eSupervision: Challenges of Text-based Clinical

Supervision in our Online World

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Chapter objectives:

In this chapter, the reader will:

- Consider how clinical supervision must adapt to the global Internet culture with particular focus on the supervision of text-based eCounselling
- Become aware of, and experience, text-based communication techniques that are designed to create and maintain a relationship of trust between supervisor and supervisee
- Identify unique supervisor attitudes and practicalities arising from text-based eSupervision
- Recognize options around timing of asynchronous eSupervision
- Consider the process of evaluative eSupervision using the COSCE rating scale
- Increase awareness of the legal complexities of geographically based professional regulation in the nongeographic Internet era.

Humanity is increasingly living life online. If we belong to a club or a school committee or any social group, it seems we must have an email address to be a "part of the group." We take courses

and even earn degrees entirely online. We do our banking online. We buy a gift online and have it delivered to a loved one abroad without ever seeing, smelling, or holding that gift in our hands. We go online to search for the latest movies and book our tickets. We use online maps to navigate in unfamiliar territory. Wherever we are, if we are not feeling well, we are able to search the Internet for health information. We can find out anything we want in seconds through online search engines. In today's world, individuals often search for companionship or life partners through websites for dating and social networking.

So, not surprisingly, we may also be seeking psychological and relational help online. We type in the symptoms of what we're experiencing and a world of information and self-help tools appear.

What about professional counselling? Within this context of the global growth of Internet usage, it is not surprising that the demand for counselling services online is increasing (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2013). As professionals, our role in this global trend is to strive to ensure that we offer only the highest quality, ethically delivered professional counselling services. Therefore, eSupervision - the clinical supervision of online counselling - and training is essential and

especially important while the field of online counselling is still a relatively new service modality.

If you are a clinical supervisor and the context of your supervisee's counselling delivery is online, you will find some food for thought in this chapter. Most of this chapter's content is applicable primarily when the supervisee's counselling is text-based. It does not address audio or audio-visual modalities such as telephonic counselling or video counselling, which have their own unique challenges. We will also consider the jurisdictional and legal issues that are relevant for counsellors regardless of the modality of online communication. The latter topic has become a poignant issue within the global culture of the Internet.

Like text-only eCounselling, this chapter is also text-based.

Here, then, is an opportunity to demonstrate some SITCOMs

(Skills in Text-based Communication) that are essential both in text-based eSupervision and in eCounselling.

[insert sidebar about here]

When we refer to text-based eSupervision or eCounselling, it is with reference to text-based asynchronous online modalities, including secure email, as well as synchronous modalities, such as chat and instant messaging. Note that it is assumed and expected that the eCounselling and eSupervision communications are

properly secured and/or encrypted. And it is also assumed that the eCounselling and eSupervision takes place only in private places (e.g., not on a tablet computer while in a public setting).

Background and context disclosure

From this point forward, we are planning that this chapter will differ in writing style from most academic writing.

While we were preparing to write this chapter, we were faced with a fundamental decision: do we conform to the usual objective tone of academic writing? Or should we attempt to model the writing style that we have found to be effective in both eCounselling and eSupervision? If we follow only the usual academic expectations, a very significant learning opportunity would be lost – not just to "talk about" text-based eSupervision but, to a degree, d-e-m-o-n-s-t-r-a-t-e it.

[insert sidebar about here]

So, at this time, Dan Mitchell will begin this demonstration, by switching to a more conversational style to share the remaining points regarding eSupervision. We are hoping the skills and attitudes we want to talk about will become alive for you as Dan writes... er... speaks with you in this more personal style of professional communication.

You heard that right... s p e a k with you. I invite you to imagine that you and I sitting in my office together having a chat about clinical supervision.

Speak with you?

Yes, with you.

If I'm going to write in this style, then I am not talking to an audience of readers. I'm talking with *you*.

I'm sorry I don't know your name or I'd use it. [warm smile]

See, I strongly suspect that, at this moment, you are reading this alone,....silently. And if that's true, then it's just me and you.

[insert sidebar about here]

W-o-w! I suddenly feel incredibly honoured and grateful that you would be interested to spend this time with me.

I do appreciate that you agree to intentionally play along – to let yourself hear me and "see" me in your mind's eye.

[insert sidebar about here]

Before I go much further, I feel the need to give you some background, some context of where I'm coming from.

Hmmm. [pausing to collect my thoughts to share]

[insert sidebar about here]

Where to begin...

I wear a lot of hats.

I play a lot of roles within the Canadian online counselling company that I'm a part of, as well as in other facets of my life that come to bear on my role as eSupervisor.

I write courses and design training. I also continue to envision better software for online counselling and convey that vision to software developers.

In regards to eSupervision, I have multiple roles in relation to the counsellors I supervise. As a business person, I sometimes ask them if they'd like to be involved in, for example, staffing an exhibitor booth at a conference. Or writing a paper. Some of the counsellors are also instructors in our Cybercounselling courses.

[insert sidebar about here]

Now, I imagine you've been waiting to ask something:

"What do you have to say about how eSupervision is done? What
are the practicalities?"

Good questions! [nodding]

Since my team of counsellors is spread across Canada, needless to say [playful smile], we don't meet in person very often.

In fact, there are a couple of counsellors whom I have never met in person [feeling amazed since I know them so well].

Yes, of course, I find it is also comfortable for my supervisees to talk with a phone call about their experiences with clients, especially about immediate or critical concerns they may have about particular clients. Or to share their own issues and needs as counsellors, enabling both of us to strategize together about the direction of the therapeutic process. We also talk often about the nature of our professional relationship – the supervisee's goals in supervision, my motives, any multiple roles we are aware of. I am especially intentional about openly exploring with the supervisees any possible conflicts of interest.

[insert sidebar about here]

I have occasionally met my supervisees in person – either at a conference or, for those who live fairly nearby, whenever the opportunity for direct meeting presents itself. If I *had* to say, actually [shifting uncomfortably in my seat], strictly considering the quality of the supervision, I think I prefer meetings that are *not* in person. Yes, as actually, text-based supervision eliminates a good many peripheral practicalities normally associated with inperson supervision. To name only a few, there is no travel time and

no finding parking. Schedules do not need to be coordinated. Textbased supervision is more focused on the process of supervision.

In my experience, the most in-depth – dare I say *intimate* – forum for eSupervision is based upon the use of text-only media.

Hmm, now I wonder if that comes as a surprise to you [twinkle of anticipation in my eyes].

The eSupervisor's Attitudes in Approaching the eCounselling Text

Let's talk for a few minutes about some unique qualities of text-based counselling and what this means in supervision. Think about it: The text *is* the counselling. [Becoming more excited and animated.] It's not just a record of the counselling conversation. It is the *entire conversation* of the clinical session. Yes, [nodding] the text is the complete content and process experience for both counsellor and client (and now eSupervisor!). I, as eSupervisor, literally get to *be* there. Right there. In their session. As it happens. [insert sidebar about here]

This is not at *all* the same as the transcript of an in-person counselling session. In face-to-face counselling, the moments spent with a client *are* the counselling. The transcript of that in-person session is not the counselling. It is a narrow band representation

usually recording only the words spoken with few descriptions of tone of voice or non-verbals unless they are especially notable.

Again, the text-only eCounselling transcript is the *complete* record of the actual counselling experience. Nothing more than what is written happens *within the text-only counselling session*. Let me explain what I mean. Let's say the client sneezes while replying to her counsellor. That sneeze will almost certainly not be mentioned by the client in the text-only counselling session. It would not be relevant if a sneeze happened in an in-person session either. It would be ignored. Yet it still would be a part of the inperson counselling experience. In text-only counselling, client and counsellor carefully select what is said within their counselling session. Yes, every word of the eCounselling transcript is a part of the counselling. Mention of unspoken emotion, non-verbal cues, description of the weather or the office in which the counselling takes place – all of these are intentionally part of the eCounselling.

My experience when providing written eSupervision is similarly distraction free. It is focussed (sure if there is a real distraction, well, I can leave the supervision and return, with no loss of 'focus'). [wee grin].

Truth be told, I suppose there are a number of ways to interact, as a clinical supervisor, with an eCounselling transcript.

At this point, I want to focus and share with you more about the process of providing eSupervision using an eCounselling transcript.

First of all, my personal preference - and not every eSupervisor would agree - is to work on the screen rather than printing out the transcript. (Also, the need to maintain confidentiality means any printed copy would have to be destroyed or filed securely). So usually, I end up working on the screen anyway even if I do have a printout to hold. The first, and I would say, most important thing I do after ensuring I have a chunk of undistracted time available, is check my attitude. A deep respect is called for... a recognition that the counselling session I am privy to is to be treated as... well... (the word I want to use is) *sacred*. This personal and professional sense of entering into a counselling session is also noteworthy.

As I login to access a text-only session, I recognize that I have the glorious and undeserved privilege of stepping into perhaps the deepest moments of clients' lives. And I'm right there as if the session were happening in this moment, invisible to them, yet in the very true presence of client and counsellor.

With that awareness, I begin reading... actually, more accurately, *listening to* and *observing* the session. And what am I

listening to? Or looking for? Well, it depends. If the counsellor has chosen to invite me to be a part of this particular session for a reason, then I will be particularly attentive to the counsellor's reason or goal in inviting me in. But it is also very fruitful if the counsellor grants me free and open license to provide any clinical feedback.

Most of all, I pay attention to the essential qualities of excellent counselling. At their core, these are human qualities, not technical ones. Is it evident that the counsellor is genuine, congruent, and truly cares about the client? Does the counsellor seem to grasp the scope and intensity of the issues the client raises? And is it clear that the client knows and experiences this subliminal cushion so that he or she trusts and hopes enough to open up, be seen, and be held together by the counsellor?

At its heart, eSupervision of a transcript is a privileged sharing of a counselling experience in an observer role. I get to be present without being present... [twinkle in my eye, smile growing]

...which leads me to want to tell you about the process of giving feedback in text. By providing feedback to the counsellor, I get to be visibly present to the counsellor, but imperceptible to the client, unless the counsellor chooses to tell the client. (I am

assuming here that an earlier disclosure of privacy agreement has been made with the client regarding the fact that eSupervision may take place.)

As I observe their session, giving it my full attention with the appropriate attitude, there are invariably moments where a response is called from within me. I have observed moments where the counsellor validates, provides hope, links the client's concern to another related event in the client's life, and does all of this metaphorically while describing their own physical posture and facial expression. At moments like that, I shake my head in awed disbelief, my heart gets warm with joy, and it all bursts out loud saying, "Wow! Unreal! What incredible work!"

And actually, that is literally what I would insert into the midst of the eSupervision transcript, right at that point to the supervisee. So, it might look something like this:

DM: 'John', I am shaking my head in awed disbelief! My heart is warm with joy, and I am bursting out loud, "Wow! Unreal! What incredible work!"

[insert sidebar about here]

And then I would go on to describe why I experienced that reaction.

Okay, on the other side, let's say, while I'm in their session, I felt a moment of ... "wait a sec." In this case I sense a moment in the session where the quality of genuine and deep human contact is somehow diminished. When that happens, I look very carefully at the interaction... at those moments in the session. Perhaps I will notice that the feeling in the "counselling room" is lacking something. Often in such moments, I may find myself noticing a lack of emotional tone. And so I likely would start typing something like:

John, as I'm listening in I just noticed I'm feeling less engaged right now than a moment ago. When you said to your client, "Depressed people often experience physical symptoms such as insomnia or the opposite, too much sleep," I found myself wishing I could sense your compassion. Somehow it felt more like the kind of information that I could read in a self-help magazine.

Another idea would be for you to let your client know how you're feeling towards her as you offer that information.

How would that fit for you?

Or, perhaps I might model to John what I mean, like:

With depression, people often experience physical symptoms such as insomnia or the opposite, too much sleep

[feeling sadness as I begin to recognize the impact depression might be having on you]

Timing Options with Asynchronous eCounselling/eSupervision

I want to switch gears now to tell you about two fascinating and unique opportunities that arise when we are offering eSupervision in an asynchronous text-only place.

First, eSupervision can occur even *before the supervisee creates a reply!* Think about it! Asychronous communication means one person sends a message, time passes, and the recipient replies. So even before the actual counselling session begins, we have every word the client has spoken into that session.

Supervisees can discuss with me the presenting clinical situation even before they start to draft a response! I've been doing this for years and I still feel utterly amazed about this. We can assess any possible risks, discuss any areas the counsellor may lack confidence, and formulate a strategy.

But that's not all [feeling excited to share with you]! The second idea is that eSupervision can be given *after the supervisee*

has written a reply to the client, but <u>before</u> it has been sent to the client!

Wow! In this scenario we have the entire session in stasis while supervisee and supervisor discuss to their hearts' content!

The only limitation of time is related to the client's expectation of when he or she will be receiving that reply. As you know, eSupervision can take place by phone or by inserting feedback and ideas directly into the eCounselling transcript. After any input from the eSupervisor, the supervisee may integrate whatever seems important or useful into a revised message, and then send it to their client.

These topics deserve a lot more reflection. Somehow they seem to defy the space/time continuum [smiling with wonder and a hint of humour]. But there are two other topics I r-e-a-l-l-y want to bring up with you, so I'll have to leave the space/time continuum alone for now.

[insert sidebar about here]

The Cyber-Counselling Objective Structured Clinical Examination (COSCE)

It is obvious that text-based online counselling produces objective material that is amenable to analysis and measurement.

Our profession has barely begun to scratch the surface of the

implications of this opportunity. At this time, I want to share with you some of my thoughts and experiences around evaluative eSupervision, using an objectively validated and reliable rating scale.

To be quite honest with you, sometimes I have very mixed feelings about evaluating the counsellors I am responsible for. Who am I to judge a colleague's performance?

On the other hand, as pointed out by Shepard and Martin (2012), it is every supervisor's ethical and legal professional responsibility to ensure the quality of the service that clients receive from the counsellors under their supervision. [Thinking that is no surprise to you.] And of course, supervision sets out to facilitate professional growth for the counsellor as well.

Evaluation is not the only way to ensure quality or promote clinical development. Nor is it necessarily the most effective way. But a specifically evaluative process does create records of an effort to ensure quality and hopefully prevents harm to clients, but would be especially beneficial should anything ever go terribly wrong for a client while in counselling. For me, I suppose these are key motivators for evaluative eSupervision.

So, the counsellors and I have worked hard over the past several years developing and experimenting with an evaluative process for eCounselling.

[insert sidebar about here]

In parallel to the work I was doing with my eCounsellors, some colleagues at the University of Toronto, along with the cofounder of Worldwide Therapy Online, Lawrence Murphy, began developing a rating scale to measure eCounselling competency as demonstrated in actual counselling transcripts (Fang, Bogo, Mishna, Murphy, Gibson, Griffiths, & Regehr, 2013). These authors had already been engaged in the measurement of counselling competencies in face-to-face settings. I still smile and feel energized as I consider the beauty and timing of the overlapping intentions that we all shared. Granted, the core competency process that my counsellors and I had already been experimenting with was a more comprehensive process involving discussion, self-evaluation, and supervisor evaluation, both formative and summative. Nevertheless the thought of having a rating scale to analyse a transcript was truly serendipitous!

To design this scale, we combined this past expertise with some of the specific competency measures Murphy, my counsellors and I had been developing and had been using in our

training for years. After the validation study the authors concluded, "with further development and replications, the COSCE can be a reliable and valid tool in assessing the competence of cybercounseling practitioners" (Fang et al., 2013, p. 87).

The COSCE is an 18-item Likert-like rating scale designed to assess the competency level of eCounsellors, as demonstrated in a text-only transcript. The scale covers traditional domains such as accuracy in assessment and appropriateness of interventions, as well as areas that are specific to eCounselling. Five items attempt to evaluate text-based eCounselling skills - SITCOMs. These five skills are intended to maintain and enhance a strong therapeutic bond. They are emotional bracketing, descriptive immediacy, non-lexical verbalizations, time presence, and spacing and pacing. [insert sidebar about here]

I have used the COSCE with my supervisees several times now, and we are learning from the experience every time. We have realized that there are a number of creative ways to use the tool. The first impulse was to use the COSCE to independently rate a supervisee's transcript, adding written rationale to most of my ratings. We quickly realized that there had not been a feedback loop – it was a one-way evaluation with no opportunity for me as supervisor to experience the supervisee's reaction.

The next effort integrated an on-the-phone debrief session along with my written evaluation. Since then we have realized that the counsellor also can use the tool to self-evaluate, or for one counsellor to rate another. As long as we maintain an attitude of learning and discovery, we keep the process creative and fresh. My supervisees have expressed appreciation for the value of the tool to remind them of the process ideals they are aiming for in their work.

Jurisdiction

Jurisdiction is another major topic for eCounsellors today that is quite a challenge. I say "today" because I hope that, 10 years from now, what I am about to discuss will appear naïve and outdated.

Yet, the current state of the cultural clash of the nongeographical nature of the Internet with geographically based legal jurisdiction is a reality that demands the attention of our counselling profession. This issue is one that eCounsellors must wrestle with, but even more so must eSupervisors. Presently, inperson counsellors need only be concerned about their local legal and regulatory professional jurisdiction. But because the Internet

knows no geographic boundaries, eCounsellors do find themselves open for business worldwide.

Here is the core issue: if a client does not live in the eCounsellor's professional jurisdiction, whose laws & counselling regulations apply? Philosophically, it seems clear that "going for counselling" on the Internet involves the clients actively searching and selecting, clicking to arrive at, and registering for an online counselling service. They must take several actions to reach the eCounsellor. Based on this, one would think that eCounselling is located in the eCounsellor's jurisdiction. Nevertheless [sigh], if a disgruntled client sought legal recourse, practicality may suggest he or she would approach the local judicial protections available to them. According to the American Telemedicine Association (Turvey et al., 2013), the patient's current location at the time of receiving care defines the jurisdictional laws and regulations that apply.

[Insert sidebar about here]

And so, from a liability perspective, we see that it is necessary for the eCounsellor to comply with the laws and regulations of the client's location. The CCPA website provides an excellent foundation for thinking through jurisdictional issues found at http://www.ccpa-accp.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/10/E-

Association, n.d.) and, inseparably related to that, the current status of Canadian interprovincial transferability of counselling credentials at http://www.ccpa-accp.ca/profession/regulation-across-canada/_(Canadian Counselling and Psychotherapy

Association, 2015). So, eCounsellors can consult the chart on the latter web page to determine whether relevant provincial laws or regulations exist in the province in which the client is located. The absence of counselling regulations in some Canadian provinces and other countries around the globe implies that the provision of eCounselling to clients in those locations is not illegal.

But the water is muddier than this [my brow is furrowed and I feel tense]. In fact, the "governing law" issue is multidimensional. The involvement of a clinical eSupervisor adds another dimension. The client, the eCounsellor and the eSupervisor may each be located in different provinces, or even different countries.

Hang on now! [my tension is transitioning into giddiness]
Whose laws apply when the client is a Canadian expatriate on
assignment in a foreign country?

And if the client can be a Canadian living elsewhere, what about eCounsellors who are "snowbirds?"

[insert sidebar about here]

Many of us like to travel south to find some warm relief from our Canadian winters. So we could have an eCounsellor who lives in Ontario currently visiting Florida providing service to a Manitoban expatriate in Nigeria through an Employee Assistance Provider agency and supervised by a BC-based eSupervisor currently on vacation in Palm Springs, California (where I happen to be sitting at this very moment). And whose laws apply if that client saves a draft message to his counsellor while in Nigeria, crosses the border into Cameroon, finishes up the message and sends it from there? And just so you know, Canadian privacy law requires servers that store health (counselling) data to be located in Canada.

If your head is spinning, so is mine! W-h-e-w.....

But I am making an important point. The Internet is not geographically bounded. Yet our laws are. And each jurisdictional location on this earth is governed by different laws. We are at a place in history where current laws lag far behind in terms of managing the Internet and its complex "anywhere, anytime" culture.

If I put myself in a client's shoes, I want the freedom to select the best counsellor of my choice. Period. No reference to

location. Long term, I truly hope that leaders in the counselling profession can ensure that supervised eCounselling services are available to clients anywhere, while still ensuring that our own risks are well managed and our exposure to liabilities minimized. Laws are made for people. People are not made for laws. We, the counselling profession worldwide, need to become clear about what real life is like in this Internet age, and begin conceptualizing meta-laws that accommodate humanity's new way of life in the context of counselling.

Ideals aside, and practically speaking, one bottom line question you and I need to ask ourselves again is: where would the client go to seek legal recourse?

As I said, the Internet has brought about a cultural clash. So what this means for me and you is that we need to be able to put the client's best interests first, and to prove due diligence in case - heaven forbid - you or I are summoned to court (somewhere??). If need be, we can demonstrate that we have considered the jurisdictional issues, have a reasonable rationale for our actions, and have documented both the client's and supervisee's understanding of the issues and agreement to our rationale.

So. [taking a deep breath and leaning back in my chair]

I'm both hopeful and a little overwhelmed. What's your take on all this?

SUMMARY

In summation, our primary objective in this chapter was to introduce the processes of eSupervision within the particular context of a text-based eCounselling service. We noted how the non-geographic nature of the Internet culture is shaping the way we think and behave. Along with every other aspect of civilization, the counselling profession is now caught up in the Internet culture. We have drawn attention specifically to the present lack of clarity around the legal risks associated with cross-jurisdictional counselling and supervision. Most of all, we hope you have had a taste of the power of text-only communication. The particular style we demonstrated is intended to create a personal and human experience, suitable for both counselling and supervision, as compared to the more common objective tone of written material. As well, text-only communication affords some quite wondrous creativity in the timing of supervision, as well as inherent opportunities for research and quality control in eCounselling. The COSCE rating scale is a research instrument, and we have

discussed extending its application as a tool in the service of evaluative eSupervision.

eSupervision plays an important role in the young and growing field of eCounselling. Let's accept the realities of an Internet-saturated world with its wonders and challenges for the counselling profession, do the best we can keeping the CCPA Code of Ethics near and dear, and continue to nurture eCounselling into maturity.

Learning Activities

- In an effort to demonstrate a personal style of communication in a text-only context, the author(s) attempted to begin a collegial relationship with you around the topic of eSupervision. What was it like for you to experience this?
- What are some situations that would benefit from the ability to supervise a complete text-based counselling session before the client receives it?
- If you are an eSupervisor of text-based eCounsellors, consider downloading the COSCE and try using it in

creative ways to support quality assurance and counsellor development.

- led to complex professional, jurisdictional and regulatory challenges for counselling and supervision. What does this mean for you as a clinical supervisor? Would you offer remote supervision while temporarily away from home in a province/state/country where you are not registered/ licensed, when registration is required in that place? Would it make any difference if your temporary location were unregulated?
- Consider the same questions regarding the permanent or temporary location of your supervisees, as well as the permanent or temporary location of their clients.
- Based on your due diligence regarding the above set of questions, update your Supervisor Professional Disclosure.

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