ESTABLISHING, PROMOTING AND MAINTAINING
counselling relationship for effective
working alliance at a distance

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The paper focuses on how to establish, promote and maintain therapeutic relationship, rapport and effective working alliance at a distance. The paper explored the possibility of counsellors using telephone and computer/internet technologies to communicate their generic skills, receptive and responding skills to the clients vis-à-vis facilitating clients’ self disclosure, growth towards self autonomy and learning new coping strategies that would have more generalised application in the whole life of the client. The counsellors’ generic attributes, receptive and responding skills identified in this paper include; empathic understanding of the clients and unconditional respect for clients and to be perceived as congruent, genuine, honest, and non judgemental acceptance of clients. The objective of the paper is to sensitise the counsellors of the advantages, prospects, challenges, and ethical issues that might arise from telephone and computer/internet counselling. The use of technologies for counselling at a distance could only be effective if the process is ‘humanised’ and not with intention of substituting face-to-counselling process with technology. The choice of mode of counselling in any situation must be mutual agreed upon by the counsellor and counselee before the commencement of the process.

Key words: Establishing, promoting, maintaining, counselling, therapeutic, relationship, technologies, telephone, computer/internet

INTRODUCTION

The paper examines how therapeutic relationships, rapport and working alliance could be established and built at a distance. Therapeutic relationship is specialised helping relationship between the therapist/counsellor and client(s). Kahn (1999), reveals that the relationship is the therapy itself. In term of the therapeutic climate there is an overwhelming agreement among researchers that the key factor in client change resides in the relationship between client and counsellor, and in the self that the counsellor is able to put into the relationship (McGuines 2003). However Clarkson (1999), indicates that person-to-person relationship exemplified in Rogerian counselling is a paradigmatic example of the therapeutic relationship. According to Khan (1999), Rogers’ pursuit of goal involves setting out with the client, not to solve one particular problem or presented problem but for the client to grow, in a way that facilitate the growth of autonomous, developing coping strategies that will have more generalised application in the whole of the client’s life. Also Rogers’ (1942) concept of growth is growth towards more autonomous, responsible and confident living which is based on creation of a relationship, a therapeutic climate, which of its nature encourages, permits and enhances therapeutic movement in the client. Rogers used self disclosure as a means of establishing more symmetric relationship. Effective counselling consists of a definitely structured permissive relationship which allows the client to gain an understanding of himself or herself to a degree which enables him or her to take positive steps in the light of this new orientation (Rogers, 1942). Strupp (1986) notes therefore, what counselling may be regarded as developing, maintaining and managing, a specialised human relationship with therapeutic intent. Egan (1986) acknowledges that, the prime responsibility for creating that relationship called a therapeutic climate lies with the therapist, who must be congruent in the relationship.
The concession, among the authors above is that, the effectiveness and efficiency of a counsellor in counselling process lies with his or her ability to communicate to the client his or her empathic understanding and unconditional respect for him or her. The counsellor must be perceived by the client as being in congruent, genuine, honest, and non judgemental in accepting him or her, thus making it imperative for the counsellor to acquire both generic skills, receptive and responding skills in order to establish, promote and maintain a genuine helping relationship. The communication of the generic skills, receptive and responding skills by the counsellors to the clients will encourage the clients’ self disclosure or continuous readiness to learn new coping skills and be motivated to change their life strategies. The communication of counsellors’ attributes to the clients, forms the pillar of building a therapeutic relationship and this could be achieved through face-to face contact, telephone, audio and videotapes, Internet, audio conferencing, facsimile machines, and real-time video.

Counselling at a distance (through telephone, audio and videotapes, internet, audio conferencing, facsimile machines, and real-time video) is among the methods of service delivery in open and distance learning. In this case, counselling is hereby delivered through technologies to students who are unable or unwilling to travel to study centres, or constrained by domestic or work commitments, and/or live in geographic remote locations that may make frequent access to the study centre almost impossible. This technologically mediated mode of service delivery, involves providing counselling and support when physical or transactional distance or time separates the students from the counsellors. The provision of technically mediated counselling has its own inherent challenges. The challenges of using these mode of communication in Open and Distance learning involve potential technological difficulties, discomfort with technology, relationship development, access to technology, and ethical issues. The ability to provide counselling services at a distance depends on a variety of technologies from simple systems (for example, telephone, audio and videotapes) to more complex technologies (for example, Internet, audio conferencing, facsimile machines, and real-time video) but this paper, would be discussing telephone and online media counselling in the subsequent sections.

**Telephone counselling (one-to-one, teleconferencing, answer phones)**

Telephone counselling involves the counsellors staying in a different location from the learners and didactically communicates through cellular or fixed-line telephone with the learner. This counselling process could be used for counselling distance learners living far away and can either be initiated by the counsellors or the learners. Counselling through telephone is quite different from face-to-face counselling and the main different is the absence of facial clue or non verbal cues but the verbal counselling skills used in standard face-to-face counselling are the same. It is suitable for informing, advising and counselling the distance learners. In National Open University of Nigeria, the telephone has been the most dependable alliance of the student counsellors for providing guidance and counselling services to many students living in rural areas. Telephone system provides effective techniques for client-counsellor communication because it is fast, convenient, and efficient. Telephone and email counselling are effective supplements to traditional counselling, as they connect underserved individuals to the outside world (Mermelstein and Holland, 1991; Tait, 1999). Despite challenging issues like telephone tag and avoids the interruptions associated with telephone calls, the telephone has been effective tool for distance counselling, (Neill, Mainous, Clark, and Hagen, 1994). In addition, telephone could be used for other guidance services such as information, advice, referral, advocacy, follow up etc and these services could be provided through calls, SMS, blackberry utilities and instant messages.

**Process of telephone counselling in NOUN**

In NOUN, the beginning phase process of telephone counselling starts when the prospective students phone the counsellor to make first enquiry about enrolment into programmes. The prospective students might be seeking for information or advice or counselling. The process of establishing and building therapeutic relationship, rapport and working alliance through the telephone eventually starts with the exchange of telephone numbers between the counsellor and the prospective students or registered students. This process involves establishing a relationship mainly through voice clues in the absent of physical presence, facial and non verbal cues. Counselling through telephone involves communicating verbally to the clients, the counsellor’s attributes of empathic understanding, and unconditional respect, non judgemental acceptance, honest and genuine regards for the client, and for the therapeutic climate or environment to be perceived as congruent, by clients. Like in the face to face session, telephone counselling requires both generic skills, receptive and responding skills of the therapist in order to establish and build a therapeutic relationship. Active listening and hearing, the voice tone and expression, degree of reflection and appropriate responding skills of the counsellors are the building blocks necessary for the establishment this therapeutic relationship rapport and which will promote a working alliance between the counsellors and their clients. In telephone counselling, the counsellor use the same verbal skills usually used at the beginning, middle and ending phase processes observed in face-to-face counselling. These verbal skills are geared towards
Barriers to effective telephone counselling
Barriers to effective telephone counselling in NOUN might be caused by the sender’s and receiver’s poor skills of communication, perception of counsellors as unapproachable, inability of learners to speak fluently or by the external factors such as lack of or poor service delivery by mobile phone providers, faulty telephone equipment, for example, handset, call interruption, noisy environment and lack of constant electricity supply to charge the telephone batteries etc. In NOUN, student counsellors bear the cost of using their telephones for counselling at their study centres and no reimbursement is made to them to upset the cost.

For telephone counselling to be effective, for counselling in open and distance education, the following issues should be properly addressed:

a) Is telephone capable of presenting all the intended information to the counselee in clear and unambiguous manner?
b) Will telephone enables the counselee to take active part in the counselling process?
c) Cost: What is the cost structure of the telephone and the unit cost per counselling session? This must be established before commencement of the counselling?
d) What kind of counselling needs of students could be met through the telephone?
e) Interactivity and user friendliness: What kind of interaction does the telephone enables? How easy it is to use?

Meanwhile, the next section of this paper would be discussing another vital medium of counselling at a distance- counselling by computer/internet.

Counselling by computer - internet
In NOUN, with the advent of Integrated Learning Management System (ILSM) counselling by computer/internet is one of the media of counselling use to counsel learners. As of now the access to ILSM is restricted to registered students and staff of the University. The use of computer/internet for counselling demands access to computers and telecommunication equipment. On-line discussion or dial-up telephone can be conducted through the computer networks. The counsellor interacts with more learners simultaneously at different terminals. The counsellor announces the contact time in cyberspace and distance learners log-in to discuss the issues. This is known as bulletin board system or as the chat room or talk room which holds one-to-one or to many conversations respectively.

E-mail is another commonly used device for counselling via internet. For example instead of writing letters and waiting for several days to get the reply by post, counsellors can post vital information as well as give feedback or responses to distance learners individually or in a group. The asynchronous nature of email communication eliminates the frustration of frequent calls. Professionals and consumers also have the benefit of being able to respond at convenient times (Bader and Braude, 1998; Guterman and Kirk, 1999). Listening skills are important in counselling whether you are listening to a learner’s voice or to a learner’s message in written communication. As a counsellor you must interpret both the explicit and implicit messages. The counsellors must confirm that they have understood the learner’s message correctly by interpreting, clarifying and restating it.

Video conferencing is an additional technology useful for counselling at a distance (Sampson, 1998). This technology allows counsellors and clients to see and hear each other over vast distances. Video conferencing is one of the best ways of ‘humanising’ technology driven counselling process. During the past few years, desktop videoconferencing software and hardware designed for mainstream society has become economical and simple to use (Ruskin, Palmer, Hagenouw, Lack, and Dunnill, 1998). For instance, software that allows sound and moving pictures to be transmitted can be downloaded over the Internet. Most new computers include a sound card and digital cameras (Ruskin et al., 1998). Also detachable LSB web camera is available now. These advances provide the public with the ability to send and receive real-time audio and video over a computer. Videoconferencing is a technology that holds great potentials for effective psychotherapy or counselling. This mode of service delivery allows participants to view and interact with each other from distant points. Counsellors obtaining self disclosure from the clients, motivating the clients to learn new ways of thinking, doing things and developing new coping strategies to life. Listening skills are important in counselling while you are listening to a learner’s voice. The counsellor needs to be good listeners in order to accomplish this task. The first telephone call creates an opportunity for both the counsellor and client to get to know each other better and exchange vital information about one another. This information includes name of the callers or receivers, contact addresses, e-mail, residential addresses, age, occupations, marital status, schools and programmes in cases of students and other crucial information that will help to develop, facilitate, and maintain the therapeutic relationship. Equally important and imperative is the need to maintain regular communication between with the clients throughout the process phases of the counselling or therapy. Recently video and audio telephone conferencing has been introduced and could be used for cellular phones counselling hereby ‘humanising’ the process. In Nigeria, cellular phone service providers such as Airtel and MTN have made provision for video/audio telephone conferencing for their customers especially phones with web cameras. This software can be used for counselling purposes.

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and clients have the advantage of reading the body language and facial expressions of one another, which helps establish rapport and build therapeutic relationship. Videoconferencing is the technology that most closely resembles counselling in person therefore, it appears to be a promising mode of technology for serving clients residing in rural and geographically remote areas. In order to initiate a videoconferencing session, counsellor contacts client(s) by typing in the address of the second person's computer, the two computers establish a connection over the internet and the counselling begins. This modality is interactive: information can be provided and feedback given at the same time. Thus, communication is enhanced as the participants can see and hear each other as they interact.

Teleconferencing is another counselling process used in NOUN to counsel distance learners and it involves linking a number of students at different locations to the same Integrated Learning Management system with the counsellor being at one end while others are of different ends. Teleconferencing can be in form of two-way-audio and one-way-video conferencing. A well equipped e-learning has been established at the NOUN Headquarter. The University currently working with National Space Research and Development Agency (NASRDA) through collaboration had linked up 16 of its study centres with the Nigerian satellite for the provision of internet connectivity, conduct interactive video conferencing and conduct tutorial facilitation, advice, information and counselling on line across all these centres from just one base (Ipaye, 2007). At the National Open University effort is being made to incorporate desk teleconferencing provision into the Integrated Learning Management System. Although it is conceivable that videoconferencing will supplement the counselling process, it is not equivalent to face-to-face counselling (Sampson, 1998). The costs and benefits of counselling in person and at a distance must be completely understood before making full use of counselling through videoconferencing (Sampson, 1998)

Advantages of using technologies for counselling at a distance
One of the primary advantages of using technologies for counselling at a distance is that they increase access to resources related counselling beyond those traditionally available (Kreutzer, West, Sherron, Wehman and Fry, 1992). Distance technology can also transmit counselling services to geographically remote, underserved individuals (Mermelstein and Holland, 1991; Sampson et al., 1997; Swinson et al., 1995).

An additional advantage is that distance communication technologies can be seen as cost-effective. Jones (1997) indicates that tele-counselling is more cost-effective than traditional office visits. Additionally, Osgood-Hynes et al. (1998) explains that distance technology improves access to effective psychological treatment at a reasonable cost. Cost-effectiveness of distance technology was also demonstrated in relation to distance education (Ancis, 1998) Distance counselling was found to be more efficient than the traditional method (Alimandi, Andrich, and Porqueddu, 1995; Guy, 1995; Kreutzer et al., 1992). The actual counselling process occurs faster at a distance than in person (Alimandi et al., 1995) and eliminates the travel time (Swinson et al., 1995). These characteristics allow ideal use of clients' time and energy. Furthermore, idle time is minimized due to the real time interaction that on-line counselling offers (Alimandi et al., 1995).

Another crucial advantage of distance counselling is that it increases client's self-confidence, as it opens up new opportunities for them (Kreutzer et al., 1992). Individuals with disabilities in distance education courses found that participation helped them adjust to their disabilities through the discipline it required and the feelings of achievement it furnished (Kenny and Murray, 1993). Additionally, computer use increased the motivation of individuals of various ages, backgrounds, interests, and abilities (Kreutzer et al., 1992). In NOUN, through Integrated Learning management System, the students in prison, in Nigerian Army, Air Force, Navy, Custom, Immigration Civil Defence and those living in remote area can now be easy to reach.

Challenges of Counselling at a Distance
Although the foregoing section identified some exciting applications of technology, these same applications are not without inherent special challenges for counselling. One challenge involves the inevitable technical difficulties that arise occasionally. Counsellors must be prepared with alternate plans of service delivery in the event of technical failures. For example, using the telephone as a back up when a videoconferencing system fails.

Clients may also be apprehensive about distance counselling due to the non-traditional nature of the counselling sessions and the technology that is involved. Strategies counsellors may use to decrease consumers' anxiety include training, humanizing the environment, and portraying a favourable outlook on the distance counselling process.

Counsellors who “humanize” the counselling environment help clients accept counselling at a distance. The term “humanize” was introduced in the distance education literature and refers to the establishment of a safe, accepting environment (Ancis, 1998). A humanized environment is one in which the barrier of distance is broken down through the establishment of rapport among the participants. The creation of rapport increases consumers' interest, motivation, and comfort (Ancis, 1998). "There is no substitute for a positive, caring, nonthreatening environment" (Spitzer, 1998, p. 55). Overall, this human dimension is as significant to the
success of distance activities as the technical dimension (Spitzer, 1998). Therefore, counsellors must develop the human dimension of distance services as well as the technical dimension.

According to Alimandi et al. (1995), clients were capable of interacting with distance counsellors in a relaxed and natural manner after participating in computer training. Additionally, consumers' attitudes regarding technology improved after the training. These researchers demonstrated that the key issue for success with on-line counselling was the ability of the participants to relate to each other. As regards training, the NOUN have in recent past organised comprehensive training both staff and students through workshops and seminar on how to use Integrated Learning Management System.

In addition to providing training and humanizing the environment, the professional must have a positive attitude toward technology and distance activities (Alimandi et al., 1995; Ancis, 1998). The counsellor who views distance counselling with an open mind creates an atmosphere responsive to effective counselling. Likewise, a facilitative environment is produced when the counsellor views distance counselling as a tool for providing services to consumers who have limited opportunities.

Conversely, some resist the technology because they view it as a mechanical rather than human technology (Anthony et al., 1990). According to McCollum and Chan (1985), counsellors who reject the use of technology are not assisting their clients effectively. Counsellors will be most effective if they incorporate technology into their practices while maintaining a humanistic orientation (Anthony et al., 1990). "Rather than assuming critical elements are lost when human relationships are mediated by technology, it seems more fruitful to examine how they have changed" (Tait, 1999, p. 119).

Consensus continues to build that technology is a means for counsellors to practice more effectively, to involve their clients in the counselling process, and to achieve improved counselling results (Anthony et al., 1990). Therefore, although some counsellors' express discomfort toward technology, they must go beyond their comfort zones to ideally serve their consumers.

The literature documents several activities to help counsellors reduce their anxiety about using technology. First, distance counselling should be introduced to counsellors slowly (Anthony et al., 1990). Individuals accept change when they experience success with moderate, focused, and specific changes (Gay, 1996). Next, counsellors require adequate training to decrease their apprehension and increase their comfort with technology (O'Toole and Wagner, 1985). Similarly, distance technology literature, in-service workshops, and shadowing experiences should be offered to professionals before they engage in online counselling (Ancis, 1998). Finally, technological support must be available to assist counsellors once they have initiated online counselling (Spitzer, 1998). All of these activities are instrumental in improving mental health counsellors' perspectives on distance counselling.

The development of a counselling relationship via technological systems is also a potential problem (Mermelstein and Holland, 1991; Neill et al., 1994; Sampson et al., 1997). Many counsellors have contended that authentic counselling cannot take place over a distance (Sanders and Rosenfield, 1998). They proposed that the long distance between the counsellors and clients compromises the counselling relationship (Ostbye and Hurlen, 1997; Sanders and Rosenfield, 1998; Tait, 1999). Although compromising the relationship is a concern, relevant literature has provided evidence that distance learning (Eldredge, Gerard, and Smart, 1994; Spitzer, 1998) and distance counselling (Frank et al., 1997; Osgood-Hynes et al., 1998; Sampson et al., 1997; Selmi, Klein, Greist, Sorrell, and Erdman, 1990) can be as effective as traditional approaches. The following researchers analyzed the effectiveness of distance counselling in their respected fields.

Efficacy of distance counselling is insignificant if clients do not have access to distance technology. A socioeconomic challenge to counselling, therefore, involves inequitable access to computers and the Internet (Sampson et al., 1997; Tait, 1999). This inequity could widen social disparities in access and outcomes in counselling. Previous research indicated that Internet use is skewed toward well-educated, affluent, middle-aged males (Who's in line, 1997). However, recent research suggests that the demographics of Internet use are changing, and the Internet has been embraced by every age and ethnic group (Crockett, 1999). In regards to gender, men have dominated the Internet. However, women are the fastest-growing segment of the online population (Johnson, 1998; Who's in line, 1997). Although email is still not available to as many individuals as the telephone, the number of Internet users and cybercafé in Nigeria is growing at a astronomical rate. This trend correlates with low-cost Internet use, mass marketed online services, employer-provided email accounts, and increased public access to the Internet (Tait, 1999). Therefore, as computer and Internet access become more widespread, the distribution of users becomes more diversified.

Ethics

Ethical issues pose legitimate concerns regarding online counselling. The novelty of on-line counselling does not excuse it from traditional standards of the counselling practice. One such standard is the protection of the clients' confidentiality. The greatest concern expressed in the literature involves potential lack of client confidentiality while using email for consultation (Neill et al., 1994; Sampson et al., 1997). Clients who use email in
the workplace for consultation are not assured of confidentiality and may inadvertently expose personal details to their employers.

Furthermore, clients who use accounts at home may lack privacy from their families. In order to achieve clients' confidentiality, encryption techniques must be developed and adopted by all Open universities as it done with the Integrated Learning Management system in NOUN. For example, every email user should have a distinct identifier for logging onto the system. Additionally, procedures should be in place that restricts users' access to only information for which they have a legitimate need. Furthermore, agencies should take steps to limit unauthorized access to computer systems (National Research Council, 1997). Some basic encryption already exists in many email programs, but it is underused. Adoption of digital certificates will quicken over the next years and personal email will be sufficiently protected (Forrester Research, 1996). Until email users' confidentiality is secured, counsellors should not engage in online counselling due to the possibility for interception of the messages.

Clients who receive online counselling and preserve their anonymity pose an additional ethical concern for counsellors. In the case of Integrated Learning Management System, students log in with their matriculation numbers and also the issue of hidden identity is ruled out. However in cases where the students agreed with the counsellor to use public cybercafés, such problem may be addressed prior to commencing distance counselling by identifying the client, verifying his or her identity and obtaining alternative methods of contact in an emergency (American Counselling Association, 1999). Counsellors must also screen for suicide and violence prior to initiating distance counselling services (Grohol, 1997a). Clients with suicidal or violent tendencies must be referred to a traditional counselling setting.

In addition to the anonymity clients have while online, counsellors' identities are also concealed. This creates a problem in confirming counsellors' credentials and identities. In the past clients have been left with the burden of obtaining and verifying potential counsellors' documentation. Currently, however, clients can access web pages that offer credentialing services for online counsellors (Grohol, 1997b). Apart from having access to web pages, for the counsellors and students to interface using Integrated Learning Management System platform in NOUN, they must login with their identification number. Counsellors who pay annual fees and provide documents that verify their credentials and identity are listed online for prospective clients to view. This is only the beginning to assuring clients that online counsellors are qualified for the services they render. Online counsellors also need to take responsibility and clearly document their credentials (Sampson, 1998 p. 224). He further stated that, "Professional associations in counselling need to re-evaluate their role and functioning in an information age in which psycho educational assessment and information are readily available outside of the traditional counselling process" (Sampson, 1998, p. 224). Standards for counselling at a distance must be developed and updated periodically to maintain an ethical model for the counselling profession.

Furthermore, it is ethical for distance counsellors' to establish boundaries to their use of distance technology. A framework for selecting the counselling method that best meets the need of each client must be developed and implemented. This may be accomplished by establishing an in-take procedure that individually evaluates potential clients and determines the most appropriate counselling mode for each client (American Counselling Association, 1999). Counsellors must also evaluate clients' intellectual, emotional and physical abilities to use online counselling services (American Counselling Association, 1999). Through this process, determination is made as to which counselling needs may be fulfilled through online counselling and which needs may only be met through in-person counselling (Haas, 2000; Mandl et al., 1998). For instance, traditional counselling is necessary for intensive forms of counselling (Haas, 2000) and for clients in severe crises. However, online counselling is most appropriate for helping individuals who have life and relationship issues and are not able to access traditional counselling services.

Another serious ethical issue related to counselling online is that counselling standards have not kept pace with the use of technology. "Potential breaches of confidentiality, lack of interstate licensure, and the inadequate policing of online counselling makes the ethical and legal use of this medium somewhat murky" (Haas, 2000, p.26). In order to clarify some of these issues, the National Board for Certified Counsellors' (NBCC) has endorsed ethical standards for online counselling (Bloom, 1999). These standards include ethics for online counsellors. According to these ethics, online counsellors must:

- Review legal and ethical codes and inform clients of encryption methods
- Inform clients if and how long session data is preserved
- Address impostor concerns
- Verify parental/guardian consent for minor clients
- Follow procedure regarding release of information
- Provide rationale for web counsellor's level of disclosure
- Provide a link to web sites of certification bodies and licensure boards
- Obtain the name of at least one counsellor on call within the client's geographical region
- Discuss procedures for contacting the counsellor when he or she is not online
- Explain the possibility of technological failure
- Explain how to cope with potential misunderstandings
CONCLUSION
In conclusion, online counselling is a very promising mode of service delivery that should be considered to supplement traditional counselling services. As many authors have cautioned, it is unrealistic and undesirable to substitute all traditional face to face counselling sessions with online counselling. However, the effective usage of online counselling will depend on the capability and competency of the counsellors and counselees in operating the computer and internet. The concession among the authors is that if online mode of counselling is effectively developed, counsellors and counselees are sufficiently made available to the students. The internet could be used to bring counselling services to the door step of every distance learner. Challenges such as clients comfort, technical difficulties, ethics, and cost-effectiveness must be addressed prior to integrating this technology into the counselling process at a distance. Online counselling will not totally replace the conventional mode of service delivery. Rather, it should complement traditional services to improve access to and the calibre of counselling. Furthermore, it is important to remember that online counselling has a technical dimension and a human dimension (Spitzer, 1998). Therefore, counsellors must develop the human and the technological components of distance counselling to achieve success. Also the choice of online counselling should be of the clients' consent and not imposition.

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