

PSYCHOTHERAPY IN INTERNET-AGE SOCIETY

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Summary: The article regards a number of challenges for psychotherapy, posed by the dynamic development of the Internet and changes in the functioning of individuals and societies related to this. The author analyses the social role of psychotherapy — its tasks, the needs it fulfils, and the expectations it tries to meet. Subsequently, he refers to cultural changes related to the communication revolution, and points at areas which will require special attention in the coming years, so that psychotherapists are able to adjust their methods to a developing environment. In the light of contemporary research, the Internet appears to be both a source of danger to mental health, but equally — a space for utilizing new methods of help. Making use of these possibilities, as the author claims, goes far beyond remote psychotherapy. It requires something more from help providers: understanding and considering the new types of human relationships which develop in communication facilitated by new media.

Introduction — psychotherapy as a social phenomenon

From a clinical perspective, psychotherapy is a method of treating mental disorders through the means of psychological influence. Its increasing popularity and dynamic development make it worth considering also as a social phenomenon.

The beginnings of contemporary psychotherapy are marked by the rise of psychoanalysis in the late 19th/early 20th century. Freud's method became something beyond just another technique used in the treatment of patients in clinics: it provided new tools for self-understanding and for explaining the incomprehensible, painful experiences of the healthy people. Soon it became popular, influencing culture, art and social relationships.

Many movies inspired by psychotherapy were made; the common understanding of childhood experience has changed. Discoveries made by psychoanalysts, and later — therapists representing other theoretical orientations, entangled with popular culture to the extent that it is difficult today to single out elements of daily social functioning that emerged or developed due to the popularity of psychotherapy. Bookstores offer a vast choice of psychological guides; diagnostic categories in psychiatry describe

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phenomena not previously considered as subjects of psychopathology (such as sadness, shyness or impoliteness) [1, p. 240]; family courts order inefficient parents to participate in therapy.

Psychology and psychiatry compete with religion in the social arena, attempting to define a good, meaningful life. The secularisation of Western societies may have been impossible were it not for the fact that these sciences began to meet at least some of the needs previously fulfilled by religious institutions and beliefs. The American psychiatrist Fuller Torrey, in his book “The Mind Game: Witchdoctors and Psychiatrists” [2] directly compares the role of his colleagues in the USA with folk healers in Third World countries. He points at many similarities between the role of the psychotherapist and the shaman or healer in traditional societies.

Regardless of whether we agree or not with Torrey’s insights, it is difficult to deny that psychotherapy has become an important part of culture and that its importance for society expands vastly beyond individual benefits for patients. The aim of this paper is to draw attention to the change in the social meaning of psychotherapy in the light of cultural changes caused by the dynamic development of the Internet. In this context, psychotherapy will be understood as a certain social construct — a socially-created agreement which describes the roles of patient and therapist. This agreement is subject to constant renegotiation due to social changes. I deliberately omit the complexities of technical definitions created by psychotherapists themselves, remembering that — according to Prochaska and Norcross — “The field of psychotherapy has been fragmented by sudden changes and nowadays the choice of offers it is stunning” [3, p.2]

The Internet era — social changes related to the development of the Web

The intense development of the Internet has led to a change of quality in the term and the phenomenon itself, as well as to serious cultural and social changes. The Internet has evolved from an experimental network connecting a small number of computers in the late 1980s, to a worldwide net, which in the second decade of the 21st century is ceasing to be simply a computer network, because aside from computers, it connects their users. The Internet can be seen today rather as a global community, in which technical possibilities provided by computers are merely means to facilitate and organise human activity.

In the past, the discovery of writing made it possible to develop beyond tribal organisation and myths based on oral transmission, into communities organised through written words in sacred books. The invention of print helped to develop the Reformation movement and gave Europeans an opportunity to reflect on and individually interpret truths from these sacred books, thus weakening the interpretational monopoly of church institutions. In the 21st century, the Internet as the next revolution in communication has impacted the functioning of contemporary society in a similar way.

Some of these changes are already visible: many social institutions have undergone significant reforms — retail turns to a larger extent towards an online model, or at least relies on online marketing

(which in itself is growing as an area of interest in building communities around brands). Even services which seemed impossible to implement on the Internet (due to client mistrust), have undergone deep metamorphosis, adapting to the challenges and possibilities of the platform, offering more options and expanding their customer bases — as in the case of banks and airlines.

It is difficult to find institutions in society which remain entirely unchanged under the influence of the Internet. Even though traditional state institutions still exist, and many of them work in the same way as a few decades ago — governments are still in power; the law is established by parliament; courts deal with justice — all of them have begun to take the power of the World Wide Web into consideration. One spectacular example of confrontation between the new principles of the Internet community and the old rules of executive, legislative and judicial power can be found in the recent protests caused by proposed legal changes regarding liberty and the anonymity of information transmission included in the ACTA treaty.

Along with institutions, the role of an individual is also changing. Information is accessible to all like never before. Tomasz Zarycki notes that the Internet's role can be included in the model of “the evolution of society from collective systems to modern, individualised contractual societies. One of the obvious and often stressed qualities of the Internet is the fact that it extends the autonomy and independence of an individual in social activities” [4].

Never before has so much depended on billions of microdecisions taken by millions of people. Today, the fortunes of creators of Google and Facebook are made thanks to discovering the rules of clicking, established in an interaction between the capability of the machines and the needs of the thinking beings. The Internet, as a non-hierarchical medium, free of strict division between the creators and receivers of a message, becomes a kind of message itself, like it or not. One may paraphrase Winston Churchill and say that never in the history of mankind have so many owed so much to so many.

Changes in the social meaning of psychotherapy

In the early 20th century, psychoanalysis was a privilege reserved for a certain elite — the rich bourgeoisie — those who were able to afford lengthy and expensive treatment — now, psychotherapy is generally accessible, not limited to specific social groups. In accord with Marx's theory, quantity turns into quality and psychotherapy becomes something else (at least to some extent) from a social perspective. Expectations are different, and so are the perceptions of therapists and patients. Along with the increasing popularity of psychotherapy, patients cease to be seen as “mad” or “different”, and become more “normal.” This means that psychotherapy has ceased to be a mean of social exclusion — as in dealing with “the different one” — and has become a method of working on positive “being together” — building satisfying relationships with other people. Therapists, instead of being specialists dealing with things outside the norm, become — to the contrary — experts on normality, in common understanding.

Expanding the reach of psychotherapy is connected to blurring certain boundaries it has. Today, it is

difficult to provide a concise, clear definition of psychotherapy, generally acceptable for all therapists. On the one hand, it includes strictly clinical work with people suffering from mental disorders, on the other — it strives towards the improvement of dysfunctional families and, moreover, — offers the possibility of personal improvement for mentally healthy people. Sometimes it is also an additional method used in the treatment of somatic diseases (as in the case of Carl Simonton's method of work with oncological patients) [5]. Its wide use, unclear borders, and irremovable conflicts between the representatives of various approaches have led to tensions around the management of psychotherapy. Since many countries have introduced the refunding of psychotherapy from the health care budget, its accessibility has visibly increased. Yet, reimbursement from the health insurance budget means, especially in places where insurance is privately owned, that there is pressure on the cost-effectiveness of psychotherapy. Hence, the increasing popularity of “evidence-based practice”, which stimulates research on psychotherapy but sometimes leads to applying simplified, superficial therapies that only treat short-term external symptoms, without care for deeper reasons and the patient's wider wellbeing.

The Internet and psychotherapy

The dynamic development of the Internet has led to the online expression of various activities of human life; mental health is no exclusion here. According to research on the daily activity of US Internet users in 2010 [6], 7% of users regularly participated in online discussions or other groups which deal with support for personal or health issues. 10% regularly sought medical information online, while 5% — religious and spiritual information. Among teenagers, as many as 17% searched daily for information about “medical issues which are difficult to discuss, like drug use, sexual health or depression.” All of these data refer to activities on a “typical day”, thus showing the great interest in and developmental potential of mental health care on the Internet.

Despite such wide interest in issues which psychotherapy usually deals with, virtual space remains poorly researched among therapists. There are self-help groups and remote psychological advice, psychoeducation and even psychotherapy, but this area is still treated with caution. Therapists are not even encouraged by research results, which regularly indicate the usefulness of Internet-based psychotherapy. In 2008, Azy Barak and his associates published the results of a meta-analysis of 92 research projects, which included nearly 10,000 surveyed people. The results, even though limited to the cognitive-behavioural therapeutic approach, indicate the effectiveness of online intervention, comparable with traditional contact [7].

Psychotherapy is a product of culture, and in the light of cultural changes stimulated by the digital revolution, its place in the matrix of social institutions is also shifting. The Internet poses many challenges to psychologists, some of which are worth mentioning:

A democratic approach and shift in attitude towards authority figures. Psychotherapy emerged

in the rigidly hierarchical society of the late 19th/early 20th century. Its development was tied to the changing role of authority figures, because the therapist's authority is one of the key factors in psychotherapeutic treatment, as a base for trust, or, conversely, a field to recreate and correct basic relations towards authority from early childhood. The Web is non-hierarchical, especially since the emergence of Web 2.0, in which the division between senders and recipients of messages has become almost entirely blurred. Following this, society has become less hierarchical — something that could inspire psychotherapy to keep up with social change and reduce its hierarchical approach in favour of trust in clients' choices.

Speed of interaction — clickability. Short-term psychotherapy lasts a few months; long-term psychotherapy — a few years. On the Internet, time is measured in seconds, and decisions are made with a click. This difference in temporal perspectives makes it difficult to find a Web-mediated interaction between therapist and client which would meet both the requirements of therapy and also the expectations of the impatient Internet user. This is not impossible, as proven by the number of lasting friendships and romantic relationships built online — yet, it requires a certain effort from therapists used to working in their practice rooms, and inclusion of the specifics of online contact in therapeutic dialogue.

Specific mode of communication — textuality. One of the significant discoveries of social psychology was the recognition of non-verbal communication. It transpired that in building trust and developing relationships between people, signals included in facial expressions, intonation and gestures carry more meaning than words. Online, most interaction is mediated by the written word, which erases much of the non-verbal nuance. There are certain methods of communicating this via the keyboard (as in case of emoticons), yet still, from the subtle perspective of psychotherapy, such narrowing of a communication channel becomes a limitation.

Difficulties in verifying the therapist's qualifications. It is somewhat easy to pretend to be a different person on the Internet. Therapy is a field of service, in which the quality of help is fairly difficult to estimate at the beginning, and requires trust towards the therapist. In the “real world”, institutions which organise psychotherapeutic help (clinics, healthcare centres, psychotherapy institutions) aid this process, along with documents certifying the qualifications (diplomas and certificates). Internet users have created new methods, which, despite remaining imperfect, to some extent help to verify the credibility of the person they are interacting with. The number of portals with opinions on doctors and other specialists is growing. Unfortunately, these are prone to deceit — publishing good opinions about oneself or negative ones about one's competitors. Despite this, they are increasingly influential.

“Haters” and transference. Online anonymity makes it easy to publish negative, aggressive and hurtful comments. “Haters” (anonymous aggressors) are the scourge of many social media sites. Vulgar and unfair comments are easy to publish, and they bring popularity. On the other hand, an important quality in psychotherapy is transference, which means that in therapeutic relations, certain aspects of relationships with important people in the patient's life are replayed. If, for example, the patient carries unresolved anger

towards their parents, then it is probable and usually therapeutically beneficial to transfer this onto the therapist in order to recognise, analyse and rework it. This happens in the safe space of the practice, where difficult emotions can be stored. The Internet can, in such situations, become a resonator, in which anger escalates and aggressive opinions gain popularity. Emotions pass, and the anger expressed in the therapist's practice usually does not hurt anyone. The same anger, expressed through comments in social media and online portals leaves a lasting mark, which can harm the therapist's reputation for a long time.

Secret protection. Psychotherapy is an intimate process, which engages the patient deeply and touches their hidden secrets. The Internet has its protective tools (e.g. SSL certificates), but hackers' activity and their success in breaking security measures — even government databases — can make one cautious. Yet, the development of online banking, where the question of protecting confidential data is hugely important, is a reason to be optimistic.

New types of relationships. Many therapists believe that in psychotherapy, the relationship between the specialist and the patient is itself the most healing factor. John Suler points out that virtual space enables the development of various types of therapeutic relations based on various means of communication, from simple instant messengers to virtual worlds with animated avatars [8, p.103]. Adapting these spaces for clinical use or, conversely, changing the habits of therapists regarding the nature of the therapeutic relationship, may require a lot of effort.

The aforementioned list of challenges which psychotherapy faces in Internet-era society is obviously incomplete. It is supposed to be a sample, encouraging therapists to become sensitive to the new dangers and possibilities they may encounter.

Perspectives of future change

The contemporary situation of psychologists carrying out online therapy can be compared to the problems of motorists in the early 20th century — when the law required that a man with a warning flag would run before every vehicle not pulled by horses [9]. Today, we are at the stage of considering “psychotherapy via Skype” in the same way that horse-free vehicles were once thought of. It was only later that the new technological invention — the car — gained social approval and changed the lives of billions of people. I assume that — judging by the pace of Web development — there will, in the near future, emerge methods of psychological help which will not simply be “therapy outside the practice room”, but new formulas for interaction, oriented at preventing and treating mental illnesses and disorders.

John Suler points out that new media, even though it expands the possibilities of clinical help for people in need, to some extent also deconstructs psychotherapy in its current form, questioning seemingly obvious dimensions — presence in the same time and space, and the direct relationship between two people. According to Suler, in the future we may not define Web-mediated forms of clinical work as “psychotherapy”, or we may change our thinking about what psychotherapy actually is [10, p.102]. Perhaps

new terms to describe such forms of clinical work will be necessary. Maybe psychotherapy, also in its offline form, will use the specific achievements of Web culture, such as Web 2.0 which removed the distinction between sender and recipient, p2p support (peer to peer — exchange between equals), or methods of Agile programming (methods developed by programmers for efficient cooperation on a project).

Recapitulation

We have the privilege of living in an era of communication revolution, which may cause concerns about the unpredictable future, but also inspires one to follow the development of the previously unrealised ideas of dreamers. Every day, billions of people meet in the global Web, doing beautiful as well as terrible things. It seems unavoidable that two previously near-independent currents of social change — one related to the development of information technology, the other to expanding the limits and uses of psychotherapy — meet at some point, creating new possibilities for individuals and communities.

It is difficult to deny that the dynamic of change in the area of psychotherapy is currently much slower than the cultural shifts caused by new communication technologies. Perhaps this is caused by the cautiousness of therapists, who, following the old principle of “primum non nocere”, are afraid of introducing new technological solutions. Susan Simpson, in her article on videoconference-based therapy, points out that research often indicates the effectiveness of such methods and reverses the question about ethics, suggesting that restraining oneself from online help for willing patients who have no other means of support would be unethical [11].

Attempts at predicting the future are always risky, and most of them look comical in retrospect. Yet, they are useful in a certain way: they inspire one to realise dreams previously considered impossible. Remembering that the only constant thing is change, I allow myself to fantasise about the future in order to prepare myself for the surprises which tomorrow brings.

Finally, I would like to recall the Agile manifesto, which is the result of cooperation between many software developers, and a type of compass for use in the struggles of working with various clients. As I read it, I cannot help but think that it could be a psychotherapists’ manifesto as well:

Manifesto for Agile Software Development

We are uncovering better ways of developing software by doing it and helping others do it.

Through this work we have come to value:

Individuals and interactions over Processes and tools

Working software over Comprehensive documentation

Customer collaboration over Contract negotiation

Responding to change over Following a plan

That is, while there is value in the items on the right, we value the items on the left more [12].

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