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Online Therapy, a Cultural Perspective

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Summary

Computer-mediated relationships are growing by the day. Personal and professional activities are now commonly carried out online. E-therapy and virtual office abound on the internet. Yet while there are countless English-speaking online therapy sites available on the different search engines, there are practically no search results for e-therapy in Spanish. This article will contemplate on the possible explanations for this marked difference, and look at online relationships from a cultural perspective.

Keywords

online-counseling, e-therapy, terapia online, orality, intercultural aspects

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My personal journey into e-therapy

Online therapy has been a part of my profession for over ten years now, and today I couldn't envisage my practice without it. I see it as an indispensable resource to my work, not only in that it expands my possibilities, but also because online activities are growing by the day. Internet usage in the world population as for June 30, 2009 has almost quintupled with respect to December 31, 2000ⁱ.

In a way, opening a virtual office was a natural extension of my earlier interests. Computers had already been a part of my life, and although information science as a discipline had little to do with my career, I had always found the time to perfect my computer skills. As technology became more sophisticated, I began to integrate it into my clinical practice. I not only had a computer at home, but also one in my office, long before this became standard practice.

And then came the Internet, which of course added an entirely new dimension to computer use. I was fascinated by the opportunity to have such direct access to all the research tools the Internet offered, right there at my fingertips. Later I joined forums on specialized topics of my interest, and registered with sites

offering academic material. I could also pursue my hobbies, "chat" with my friends and relatives all over the world, and even meet new people or add colleagues to my MSN. All of a sudden, I was connecting with people across the globe, and experimenting with how to communicate with them through this new and engaging medium. Taking my practice online seemed like the next logical step.

Some Cultural Considerations

Most of my first online clients were English-speaking individuals or couples—mostly Americans, Canadians, British, and Australians. This made sense, of course, since my initial virtual office was on an American site, attracting mainly Anglo-Saxon clients. But as I started expanding my virtual practice, and discussing online therapy with colleagues and acquaintances, I started to notice some cultural differences (1).

Although born in Belgium, and having lived in several different countries while growing up, I have resided most of my adult life in Buenos Aires, Argentina. In my face-to-face practice I attend clients from different cultures, in the language of their choice (i.e., if I am able to provide it), but ironically I have a far less diverse clientele online.

What surprised me most, given my experience with Latinos in face-to-face settings, is that I have had very few Latin clients throughout my online experience. That should be no surprise, since upon Googling "*terapia online*" (or equivalents) there don't seem to be many sites dedicated to online counseling in Spanish, if any at all (although there are individual therapists who do offer online therapy).

Nor have I come across any search results for Argentinean online therapy sites, except, again, for individual websites. And although most Argentineans are not novices to cyberactivities, have easy access to the internet and use it frequently, online services such as e-therapy have still not latched on. Critics of online counseling - who usually include people who have never tried it - have told me that it lacks interpersonal closeness. What is interesting, however, is that many of these skeptics engage in numerous other types of non-therapy related online relationships where this shortcoming does not seem to be an issue.

The prospect of sitting in front of a computer in order to get online therapy is culturally conceived as being less intimate, personal, and spontaneous. From what I have been told in the many discussions I have had on the subject is that the idea of a virtual office is perceived as distant, unreal, unemotional, and lacking the ability to convey empathy. The non-physicality of computer-mediated relationships is seen as interfering with the therapeutic alliance. Even webcam sessions seem to have little appeal. According to Julio Moreno, member of the Psychoanalytic Association of Buenos Aires, for instance, "digital-informatics leaves out a very complex and extremely rich range of sensations which accompany the contact and closeness of the bodies. For instance, when we meet with a patient in our office, even before having pronounced a word, there is an abundance of sensations which transmit very valuable information. We have a

psychic apparatus as well as a physical one, tailored to capture the type of information which is irreplaceable and essential to our practice as analysts" (2). The emphasis here is on the therapist-client proximity, as well as on verbal and nonverbal communication, and virtual offices are reported to lack these essential components.

As a believer in the validity of computer-mediated communication myself, I have often wondered about the reasons for this cultural resistance to virtual counseling. Here are three possible explanations I have come up with so far:

1. Oversupply of Therapists

As is generally known, one of the main reasons people seek online therapy is because they may not have easy access to face-to-face psychotherapy, whether it be because they are homebound or because they live in geographically removed areas with little or no availability of mental health professionals. E-therapy offers mobility, and this is what makes it especially attractive to those who lack access to in-person care. In Argentina, psychotherapists abound - not only in Buenos Aires, its capital, but in most major Argentinean cities and towns. So with this extensive availability of *in situ* psychological resources, the need for online option may diminish. There are more psychologists in Argentina per capita than in any other country in the world except for Uruguay (3), its small neighbor. Buenos Aires, sometimes referred to as the world capital of psychoanalysis, appears to have three times as many mental health professionals per capita as the entire state of New York (4), reportedly one therapist per 121 inhabitants (5), and the number continues to grow. Most middle class *Porteños* (6) have undergone psychotherapy at one point of their lives (7). Many psychoanalyzed patients are proud to admit it and openly discuss their therapy sessions with great detail.

2. Psychoanalytic Culture

Argentina has had a longstanding love-affair with psychoanalysis. Although once banned by the military régime for being considered somewhat "subversive" (8), forcing many psychoanalysts into exile, its influence has never really left the country. There is even a neighborhood in Buenos Aires called *Villa Freud* - just one of many examples of Argentina's devotion to Freud - a district where the majority of psychoanalysts have their offices. Moreover, psychoanalytic lingo is very much a part of everyday language in Argentina. From academics to artists to taxi drivers, psychoanalytic concepts are mainstream topics and dominate daily conversations: mostly everyone is familiar with the Oedipus Complex, repression, projection, etc., and there is a general fascination with the unconscious, dream interpretation, etc., all of which are granted a great deal of truth value. There are also dozens of television shows dedicated to psychoanalysis, such as the 2008 program *Terapia: Única Sesión* (Therapy: One Session), conducted by a well-known psychoanalyst, who carried out televised couch sessions with several local celebrities who spilled out their hearts, desires, passions, and fears for the whole nation to watch and comment on.

For psychoanalysts, special attention still tends to be paid to cues such as tone of voice, slips of the tongue, speech errors, body language, visceral indicators, etc., and are considered highly important to the therapeutic process, and for orthodox

psychoanalysts this may be very hard, if not impossible, to achieve via a computer screen. Some of the critics of online therapy whether it is possible to accomplish a transference relationship in a virtual office setting, or whether “free association” can be truly attained in written form. And how can one recreate the psychoanalytic couch, the emblem of psychoanalysis, in virtual format? Lying on a psychoanalyst’s couch three or four times a week is very much part of many Argentines’ routines, and they are not about to give it up.

3. Orality and Proximity

Proponents of orality tend to defend vocal communication over the written word in that they see the former as a more dynamic and spontaneous activity, and the latter as a more static form of interaction used primarily as a tool for transmitting information. Some cultures show a marked preference for oral communication, regardless of their level of literacy. Argentina, despite its highly literate population, still favors orality as its preferred form of interaction. Being a relationship-driven culture, a lot of importance is put on in-person conversation, and many activities and cultural rituals revolve around this tradition. One example is the *mate* custom. *Mate*, a tea served in a gourd with a metal straw (*bombilla*) which is passed around and shared, is a social as well as physical experience. It is a bonding practice, an occasion to get together with friends, relatives, acquaintances, or even strangers, and chat. Many Argentineans who move abroad have told me that they do not so much miss the drink itself as the whole togetherness of this ritual. Relating to people means proximity, touching, eye contact (staring is not considered rude). According to Foster, Lockhart & Lockhart (1988), for Argentineans “extensive physical contact [...] involves greetings and goodbyes always paired with kissing and hugging” (9). Families tend to be close-knit, and children live at home well into adulthood, sometimes even when married. Sundays are sacred for many families in that they all get together for extended lunches. Verbal storytelling, although less so than in the past, is still a favorite pastime. This oral tradition can be seen in other settings as well. At the universities, oral examinations far outnumber written exams. In my experience as a university professor, the vast majority of students are quite adept at oral exams, but far less so at written papers. Also, in my face-to-face practice as a psychotherapist, written assignments, such as letter writing for instance, are sometimes dismissed as uninteresting or even useless.

And yet, in my experience, the written word can have so many benefits. According to Michael Fenichel, written forms of communication can actually enhance communication. The act of composing and editing messages “can result in more thoughtful, focused communication” (10). Written words can be chosen with greater contemplation and reflection, thereby being more precise, not only for the writer but also for the reader, who can read at his or her own pace, reread passages, take notes, etc.

Future considerations

Yet it seems that slowly more and more Argentineans are at least considering recurring to different, non-traditional forms of therapy. After the economic

collapse in 2001, many Argentines were forced to emigrate to other countries. Some of them, feeling uprooted in their new environment, others limited by language restrictions, have sought help online. But even so, these clients still tend to be more accepting of non text-based forms of online therapy - chat sessions using webcams, or telephone sessions - i.e., real time sessions as opposed to asynchronous setups. This seems to add some orality to what may otherwise be perceived as static and impersonal. I have since attended quite a few clients who have left the country, mainly through webcam or telephone sessions. All of them had been in traditional therapy with me before. It does seem that the existence of prior in-person contact is still an important condition in order for online counseling to succeed. Yet I will be presenting a conference on online therapy and virtual relationships in an upcoming local congress next October. There may be skeptics, but I am sure I will attract at least some curious attendees. And perhaps, if I am lucky, I may manage to deconstruct the binary of written vs. oral communication, or the dichotomy of the 'virtual' vs. the 'real'. It is this polar either/or thinking, after all, which divides us, narrows our thinking, and closes our minds to new possibilities.

Footnotes

(1) Clients who seek this format seem to do so because of its convenience and practicality: e.g., they do not have to worry about long commutes or traffic jams to get to their therapist's office; instead, they can reach their therapist from the comfort of their own home. Others, especially those who live in rural or remote areas, enjoy the fact that they are not restricted to therapists in their own area, and can choose from a wide variety of specialists from all over the world. Another important motivator for seeking e-therapy is that it is usually a more affordable option than face-to-face sessions. And lastly, certain issues, especially those of an extremely sensitive nature, are easier for some clients to discuss in this type of setting.

(2) Psicoanalizarse por la Web, una polémica terapia que ya es moda, Clarín newspaper, March 6, 2009 (own translation).

(3) Krauss, C., Buenos Aires Journal; Doctor, Why Do I Keep Dreaming of Argentina?, New York Times, September 1, 2009.

(4) Foster, D.W., Fitch Lockhart, M. & Lockhart, D.B. (1988), Culture and Customs of Argentina, Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., pg. 40.

(5) Data published by La Nación newspaper, July 26, 2006.

(6) Inhabitants of Buenos Aires.

(7) Foster, D.W., Fitch Lockhart, M. & Lockhart, D.B. (1988), Culture and Customs of Argentina, Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., pg. 40.

(8) Ibid., pg. 41.

(9) Foster, D.W., Fitch Lockhart, M. & Lockhart, D.B. (1988), Culture and Customs of Argentina, Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc., pg. 38.

(10) Fenichel, M. Online Psychotherapy: Technical Difficulties, Formulations and Processes, extracted from <http://www.fenichel.com/technical.shtml>