

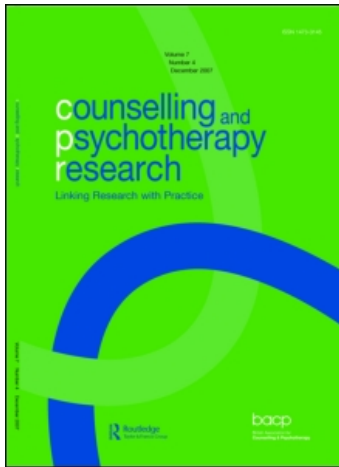
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### Developing youth-friendly online counselling services in the United Kingdom: A small scale investigation into the views of practitioners

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ORIGINAL ARTICLE

## Developing youth-friendly online counselling services in the United Kingdom: A small scale investigation into the views of practitioners

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### Abstract

This study focused upon the development of online counselling services for young people in the UK. It used online forums to host an asynchronous focus group with the intention of bringing together the views of a small sample of counsellors and counsellors in training regarding the subject matter. The focus group lasted a one-month period and initiated 10 threads of discussion and received 41 message postings. These dialogues were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach. Findings suggested that although there is a great potential for offering therapy in this medium, services need to be appropriately regulated and good practice promoted. Issues around where the parameters of regulation should lie are discussed and recommendations for the minimum requirements of training or experience that counsellors working in this field should possess are made.

**Keywords:** *Internet, online, counselling, adolescents, counsellors' views, best evidence based practice*

### Setting the scene

#### *Youth counselling*

Within the UK there has been a steady development of counselling services for young people. This has been backed up by some high profile research projects that suggest that this client group are both in need of such services, 'up to 1 in 5 young people may experience some form of psychological problem' (BMA, 2003, p. 33), and can benefit from such provision (NICE, 2005; Cooper, 2005; Sherry, 1999). It is this move towards a society that is increasingly sensitive to the mental health of its youth that has led organisations such as the National Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children (NSPCC) and government ministers to call for all young people to have easy access to professional counselling services (NSPCC, 2004; McGinnis & Hodge, 2004).

For counselling services to be youth-friendly they should be accessible, friendly and relevant (Griffiths, 2003) and the counsellors working in these settings are encouraged to be more pro-active and flexible in their style (Geldard & Geldard, 2004). This approach has led some counsellors to meet, and offer counselling to young people in a territory that may be perceived to be safer than meeting face-to-face,

notably online. E-Motion, an online counselling pilot project developed and maintained by the youth charity Visyon is one such service (Hanley, 2004). Thus counselling has begun to follow the precedent of online advice giving services for young people such as the NSPCC's 'there4me.com' and the Connexions-Direct service.

#### *The Internet: Is it still a 'minority technology'?*

Hine (2000) described the Internet as a 'minority technology'. Although this is a relatively up-to-date publication, surveys have begun to show that only a few years after her work was published, a sea change occurred. Internet use in the UK has blossomed and national statistics suggest that 47% of households in the UK now have access to the Internet (National Statistics, 2004). This percentage increases further when looking at the Internet usage of young people. The UK Children Go Online project estimating that 75% of young people have access to the Internet at home and 92% have access at school (Livingstone & Bober, 2004). Although access and usage statistics do not identify regular competent computer users, the sheer size of the figures in question suggests that Internet usage is moving away from the minority and into the mainstream.

**What does this study explore?**

- The use of an online focus group to discuss the development of online counselling services for young people in the UK

*Online counselling for young people*

Online counselling is still a relatively new phenomenon. Many are sceptical about its practice and highlight how little we understand about working in this medium (Alleman, 2002; Pelling & Renard, 2000; Robson & Robson, 1998; to name but a few). There is also only a glimmer of an evidence base for the efficacy of such work. However, although these warnings and gaps in knowledge should not be ignored, the reality is that practitioners are continually moving into virtual environments and this needs to be responded to appropriately. The work of Rochlen, Zack and Speyer (2004) provides a comprehensive and balanced summary of the challenges and benefits of working in this medium.

Although there are many overlaps between online adult counselling services and youth counselling services, presently there is very little research examining the specifics of youth friendly online work. The work of King and his colleagues in this issue looking at the Australian Kids Help Line (KHL) service, provides a good yardstick for research into this area. To date their work has demonstrated that young people find the Internet a comfortable environment to access counselling services (King et al., 2006a) and they are presently looking into the differences between KHL's online and telephone services (King et al., 2006b).

**Key research question**

As this study was exploratory in nature, and hoped to gather together the views of a number of counsellors who were interested in the subject matter, the following research question was adopted:

*What questions will counsellors raise, and what challenges are envisaged regarding the development of online counselling services for young people in the UK?*

**Research design**

Initially a website ([www.onlinecounsellingresearch.co.uk](http://www.onlinecounsellingresearch.co.uk)) was devised to host the research project. This site would act as the gateway for individuals to find out more and take part in the study. It was also intended to act as a resource for individuals, both counsellors and potential clients, who wished to find out more about the research base that underpins online coun-

selling. This site still exists and continues to evolve and host further research.

Data was gathered by using an online discussion forum to host a focus group. Due to the asynchronous nature of the technology used, unlike face-to-face focus groups, online groups can be run over a longer period of time and incorporate the views of large numbers of participants (Bloor et al., 2002). For the purpose of this study the focus group was hosted for a one-month period with those involved being able to contribute as and when they liked.

Participants were recruited from a variety of sources. These included approaching known interested parties (notably counsellors from organisations who have been involved in such work) counsellors in training and through postings to relevant online mailing lists. As the group was intended to focus upon UK counsellors' perceptions, those involved were asked to register to participate in the group and questioned whether they were based and working in the UK. In total nine individuals self-selected, registered and took part in the discussions. A further 5 people registered but did not make any postings to the forum.

*A note about ethics*

Researchers working online need to be aware of both technical considerations regarding computer-mediated groups and communities and more common codes of conduct (Bloor et al., 2002). To cover both of these areas, this study had a technologically competent researcher (the author) at its centre and it worked within the ethical framework for good practice and ethical guidelines for researching counselling and psychotherapy developed by the BACP (BACP, 2002, 2005).

**Findings**

The one-month data collection period initiated 10 threads of discussion and received 41 message postings. These postings varied greatly in length and ranged from short one-line responses to more comprehensive responses lasting several paragraphs (a full unedited archive of these discussions can be found online by following the forums link at [www.onlinecounsellingresearch.co.uk](http://www.onlinecounsellingresearch.co.uk)). The dialogues from the focus group were analysed using a Grounded Theory approach (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; further informed by Rennie, 2005) and five key categories, each of which pivoted around the central category of 'Regulation' emerged; these were 'Regulation Issues', 'Training Issues', 'Type of Service', 'Uncertainty' and 'Organisations Presently Offering Online Services'. It is the central category of 'Regulation' that this paper considers. For more discussion around the other categories see Hanley (2005).

### What do we learn from this study?

- Regulation was a major concern
- Training, legal and ethical issues raised important questions
- The project provided a skeleton for regulation which may be useful for those setting up new services

#### *Regulating online work with young people*

From the discussions it became very apparent that regulating online counselling services for young people would not be straightforward. In particular questions were raised around where the boundaries of such an endeavour would be set. Table I provides, in the form of questions, a summary of the different types of online counselling that were mentioned in the focus group. Needless to say I feel that this list is not exhaustive (and is likely to date relatively quickly) but it is presented to provoke thought within potential service providers or regulatory bodies.

#### *Recommendations for service providers*

Counsellors working online with young people should be appropriately prepared for offering their services in this medium. In considering this, the focus group discussed the minimum requirements that organisations in the UK should be responsible for. These points can be summarised as:

- Ensuring that practitioners have appropriate levels of training or experience. This falls into three distinct areas:
  - Counsellor training (minimum of a Diploma in Counselling);
  - Relevant experience or training in working with young people;
  - Relevant experience or training in developing therapeutic relationships online.

Table I. Nine thought-provoking questions for potential service providers or regulatory bodies.

| Question  |
|---|
| 1 Who provides the therapy? A human, computer or both?  |
| 2 How is the service provided? By email, IRC, message boards etc?   |
| 3 Is it an emergency service that offers individuals the opportunity to contact a counsellor 24 hours a day? Or is it only available through appointment? |
| 4 Do clients get to meet with the same counsellor for longitudinal support? Or can they only meet with whoever is available when they are online?         |
| 5 Is the service exclusively online? Can clients meet the counsellors face-to-face if they wish?  |
| 6 Is the service targeting a particular client base?  |
| 7 Is the service explicitly therapeutic? Or is it more implicitly placed in a game? (For instance an online reflective role playing game.)                |
| 8 Who pays for the service? The client, or is it free at the point of delivery?   |
| 9 Is the service evaluated? If so how?  |

- Ensuring that individuals offering online counselling services for young people are aware of the appropriate legalities of running such a service. The major issues raised in this area were that counsellors should be aware of Child Protection and Data Protection issues. It was also felt that all practitioners working in this field should have up-to-date enhanced Criminal Records Bureau checks.

And a final responsibility may also be to:

- Ensure that practitioners are working within an appropriate and recognised set of ethical guidelines and are member of a professional counselling body.

### Discussion

Conducting this study raised a number of important points regarding the practical development of online counselling services for young people. Presenting summaries of these discussions in the public domain may help short-cut the developmental stages of other organisations setting up similar services and help avoid the creation of under prepared online counselling websites targeting young people. Interestingly, many of the points raised echo similar issues that organisations would automatically take account of when offering face-to-face counselling. Thus, reassuringly, including technology into the equation proves only to be an additional consideration when developing a service, rather than a factor that means we have to start afresh with our thinking.

This project was not without its limitations. It proved to be a relatively optimistic study. It pooled together the views of a small number of counsellors who generally appeared to see online counselling in a positive light. The views of more sceptical counsellors may have taken the study into very different territories. Almost inevitably there were also technical problems specific to researching online. For instance a number of postings to the forum disappeared due to a technical 'glitch' when logging into the web space. My voice, as an online facilitator, came through very strongly; although a pro-active role is encouraged within this type of research (Mann & Stewart, 2000), it raises a number of issues around biasing the data collected. To some extent this bias was combated by asking participants to view and comment upon final drafts of the summaries that have been made of the work.

Finally if we link this work back to the literature that has already been mentioned, it will be interesting to see whether online counselling will be factored in when devising youth support services in the future. There is clear potential for the development of youth friendly services in this medium however concerns regarding the efficacy and ethical nature of such work should not be overlooked. The findings presented here echo this cautionary viewpoint and have been

reframed to provide those involved in setting up and regulating services with some concepts to think about and a skeleton framework of good practice to consider.

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