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A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF EIGHTEEN SCHOLARLY JOURNALS: WHAT HAS  
BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT ONLINE FAMILY THERAPY?

A DISSERTATION  
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS  
FOR THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
IN THE GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THE  
TEXAS WOMAN'S UNIVERSITY

DEPARTMENT OF FAMILY SCIENCES  
COLLEGE OF PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

BY  
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DENTON, TEXAS  
AUGUST 2013

DEDICATION

To my husband with love

For Mom & Dad

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I graciously thank Dr. Linda Brock for her encouragement and patience during this process. You have been my leader and confidant these many years through multiple degrees and educational challenges. I have been fortunate to work with you and feel honored to have you as my mentor and leader. I will always remember our discussions on family systems as I continue to grow personally and professionally. With your guidance I have reached my goals and tackled unexpected challenges. I thank you for your support.

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## ABSTRACT

JENNIFER LIVINGS, B.S., M.S.

### A CONTENT ANALYSIS OF EIGHTEEN SCHOLARLY JOURNALS: WHAT HAS BEEN WRITTEN ABOUT ONLINE FAMILY THERAPY?

AUGUST 2013

The purpose of this study was to ascertain what has been written about online family therapy in selected scholarly journals focused on marriage and family issues. Technology is impacting the way individuals communicate and has changed the face of how therapy can be provided to clients. Online therapy has multiple definitions across a variety of disciplines including social work, psychology, family therapy, technology, and communication fields. A consistent definition for online family therapy is lacking in the literature and a call is made for family therapists to define and create standards and practices for the field. The content analysis utilized quantitative and qualitative methods to report results. A coding team was utilized to determine results and identify themes emerging in the literature. Themes were obtained from ten scholarly articles outlining practices of online family therapy and recommendations for family therapist practitioners are presented. *The Family Journal* yielded the most results with an article prevalence rate of 0.58%. Major themes emerging from the literature are *Legal and Ethical Concerns*, *Benefits*, and *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*. A discussion of the results was presented and conclusions were drawn. Finally, implications and recommendations were given to discuss the future of online family therapy.

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## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

One area of research that has recently received increasing attention is the role of technology in the therapy arena (Abney & Maddux, 2004). A variety of terms have been created to describe therapy services utilizing technology, including behavioral telehealth (Nickelson, 1996), computer-mediated communication (Miller & Gergen, 1998), information communication technologies (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2001), e-therapy (Manhal-Baugus, 2001), web-based counseling, email counseling, online practice (Finn, 2002), WebCounseling, cybercounseling, E-counseling, telehealth services (Heinlen, Reynolds-Wefel, Richmond, & Rak, 2003), distance counseling/therapy, behavioral e-health (Bischoff, Hollist, Smith, & Flack, 2004), online therapy (Rochlen, Zack, & Speyer, 2004), online counseling (Alemi, Haack, Harge, Dill, & Benson, 2005), Internet therapy (Griffiths, 2005), Internet counseling (Pollock, 2006), web-based therapy (Barak, Klein, & Proudfoot, 2009), Internet-based interventions (Mora, Nevid, & Chaplin, 2008), and cybertherapy (Botella, Garcis-Palacios, Banos, & Quero, 2009).

According to a report from the Pew Internet and American Life Project, approximately 93 million Americans have researched at least one health topic online, while over 20% of users have directly sought out mental health information through the Internet (Fox & Fallows, 2003). Accessing mental health information online provides

access to information about treatment modalities to address symptoms and specific diagnosis instantly (Anthony & Nagel, 2010). A variety of systems are impacted by the instantaneous access to technology and information. Families are now faced with technology impacting emotional and relational contexts of communication due to the influx of technology options, while therapists can use technology to foster collaborative relationships with family members (Bacigalupe & Lambe, 2011). The Internet is revolutionizing systems across the globe with its easy access and growing numbers of users (Miller & Gergen, 1998). Recent increases in providing online therapy are related to how easy, affordable, and accessible technology is becoming in people's lives (Bischoff, 2004).

Online therapy is defined as “any type of professional therapeutic interaction that makes use of the Internet to connect qualified mental health professionals and their clients” (Rochlen et al., 2004, p. 270). In recent years, researchers have been focused on how the field of family therapy is incorporating telecommunications in therapeutic service delivery (Bischoff, 2004). As new technologies emerge and shape online therapy with families, Pollock (2006) stated “therapists in this century will need to be informed of this phenomenon, regardless of whether they choose to engage in providing online therapy themselves” (p. 65). Staying informed will allow therapists to be aware of new counseling trends and practices created by technological advances. Miller and Gergen (1998) stated, “the Internet – is beginning to have revolutionary effects on cultural life,

extending from families, friendships, and communities to broad systems of education, government, medicine, and more” (p. 189).

### **Statement of the Problem**

The increase of using technological advances in therapeutic interventions has created controversy about using technology such as the Internet and current telecommunication methods to conduct therapy (Abney & Maddux, 2004). According to Barak et al. (2009), the emergence of technology into the helping profession has resulted in inconsistent “terminology, professional standards, and methodology” (p. 5). In addition, the effectiveness and ethical practices of online therapy without the support of current empirical evidence has also increased debate about this phenomenon (Ragusea & VanderCreek, 2003). According to Hanley and Reynolds (2009) online therapy “appears to violate many of the fundamental principles of the therapeutic relationship” because it impacts physical and relationship factors, while potentially increasing the risk for miscommunication between client and therapist (p. 5). In the last several years, there has been an increase in research focused on the implications, definitions, and techniques of using technology to conduct therapeutic services (Castelnuovo, Gaggioli, Mantovani, & Riva, 2003; Miller & Gergen, 1998; Rochlen et al., 2004).

Despite this growing trend, a limited amount of research is focused specifically on how marriage and family therapists are utilizing and defining online therapy. Research has been limited by the debate of defining online therapy, how new online therapy is within the field, and accessibility to individuals and therapists engaging in online therapy

(Rochlen et al., 2004). In combination, these factors have resulted in the use of a variety of terms and practices across disciplines including social work, psychology, healthcare, technology, communication, and family therapy as technological advances and ethical standards are consistently changing (Mallen & Vogel, 2005). Determining how current literature is addressing this phenomenon will assist marriage and family practitioners in developing a deeper understanding of how online family therapy is emerging in the field.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a content analysis of the professional literature about online family therapy. Eighteen scholarly journals were examined, including:

- *American Journal of Family Therapy*
- *Contemporary Family Therapy*
- *The Family Journal; Family Process*
- *Family Relations; Family, Systems, & Health*
- *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*
- *Journal of Counseling Psychology*
- *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*
- *Journal of Family Issues*
- *Journal of Family Psychology*
- *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*
- *Journal of Family Therapy*

- *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*
- *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*
- *Journal of Marriage and Family*
- *Journal of Systemic Therapies*
- *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training*

The content analysis will include articles published from 1997 to 2012 to provide a holistic view of how online therapy is being applied, defined, researched, and practiced in the marriage and family therapy field. The content analysis summarized themes of the literature on the phenomenon of emerging technological trends and frameworks of online therapy within the marriage and family therapy field.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions were addressed.

1. To what extent have articles published in marriage and family therapy journals addressed online family therapy?
2. What are the common themes emerging in the literature about online family therapy in marriage and family therapy journals?

The research questions guided the researcher in article selection and data collection using the following terms: online therapy, online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling, email counseling, and information communication technologies.

## **Definition of Terms**

For this study, the following operational terms were used:

*Online therapist* – is defined as “a qualified mental health professional who is using the Internet as a medium for practice” (Rochlen et al., 2004, p. 270).

*Online therapy* – is defined as “any type of professional therapeutic interaction that makes use of the Internet to connect qualified mental health professionals and their clients” (Rochlen et al., 2004, p. 270).

*Online family therapy* – is defined as providing therapeutic services to one or more persons utilizing a systems perspective in combination with technology mediums.

*Traditional family therapy* – is defined as “conjoint treatment in the office of the therapist or in the consulting room of a clinic” (Springer, 1991, p. 124).

*Computer-mediated communication* – is defined when clients and therapists are in separate geographical locations and communicate via asynchronous or synchronous communication (Mallen & Vogel, 2005).

*Asynchronous communication* – is defined as communicating via email or through online letter writing when the communication exchange is not instantaneous (Mallen & Vogel, 2005).

*Synchronous communication* – is defined as any communication conducted via videoconferencing, chat, or voice technology that completes communication exchanges instantly (Mallen & Vogel, 2005).

*Cyberspace* – is defined as a virtual reality allowing information and communication to be created and exchanged through technology devices (Kellerman, 2007).

### **Assumptions**

The following assumptions guided this investigation:

1. Minimal research exists about how technology impacts family therapy and systems.
2. An analysis of available research would inform current evidence and best practice methods of online family therapy with individuals, couples, and families.
3. Family therapists can benefit from research about advances in technology impacting the delivery of family therapy.
4. The therapeutic relationship is important in both traditional family therapy and online family therapy.
5. Systems are created when clients and therapists interact through technology mediums.
6. Cyberspace is a created shared reality space for therapists and clients to interact within.

### **Delimitations**

The content analysis included journal articles published from 1997-2012 from specific peer-reviewed marriage and family therapy journals. Search terms used in this analysis were: online therapy, online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling,



email counseling, and information communication technologies. The content analysis included 18 peer-reviewed journals focused on marriage and family issues for analysis.

### **Summary**

Debates regarding efficacy, definitions, and best practice methods for online therapy within family therapy, social work, psychology, and other fields are ongoing as online family therapy is in early stages of development. Identifying research about online family therapy will develop a context for future practices, define interactions with clients, and shape online family therapy within the field of marriage and family therapy. Understanding current themes in the literature will assist practitioners in describing and explaining what is currently being practiced in the field.

## CHAPTER II

### LITERATURE REVIEW

This chapter will provide a review of the literature found addressing online therapy research specifically focused for marriage and family therapists. The articles used in the research sample are excluded. The literature review includes articles from a variety of journals currently publishing online family therapy research.

#### **Impact of Technology on Systems**

Cyberspace is a virtual reality allowing information and communication to be created and exchanged through technology devices (Kellerman, 2007). The creation of cyberspace is impacting the concept of how individuals interact and create community for a shared reality (Riva & Galimberti, 1997). According to Barak and Grohol (2011), “the Internet has transformed the way we research topics, explore new ideas, and communicate with one another” (p. 156). Information communication technologies are a “new resource for constructing a kind of connected presence even when people are physically distant” (Licoppe & Smoreda, 2005, p. 321). Rheingold (1993) stated computer mediated communication can potentially affect individuals’ personal views, relationship interactions, and social dynamics as technology is becoming fully integrated into people’s lives. According to Steinberger (2009) the “cultural transformation of communication affects language, social intercourse, and attitudes toward the self, significant others, and the global community” (p. 130).

In an opinion piece regarding the impact of the Internet on family therapy, King, Engi, and Poulos (1998) stated “the www is causing a paradigm shift in the manner in which people communicate and share information” (p. 48). King et al. stated the Internet has changed the delivery information because it breaks barriers of traditional mass communication by providing information from multiple sources instead of just one source. In addition, the authors “opportunities exist for knowledgeable therapists to use the tools of this new communication medium to facilitate change in their clients” (p. 48).

Increases in awareness about the impact of online therapy on family systems, health care fields, and communication dynamics is still being understood as “the evidence base for online counseling is in the early stages of development” (King et al., 2006, p. 175). Researchers are left with unanswered questions regarding efficacy and benefits of facilitating therapeutic relationships in “virtual environments” (Hanley & Reynolds, 2009, p. 6). Barak and Grohol (2011) stated the Internet is changing the way people communicate and access mental health services. Technology is consistently changing and early predictions for the growth of online therapy underestimated the rapid changes in social media, high-speed Internet, and mobile devices that have impacted Internet accessibility (Barak & Grohol). As modern communication methods are on the rise, researchers are addressing the demand for Internet based methods by examining Internet based cognitive-behavioral programs (Sheeber et al., 2012) and online self-help programs (Strom et al., 2004).

The rapid growth of online therapy has created a variety of choices for therapists who choose to provide online therapy. According to Abney and Maddux (2004), therapists' worldviews determine whether or not to provide therapy online while personal worldviews assist practitioners in determining how to apply theoretical models within virtual environments. To support this claim, Abney and Maddux support the worldviews of an organismic model assuming that "humans are systems that can be experienced multi-dimensionally" (p. 16). For existential therapists, the multi-dimensions of time and space are impacted, thus challenging how to apply these theories in an online environment (Kasket, 2003). According to Hanley and Reynolds (2009) "online therapy appears to violate many of the fundamental principles of the therapeutic relationship" and can face technical issues not found within traditional counseling therapy methods (p. 5).

Norcross, Hedges, and Prochaska (2002) interviewed a group of mental health professionals to gather opinions about how the mental health profession will change over the next few years. Utilizing the Delphi Method, professionals stated that substantial increases in practitioners using technology and computer assisted therapeutic interventions were likely to occur. In addition, results indicated that technology-assisted psychotherapy was the fifth most likely therapeutic scenario to increase in occurrences over the next decade (Norcross et al., 2002). According to Sampson, Kolodinsky, and Greeno (1997) online therapy is no longer a possibility for the future, but a present influence in the counseling field.

## **Online Family Therapy Literature**

DuBois (2004) conducted a study examining demographic features of clients who wish to engage in online counseling. Findings from client self-report questionnaires revealed the majority of clients seeking online therapy were female (85%) between the ages of 20-30 (28%), married (52%), and were seeking free counseling online (89%). Individuals interested in online therapy reported their primary reason for seeking online therapy was related to relationship issues with their partner.

Maheu and Gordon (2000) conducted a study to find out more about individuals who chose to provide online therapy services. A total of 16 international and 40 U.S. participants were administered an online survey focused on demographic and professional licensure information as well as the type of preferred technology medium for administering online therapy. Of the participants, three described themselves as marriage and family counselors. Results indicated that the majority of therapists were male psychologists living in the U.S. who used e-mail as their preferred online therapy method. Also, the majority of participants (63%) stated their delivery methods were “education” or “advice” (p. 485). Fee for services varied and most were offered at no cost; however, some practitioners charged over \$50 dollars per hour for services. Finally, over 75% of the participants reported ethical concerns about providing therapy services via the Internet (Maheu & Gordon, 2000).

Sampson et al. (1997) stated online therapy can be beneficial for couples who live in separate geographic locations or for couples who experience physical distance due to

consistent traveling career obligations. Sampson et al. concluded that family counseling can often be delivered online when families do not live in the same location or are separated due to military obligations when traditional counseling methods are not possible (Sampson et al., 1997). Oravec (2000) stated online family counseling can be an adjunct to traditional methods when families are separated geographically (p. 124). Oravec stated families often communicate through email or other technologies to stay in touch about activities, however, not all family members will have current knowledge of technological advances which could limit the application methods for online family therapy. Oravec concluded family systems may be burdened by technology resulting in computer-dependence or increases of negative feelings about computer technology.

There are multiple different ways to offer online therapy. Mallen and Vogel (2005) stated that computer-mediated communication is conducted when clients and therapists are in separate geographical locations and communicate via asynchronous or synchronous communication. Asynchronous communication is conducted via email or through online letter writing when the communication exchange is not instantaneous. Synchronous communication is conducted via videoconferencing, chat, or voice technology that completes communication exchanges instantly (Mallen & Vogel, 2005).

Jedlicka and Jennings (2001) conducted a qualitative study using asynchronous email communication to determine if email can be an effective medium for couples counseling. Results indicated that couples therapy via email is therapeutic and can often lower the potential for therapists' to be involved in triangles. Therapists' ability to

manage personal anxiety about triangulation is also a benefit of email therapy. In addition, both clients and therapists benefited from being able to review communication exchanges which can impact objectivity from all parties. Finally, when couples took time to process thoughts through writing, this process was found to be cathartic. Jedlicka and Jennings coined the term for experiencing catharsis through email therapy as ecatharsis.

According to Doss et al., (2013), barriers for couples seeking face-to-face therapy are related to the cost of services and the potential for couples to be unwilling to share intimate details about their relationship. Doss et al. stated many couples are unaware of their current relationship troubles or stay stuck because of feelings that it is “too late” for therapy to help the relationship (p. 142). The Internet is a new frontier for interventions for couples to engage in a “self-help framework” since individuals are frequently turning to the Internet to learn more about ways to improve and save their relationship. To support their claim, Doss et al. provided a case illustration of a couple receiving a Web-based intervention focused on helping the clients with relationship issues. This program was a combination of education, assessment, and feedback through the program DEEP (Differences, Emotions, External Stress, and Patterns). During this program, the couple did not engage in direct synchronous communication with a therapist, but rather was provided feedback via email or an asynchronous message board with a “staff”. Results indicated the couples’ “marital satisfaction” and “confidence that they could handle conflicts related to the core issue” increased after receiving the Web-based intervention (p. 151).

Gilkey, Carey, and Wade (2009) conducted a study using a 14-week web-based problem-solving intervention in conjunction with synchronous videoconferencing therapy with families whose child has a traumatic brain injury (TBI). Outcomes from three selected case studies produced mixed results. Findings suggested teenagers were more likely to have higher comfort levels using technology, whereas younger children were difficult to engage and lost interest easily. Parents were challenged by advanced technology while many were overly anxious about balancing chaotic living environments and staying focused on therapy tasks. Suggestions for future research included therapists being open to different levels of engagement by clients, being readily available to address technological issues, and identifying appropriate clients for these types of interventions (Gilkey et al., 2009).

King et al. (1998) stated assessing client competence using and accessing technology helps identify appropriate families for email therapy. King et al. stated families who are estranged, refuse to be in the same room together, or are geographically separated would potentially benefit from email therapy. King et al. recommended therapists should assess for depression or suicidal ideation before the start of therapy to ensure the client is appropriate for email therapy or if the client would be better served by traditional counseling methods.

Santhiveeran (2004) stated e-therapists can help families “cope with life-situations, relieve symptoms, and over-come stressors” while assisting with increasing the overall wellbeing of the family by measuring changes in attitudes and behaviors.



Santhiveeran stated e-therapy can be beneficial for families who do not have large amounts of time to dedicate to traditional therapy or for parents who have special needs children at home. Finally, Santhiveeran stated e-therapy can be a convenient method for families that allows clients to engage in text-based interactions that can assist clients in expressing their thoughts and feelings.

Dausch et al. (2009) conducted a case study examining treatment outcomes for a veteran and his mother who received family-focused therapy via videoconferencing. Participants lived in a rural area and were selected for treatment based on the participant's schizoaffective disorder, consistent hospitalizations, and self-harm behaviors. Treatment methods utilized in this study were focused on communication training, seeking solutions to problems, and relapse prevention. Results indicated participants were satisfied with treatment via videoconferencing and reported the technology applications were adaptable to assist client's hearing impairment. Self-report outcomes indicated increased feelings of hope and quality of life with decreased hospitalization as a result of treatment.

In 1996, Sander engaged three couples in a series of couple's group therapy sessions utilizing computer-mediated communication. Sander was working with the couples in a face-to-face environment and transitioned the counseling environment to cyberspace by creating a private, real-time chat room to conduct group sessions. Results concluded that participants were resistant to the computer technology, felt disconnected to the lack of non-verbal cues, and felt disjointed in communicating with the group and

therapist. This early experiment with cybercounseling stated clients who live in rural areas or are disabled could be potential clients for cybercounseling.

### **Ethical Code for Marriage and Family Therapists**

The emergence of technology has brought about multiple changes in the field of family therapy encouraging researchers to re-examine how therapy is provided to clients (Alemi et al., 2005). As the number of individuals using the internet for personal, business, recreational resources, and medical information increases, the need to examine and research this issue is crucial for family therapy researchers. The main issue of treating mental health online stems from how the Internet is designed. According to O'Dochartaigh (2007) the Internet is “not an organized system” (p. 3) and lacks regulation. Traditionally, treating mental health has been conducted in organized methods and delivered within a face-to-face environment. Without means to regulate and organize Internet resources, individuals could potentially receive misleading or misguided therapy treatment options and information. Communicating with clients through technology mediums creates risks to confidentiality and client identification factors that must be addressed with standards for ethical online practice (Heinlen et al., 2003). According to Bradley and Hendricks (2009), “email has created new ethical dilemmas for family counselors” (p. 267).

The growth and potential for online family therapy has influenced organizations and ethical boards to “take positions and formulate statements” about providing online therapy (Abney & Maddox, 2004, p. 9). The International Society for Mental Health

Online (ISMHO) was created to support the development of technologies to facilitate online therapy, provide a listing of services available on the Internet, and outline guidelines for practice (Chester & Glass, 2006). In addition, the National Board for Certified Counselors (NBCC), the American Counseling Association (ACA), and the American Psychological Association (APA) each have ethical guidelines outlining practice methods for online therapy (Heinlen et al., 2003). To assist clients in locating and identifying potential online resources and services, specific websites are available to assist clients in service recommendations and to offer credential checks of providers offering online therapy (Heinlen et al.).

According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) the code of ethics effective on July 1, 2012 outlined the standards for electronic therapy.

Principle 1.14 Electronic Therapy. Prior to commencing therapy services through electronic means (including but not limited to phone and Internet), marriage and family therapists ensure that they are compliant with all relevant laws for the delivery of such services. Additionally, marriage and family therapists must: (a) determine that electronic therapy is appropriate for clients, taking into account the clients' intellectual, emotional, and physical needs; (b) inform clients of the potential risks and benefits associated with electronic therapy; (c) ensure the security of their communication medium; and (d) only commence electronic therapy after appropriate education, training, or supervised experience using the

relevant technology (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2012).

### **Summary**

This chapter provided an overview of literature about online therapy and its use with couples and families. Online family therapy has emerged as a relevant research topic for practicing therapists and researchers. Outcomes of online therapy are still being understood, however, application methods for clinicians are widely discussed in the literature. Ethical boards have answered this growing trend by adopting ethical guidelines for the practice of online therapy. Continued research is essential for the development of practice methods for online family therapy to promote awareness of advantages and disadvantages of this growing field.

## CHAPTER III

### METHODOLOGY

This chapter provides the methods selected for the content analysis. Weber (1990) defined content analysis as “a research method that uses a set of procedures to make valid inferences from text” (p. 9). Content analysis utilizes systematic methods to study message characteristics and recorded communications (Babbie, 2007; Neuendorf, 2002). Krippendorff (2003) explained that content analysis infers text to provide a deeper understanding of a phenomenon and describes contexts of communication to support valid evidence and reliable inferences. Content analysis utilizes messages as the level of analysis (Neuendorf, 2002) and is well suited for analyzing a selection of academic journals to ascertain what has been written about online family therapy.

#### **Sample**

The sample for this content analysis was 18 scholarly journals:

- *American Journal of Family Therapy*
- *Contemporary Family Therapy*
- *The Family Journal; Family Process*
- *Family Relations; Family, Systems, & Health*
- *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*
- *Journal of Counseling Psychology*
- *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*

- *Journal of Family Issues*
- *Journal of Family Psychology*
- *Journal of Family Psychotherapy*
- *Journal of Family Therapy*
- *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*
- *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*
- *Journal of Marriage and Family*
- *Journal of Systemic Therapies*
- *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training*

Analyzing scholarly journals' published materials since 1997 parallels the 15-year span used by Rochlen et al.'s (2004) research study reviewing online therapy literature and practices. The content analysis adapted journals used from Blumer, Green, Knowles, and Williams' (2012) research because the selected journals from the research focused on marriage, couple, and family issues. In addition, *Journal of Systemic Therapies* was included in the content analysis because of the journal's relevance of publishing articles focused on working with families.

The journals' impact factors were reviewed to determine inclusion in the content analysis. Impact factors are "used as a primary tool for evaluating the quality of scientific publications" (Tort, Targino, & Amaral, 2012, p. 1) and represent the journals' significance in publishing current research. Book reviews, introductions, forwards, honorariums, and commentaries and responses were excluded in this research study

similar to a content analysis conducted by Clark and Serovich (1997). The selected peer reviewed journals are described in detail to outline each journal's history, relevance to the field of family therapy, impact factors, and current research developments.

*American Journal of Family Therapy* was formerly known as *International Journal of Family Counseling* and *Journal of Family Counseling*. Published by Taylor and Francis, this peer reviewed journal is focused on family dynamics including domestic violence, parent/child dynamics, addiction issues, and other family intervention research topics. *American Journal of Family Therapy* is indexed in CSA, EBSCOhost, Elsevier, E-psyche, Gale, ProQuest, SwetsWise, and many others. *American Journal of Family Therapy* has a current impact factor of 0.54 (*American Journal of Family Therapy*, About this Journal).

*Contemporary Family Therapy* was selected because of its focus on current literature related to theory development, research, and systemic emphasis on family therapy, therapeutic relationships, and multicultural perspectives. It is indexed on ERIC, PsycINFO, Academic Search Complete, ERIC, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, and many others (*Contemporary Family Therapy*, About this Journal).

*The Family Journal* is focused on systemic research and practice with families. Focusing on family systems, *The Family Journal* publishes a variety of research methods for practitioners and educators and was selected because of the focus on current research interests of family systems. A current impact factor was not indicated on the journal's

website. *The Family Journal* is indexed in Family & Society Studies Worldwide, PsycINFO, PsycLIT, Scopus, and many more (*The Family Journal*, About this Journal).

*Family Process* is a leader in the field of research with focus on multidisciplinary family theory application and practice. *Family Process* was the first journal of its kind and continues to lead the field in research development. *Family Process* is partnered with Wiley/Blackwell and is indexed in Academic Search, Ecology Abstracts, ProQuest Central, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, Social Sciences Abstracts and has a current impact factor of 1.727 (*Family Process*, Overview).

*Family Relations* is an interdisciplinary international journal of applied family studies. Published by Wiley-Blackwell, *Family Relations* is focused on issues of diversity, prevention, and intervention to increase awareness of family issues to inform practitioners, educators, therapists, and researchers on current literature, empirical studies, and conceptual analyses. It is indexed on multiple databases, including Academic Search Complete, Child Development and Adolescent Studies, ERIC, SocINDEX, and currently has an impact factor of 0.68 (*Family Relations*, Overview).

*Family, Systems, & Health* is focused on collaborative family health and clinical research including publications on medical family therapy. Published by the American Psychological Association, *Family, Systems, & Health* reported a current impact factor of 1.055. *Family, Systems, & Health* is indexed on multiple databases including Academic OneFile, Alt-HealthWatch, CINAHL, MEDLINE, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Sociological Abstracts (*Family, Systems, & Health*, Description).



*Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* is focused on research that adds to the study of treating disorders, mental illnesses, and diagnosing. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* is published by the American Psychological Association and has an impact factor of 4.848. *Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology* is indexed in Academic Search Premier, Current Abstracts, Education Research Index, Family Index, Family Studies Abstracts, SCOPUS, and Studies on Women and Gender Abstracts (*Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology*, Description).

*Journal of Counseling Psychology* is published by the American Psychological Association and has an impact factor of 3.228. A leader in the field, *Journal of Counseling Psychology* is aimed at counseling practices, supervision dynamics, and prevention methods. The journal aims to publish research highlighting strength-based dynamics, interventions, training, and consultation aspects. *Journal of Counseling Psychology* is indexed in Academic ASAP, Academic OneFile, AgeLine, Business Source Complete, Current Abstracts, Family Index, ProQuest, PsycINFO, PubMed, Reactions Weekly, Social Work Abstracts, TOC Premier, and many more (*Journal of Counseling Psychology*, Description).

*Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy* is formerly known as *Journal of Couples Therapy*. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy* is aimed at understanding relationship dynamics of a wide variety of relationship types while focusing on practice methods and treatment approaches. *Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy* is

published by Taylor and Francis and does not currently list an impact factor (*Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy*, Journal Information).

*Journal of Family Issues* is focused on research about current issues families face with a wide range of topics in various research areas of social work, family studies, psychology, and sociology. Focused on family dynamics, *Journal of Family Issues* is published by Sage and has a current impact factor of 1.035 and was selected because of the relevance of current, cutting edge research publications (*Journal of Family Issues*, About).

*Journal of Family Psychology* is focused on current research directed at systemic interventions, assessments, interactions, and policies aimed at family relationships. Published by the American Psychological Association, *Journal of Family Psychology* has an impact factor of 1.656 and is indexed in multiple databases including Academic Search Complete, Addiction Abstracts, Current Abstracts, Education Academic ASAP, Health & Wellness Resource Center Gold, Special Educational Needs Abstracts, TOC Premier, and many others (*Journal of Family Psychology*, Description).

*Journal of Family Psychotherapy* is published by Taylor and Francis and is focused on case studies, reports, and clinical practices. This peer reviewed journal highlights research that reports change factors and effective treatment methods by focusing on and treating the family dynamic. *Journal of Family Psychotherapy* is indexed in Adis International Ltd., CSA, EBSCOhost, Elsevier, OCLC, SwetsWise, and many more (*Journal of Family Psychotherapy*, Journal Information).

*Journal of Family Therapy* was selected because of its strong foundation in publishing articles on theory and research. *Journal of Family Therapy* is published by the United Kingdom Association of Family Therapy and Systemic Practice and has an impact factor of 0.935. The journal's focus is on couples, families, and professionals to provide information on systemic training and practice. *Journal of Family Therapy* is indexed in Academic Search, Current Content, Social and Behavioral Sciences, Psychology & Behavioral Sciences Collection, Social Care Online, and numerous others (*Journal of Family Therapy*, Journal Information).

*Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* is also published by Taylor and Francis and is an international journal dedicated to research focused on the systemic use and application of feminist theory and family therapy while accounting for cultural differences and women's issues from a feminist perspective. *Journal of Feminist Family Therapy* is indexed in CSA, EBSCOhost, E-psyche, OCLC, ProQuest, and others (*Journal of Feminist Family Therapy*, Journal Information).

*Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* is the journal of the Association for Marriage and Family Therapy and is published by Wiley-Blackwell and currently has an impact factor of 1.014. Focused on family and couple therapy, *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* provides research on training, theory, and practice development. *Journal of Marital and Family Therapy* is indexed in Academic Search Premiere, MEDLINE, ProQuest Central, Social Services Abstracts, and many more (*Journal of Marital and Family Therapy*, Journal Information).

*Journal of Marriage and Family* is published by Wiley-Blackwell and currently holds an impact factor of 2.028. *Journal of Marriage and Family* publishes research focused on family dynamics and relationships. *Journal of Marriage and Family* is a leading journal in the field and is the journal of the National Council on Family Relations. This peer reviewed journal is focused on relationships of families and is indexed in Academic ASAP, Academic Search, Expanded Child Education Resources, ProQuest Central, PsycINFO/Psychological Abstracts, Social Services Citation Index, and many more (*Journal of Marriage and Family, Overview*).

*Journal of Systemic Therapies* is a practice-oriented journal focused on current methods of theory application with individuals, groups, and families. This journal publishes articles on the cutting edge of practice methods focused on ethical issues, brief model approaches, and narrative practices. Published by Gilford Press, *Journal of Systemic Therapies* does not provide current information on indexing or impact factors. Currently published issues have been focused on narrative and solution focused practices (*Journal of Systemic Therapies, About Journal of Systemic Therapies*).

*Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training* is aimed at practice, training, theory development, and research of psychotherapy. With an impact factor of 0.978, *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, and Training* is published by the American Psychological Association and is currently indexed in AgeLine, Current Contents, Family Index, PsycINFO, PubMed, and Social Sciences Citation Index (*Psychotherapy, Description*).

### **Population**

The population sample for the content analysis were articles from issues found in 18 journals focused on marriage and family issues. Articles published between 1997 and 2012 with online family therapy content were used. The following terms assisted in guiding the researcher to appropriate articles about online family therapy: online therapy, online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling, email counseling, and information communication technologies.

### **Data Collection**

In order to collect articles for this content analysis, the researcher searched each selected peer-reviewed journal using the Texas Woman's University Library. Journals not available electronically were accessed via Interlibrary loan, Google Scholar, ERIC, PsycINFO, SOCIndex, Family and Society Studies Worldwide, MasterFILE Premiere, and Academic Search Complete. The selected terms for the search criteria were: online therapy, online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling, email counseling, and information communication technologies. The content analysis included articles related to online family therapy; however, certain exclusion criteria were applied to assist in article selection. Articles not related to online family therapy, articles not translated into English, duplicate articles, and non-peer reviewed or other resource materials were not included in the content analysis (Manganello & Blake, 2010). Book reviews, introductions, forwards, honorariums, and commentaries and responses were also excluded in the content analysis.

As highlighted in Chapter One of this study, a variety of terms describing online therapy or the use of technology to conduct therapy services is present in the literature. To assist in selecting research terms, the researcher focused on which terms would yield the most research results. Many terms describing online therapy were not relevant to specific application factors to marriage and family therapy. When terms did not produce relevant journal articles, the terms were excluded from the study. The researcher originally explored a larger collection of search terms and eventually narrowed down useful search terms that were most relevant to online family therapy. The following search terms were used in this study: online therapy, online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling, email counseling, and information communication technologies.

### **Categories for Coding**

According to Babbie (2007) coding is defined as “the process of transforming raw data into a standardized form” (p. 325). To maintain objectivity-intersubjectivity, the coding schemes were selected a priori (i.e. “before the fact”) before observations began (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 11). The coding schemes were adapted from Rochlen et al.’s (2004) article outlining a framework to “conceptualize and categorize different aspects of online therapy for research purposes” (p. 269). The Coding Form (Appendix A) was used to record and organize objective observations (Neuendorf, 2002). The Coding Form “provides spaces appropriate for recording the codes for all variables measured” and “should stand alone as a protocol for content analyzing messages” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 132). The coding schemas included: definition, practice, debates, benefits, challenges,

ethical issues, and potential clients (Rochlen et al., 2004). A category for “Other” was added as a coding schema to include articles not applicable to other coding schemas. Article traits were recorded on the Coding Form and included: journal title, article citation, and professional affiliations of authors. A key function for the Coding Form was to record key words and phrases specific to articles that assist in identifying emerging themes from the coding schemes.

### **Treatment of Data**

Articles included in the content analysis were thoroughly read and analyzed with the use of the Coding Form. The Coding Form assisted the researcher in identifying both manifest and latent content. Manifest content is easily identifiable and observable (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) and includes data that are “physically present and countable” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 23). Latent content is defined as the emergence of patterns of the underlying interpretative meaning of content (Potter & Levine-Donnerstein, 1999) and is designed to “tap into the deeper meaning of messages” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 23). Two independent coders read and analyzed the articles with the use of the Coding Form to increase the validity of the coding process. Journal articles were thoroughly read and analyzed for emerging themes and phrases significant in the literature. Selected phrases and themes supported the context of the research questions: “To what extent have articles published in marriage and family therapy journals addressed online family therapy?” and “What are the common themes emerging in the literature about online family therapy in marriage and family therapy journals?”

### **Credibility and Trustworthiness**

Weber (1990) defined reproducibility as “the extent to which content classification produces the same results when the same text is coded by more than one coder” (p. 17). Compatible coding results yield higher accuracy rates of classifying the data into generally acceptable standards or norms. To encourage this type of reliability, two independent coders familiar with qualitative and quantitative research were used to increase trustworthiness of the data as described above. Incorporating multiple coders creates the ability to calibrate findings and to “provide basic validation of a coding scheme” (Neuendorf, 2002, p. 142).

The first independent coder is a Licensed Marriage and Family Therapist and Licensed Professional Counselor who has completed advanced qualitative and quantitative research methods courses at the PhD level. The second independent coder has training in advanced qualitative and quantitative research methods courses at the PhD level and currently holds a Master’s degree in Family Therapy. Initially, each coder met with the researcher and was oriented to the purpose of the study, data collection, and Coding Form methods. Each coder was provided a copy of each of the ten articles used in the content analysis. Secondly, each coder read and analyzed each article with the Coding Form. Once the analysis process was completed, the coders met individually with the researcher and participated in a debriefing process to discuss the themes and concepts that emerged from the data.



## **Summary**

This chapter discussed the research methodology used in the content analysis. This analysis included a sample of peer-reviewed articles in selected journals. The research was guided by the research questions “To what extent have articles published in couple and family therapy journals addressed online family therapy?” and “What are the common themes emerging in the literature about online family therapy in couple and family therapy journals?” and included one or more terms describing this phenomenon. The researcher read each article and analyzed the data with the use of the Coding Form to identify emerging themes in the data. Two independent coders were provided articles to analyze themes. The primary researcher and independent coders debriefed and processed the findings.

## CHAPTER IV

### RESULTS

This content analysis was conducted to address a gap in the literature about what has been written about online family therapy. The content analysis included a total of 18 journals to ascertain what has been written about online family therapy. This chapter will discuss the results of the content analysis through quantitative and qualitative data. A total of ten articles were analyzed for themes.

#### **Quantitative Content Analysis**

The quantitative portion of the results is expressed through manifest content. The researcher identified the total number of articles in each journal by physically counting each journal article found either online directly from the journal's website or from the Texas Woman's University library journal collection. The total number of articles published from 1997-2012 in all journals was 12,976, with 10 articles being applicable to marriage and family therapy. These account for (.08%) of the overall sample. Results indicated *The Family Journal* published the most online family therapy articles yielding a total of 5 articles out of a total of 860 or (.58%) of the sample. *Contemporary Family Therapy* produced two articles focused on marriage and family therapy or (.38%) of the published articles. *Family Process* published one article (.19%) about online family therapy of the 744 published articles. *Journal of Systemic Therapies* also published one article about online family therapy which was only (.18%) of the published articles.

Finally, the *American Journal of Family Therapy* published one article about online family therapy with a total of (.17%) out of the 578 published articles. A total of 39 articles were represented when researching all of the selected search terms in each journal. Each article was reviewed and read for online family therapy content while keeping in mind the study's research questions. A total of 10 articles were selected because of the articles' relevance to online family therapy (Appendix B). The other 29 articles were excluded because the articles were not applicable to marriage and family therapy.

Multiple terms describing online family therapy (as noted in Chapter One of this study) were used to collect articles. Upon searching the Texas Woman's University library, many of the search terms yielded no results relevant to the field of marriage and family therapy. The researcher searched each term and assessed the relevance of each article generated. Many articles discussed marriage and family therapy issues, but not the specific application of online family therapy. The researcher specifically searched journals for the term "online family therapy" and found no articles relevant to that specific search term. The search terms were narrowed down by the amount of relevant articles generated to the research topic. Once search terms were narrowed down, a total of 39 articles were generated. Each of the 39 articles were reviewed to assess if the content was related to online therapy practice specific to the field of marriage and family therapy. The following is a list of the final search terms used for data collection: online therapy,

online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling, email counseling, and information communication technologies.

Table 1 outlines the following: the total number of articles published in each journal from 1997-2012, the number of articles found when using selected search terms defining online therapy, the number of articles with online family therapy content in each journal, and the percentage of online family therapy articles comparative to the overall sample.

Table 1  
*Number of Online Family Therapy Articles Published from 1997-2012 in 18 Scholarly Journals*

Journal Title	Articles from 1997-2012	Articles with identified search terms	Articles with online family therapy content	%
American Journal of Family Therapy	578	1	1	0.17%
Contemporary Family Therapy	527	2	2	0.38%
The Family Journal	860	5	5	0.58%
Family Relations	744	0	0	0.00%
Families, Systems, and Health	572	1	0	0.00%
Family Process	522	1	1	0.19%
Journal of Consulting and Clinical Psychology	1,761	13	0	0.00%
Journal of Counseling Psychology	784	0	0	0.00%
Journal of Couple and Relationship Therapy	315	0	0	0.00%
Journal of Family Issues	859	0	0	0.00%
Journal of Family Psychology	1,132	0	0	0.00%
Journal of Family Psychotherapy	414	0	0	0.00%
Journal of Family Therapy	403	0	0	0.00%

(Continued)

Journal of Feminist Family Therapy	275	1	0	0.00%
Journal of Marital and Family Therapy	605	1	0	0.00%
Journal of Marriage and Family	1,331	0	0	0.00%
Journal of Systemic Therapies	568	1	1	0.18%
Psychotherapy: Theory Research, Practice, and Training	726	13	0	0.00%
Totals:	12,976	39	10	0.08%

Articles used for analysis are identified in the reference section with an asterisk by the primary author's last name. In addition, the articles used for analysis are also listed here:

Bacigalupe, G., & Lambe, S. (2011). Virtualizing intimacy: Information communication technologies and transnational families in therapy. *Family Process*, 50(1), 12-26.

Baltimore, M. L. (2000). Ethical considerations in the use of technology for marriage and family counselors. *The Family Journal*, 8(4), 390-93.

Bischoff, R. J. (2004). Considerations in the use of telecommunications as a primary treatment medium: The application of behavioral telehealth to marriage and family therapy. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 32(3), 173-187.

Bischoff, R. J., Hollist, C. S., Smith, C. W., & Flack, P. (2004). Addressing the mental health needs of rural underserved: Findings from a multiple case study of a behavioral telehealth project. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 26, 179-198.

Georgiades, S. D. (2008). A solution-focused intervention with a youth in a domestic violence situation: Longitudinal evidence. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 30, 141-151.

McDaniel, S. H. (2003). E-mail communication as an adjunct to systemic psychotherapy. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 22(3), 4-13.

Frame, M. (1997). The ethics of counseling via the Internet. *The Family Journal*, 5(4), 328-30.

Jencius, M., & Sager, D. E. (2001). The practice of marriage and family counseling in cyberspace. *The Family Journal*, 9(3), 295-301.

Pollock, S. L. (2006). Internet counseling and its feasibility for marriage and family counseling. *The Family Journal*, 14(1), 65-70.

Stevens-Smith, P. (1997). Of cyberspace, managed care, and family counseling: Entering the 21st century. *The Family Journal*, 5(1), 53-55.

Table 2 outlines each article used in the analysis and the article's topic, publication journal, role of online family therapy, and themes present in the literature.

Table 2  
*Topics and Themes Present in Articles Focused on Online Family Therapy*

Articles	Topic	Journal	Role of Online Family Therapy	Themes Present
Bischoff (2004)	Considerations for using online family therapy and case study	American Journal of Family Therapy	Presents challenges for MFTs	Legal/Ethical Benefits Adjunct
Bischoff, Hollist, Smith, & Flack (2004)	Multiple case study focusing on rural populations	Contemporary Family Therapy	Effective for rural populations	Legal/Ethical Benefits

(Continued)

Georgiades (2008)	Case study using email as an adjunct	Contemporary Family Therapy	Effective, therapeutic relationship important	Adjunct
Baltimore (2000)	Opinion article about ethical considerations	The Family Journal	Ensuring standards and education for practitioners	Legal/Ethical
Frame (1997)	Opinion article about ethics of online family therapy	The Family Journal	Positive and negative implications	Legal/Ethical
Jencius & Sager (2001)	Opinion article about practicing online family therapy	The Family Journal	Online therapy has benefits while challenging traditional views	Legal/Ethical Benefits Adjunct
Pollock (2006)	Opinion article about the phenomenon of online therapy	The Family Journal	Not fully replace, but better than no counseling at all	Legal/Ethical Benefits
Stevens-Smith (1997)	Opinion article about ethical considerations	The Family Journal	Ethical codes need to reflect current changes	Legal/Ethical
Bacigalupe & Lambe (2011)	Case study using videoconferencing	Family Process	Encourages connection between separated families, effective	Adjunct
McDaniel (2003)	Case study using email as an adjunct	Journal of Systemic Therapies	Viewed as effective, but evaluate appropriateness	Adjunct

### Qualitative Content Analysis

The qualitative component of the research results is expressed with latent content. The content analysis was guided by the research questions “To what extent have articles published in couple and family therapy journals addressed online family therapy?” and “What are the common themes emerging in the literature about online family therapy in couple and family therapy journals?” Articles included in the results contained at least

one or more of the selected terms describing the phenomenon of online family therapy. Articles were read and coded by each member of the coding team with the use of the Coding Form.

The coding team included the following individuals: the researcher and two independent coders. Initially, the researcher facilitated an orientation meeting with each of the independent coders. The purpose of the orientation meeting was to orient the coders to the purpose of the study, research questions, methods for data collection, and instructions for using the Coding Form. Copies of each article used for data analysis and copies of the Coding Form were provided to each of the independent coders. Once the independent coders analyzed the data, a debriefing meeting was conducted with each of the independent coders to review the results.

Results indicated both of the independent coders identified two major themes: *Legal and Ethical Concerns* and *Benefits*. During the debriefing meeting, the researcher processed the potential for *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy* to become a major theme because both independent coders identified ways technology can be used to “support” or impact the “practice” of family therapy. Both independent coders agreed with the inclusion of the theme, *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*, in the results. The following three themes emerged from the literature about online family therapy: *Legal and Ethical Concerns*, *Benefits*, and *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*.



## Legal and Ethical Concerns

The first theme that emerged from the data is the *Legal and Ethical Concerns* for therapists conducting online therapy. Each member of the coding team identified *Legal and Ethical Concerns* as a major theme. A total of seven out of ten articles addressed legal and ethical concerns. This section will outline the results of each article discussing *Legal and Ethical Concerns* for therapists.

In efforts to encourage ethical practice, Baltimore (2009) stated professionals need “to become efficient and to develop competencies in the use of computer technology to serve clients and to communicate within and across disciplines” (p. 390). According to Stevens-Smith (1997), “clinicians have the ethical obligation to stay current on their own clinical training as well as the ethical and legal complications created by technology today” (p. 54). An overwhelming response from researchers was the need for marriage and family therapy to address ethical standards in the American Association for Family Therapy (AAMFT) ethical code (Baltimore, 2000; Jencius & Sager, 2001; Pollock, 2006). Bischoff et al. (2004) stated “one of the hallmarks of ethical psychotherapy practice is confidentiality” (p. 188).

According to Stevens-Smith (1997) the “most pressing issues facing the field today is how to handle confidentiality in cyberspace” (p. 54). Baltimore (2000) discussed a major concern about therapists practicing online therapy before standards have been written into ethical codes. Practicing without knowledge of current ethical practices could potentially lead to ethical violations and open up therapists for criticism and legal

challenges and enforce poor practice methods. Bischoff (2004) stated “the novelty of telehealth and the absence of established laws, regulations, and professional ethical standards can easily lure therapist into using telecommunications treatment strategies that puts both themselves and their clients at risk” (p. 176).

Since marriage and family counseling has emerged in the technology arena, AAMFT has since addressed standards for electronic therapy; however articles collected for this content analysis addressing ethical considerations were written before the standards were placed into the ethical code. According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) the code of ethics effective on July 1, 2012 outlined the standards for electronic therapy.

Principle 1.14 Electronic Therapy. Prior to commencing therapy services through electronic means (including but not limited to phone and Internet), marriage and family therapists ensure that they are compliant with all relevant laws for the delivery of such services. Additionally, marriage and family therapists must: (a) determine that electronic therapy is appropriate for clients, taking into account the clients’ intellectual, emotional, and physical needs; (b) inform clients of the potential risks and benefits associated with electronic therapy; (c) ensure the security of their communication medium; and (d) only commence electronic therapy after appropriate education, training, or supervised experience using the relevant technology (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2012).

Challenges of protecting confidentiality were present in the literature as many ethical violations are related to a lack of therapist's knowledge about details of online therapy technology specific to client protection. Many of these challenges are focused on confidentiality as "privacy over the Internet is not ensured" (Baltimore, 2000, p. 391). The lack of privacy and security requires family therapists to take steps to ensure clients are aware of the limits of confidentiality online by educating clients on the potential risk for confidentiality to be broken due to the nature of the technology used (Baltimore, 2000; Pollock, 2006). Recommendations for protecting clients' private information when using computer-mediated communication were related to having clients sign waivers and consent forms acknowledging their understanding that the Internet is not secure and confidential information can be accessed by others if not properly protected (Baltimore, 2000).

To increase client awareness about the limitations of confidentiality, Baltimore (2000) suggested therapists educate their clients about the difference between secure and non-secure online websites. Secure websites limit the access for unauthorized users to obtain information. Non-secure websites are accessible by third-parties and are typically used for sharing information and not for conducting confidential therapeutic services. Baltimore suggested therapists must be aware of methods to protect confidentiality by using encryption software so information can be protected and not retrieved by outside parties. Encryption software is essentially a "backing up of communication to secure systems, and printing hard-copy documents" and should be a standard practice in

protecting confidential information that can only be accessed by the client and is password protected (Baltimore, p. 391). Therapists cannot predict how individuals will protect their own confidential information. Baltimore stated, individuals could allow coworkers or family members to access their information which could increase the potential for unauthorized individuals to access their data resulting in potential legal issues. Bischoff (2004) stated “it is impossible for the therapist to have complete control over the security of the location in which the client is receiving services” (p. 177). Explaining the potential for technology failure and miscommunication due to a lack of nonverbal cues or misinterpretation of written information are good practices to engage in when preparing clients for online family therapy (Baltimore, 2000). In addition, Baltimore stated therapists must inform clients of the limits of confidentiality, especially if email communication is not encrypted, and therapists must be knowledgeable about the legal implications of their practice methods.

Legal issues are a major concern for online family therapists due to the potential for breaches of confidentiality which could result in progress reports and documents being misused in court proceedings or could lead to information being misrepresented in trainings or other public forums (Baltimore, 2000). In addition, therapists open themselves up for legal issues when they treat individuals online without doing a full assessment of the clients’ mental health needs, fail to obtain client identity through billing information, and do not provide alternate therapy services for clients who are experiencing crisis and live in other geographic locations (Frame, 1998; Pollock, 2006).

To limit deception, therapists could potentially identify the client by obtaining client information, talking on the phone, or using videoconferencing to ensure services are provided to the correct person participating in online therapy (Jencius & Sager, 2001). In addition, online family therapists may not be prepared for assessing clients' cultural needs through technology mediums which could result in therapists making hasty cultural assumptions or implementing treatment plans without properly addressing cultural differences or similarities (Frame, 1998). Therapists must also be cautious when assessing a client's competency and comfort levels using technology (Pollock, 2006).

Similar to traditional counseling services, online family therapists should practice methods to minimize harm by assessing the limits of online therapy and be aware of how the delivery method will impact the therapeutic relationship and assessment possibilities (Bischoff et al., 2004). In addition, clients should be informed of resources available to them should a referral source be made if online family therapy is not a viable treatment option. Appropriate self-disclosure, transparency in providing therapist credentials, and ensuring clients are provided consent forms and treatment options are essential to protecting both clients and therapists who are in a therapeutic relationship in cyberspace (Baltimore, 2000).

A major concern for online family therapists is the practice of treating clients in different geographic locations, especially counseling clients who live in different states; because it highlights the issue of therapists practicing outside of their licensing boundaries as cyberspace has the potential to alter the concept of geographical borders

(Jencius & Sager, 2001). Liability insurance is also a legal concern for therapists practicing online family therapy as insurance providers realize “the efficacy and safety of such practice has not yet been established” (Jencius & Sager, 2001, p. 298). Mental health services can be manipulated online because of the absence of laws and regulations to protect therapists (Bischoff, 2004). In addition, Bischoff stated the absence of regulating online activity and implementing laws to protect therapists and clients could make it easier for clinicians to manipulate systems and seek out loopholes to continue to offer services outside their jurisdiction and state laws. Therapists are recommended to properly post information on their websites to ensure they are protecting themselves and being transparent about their qualifications by offering credential checks and providing links to licensure boards on their websites (Jencius & Sager, 2001).

### **Benefits**

The second theme identified by the coding team was the *Benefits* of online family therapy. Each member of the coding team identified *Benefits* as a major theme. Articles containing information regarding the benefits of online family therapy were found in four of the ten articles. Articles describing benefits were brief, however, based on the results two aspects emerged: benefits to clients and benefits to therapists. Each of the four articles addressed benefits to both clients and therapists.

#### **Benefits to Clients**

According to Bischoff (2004), “clients may find treatment delivered through telecommunications convenient because it means fewer disruptions of their schedules,

allowing them more time at home, at work, or in other activities” (p. 174). Barriers to receiving therapy are reduced because time constraints and geographic factors limiting access to specialized treatment options are not present when engaging in online therapy (Bischoff, 2004; Pollock, 2006). Pollock highlighted the following example about the importance for clients’ to access online therapists who are aware of diversity issues, “if you are a gay or lesbian couple living in a remote area, you may have difficulty finding a local therapist sensitive to your lifestyle. However, you may more readily find one online” (p. 66).

Another benefit of online family therapy is the potential for financial expenses to decrease because travel costs to and from counseling appointments are eliminated (Bischoff, 2004). An article by Sussman (as cited in Jencius and Sager, 2001), the benefits of online therapy are as follows:

“...providing access to clients in remote geographical areas; the ready availability of specialists through the Internet, opening up more providers of service to families; the ability to time-shift session to a convenient private part of the day; and the availability of services to those who cannot or will not walk into a counselors office” (as cited in Jencius & Sager, 2001, p. 296).

Clients who are disabled or cannot leave their home for medical reasons and clients who are unable to easily access traditional counseling services due to employment constraints or caretaking responsibilities are potential clients who could possibly

benefit from online family therapy (Pollock, 2006). Pollock stated Internet counseling can be more cost-efficient while many clients may feel they can express themselves more easily when participating in therapy services in their own home because the sense of privacy is increased.

Pollock (2006) stated potential clients who could benefit from online therapy are individuals living in rural areas. Marriage and family therapy faculty at The University of Nebraska-Lincoln created a behavioral telehealth (BTH) program to provide mental health treatment to rural populations (Bischoff et al., 2004). Therapy was provided by master's level students and delivered via satellite and video connection to accommodate multiple family members in treatment. Participants in this study reported therapy goals related to marriage and family issues; however, no other family members elected to participate in treatment with the participants. Results provided "some preliminary evidence to suggest that the BTH program can satisfactorily address the access to mental health care problem facing many rural communities" (p. 195).

Bischoff et al. (2004) stated the biggest challenges for seeking therapy in rural areas are struggles with traveling long distances in combination with individuals "perception that everyone knows everyone else's business" (p. 188). Participant A, from this multiple case study, described reasons why rural populations do not seek out traditional therapy by stating, "sometimes people don't go to get help because of the stigma that everyone will know" (p. 188). Bischoff et al. discussed the impact of



therapists offering extended or flexible hours because it can directly assist with reducing “public knowledge of their participation in therapy” (p. 189).

### **Benefits to Therapists**

The second aspect regarding the theme of *Benefits* is the benefits to therapists. Reducing biases against online therapy and reducing barriers to building therapeutic relationships online is directly related to how therapists communicate the benefits of online therapy to their clients (Bischoff et al., 2004). Internet therapy has low overhead costs, does not require formal office space, and can be conducted in a variety of settings (Pollock, 2006). Pollock outlined audio conferencing as a low-cost alternative that can be delivered over the Internet. A major benefit of this approach is being able to include multiple individuals by breaking geographical barriers and increasing “the opportunity for counseling to occur over great distances” (p. 297). Another tool that can benefit therapists is videoconferencing because it includes visual data for the therapist to observe. Videoconferencing can be used not only in therapy, but also to provide supervision. In addition Pollock stated, therapists can offer a variety of flexible hours to clients resulting in reaching clients who would not otherwise seek out services. Pollock (2006) stated “working with couples and families via the Internet allows the therapists to include members who are geographically remote, on different time schedules, or anxious about being seen in a therapist’s office” (p. 68).

Bischoff (2004) stated therapists may have fewer cancellations as a result of using telecommunications for treatment. In addition, therapists can manage their schedules and

organize billing through online websites that offer “virtual offices” (Jencius & Sager, 2001). In addition, Bischoff (2004) stated therapists reduce their personal travel time because they no longer have to drive to a formal setting such as an office. Another benefit for therapists is the current technology that protects client confidentiality such as encryption methods and password protection (Jencius & Sager, 2001). In addition, Jencius and Sager stated the ability for exchanging private and protected information through technology may be “greater protection than what we afford our paper records” (p. 296).

Having appropriate skills to communicate with clients through technology that uses writing skills is important and can assist therapists’ in building therapeutic relationship and creating a baseline for communicating through technology mediums. Pollock (2006) stated therapists can use an “emoticon” to express feelings which are patterned keyboard strokes that create pictures of facial expressions (p. 67). An example of this would be inserting a smiley face into an email. In addition, Pollock stated emotional bracketing allows therapists to bracket feelings in the middle of sentences to convey emotion. An example of this would be “I am working very hard [because I feel anxious] about expressing my feelings”. Finally, Pollock discussed the use of “descriptive immediacy” which is writing language that describes the nonverbal imagery to convey understanding. An example if this would be writing to a client “I feel excitement for you and how hard you have work, I am smiling with appreciation”.

Bischoff et al. stated using telecommunications for online therapy is convenient and can help therapists' access clients who seek out anonymity and wish to have control over what information they release about themselves. This factor may increase the therapists' access to clients who wish to remain somewhat anonymous in the therapeutic process. According to Pollock (2006) online counseling mediums are beneficial because the technology "transcends time zones, geographical limits, self-consciousness, hectic schedules, and physical limitations" (p. 68) which benefits the system overall.

Therapists can also benefit from soliciting referral agents and participating in collected practices (Jencius & Sager, 2001). According to Jencius and Sager, a referral agent is a service that "provides linkages from online consumer to family counselors" and only refers clients to fully licensed therapists who have active websites informing consumers about their services (p. 298). In addition, a collected practice is a website incorporating multiple therapists that focus on specific issues or problem areas, an example being marriage and family issues (Jencius & Sager, 2001).

### **Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy**

The third major theme emerging from the data is *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*. Both independent coders identified ways technology can be used to "support" or impact the "practice" of family therapy; however, under further analysis *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy* was a major theme identified by the coding team instead of just an aspect to the benefits of online family therapy. Five out of the ten articles addressed technology as an adjunct to traditional therapy.

Technology can be incorporated into traditional therapy practices in a variety of ways. The telephone is the most commonly used technology tool that can be used as an adjunct to face-to-face therapy (Bischoff, 2004). Bischoff stated therapy services only using the telephone does not provide adequate service if a client is experiencing crisis. In addition, utilizing a telephone only approach greatly decreases a therapist's ability to provide confidential treatment (Bischoff, 2004). Jencius and Sager (2001) stated "videoconferencing, similar to other online tools, could be used as an adjunct to family counseling" (p. 297). Bacigalupe and Lambe (2011) presented a case study using the telephone and videoconferencing to conduct family therapy sessions with a teenager with behavioral problems and her parents. Both of the client's parents were unable to attend therapy sessions due to their work schedules, but were able to participate in telephone sessions. The therapist also conducted therapy sessions between the family and the school counselor to discuss strengths and goals for the system as a whole. Therapy continued via telephone and utilized Skype technology to include additional transnational family members. Through the power of videoconferencing, the immediate and extended family processed experiencing cultural differences and assimilation factors while living in different geographic locations. During therapy session, the therapist was able to construct a genogram and engage the family in role plays which assisted the family in addressing cultural challenges.

Another convenient adjunct method for therapy is the use of electronic mail (Jencius & Sager, 2001). According to Bischoff (2004) the major benefit of email is the

potential for recorded information to be reviewed after it has been written because the email can be printed or saved. Email offers a potential for delaying responses by providing time for clients and therapists to process their thoughts and feelings before sending their communication. According to Jencius and Sanger, “couples and families may use email more effectively when they are having difficulty expressing their feelings and perspectives to each other verbally” (p. 68). Email can also link family members who are geographically separated (Jencius & Sager, 2001) and allows for the user to control the time and place when responding.

Email can be a way to bridge family members who are cut-off emotionally from one another (McDaniel, 2003). The benefits of using email as an adjunct to therapy included offering support for clients’ between regular therapy sessions and can also assist the therapist in reviewing communication between family members. McDaniel described a case study to outline how to use email communication as adjunct to traditional counseling. A couple presented for marital therapy and during the course of treatment it was concluded that the client had a long history of cut-offs in her family. The client contacted her previously cut-off step-brother via email during the course of treatment. She was able to process their email communications in face-to-face therapy sessions. Email communication was conducted between client and therapist between therapy sessions to further process information and offer support to the client as she continued to express her feelings in written form. McDaniel stated email is only a communication tool and was not conducted between the family members as a whole. McDaniel stated

therapists should be aware of how email communication can be misinterpreted and therapists should assess the strength of the therapeutic alliance before using email as a form of communication with clients.

Georgiades (2008) discussed a case study using face-to-face therapy in conjunction with email communication with a teenager who entered therapy due to past exposure to domestic violence. The theory used for treatment was based on solution focused interventions to assist the boy in processing anger related to abuse. Emails were exchanged between client and therapist for approximately 4 years. The therapist was able to process safety plans and structure future focused questions to assist the client in reducing his fears and dealing with anxiety regarding his father abusing him and his mother in the future. Throughout the course of treatment, the teenager and his mother were re-victimized by the father. The client experienced decreases in personal functioning and grades after this trauma occurred. The therapist encouraged the client to communicate with his father via email regarding the pain and anguish he and his mother suffered from the past exposure to domestic violence. This email communication was processed in therapy and incorporated into helping the teenager develop more strengths and coping skills. Results of behavior and functioning assessments represented increases in functioning after the email communication with the father. Ongoing email therapy as an adjunct to face-to-face therapy was useful with this family due to separation of geographical space (McDaniel, 2003).

## Summary

This chapter reviewed the results of the content analysis. Each article was read and coded for emerging key phrases and themes. The quantitative portion of the content analysis described the frequency of online family therapy articles in selected peer-reviewed journals. *The Family Journal* had the most articles with a prevalence rate of 0.58%. Each member of the coding team identified *Legal and Ethical Concerns* and *Benefits* as major themes. The primary researcher identified *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy* as a major theme and after the debriefing process, each independent coder agreed with the results. *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy* was a major theme instead of an aspect of the benefits of online family therapy. The qualitative portion provided detailed descriptions of the following themes about online family therapy: *Legal and Ethical Concerns*, *Benefits*, and *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*. These themes present an overview of what is currently being researched and offers a way to understand how online family therapy is impacting practice methods and ethical boundaries for marriage and family therapists.

CHAPTER V  
DISCUSSION, CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND  
RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter will discuss the findings of the research relevant to the field of marriage and family therapy and address the gap in current literature publishing articles focused on the impacts and practices of conducting online family therapy. Conclusions, implications, limitations, and recommendations will be addressed.

**Discussion**

The research results indicate the need for therapists to develop a deeper understanding of the impact technology will have on the field of marriage and family therapy, as well as the ethical concerns for therapists who choose to provide online therapy. The results for the content analysis were limited in scope and typically based on logistical factors of using online technology with little supporting evidence for the effectiveness or outcomes of online family therapy research.

This study examined 18 scholarly journals for articles related to online family therapy. The results produced ten articles for analysis. Each member of the coding team read each article and through the use of the Coding Form, highlighted key words and phrases that described online family therapy. The coding team included: the researcher and two independent coders. Once the independent coders read and analyzed the data, a debriefing meeting was conducted with each member of the coding team to process



results. The research findings revealed three themes: *Legal and Ethical Concerns*, *Benefits*, and *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*. The following is a discussion of the results of the content analysis.

Online family therapy research has addressed ethical and legal concerns for therapists and clients resulting in an initial understanding of how online family therapists can educate clients about the benefits and challenges of online family therapy. Providing ethical treatment to clients online is paramount. The overwhelming message is the impressing need for therapists to protect their clients from harm. Family therapists must increase their knowledge base regarding ways to protect clients and decrease the potential for harm when engaging in online family therapy. Services provided online come with substantial risks to confidentiality that can impact both clients and therapists. Therapists place themselves at risk when they do not properly follow ethical guidelines or fail to take initiative to ensure clients have the knowledge to make informed decisions regarding online family therapy.

An influx of research focused on ethical issues was present in early 2000; however, ethical research has become stagnant in recent years. According to the American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy (AAMFT) the code of ethics effective on July 1, 2012 outlined the standards for electronic therapy.

Principle 1.14 Electronic Therapy. Prior to commencing therapy services through electronic means (including but not limited to phone and Internet), marriage and family therapists ensure that they are compliant with all relevant laws for the

delivery of such services. Additionally, marriage and family therapists must: (a) determine that electronic therapy is appropriate for clients, taking into account the clients' intellectual, emotional, and physical needs; (b) inform clients of the potential risks and benefits associated with electronic therapy; (c) ensure the security of their communication medium; and (d) only commence electronic therapy after appropriate education, training, or supervised experience using the relevant technology (American Association for Marriage and Family Therapy, 2012).

Current research discussed potential legal issues of practicing without knowledge of how to protect confidentially online. In addition, therapists open themselves up for criticism when they are unaware of the harmful ways they could impact clients when providing online therapy to those who lack knowledge of online therapy or offering services to clients who are not suitable for online therapy. Overall, the legal and ethical concerns for online family therapists is concerning because many of the traditional counseling practices are not easily translated into the cyberworld of technology, computer-mediated communication, and the Internet.

Results identified two aspects of the theme of *Benefits*: benefits to clients and benefits to therapists. Clients who could benefit from online therapy include individuals living in rural areas. In addition, individuals who cannot access traditional mental health treatment or individuals who need flexibility in scheduling counseling sessions could also benefit. Articles included in the results provided some information about clients who are

not appropriate for online family therapy including clients who are experiencing severe crisis or who are unfamiliar with technology; however, more research needs to be done to fully understand this aspect. The results revealed the benefits to therapists are low overhead costs, flexibility in scheduling clients, and the ability to access clients who would not otherwise seek out services. Taken together, these two aspects revealed the potential for online family therapy to be beneficial for both clients and therapists as the Internet increases accessibility and flexibility for both parties. Although the two aspects are focused on different benefits, the findings reveal equality in both parties receiving equivalent benefits.

Online family therapy challenges traditional counseling ideals because of the removal of non-verbal cues and the lack of face-to-face contact. Unfortunately, substantial information about how therapists can account for the lack of non-verbal cues by processing ways to convey emotions when exchanging emails or written communication with clients was not extensively discussed in the literature, but a few techniques were discussed. Learning how to use keystrokes and bracketing to convey emotion is important to teach clients. Building therapeutic relationship is essential in both traditional therapy and online family therapy; however, researchers have yet to define skills for online therapists to use with technology that can assist in relationship building. The lack of non-verbal cues also limits the therapist's ability to assess a client's behavior or to become familiar with their type of communication style regarding humor,

expressing emotions, comfort levels, or other feelings that typically accompany traditional therapeutic interactions.

Finally, the results focused on *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy* were relevant for practitioners regardless if they choose to provide online services. The case studies revealed how technology can be integrated into traditional therapy. Results indicated therapists were able to communicate with their clients easily because the therapeutic relationship was already established. In addition, the ability to use a wide range of technology mediums was present in the literature. Results indicated that online family therapy can be applicable for rural populations or when incorporating family members who could not have otherwise been present in person. Potentially, the transition to incorporate technology into traditional therapy can be an easier move for many therapists not quite ready to fully provide online services.

### **Conclusions**

The purpose of this study was to conduct a content analysis of the professional literature about online family therapy. The research was guided by the research questions “To what extent have articles published in couple and family therapy journals addressed online family therapy?” and “What are the common themes emerging in the literature about online family therapy in couple and family therapy journals?” A review of online family therapy research provided an overview of guidelines and best practice methods for online family therapists. The content analysis revealed that research about the effects and practices of online family therapy is still in early development. The term online family

therapy was not identified in the literature and a variety of terms describing online therapy were present in the literature. Neither the fields of psychology, health care, social work, nor marriage and family therapy have consistent terminology describing this phenomenon.

It is concluded that three themes were present in the literature about online family therapy: *Legal and Ethical Concerns*, *Benefits*, and *Technology as an Adjunct to Traditional Therapy*. Upon future examination of the research questions, it is concluded that current research has not fully examined online family therapy to the extent that it should to entirely understand this phenomenon. Since online family therapy is still in early development, researchers have plenty of opportunity to add to the body of knowledge to increase awareness about the scope of practice, benefits, challenges, and potential outcomes for online family therapy. Based on the literature review presented in Chapter II of this study, it is concluded that many researchers are publishing research in journals not specifically focused on marriage and family therapy. For example, Jedlicka and Jennings (2001) published an article about email therapy with couples in the *Journal of Technology in Counseling*. In addition, Oravec (2000) published an online counseling opinion article in the *Journal of Mental Health*. Sampson et al. (1997) published their research article in the *Journal of Counseling & Development*. Finally, Sander's (1996) article examining couple group computer-mediated communication therapy was published in *Computers in Human Behavior*. This is alarming as experts in the field need to be contributing to this growing trend. In addition, comparison or outcome studies were

lacking. Conducting comparison studies is important because it could potentially support much of the research findings reported in this content analysis with concrete findings instead of suggestions for practice. The extent of published research is quite limited, especially since almost every article called for practitioners to gain knowledge and increase their personal awareness about online family therapy.

The need for evidence-based practices has been a growing influence on research. The field of family therapy must stay on trend and empirically research online family therapy to make conclusions about the evidence base for online family therapy. The articles for this study were mainly expert opinion and case studies. The current research did not possess the characteristics necessary to be evidence base including: randomization, clinical trials, efficacy factors, or generalizability factors. A lack of empirical evidence limits the potential to discuss strengths, weaknesses, and recommendations for future practices based on the results. The limited information available regarding online family therapy only provides a narrow scope for the recommendations and practices for online family therapists.

In addition, after a thorough review of literature, it is concluded that current research has failed to address the core concepts essential in conducting traditional family therapy. First, the literature was not specific in addressing how to incorporate multiple family members into online family therapy. This can be examined further by discussing how to incorporate family members living in the same location or living separately. It was established in Chapter II of this study that many clients seek out online therapy to

address relationship issues (Dubois, 2004); however, in the multiple case study by McDaniel (2003), family members refused to participate with the client online. Understanding client's motives for online family therapy and gaining a deeper understanding of their personal opinions about this therapy method would greatly benefit the field.

Second, the literature was not specific in how to apply family therapy models into an online environment. The logistics of setting up practice and ensuring clients' confidentiality was discussed; however, how to facilitate change with clients and apply theory through technology mediums was strongly lacking. This brings up many questions for future research about "how can theory be applied online?" and "which theories will be most effective in an online environment?" For example, it would be difficult to apply experiential techniques when conducting online family therapy. The feel of the environment and the impromptu application of experiential techniques would be difficult to translate. More importantly, this research brings up the question "how is change achieved in an online environment?" and "how is the therapeutic relationship developed online?" Researchers have long discussed the power of the therapeutic relationship in connection to change. From a systemic lens, technology will certainly impact the system overall which will impact the potential for change.

As discussed, in Chapter II of this study, technology is changing the way individuals communicate, which changes systems and creates new realities that individuals can access instantly, regardless of geographic location. Kellerman (2007)

stated systems are created in cyberspace. Licoppe and Smoreda (2005) discussed how the Internet creates “a connected presence” to others because of how technology connects individuals instantly (p. 321). In addition, Steinberger (2009) stated we are facing a “cultural transformation” as increases of using technology to communicate and build relationship with others is becoming more common. As Internet resources, social networking, and smart technology continue to increase, the natural inclination will be for individuals to use these methods for information gathering and communication exchanges. The creation of new technology has altered how systems are created which will be a major challenge for family therapists to address. Family therapists must take into account how the system of technology and the creation of new devices will impact systemic interactions.

Taking these aspects of potential changes, the field of family therapy is on the verge of a paradigm shift. The influence of technology on family therapy will have lasting changes. The influence of technology is pushing the bounds of what is possible for therapists; however, it must be taken with caution. Much of the research in this study addressed new principles for conducting online family therapy. The gathering of information and the way information is received and conveyed will certainly impact the therapeutic system. What steps must therapists take to adapt to how emotions are expressed through technology? How will therapists alter their concept of defining emotion based on this new avenue? How often will misunderstandings between therapist and client occur purely based on the system of technology added to the relationship?



Communication between client and therapist who occupy the same space can be a challenge. What will occur when therapist and client are separated by miles, states, or countries? The utilization for how emotion is conveyed opens up discussion for not only how emotions are perceived, but how they are perceived through the filter of technology.

### **Implications**

Researchers have discussed the increased potential for family therapy to be conducted online as the use of technology continues to be a present influence in the field. The results from this study have several direct implications for the field of marriage and family therapy. The results of the content analysis have several implications for researchers who are interested in adding to the body of knowledge about online family therapy. In addition, implications for practitioners' utilizing technologies either as a primary method for therapy or as an adjunct to traditional treatment are present. Implications for clients focused on easy access to services and convenience factors are also found within the literature. Finally, implications for academic institutions, training facilities, and ethical boards are present.

1. Online therapy is on the rise and as the demand for technology increases, so will the need for the professional to understand the impending changes that could impact the field of marriage and family therapy.
2. Technology affects how systems are created and maintained. It is necessary for therapists to develop an understanding of how relationships, communication

styles, therapeutic interactions, personal connections, and social relationships have adapted to the influence of technology.

3. Family therapists must address how technology is shifting the delivery of therapy services; thus changing how clients and therapist interact.
4. Therapists and clients have both similar and different benefits of using or administering online family therapy. Client's living in rural populations or who need flexible scheduling options or specialized treatment options could benefit. Therapists benefit from administering online family therapy by accessing a wide range of clients and have the options to include multiple family members into counseling sessions that may not otherwise participate in treatment.
5. As the influence of technology increases, educational institutes and universities will need to incorporate coursework and train new therapists about online family therapy. This will support current researchers' calls for continued education to stay abreast of ongoing changes in the field.
6. Family therapists must lead the field on the development, practice, and theory application for professionals. Family therapists need to publish online therapy research in journals specific to marriage and family to widen the scope and educate other practitioners.
7. Ethical boards will set the stage for practitioners to adopt guidelines to protect therapists and clients. Professional organizations must create ethical codes that

encompass the growing changes in the field by ensuring all the aspects of online family therapy are being addressed in ethical codes.

8. The field of family therapy has begun to research online therapy, but little research exists on specifically working with couples and families. The field must address the inclusion of families so the field is not reinforcing an individualistic approach.
9. The field of marriage and family therapy is facing a paradigm shift since the demand for social media and the creation of cyberspace has crept in as an influence in the field of marriage and family therapy.
10. Family therapists may be too quick to judge this growing trend because of their lack of knowledge, bias against technology, or not understanding how technology is already making an impact of how services are delivered.
11. Marriage and family therapists must be ready to educate themselves about the impending changes that will impact how therapy is delivered and be prepared to stay abreast of emerging technology trends by obtaining knowledge about software programs and social media outlets that will influence the field.
12. Technology connects families regardless of geographical distances and time and using technology as an adjunct to traditional therapy can be a viable option for many family therapists, under the right circumstances.
13. Current research is focused on the logistics of online family therapy, ethical concerns, and identifying potential clients; however, current literature does not

address theory application using a variety of technology mediums. Theory application research has potential to influence interventions and ensure good practice methods for online family therapist.

### **Limitations**

The articles included in the content analysis are by no means exhaustive of the literature regarding online therapy. This content analysis included articles published from 1997-2012 in select peer-reviewed journals which is a limitation of this study because it excludes articles published outside of those dates that could have information regarding online family therapy. Articles were obtained through the Texas Woman's University library. Articles not available electronically at TWU were accessed via Interlibrary loan, Google Scholar, ERIC, PsycINFO, SOCIndex, Family & Society Studies Worldwide, MasterFILE Premiere, and Academic Search Complete.

The content analysis results were limited to examining areas of interest focused on online family therapy. The term "online family therapy" was a limitation in this study because a concrete definition of online family therapy was not identified in the current research resulting in the primary researcher defining the term "online family therapy". Online family therapy is defined as providing therapeutic services to one or more persons utilizing a systems perspective in combination with technology mediums. The content analysis was also limited by only including journals relevant to the field of marriage and family therapy, excluding multiple peer-reviewed journals focused on technology, health, and psychology.

In addition, the researcher focused on limiting biases by setting aside personal prejudice about the application and influence of technology in the field of family therapy. Technology has an increased presence in individuals' lives and more people are turning to their smart phones, social networks, and computers to communicate and share information. The bias that this form of communication is subpar to traditional face-to-face communication could have skewed the results.

Online therapy is defined with a variety of terms; however, the researcher chose to only include certain terms to assist in narrowing results relevant to family therapy. The inclusion of additional search terms could have widened the scope of the results to strengthen the study. The following terms were used: online therapy, online counseling, Internet therapy, Internet counseling, email counseling, and information communication technologies. The researcher could have unknowingly excluded search terms or journal articles that could have been relevant to the research topic. Another potential limitation for the study was the selection of the coding team. Individuals trained in systems were included which could bias how the results were interpreted and reported. Potential biases about using technology in family therapy could have altered how the information was analyzed.

### **Recommendations**

The potential for future research about online family therapy is encouraging. Online family therapy is a new and an upcoming area for future researchers to help build a strong foundation of research aimed at increasing awareness and knowledge about the

growing trends and practices in online family therapy. The field of marriage and family therapy has yet to fully address the impact of technology on systemic interactions via technology mediums. In addition, the application of theoretical concepts in an online environment is widely under-researched. The implications for systemic interactions between therapist and client in cyberspace are still being explored. In addition, current research does not address how to gauge treatment outcomes and incorporate family members into the online therapy environment.

1. The field of family therapy needs a consistent definition for online family therapy.
2. Empirical research in this field is greatly needed as there are many unanswered questions regarding efficacy and treatment benefits of online family therapy.
3. Researchers need to examine how online family therapy compares to traditional family therapy by conducting empirical research.
4. Research still needs to address the implications of how cyberspace will impact systemic interactions between client and therapist.
5. Evidence-based practices will be important to determine evidence for online family therapy.
6. Future research needs to examine client perceptions and values about online family therapy.
7. Research needs to identify specific technology applications to determine efficacy, instead of just reporting about the functions of technology tools and potential benefits that are not based on outcome research.

8. Professional organizations can provide conferences and continuing education to address technology trends to increase the knowledge base about online family therapy.
9. Universities must incorporate the ethics of online family therapy into coursework requirements.

### **Summary**

Limited research exists about online family therapy. The goal of this study was to ascertain what has been written about online family therapy. A discussion about the results was presented. Conclusions, limitations, and recommendations were discussed. The future of online family therapy has great potential, but must be processed with caution and awareness of how technology influences systemic interactions.

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APPENDIX A

Coding Form



## APPENDIX B

### Articles for Qualitative Analysis

## ARTICLES FOR ANALYSIS

### *American Journal of Family Therapy*

Bischoff, R. J. (2004). Considerations in the use of telecommunications as a primary treatment medium: The application of behavioral telehealth to marriage and family therapy. *American Journal of Family Therapy*, 32(3), 173-187.

### *Contemporary Family Therapy*

Bischoff, R. J., Hollist, C. S., Smith, C. W., & Flack, P. (2004). Addressing the mental health needs of rural underserved: Findings from a multiple case study of a behavioral telehealth project. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 26, 179-198.

Georgiades, S. D. (2008). A solution-focused intervention with a youth in a domestic violence situation: Longitudinal evidence. *Contemporary Family Therapy: An International Journal*, 30, 141-151.

### *Family Process*

Bacigalupe, G., & Lambe, S. (2011). Virtualizing intimacy: Information communication technologies and transnational families in therapy. *Family Process*, 50(1), 12-26.

### *Journal of Systemic Therapies*

McDaniel, S. H. (2003). E-mail communication as an adjunct to systemic psychotherapy. *Journal of Systemic Therapies*, 22(3), 4-13.

***The Family Journal***

Baltimore, M. L. (2000). Ethical considerations in the use of technology for marriage and family counselors. *The Family Journal*, 8(4), 390-93.

Frame, M. (1997). The ethics of counseling via the Internet. *The Family Journal*, 5(4), 328-30.

Jencius, M., & Sager, D. E. (2001). The practice of marriage and family counseling in cyberspace. *The Family Journal*, 9(3), 295-301.

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Stevens-Smith, P. (1997). Of cyberspace, managed care, and family counseling: Entering the 21st century. *The Family Journal*, 5(1), 53-55.

# Jennifer Livings MS, LPC

## Education

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### Texas Woman's University

- Degree: Doctorate of Philosophy, Family Therapy
  - Currently ABD, anticipated date of graduation: August 2013
  - Current Research: A content analysis of eighteen scholarly journals: What has been written about online family therapy?
- Degree: Masters of Science, Family Therapy
  - Graduated: August 2008
- Degree: Bachelor of Science, Psychology
  - Graduated: May 2005

## Professional Credentials and Organizations

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### Licensed Professional Counselor

- Licensure current since 2011

### Phi Kappa Phi

- Current national member since 2011

## Clinical Experience

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### Clinical Coordinator, Cumberland Presbyterian Children's Home

Provide direct clinical services to clients incorporating strength based approaches. Oversee the organization of clinic programs to clients and families. Provide case consultation to LPC-I mental health professionals. Responsible for implementing new programs to meet a variety of mental health needs of clients.

- Work directly with Texas Department of Family and Protective Services to provide a holistic treatment for mandated clients including therapy and parent trainings.
- Provide therapy to children living in a residential setting and communicate directly with residential case managers through treatment team meetings.
- Supervise the delivery of therapeutic services to clients and oversee intern program.

### Case Manager, Cumberland Presbyterian Children's Home

Responsible for case management of children's residential program with focus on writing service plans based on treatment goals. Provided direct communication to Child Protective Services case managers and Residential Youth Care Workers to review cases, progress and behaviors. Directly responsible for the creation and organization of clinical files.

### Intake Counselor, Cumberland Presbyterian Children's Home

Created a referral based program responsible for communicating services to clients and families. Provided assessments for potential clients and facilitated referrals to applicable agency programs. Facilitator of parent behavior management trainings and pre-marriage trainings to individuals, couples and families.

## Qualifications Summary

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- Licensed Professional Counselor with experience providing therapy to families, individuals, couples and children.
- Experience with working collaboratively with community partners to provide services to clients and families.
- Proficiency in theory application and assessment using critical thinking skills.
- Excellent team focused approach with solid leadership and communication skills.
- Systems trained therapist.