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Cyber-Systemic Themes in MFT Literature

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In the fifteen years since the explosion of the Internet, using cyber technology for work & social functions has exponentially increased. Yet the questions around how to manage such changes remain elusive in family therapy literature. In this investigation, we conducted a content analysis to determine to what extent marriage & family therapy (MFT) journals have responded to the integration of the Internet in couple & family life. We found 79 of 13,274 articles across seventeen journals focused on the Internet in some capacity supporting the contention that cyber issues are largely ignored within the MFT field.

**BACKGROUND**

- The Internet and other web-based technologies play a prominent role in the following:
  - Education (Livingstone & Bober, 2005)
  - Entertainment (Whitty & McLaughlin, 2007)
  - Leisure activities (Vandelanotte, Sugiyama, Gardiner, & Owen, 2009)
  - Relationship development & maintenance (Luo, 2007)
  - Social engagement (Subrahmanyam, Reich, Waechter, & Espinoza, 2008)
- Cyber issues that emerge in therapy include:
  - Online intimacy problems (Hertlein & Stevenson, 2010),
  - Internet infidelity (Hertlein & Piercy, 2008; Hertlein, in press)
  - Internet use among adolescents (Landau, Garrett, & Webb, 2008)
  - Online gaming & relationships (Mitchell & Wells, 2007)
- Nearly 300 online independent therapy or counseling practitioner sites exist in addition to three cyber therapy clinics (e.g. MoodGYM, MyTherapyNet.com, etc.) with hundreds of therapists in each (Metanoia, 2001).

**PURPOSE**

- Conduct a content analysis of articles in leading MFT journals to determine the extent of attention given to cyber issues from 1996 through 2010.
  - How are Internet issues addressed in theories?
  - How are Internet issues addressed in research?
  - How are Internet issues addressed in practice?
- We hypothesized there would be a parallel process between growth in Internet usage & that of publication with regard to cyber issues, especially when viewing them in context of the exponentially steady rate of growth experienced in Internet usage during the same time period.
- We hypothesized that the categories of articles found in the journal would contain approximately the same number of articles.

**METHODS**

- Searched 17 peer-reviewed journals between 1996 and 2010
- Search terms included: computer, internet, online, technology, virtual reality, World Wide Web, and cyber- (such as cyberspace, cybersystems, cyber supervision, cyber technology, cyber therapy)
- Excluded non-articles (e.g., book reviews, editorials, epilogues, movie reviews, etc.)
- Sorted through 13,274 & found 116 articles containing the search terms
- Third order sort procedure: 1) First 3 authors read abstracts and put articles into categories. 2) Same authors read each article in depth independently and refined categories. A 4th author was also added who read each article and categorized them for reliability and validity 3) All authors met to refine and finalize categories.

**RESULTS**

- Final article count: 79 or 0.006% of the total articles in the 15-year time period.
- Content of the final 79 articles primarily focused on one of the following categories (in order of most to least frequent):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CATEGORY</th>
<th># OF ARTICLES</th>
<th>% OF CYBER ARTICLES</th>
<th>% OF TOTAL ARTICLES</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Clinical Practice</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>35%</td>
<td>0.0021%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cybersex &amp; Couples</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>0.0014%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education &amp; Training</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>22%</td>
<td>0.0013%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Support &amp; Resources</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>0.0005%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teenager &amp; Child Use</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>0.0003%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrative &amp; Business</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>0.0002%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cyber Addiction</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>0.0001%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

- Our hypothesis was not supported. Rather than a parallel process of Internet popularity to publications, we discovered variability number of articles published each year.
- We also conducted a chi square to determine whether there was a significant differences in the types of articles.
- Our results indicated that there were significant difference among the groups in terms of frequency of articles in a given category, $\chi^2 = 51.72$, $df = 6$, $p < .001$.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY AND RESEARCH**

- Develop further understanding of the pros and cons associated with the use of technology in the business and practicing of therapy.
- Explore the role of addiction in the lives of families, not just individuals.
- As systemic thinkers, MFTs should be at the forefront of developing more sophisticated theories to guide families in making decisions around children’s usage of the Internet.
- Increasing publications in these areas in MFT journals to permit access to therapists.
- Develop more research to determine whether the way the Internet affects couples and families changes depending on the cultural context of the couple or family.
- More attention should be focused on categories that received significantly fewer articles, such as addiction issues, administrative and the business end of cyber issues in treatment, and the use of cyber-based technologies in teens and children.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR TRAINING AND PRACTICE**

- Because the growth of Internet is not matched by the publication rate, therapists and trainees need to seek additional venues for learning more about the effect of technology on the couples and families.
- Work with clients to determine at what point in the family life cycle the Internet has a particular influence.
- Develop more specific strategies and interventions for clients of various cultural backgrounds.