

Ethics, relationships and pragmatics in the use of e-technologies in counselling supervision

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Abstract

International literature and local anecdotal evidence report increasing use of video and other e-technology in counselling supervision. In this small-scale study, five experienced supervisors were interviewed about their use of e-technology within supervision. The research was part of a postgraduate paper in professional supervision and worked to introduce and engage researcher-students, all of whom were experienced counselling practitioners, in a supervised collaborative project. It also generated new knowledge for the researchers and participants for their supervision practice. This article offers a review of literature, and ideas about safe and ethical practice for the wider professional counselling community engaged in offering supervision using e-technology. While the use of e-technologies is an effective means of providing supervision, this study found that inquiry should be encouraged within supervision conversations to nourish the quality of supervisory relationships, and thereby enhance the effectiveness of supervision.

Keywords: supervision, e-technology, ethics, supervisory relationship, distance practices

This study on the use of e-technology in counselling supervision emerged in the context of an advanced education programme in counselling supervision in which teaching staff and students have regularly published co-authored articles on supervision. E-technology in supervision is increasingly referred to in both literature and professional contexts. Wright (2011) predicted that “online counselling and supervision will expand in Aotearoa New Zealand as internet connections become faster, cheaper and more widely available” (p. 175). The New Zealand Association of

Counsellors (NZAC) has recently considered developments in technology and its use in counselling, and made changes to Section 13 of the Code of Ethics (NZAC, 2016).

Various terms are used in the literature when referring to supervision by means of e-technology: web-conference supervision (Abbass et al., 2011), e-supervision (Deane, Gonsalvez, Blackman, Safford, & Andresen, 2015), distance supervision (Orr, 2010), online supervision (Perry, 2012), cyber supervision (Powell, 2012), technology-assisted supervision (Rousmaniere, Abbass, & Frederickson, 2014; Wanlass, 2013), and information technology (NZAC, 2016). We have chosen to use the term *e-technology* throughout this article to describe and include the various uses and applications of electronic technologies in counselling supervision.

This study builds on research from New Zealand, Australia, and the United Kingdom. It also draws on literature from the United States, recognising that material from the US usually assumes that supervision exists within a teaching context (see, for example, Abbass et al., 2011; Barnett, 2011; Orr, 2010; Perry, 2012).

Much of the literature is supportive of the use of e-technology in supervision (Abbass et al., 2011; Barnett, 2011; Deane et al., 2015; Orr, 2010; Wright & Griffiths, 2010). Perry (2012) found that “students and supervisors experienced webcam-based supervision as an effective means to nurture this growth in professional identity” (p. 59). However, many authors also identified potential drawbacks (Powell, 2012; Rousmaniere et al., 2014; Wanlass, 2013). Abbass et al. have suggested that “the limitations of web-conference supervision include technical, practical, ethical, and interpersonal issues” (p. 114).

Ethics

The clearest benefit offered by the use of e-technology is that it provides practitioners with increased access to supervisors. Practitioners living in remote areas can access supervision, and those with particular interests or specialties found it easier to find matching supervisors when geographical location was not a barrier (Abbass et al., 2011; Barnett, 2011; Deane et al., 2015; Orr, 2010). In New Zealand, Wright and Griffiths (2010) found that e-technology created opportunities for supervision that were not otherwise available. One ethical question which then arises, as Wright (2011) noted, is: “Is it ethical NOT to extend our practice if clients choose computer-mediated communication?” (p. 175).

The use of e-technology, however, holds other ethical questions. A primary concern for Wright (2011) was that counsellors should have appropriate technical support to

ensure security and privacy. This concern was shared by Barnett (2011), who noted that “it is essential that [supervisors] utilizing these technologies establish and maintain competence in the use of the technologies themselves” (p. 105).

Other issues that have been identified include dealing with cultural differences (Glosoff, Renfro-Michel, & Nagarajan, 2016; Orr, 2010; Rousmaniere et al., 2014; Wanlass, 2013); barriers to open disclosure due to reduced visual contact and sensitivity (Powell, 2012); generational differences in comfort with technology (Perry, 2012; Powell, 2012); and geographical differences in legal requirements (Rousmaniere, Renfro-Michel, & Huggins, 2016; Wanlass, 2013).

A number of authors held concerns about how well issues of confidentiality, privacy, and security are understood or negotiated between supervisors and those who consult them (Deane et al., 2015; Glosoff et al., 2016; Orr, 2010; Wilczenski & Coomey, 2006). Orr asked how privacy is maintained within the environments in which people are online, particularly if they are online within their home or work contexts. Wright and Griffiths (2010), reflecting on the “confines of ‘Skyping’ from one’s work-place,” stated that one “might be less likely to pursue the kind of deep emotional content...if it seemed that anyone was free to walk into the room and interrupt the session” (p. 700).

Wilczenski and Coomey (2006) questioned the possible effects on levels of trust and openness, given the potential for recording and possibilities for others to be present and listening without one party knowing. Following an earlier study, they declared that “Online counselling and consultation services test the bounds of professional competence, confidentiality, and informed consent” (p.327). Glosoff et al. (2016) stressed the importance of developing a collaborative relationship, including a process for supervisors to explore with counsellors their expectations of supervision, the supervisor, and themselves.

Pragmatics

A number of authors reflected on how relationship-building for supervision is attended to if people have not previously met face-to-face (see Orr, 2010; Powell, 2012). Concerns were expressed that the process of building connectedness might be slowed down or delayed (Powell, 2012). In addition, Wilczenski and Coomey (2006) warned that “computer-mediated conversation focuses more on task-oriented discussions than on social-emotional issues...so important social and emotional information may be lost through cyber-communication” (p. 329).

In contrast, Rousmaniere et al. (2014) criticised the assumption that face-to-face or in-person supervision is better. They cited Ellis and Ladany (1997) who observed, “The traditional methods of supervision are in wide use because they were the only methods available, not because research determined them to be the most effective” (p. 1083). The authors encouraged acting on new opportunities, and warned against “alienating a younger generation of supervisees who identify with technology being integrated into every part of their lives” (p. 1092).

Abbass et al. (2011) saw in-person supervision as “the ideal format” (p. 116). However, they then commented that despite it taking a few sessions for both supervisors and practitioners to adjust to web-based supervision, using e-technology was a valuable method of holding supervision: “from our experience...the overall benefits of Web-conference supervision outweigh its relative limitations” (p. 116).

One matter commonly identified throughout the literature was a need for technological knowledge—in terms of securing connectivity during the session as well as the ethical aspect of security of communication and material (Powell, 2012; Wright & Griffiths, 2010). Rousmaniere et al. (2016) noted that people working in the field of mental health were already aware of issues of security. The use of e-technology and (in the US) regulatory requirements such as the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act 1996 (HIPAA)¹ have “introduced an increased need to be aware of security as a legal/ethical issue” (p. 22). These challenges were seen by Wanlass (2013) as a responsibility to be shared by supervisor and practitioner, who both need some technical skills to troubleshoot technical problems. Deane et al. (2015) made the sobering comment: “users are a primary weakness in any digital system, and user education is imperative in combatting this” (p. 246). In view of these matters raised in the international literature, the current study was undertaken to explore the experiences of a small sample of local supervisors who were using e-technology in supervising counsellors.

Method

Recruitment of participants

An invitation to participate was circulated to members of NZAC in the Auckland and Waikato branches, aimed at those who use e-technology in supervision with practitioners. All five who volunteered as participants were aged 55 years or more, with four identifying as female and one as male. Three were located within the two main cities, and two were from smaller centres.

Procedure

Researchers collaboratively developed a semi-structured interview schedule which served as a guide for their interviews with the participants. Each researcher was allocated and interviewed one participant. Participants were matched to researchers by the first author, ensuring that they were not currently in a supervision relationship. The researchers recorded and transcribed the interviews they conducted with the participants.

Interview transcripts were then shared among the researchers, with participant identities kept confidential to the researcher and the first author. Participant anonymity was maintained through the use of initials selected by the researchers. Transcripts were analysed according to the themes of the advantages, ethics, and pragmatics of using e-technology in counselling supervision.

Findings

The following describes some of the themes that emerged from our analysis of the five interviews. We have elected to report these using fragments of conversation from the interviews. Our hope is that as you read the words of those we interviewed, you can hear their own voices in our reporting. All participants referred to their use of Skype, but we will discuss use of software later in this article. We have grouped these findings under three broad themes: the relational; technology; and ethical issues of confidentiality, privacy, and safety.

The relational

All five participants were positive about their experiences of offering supervision via e-technology but it formed a relatively small part of their practice. All identified that the most significant benefit was the ability for supervisor and practitioner to meet across distances. In addition, e-technology makes supervision available for people who might not otherwise be able to access it. The general assumption was that supervision would preferably take place face-to-face and that supervision via e-technology would be used only if this was not practical. This reflects a strongly expressed view in the literature (Abbass et al., 2011; Orr, 2010; Wanlass, 2013; Webber & Deroche, 2016; Wright & Griffiths, 2010).

Four participants expressed a preference for meeting practitioners they were working with face-to-face before starting supervision via e-technology. LP and HP were working only with practitioners they had known before starting to use e-technology

for supervision with them, while JP, VP, and CP had some experience of working online with people they had never met face-to-face prior to beginning supervision together. JP compared meeting face-to-face to “diving into the water with your eyes open rather than shut.”

VP: I started off with a position that I will do Skype if we can have a face-to-face session first...I wanted to meet the whole person and to build the relationship as a foundation face-to-face before a Skype relationship...it would [still] be a preference if it were possible.

LP: The people I Skype, I have worked with person to person...I think now that I am familiar with it I would be ok about Skyping someone that I hadn't met, but I think I would always want, at some point, to meet them.

HP: For me personally and professionally I would prefer there is still the human touch.

In contrast, and in line with the findings of Abbass et al. (2011), CP felt that there was no real difference in her experience of working with someone she already knew compared with someone she had never met.

CP: Just remember your good supervision principles and treat it exactly like that, that if it's good supervision, it doesn't matter whether it's face-to-face or Skype.

JP's commitment to making some face-to-face interaction possible meant he was willing to drive a considerable distance to meet with one of the people he was working with, but he and VP both felt that it was not practical to insist on meeting face-to-face in every case. The value of being able to make supervision accessible outweighed the disadvantage of not meeting.

JP: [e-technology is a] means to achieve something which is worth doing if there aren't better ways to do it.

The findings clearly reflected the value and importance placed by the research participants on building an effective connection. In most cases participants used similar practices and skills to those used in traditional face-to-face supervision, but more attention was given to building the initial connection.

JP: You're focusing on the core conditions and being able to communicate and using yourself in the work.

HP: You really have your own dance, like a dancing interaction...sometimes it's hard to explain. But it's there, you just have to really focus on the screen... based on my experience, you really have to put that trust [in] and make sure that person trusts you. I think that is the main thing, a rapport; you really have to look at it.

CP: Well the building of relationship is really important and it's whether you can build this relationship over Skype...I keep checking in...it's the relationship that's important.

VP: It's trying to bring some of those things that I have had to be more intentional about and missed in the beginning...now I make an effort to share a bit of myself, so bringing the relationship into it and making sure I am asking questions about how they are doing...I would do what I normally do and take that extra care negotiating it.

LP: I would introduce myself to you and try to make some kind of connection.

However, supervisors experienced some limitations in building a relationship, particularly when they had had no face-to-face contact at all. Supervision via e-technology did not match the experience of meeting face-to-face in the first session, and building the relationship took longer. Participants emphasised building trust and regularly checking in with questions to enhance openness.

VP: In the beginning it was harder to build the relationship.

JP: It takes a lot longer to build up a rich relationship...there'd be more effort in it, effort in seeking to understand what she was saying...If I was not sure what she meant I could ask but you don't want to be doing that all the time because you're building up a relationship.

Wanlass (2013) reported being more tense during an e-technology session than in a face-to-face encounter. Two of our participants mentioned a similar experience. VP reported being more tense, and JP reported having a headache after working with people he had never met face-to-face.

One participant discussed the potential effects of the medium on the ability of the practitioner to discuss emotional and difficult issues. This included self-disclosure and discussion around how the therapeutic work might be affecting the practitioner on a personal level. VP reported noticing that she was initially much more task-focused when first using e-technology.

VP: One wondering I have had...is about supervision sometimes going to the personal and I do have a little wondering—is that less likely on Skype?

Having a clear process of informed consent, and a working agreement/contract when meeting face-to-face and via e-technology, were important to most participants. These processes and documents facilitated best practice and a collaborative working relationship. An emphasis on being accountable together was a way of supporting working safely (see Crocket, 2004; Wright & Griffiths, 2010).

VP: We are accountable together, rather than they are accountable to me...it would be very carefully negotiated.

CP: A lot of the same contracting as I would do face-to-face, but more checking in on how this might work.

LP: To me, I wouldn't do anything differently. I think starting supervision with anybody, it's setting out the way in the first few sessions.

Technology

All five participants reported some hesitancy when starting out using e-technology for supervision, with most learning and developing their practice and technical experience as they went. Any hesitation and uncertainty around the use of technology seemed to dissipate with experience.

LP: I'm not at all tech efficient...I have learned what I need to know. I find that this is the best way...I've learned what I need to learn to do it...I don't think it took me very long once I had gotten over my tech anxiety.

CP: I don't think I needed any tech proficiency; it was just to be able to make the arrangements.

Participants noticed an increased level of comfort in using e-technology as they continued using this medium.

VP: I have become more relaxed and more comfortable...

LP and CP reported having reached a level of comfort where they often forgot they were using this platform at all.

LP: It's often something that disappears out of your mind. Once you set yourself up and you're sitting here and you get into supervision, it kind of just disappears.

CP: It just sort of flows once you get really connected with the conversation.

The most frequently mentioned limitation was that of technical interruptions, specifically speed of, or breaks in, internet connection, software failing, and poor image or sound quality. This raised an ethical concern of care for the practitioner, particularly when interruption occurred in the midst of discussing difficult or emotional content.

JP: The disadvantage of Skyping, here in New Zealand I mean, is the potential for the signal to be disrupted so you can start your work and you can be fully engaged in whatever the supervisory task is and then you've lost the signal and it's extremely frustrating.

All practitioners interviewed had one or more back-up options available during sessions (see suggestions in Haberstroh & Duffey, 2016), most commonly, the telephone. One practitioner also made use of other web-based communication.

HP: But you always have a backup; our backup is WhatsApp or for some, Viber.²

Participants dealt with interruptions in different ways. Some allowed time between appointments so that time spent attempting to reconnect could be added on to the end of the session. Others viewed these interruptions as part of supervision using e-technology and did not adjust the length of session for the time lost.

All participants had spent time thinking about the importance of online security and acknowledged that this was something they learnt more about as they went.

HP: So actually, doing this you need to make sure that the digital part of it is well-secured and that everything is ok.

This included the need for current virus protection software, password protection of equipment, and ensuring that others were not able to access files or contacts if a computer was shared. Participants felt that as Skype conversations go through an encryption process, this was enough to protect confidentiality.

VP: Skype is encrypted and it is actually a pretty safe way of having a conversation because it is encrypted transmission.

It is worth noting, however, that Skype does not meet the security requirements laid down by HIPAA (Rousmaniere et al., 2016) in the US.

Technical challenges and privacy issues can also occur in reviewing recordings of client work, particularly with regard to the method of transmission (Abbass et al., 2011).

VP: I think that is a vexation for people—how to get me recordings... What one person did was send me USBs but it worries me and I would request them to be sent with a tracked courier, rather than just with the post. There are the pragmatics about the recordings but people find ways.

All five participants considered that perhaps there was more to think about regarding security, confidentiality, and privacy using this medium.

CP: Maybe we're doing these things in innocence and haven't sort-of thought of all these things.

Certainly, the literature puts considerable emphasis on the technical specifics required of systems and the technical know-how required by system users (Orr, 2010; Rousmaniere et al., 2016). This was not strongly reflected by our participants, however. Furthermore, the New Zealand Association of Counsellors (2016) has recently revised its Code of Ethics to take out the requirement for encryption of electronic communications "because it's not widely used or regarded as an essential part of maintaining privacy," yet encryption is a minimum requirement for HIPAA.

Confidentiality, privacy, and safety

One of the advantages of supervision via e-technology is that the supervision takes place not in a single location but in a location which is co-created by the two people involved. This raises questions about privacy, self-disclosure, distraction, and who is responsible for managing the environment (see Glossoff et al., 2016; Haberstroh & Duffey, 2016; Wanlass, 2013).

LP: When someone comes to you for supervision, you can set up the surroundings. I can't do that when Skyping, so I have expectations that they will do what I do, but you can't enforce it.

JP: They prefer to be in their own home and that's understandable, but the consequence of that is I don't have any influence over what's going on in that space.

CP: Privacy, do you know whereabouts the person is Skyping from? Is it a public place? A private place? I guess it's different if it's from somebody's bedroom. It feels a little bit intimate... Is the concentration still there... or are there other distractions?

HP: I was even able to speak with my supervisor when I was in the bus.

[referring here to ease of access to participant's own supervisor via e-technology]

All five of the interviewed supervisors reported experiencing a wide range of interruptions, including children and other family members entering the room, pets demanding attention, people knocking at office doors, and practitioners leaving the video session to attend to distractions or other interruptions. Participants questioned how these experiences might violate counsellor and client privacy. JP also noted, “It leaves me wondering how much that person is treating the supervision seriously.”

These interruptions were relatively uncommon, however, and participants called upon the professional ethics of the people they were working with to address them. There was an assumption that practitioners would take ethically responsible care to create an appropriate space for the online supervision to take place. This is, after all, a serious professional discussion of significant matters in which attention to confidentiality, and practitioners’ ethical responsibility, should not be taken for granted.

VP: People have been careful about creating that safe space for the [supervision] conversation...and are aware as practitioners, certainly those that are experienced.

CP: If I was Skyping with a person who’s not a counsellor, I might be inclined to be more explicit [about privacy expectations].

The video element of a Skype conversation inevitably reveals some information about the surroundings of both parties. Participants differed in their views about managing this disclosure of personal information.

JP: It’s about keeping my private world out of the picture and giving...an open scene.

HP: I can imagine myself holding the computer and showing the person my surrounds—my dog, the weather—that’s part of the relationship isn’t it?

HP’s comment raises a particular question for supervisors about negotiating the “setting and monitoring [of] boundaries” (NZAC, 2016, S.5.11(a)) and what personal information might be shared in this supervision relationship. The use of e-technology makes it possible to have rapid visual contact in a crisis situation and our participants identified this as affording an extra medium of support to people whom they normally saw face-to-face.

LP: People have just phoned and said can I make a time to phone/Skype you? and if it’s urgent, I say ok.

The importance of not raising false expectations, however, was mentioned by a couple of participants.

CP: Well that's no different from any of the other counsellors who try to contact me. They have to leave a message and I'll get back to them, so I don't offer an instant [response], well actually for any of them. They all understand that. I will get back to them but it won't be immediately.

JP: It's no good saying "You can have instant access to us" because it's not instant. It's only instant at the time you've previously agreed.

Several participants stressed the importance of knowing what support was available for practitioners in the community in which they were practising, and HP suggested having "a contact number for emergencies," perhaps a work colleague of the practitioner.

HP: I think one thing, if you are really going to offer digital supervision, [is] that you know you have a contact for emergencies for safety.

Three participants had some experience of supervision across countries and none of them identified legal jurisdiction as an issue of possible concern. Reporting on a time when he had offered to make himself available while he was on holiday in New Zealand, JP did not see it as an issue.

JP: I would have interpreted that as a Canadian client [nationality changed] within Canada contacting me, a Canadian counsellor, who happened to be in New Zealand at that moment.

All participants made some mention of attending to cultural difference, but did not see it as necessarily different from face-to-face.

CP: [The practitioner] working overseas is working cross-culturally, so we often have conversations about that.

VP: I would be having that conversation anyway, about my culture and what I might miss.

Discussion and implications for practice

Supervisors should structure the supervision process with intentionality and foresight, considering the intersection of technology and relational connections on the establishment of and growth in the supervisory relationship.

(Haberstroh & Duffey, 2016, p. 96)

Benefits

E-technology provides an excellent alternative to face-to-face supervision, be it temporarily if in response to a change in location, or more permanently in the case of someone who has no local access to a supervisor or no local access to a supervisor with a particular specialty. Wright and Griffiths (2010) noted that “telephone, Skype and asynchronous email can overcome some of the obstacles of distance” (p. 693). The participants in our study highlighted the benefits of synchronicity during sessions by having immediate and real-time conversations, as opposed to an asynchronous context, such as email.

Supervising online means supervisors are potentially more available/contactable. Some of our participants referred to making use of this in emergency situations. They also highlighted some potential issues about time and space. E-technology is accessible at all times of the day. It may then be assumed that the supervisor, too, is available. We hope that supervisors might reflect on how they prepare for and care for their professional selves, given that this technology potentially offers the invitation to be so available. The limits of availability need to be thoughtfully considered by both parties while setting up initial contracts. As one of this journal’s editors commented, “The technology is simply a tool and we, and not the tool, are in charge of how we use it” (personal communication).

E-technology also makes it possible for people to access supervision without having to travel. We would suggest that location, in terms of the physical space, be considered in negotiating a supervision contract. Whether in a home or workplace context, both parties need to consider whether their chosen location is private and free from distractions. One participant questioned whether there could be potential for practitioners being “used and abused” by employers insisting that they have their supervision online in their place of work to save time and travel costs for the agency involved. A time for reflection and reflexion is valuable in terms of self-care.

Negotiation around space/location needs to be ongoing. Two participants wondered at times whether there were other people in the rooms that the practitioner was operating from. Continuity, in terms of using the same space as much as possible, was important for supervisor confidence. One participant was distracted when the practitioner’s location changed frequently. Some guidelines might include: never assume; always check and ask questions; and be aware of what we say when there is an environment we cannot see.

All participants preferred face-to-face supervision but accepted that a “hybrid” with e-supervision worked well. It was important to them to meet with someone face-

to-face first if possible, before engaging in an e-supervision arrangement. This was valued as supporting *digital immigrants* in building relationships and trust. This preference for a hybrid may not apply for those who have grown up as *digital natives* (see Perry, 2012).

The use of e-technology may affect the practice of supervision itself. One effect identified both in the literature and by the participants in our study was a greater emphasis on tasks rather than emotional and relational matters. This may be because of the perceived challenge of dealing with emotional intensity over distance. Supervisors may need to pay a different kind of attention to building and maintaining the supervisory relationship.

Practicalities

The biggest practical challenges were dealing with technical difficulties and breakdowns; the variety of technologies available; virus protection; and the issues of non-compatible systems, i.e. PC, Mac, iOS, Windows, i-Pad, tablet, and phone as a device for meeting software. All are important elements for inclusion in the contracting conversations. There is also a need for training to develop technological understanding of both the relevant hardware and software.

Participants acknowledged the need for themselves, as well as for their supervisees, to have an understanding of how information is stored in their computers. A discussion about “do you know where things go?” would include the specifics of the secure storage and protection of information, as well as what is involved in the deletion of information. Knowledge about storage and maintenance is necessary to support security and privacy. This is vital when documents and files, such as reports, letters, or recordings are used. Considering ethical care for people’s privacy and confidentiality requires counsellors and supervisors to be vigilant about the security of their systems and materials.

Education for supervisors using e-technology should not be limited to technical issues. Three of the participants had training and had practised as telephone counsellors, and found they utilised their experience and skills when first establishing a connection using e-technology with practitioners. It might be useful for counsellor educators to consider how these skills could be developed for current and future practitioners.

It would be both practical and ethical to consider the availability of local support for practitioners in case of crisis or the need for face-to-face support. We recommend

that this be discussed at the time of contracting and informed consent; as Glossoff et al. (2016) stated, “a clear plan in the event of an emergency should be determined at the beginning of the supervision process...and continuously evaluated throughout supervision” (p. 44).

Ethics

As technology continually develops, there are potential ethical matters of confidentiality, privacy, and safety requiring examination at regular intervals. All participants used Skype primarily and felt confident that it was secure. This was in part due to previously having had face-to-face contact with almost all practitioners. However, the literature suggests that most online meeting software, which includes Skype, is not deemed “secure” (Rousmaniere et al., 2014, p. 1088), and that as online supervision increases, so too does the need for “high-quality digital security” (Rousmaniere & Kuhn, 2016, p. 103).

Perry (2012) suggests that ethical problems inherent in supervision via e-technology are real, but warrant no more or less concern than the ethical issues inherent in doing in-the-same-room supervision. There are, though, a number of ethical issues in the use of technology that are not present when working face-to-face. It is important that these be addressed in contracting and throughout the supervision relationship.

In addition to supervisors’ sufficient knowledge of equipment and processes to protect privacy and security, participants were also asked whether the counsellors they supervised told their clients that they had supervision by means of e-technology. One participant told the counsellors she supervised who her own supervisor was. Yet there was no mention that practitioners might inform their counselling clients that they were using e-technology for supervision (see Baltrinic, O’Hara, & Jencius, 2016). As we reflect on ethics in supervision, one possibility would be for both supervisors and practitioners to inform those who consult us about how we physically engage in supervision: face-to-face, phone, or Skype.

In relation to their responsibility for protecting supervisees’ and clients’ confidentiality and privacy, there was discussion about sending transcripts and recordings between practitioner and supervisor, with some sending files by email and one sending USBs by registered mail. Maintaining security and confidentiality in the transport of recordings and transcripts, as well as the storage of recorded supervision sessions, presents significant challenges. Orr (2010) warned of the potential for copies of recordings to be made during supervision using e-technology without the knowledge of the other party.

The potential problems of ensuring security of data, discussed in the previous section, that are not present when working face-to-face, have obvious ethical implications, and supervisors may want to ensure these are fully discussed with the practitioners they work with. These discussions might include whether informed consent requires that practitioners disclose to clients the fact that their supervision takes place online, and get specific consent before, for example, sending a recording or transcript of a session via electronic means.

Something that we did not discuss, but is one of the more challenging aspects of e-supervision for both *digital immigrants* and *digital natives*, is the pervasiveness of social media and the implications of discussing something through these platforms, such as Facebook (see Luke & Gordon, 2016).

Conclusion

The participants in this study found that e-technology, specifically Skype, offers an effective means of providing supervision. Acknowledging the matters and wonderings discussed above, and while considering potential technological difficulties, the overarching belief is that Skype is a preferred platform to continue a supervisory relationship. Most found that the relational connection between the parties was effective and, in some situations, a very strong relational connection was possible utilising Skype. This corresponds with views expressed in the literature. Rousmaniere et al. (2014) ask, “What is now possible and how can it serve my supervisees and their clients?” (p. 1092).

Perry (2012) reflected on *effective* supervision as that which “facilitates growth in professional identity” regardless of “whether in the same room or via the Internet” (p. 56). This study encourages inquiry within supervision conversations to grow relational quality and to enhance the kind of relationship useful to effective supervision. The research participants, as *digital immigrants* coming to technology later in their careers, preferred previously meeting people face-to-face before meeting online. Yet, as Perry (2012) noted, “By contrast, the digital natives are at least as comfortable with and skilled at constructing relationships via digital media as they are with in-person interactions” (p. 65). It seems that those among us who are older or less familiar with technology may need to work harder for the relational quality we are hoping for in online supervision contexts.

We caution against romanticising the experience of e-technology (its availability, no/low cost, accessibility, and immediacy) when there might be a need to address more

fully the issues of security and privacy. At the same time, we do not want to encourage fear of the unknown, but suggest a caution that invites curiosity and inquiry. We aim to promote reflexivity in this aspect of supervision practice and support the notion that “regardless of the type of technology used, supervision is supervision” (Glossoff et al., 2016, p.45). It seems there is still much to consider and contemplate for safety, security, confidentiality, and the unknown limits of e-technology in supervision.

Abbass et al. (2011) and Barnett (2011) encourage users of technology to follow the guidelines in their professional code of ethics. Section 13 of the NZAC Code of Ethics states, “This section refers to counsellors’ use of information technology and should be read in conjunction with the rest of the NZAC Code” (NZAC, 2016, s.13). Wright’s (2011, pp. 177–179) checklist for ethical practice about online counselling and supervision is a useful resource for supervisors and practitioners using e-technology. We offer the following questions for readers to reflect on for their own use of e-technology in their supervision practice—as practitioner and/or as supervisor:

- How well can professional identity be constructed through supervision using e-technology?
- When using e-technology, how do we explore and discuss issues of privacy and security while negotiating supervision relationships and agreements?
- How can supervisors and other users be confident that their data have adequate protection from unintentional or intentional breaches of security?
- How can supervisors determine whether they are technologically knowledgeable enough to be ethically and professionally safe in using e-technology? Is there any need for standards of proficiency?
- How do we determine the appropriateness of the technologies we use to hold e-technology supervision sessions? Are some online meeting platforms more secure than others?
- What expectations do supervisors and practitioners have about disclosing information about their own supervision arrangements to their clients?
- Where do these responsibilities for disclosing how supervision occurs lie, and how might they be discussed in the context of e-technologies?
- What preparation is needed prior to supervision using e-technology when recordings of client practice are included? How might this differ from what is expected in in-person supervision when client sessions are reviewed?
- What needs to be discussed regarding what is visible on the screen during supervision—e.g., the other person’s personal space, distractions of lighting, visibility of the person, etc?

- How might discussions of the limitations of e-technology be initiated, including the way the medium being used might inhibit addressing difficult topics or personal issues?
- What do both supervisor and practitioner need to consider during contracting that might be specific to meeting when using e-technology?
- What can we learn from international requirements and legislation around online supervision that could be applied to the New Zealand context?

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Notes

1. HIPAA is a piece of legislation in the United States which serves to provide “data privacy and security provisions for safeguarding medical information” (Rouse, 2017). We considered it useful to include here as we reflect on the global influence of e-technology and the changing regulatory and ethical frameworks that affect practitioners internationally.
2. WhatsApp and Viber are internet-based messaging applications freely available for computer and mobile technology.

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