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Online Counseling: Much To Do About Nothing in the Political World?

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Abstract. This article describes some of the common issues in assessing the efficacy of online counseling.

Although there is much professional controversy about the efficacy of online counseling, the issues being raised and the impediments to resolving these issues are as old as counseling itself.

One route to efficacy is the ease with which a counseling modality can be offered. Online counseling can transcend space and time dependent on the specific submodality: e.g., email, video conferencing, chat rooms, and the like. Thus, it appears that it increases inclusiveness for all those who might wish to obtain counseling. On the other hand, without supporting technology, online counseling shuts off segments of populations who often are the least educated and of the lowest socioeconomic strata. In this case, online counseling mitigates against inclusiveness. (Another aspect of dependence on technology is that online counseling tends to reify technology as a problem arbiter and solver and to discount technology as a problem creator and maintainer.)

Another route to efficacy may be the degree to which patients and clients can misrepresent themselves. One school of thought is that anyone can be anyone through online communication and, thus, misrepresentation is a reliability and validity threat to effective counseling. Another school of thought is that anyone can be that anyone's true someone online. A third perspective is that misrepresentation goes with the territory of communication and that online counseling brings nothing qualitatively distinct to the table. A fourth perspective is that we all are constituted by multiple selves that are triggered by various internal and external stimuli. As can be seen, the interface of misrepresentation and online counseling may serve as a projective device for one's own ideologies.

Another route to efficacy may be the "personal" touch or some "authentic" aspect of the counselor-counselee relationship or process. Opponents of online counseling advocate that the personal and authentic can only occur or much more likely occur when space or time are shared in the immediacy and spontaneity of the Now. Opponents of these opponents suggest that various online relationships may be quite personal and authentic regardless of space, time, immediacy, and spontaneity--or because of distances and disparities in combinations of these variables. One source of data supporting this last suggestion is the "hit rate" and economic success of personal and pornographic chat rooms and other services--often mimicking or sharing an isomorphic parallelism with boundary violations and transference and countertransference problems.

Yet another route to efficacy may be effective regulation and monitoring of online counseling by appropriate authorities. This presents issues as diverse as who will regulate the regulators to the challenge of controlling cyberspace. In addition, the separation of guild and other professional and consumer economic issues from issues of therapeutics and human welfare needs to be addressed--but this very issue as formally constituted may only be a manifestation of false consciousness.

The above suggest that controversy about online counseling is less about the modality than about ideological stances that are online even when offline. (See Almer, E. (April 22, 2000). Online therapy: An

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arm's length approach. The New York Times, p. A1; A11; Finfgeld, D.L. (1999). Psychotherapy in cyberspace. *Journal of the American Psychiatric Nurses Association*, 5, 105-110; Miller, J. K., & Gergen, K. J. (1998). Life on the line: The therapeutic potentials of computer-mediated conversation. *Journal of Marital & Family Therapy*, 24, 189-202; Murphy, L. J., & Mitchell, D. L. (1998). When writing helps to heal: E-mail as therapy. *British Journal of Guidance & Counselling*, 26, 21-32; Newman, B. (1997). The use of online services to encourage exploration of ego-dystonic sexual interests. *Journal of Sex Education & Therapy*, 22, 45-48.) (Keywords: False Consciousness, Online Counseling, Therapeutic Efficacy.)