Tele-Counseling Experience of Psychology Graduate Students in Online Internship: A Narrative Inquiry

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ABSTRACT

Tele-counseling has been recognized as a useful and effective modality for delivering mental health services, there remains a need to explore whether psychology graduate students can effectively adapt to this emerging form of practice. Unfortunately, the literature addressing the tele-counseling practices of these future professionals is scarce. To address this gap, this study investigates the lived experiences of psychology graduate students as they deliver tele-counseling services during their online internships. Employing a narrative inquiry approach, semi-structured interviews were conducted with six interns from various school of Psychology in Zamboanga City. The study uncovered sixteen emerging narrative themes that provide insights into the complexities of tele-counseling. Key findings include interns' efforts in building rapport, exercising autonomy in selecting counseling approaches, guiding clients, managing technological challenges, struggling with limited observations of nonverbal cues, tolerating interruptions, and maintaining spontaneity during sessions. Post- session, interns engaged in reflective practices, observed client improvements, consulted with mentors, received feedback from colleagues, and conducted extensive research. Before subsequent sessions, they established protocols, made intentional preparations, experienced performance anxiety, and implemented self-care activities. The study concludes that targeted training and support are essential for preparing interns for the demands of tele-counseling. It is recommended that psychology internship programs incorporate comprehensive tele-counseling training modules, including technology use, supervision, and self-care strategies, to enhance interns' readiness and effectiveness in delivering virtual mental health services.

Keywords: online internship, psychology graduate students, professional training, tele-counseling

I. INTRODUCTION

Tele-counseling, the provision of counseling services through digital platforms, has become an increasingly important modality in mental health care. It offers numerous benefits, such as enhanced accessibility, flexibility, and convenience for clients, while maintaining the therapeutic efficacy of traditional in- person counseling. This mode of service delivery has proven particularly beneficial for individuals in rural or underserved areas where access to in-person services is limited, and it has been associated with positive outcomes such as reduced stigma around seeking help and improved mental health access (Henderson & Reynolds, 2019; Simpson & Reid, 2014). As tele-counseling continues to expand, it represents a significant shift in how mental health services are delivered, with the potential to address disparities in care and reach a broader population.

The rapid shift to tele-counseling was further accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, which necessitated the transition from face-to-face counseling to online modalities due to social distancing measures and lockdowns. This shift has highlighted the importance of adaptability and innovation in mental health service delivery. Tele-counseling has shown to be effective in maintaining therapeutic rapport and facilitating positive client outcomes (Williams et al., 2020). However, it also requires professionals to develop new competencies, including technological proficiency and the ability to engage clients in a virtual environment. While tele- counseling presents many opportunities, it also introduces unique challenges that need to be addressed through proper training and supervision.

In the context of professional training, tele-counseling offers a valuable opportunity for psychology graduate students to gain hands-on experience with this emerging modality. Internships are a critical component of psychology education, providing students with opportunities for practical learning, skill development, and career exploration. They bridge the gap between academic training and real-world practice, allowing students to apply theoretical knowledge in diverse clinical settings (Baker et al., 2018). Through internships, students develop essential competencies such as clinical assessment, intervention planning, and ethical decision-making, which are fundamental for successful professional practice (Perez & Kishore, 2016; Santos et al., 2020).

Internship experiences that include training in tele-counseling are crucial for preparing psychology interns to effectively navigate the complexities of virtual client interactions. By leveraging technology, interns can develop proficiency in delivering quality mental health care in a rapidly evolving landscape. As tele-counseling becomes more integral to mental health services, the role of psychology interns in supporting and advancing best practices in virtual care becomes increasingly significant.

Despite the growing relevance of tele-counseling, there remains a notable gap in the literature regarding the experiences of psychology graduate student interns engaged in this modality. While existing studies have explored the efficacy and ethical considerations of tele-counseling from the perspective of established professionals (Maheu et al., 2005; Simpson & Reid, 2014; Sucala et al., 2012), there is limited research specifically addressing the experiences, challenges, and training needs of interns. This gap limits our understanding of how these emerging professionals adapt to tele-counseling, the strategies they employ, and the support they require to succeed in this format. Therefore, this study aims to address this critical gap by investigating the impact of tele-counseling on the professional development and clinical training of psychology graduate student interns, providing insights that can inform the enhancement of internship programs and tele-counseling training.

Intern Experiences with Tele-Counseling: Navigating Challenges and Growth During the COVID-19 Pandemic

The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic brought a swift transition to tele-health counseling, profoundly impacting interns and trainees in clinical psychology. As they navigated this new landscape, interns reported a blend of challenges and opportunities, reflecting a dynamic learning process throughout their tele-counseling experiences. Before conducting tele-counseling sessions, many interns expressed initial reluctance and uncertainty about their ability to connect with clients remotely. This apprehension often stemmed from concerns about building therapeutic rapport and managing technical aspects of virtual sessions, which differed significantly from their prior face-to-face training (Gallo et al., 2022). However, as they gained more experience, their confidence grew, supported by regular feedback and guidance from supervisors, which helped them navigate these new challenges (Symeonidou & Giannouli, 2023).

As interns became more familiar with tele-counseling, their experiences improved, particularly for those who had prior exposure to telehealth. These interns reported stronger therapeutic relationships and better multicultural counseling skills (Wilczewski et al., 2022). While the pandemic accelerated the integration of telehealth training in clinical psychology programs, a continued need for expanded telehealth education remains, underscoring the importance of further developing formal training programs and competencies to fully prepare interns for effective remote practice (Perle et al., 2022).

Insights from Graduate Students Experiences in Online Placements

Undergraduate psychology internships have long been valued for their significant contributions to skill development, career satisfaction, and enhancing the perceived worth of psychology degrees (Sheen et al., 2021). However, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these experiences, reducing available training opportunities and increasing social isolation. This shift forced a heavier reliance on telepsychology and heightened stress levels among trainees, fundamentally altering the internship landscape (Gilchrest et al., 2022). Despite these challenges, internships continue to play a crucial role in helping students shape their future career paths and better understand their own strengths and weaknesses (White et al., 2022).

Interns working in research-intensive settings, especially in sensitive fields like violence and injury, often face emotional challenges, but these experiences can also drive both personal and professional growth (Mokobedi et al., 2024). Supportive work environments and strong collegial relationships are critical in helping interns manage

these stresses effectively (Mokobedi et al., 2024). While internships remain an invaluable component of psychology education, their effectiveness can vary widely based on individual career trajectories and external factors, such as global crises like the pandemic (Sheen et al., 2021; Gilchrest et al., 2022). This variability highlights the need for flexible and supportive training environments that can adapt to changing circumstances while continuing to provide meaningful learning opportunities for psychology students

I. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

This study attempted to answer two main research questions:
1. In what ways do interns describe their experience during, after, and before conducting a new tele- counseling session?

2. What implications might there be from such experiences for an internship in psychology?

II. METHODS

This study utilized a narrative inquiry design to explore the tele-counseling experiences of psychology graduate students during their online internships. This qualitative approach was selected for its ability to capture the rich, multifaceted narratives of participants, offering a deep understanding of their lived experiences, perceptions, and sense-making processes (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Riessman, 2008). The complex interplay of personal, professional, and technological factors involved in tele-counseling made narrative inquiry particularly suitable for this research.

David Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory served as the theoretical framework, guiding the analysis of how interns processed their experiences. Kolb's model, which includes the cycle of concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation, provided a structured lens to understand the developmental processes of the interns in their tele-counseling practice.

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a diverse representation of psychology graduate students engaged in tele-counseling during their online internships. The selection criteria included: (1) current enrollment in a psychology graduate program, (2) active participation in an online internship involving tele-counseling, and (3) willingness to share detailed accounts of their experiences. The sample consisted of six interns, comprising four females and two males, aged between 24 to 30 years. They were selected from various school of Psychology in Zamboanga City to capture a range of cultural and contextual influences on their tele-counseling practices. All participants had prior experience in face-to-face counseling, which allowed for comparative insights into their adaptation to tele-counseling.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the six selected interns to elicit detailed narratives about their tele-counseling sessions. The interviews focused on the challenges they faced, the strategies they employed, and their reflective practices throughout their internship. Interviews were conducted via video conferencing platforms, recorded with the participants' consent, and transcribed verbatim to ensure accuracy. The data were analyzed thematically, using a coding process to identify common themes and patterns across the participants' narratives. This thematic analysis provided a comprehensive understanding of the interns' experiences and the developmental processes guided by Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory.

III. RESULTS

This study explored the experiences of psychology graduate students providing tele-counseling services during their online internships. The findings are organized into three distinct phases: during tele-counseling, after tele-counseling, and before conducting a new tele-counseling session.

During the tele-counseling sessions, seven themes emerged. First, interns (1) built rapport with clients, effectively establishing connections despite the challenges posed by the virtual environment. They (2) freely utilized counseling approaches, exercising autonomy in selecting and applying various techniques tailored to their clients' needs. Throughout the sessions, interns (3) guided clients through the counseling process, striking a balance between supportive and directive interventions. However, the virtual setting introduced challenges, as interns frequently (4) experienced technology issues such as connectivity problems and software glitches, which occasionally disrupted the flow of sessions. The online format also meant that interns (5) struggled with limited observations of clients' body language, making it difficult to fully interpret emotional states. Furthermore, they

(6) experienced different forms of interruptions, including technical difficulties and environmental distractions, which impacted the continuity of the sessions. Despite these challenges, interns reported (7) being spontaneous during sessions, adapting in real-time to the evolving dynamics and client needs.

After the tele-counseling sessions, five themes were identified. Interns engaged in (1) reflections, critically analyzing their performance and identifying areas for improvement in future sessions. They (2) observed signs of clients' improvements, which reinforced the effectiveness of their interventions. To further refine their practice, interns (3) consulted with mentors, discussing session outcomes and receiving valuable feedback on their techniques. Peer interaction also played a significant role, as interns engaged in (4) feedback with colleagues, learning from others' experiences and refining their approaches. Additionally, interns undertook (5) extensive research to deepen their understanding of specific client issues and explore new counseling strategies.

Before conducting new tele-counseling sessions, four themes emerged. Interns emphasized the importance of (1) establishing protocols to ensure consistency and professionalism in their practice. They engaged in (2) intentional preparations, meticulously planning their sessions to address anticipated challenges. Despite their preparations, many interns experienced (3) performance anxiety, driven by concerns about their effectiveness and the unique demands of tele-counseling. Recognizing the emotional toll of their work, interns also prioritized

(4) Self-Care to maintain their well-being and sustain their professional performance.

IV. DISCUSSION

I. Interns Experiences During, After, and Before Conducting a New Tele-Counseling Session

During Tele-Counseling

The experiences of respondents during tele-counseling revealed two major points. First, while the fundamental aspects of tele-counseling and in-person counseling are similar (Corey, 2011; Sanders et al., 2021; Steward & Sutton, 2017), the mode of delivery through technology introduces unique challenges that necessitate adjustments from the interns. For instance, options for establishing rapport in tele-counseling are more limited than in face-to-face settings, where environmental factors such as room setup can significantly contribute to client comfort and connection. Interns found that they had to rely more on verbal communication skills—such as appropriate voice tone, nods, and eye contact in video conferences—to maintain engagement, as supported by Day and Schneider (2000), who noted mixed reactions to emotional connections in online sessions. This was particularly significant as some clients felt safer in tele-counseling sessions, despite the perceived lack of human connection.

The ability to adapt and exercise autonomy in selecting and tailoring various counseling approaches, such as Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, Solution-Focused Brief Therapy, and Positive Psychology, to the tele- counseling format was a recurrent theme among interns. Day and Schneider (2000) also observed the necessity for counselors to modify specific techniques for the online setting, underscoring the adaptability required in tele- counseling. Despite these challenges, interns expressed that tele-counseling effectively allowed them to guide and assist clients, similar to in-person sessions. Ali et al. (2017) found that patients experienced significant mental health improvements over six months of tele-counseling, which aligns with the interns' observations of positive client outcomes.

Several unique challenges specific to tele-counseling emerged, including "technology issues," "limited observations," and "interruptions." These challenges, largely stemming from external factors beyond the counselor's control, such as internet connectivity and the digital nature of sessions, differ from the more controlled environment of in-person counseling. This aligns with findings from Bernal et al. (2012), who identified environmental control as a significant issue in tele-counseling. To address these challenges, interns developed mitigation strategies, such as preparing backup internet solutions and refining their use of available nonverbal cues like vocal tone and message clarity to interpret client emotions and thoughts. This adaptive response reflects the "Concrete Experience" stage in Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, where learners encounter new situations and reinterpret them to fit evolving contexts (Kolb, 1984).

Additionally, the theme of "Spontaneity" emerged, indicating that as interns grew more comfortable with the online modality, they moved from scripted interactions to more authentic, spontaneous communication. This progression suggests a development of professional maturity and adaptability, reinforcing the importance of

experiential learning in professional training (Figueiredo & Ipiranga, 2015). Initial uncertainty around building rapport in a virtual setting gave way to strengthened therapeutic alliances as interns refined their approaches based on reflective practices and iterative learning—consistent with Gallo et al. (2022), who highlighted the role of relationship-building and emotional awareness in remote counseling.

After Tele-Counseling

Post-tele-counseling, five themes emerged, highlighting the "Reflective Observation" and "Abstract Conceptualization" stages of Kolb's cycle. Interns reported observing signs of client improvement, which served to validate their efforts despite initial hesitations about the efficacy of tele-counseling. This observation is consistent with findings by Dunstan and Tooth (2012), who documented positive therapeutic outcomes in tele-counseling settings. Moreover, interns engaged in reflective practices, consulted with mentors, sought feedback from colleagues, and conducted extensive research to refine their techniques, underscoring the value of continuous learning and professional development.

A challenge noted by several interns was the limited availability of mentors for consultation, which impacted their ability to fully benefit from supervisory guidance—a finding that aligns with Wilczewski et al. (2022), who reported that providers with prior telehealth experience noted stronger therapeutic alliances and competencies. The reliance on peer feedback, while beneficial, also raised concerns about confidentiality and the adequacy of informal peer support systems. This mirrors observations by Sheen et al. (2021), who emphasized the importance of structured, formal feedback mechanisms in enhancing internship outcomes.

The reflective observation stage allowed interns to critically assess their performance and identify areas for improvement, contributing to their professional growth and an increased appreciation for the counseling profession. Their reflections often extended beyond technical skills, touching on the broader implications of their work and reinforcing their dedication to the field. Institutions could enhance this process by offering

targeted training on reflective practices and establishing structured opportunities for mentor feedback, as suggested by Mokobedi et al. (2024), who highlighted the importance of workplace support and collegiality in managing the emotional challenges of internships.

Before a New Tele-Counseling Session

In preparation for subsequent tele-counseling sessions, interns engaged in the "Active Experimentation" stage of Kolb's cycle, applying lessons learned to refine their practice. The themes "establishing protocols" and "intentional preparations" reflect the proactive steps taken by interns to address previous challenges, such as refining routines to ensure efficient use of session time and setting clear objectives. This stage of active experimentation aligns with the findings of Perle et al. (2022), who reported a significant increase in the integration of telehealth education in clinical psychology training programs, though many expressed the need for further development in this area.

Interns also reported experiencing "performance anxiety" prior to new sessions, reflecting concerns about their effectiveness and the potential impact on their clients. This anxiety underscores the affective dimension of experiential learning, where emotional responses play a significant role in shaping learning outcomes (Coutu, 2002). The emphasis on "self-care" emerged as a critical component for sustaining their capacity to deliver effective counseling, particularly given the demanding nature of tele-counseling. Gilchrest et al. (2022) also noted the heightened stress levels among trainees during the pandemic, underscoring the need for robust self-care strategies and support systems within internship programs.

Overall, the findings from this study underscore the dynamic nature of learning in tele-counseling internships, highlighting the importance of reflective practices, supervisor support, and targeted training to enhance the professional development of psychology interns. The alignment of these findings with related literature provides a comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved in tele-counseling and offers insights into potential areas for enhancing internship programs in a post-pandemic world.

II. Implications of Experiences for an Internship in Psychology

During Tele-Counseling

In academic literature, "implications" often describe the potential impact and influence of a study or the

inferences that can be made from specific findings (Ryan, 2022). Based on the narratives of the respondents as they conducted tele-counseling during online internships, several key implications can be drawn.

Diverging—During their tele-counseling experiences, interns developed skills in building rapport, selecting appropriate counseling frameworks, guiding clients, managing technological issues, navigating limited nonverbal cues, dealing with interruptions, and handling sessions with spontaneity. This aligns with the diverging phase of Kolb's Experiential Learning Cycle, which involves assessing experiences from multiple perspectives and reflecting on concrete experiences (Kurt, 2020). This reflective process allowed interns to generate diverse solutions to the challenges they faced, demonstrating the value of varied perspectives in developing counseling competencies. This is consistent with Gallo et al. (2022), who found that emotional awareness and adaptive thinking are crucial in remote counseling, further emphasizing the importance of flexibility in clinical practice.

Assimilating—In the reflective observation and abstract conceptualization stages, interns not only reflected on their personal experiences and client interactions but also sought insights from supervisors, peers, and academic research. This process of assimilating—integrating feedback and exploring further understanding—was critical for interns as it supported the development of a comprehensive approach to tele- counseling (Kurt, 2020; Talreja & Agashe, 2024). Symeonidou and Giannouli (2023) also highlighted the role of supervisory support in building confidence among trainees, underscoring the importance of mentorship in bridging the gap between theory and practice.

Converging—As interns progressed to the abstract conceptualization and active experimentation stages, they applied new insights from their reflections, research, and feedback to subsequent sessions, demonstrating the converging phase of Kolb's model (Kurt, 2020). This involved refining protocols, intentional preparations, and engaging in self-care—all aimed at enhancing their practice. This phase illustrates the importance of applying theoretical learning to practical scenarios, as supported by Perle et al. (2022), who noted the increasing integration of telehealth education in clinical training programs. This stage also mirrors Wilczewski et al. (2022), who found that those with prior telehealth experience reported stronger therapeutic alliances, underscoring the value of repeated practice and feedback.

New and Accessible Platform—The experience of tele-counseling during internships provided interns not only with the realities of professional practice but also exposure to an evolving modality that is becoming

essential in modern psychological services. As mental health issues continue to rise globally, tele-counseling presents a critical solution for expanding access to care, particularly for underserved populations (MacMillan, 2022; Ibragimov, 2022). The importance of this new platform was further emphasized by the study of Gallo et al. (2022), which highlighted the rapid adaptation required by trainees to meet the increasing demand for telehealth services during the pandemic.

Competence in Aid of Technology—Interns' experiences underscored the significance of being adept with technology in tele-counseling. The intensive hands-on training during their internships positioned them to be more proficient and prepared to handle real-world scenarios. The integration of traditional counseling principles with digital tools allowed interns to sharpen their skills in a dual context, thereby making them more adaptable and versatile as future practitioners (Smith & Gillon, 2021). This finding supports the notion that technology-assisted modalities are not just an alternative but an enhancement to traditional approaches when well implemented.

Enhanced Affective Skills—Beyond technical and procedural skills, interns reported notable growth in affective skills such as adaptability, resilience, and a growth mindset. These skills are crucial for navigating the emotional landscape of professional practice (Brouse, 2021). The development of a growth mindset, as highlighted by Kamel (2022), allows individuals to embrace challenges as opportunities for learning rather than as barriers. Enhanced intrinsic motivation and a deeper appreciation for the counseling profession were also observed, suggesting that these affective skills contribute to greater job satisfaction and longevity in the field (Rollins, 2019). This aligns with findings from Symeonidou and Giannouli (2023), who reported increased confidence and positive attitudes among trainees as they gained experience.

Enhanced Internship Program—The insights from tele-counseling experiences can inform enhancements to psychology internship programs. The initial anxiety and uncertainty expressed by interns highlight the need for

pre-internship training that specifically addresses the unique demands of tele-counseling. This aligns with Robertson and Lowell (2021), who found dissatisfaction with current curricula's lack of emphasis on distance counseling. Introducing structured training and simulations before internships could better prepare students, enhancing their readiness and confidence when faced with real clients. Furthermore, embedding tele-counseling competencies into the core curriculum of psychology programs could better equip future professionals for the evolving landscape of mental health care (Gude et al., 2021; Novotney, 2017).

Areas for Improvement—The tele-counseling experiences of interns provide valuable insights for continuous improvement. For interns, the narratives serve as a preparatory guide, setting realistic expectations and highlighting common challenges. Supervisors can draw from these findings to enhance their engagement and support mechanisms, establishing regular consultation schedules and responsive communication channels, particularly for crisis situations involving high-risk clients. School authorities are also encouraged to invest in upskilling mentors and incorporating tele-counseling competencies into their training frameworks, ensuring that both interns and supervisors are well-prepared (Robertson & Lowell, 2021). Enhanced supervision and structured feedback systems are vital, as highlighted by the ongoing demand for additional telehealth education (Perle et al., 2022).

The findings from this study emphasize the need for a holistic approach to tele-counseling training within psychology internships, integrating both technical competencies and affective skills. By aligning internship experiences with current best practices and emerging trends in telehealth, institutions can better prepare future psychologists to meet the growing demand for accessible and effective mental health care in a rapidly changing world.

V. CONCLUSION

This study concludes that the process of learning tele-counseling during online internships effectively aligns with Kolb's Experiential Learning Theory. This theory posits that learning is a cyclical process involving four stages: concrete experience, reflective observation, abstract conceptualization, and active experimentation. By engaging in these stages, interns can systematically develop their counseling skills. Moreover, tele- counseling provides interns with an opportunity to adapt to the unique challenges of virtual service delivery, which enhances their ability to exceed traditional expectations and master essential counseling skills.

The findings suggest that tele-counseling internships offer diverse learning experiences—such as diverging, assimilating, and converging—that contribute significantly to professional growth. These experiences encourage interns to step out of their comfort zones, thereby enabling them to realize their full potential as future counselors. Additionally, the study provides insights that could guide improvements in psychology internship programs, including enhancing supervision, fostering group learning, and integrating self-care practices.

However, it is important to acknowledge the study's limitations. The results are based on a specific group of psychology graduate interns, which may affect the generalizability of the findings. Future research should consider exploring diverse populations and settings to validate and extend the implications of tele-counseling in professional training.

The study also offers practical recommendations for educational institutions and program developers. Enhancing internship programs through improved supervision, facilitating group learning, and incorporating self-care and stress management sessions could better prepare interns for the demands of tele-counseling and the broader challenges of the mental health profession.

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