

GUEST EDITORIAL

Introduction to the Special Issue “Telepsychology: Research and Practice”

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Australia presents significant geographical and sociodemographic impediments to the provision of effective and efficient psychological treatments (Richardson, 2011). Telepsychology, or psychological interventions mediated by distance technology, can help overcome these obstacles and keep Australia's clinicians and their clients at the cutting edge of mental health treatments and interventions. Telepsychology has many advantages over its face-to-face counterpart in that it is portable, currently relatively inexpensive, and can be conducted wherever suitable equipment and bandwidth are available. Telepsychology is a significant equaliser in the provision of treatment and support in Australia, particularly to rural and regional populations that have been traditionally underserved, and one in which practice has largely led research.

Not only can telepsychology be offered as a way to facilitate treatment and interventions, it is now increasingly expected by psychological consumers who want flexible treatment options. The increasing technological sophistication of a broad spectrum of everyday users has meant that what was once unique and an expensive singular occurrence (e.g., like the corporate videoconference) has become part of daily interactions, and consumer clients demand flexibility in the approaches and accessibility of their clinicians in a way that is hitherto unparalleled in the history of our profession. Within the last decade and a half, the technology of videoconferencing, portable and wearable devices, and wireless communications have caught up to, and in some cases surpassed the quality and efficiency of, the face-to-face world. No longer do clients have to wait for the monthly visit from the psychiatrist or psychologist to their regional centre, but weekly and even daily video sessions can occur across thousands of kilometres with less than 5 min of preparation. We live in a brave new world, and one in which Australian psychologists need to lead the change for ethical, efficient, and

effective treatments and interventions for both their client's benefit and the advancement of the profession.

This special edition provides a rationale for the use of videoconferencing and other types of technology in the context of applied psychology in Australia, while exploring its significance and current evidence base. In recent years, there has been significant growth in the evidence supporting the efficacy of videoconferencing-based psychotherapy across therapeutic modalities (Simpson & Reid, 2014a), as shown by several recent reviews in the field (Backhaus et al., 2012; Boydell et al., 2014; Flood & Pelling, 2008; Gros et al., 2013; Hilty et al., 2013; Richardson, Frueh, Grubaugh, Egede, & Elhai, 2009; Simpson, 2009). In addition, the cost-effectiveness of video therapy has been an important factor supporting its use, especially in rural and remote areas (Godleski, Darkins, & Peters, 2012; Shore, Brooks, Savin, Manson, & Libby, 2007). Although several randomised controlled trials have been conducted in recent years (e.g., Frueh, Monnier, Grubaugh, et al., 2007; Frueh, Monnier, Yim, et al., 2007; Glueckauf et al., 2002; Greene et al., 2010; Marrone, Mitchell, Crosby, Wonderlich, & Jollie-Trottier, 2009; Mitchell et al., 2008; Morland et al., 2010), naturalistic studies have also provided rich information with high ecological validity regarding the factors associated with client acceptance and the ways in which the technology interacts with therapeutic process (e.g., Bakke, Mitchell, Wonderlich, & Erickson, 2001; Himle et al., 2006; Morgan, Patrick, & Magaletta, 2008; Nelson & Bui, 2010; Richardson, 2011; Simpson, Bell, & Britton, 2006; Simpson & Slowey, 2011; Shore & Manson, 2004). Videoconferencing combined with video recording has similarly been used in supervision processes and has now become commonplace in advanced psychological training (Panos, Panos, Cox, Roby, & Matheson, 2002; Pelling & Renard, 1999; Rousmaniere & Frederickson, 2013; Sørli, Gammon, Bergvik, & Sexton, 1999). Of considerable significance, a recent review found that the majority of articles that have measured therapeutic alliance as an outcome in video therapy found it to be essentially equivalent to in-person settings across a wide range of therapeutic modalities, client groups, and modalities (Simpson & Reid, 2014b).

This special edition is timely because current advances in technology are providing incredible opportunities for clinicians

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and researchers to rethink our profession, and to use our skills in unique and effective ways. Telepsychology has moved from the occasional and unique to the mainstream.

The articles presented in this special edition emphasise several themes, including (a) the unique applications of traditional videoconferencing telepsychology, as well as the use of new tools like text-chat and social media, across varying environments and client groups; (b) the practice pragmatics of telepsychology in terms of ethical challenges; and (c) the future for the profession of technology-infused psychology. The issue begins with a thought-provoking commentary by B. Christopher Frueh, an international and veteran researcher in the telehealth field. Each of the articles included in this issue are introduced by Frueh and contextualised, by use of a stimulating narrative, in a framework highlighting the growth of the telehealth field (Frueh, 2015). It is expected that several contributions will generate discussion regarding the applications of current research to local practice (Gamble, Boyle, & Morris, 2015; Rees, 2015; Richardson, Reid, & Dziurawiec, 2015; Simpson, Guerrini, & Rochford, 2015) and within novel settings (Reid, Campbell, Locke, & Charlesworth, 2015; Sansom-Daly, 2015). Additionally, several of the articles explore cutting-edge technology, such as text messaging, Facebook, and video therapy, in facilitating engagement and access to psychology services (Pietrabissa et al., 2015; Rees, Stubbings, & Roberts, 2015). Finally, the future of telepsychology is explored in terms of the implications for mental health services and in particular policy makers (Richardson & Simpson, 2015).

In conclusion, the implications of this special issue are far-reaching for the future of our profession, and provide highly relevant examples of the nexus of psychological research and clinical practice. It is important for us to anticipate the demands of future generations for psychological services and to think creatively about how we can harness the technology available to provide greater equity in access to services across both urban and rural settings (Simpson & Reid, 2014a). This special issue encourages psychologists to stay abreast of the field and to utilise our unique skills to enable us to play a lead role in developing clinical practice guidelines based on current research evidence. As a profession, we are arguably well placed to learn from the research that exists and to implement evidence-based practice, incorporating technologies that have been shown to have high acceptability and good clinical outcomes across a range of clinical settings and client groups.

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