, you may want to take a look.

And then during the 70s, there were things like self-help tapes. During the turn of the century, lots of computerized cognitive behavioural therapy has become very big business, to the point that it is recommended within the United Kingdom, for supporting people who may have anxiety or depression.

And then also outside of that I guess different ways of supporting people. The people currently use are things like email and text messages. Maybe internet Relay Chat. So that's chat rooms, people using telephone, using the audio elements of computer mediated communication Tele or video conferencing as Zehra and I are using at the moment.

And then maybe things like avatars, so I've got this little image down in the corner of where you may use a visual representation of who you are in a therapeutic context.

Zehra: Can we choose our therapist in such an image as an avatar?

Terry: So, in here you would be able to create, who you are. So, you'll be able to represent yourself and then maybe bits that you like or dislike about yourself more than you would

choose to put in, or not put in. And so, the therapist would choose an image like this and the clients within this context.

But at that point I think that is where I'm going to stop sharing the screen before we move to talk about what may be happening now as a consequence of Covid, and the current situation. But Zehra, this is where I will bounce the question back to you about kind of you asked me how I got involved in this territory, and I wonder what- you completed a thesis project about online therapy with young people, what interested you in it.

Zehra: It is a really good question. I was involved in some school-based counselling before, and my experience with students, young people really was - I was upset with the fact that they were online all the time and that was not really long back it was around 2008. So, it was not that long back, and they were always online being the inhabitants of that space & medium, and I was curious intrigued about their intentions and why they felt really safe about their presence there.

But I also realized that maybe that could be actually an option for us to get them there, so help them there, approach them and make it accessible because of the stigma as well - The experience in Turkey back then. I liked the idea of approaching them in a more open space on more friendlier terms. That's how I got into, and of course I was lucky finding a supervisor who was interested in the area which changed my life really, and my understanding of what online therapy would look like. So yeah, I'm a bit involved in right now, with my own personal experience, the professional, but also as a researcher as well.

Terry: Yeah, that's really interesting and you raised that I didn't mention the links really, you know, thinking of the conference theme of thinking about super diversity and, and how one of my interest was how the internet proved really interesting context for enabling people who may not ordinarily contact face to face counsellors to access support.

And some of the organizations and young people I talked to at those organizations clearly reflected that they wouldn't have sought out support face to face, which sounds like some of the experiences you were talking about in Turkey.

Zehra: Absolutely. Now I would like to hear more about where we are with online counselling nowadays, that things are changing?

Terry: And maybe if I go back to the slides, what I what I forgot to mention previously on this slide was also that when we talk about using technology in therapeutic practice, we often think about computer mediated work, but also, we have to think that there are different ways that technologies come into our work even in face-to-face work or in-person work.

So, we may already be creating websites, we may be using computers to book appointments, etc. And all this side is more kind of the things that we've just been talking about what people may want to use technology to actually mediate the therapy.

But what this is, this is where I thought have slides for thinking about what's happening now.

And what is happening because of Covid. This is a visual representation of Covid, well, it's changed the lives of many people in many countries I won't be exclusive. I'm sure there are certain people who haven't been affected by think certainly many of the countries that are involved in this conference will be impacted.

And what we've found so recent piece of research we did into looking at how our services responding to this really showed that people are also going online online for support around issues related to Covid. So, I guess we're seeing online service use increase phenomenally.

And this paper that was published in frontiers recently sort of highlighted that all services into sharp real steep increase in usage, with issues around things like anxiety, particularly health anxiety, loneliness, I guess, particularly in countries where there were periods of social lockdown occurring.

Also, sort of instances of people being in an unsafe domestic situation so with domestic violence potentially increasing, which again, as people are locked down in close proximity with one another - maybe predicted in some ways.

And then the other area sort of thinking of financial concerns, so lots of people are maybe may have lost their jobs or may be have job uncertainty as a consequence of what's happening. So, just visually, we may represent it almost.

We've recently pulled together a paper, where we talk about the idea of Covid being an evolutionary catalyst. So, if we were to think of online therapeutic work without Covid, we might see it sort of just following this relatively low line, it's not very popular. Not many people were using it compared to face-to-face equivalents.

Whereas now, as a consequence of Covid, we see that actually, there's a real steep increase in the way that people are using online support services. And from my perspective, this will probably decrease, when things get back to some semblance of normality. But, if not to the levels where they were before. I think things like zoom and our sort of confidence and competence in using technology as a society will change some of that going forward.

I will stop sharing so we could talk a little more.

Zehra: So I wonder whether your life changed as a lecturer as a professional or as a researcher on the virtual end?

Terry: And, yeah, so I suppose if I think about my therapeutic work first, I work as a football therapist with survivors of torture. And, unfortunately, because of all the lockdown it meant that that couldn't happen. So a lot of that work had to stop because it was viewed as unsafe.

And I see that within my work as a lecturer at the university where all of my trainees had to immediately stop working, or to transfer their work online. So, in the initial stages of

lockdown people were having to transfer their work into zoom, or where possible. And now I think all of our students have had some experience of working therapeutically online. Now, where we find that lockdowns are easing, we have trainees who are working in a socially distanced way.

So they may be sitting quite far away from the people they are supporting. They may be wearing face masks. And so all of these things become new practices that as a discipline we've had to understand. But as a person, as a professional my work has changed dramatically. All of my teaching is now through this.

How, how was your experience?

Zehra: I would identify with what you encountered there tremendously. One of the things our trainees find difficult is the fact that sometimes clients does not want to share their videos, put their camera on.

So, you know, on a synchronous based chat therapy, we would come to the session ready for that. At times, some of the trainees experiencing audio-only conversations challenging. The experience challenges them -the fact that it was really hard to understand what they were going through, whether they cry, or whether they self-harm. So, there were a lot of ethical dilemmas they had to really think through. So, this is where we are at right now trying to find out an ethical stance, but also a competent stance with what we do online, and now face to face, because of coming back to actual work.

Terry: Yeah, that make sense, sort of, I think. These seem like unknown times and there's lots of uncertainty around. And one of the uncertainties is what technology will look like in the future. I imagine my teaching will involve more zoom-based sessions. But I do not know for sure, you are in your office, I am in my own. Different countries will have different regulations and rules worries and concerns that will impacting.

Zehra: That's very true. That brings me to the question of what do you expect the future will look like?

Terry: Well, I have some more slides. So, in terms of going forward. So, I will talk a little bit about the future. And in terms of therapy, I wanted to almost provoke some thoughts as this will not be for everyone. But I think working online will be kind of more prevalent, I think, for sure.

But how - might take a numerous different forms. So one; this is a game that's based on cognitive behavioural therapy principles. So there is an element that some therapy will become more gamified, or it will take images like this. Likewise, if you view the bottom is a view where people may be able to create images of landscapes, which they see themselves in. And this could be used in face-to-face work, not just online work as well. Then, outside of that we get even more - seems even more like fantasy land in some ways but isn't actually

that far away. So, people will start using things like virtual reality headset to feel closer to one another.

They may or it is likely that artificial intelligence and machine learning will become a part of the landscape we are working. So I'm working on a project at the moment where they're trying to spot mobility indicators in audio conversations.

The long way away from becoming useful, but particularly within audio work but I think within tech space work; it is quite common now that there is artificial intelligence running in the background of communication between people. And this quote from Stephen Hawking, the physicist, that says "Computers are likely to overtake humans in intelligence at some point in the next few hundred years. When that happens, we will need to make sure the computers have goals aligned with ours."

And I think the important thing there is thinking, well, I see it almost as a, an ethical duty to be involved in the conversation. As much as I see it as being potentially quite dehumanizing. I think there's a real potential in it, in its use in a way that can be controlled by.

Zehra: Yeah, I hear you.

Terry: So, at that point I wonder, I realized I have two more slides, I would share. Should I share them now.

Zehra: Please do.

Terry: Because I think this links again to the kind of idea of the conference theme around sort of in diversity, because within the therapeutic work and I know you share this idea that one size doesn't fit all. So, some people using technology using virtual reality may be a really positive thing. But for some people it won't be.

And so, the final bit that I would share is this, this was from work with an online counselling provider for children and young people. This is a summary of a piece of work, looking at how they worked as an organization. And really, we had to sort of reconceptualize how we viewed what a therapist did - to really thinking of what the ecosystem, what the whole kind of system of the website was offering. And this particular website tried to offer this positive environment, it was sort of caring, non-judgmental, safe, etc.

It offers static content - so magazine content. It enabled people to connect via moderated forums, and then it also enabled people to access direct professional support with a counsellor or social worker etc. So it is this interaction between all of these different support systems that become the ecosystem.

Now this is one organization, and I guess the challenge going forward is going to be how do these start integrating with face to face services, other online services, family networks etc

etc. And I really think this is going to be part of the debate is not few doing therapy as individuals but thinking about that ecosystem of support in some ways going forward.

I'm going to stop sharing.

Zehra: Thank you. The last slides especially give me a context where we are at SIPCC as well, that we also are trying to create this positive ecosystem where different religions and cultures and backgrounds races and ethnicities can just all come together, recognizing the fact that one size does not fit all. We would need to explore, and I agree with you, we have a responsibility over what the future will look like about psychotherapy in general, and spiritual care and counselling. And this talk gives us great opportunity to be able to understand what feature might offer us and while we can really dive into it, and whether we are ready to dive into it.

Terry: I think that's a big question at the end. Whether or not we are, technology will keep being used, but how it will be used is going to be part of the important questions on the floor right now.

Zehra: And the conversation will flow right. And this is our part. Thank you, Terry, thank you so much for your time. And we'll see you in the conference, and we will have more discussions around the topic.

Terry: You are welcome Zehra, it has been a pleasure. and I look forward to seeing everyone in the conference. I hope it provokes some thoughts for everyone and I look forward to talking to you at the conference.