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ONLINE PSYCHOTHERAPY: POLISH PSYCHOTHERAPISTS' PERSPECTIVE

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online psychotherapy psychotherapists' perspective

Summary

Objectives: The article presents the results of a survey conducted among 193 psychotherapists. The subject of the research was the attitudes of psychotherapists towards the phenomenon of online psychotherapy. The perceived limitations and advantages of this form of contact were reviewed, along with the conditions and circumstances of its application.

Methods: The assessment was conducted in the form of an online questionnaire sent to psychotherapists by email. The participating psychotherapists were members of the Psychotherapy Section of the Polish Psychiatric Association.

Results: Nearly one-third (32%) of the surveyed psychotherapists have conducted or are currently offering online psychotherapy. The vast majority of them (77.4%) believe that online psychotherapy should be used only in exceptional cases. 10.3% of respondents stated that online psychotherapy should not take place at all.

Conclusions: The results testify to the ongoing process of professional reflection on the new formula of contact with the patient. Apart from the therapists clearly (positively or negatively) evaluating the studied phenomenon, there is a large group of clinicians expressing their doubts about this form of therapy and advocating for its use only in clearly specified, exceptional situations.

Introduction

The research was conducted in September 2017 as an online survey distributed among members of the Psychotherapy Section of the Polish Psychiatric Association. The authors of the research are grateful to the Board of the Section for their help in reaching a broad group of psychotherapists.

The aim of the study was to investigate the contemporary attitudes of Polish psychotherapists towards online psychotherapy (further referred to as OP) in its behavioural aspect (do they work online and if yes, in what circumstances and in what way?) and cognitive aspect (what do they think about this form of psychotherapy and what are the perceived advantages and disadvantages of this technique?).

The character of the research was exploratory. Its purpose was to learn how psychotherapists approach this relatively new form of contact with patients.

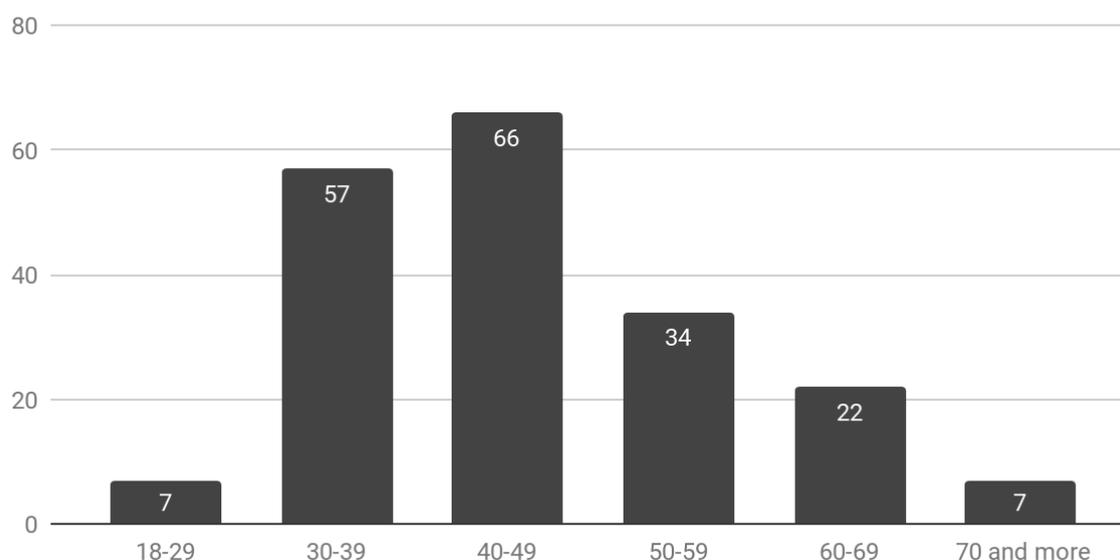
Methodology and test sample

The test survey comprised 15 questions. The first four questions referred to demographical data (age and sex), level of professional development and the represented psychotherapeutic paradigm. The following four questions referred to experiences in online psychotherapeutic practice. Seven questions considered advantages, disadvantages and other significant aspects of online psychotherapy perceived by the interviewees. Three of the last seven questions were open-ended questions, encouraging the interviewees to share their own opinions and reflections about the technique.

Out of 1,220 invited members of the Psychotherapy Section of the Polish Psychiatric Association, 199 persons participated in the study. Six of the 199 surveys were found to be incomplete and were excluded from further analyses.

Chart 1.

Number of participants in age groups



The participants of the study were active psychotherapists with different work experience and level of professional development. There were 89 psychotherapists in training without a certificate of psychotherapists, certified psychotherapists (70 people) and supervisors of psychotherapy (34 people). There were also differences in the age of participants, from people in their twenties up to psychotherapists in their seventies. The distribution of the participants' age is presented in Chart 1.

Nearly 77% of participants were female. Most of the participants identified with psychodynamic and integrative modalities of psychotherapy. Demographic characteristics of the group are similar to the age profile and proportions of sex in the group of Polish psychotherapists presented by Szuszek, Grzesiuk, Styła and Krawczyk [1, 2]. The members of SNP PTP usually had a higher degree of professional development than the average population of psychotherapists in Poland.

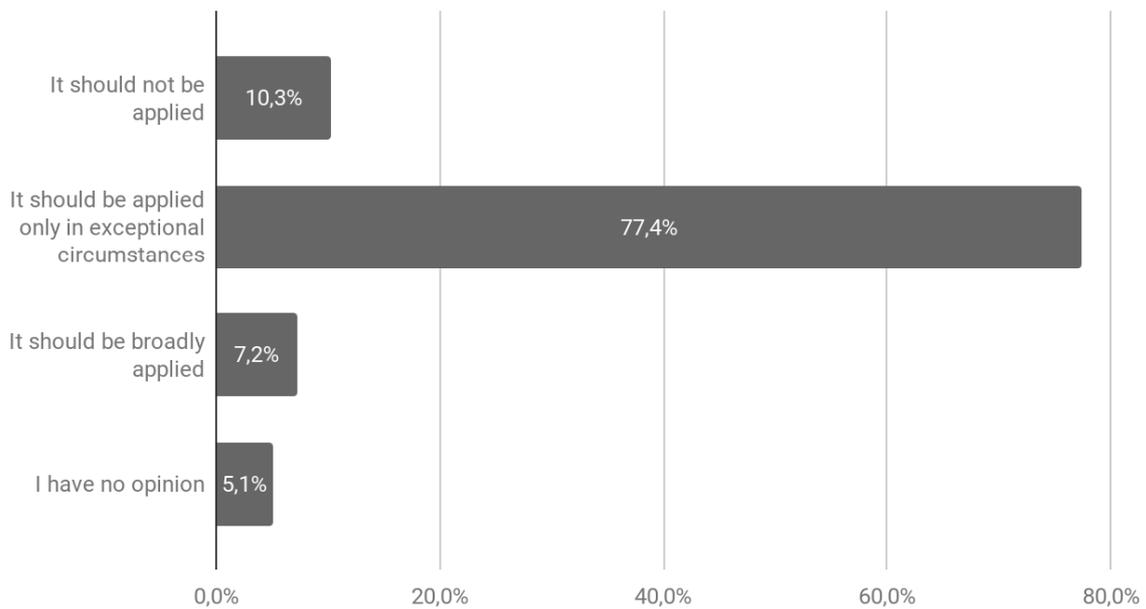
Results

Opinions about online psychotherapy

The vast majority of psychotherapists participating in the study (77.4%) expressed the opinion that online psychotherapy should be applied only in exceptional circumstances. Only 7.2% of the participants thought that it should be broadly applied. The opinion that online psychotherapy should not take place at all was shared by 10.3% of the therapists. The remaining (5.1%) did not have a specific opinion on this area.

Chart 2.

Considering application of online psychotherapy, I think that ...

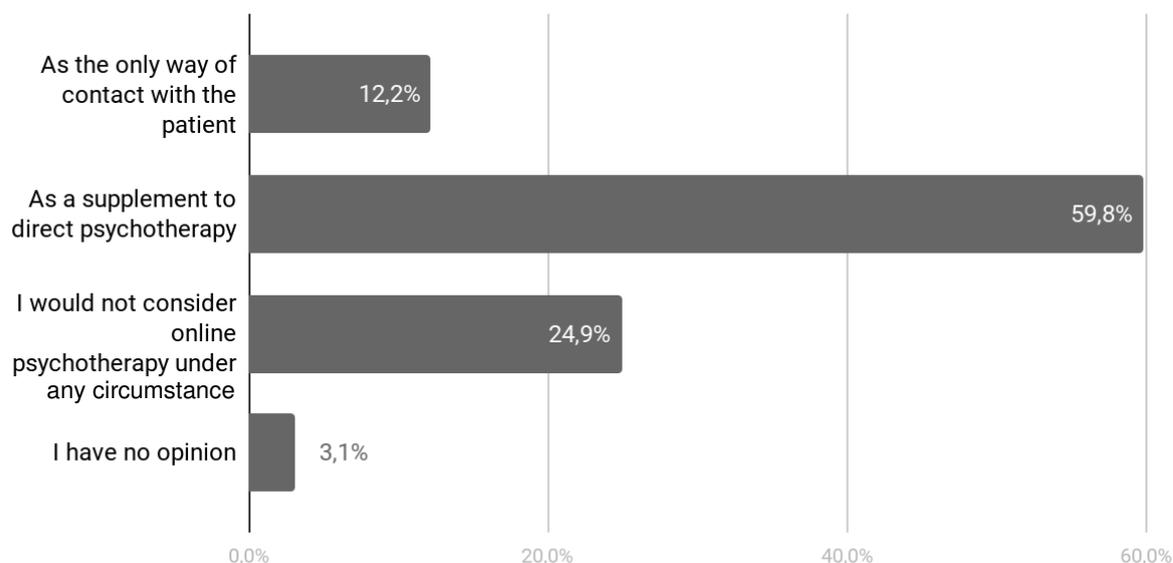


Willingness to work online

Only 12.2% of the therapists participating in the study were willing to use online psychotherapy as the only way of contact with the patient. The highest number of the participants (59.8%) considered online contact as a supplement to direct psychotherapy (complementary model). 24.9% of the participants would not consider online psychotherapy under any circumstances; 3.1% of the participants had no specific opinion on this area.

Chart 3.

I would consider application of online psychotherapy ...



70% of the psychotherapists would consider conducting online psychotherapy in specific situations, when it would be otherwise unavailable to the patient – for instance, when they are immobilised by somatic disease.

49% of the therapists would consider the application of online psychotherapy when it would be difficult for the patient to access a consultation room because of distance.

Only 2% of the psychotherapists would consider the application of online psychotherapy if there would be no clear difficulties for the patient to access a consultation room.

Other cases when many therapists would decide to accept contact via the Internet are their patients' long-term trips abroad or one-time situations when a direct meeting is impossible.

Applications of online psychotherapy

Almost one-third of the therapists participating in the study (32%) has been conducting online psychotherapy. 68% of the participants have never made such an experience.

The chi-squared test has shown no statistically relevant correlations between the age of the psychotherapist and the experience of conducting online psychotherapy ($p = 0.1025$). The following table presents how frequently online psychotherapy was conducted in various age groups.

Age	I have conducted/ I am conducting OP	
	%	n
18-39 (n = 64)	23	15
40-49 (n = 66)	41	27
50 and more (n = 63)	32	20

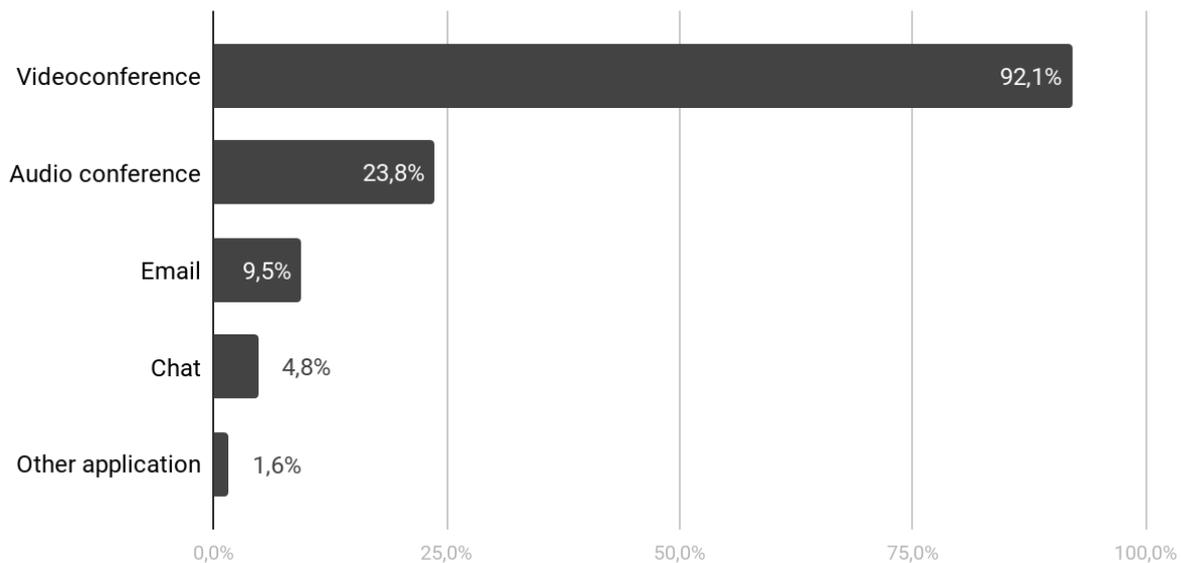
The chi-squared test has shown no statistically significant correlations between professional status and the experience of conducting online psychotherapy ($p = 0.0613$). The following table presents how frequently online psychotherapy was conducted in various professional status groups.

Professional status	I have conducted/ I am conducting OP	
	%	n
Therapists without certificate (n = 89)	24	21
Therapists with certificate (n = 70)	39	27
Supervisors (n = 34)	41	14

Among therapists conducting online psychotherapy (n = 63), the vast majority (92%) used videoconference as a mean of contact (simultaneous transmission of sound and vision). Almost 24% used audio-conference (no vision), whereas 9.5% conducted psychotherapy via e-mail, 4.8% used chat¹.

Chart 4.

I have conducted online psychotherapy via...

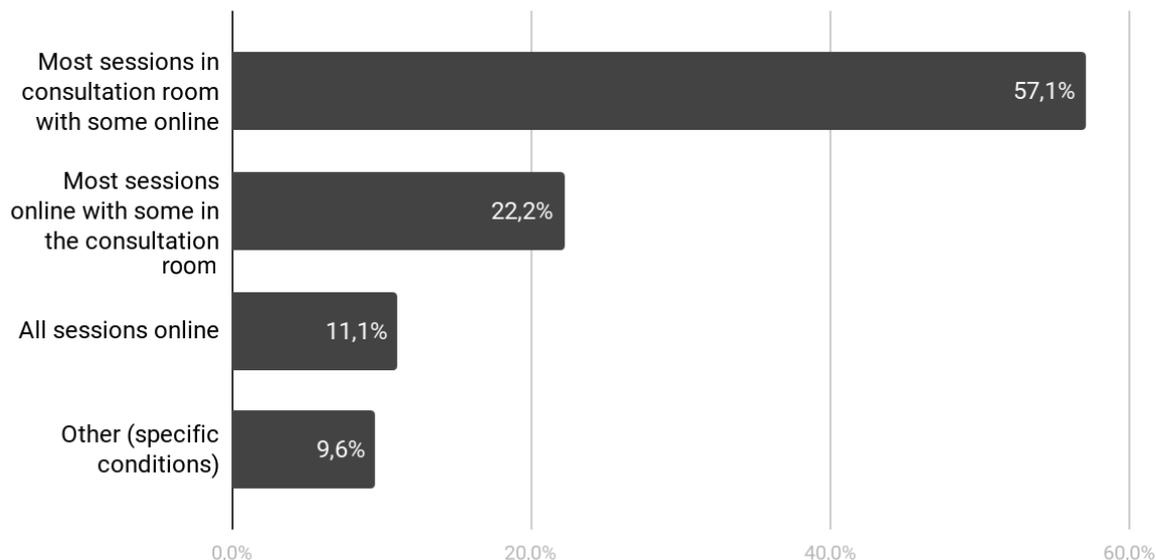


There were differences among the psychotherapists in the attitude to OP. Some of them considered it to be the only form of contact with patients, others connected it with consultation room meetings. Among the therapists who did online psychotherapy (n = 63), only 11% conducted all sessions via the Internet. Other participants (89%) had some online sessions and some consultation room-based sessions.

¹ Some participants used more than one channel of communication, therefore the sum exceeds 100%.

Chart 5.

I have conducted online psychotherapy in the following formula



Among psychotherapists who used to work online, 61.3% supervised their work.

Interest in online psychotherapy

The vast majority of participants were interested in broadening their knowledge of online psychotherapy. Only 4% of participants were not interested in it. The most interesting areas were the following:

1. Analysis of patients' experiences from online psychotherapy – 77.1% of the therapists were interested in broadening their knowledge in this area,
2. Analysis of therapists' experiences from conducting online psychotherapy – this issue was interesting to 74.5% of the therapists,
3. Differences between online and traditional psychotherapy – 58.3% of the therapists were interested in broadening their knowledge in this area.

Discussion

A careful reader could observe that the key concept of “online psychotherapy” has not been defined in the study. This was a conscious decision of the authors, as we were interested in the concept, for which definition and borderlines are socially constructed. We wanted to examine attitudes towards the concept defined by the participants of the study themselves as “online psychotherapy”. The subject of the study was therefore not a standardised procedure meeting some objective criteria of online psychotherapy. Simply speaking, we adopted the idea that online psychotherapy is exactly what psychotherapists consider to be online psychotherapy.

On the one hand, we could cover a broad range of activities which are embedded in the term “online psychotherapy”. On the other hand, we do not know whether our conclusions refer to one or more phenomena encompassed by the common concept of “online psychotherapy”. Without defining the concept of “online psychotherapy”, we rejected questions about the core issues and limitations of this phenomenon, e.g. “Is it enough to have a few sessions to call it online psychotherapy?”; “Can we talk about online psychotherapy at all?”. We consider these questions to be important and worth further examination, despite the fact that they were not issued in this study.

Regarding the results, one needs to remember that participants of the study were volunteers. Brzeziński [3] writes that people volunteering to participate in a study tend to present unconventional patterns of behaviour. This may be important, as the issue of this study was an unconventional form of psychotherapy. We presume that therapists with more polarised views (for or against) on online psychotherapy may have been more willing to participate in the study, whereas the group of less interested therapists may be underrepresented. The composition of the test sample might have been affected by the distribution of the questionnaire by email, as it promoted therapists who are more willing to use the Internet. Moreover, questionnaires were sent to members of the Psychotherapy Section of the Polish Psychiatric Association, whose experience in psychotherapy is greater than average. Despite these limitations, the following interesting observations can be made.

Only 10% of the therapists participating in the survey oppose online psychotherapy. Yet an even smaller number (6%) strongly recommends its broad application. On the base of these data, we can make the conclusion that both total removal and total assimilation of OP are not preferred by most psychotherapists. There seems to be an informal consensus about the role of online contact in psychotherapy. OP is treated as an extraordinary mean applied in specific circumstances. Almost 80% of psychotherapists supported such an attitude. This result shows that the dilemma “should online psychotherapy be applied?” is losing its significance, and the questions “when and how can it be used?” is becoming more important.

The issue of interlocking consultation room meetings with online meetings in one therapeutic process seems to be gaining importance. Only 12% of therapists working online conduct psychotherapy seeing their patients only online. The most popular model is a complementary one, where online meetings are mixed with sessions in a consultation room. Psychotherapists often referred to situations when psychotherapy began in a consultation room and was continued online after the patients moved to a different city or country. According to the Central Statistical Office in Poland, by the end of 2016, over 2.5 million Polish citizens were temporarily living abroad [4]. Both the European and global trend of increasing mobility may cause more and more therapists to be faced with the dilemma of choosing an appropriate form of psychotherapy.

An interesting stance towards online psychotherapy has been officially presented by the Polish Association of Psychodynamic Psychotherapy, who has banned online psychotherapy in their code of ethics, stating that direct contact is a fundamental characteristic of psychodynamic psychotherapy:

“The psychodynamic psychotherapy framework is founded on the rule that the psychotherapeutic process may take place only in direct contact between therapist and patient. This excludes any electronic form of communication” [5]. This official and unequivocal statement may paradoxically inspire discussion and allow psychotherapists to formulate basic questions related to the development of online communication: what are the fundamental characteristics of psychotherapy? what is the essence of contact with a patient and what makes it direct or indirect? (Is this a dichotomy or a continuum?) It is possible that online psychotherapy does not make communication with the patient indirect, but adds another layer of indirectness, making the general lack of directness more visible? Contact with the patient is always established by means of language, words, gestures, intonation, and cultural forms. If we consider the whole range of means applied to reach towards another person, we could treat online communication as a contemporary tool supplementing our language with forms that allow us to meet a person who is physically distanced from us. On the other hand, distance itself is an important multidimensional, relational message, showing possibilities, limitations, and reasons for distance or proximity. Online contact may be, therefore, considered not as an “informational noise” that makes communication more difficult, but as an important message that needs reflection in psychotherapy.

Data collected in the study show that online psychotherapy is not only the domain of young psychotherapists with little experience but OP also often seems to be applied by older therapists with more experience. In order to make a more detailed analysis of correlations between professional status, age and application of OP, a more detailed and focused study is necessary. The fact that one-third of the psychotherapists participating in the research have made the experience of online psychotherapy, shows that this phenomenon is not marginal and needs to be broadly discussed among therapists. Not enough seems to be said in this area, it is neglected in training programmes, which leaves therapists to make their own judgement and use trial and error method in the application of OP.

Only 61% of psychotherapists supervise online psychotherapy. This is alarming, considering the fact that over 95% of psychotherapists in Poland supervise their work [2]. Online psychotherapy evokes strong emotions and polarisation of opinions. This may encourage therapists to hide their online activity in order to avoid assessment by their colleagues. Avoidance of supervision in OP increases the risk of standards' violation in this new and difficult area of psychotherapeutic practice.

The most popular tool of contacting patients are video conference applications that enable real-time transmission of sound and vision. 92% of psychotherapists working online use these tools.

This indicates an important change since 2008 when video conference applications were far less popular [6]. On the one hand, technological development and the associated cultural changes increase the quality of connections bringing them closer to the form of direct communication, on the other hand, people tend to treat online communication as a natural form of contact with other people.

Recapitulation

The collected results show a vivid interest in the subject of online psychotherapy among Polish psychotherapists. This technique is becoming more and more popular as an additional form of contact with patients, supplementing direct contact in a consultation room. The vast majority of psychotherapists treat OP as an appropriate method of working with patients when they have significant obstacles in reaching the consultation office.

The collected data clearly show that online psychotherapy is not a “niche activity”, as it is not applied solely by young psychotherapists. It is, however, a phenomenon which raises strong controversies and which sheds new light on questions considering the essence of psychotherapy and its future.

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