

Chapter 24

ONLINE RESEARCH METHODS FOR MENTAL HEALTH

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GOSS

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INTRODUCTION

This book reveals the ways Internet technologies are transforming the professional, social and psychological world available for counsellors and psychotherapists. The penetration of Inter-net technologies into everyday life has reached such an extent that it is difficult to draw clear lines between people's on-line and offline lives. For those working in the area of mental health this has profound implications, creating the challenges and opportunities examined throughout this volume.

“Cyberspace” used to be discussed as if it was another country that people visited for their holidays. However, increasingly technologies like Facebook, MySpace and You Tube draw people's social, professional and psychological lives online. The Internet is no longer an exotic destination but is overlaid on our ordinary lives facilitating things as mundane as doctors appointments, train ticket booking, the sharing of holiday snaps and, now, the provision of therapy.

Much of this book has focused on the way in which technology can support or contribute to the counselling experience. However, another area of application for Internet technologies is the investigation of social, cultural and psychological life.

This may be about investigating interrelationships between society, psychology and technology in general and therapeutic relationships in particular or about providing tools that speed up or improve research processes, whether that be clinical audit, outcomes or process research or the socio-psychological effects of online clinical relating. This chapter will examine how online research methods can address the kinds of research questions that are likely to interest counsellors and psychotherapists.

WHAT ARE ONLINE RESEARCH METHODS?

Online research methods are methodological techniques used to collect data via the Internet. They cover a wide and growing number of online techniques such as ethnographies, experiments, network analysis, web analytics and a range of engagements with Web 2.0 technologies. This chapter tries to maintain a distinction between the methodology (the approach used to investigate a particular subject) and the technology (the tool used to do this).

For example, in online ethnography, sometimes known as netnography (Kozinets, 1998, 2006; Langer & Beckman, 2005), the methodology draws on conventional face-to-face (often called “onsite” as opposed to “online”) ethnography and reapplies it to a new environment (see Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2001). The term ethnography defines the methodology and philosophy that underpins the work of the researcher (qualitative, researcher as participant, holistic and so on) and the type of data likely to be generated. Within the context of the Internet, ethnographies can take a wide range of forms determined by the environment being researched and the tech-

nology used. Researchers could, for example, participate in email lists, observe discussions in specialist forums or professional/social networking sites (e.g., www.Onlinetherapysocialnetwork.com), engage in video exchanges via You Tube (for example, Wesch, 2008), examine the written record afforded by chat or email therapy exchanges with counselling clients, observe user behavior in online gaming environments or sites intended to address problem gambling (e.g., <http://www.GamblingTherapy.org>, cf. Anthony, 2005). Despite the variety of technologies used all of these projects could be online ethnographies.

This chapter will concentrate primarily on two methodological approaches, looking at online questionnaires and then at online interviews and focus groups. It is likely that researchers in counselling and psychotherapy might also want to utilise other methodologies such as ethnographies and experiments. However, gaining an understanding of how to collect data online using questionnaires or focus group interviews will provide a good grounding for other types of online research methods.

Online research methods are particularly useful and appropriate when investigating online counselling and psychotherapy (e.g., Kraus et al., 2004; Rochlen et al., 2004; Skinner & Latchford, 2006). The factors that influence a participant's willingness to undertake online counselling, such as IT and web literacy, the desire for anonymity or distance from conventional counselling opportunities, are also likely to mean that such people are suited to participating in studies conducted online.

However, online research is not necessarily confined to investigating online activity. Madge et al. (2006) identified advantages offered by online research methods on the Exploring Online Research Methods website (<http://www.>

geog.le.ac.uk/ORM/) which can be summarised as:

- enabling the researcher to contact geographically dispersed populations (useful in internationalising research);
- facilitating contact with difficult to reach groups, such as the less physically mobile (disabled/in prison/in hospital), the socially isolated (drug dealers/terminally ill) or those living in dangerous places (e.g., war zones);
- providing savings in costs (travel, venue, data entry);
- enabling a quick supply of data (in comparison to postal, face-to-face and telephone surveys).
- supplying ready transcribed interview data;
- reducing issues of interviewer effect as participants cannot “see” each other.

All these advantages apply regardless of whether the experience being investigated originally took place online or not. So, for example, researchers could investigate a particular therapeutic approach using a survey to investigate levels of satisfaction. This survey could be sent out by post with prepaid envelopes or undertaken as a series of face-to-face meetings using a clipboard and paper questionnaire. Despite the development of online research methods these onsite research approaches still have their place, but both would be slower, potentially more expensive and more complex to administer than an online survey. So, even where the experience under investigation is something that takes place offline, online research methods may offer significant methodological advantages.

Online research methods can contribute to the understanding of both online and

offline phenomena. However, while online research methods can be powerful, they are not always the most appropriate methodological tools. There are disadvantages with online research methods just as there are advantages. Both Illingworth (2001) and O'Connor and Madge (2001) found that new technologies can present technical challenges to be negotiated by both researcher and participants. Furthermore, even with increasing levels of penetration of the Internet into the general population, a digital divide still exists between those who have Internet access and those who do not. For example, undertaking research on older age groups, the socially excluded or those outside a western context using an online research method may impact on the validity of the sample. Furthermore online research methods (at least when text based) mean that subjects are responding in circumstances beyond the researcher's control, without visual and auditory cues and where, as Hewson et al. (2003) note, the researcher cannot ultimately be sure of the participant's real identity. However, it is also worth noting that many of these disadvantages can also be the case in other methods. For example, identity can also be difficult to verify in postal questionnaires.

A BRIEF HISTORY OF ONLINE RESEARCH METHODS

Emails and website pop-ups requesting participation in surveys, questionnaires or other online research projects are now extremely common. However, as with many phenomena on the Internet, this is a relatively recent development. While the Internet remained the province of a small minority of the highly IT literate, it did not attract much interest from most social scientists. Nonetheless, researchers such as Bosnjak et

al. (2001) were beginning to experiment with the potential of the medium relatively early in its development.

As use of the Internet expanded further into the general population, researchers became increasingly interested in how it could support both quantitative and qualitative social science research. The middle of the 1990s saw further development of online survey research with O’Lear (1996), *Using electronic mail (e-mail) surveys for geographic research*; Coomber (1997), *Using the Internet for survey research* and Harris (1997), *Developing online market research methods and tools*. At the same time, qualitative researchers and ethnographers were also starting to explore the opportunities that the Internet offered to their research with Gaiser (1997), *Conducting online focus groups* and Clodius (1994), *Ethnographic fieldwork on the internet* both serving as examples that still offer useful advice today. Around the same time, online research into counselling and mental health began to develop using a broader range of methodologies (e.g., Walther & Burgoon, 1992; King, 1994; Cohen & Kerr, 1998) and continues to offer an increasingly de-tailed range of evidence to inform practitioners, their clientele and the profession as a whole (c.f. Barak, 2008).

The level of interest in online research methods continued to grow with the publication of large numbers of articles utilising these methods. Whilst the increasing penetration of the Internet in-to the wider population made it ever more interesting to researchers, it was the gradual improvement in the usability of online technologies that enabled researchers to experiment more regularly and on a much larger scale. The rapid growth in the use and uptake of online research methods has been

accompanied by continual technological developments. This has resulted in a situation where methodological questions have had to be solved rapidly and where best practice in the conduct and analysis of online research is still in flux. So, for example, Wakeford (2000) has argued that

The quantity of information that may be generated and the speed at which responses can be collected, can result in pleasing piles of data—but we should be wary of being seduced by sheer quantity; data is only useful if it is representative of the larger population. (p. 33)

Just because an online survey is fast and cheap does not necessarily mean that it is good. However, concerns, such as this one about sampling, are likely to be changing as the Internet is used by an ever-wider audience. Riva et al. (2003) report no significant differences in responses gained from the same questionnaire from online participants compared to those completing a paper survey, even when the online sample is not controlled. Furthermore, Reynolds and Stiles (2007) reported equivalence between results from paper and pencil and online testing with comparable distributions of participant responses. It must be remembered that online research methods operate in a changing social and technological environment which means that making absolute statements can be difficult.

DEALING WITH ETHICAL ISSUES

Undertaking research in the area of counselling and psychotherapy requires researchers to be aware of the ethical implications of their work. The potential

to unwittingly do harm becomes even greater when working with a research subject who cannot be seen and who the interviewer has never met. The Internet does not present an ethical challenge in and of itself, but rather adds new complexities to already existing ethical dilemmas.

Despite the fact that research ethics has been becoming a much bigger issue for social researchers (see for example the ESRC's (2005) *Research Ethics Framework*) there is a general wariness about how these ethical issues play out in the online environment. Online research ethics is a relatively new area which is subject to rapid changes in methodological practice and technological capability. Nonetheless, it is possible to draw out some general thoughts about online research ethics in this chapter that may be helpful to the researcher without offering a "one size fits all" ethical prescription.

One of the main issues for the researcher to consider is whether there is anything special about the online environment that requires new ethical guidelines. Are online communications necessarily different from those that happen offline? Hine (2005) argues that online research is "a special category in which the institutionalised understandings of the ethics of research must be reexamined" (p. 5). However, the problem is not necessarily that the online space is a "special category" but rather that it masks a wide range of spaces and categories. The researcher needs to analyse these spaces when considering the ethical implications of conducting research in that space. For example, writing that appears in an online journal or newspaper clearly has a different status from that which appears on a person's Face-book profile.

The balance between private/public and identified/anonymous can be very difficult to tease out online. It is difficult to make clear statements about the status of a particular forum or technology. Consider a BBC forum that deals with the latest government budget. It might be concluded that postings within it were public, available to quote and likely to be personally (if not politically) uncontentious. On the other hand, we might feel much less clear about how far the contributors felt their postings to be public and available for general use and republishing on a forum that dealt with the experience of psychotherapy. Yet, in this example the technology and the rules governing the forums would be identical. The law also gives researchers little guidance in this area and is, in many countries, generally highly permissive. Therefore it is difficult to produce absolute guidelines and thus the decision about how to proceed ethically sits with the researcher (and an appropriate research ethics committee). The Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) Ethics Working Committee (Ess, 2002) supports this ethical pluralism and concluded that there is likely to be more than one ethically defensible response to an ethical dilemma and that ambiguity, uncertainty and disagreement are inevitable.

There are a number of considerations that researchers might want to make when making ethical judgments about research using online methods:

- Is the space being researched public (like a town hall meeting) or private (like a bedroom) or is it somewhere in between (like a café or bar)?
- Is the author of the words consciously publishing (as in a book)

or engaging in private communication (as in a phone call) or somewhere in between (perhaps like a local newsletter)? Shirky (2008) makes the point that most conversations on the Internet are available to all but are consciously written for a small group of like-minded people. Researchers need to consider the ethical implications of moving the conversations of these “small worlds” into a new and possibly larger, context.

- Does the author perceive that they are publishing anonymously (as if to a priest or counsellor) or are they keen on publishing to advance their reputation and gain greater renown (as in a professional journal)? Or, as will often be the case, are they happy to be known within their community without necessarily seeking wider fame or publicity for their opinions.

Many of the ethical considerations discussed above are not particular to online research. The boundaries between categories are more blurred than in traditional research, but the same questions need to be asked of any research project, online or onsite. There is an extensive literature on undertaking ethical research in counselling and psychotherapy (see for example West, 2002; Bond, 2004 and British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2002) but the following questions are a useful starting point.

- is there potential to do harm?
- how can informed consent be sought and agreed with the participants?
- can the participant withdraw from the research if they feel uncomfortable?
- is deception a defensible research strategy? For example, can “lurking” as

socialisation into the online culture of a group be an important prerequisite for research?

- what will happen to the data and how will the participants be informed/involved in this feedback process?

Researchers are likely to have to gain ethical approval for any research they undertake. To show an awareness of the ethical issues and the potential difficulties raised by the research and the methodology is a much more powerful way to negotiate ethics approval than trying to mask or diminish any ethical difficulties.

COLLECTING DATA USING ONLINE

SURVEYS AND QUESTIONNAIRES

Online questionnaires and surveys offer some powerful advantages, which have been discussed above. However, despite obvious attractions, their use must be appropriate and justified for each particular study. Even when the decision has been made that an online questionnaire is an appropriate research tool, it is necessary to design an appropriate methodology considering the balance of qualitative and quantitative questions, deciding on questionnaire type, establishing a justified sampling strategy and ensuring an appropriate response *rate*.

Many decisions facing online survey researchers are similar to those that face the onsite researcher. If you are new to research, obtaining specialist supervision and accessing the literature (e.g., Rea & Parker, 2005; Leong & Austin, 2005; Timulak, 2008) should help guide you through the basic issues around survey design and

analysis in counselling and psychotherapy, whereas this chapter concentrates on issues relating specifically to the online environment.

As has already been noted, use of online surveys and questionnaires has proliferated in recent years. The bombardment of potential participants with invitations to take part in online surveys, many of which are poorly designed, has resulted in a situation where response rates to online surveys are often very low, with less than 10 percent not being uncommon. As a result, online researchers need to think carefully about their sample frame and the usability and design of their questionnaire in order to maximise their response rates and generate useful data.

In comparison with onsite research, the lack of detailed information about online populations in general and difficulty in gaining access to accurate online databases, such as directories of email addresses, means that it is very difficult to undertake probability-based sampling in online surveys. Consequently, many online surveys rely on nonprobability-based samples where participants are not selected at random, but instead positively elect to participate in the survey, for example by following a link or invitation to participate from a website. However, where the population to be surveyed is closed and known, such as all the clients of a particular counsellor or the members of a particular professional group, researchers may have sufficient information to enable use of a random or stratified sampling frame. Where respondents are self-selecting, a crucial issue is whether this introduces nonresponse bias into the survey—where the characteristics of those responding to the survey are different from those who have chosen not to respond.

Another sampling issue to be considered, particularly where more traditional psychotherapy research techniques are being converted into an online format, is the issue of measurement error, which occurs when survey responses differ from the “true” response. For example, an individual respondent may produce a different answer online than they would when faced with the same question in a paper-based or face-to-face survey, although as noted above this certainly does not always occur (Reynolds & Stiles, 2007). When it does, it may be due to respondents feeling able to answer different types of survey formats more honestly than others, or it could be that there is something about the way in which the survey is presented online that produces the difference. In some cases, respondents have been found to prefer the online environment for the sense of anonymity it provides them. Such anonymity may, of course, be illusory and researchers should inform respondents of the limits that may exist, such as an employer or Internet Service Provider examining the content of emails for perfectly legitimate reasons.

A further key issue in encouraging respondents to complete online surveys and questionnaires is the ease with which respondents can complete them. Careful consideration needs to be given to the length of the survey and the number and type of questions. In general, response rates are likely to be higher if the survey is short and participants are given an honest indication of the amount of time required to complete the survey (Crawford et al., 2001). In addition, whilst online surveys offer researchers a vast array of possible question formats and types (such as inclusion of multimedia stimuli), it is best to stick with formats common to most online surveys (such as option buttons, drop down lists and tick boxes) unless there is a very good

reason for using more complex question types. Online surveys must also be thoroughly tested to ensure they operate as expected across different types of computers and operating systems. Thought also needs to be given to how accessible the survey is to those using assisted technologies such as screen readers.

ONLINE FOCUS GROUPS AND INTERVIEWS

Focus groups and interviews can be powerful tools in exploring people's experiences, attitudes and psychologies. These techniques are therefore applied regularly in counselling and psychotherapy research (see for example Grafanaki, 1996; Read, 2001). However, they require easy access to research subjects which is not always possible. Online research may enable researchers to overcome barriers of distance and access and to contact research participants that would otherwise be out of reach. However, they also pose some significant challenges which this section will discuss.

Undertaking face-to-face interviews or focus groups requires strong inter-personal skills and draws on the researcher's ability to build rapport and relationships with people. Madge et al. (2006) note that traditional guidance on interviewing and focus groups "rely heavily on the use of visual and physical clues and pointers in order to build rapport and gain the trust of the interviewee." So Robson (1993) recommends smiling and dressing ". . . in a similar way to those you will be interviewing" (p. 236) whilst Glesne and Peshkin (1992) advise that "your appearance, speech and behaviour must be acceptable to your research participants" (p. 95). In the online environment these key research skills, basic or perhaps fundamental though they may be for most

mental health practitioners, have to be reimagined. More sophisticated interpersonal processes such as empathy or appropriate handling of transference, perhaps augmented by disinhibition, are also likely to be of importance in much online research relating to counselling and psychotherapy.

In the online environment, many of the interpersonal tools used face-to-face to develop rapport are absent. Furthermore, as Paccagnella notes “a stranger wanting to do academic research into online communities is often viewed as an unwelcome arbitrary intrusion” (1997, p. 3). So online researchers need to overcome these barriers and find new ways of establishing trust and rapport before beginning to gather data. In the online environment this process relies on a host of other signals and skills from the onsite researcher’s armoury of clothes, smiles and exchanges of cups of tea or coffee. It is useful to gain insights into the culture and communication style of the environment being researched. Mastering, or at least understanding, jargon, slang and paralinguistic expressions like “lol” and emoticons such as “;-)” are just as important as they are for online therapists. There are a number of other techniques that researchers may consider when thinking about building rapport with their research subjects. For example:

- establishing web pages with photographs and brief biographical information so that potential interviewees can gain some knowledge about the interviewer;
- establishing some relationships before the start of the interview or focus group by meeting, telephone or email exchanges;
- using any similarities or insider status that you have to encourage identification;

- sharing your own profile data and encouraging others to do so.

However, it is important not to paint the experience of online qualitative research as second rate. There are good reasons to believe that it enables researchers to gather different kinds of data more effectively than onsite interviewing. As Poster (1995) notes:

without visual clues about gender, age, ethnicity and social status conversations open up in directions which might otherwise be avoided. Participants in these communities often express themselves with little inhibition and dialogues flourish and develop quickly. (p. 90)

Online focus groups can be synchronous, when all participants are online simultaneously, or asynchronous when participants respond at their own convenience. The researcher also needs to make decisions about whether to use a one-to-one interview or a focus group. Each of these methods has its own advantages and disadvantages and also associated technological challenges. Synchronous interviews and focus groups are most similar to onsite methods and generally use some kind of Internet chat software. Key considerations are to ensure that the technology is easy to use, that the online conversation will be private to participants (e.g., encryption) and that discussions can be downloaded for later use by the researcher. Conversely asynchronous methods offer powerful tools for longitudinal work and can encourage reflective and thoughtful responses.

Managing an online focus group can be a challenging experience. It is more

difficult to impose order than in a face-to-face focus group. In onsite focus groups much of the management is done implicitly via body language and tone of voice. However, in the online environment it may be more important to formally set grounds and to be prepared to challenge people openly if they repeatedly move off topic etc. The change in dynamics from the onsite focus group also has benefits in allowing different people to contribute (for example, the fastest typist, not just the most dominant personality), encouraging reflection and ensuring that the researcher does not miss any contributions.

CONCLUSION

Online research offers powerful tools for undertaking research in counselling and psychotherapy. They are particularly effective when investigating online experiences but their use does not need to be confined to the online world. They offer advantages of geography, cost and efficiency and may encourage respondents to engage with research in interesting and reflective ways. However, as Dodd (1998) argues, we must ensure that “cheap entry costs and glowing attractiveness of Internet fieldwork do not result in shoddy ‘cowboy research’” (p. 60). Online research should not be seen as a replacement for traditional onsite methods or as a quick fix to the methodological problems of researchers. However, if they are used in a considered way where ethical and methodological concerns drive the use of appropriate technologies, they will continue to be an essential part of the researchers’ toolkit.

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