Online Counseling and Ethics: A Systematic Review of Empirical Research[1]

Çevrim İçi Psikolojik Danışma ve Etik: Kanıta Dayalı Araştırmaların Sistematik Bir Alanyazın Taraması

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to review empirical studies on ethical issues in online counseling. In line with the criteria of this research, articles were searched in the Web of Science database; empirical research articles that collected data from mental health professionals, published between 2000-2021 years in psychology and counseling journals and indexed in SSCI were included. Seventeen articles that met the inclusion criteria were found. Nine different ethical issues were discovered according to the findings from these articles. Respectively, maintaining confidentiality and privacy, need for a separate competency to perform online counseling, providing security, and difficulty of intervening in crisis situations due to physical distances, client verification, risk assessment, boundary issues, and unclear circumstances for possible malpractice in online counseling were the ethical issues stated in the reviewed articles. To conclude, it is crucial to have clear, comprehensive, and detailed ethical standards for effectively dealing with these ethical concerns by examining evidence-based research so that mental health professionals can adjust more effective practices.

ÖZET

Bu çalışmanın amacı, çevrim içi psikolojik danışmada karşılaşılan etik sorunlarla ilgili ampirik çalışmaların derlenmesidir. Bu çalışmaya dahil edilecek makaleler için bazı kriterler belirlenmiştir. Web of Science veritabanında yer alan, 2000-2021 yılları arasında SSCI'de indekslenen psikoloji ve psikolojik danışmanlık dergilerinde yayınlanan ve verileri ruh sağlığı uzmanlarından toplanan ampirik araştırmalar bu çalışmaya dahil edilmiştir. Dahil edilme kriterlerini sağlayan 17 çalışmaya ulaşılmıştır. Bu çalışmalardan elde edilen bulgulara göre 9 farklı etik problem alanı belirtilmiştir. Sırasıyla, çevrim içi psikolojik danışmada, gizliliğin ve mahremiyetin korunması, çevrim içi danışma yapmak için ayrı bir yetkinliğin gerekliliği, güvenliği sağlayabilme, fiziksel mesafeler sebebiyle kriz durumlarına müdahale etmenin güçlüğü, danışanın kimliğini doğrulama ve risk değerlendirilmesi yapma, sınırları koruma, çevrim içi psikolojik danışmanın yanlış kullanılması durumunda yapılması gerekenlerin net olmamasıdır. Sonuç olarak, belirlenen etik probleri etkili bir şekilde ele alabilmek için, kanıta dayalı araştırmaların incelenerek açık, kapsamlı ve detaylı etik standartların belirlenmesi, ruh sağlığı uzmanları tarafından daha etkin uygulamaların sağlanması için önemlidir.

Ethical Declaration: In this study, we did not collect data from neither human participants nor animals. We just reviewed the existing literature. For this reason, ethical approval for this study is not required according to TR Index Criteria for the systematic review studies.

[1]This study was presented online in 22nd International Psychological Counseling and Guidance Congress (October 7-10, 2021, Turkey).

INTRODUCTION

Mental health care services are one of the fields that have been significantly affected by the global pandemic, COVID-19, across countries (Boldrini et al., 2020, Silver et al., 2020, Velykodna, 2020). According to the World Health Organization (WHO) report, among 130 countries, 67% reported that they had difficulties in maintaining counseling, psychotherapy, and psychosocial interventions, resulting in disruptions of practicing jobs, and switching to online applications (e.g., zoom, skype) (WHO, 2020). Consequently, mental health service providers gradually shift their working habits from face-to-face to online (Feijt et al., 2020). Online counseling which defined as "*any delivery of mental and behavioral health services, by a licensed practitioner to a client in a non-face-to-face setting through distance communication technologies such as the telephone, asynchronous e-mail, synchronous chat, and videoconferencing* (Mallen & Vogen, 2005, p. 764)" is not a new phenomenon and was being used and studied before the global pandemic. However, the importance of online practices gained more reputation during the COVID-19 process. Pandemic still lasts, and the possibility of maintaining online psychological helping services may go beyond this area (Wind et. al., 2020). The dramatic increase in the prevalence of online applications has created changes in the counseling and psychology field and accelerated ethical regulations in online mental health services. Most of the mental health associations work to improve and revise their ethical rules and standards to answer practitioners' questions about online ethical conduct in psychotherapy and counseling. So, national organizations such as the Turkish Psychological Counseling and Guidance Association, Turkish Psychologist Association and other worldwide associations like American Counseling Association (ACA) and American Psychological Association (APA) revised their ethical standards and published papers or books about this urgent issue (e.g., İkiz, Baş, & Arslan, 2021).

Previous studies on online counseling covered the history, definitions, advantages and disadvantages of online counseling, debatable issues, ethical considerations and practices in online counseling (e.g., Rochlen et al., 2004; Mallen & Vogel, 2005). For example, a systematic review discussed the feasibility of video conferencing practices in online counseling (Backhaus et al., 2012). Barnett (2005) emphasized recommendations to resolve challenges in online counseling practices. Richards and Vigano (2013) conducted an extensive systematic review study on online counseling, including ethical issues, professional training, attitudes and experiences of both mental health service providers and receivers. They conclude that online counseling and face-to-face counseling may not differ so much in terms of their effectiveness, but they addressed a need for more robust empirical research. A broad study by Haberstroh et al. (2014) examines state standards of different professions (e.g., marriage and family therapists, psychologists, counselors, social workers) in the USA to specify ethical standards for online counseling settings. They found that 67% of the states offered some kind of guidelines for online help. However, they mentioned that there is a lack of compulsory guidance for online help by many state boards. Charalampous et al., (2019) reviewed the literature to display how remote working affects the well-being of remote workers. Although studies identify positive aspects of distance practice, there are also some negative facets like social and work isolation and barriers to career prospects in this field (Charalampous et al., 2019). A more recent review based on empirical research analyzes general attitudes and experiences of mental health service providers about telemental health only via videoconferencing. It reveals that practitioners have more positive attitudes towards online settings (Connolly et al., 2019). However, they note some concerns such as increased workload, legality, limited training, space and tools, technical and technological difficulties, risk assessment, safety, security, liability in a crisis, and confidentiality (Connolly et al., 2019). Several articles provide theoretical basis and comments on online

psychotherapy and counseling and discuss the literature regarding services, ethical standards, benefits, and barriers, and give suggestions about ethics (Poyrazlı & Can, 2020; Tuzgöl, 2020); however very limited number of empirical research was conducted on the topic (e.g., Woo et al., 2020).

The current review study, which aimed to systematically review existing empirical research on ethics in online counseling in the last two decades is significant for practitioners and researchers. Firstly, although some general review studies on online counseling touched upon the ethical parts of online counseling, there is a scarcity of review studies in the literature which solely focus on the ethical dimensions of online counseling. Secondly, the current research summarized empirical research results on ethical considerations in online counseling. It provides professionals to have more accurate ideas, practices, and techniques rather than untested hypotheses and biased information because empirical research tends to be free from researchers' bias (Cipani, 2009).

METHOD

Search and Selection of Literature

In the current study, we conducted a systematic review of the ethical issues that mental health practitioners encountered in online counseling using the Web of Sciences (WOS) database. While selecting articles related to ethical issues in online counseling, we considered four inclusion criteria: indexed in SSCI, published between 2000 and 2021, published in psychology and psychological counseling journals and included evidence-based research in which data were collected from mental health professionals. Document analysis, web analysis, commentaries, and theoretical papers were excluded. While searching on the WOS database, we checked "psychology" and "counseling" journals in SSCI by using various keywords for online counseling because several different terms define online counseling. These keywords were "telemental health", "telepsychology", "telepsychotherapy", "videoconferencing", "video counseling", "video therapy", "online counseling", "online therapy", "e-counseling", "internet therapy", "internet counseling", "web counseling", and "web-based counseling". For the ethics part, we used "ethics", "ethical issue", "ethical concerns", "ethical dilemmas", "challenges", "disadvantages", "barriers, "rules", and "policy" as keywords. A total of 17 articles meeting the inclusion criteria that are summarized in Table 1 have been found in 12 different journals.

Table 1. *Inclusion and Exclusion Criteria for Research Articles*

Inclusion Criteria	Exclusion Criteria
1. Indexed in SSCI 2. Published between 2000-2021 3. Published in Psychology and Psychological Counseling Journals 4. Included evidence-based research in which data were collected from mental health professionals	1. Did not provide evidence-based results (e.g., commentaries, theoretical papers) 2. Did not collect data from human subjects (e.g., document analysis, web analysis).

Table 2 displays the descriptive information of the selected research articles. When we examined the methods of the studies, we saw that seven of them used quantitative research methods (6 survey studies and one longitudinal study). Six of them used qualitative research design and the rest four of them used mixed methods. When we checked the participants of the studies, we saw that different mental health

professionals participated in these studies. Six of the study reached out counselors, 2 of them reached out psychologists. Two studies included school counselors; 2 studies collected data from couple and family therapists. One study described its participants as therapists. Three studies selected different mental health professionals and worked with a mixed sample, including counselors, psychologists, etc. The most preferred format of online counseling that the participants in these articles mentioned was videoconferencing (7). E-mail (6), chat (5), and telephone (4) formats follow videoconferencing. Lastly, social media (1) (e.g., WhatsApp, Facebook, Viber) was used by practitioners in only one study. In four studies, participants reported that they do not use or experience any of these formats.

Table 2. *Descriptive of Research Articles*

|		*f*
Methods	Quantitative: Survey	6
	Qualitative: Interview	6
	Mixed	4
	Quantitative: Longitudinal	1
Participants	Counselors	6
	Different professionals (social workers, nurses, etc.)	3
	Psychologists	3
	School Counselors	2
	Couple and Family Therapists	2
	Therapists	1
Format	Videoconferencing	7
	E-mail	6
	Chat	5
	Telephone	4
	Social media	1
	None of these format	3

Note. f=frequency

RESULTS

The current review results indicated that mental health professionals reported nine different ethical challenges encountered in online counseling. Confidentiality (12) is the most reported issue faced by mental health professionals in online counseling. Subsequently, privacy (7) and competency (7) were mentioned as second main concerns by practitioners. Crisis intervention (6), security issues (6), client verification (5), risk assessment (4), and maintaining professional boundaries with clients (3) follows privacy and competency. In two studies, mental health professionals touched upon the insurance problem (2), which means enforcements about possible risky practices in the online environment are also a concern.

Additionally, results showed that most mental health professionals do not have a high awareness of ethical issues in online counseling practice. The majority of the practitioners mentioned that they do not have enough knowledge, and some of them do not have much confidence in managing online counseling, and need specific training to implement online counseling for their clients. Practitioners have difficulty with what kind of procedures, strategies, and assessment techniques they should follow in online counseling. Mainly, protecting the confidentiality and privacy of clients emerged as core concerns. In many studies,

mental health professionals have both competency and confidentiality concerns. These results also indicated that protecting confidentiality in online settings may require a certain level of competency among professionals.

Figure 1. *Number of Ethical Concerns Mentioned in Research Articles*
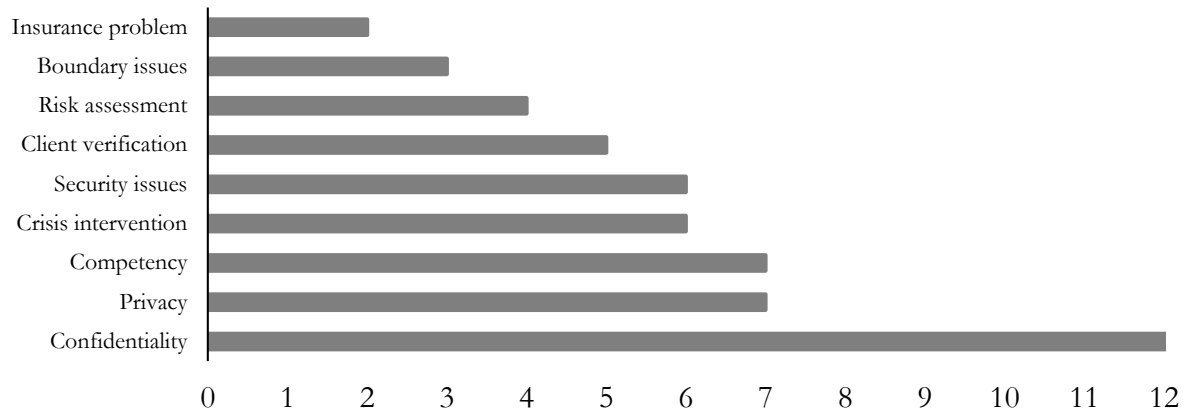
Moreover, intervening the crisis situation emerged as another concern in online counseling. Practitioners state that they do not have clear procedures and standards to follow to moderate or assess suicidal clients, very severe problems of clients, and other risky situations in online platforms. Maintaining security and cyber security, in general, is another difficulty that professionals encounter. In one study, practitioners reported that although they know some applications do not meet the security standards, they still utilize these applications (Borcsa et al., 2021). This systematic review found one of the critical competency issues that practitioners generally know ethical concerns in online counseling. However, they do not know how to manage and cope with these difficulties.

Table 3. *Summaries of the Research Articles*

Authors(Date)	*Methods*	*Subjects*	*Main Findings*
Maheu & Gordon (2000)	Survey	56 participants from different mental health professions	Crisis intervention
Negretti & Wieling (2001)	Mixed	42 practitioners from different professions	Boundary Issues
Chester & Glass (2006)	Survey	67 counselors	Confidentiality Crisis intervention
Haberstroh et al., (2008)	Qualitative	6 trained graduate counseling students	Boundary issues Competency Confidentiality
Callahan et al., (2012)	Mixed	9 online mental health providers from different professions	Crisis intervention
Ipsen et al., (2012)	Mixed	1,187 counselors	Confidentiality Competency
Glasheen et al., (2013)	Survey	210 school counselors	Privacy Confidentiality

Authors(Date)	Methods	Subjects	Main Findings
Blumer et al., (2015)	Mixed	227 family therapists	Competency Security Confidentiality Privacy Risk assessment Insurance problem
Cipoletta et al., (2018)	Qualitative	2 psychotherapists	Privacy
Cipolletta & Mocellin (2018)	Survey	289 counselors	Privacy Security Confidentiality Competency Client verification Crisis intervention
Glueckauf et al., (2018)	Survey	164 psychologists	Crisis intervention Confidentiality Security Insurance problem Competency
Harrison & Wright (2020)	Qualitative	4 counselors	Risk assessment
Knott et al. (2020)	Qualitative	12 psychologists	Risk assessment Security Confidentiality Competency Crisis intervention
Békés et al., (2021)	Longitudinal	1.257 therapists	Privacy Confidentiality Boundary issues
Borcsa et al. (2021)	Survey	220 family therapists	Confidentiality Competency Security
Khan et al. (2021)	Qualitative	4 counselors	Confidentiality Privacy Client verification Risk assessment
Mageshprasath & Yuvaraj (2021)	Qualitative	11 counselors	Confidentiality Privacy Competency Security Client verification

DISCUSSION

This study showed that mental health practitioners' main ethical concern in online counseling is confidentiality. Previous studies have also mentioned that confidentiality is the primary concern among professionals in online counseling (Wells et al., 2007; Baker & Ray., 2011; Stoll et al., 2020). Past research suggests several ways to protect confidentiality. These include utilizing firewalls, using passwords, data encryption, employing secure socket layer encryption for computers of both parties (Rummell & Royce, 2010). Similar to the current study, privacy was also discussed as a top essential concern in several studies (Reamer, 2013; Richards & Vigano, 2013; Stoll et al., 2020). The study conducted by Dores et al. (2020) showed that compared to the pre-COVID-19 process, perceived challenges about privacy issues in online counseling are slightly more critical after the pandemic (Dores et al., 2020).

The majority of the participants of the reviewed studies had more experience with face-to-face counseling and also had some experience in online counseling. However, they still have concerns over competency issues. As a result, being a competent counselor in face-to-face treatment may not necessarily mean that counselors have sufficient qualities for practicing in online counseling (Zack, 2008). There are different formats in online counseling; one may not have competency over all formats of online counseling. So, to ensure competency, training focusing on specific formats might be helpful rather than general online counseling education. Previous studies pointed out the lack of online counseling education and availability of supervision (Rumell & Royce, 2013). However, with the ongoing pandemic situation, this issue will probably change positively in the future, and counseling training programs will include more information and practices regarding online counseling.

Although online counseling provides an enormous option for clients who want to hide their identity and receive help anonymously, there are no clear methodological guidelines for providing crisis interventions, assessing risks in the online environment. Professionals may not apply advantages of anonymity for particular clients, especially those with severe issues (Silva et al., 2015). In terms of emergency issues, therapists need to validate the true identity and the geographic location of their clients (Shaw & Shaw, 2006). So, the issue of identity verification, assessing risks appropriately, and intervening in crises might be somehow related issues.

Past research also mentions security risks in online counseling as one of the top issues (Stoll et al., 2020). Surprisingly, people tend to concern more about the security risks of online counseling before COVID-19. However, this tendency seems to lose importance after the pandemic (Dores et al., 2020). The reason behind this perception change may be because of the inevitability of online practices during the COVID-19 process.

The present study shows that a few studies had mentioned difficulty encountering boundary issues compared to confidentiality, privacy, security, crisis intervention, and identity issues. The main reason might be that professionals may view no difference between traditional and web-counseling competencies about setting professional boundaries. However, past research says that since counselors and clients enter each other's' homes, this may affect intimacy. There is a possibility of increased self-disclosure that may lead to boundary violations. Clothing casually and difficult control over third parties' involvement at home are severe issues (Drum & Littleton, 2014). If practitioners do not consider online counseling as a different field to ensure competency, they may not be aware of the boundaries that they have to set. Consequently, setting professional boundaries online can be considered an expertise issue for practitioners to ensure competency. There is a need for new communication skills and specific attention

to a unique therapeutic relationship about boundary issues (Stoll et al., 2020). Effective therapeutic relationships for online therapy might need different expertise specifically. So, more attention to boundary setting issues and standards is essential (Drum & Littleton, 2014).

As a specific concern, this review suggests insurance problems about malpractice risks in online counseling, especially for countries that constitute different states (e.g., USA). Past research discussed the uncertainty of the licensure that psychotherapists will practice online (Rummell & Joyce, 2010). Mental health professionals in some states may have difficulties with the consequences of malpractice, particularly in online counseling due to specific state laws.

To sum up, in this study, articles related to ethical issues in online counseling have been reviewed and found that both face-to-face counseling and online counseling share similar ethical concerns, but these are more challenging and difficult to handle in online counseling. For this reason, new ethical regulations and adapted rules should be considered comprehensively by mental health associations, mental health professionals, and clients. Guidelines and steps for the practices should be mentioned clearly. Adjustment of technical and technological enhancements should be performed. Both practitioners and clients must get the appropriate information about online counseling. Due to the fact that the ethics of counseling has a dynamic structure and might change according to the technology advancement, these ethical guidelines need to be reviewed and developed periodically. In specific situations like a pandemic, some problems might be minor or more important. So, mental health professionals must understand and perform accurate practices according to evidence-based research.

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Author Contribution

FBY and MP equally contributed in deciding and constructing the research question, identifying the inclusion and exclusion criteria for research selection and planning the methodology of the study. MP took more active role in data analysis and writing the manuscript. FBY guided the process and provided constructive feedback for increasing the quality of the written paper.

Conflict of Interest

Both of the authors declares that they have no conflicts of interests to display. Authors conducted the study by the absence of any financial and commercial relationship.

Ethical Statement

In this study, we did not collect data from neither human participants nor animals. We just reviewed the existing literature. For this reason, ethical approval for this study is not required according to TR Index Criteria for the systematic review studies.