

Technology and Assessment in Contemporary Counseling Settings

Clifford Kincaid

Amberton University

Carl Sagan, the astronomer, scientist, and popular science book author, speaking about technology said, “We’ve arranged a civilization in which most crucial elements profoundly depend on science and technology.” Indeed, these are interesting times in which we live, and each one of our lives are greatly impacted by the technology around us. Technology not only permeates almost all facets of our lives, but it also plays a part in many professions, including that of counseling. Specifically, counseling assessment has both changed and benefited greatly from the exponential technological growth of the past two decades.

This paper will explore counseling assessment and how it has changed over the years through the advent of new technologies. It will explore emerging psychological testing trends within a technological context and the use of mobile phone applications to assess counseling efficacy. Additionally, wearable technology will be explored as to its applicability in the modern counseling setting. Finally, future advancements in technology will be discussed as far as how they will affect future clinical assessment.

The emotional attachment between a person and their technology is a relatively new phenomenon. In a recent study, researchers found that, at the neuronal level, people will respond to the sound of their iPhone in the same way as they would react to a loved one (Lindstrom, 2011). With this kind of relationship, it is important that counselors see this ever present technology as a tool that can be effectively used by the counselor both in assessment and treatment.

One particularly interesting and useful application is that of mood tracking. With hundreds of mood tracking applications across the major mobile operating systems of today

(Android, iOS, and Blackberry), it has never been easier for a client to quickly and easily record their current mood state. Increasing traits like mindfulness and resilience for a client are often crucial, not only to aid development in the present but to limit the incidence of recidivism to maladaptive behaviors in the future. These applications can aid the client in understanding of behavioral patterns, and can serve as a springboard to productive client-therapist discussions (Morros & Aguilera, 2012). Furthermore, with instant registration of moods, there is much less risk of waiting to try and record moods from the entire day at the end of the day, which certainly entails a degradation of memory.

Another relatively new technology is that of wearable technology. Some devices, such as the Jawbone Up, are worn on the wrist, and are relatively inexpensive. This device measures characteristics like sleeping patterns and activity levels. Other devices are more advanced (and expensive) and measure items like skin conductivity. Still other devices measure speech patterns and affectivity in vocal tone (Morros & Aguilera, 2012). This would of course be helpful for a therapist assisting a client with their social skills.

Mobile applications, cell phones, and wearable technology all have the potential to redefine how measurements are taken and treatment plans are devised. It is important that therapists integrate these devices into the assessment and treatment, as they are already items that a client uses in their everyday lives (Morros & Aguilera, 2012). A therapist's instructions to a client to keep a diary or record their moods are inherently easier to follow when all that is required is to launch an app or to speak their diary entry and voice-to-text software to do the rest.

It is not only mobile technology that has the capability to change counseling assessment. Personal computer-assisted interviewing and rating scales present the opportunity for not only greater validity in counseling assessment, but also to save time and money for both clinician and client. Clients in front of a computer may be inclined to share more personal information. Furthermore, it eliminates the need to transcribe the answers to interview questions. Besides interviews, there are new personality tests that now utilize computerized adaptive testing. By adapting the questions based on preceding questions, the number of total questions is reduced, and the time burden for clients can be minimized (Trull, 2007).

An interminable challenge in the execution of successfully treating and assessing clients is that of the perennial social stigma of seeking psychological services. For those individuals who may not wish to go into a counsellor's office, directed self-study along with regular video chats with a clinician may be an avenue in which reluctant mental health sufferers can turn to begin therapy. Turning to the area of technology and assessment which is the focus of this paper, clinical assessment techniques like the structured interview can easily be accomplished through videoconferencing and today's broadband internet connections. Additionally, the greater ease of access for some people can mean that follow-up assessments are not delayed and that the results are much more reliable (Yuen, Goetter, Herbert, & Forman, 2011).

Particularly interesting to note is how much technology plays a role in training and assessing new clinicians. A clinician right out of school may hope to return to their rural hometown to open a practice, but still are in need of supervised hours. In the past, if a clinical supervisor did not exist in their hometown, they would be unable to return until accomplishing

the hours. However, now with supervision able to be accomplished long distance using an internet connection, electronic mail, and videoconferencing, one can set-up a practice almost anywhere (Yuen, Goetter, Herbert, & Forman, 2011).

Looking to the future, neuroimaging is perhaps one of the most exciting frontiers for counselling. Despite much advancement, modern clinical assessment can be a complex and difficult undertaking, with many different factors able to negatively impact the quality of the assessment results. As neural imaging continues to evolve, the clinician may gain the ability to assess the client's feelings and attitudes directly, without the client hiding information (whether consciously or unconsciously (Trull, 2007)). The idea of neural imaging used in counseling assessment will require the fusion of many different scientific disciplines, and reflects the increasingly multidisciplinary approach of successful mental health intervention.

References

Lindstrom, M. (2011, September 30). You love your iPhone. Literally. *New York Times*, Op Ed

Morris, M.E., Aguilera, A. (2012). Mobile, social, and wearable computing, and the evolution of psychological practice. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*. 43(6). 622-626

Trull, T.J. (2007). Expanding the aperture of psychological assessment: Introduction to the special section on innovative clinical assessment technologies and methods.

Psychological Assessment. 19(1), 1-3

Yuen, E.K., Goetter, E.M., Herbert, J.D., Forman, E.M. (2011). Challenges and opportunities in internet- mediated telemental health. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*.

43(1), 1-8