**Cyber-psychology: Psychological counseling using Internet technologies and potential clients’ expectations**

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Internet technologies are widely spread over the world for using different kinds of psychological consulting and assistance. In Bulgaria there is a certain interest in seeking such information among people using Internet (surfing). The problem is that it is difficult to find adequate information given from experts on psychological consultation.

The aim of our paper is to reveal potential clients’ expectations who are looking for psychological help and also the real possibilities and limitations in working with clients in virtual space: e-mail, video-conference, network discourses (chat), etc. All is done in the light of ongoing project OHN 1514/2005 funded by National Science Fund, Bulgaria.

**Introduction**

Since the emergence of technology-assisted media such as the computer, Internet and telephone, there has been a considerable shift in the way psychologists provide services to their clients. The terms commonly used are telepsychology or cyber-psychology or even telehealth, however other terms are used such as e-health, e-counselling, online counselling, web-counselling, telephone counselling or helplines. All these terms reflect the nature of remote psychological services. The utilization of information and communication technologies for online counselling and therapy turns out to be one of the most interesting and at the same time rather controversial areas emerging in contemporary psychology.

Discussions about application of the net for the needs of psychology began almost 35 years ago with the development of Internet’s prototype, the project ARPANET. The later started operation in late 1969 and ended in 1989.

Nowadays Internet technologies are widely spread over the world for using different kinds of psychological consulting, therapy and assistance [1-6].

**The Project**

In Bulgaria there is a certain interest in seeking such information among people using Internet (surfing). In Bulgaria there is a demand of cyber-psychology services. Although computers and Internet are not available in every household, about 1% of Internet visitors are looking, for psychological information and support. What users are looking for? The answer is simple - many people know how they should live healthier (food, weight, exercise, etc.) but are not able to adjust their life to this knowledge. Internet users are very much looking for such information. In addition, they are looking for psychological advice and counseling in lots of areas covering life-style problems, loneliness, melancholy, jealousy, marital problems, alcohol and drug dependence, bulimia, etc. All of this may be just a part of everyday life, or may be serious mental illnesses, or anything in-between. Even less serious problems are often a cause of misery and lack of capacity for productive work and healthier life. Several web sites already exist offering exclusively or as part of their service cyber psychology consultations (Fig. 1). Some are free, some require small fee. The users contact these sites usually from home. The problem is that it is often difficult to find adequate information given from experts on psychological consultation.

The aim of our paper is to reveal potential clients’ expectations, the expectations of those who are looking for psychological help and also the real possibilities and limitations in working with clients in virtual space: e-mail, video-conference, network discourses (chat), etc. All is done in the light of an ongoing project OHN 1514/2005, funded by National Science Fund, Bulgaria.

Project’s strategic goal is to develop and offer a virtual high quality psychological service (focuses child psychology and depression) to people from rural areas that had rare contacts with licensed psychologists. Text, color images, video and audio clips will be transmitted. The project employs state-of-the-art networking technology to enable experts to communicate directly with patients and perform remote consultations, supervision, etc. The project will test and evaluate pros, cons and overall effectiveness of cyber-psychology services and thus provide a platform for wide introduction of tele-psychology. The project will use existing local, packet-based wireless access infrastructure relying mainly on 2.4 GHz frequency band and optic connections in rural area. The network consists of public tele-centres, GP offices in 10 villages, local Emergency medical centre and specialized tele-server at Bulgarian Academy of Science, thus providing a platform for the wide introduction of multimedia services such as telemedicine and cyber-psychology.

Project partners are: Institute of Psychology at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Solar-terrestrial laboratory at Bulgarian Academy of Sciences, Ministry of Transport and Communication and Bulgarian Association of Telecenters.

The target region is a small semi-mountainous community - Septemvri. The reason to direct attention to a rural area is that 31.6% of Bulgarian population lives in remote villages. If the percent of citizens from small towns is added, more that half of Bulgarians lives in rural areas. People in rural areas
False Perceptions

We consider as potential clients those subjects who are seeking actively psychological help from a psychologist using internet. A client usually experiences certain psychological difficulty, discomfort or suffering and wants to get rid of them. These experiences should not be objective or subjective kind of illness. In this respect, we would like to describe different kinds of wrong potential clients’ expectations to a consulting psychologist in using internet technologies. We will use a classification of false clients’ expectations to a practicing psychologist given by Liders [7]: psychologist accepted as a doctor, as a tutor, as a lawyer and as a priest.

Psychologist as a doctor

Psychologists are often wrongly accepted as medical doctors. This misunderstanding is usually connected with the notion that a psychologist is someone like a doctor of the human soul. For example, a psychologist is expected to prescribe medicine or some kind of “psychological” pills that will have a quick positive effect without any social intervention. In this situation, when psychologists are asked for “psychological” medicine that acts independently from clients’ activity, they feel that they are misunderstood and accepted as doctors. Psychologists are not allowed to make out prescriptions and also have no competence to do it.

Psychologist as a tutor

Clients’ expectations towards a psychologist often may be as if he is a tutor, a supervisor or educator, but it is a wrong kind of attitude. Psychologists in their consulting practice are not supposed to evaluate their clients’ abilities, competencies or their personality as a whole. Changing client’s behavior or personality by using any kind of reinforcement or punishment (“a carrot or a stick”) is also undesirable. A psychologist may give his client useful psychological information or knowledge for resolving a problem, but it would not be any education.

Psychologist as a lawyer

Psychologists often experience situations in which they are taken for officials or lawyers. In these cases a psychologist is demanded / required to prepare documents, to make inquiries or something else that is not a psychological work and is away from psychologist’s competence. Psychologists cannot be a lawyer, because his clients are not supposed to be given legal protection or their civil rights and interests to be defended. Psychologists are not supposed to feel like officials in order to communicate more effectively with their clients.

Cyber-psychology – the alternative

Virtual psychological consultations are alternative, especially for people who cannot afford private consulting, or for those who are afraid to speak about their difficulties face to face to a counselor, or for shy people who want quick answers [9]. To put it briefly, thanks to the development of new information and communication technologies this service is available and is an option for a rapid psychological counseling while at the same time expands the group of potential users of psychological help. However, cyber-psychology has its risks, especially for the psychologist, who lacks the possibility to check user’s background, or use non-verbal language necessary in any counseling and interviewing process.

At the same time, both sites of cyber-psychology have to bear in mind that the present cultivated public image of psychological counseling as values-neutral is a misrepresentation of reality. Psychology conveys a worldview that teaches what is "good" (translated into clinical sounding terms such as healthy, whole, adaptive, realistic, rational, mature, etc.) and what is "bad" (translated clinically as abnormal, pathological, immature, stunted, self-deceived, etc.). Thus psychology is concerned with moral and philosophical questions. And clients are inevitably affected by their psychologist worldview. Studies have shown that counseling and therapy tend to change a client's values, and psychologists tend to rate those clients as "more successful" whose values change to fall into line with the psychologist's personal worldview. Thus no client is immune to the psychologist's ethical influence [8].

We may summarize that a psychologist is expected to help his/her clients, but in a certain framework: psychologist does not cure people (not being a doctor), he does not educate (not
being a tutor), he does not defend clients’ rights or interests (not being a lawyer) and does not make remission of sinners (not being a priest).

In Sum

What is a practicing psychologist supposed to do? In a very broad and abstract sense he is expected to help people. To be more concrete, his professional activity includes diagnostics, consulting, psychotherapy, etc. Any practicing psychologist may not be an expert in all these fields, but only in one or two of them. On the other hand, a psychologist is expected to be active helping his client and the client may be seen as an active or a passive partner. It is better for a client to be acting in the process of getting in touch with a psychologist who is dealing with client’s psychological problems. A psychologist and his client have to develop a kind of joint activity, not only ad hoc and here and now but in a certain perspective. Contacts between a psychologist and his client may be short, 10 – 30 minutes or they may last for months or even years, depending on different factors. Nevertheless, time is not an indicator for the efficiency of contacts between a psychologist and his client. If the psychological problem is successfully resolved and the client has a clear future orientation how to proceed with it, this may be a general indicator for a fruitful client-psychologist communication.

Internet technology is a new way in making contact between a psychologist and his client. The advantages of this kind of communication are that it is direct and time gaining, but wrong clients’ expectations about psychological help and competencies of a practicing psychologist still may remain. So, potential clients have to keep in mind that a psychologist can not take the role of a doctor, a tutor, a lawyer or a priest, because his competency is in the field of psychological practice.

Our intention is to develop cyber-psychology only in the field of psychological consulting using Internet. This will not include any education or psychotherapy, but a series of methods of distant consultations in child and adolescent development and also in managing states of depression.

REFERENCES