ACADEMIC AND EMOTIONAL IMPACT OF E-LEARNING EDUCATION ON SYSTEMIC TRAINEES DUE TO COVID-19 RESTRICTIONS

Konstantia Lagomati
Dimitra Papaspyrou
Charikleia Patelou
Valasia Petridou
Aikaterini Sampani
Panagiota Zoi

Systemic Center for Training & Psychotherapy

Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic (COVID-19) is a global public health crisis that has drastically affected the economic, political and social reality in every country.In Greece, the measures taken by the government in order to contain the spread of COVID-19 lasted approximately two years. Two lockdowns were imposed on the country; the first one lasted for about three months and the second one, for six months. At this period, there were various types of restrictive measures, ranging from curfews to mandatory texting via mobile phone to permit people to leave their residence.

This has resulted in some operations being sidetracked, including education, which has been conducted online for almost two consecutive years. Now, that conditions have started to get better in terms of biopolitical restrictions, we could not help but be curious about the impact it will have on the structure and homeostasis of the systems and the hyper-system.

Although the current literature has studied the impact of the pandemic and the results of e-learning, there is a gap. While the effects have been thoroughly researched at all levels of education, both in faculty and trainees, no research, up to date, has been conducted on trainees in psychotherapy and specifically on the systemic approach. Thus, we attempted to explore the emotional and cognitive effects, in a sphere that we had access to; The Systemic Center for Training and Psychotherapy, in which we study.

This research could be a first step in understanding and sublimating this experience, in order to suggest a better handling in a challenging educational situation in the future.

Aim

The research focuses on the impact of online education in relation to concentration, learning, communication and the trainees' mood, but also on changes in the supervisory process and interactive activities. In addition, we aim to highlight the influence that online education had on the connection between group members and on the professional identity of the systemic trainees. Finally, an object of the study is also the positive resources and their importance as boosters in the participants' training process. The present project, seeks to contribute to filling the research gap in the field of systemic psychotherapy training in the era of online courses.

Items of the original questionnaire were:

1. Describe any differences in the following: concentration, learning, communication, and emotional & mental state, during online courses.
2. What were the differences in the online interactive activities in comparison to face-to-face ones?
3. Did the supervisory process change for you through e-learning? And if so, in what way?
4. How did e-learning affect your thoughts and feelings about your professional profile (as a psychotherapist)?
5. Which were your positive resources through online training?
6. How did e-learning affect your relationship with others in the educational group?
7. How did the training experience change for you through the e-learning process?

Methodology

Design
In order to conduct this qualitative research, a seven (7)-item open ended questionnaire was created by the research group. This original questionnaire was created after literature review, based on the fields of interest.

Participants
The participants in this research were trainees in Systemic Psychotherapy at SKEPSYS center (Athens, Greece), who were attending their 3rd and 4th year of training during the research (2022) and their participation was voluntary. The number of participants was 8 people (n=8), (7 women and 1 man), between the ages of 27-42 years, with an average age M: 34 and they were chosen because they had both in person and online educational experience.

Process
The participants were invited to take part in the research via e-mail, which was sent by the center secretary (SKEPSYS), where the research group is studying (2nd year). Those who were interested, were informed about the issues of anonymity, confidentiality and the right to withdraw at any point in the process, as well as the subject of the research. Also, it became clear that there would be no possibility of psychological or physical harm. In order to participate, written consent was necessary. After reading the informational material, participants were asked to indicate whether they agree or disagree with participating in this study. Those who agreed to take part were given the researchers' contact information to ask any further questions. Interviews took between 40 and 61 minutes to complete. Four online semi-structured interviews were conducted (via the Skype online platform) with one, two, three and two participants respectively, in each of them. The interviews were recorded on video and then transcribed, in order to proceed to the data analysis.

Analysis
The findings resulting from the thematic content analysis of the interviews were grouped and presented below, based on the theory of Glaser and Strauss (1967). The whole process of collecting information, categorizing and coding the findings, as well as presenting them, was based on Philip Burnard's guide; A method of analyzing interview transcripts in qualitative research.

Findings

i. Cognitive & Emotional Functions

Concentration During E-learning

Starting from the cognitive functions, the results of the research show that the concentration of the participants was negatively affected during e-learning experience. The participants state that they encountered great difficulty and had to make an effort to stay focused: “I had a lot of difficulty concentrating. I had to discipline myself”. However, some participants reported that their concentration was not significantly affected by this procedure: “I did not detect any differences in concentration”. These findings confirm recent literature, according to which the large majority of online learners report significant differences in their ability to concentrate in online courses (Norze, J., & Twijukye, R., 2021).

Learning Ability During E-learning

Regarding the participants' ability to learn during distance learning, the findings are mixed. As the literature recommends, the learning ability of the participants in this research was positively affected: “Online is more beneficial. I don't feel that it was an obstacle for us, it was the same”, as well as negatively affected: “I am content with the theoretical part during online classes. The experiential part of education is inadequate; there is a gap on that” (Norze, J., & Twijukye, R., 2021). In addition, for some participants, learning was not significantly affected by the transition from in-person classes to online classes: “Learning, on a theoretical level, didn't change that much”.

Communication During E-learning

According to participants, communication in e-learning seems to have played a key role during the process. Indicatively, crucial areas of training were affected, such as connection and commitment to the group, personal motivation, as well as the emotional and mental state of the participants: “Communication was missing. I don't think online classes replace the in-person experience” and “In communication, spontaneity is lost. The feeling you get in the whole interaction is irreplaceable”.

Emotional & Mental State During E-learning

As mentioned above, the emotional and mental state of the trainees during e-learning was negatively affected: “The mood is better when you are close to your group, while attending the course”. This finding is confirmed by the literature, according to which some of the disadvantages of e-learning are the lack of direct contact between instructors and trainees, as well as the appearance of feelings of despair and confusion (Atlam, E., Ewisb, A., Abd El- Raouf, M.M, Ghoneimd, O., Gad, I., 2022). However, some of the interviewees had a different response to the new educational process: “The way I felt remained the same. I attended with the same interest and enthusiasm” and “I was not physically tired. I could handle my mood better, being in my personal space”.

ii. Interactive Activities

For the participants, the interactive activities were a point of concern, given the influence they have on the feeling of connection to the group. In general, interactive activities offered more proximity and better quality practice in the learning material: “I wouldn't prefer remote learning now in any case; I would prefer in-person classes. It's a lot easier, we have a better connection and the educational benefit is more sufficient”. In addition, participants expressed concerns about the frequency of the interactive activities. As they reported, these activities had decreased. However, some trainees derived educational benefits from the interactive activities, both in-person and online: “I liked both; team bonding was stronger during in-person courses, while the educational material was more adequate during e-learning”.

iii. Supervision During E-learning

Online supervision seems to be as beneficial as in-person. The participants referred to an adequate and supportive supervision process during e-courses: “During the supervision process I felt supported. It is possible to get the help that you need during online supervision sessions. However during the in-person sessions; you have a sense of support from the group members, a non-verbal sense of that”. The statement above, also reveals the difficulties that e-learning brought to the supervisory process, with some participants feeling a lack of connection and response from the other group members: "When in-person… it is as if you are getting closer to the incident and you have a better connection with the case you are talking about. During e-courses, the supervision session is «shortened»”.

iv. Professional Profile

For most of the participants, it appeared that distance learning induced changes both in terms of their preparedness to take on a client, but also in the sense of competence they may have already acquired. “It affected me. I'm not ready to take on a client. I felt frustrated and lack of confidence”. As suggested by other researches, professionals who started to work online experienced an imbalance, in relation to their roles, self-image and beliefs. The sense of adequacy for their work was significantly reduced (El-Sussi, A., 2022 & Simon, 2012). A smaller group of the participants expressed the opinion that they were not affected by this. “I don't think it affected me. It didn't affect my feelings about whether I would be a psychotherapist, nor my desire to be one”.

Emergence of Professional Identity

In this unprecedented experience, trainees got familiar with a new reality. This made them discover new facts about themselves, but also about their professional "uniqueness". The findings of the research highlight a new narrative of their professional identity. “I'm more familiar with online now, so I can start conducting online sessions from the comfort of my own place” and “I don't want to be an online therapist. I want to have interpersonal sessions. I can't do it online”. Therefore, it seems that in many cases, distance learning procedure was the reason for the emergence of the professional identity. Thus, it became clear to them, whether or not they will apply the online technology into their professional life.

v. Positive Resources

At this point, we wanted to examine the positive resources that helped, in the distance education process, on a personal level. The responses were as many as the number of the participants.
“The three main things that kept me going were our trainer, our educational group and the fact that this kind of training is also therapeutic.”
“The positive resource for me was my technological capability.”
“Clearly, it was my previous interpersonal educational experience.”
“I had the space and time to acknowledge my personal needs.”

For some of the participants, this transition was not difficult, since their efficiency with technology worked as a positive resource (Gerbic, 2011). While for others, it was the opportunity to rebuild their personal identity (Baran et. al., 2013). Finally, for some, this role was played by their previous experience (interpersonal education), their relationship with the other members of the educational group and their instructors. Last but not least, the therapeutic aspect of the process also worked as a booster (Anderson, Rourke, Garrison & Archer, 2001).

vi. Connectedness of the Educational Group Members

An important element for achieving the connection of the members of a group is the existence of a framework in which they communicate, interact and thus shape the relationship between them (Κόκκος, Α., 1998). Team bonding improves when a sense of mutual trust develops and is strengthened through constructive feedback (Jaques, 2004).

As the statements of the participants showed us, for some, distance learning affected and even violently disturbed their connection with the group: “On an emotional level, we had a very good chemistry that was faded away as we violently separated. There was no longer the same vibe and the cohesion we previously had”. While for others, it was an opportunity to identify their common needs: “The online process separated us, but at the same time, it might have brought us closer. It created the common ground that we did not want this disconnection”. Lastly, for some participants it was a springboard to find a new position in the group: “When we returned to interpersonal education, I realized that I was able to communicate and interact more freely”.

vii. Overall Rating of the Experience

The last question in our survey was about the overall experience of distance learning. Our intention was, after a detailed review of individual topics, to end this conversation with a debriefing question. The range of answers was wide, but most of them were about the difficulties that each one of them faced: “We had a big training gap in the interactive part of the process and thus there wasn’t a therapeutic aspect anymore”.

However, a positive opinion was also expressed, regarding the technical part of distance education. “I welcomed it. I liked this change; in fact, on a technical level I acknowledged its potentials. On an emotional level, it was as if everyone was more oriented towards their own professional goal. The priorities have changed during the years of distance learning”.

Conclusions

The findings above highlight the educational and emotional effects of e-learning on systemic therapy trainees. Based on literature review, we came up with six main fields of research, from which a wide range of responses emerged. Basically, the participants expressed difficulty in adapting to the new process, as well as feelings of worry and uncertainty.

Initially, the cognitive and emotional functions of concentration, communication, and emotional and mental state were weakened during e-courses, in comparison to in-person classes. Common causes of this difficulty were the lack of connection with the group and the distractions that existed in the personal space of each trainee. At the same time, there was a more favorable attitude towards these three functions, for those who did not report a significant difference between online and in-person courses. The ability to learn was the least affected cognitive function, with several participants reporting that online education was just as effective, because it provided them with new possibilities. This finding is very interesting, as it reveals an advantage of e-learning, a point at which it is as adequate as the in-person classes. However, what clearly misses from the process was the experiential element.

This attitude emerges in the section of interactive activities, where indeed, respondents expressed feelings of greater closeness, as well as familiarity with the educational part, when they were up close. Physical presence and eye contact, as well as the tone of voice, were absent from the process, creating a more educational and less therapeutic environment.

The lack of the experiential element also defined the supervisory process, reducing the trainees' ability to remain in emotional contact with the incidents they presented. However, in general, supervision seems to be a process that works just as effectively over the Internet.

Moving on to the influence of e-learning on professional competence, participants' feelings of inadequacy and low self-confidence were observed towards the idea of functioning as therapists. This was examined based on how ready and confident they feel, having been trained online. Of course, some participants became familiar with the online platform and adapted in such a way, as to make a good use of the new possibilities it offers to them. After all, following the advent of the coronavirus, remote working is a global trend for Psychotherapists as well.

Moreover, the participants mentioned the sources that helped them face this new reality throughout the pandemic. Some of them are: the instructors, the group, the therapeutic aspect of the courses and their familiarity with the Internet. An interesting finding is the fact that for some participants, the distance created through e-learning, was interpreted as an opportunity for a deeper contact with themselves.

Moving forward, we can claim that the questions concerning the feeling of connection with the group gathered the most diverse responses. At this point, feelings of sudden withdrawal, re-approachment, but also turning towards oneself were mentioned. The main cause of this disturbance in the cohesion of the group was, as we mentioned above, the deficit that existed at an experiential level. In addition, technical issues, such as internet connection problems, as well as deactivated cameras during the lessons, resulted in the deterioration of the connection between the group members.

Overall, the diversity of responses gave us the opportunity to explore the participants’ personal experience, as well as to set our findings into a more thorough context. This process gave us a more detailed image of the temperament of each participant, making it possible to delve deeper into their "personal world". Eventually, there is a clear preference for the in-person learning process, with its key-traditional features being perceived as irreplaceable and more effective for the trainees.

Discussion

When we analyzed our findings, we were surprised to discover subjects that we did not intend to examine, but which constitute material for further research and discussion.

Embodied Experience
The first subject that occurred was the lack of embodied experience, which gave us the opportunity to understand, the importance of embodiment in the educational process. “You also feel supported in distance learning, but in face-to-face interaction, there is a therapeutic aura because of the physical presence in the room”. This highlighted the significance that face-to-face process has on systemic therapists training.

Personal Motivation
Another important finding that emerged was the participants’ personal motivation, which worked as a catalyst for them to continue their training despite the difficulties. “I had this inner motive. I felt I was gaining so much from this training, which may has deficiencies, but I didn't want to miss it for the world. That worked for me, as a major motivation.”

Emergence of Individuality
In opposition to personal motivation, the emergence of individuality was a separate finding. Since it occurs when the group’s connection and sense of belonging is broken, some individuals seem to separate themselves from the group and orient themselves towards their own personal agenda. “As if there wasn't cohesion anymore, everyone was more oriented towards their own professional goal. The priorities have changed through the years of distance learning.”

Mental resilience-Adaptability
The difficult period of repeated quarantines and general restrictions led the participants to confront their personal limits of resilience. Thus, although they were challenged in many cases, they were able to form or develop mechanisms of mental resilience and flexibility-adaptability. “Moving beyond the difficulties and finding a positive aspect is a core element of our profession.”

Alternative Ways of Communicating
Some other tools that were used in order to maintain qualitative communication and connection among the members of the educational group and functioned as a boost to the whole process, were the utilization of technology to create alternative ways of communication. “We had a group chat on messenger, so the communication wasn't lost. That helped, in terms of keeping in touch, in a way.”

Commitment to the Educational Process
Finally, an important parameter that came to light was the decrease of the trainees’ commitment to the educational process. It seemed that, in many areas of education, commitment was no longer the same and a decrease in interest and "disinvestment in the educational process" was reported (Giastas, I. 2006). “In the online courses we were not always actively involved and often many members were absent.”

Further research could also aim at a more in-depth study of the interactive activities and the supervisory process, which, as it turned out, were a key part of the educational program for the participants. Therefore, it is crucial to examine this prominent importance they hold, because both, seems to be linked with the skills of the professional role and with the connection among the educational groups’ members.

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