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Abstract

The Coronavirus Disease brought forth many novel experiences for the world. Everyone experienced lock downs, physical distancing, social isolation, and a lot more. During this time of great distress, psychologists worldwide, played a very significant role by readily offering their services online. However, this sudden and abrupt shift from in-person practice to tele-practice required psychologists to understand and acquire Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics (KSAO) based competencies for effective job performance using telecommunication technologies. A mixed method research design was used. The study was divided into two interlinked qualitative and quantitative phases. In Phase I, a deductive thematic approach was used with pre-determined theory-based major themes, namely, “Knowledge about tele-counseling, Tele-counseling skills, Abilities, and Other characteristics”. Data was collected from $N=9$ ($M=4$, $F=5$) practicing psychologists, mean age ($M=29$; $SD=3.13$) years based on criterion sampling strategy. Semi-structured interviews over Google Meet were conducted to gather data on relevant themes. In phase 2, based on the findings of phase 1 and literature, a researcher-generated 42-item survey questionnaire focusing on four major domains of KSAO competency model for Tele-counseling. This 5-point Likert rating questionnaire was disseminated online via university based educational groups and through personal contacts to students in training and early career professionals. Using convenient sampling strategy, data was collected from $N=200$ participants ($M=37$, $F=163$), mean age ($M=26.13$; $SD=3.49$). Descriptive analyses were run. Participant’s agreement on each item in terms of percentiles were established to understand the significance of factors within the domain of KSAO framework. Results of the study showed which knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics were relevant and significant in developing competency for effective practice-based delivery of Tele-counseling. This study formulates groundwork for subsequent establishment of professional standards of tele-counseling practice in Pakistan, as well as, for competency in tele-counseling practice, job recruitments, trainings, and career development.

Keywords: Abilities, Competency Model, Knowledge, Other Characteristics, Psychologists, Pakistan, Skills, Tele-Counseling

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Introduction

On March 11, 2020, the World Health
Organization declared Coronavirus Disease
(COVID-19) a pandemic, which is still
ongoing and has social and health

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consequences for everyone (Rains et al., 2021). The emergence of COVID-19 propelled global communities towards online/remote systems of survival in various fields of life (Zhou et al., 2020). The field of psychology successfully integrated technology into mental health practice, improving the awareness about and utility of available technologies for provision of psychological services. Tele-counseling, a relatively newer concept became highly popular during the Coronavirus pandemic 2019. With this, the considerations regarding the competency of technology based mental health services arose. To cater for this concern, present study aimed at understanding and evaluating the practice-based experiences of psychologists for competent practice of tele-counseling based on the KSAO (Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics) model.

The concept of tele-counseling which was previously practiced successfully in the West, sped the acceptance and implementation in the East as well. (Bakar et al., 2020; Iqbal et al., 2021; Gupta et al., 2021). For many psychologists this meant, a rapid transition, to online psychotherapy, without much notice or preparation. Given that, attitudes and expectations towards virtual therapies have an important effect on the efficacy of the treatment (Tannous, 2017). It was important to understand psychologists' knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics for competent practice of tele-counseling, especially during COVID-19, as, for a long time, it has been the sole medium of providing professional psychological services to those in need.

Researchers believe telepsychology is here to stay and it is the future of psychological services (Zur, 2012). In a recent study on therapists making a switch to telepsychology during COVID-19, data was collected on a 29-item online survey from $N=768$ USA

mental health professionals. Results indicated that 29% therapists used telecommunication methods for therapy before COVID-19 and 98% shifted to online module during COVID-19. Tele-psychotherapy was found to be highly effective, 7.45 on a scale of 10, despite the therapists feeling more burned out. Furthermore, the study identified gaps in knowledge of the therapists, creating room for training and advanced education (Sampaio et al., 2021).

Before COVID-19, tele-counseling existed, but was only considered an option. However, due to the need to maintain physical distancing and lock downs during the pandemic, this mode of counseling became a need. Initially clients and therapists doubted the use and effectiveness of tele-counseling (Schulze et al., 2019) and believed they would hardly ever use it (Hantsoo et al., 2017; Pierce et al., 2019). However, it was observed that under incidental crisis, the attitudes, and willingness to use tele-counseling became influenced (Apolinário-Hagen et al., 2017). When COVID-19 struck, tele-counseling became the last respite for provision of psychological services to meet the demands and needs of society; its acceptance increased. A recent study on the psychologist's acceptance of tele-counseling during COVID-19 was conducted on $N=795$ participants. An online survey was conducted exploring the psychologist's experiences of tele-psychotherapy during pandemic, quality of therapeutic relationship, professional self-doubt, vicarious trauma, and tele-psychotherapy acceptance. Results indicated that therapists who reported vicarious trauma and poor alliance were less likely to use tele-psychotherapy in future. While those who developed strong online rapport, their professional self-doubt was lesser and showed a positive attitude towards the use of tele-psychotherapy during COVID-19 (Bekes et al., 2021).

Lack of knowledge and training of psychologists related to the provision of tele-counseling has been a barrier reported by most. In a study on improving tele-mental-health delivery services, $N=12$ psychologists were recruited and provided online training. They were assessed twice, once before training, and then after 10 months. A 28 items researcher-generated questionnaire was used to collect data on the therapist's knowledge, confidence, motivation, and attitude towards tele-psychotherapy. Results indicated that training increased knowledge, confidence, and motivation for both adopters and non-adopters. However, adopters of tele-psychotherapy reported 'excellent knowledge of Tele Mental Health (TMH)' at the completion of the therapy as compared to non-adopters who reported the training as 'good' (Adler et al., 2014).

Use of telecommunication technologies for provision of psychological services is a skill that most psychologists practiced and learnt during COVID-19. In a study on the experiences of psychologists with tele-counseling during COVID-19, data was collected online by disseminating a survey questionnaire exploring the predictors of use of online consultations and perceived level of comfort with tele-counseling. $N=73$ Lebanese mental health professionals participated. Results showed that past tele-practice experience and perceived telepresence were two significant predictors for level of comfort with the adoption and use of tele-psychotherapy (Tohme et al., 2021). In a study on the Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other Characteristics required for competency in tele-communication versus those required for face-to-face communication was conducted via online survey questionnaire. Sample was collected from 150 psychology students to develop a measurement model for communication competence. The study explored the influence of communication (Motivation,

Knowledge, Attentiveness, Expressiveness, and Composure) on communication outcomes (Attractiveness, Appropriateness, Effectiveness, Satisfaction, Clarity, and General Media Use) in face-to-face versus tele-communication contexts. After SEM analyses, it was suggested that the two contexts in which KSAO communication is held are separable, meaning that, tele-communication based KSAO is a skill necessary and distinguished from face-to-face communication skills. This study is significant in establishing the fact that tele-mental-health services require psychologists to be trained and equipped with skill set necessary for effective delivery of therapeutic services (Schulze et al., 2017). Some other characteristics of the psychologists affecting their job competency as identified by Lin et al. (2021) in a comparative study on tele-practice versus in-person practice suggested were being a male and having no prior experience of tele-practice resulted in therapist's believing tele-counseling to be not as effective as in-person practice. However, in another study, psychologists were found to be more open to tele-practice if they perceived tele-medium of provision of therapy as easy and effective (McCord et al., 2020).

For present study, the term 'tele-counseling' has been conceptualized as any type of psychotherapeutic service provided by psychologists using tele-communication modalities including texts, emails, audio/video internet-based or network calls, for the explicit purpose of counseling (Liu et al., 2020). Competency model has been conceptualized as a collection of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAOs) necessary for effective job performance, and tele-counseling, (Shippmann et al., 2000).

Rationale of the Study

This study was predominantly influenced by the following factors; (a) A significant worldwide shift towards remote/online working due to social distancing and lockdowns in the wake of COVID-19 (Hagstrom & Maranzan, 2019), (b) An unprecedented number of psychological/mental health related problems identified during lockdowns (Duan & Zhu, 2020), (c) in response to the demand of the populace increased need for online counseling in Pakistan without any previous formal training or professionally agreed upon principles for practice. In response to above-mentioned issues, this research was aimed at (a) Using a previously valid model of competency development widely used in job analysis (b) Developing a preliminary structure for KSAO-based competency model serving as a baseline for professional tele-counseling practice in Pakistan.

Research Question?

- Based on the practice-based experiences of psychologists, what are the 'Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics (KSAO)' necessary for competent and professional practice of tele-counseling in Pakistan?

Research Objective

- To evaluate domain specific 'Knowledge, Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics (KSAO)' deemed relevant and significant for the competent practice of tele-counseling.

Method

Research Design

A mixed method (qualitative and quantitative) approach was used to address the goals of the study. In Phase I, a qualitative design based on thematic analysis was used to collect in-depth information on practice-based experiences of psychologists on KSAO-based competency factors for tele-counseling. In phase 2, a quantitative descriptive study design was used to evaluate the psychologists' knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics (KSAO model) deemed relevant and important for a competent practice of tele-counseling.

Sample and Sampling Strategy

Phase I of the Study

Using criterion based purposive sampling strategy, data was collected from $N=9$ psychologists (Males=4, Females=5), mean age ($M=29$; $SD=3.13$) years.

Inclusion Criteria

The criteria were decided as (1) holding MS/MPhil degree with minimum 2 years of work experience in relevant field and (2) Practicing tele-counseling for at least 6 months duration.

Based on the listed criteria, $N=11$ psychologists (professional contacts) were approached, out of which 2 refused to interview due to their personal commitments and the remaining 9 participants were interviewed during March-April 2021 via Google Meet audio calls. On average, each interview lasted about 25-35 minutes.

Table 1

Characteristics of Study Population- Phase I (N=9)

Sr #	Participant ID (Pseudonyms)	Gender	Age (Years)	Education	Tele Counseling Experience (in months)
1	Fahad	Male	30	M.Phil.	16
2	Sarah	Female	28	MS	9
3	Fariha	Female	29	M.Phil.	6

4	Mahrukh	Female	33	MS	12
5	Saad	Male	27	MS	13
6	Annum	Female	29	MS	14
7	Seemal	Female	28	MS	8
8	Danish	Male	31	MS	11
9	Usman	Male	26	MS	23

Note. To establish and maintain anonymity and confidentiality of information, each participant was given an assumed name. These pseudonyms have been used only to represent the data, keeping discreet the real identities of the research participants.

Phase II of the Study

Data was collected between January-October 2021 from participants related to field of psychology (students in training and early career professionals) involved in active provision of tele-counseling for at least 6 months during COVID-19. Convenient sampling strategy was used to recruit $N=200$ participants ($M=37$, $F=163$), age ranged between 22-30 years ($M=26.63$, $SD=3.49$),

from different university educational groups and through personal contacts. Data was collected online via google forms.

Inclusion Criteria

A homogenous sample was recruited and finalized based on criteria of (1) age range 22-35 years old, and (2) active provision of counseling through online modality of communication for 6 months.

Table 2

Characteristics of Study Population- Phase II (N=200)

Sr #	Study Variables	Study Groups	M	SD	f	%
1	Age		26.13	3.49		
2	Gender	Males			37	18.5
		Females			163	81.5
3	Education Level	BS/BSc			118	44.3
		ADCP			68	25.5
		MS/MPhil			80	30.0
4	Employment Status	Officially employed			84	31.6
		Self- Employed			79	29.7
		Un-employed			103	38.7
5	Tele-Counseling Experience (in months)	6 months			77	28.9
		6-12 months			103	38.9
		Greater than 12 months			86	32.3

Note. M=Mean; SD=Standard Deviation; f=frequency; %= Percentage

Measures

Phase I of the Study

Semi-Structured Interviews

Based on the KSAO model for competency in job performance, an interview protocol guide, was developed asking questions from psychologists about their practice-based experiences of tele-counseling.

Phase II of the Study

Demographic Information Sheet

A demographic information sheet was developed inquiring about participant's age, gender, education, employment status, and tele-counseling experience.

KSAO-based Questionnaire for Practicing Tele-Counseling

A researcher-generated 42-items survey questionnaire based on the findings of study phase 1 and literature was developed. Items were constructed to fit the domain of knowledge, skills, abilities, and other characteristics necessary for competency in tele-counseling during COVID-19. Participants were asked to rate each item on a 5-point Likert scale with 1=strongly disagree and 5=strongly agree.

Data Analyses

Phase I- Interviews were transcribed, and analyzed using deductive method of thematic analysis, a technique by Braun and Clarke (2012). In this approach, themes are pre-determined, based on a theory (KSAO model for job competency), and the data is coded accordingly to fulfil the objectives of the study. A table of major themes, subthemes, and relevant codes from participants' interviews are shown in Table 3. To establish research credibility (Noble & Smith, 2015), a reflexive approach was taken. Two-rater coding was done independently by author 1 and 2 which was then discussed with author 3 to come to a unanimous decision. Two research participants were then approached to

give their feedback (member-checking) on the data analyzed. Minor changes suggested were revised and incorporated in the thematic Table below. Participants' verbatim was used and emphasized to ensure that the meaning was not lost during analysis and to maintain researcher's neutrality.

Phase II- Data was analyzed using SPSS version 24. Descriptive statistics were run to investigate the percentages of agreement by participants on each item under the domain of Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other Characteristics on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1=strongly disagree to 5=strongly agree.

Ethical Considerations

APA ethics of research were followed where necessary. Consent of participants was taken explaining the nature and purpose of the study prior to data collection. Participants were ensured of their rights: willingness to participate, anonymity, confidentiality of data, withdrawal and right to ask questions regarding the research. Participant's permission to record audio interview calls was also taken.

Results

Phase I

Experiences of Psychologists on Domain Specific Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other Characteristics Needed for Competency in Tele-Counseling

Experiences of psychologists on the four pre-determined major themes Knowledge about Tele-counseling, Tele-Counseling Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics were explored by asking questions relevant to these domains. Sub-themes and codes required for research were generated from the data. Explication of the themes have been given in the discussion section.

Table 3 Summary of Themes, Subthemes, and Codes (N=9)

Research Question	Main Themes	Sub-Themes	Codes
1. What are the key areas of knowledge necessary for tele-counseling? 2. What is the relative significance of these knowledge areas in tele-counseling?	Knowledge about Tele-Counseling	Field specific	Basics of psychotherapy Related to counseling/psychotherapy Psychological Assessment DSM-5 APA Ethics of practice
		Online communication	Knowledge of use of online communication apps Audio based vs. video-based communication
		Tele-Counseling	Combination of field specific and online communication
1. What are the key skills that every practicing tele-psychologist must have? 2. What is the relative significance of these skills in tele-counseling?	Tele-Counseling Skills	Attentive Listening	Verbal cues/voice changes Open and empathetic conversations
		Tele-Interviewing skills	Active and focused questioning
		Clinical judgment	Providing accurate diagnosis Online treatment
		Therapeutic alliance	Trust between client and therapist Non-judgmental attitude Kindness and warmth
1. What abilities a psychologist must have for competent practice of tele-counseling?	Abilities	Sense of humor	Breaking the ice Diffusing a stressful situation
		Adaptability	Dealing with novel situations Active problem solving Changing therapy with the needs of the client
		Creativity	smarter solutions specific to situations
1. Any other characteristics/trait, a psychologist must have to be more competent in his job?	Other Characteristics	Self-awareness	Awareness of personal bias Awareness of competency and lack there off Self-confidence
		Self-growth	Openness to acquiring learning new knowledge and skills
		Self-regulation	Ability to deal with personal problems Managing personal vs professional life

Phase II Descriptive Statistics showing Importance of KSAO-based Practice in Tele-Counseling.**Table 4***Relative Importance of KSAO (Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other Characteristics) Items in Percentages by Participants (N=200)*

Domain	#	Item	Response in %		
			Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
1 For successful practice of tele-counseling a psychologist must have the Knowledge of	1	Psychology			100
	2	Psychopathology		30	70
	3	DSM-5 and diagnostic criteria	10	10	80
	4	Different therapies such as psychotherapy/ CBT/REBT/Behavioral therapy etc.		20	80
	5	Clinical Assessment Techniques (observations, Baselines, Psychological Tools etc.)	10	30	60
	6	APA Ethics of clinical practice	10	30	60
	7	Internet/ Digital media	20	30	50
	8	Online communication apps (WhatsApp, Skype, Google Meet, Zoom, etc.)	10	40	50
	9	Audio-based vs video-based communication	10	60	30
2 For successful practice of tele-counseling a psychologist must have Skills such as	10	Identify what prompted the call/main issue of the client	10	30	60
	11	Rapport building		50	50
	12	Making and maintaining therapeutic relationship online	10	50	40
	13	Online clinical interviewing	10	40	50
	14	Attentive and empathetic listening		20	80
	15	Being able to attend to verbal cues/voice changes in client	10	30	60
	16	Clinical judgment	10	20	70
	17	Client management via treatment adherence		80	20
	18	Managing client's expectations and demands	10	20	70
	19	Problem solving		40	60
	20	To handle unfamiliar situations during therapy		40	60
	21	To deal with the difficulties or limitations of signals or internet access	10	60	30
	22	Ensure privacy and confidentiality of client's data	10	20	70
	23	Enhance client's wellbeing		30	70

3	For successful practice of tele-counseling a psychologist must have the Ability to	24	Develop trust between client and counselor		20	80
		25	Express unconditional positive regard		30	70
		26	To keep the conversation assessment/therapy focused	10	40	50
		27	Show empathy	10	30	60
		28	Show kindness and warmth		30	70
		29	Adapt therapy to the needs of the client	10	20	70
		30	Use previous knowledge in resolving issues of any novel situations		30	70
		31	Creativity (to modify therapy towards the needs of the client or the demand of the situation)		40	60
		32	To maintain the ethical boundaries of client-therapist relationship		30	70
		33	Provide self-disclosure only when and where needed in order to facilitate therapeutic process	20	60	20
4	Other Characteristics essential for psychologists for a successful practice of tele-counseling are	34	Being aware of personal biases	10	40	50
		35	Awareness of clinical competency and lack there off		40	60
		36	Self-confidence		30	70
		37	Openness to acquiring learning new knowledge and skills		40	60
		38	Ability to deal with personal problems so that it does not affect therapists' ability to provide therapy		60	40
		39	Managing personal vs. professional life	10	40	50
		40	Sense of humor	40	40	20
		41	Being able to give corrective feedback to the client during therapy.		70	30
		42	Being able to receive corrective feedback from the client during therapy.	10	50	40

Discussion

Phase I

Experiences of psychologists on the four pre-determined major themes; Knowledge about tele-counseling, Tele-Counseling Skills, Abilities, and Other Characteristics were explored. Relevant sub-themes and codes required for research were generated from the data. Explication of the themes have been

given below. Pseudonyms have been used while quoting the supporting excerpts from participant interviews.

1. Knowledge about Tele-Counseling

To show competence, having the foundational basis and theoretical background on one's area of expertise is necessary. During COVID-19, putting their existing field related knowledge about stress,

anxiety, insomnia, depression, grief, and trauma, psychologists were able to help clients by providing them psychosomatic care through tele-counseling. Having field specific knowledge, catering for the minute differences between communicating in-person versus online communication and knowing about the medium through which one connected with others for professional services were all deemed relevant by tele-practicing psychologists. Fariha said, *“Any practice without proper basis of knowledge will not work, you need the knowledge and flexibility of mind to apply the same principles in different situations with different clients”*. Similarly, Fahad thought, *“You cannot call yourself a professional by just taking free courses online. You need the depth of knowledge that can only come when you spend years studying psychology and its related fields from theory to research to practical stuff”*. For effective online communication, the knowledge related to the medium being used, how it operated, what functions it had, was deemed very important by participants. Talking about the online facilities and the role of psychologists in tele-counseling, Usman stated, *“A psychologist should adjust to the needs and ease of the client and must have an open mind and flexibility to learn about the different apps available for online counseling.”* Similar perspective was highlighted by Annum, *“For tele-counseling, you need to have a strong grip on how to use the internet, Zoom, or any other domain you are using because if you don’t, the client might perceive you as incompetent.”*

Studies on telepsychology support that a psychologist must demonstrate knowledge related to available and evolving technologies, use of such mediums, their strengths, limitations, and effectiveness. Also, be able to translate and communicate the logistics of telecommunication to the client (McCord et al., 2020). Hagstrom and

Maranzan (2019) also concluded that improved awareness was integral for successful integration of technology into psychological practice. It was recommended that psychologists become more knowledgeable and aware of advanced technologies, major breakthroughs, themes, and patterns within professional practice (Fulmer et al., 2018). Awareness was foundational to the reliability and validity of the technology integration into practice of psychology. Awareness could be raised in the form of tech-based working groups, continuing education, and training to increase competency in related professional tele-practice field (Hagstrom & Maranzan, 2019). Psychologists must actively maintain knowledge of recent policies, guidelines, and legislation related to telepsychology (Gamble et al., 2015).

2. Tele-Counseling Skills

Before COVID-19, most psychologists had neither read upon nor received any formal training on practicing tele-counseling. Although APA guidelines and some research in the West provided a good insight into tele-practice, most psychologists, in Pakistan, however, learnt and developed tele-counseling skills through a reflective practice model. Based on their experiences, participants of the study reported active listening, use of clinical judgement, tele-interviewing skills, developing therapeutic alliance, and showing flexibility to handle unexpected situations as key skills for tele-counseling practice.

Highlighting the importance of active listening, Saad said, *“In video calls, somewhat observing the client is possible, but over audio calls you can’t see the client and the client can’t see you. A lot of information goes missing this way. For audio calls you have to be a very good listener.”* Psychologists must be very vigilant to slightest change in clients’ voice when they

are sharing their problems. Mahrukh believes:

Picking up on nuances and verbal cues is very important for tele-counseling. If you are not alert to it, and/or are distracted, then the flow of the session is gone. Your relationship with the client is also affected since sometimes clients in tele-practice are hypersensitive about sharing their problems over calls due to the concerns of privacy and confidentiality.

In conformity with the findings of the study, guidelines on the effective practice of telepsychology suggested that psychologists listened more and spoke less during tele-counseling sessions, conveyed respect for the concerns and beliefs of the clients, built trust, asked open questions, and avoided jargon and information overload (Alqahtani & Altamimi, 2016).

Clinical judgement was deemed important for tele-psychologists especially in the absence of video cues. Danish said, “*You need to use clinical judgment and not solely rely on what is being said in absence of visual cues. Client might say he’s depressed, but, in reality, it might just be an unpleasant event that he feels stressed about*”. Emphasis on clinical judgment can be found in literature too. It has been suggested that psychologists used their best clinical judgment to determine whether or not telepsychological services were safe, effective, and manageable for each patient (Alqahtani & Altamimi, 2016).

Tele-interviewing skills are also very important for online counseling sessions. Fahad said, “*If you ask too many questions over a call, you end up frustrating the client more. For tele-practice, listen carefully to question intelligently, listen more to ask less.*”

Developing and maintaining therapeutic alliance during tele-counseling sessions is one of the major skillsets, a psychologist requires for tele-practice. Usman said, “*Establishing rapport with clients to form alliance takes longer in tele-counseling sessions. I’ve to first gain trust of a client so he can openly talk about his problems. Something that in in-person sessions is pre-conceived and requires no extra efforts*”. Research also supports this finding, in a study by Lin et al. (2021), therapists reported less therapeutic skill online than in in-person therapy.

3. Abilities

Under the theme of Abilities, three subordinate themes emerged: Sense of humor, adaptability, and creativity. The emergence of these subordinate themes not only reflected their importance but also how aided the process of tele-counseling, as evident from Danish’s narrative, “*Humor is like a double-edged sword, it can help you break the ice and quickly develop rapport with client and can break your relationship and trust with client if used at the wrong place and time*”. Seemal reported that, “*Most people seeking online counseling come with mild to moderate problems. They are mostly healthy adults stuck in an unhealthy situation. A little use of humor helps loosen up and share more.*” Literature shows support for humor in therapy based on the myriad of factors unique to each client-clinician dynamic, client diagnosis, and clinician orientation (Drum & Littleton, 2014). During COVID-19, psychology trainees were encouraged to use the same therapeutic abilities they would utilize in tackling other difficult topics in in-person sessions, such as use of curiosity, unconditional positive regard, and humor when and where appropriate (McCord et al., 2021).

The concept of seeking counseling in Pakistan has not generally found a lot of

acceptance. Living in closed knitted collectivistic environment, casual household conversations with family or friends are often considered equivalent to seeking professional counseling. Considering this popular belief amongst the people, psychologists sometimes have to encounter situations beyond their professional boundaries and so in their tele-practice, they must be able to decide how to tackle and adapt with them. Fariha narrating an incident said, *“During one session, all of a sudden, the client asked me to act like a friend and talk to her mother who was concerned about whom her daughter was talking to for so long”*. Research on the practice of telepsychology suggested that psychologists develop a sound understanding of risks and benefits of use of technology in practice. While clients prefer telepsychology due to ease of access and flexibility, the psychologists need to be prepared for any such ethical issues and manage by talking in advance with clients about acceptable and unacceptable favors (Gamble et al., 2015). In another study, it was recommended that the professional and ethical practice of psychology be administered keeping the cultural context in mind (Alqahtani & Altamimi, 2016).

Being creative in the tele-counseling field, is an ability widely appreciated and encouraged by professionals in practice. Fahad shed light on it by stating, *“Being creative in a rapidly changing environment is a form of intelligence that is necessary for the psychologists of the 21st Century”*. Mahrukh believed that *“Since tele-counseling is a relatively new area, it requires a lot of brainstorming and creativity to find effective and at times innovative solutions”*. Research declared creativity and pragmatism as the hallmark of telepsychology (Waltman et al., 2020). Since tele-counseling modality is relatively new, even the experts are learning the best practices of the field. Given that the research, rules, and regulations on tele-

counseling is limited, therefore, the need for patience, creativity and flexibility have been reported necessary while developing competencies in telepsychology (Dopp et al., 2021).

4. Other Characteristics

Among Other competencies, the major subordinate themes emerged to be self-awareness, self-growth, and self-regulation. Most psychologists emphasized the importance of being aware of one’s own biases and prejudice. Annum reflected similar views, *“It’s important to be aware of one’s subconscious attitudes and preferences that effect one’s judgment and perception, if one’s attitude effects their counseling skills or their therapeutic relationship with client, then they would be jeopardizing the progress without even knowing it”*. Psychologist’s capacity to know his limitations in providing services is important. One must know what they feel trained and comfortable in and avoid malpractice. Sarah quoted:

Acknowledge when you don’t know what you are doing...clients are not guinea pigs, they trust you to take care of their issues so if you don’t know what you are doing either refer the client to a more competent person or seek supervision to provide expert advice.

While stressing over self-growth, Fahad stated, *“Most psychologists stress the need for self-growth beyond that of classroom and degrees. In professional environment, constant growth and adjustment is the only way to progress in any direction”*. Usman said, *“COVID-19 revolutionized our practices. For some, this adjustment was huge and for others, it was easy. It all depends upon how you look and assess any situation: hindrance or opportunity.”* Literature supports the importance of self-awareness and self-growth as a competency

for effective job performance. In a study on doctoral trainees, students noted that telepsychology training expanded their general field related knowledge. While they became equipped with using their existing knowledge over telephone or video-calls, they also added new competencies like technical skills (Dopp et al., 2021).

Other than the importance of having clinical skills, being able to self-regulate is critical to the process of counseling. Fariha said, *“Psychologist’s management of his/her own stress caused by professional or personal life is very important for his/her job performance and career development”*. Saad mentioned, *“Work from home can be challenging especially during times like COVID-19. Tele-counseling from office location should also be effective”*. Any effort to modify or alter one’s behavior is self-regulation. For tele-counseling, psychologists had to be mindful of possible challenges and change their behaviors for effective delivery of counseling services. Hagger (2010) found self-regulation as an important construct in psychology practice.

Phase II

Results of study phase II showed items that were deemed most important by early career professionals ($N=200$) under the domain of Knowledge, Skills, Abilities and Other Characteristics. Under the knowledge domain, participants strongly agreed with items such as Knowledge about psychology (100%), psychopathology (70%), DSM-5 diagnostic criteria (80%) and different treatment approaches (80%). In Skills domain, participants strongly agreed with having skills to listen attentively and empathetically (80%), having sound clinical judgment (70%), being able to manage client’s expectations and demands (70%), ensuring client’s privacy and confidentiality (70%), and enhancing client’s wellbeing (70%). Abilities like developing a trust relationship between psychologist & client

(80%), expressing unconditional positive regard (70%), showing kindness and warmth (70%), tailoring therapy according to the needs of the client (70%), using experience to resolve novel situations (70%), and maintaining ethical boundaries (70%) were deemed as the most significant attributes by the participants. Psychologist’s self-confidence was the only other characteristic deemed most significant by the participants for effective practice of tele-counseling in Pakistan.

Literature shows support for these findings. Adler et al. (2014) in a pilot study on $N=14$ participants found that adopters of tele-psychotherapy rated knowledge related to it as significantly important. In another study on tele-therapist’s skills, $N=440$ participants were assessed on their clinical skills during COVID-19. Based on an online survey, therapists provided ratings for 28 clinical skills divided into three factors, 1. Common therapeutic skills (warmth), 2. Extra therapeutic influence (resources), and 3. Perceived outcome (symptom reduction). Results revealed that these skills were very important for effective delivery of psychological services and that therapists were less skilled in tele-therapeutic attributes than in in-person therapeutic attributes. Trainings were recommended to improve therapist’s abilities (Lin et al., 2021).

Limitations and Suggestions

Limited research is available on tele-counseling in Pakistani context. More studies focusing on the integration of research and practice should be carried out to better understand the efficacy of tele-counseling in different geographical settings. Psychometric properties for the KSAO-based Questionnaire for Practicing Tele-Counseling can be developed. Tele-counseling became readily acceptable and widely practiced in Pakistan during COVID-19. This crisis-adopted modality of service provision should be taken up seriously as an

everlasting opportunity to grow our tele-mental-health services. Tele-counseling might be challenging for now but with more studies into the practice, and proper training, this service can be upscaled to benefit a larger population especially in the underserved areas.

Implications of the Study

The present study identifies the appropriate competencies or KSAOs for practicing tele-counseling in Pakistan. Reducing the significant tasks to a smaller number of competencies or KSAOs by an empirical method reduces the workload of subject matter experts (SMEs) in the job analysis process. It helps organizations to target and recruit the most promising candidates. Academicians can also benefit from this study by developing related competency courses and certifications and streamlining the process of gaining competency in tele-counseling.

Conclusion

The present study focused on early career professionals who adopted tele-counseling services during COVID-19 to provide a unique in-depth insight into their practice-based experiences of tele-counseling. A mixed method approach in this regard allowed to better explore and understand the practice-based competencies necessary for tele-counseling based on theory driven, and KSAO framework of competencies.

Contribution of Authors

Sadia Khan: Investigation, Methodology, Resources, Data Curation, Writing-Original Draft

Kanza Faisal: Conceptualization, Investigation, Visualization, Formal Analysis, Writing - Reviewing & Editing

Alina Rashid: Methodology, Software, Formal Analysis. Validation

Conflict of Interest

There is no conflict of interest declared by authors.

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