



Young people's experiences of mobile phone text counselling: Balancing connection and control[☆]



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ABSTRACT

Mobile phone text counselling offers an opportunity to engage young people via a familiar and accessible medium. Interviews conducted with young people highlighted aspects of text counselling they perceived as valuable including privacy and autonomy, having control over the counselling process and maintaining anonymity. Participants appreciated the accessibility of text counselling and felt comfortable communicating through text. Despite the anonymity, they also felt they got to know the counsellor as a 'real person' and experienced a relational connection with them. Text counselling may help young people balance their contradictory needs for autonomy and connection and facilitate their engagement with counselling support.

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1. Introduction

Young people are growing up in a world in which access to communication technologies, not available in previous generations, is likely to shape their experience of relationships. As youth culture embraces the rapid advances in technology, there are opportunities and challenges for counsellors and others working with youth to keep pace with their young clients' priorities and expectations. As yet, there is still relatively little research which looks specifically at the way that young people experience counselling using communication technology and even less that looks specifically at how interactive counselling delivered by mobile phone might work for this group of clients. This article offers a window into the experiences of adolescent clients who had used a mobile phone text counselling service with a particular focus on those aspects which they highlighted as valuable to them in these encounters.

1.1. Youth and communication technology

The rapid increase in the use of mobile phones and other communication technologies has given rise to concerns that these might impact negatively on relationships between people. Fears have been strongest in relation to youth where issues such as cyber-bullying (Smith et al.,

2008; Tokunaga, 2010) and mobile phone 'addiction' (Walsh, White, & Young, 2008) have received attention. There have also been concerns raised about mobile phones reducing the capacity for genuine intimacy and for emotional reflection (Turkle, 2011) as well as having other negative effects on the cognitive abilities (Abramson et al., 2009) and mental health of young people (Thomé, Härenstam, & Hagberg, 2011).

In spite of these disquiets, there is little doubt that mobile phones have become a particularly significant form of communication amongst youth. Ito (2005) notes that mobile phones are uniquely suited to young people's needs, being "lightweight, less intrusive, less subject to peripheral monitoring, inexpensive, and enable[ing] easy contact with a spatially distributed peer group" (p. 3). Ling and Yttri (2002) argue that mobile phones have become an important way of establishing and defining group membership for youth and especially important in defining the difference between themselves and the 'older generation' (p. 162). This form of communication has been recognised to create valuable spaces within which young people can communicate without adult surveillance and control (Green, 2003). Green points out that while older people who are not immersed in new communication technologies might misinterpret young people's disengagement from their immediate surrounds as a kind of cognitive or social deficit, for young people their phones are experienced as an important way of connecting to others.

In New Zealand, where this research was conducted, mobile phone text is one of the most widely used forms of communication technology. In 2012 there were reported to be 5,020,000 mobiles in this country

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where the population is 4,433,087 (TNS Global Market Survey, cited in *New Zealand Herald*, 2012). Because phone calls from mobile phones remain relatively costly, text messaging, which is much cheaper, has become a standard mode of communication for young New Zealanders. Text messaging or SMS (Short Message Service), as it is sometimes called, is also widely used in other countries around the world.

1.2. Counselling using communication technology

Some of the doubts expressed in relation to youth and contemporary communication technologies are echoed in concerns about the use of these modes of communication to provide counselling. Non-verbal cues, which are understood as central to allowing trust and mutual understanding to develop between the client and therapist, are not available through many of these technologies (Anthony, 2006). With the quality of the therapeutic relationship being at the heart of counselling (Lambert & Ogles, 2004) some have expressed reservations about whether mobile phones or other communication technologies can provide the necessary relational connection between the counsellor and the client (Helton, 2003). However, in recent years, an increasing number of researchers have pointed out the potential advantages of using contemporary communication technologies to provide counselling. Some evaluations have provided evidence for the success of technology based programmes that have operated in circumscribed ways to assist compliance with treatment, address psycho-education goals or facilitate other limited interventions (Agyapong, Farren, & McLoughlin, 2011; Preziosa, Grassi, Gaggioli, & Riva, 2009). But research has also shown that there may be some advantages to using these technologies to facilitate more complex therapeutic goals including those that build on the therapeutic relationship (Richards & Viganò, 2013). Alleman (2002), for example, has challenged the idea that meaningful emotional communication cannot take place without people being physically present to one another. As he explains:

The kind of words people use and the way they put them together in print can say a lot about how they feel even when they cannot hear or see the person with whom they are communicating. Those of us who have ... written a love letter know that being limited to text does not mean being deprived of expressiveness. (p. 200)

Furthermore, people may experience some relational advantages with anonymity, with the absence of non-verbal cues making it easier for them to talk about embarrassing issues (Leibert, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006). Suler (2004) describes this as the 'online disinhibition effect', noting that disembodied forms of communication may encourage more emotional expression and self-reflection. Using communication technologies has also been found to enable clients to experience a more equal relationship with their counsellor (Suler, 2004).

Helton (2003) argues that ideas about communication and relational development have not kept up with the changes in technology and that those who are not familiar with these changes may find it difficult to understand what it takes to develop quality relationships with others in this new context. While researchers and professionals struggle to make sense of how counselling relationships might work through contemporary communication technologies, young people who have grown up alongside these developments are in a good position to offer insights into this potential from their own experience.

1.3. Young people and counselling

Young people have not often been asked about their experiences of counselling. This is perhaps a result of beliefs that they are not able to comment with authority about their experience (Prout, 2007; Zirkelback & Reese, 2010). However, there is increasing awareness that young clients, like adults, are active agents in counselling, making meaning of this in their own way and extracting what they need from

the experience (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2007). The relatively small number of studies that do explore what is important to young people in their counselling experiences suggests that their priorities may be somewhat different to that of adult clients. There appear to be two main sets of concerns for younger clients. The first is a need for a genuine relationship within which they can express themselves openly. As Dunne, Thompson, and Leitch's (2000) research shows, young people seem to have less interest in problem solving and assign greater value to being able to talk, express their feelings and relate to the therapist. This is echoed in other research which notes aspects such as being listened to, experiencing kindness or caring, not being judged, and being treated as an individual as central to young clients (Freake, Barley, & Kent, 2007). In essence, one of the most important aspects of counselling for young people is to have a sense of real connection with their counsellor (Bolton Oetzel & Scherer, 2003).

Young people however also have other priorities, which might in some instances act as a barrier to their engagement with an adult counsellor. Young people seem particularly aware of and sensitive to power relationships and at times may experience counselling with an adult negatively as an attempt to undermine their independence (Hanna & Hunt, 1999). They value an equal relationship with their counsellor, object to being patronised and have a strong requirement for a counsellor who respects their autonomy (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Sagen, & Holgersen, 2011; Bury, Raval, & Lyon, 2007; Everall & Paulson, 2006; Freake et al., 2007). Privacy and confidentiality, particularly in relation to parents, are also major concerns (Collins & Knowles, 1995). In our recent research, we found that young people prioritised their own agency in counselling and that this was seen as a precondition to their willingness to engage in the process (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013).

This body of research suggests that while young people might be looking for a genuine and supportive relationship in counselling, they may also feel that they need to protect their autonomy against the power that the adult world wields over them (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). These two, sometimes incompatible, priorities may present a challenge for young people in having their needs met in counselling and perhaps goes some way towards explaining the difficulties of engaging and holding young clients in counselling (Block & Greeno, 2011).

The limited research available on young people's experiences with counselling using technology suggests that there might be potential for this form of communication to be a good fit with the priorities and concerns of young people. Callahan and Inckle (2012) conducted interviews with counsellors and a focus group with young people about online and mobile phone counselling (acknowledging that they were not sure whether or not the young people they interviewed had actually used this counselling). Their findings suggest that online therapeutic conversations with young people dealt with a greater variety and more sensitive topics than face-to-face sessions. They also concluded that young people might feel less intimidated talking to an on-line counsellor and more able to exercise their own power in this context (Callahan & Inckle, 2012). In interviews about young people's own use of internet counselling, Hanley (2012) found that while the initial stages of counselling were centred on setting up a relationship, other factors such as being able to control the session became important as it proceeded. King et al.'s (2006) research asked young people who had used an online counselling service about their motivations and experiences. Their findings suggested that young people felt safer, less emotionally exposed and relatively better protected from feared negative responses from their counsellor, such as boredom or judgement, compared to face-to-face counselling. Young people also seemed able to establish an effective therapeutic alliance in online counselling (Hanley, 2009, 2012; King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006). While this small body of research on young people's experiences of internet counselling is highly relevant to the current research, these studies do not address mobile phone texting in particular. To the best of our knowledge there is no research that looks specifically at young people's experiences of using a mobile phone text interactive counseling service.

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