Chapter 14
Telepsychology:
Does it Bridge the Social Justice Theory and Action Gap?

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ABSTRACT

Telepsychology, until recently, was slow-moving and half-heartedly acknowledged in the mental health profession. There is increasing scholarly discourse on the digital therapeutic space. This shift to a digital paradigm means re-evaluating the profession's identity. This chapter considers telepsychology in relation to social justice. It highlights access for underserved groups and the digital divide that limits a substantial population from accessing online services. It identifies the need to integrate telepsychology in community psychology interventions, a significant framework to challenge systemic inequalities in mental health. It outlines the inadequacy of the profession to support needs of diversity in the field and considers if tele-health is one way to bring a shift in the homogenous identity of the profession. Telepsychology has the potential to amplify adherence to social justice principles; however, this requires evolved responses on individual, institutional, and systemic levels to bring unconventional but substantial changes in training, research, and regulatory guidelines.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Being a counselling psychologist in training in the United Kingdom and a member of the mental health profession in India for the past several years I've always had an affinity towards in-person work, towards being present in a shared physical space with another individual and working therapeutically with them. The recent global pandemic led to change in circumstances thereby altering ways of offering therapy and receiving training, supervision, and personal therapy. With having always deemed telepsychology as less favourable, having to immediately embrace telepsychology leaving all prior reservations and biases about it aside felt conflicting. At that point, it became essential to reflect and identify how telepsychology helps to adhere to the fundamental principles and values of the profession. Aligning telepsychology

work with core values can be helpful to identify the value of the work that is being achieved and services that are being offered whilst also considering the implications it may have. In this chapter I considers the ways in which telepsychology commits to values of social justice and the limitations that come along with it. I specifically focus on increased access and digital divide as a result of technology, community psychology which has been cited as an important intervention in challenging systemic injustices, and lastly the considerations of telepsychology and training in the mental health profession.

INTRODUCTION

The British Psychological Society in their Code of Ethics and Conduct (2018) highlight the need to address ethical challenges that may arise as a result of technological changes and innovations as well as dangers that may be caused due to climate change and global conflicts. Established by the British Psychological Society in the 1900s in United Kingdom, counselling psychology is influenced by the humanistic value system and is built on the principle of self-determination wherein individuals have the right and capacity to choose what is best for them. There is focus on adopting collaborative, non-hierarchical, and egalitarian relationships with individuals. The Division of Counselling Psychology Professional Practice Guidelines (2005, p. 2) state that counselling psychologists must 'recognise social contexts and discrimination and to work always in ways that empower rather than control and also demonstrate the high standards of anti-discriminatory practice appropriate to the pluralistic nature of society today.' This highlights the need for counselling psychology to identify social context and work using a multicultural lens, however, the profession of counselling psychology has been previously criticised for failing to adopt an explicit multicultural and socially just identity for itself (Moller, 2011; Cutts, 2013). This has shifted in the last several years and there now is growing literature about social justice, diversity, and multiculturalism thereby bringing about a change in the counselling psychology identity (Tribe & Bell, 2018).

SOCIAL JUSTICE

To arrive to a conclusive definition of social justice in the mental health profession has been difficult. Various explanations for social justice exist with emphasis on various factors such as working to address inequalities (Speight & Vera, 2004), equity wherein services, opportunities, and resources are distributed based on need (Kagan, et. al, 2011; Chung & Bemak, 2012; Crethar & Winterowd, 2012;) as well as choice to engage in decision-making (Cutts, 2013). Cutts (2013, pp, 9-10) defines social justice as 'a goal of action and the process of action itself, which involves an emphasis on equity or equality for individuals in society in terms of access to a number of different resources and opportunities, the right to self-determination or autonomy and participation in decision-making, freedom from oppression, and a balancing of power across society.' The commitment to social justice in the profession has been growing and there have been manifold attempts to explain and define social justice. However, several concerns have been voiced regarding the translation of social justice theory to action (Speight & Vera, 2004; Cutts, 2013). Several studies outline ways in which professionals can move from a social justice theoretical lens to an action-oriented stance and integrate the same in their work. These involve micro and macro steps that practitioners can adopt to adhere to social justice principles. One can begin to read, learn, and reflect on their own power and privilege (Goodman, et. al, 2004; Winter, 2019). Assuming a non-expert

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