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Telepsychiatry and Cultural Barrier in Korea

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Abstract. This research was performed in order to empirically prove that telepsychiatry can result in overcoming of the Confucian cultural barrier which discouraged Korean patients from seeking psychiatric care. The Confucian culture of Korea forces its members to observe absolute conformity to the social norm. In this kind of culture it is very hard to admit one’s mental illness and to seek medical help. Thus telepsychiatry might be a good alternative to face-to-face meeting-based psychiatry especially in culturally inhibitive places such as Korea. We conducted a telepsychiatry experiment using Instant Messenger with 93 volunteers who had an experience of seeing a psychiatrist in person. The result shows that people tend to think that telepsychiatry allowed them to break out of the Confucian cultural protocol which put heavy emphasis on avoiding any irregular thought.

Keywords. Telepsychiatry, Cultural Barrier, Korea

Introduction

Telepsychiatry refers to a term to describe psychiatric consultation done through none face-to-face environment usually through videoconferencing via Internet connection. This method of treating mental patients was proven effective in many western countries such as US [1], Canada [2], and Norway [3], However, no such treatment has been reported in Korea where the national IT infrastructure is one of the best in the world. In this research, the effectiveness of telepsychiatry will be examined with Korean subjects in order to determine the adequacy of practicing telepsychiatry in Korea. The Confucian teaching emphasizes respect and social order in society. Thus mental illness is seen as a threat to orderly management of society because any mental patient is likely not to observe traditional protocols of showing respect to seniors and the powerful, which then might be imitated by the mass, which can lead to a challenge against the governing elite. It is true that even in western societies, for a long time, mental illness was regarded as a threat to social order. However this attitude waned as western societies became democratic. Democracy brought openness in people and thus scientific solutions to every aspect of human problems including mental diseases [4]. Korea is still having difficulty in getting rid of the Confucian tradition even as it goes through many democratic reforms. Telepsychiatry can be another tool in aiding Korean society to overcome the Confucian cultural burden in

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the area of mental health care. We would like to present an empirical finding using telepsychiatric experiments in order to prove this proposition.

1. Methods

The Social stigma of receiving psychiatric care is immensely stronger in still tradition-bound Korea much more than in western countries. Korea has gone through rapid westernization in the last 50 years and transformed itself one of the most westernized countries in Asia. However, due to the long history of the Confucian teaching-based social culture, which does not even regard mental illness as real illness it is still very difficult to overcome prejudice attached to the people of mental health care needs. It is true that even in western countries, this stigma existed before. However democratic openness of western culture helped to relieve the social burden on mental patients in modern times [5]. Thus, in western countries there are generally two kinds of needs to utilize telepsychiatry [6]. One is for remote area residents who have difficulty in finding a psychiatrist nearby. Another is for convenience of receiving the care in more comfortable environment. In the Korean case, the first need is irrelevant since Korea is a very small country where major hospitals are reachable with little travel. The second need can be a factor that is applicable in Korean context since visiting psychiatric clinics still gives a lot of shame and fear on patients. But we would like to posit that one more factor should be considered in Korea when it comes to the effectiveness of telepsychiatry, that is, the Confucian cultural factor. There is a big chance that telepsychiatry might help bring down the Confucian cultural barrier because it can minimize negative emotions such as shame and fear. We propose a following proposition: “Telepsychiatric treatment helps Korean patients to overcome cultural barrier in receiving mental health care.” The aim of this research is to prove the validity of this proposition empirically by conducting experiments and a survey. We decided to use Instant Messenger as a tool for telepsychiatry. Even though it was possible to use video conferencing through Internet, we were concerned that having to show one's face to the doctor might discourage them to open up and discuss their problems due to heavy cultural negative influence on mental care. Thus, we decided to use a text-based chatting system such as Instant Messenger in order to make sure that the patients should be able to participate in the consultation with more care-free attitude. We selected 12 Internet user group sites, which were devoted to exchange health information including mental health among members. We posted a message in these sites in order to urge volunteering for telepsychiatric consultation experiments only if they had any experience of visiting actual psychiatrist's office for consultation. This posting was done in the period of Nov. 23-Dec. 1 2007 until we were able to let 110 volunteers to sign up for experiments. We then invited these volunteers to log on to Instant Messenger and asked them to join a chatting session one by one with a psychiatrist. This consultation session was conducted in the period of Dec. 5-Dec. 10 2007 until we had 93 volunteers show up on Instant Messenger session and the rest of volunteers decided not to participate eventually. During the session typical questions were asked as following.

1. What's bothering you?
2. I will explain why those are bothering you.
Volunteers were told about treatment options and asked to go to an actual psychiatrist to continue the treatment. After the session was over, each volunteer was asked to answer the following survey.

Q1. Do you prefer telepsychiatry to face-to-face meeting psychiatry?
(1) Yes (2) No
Q2. Please rate your degree of agreement on the following statement.
"Telepsychiatry helps me overcome cultural barrier in receiving mental illness treatment."
(1)(strongly disagree) 2(disagree) 3(neutral) 4(agree) 5(strongly agree)

2. Results

Based on the collected data from 93 volunteers, the result is as following. For the first question, 87% (81 volunteers) answered “Yes” whereas 13% (12 volunteers) answered “No.” This means that overwhelming majority of people in this survey preferred telepsychiatry to conventional face-to-face meeting session. This question was asked to see demographic statistics on favorability of telepsychiatry. We also noticed that there were some people who seemed to prefer face-to-face meeting. The reason could be that more seriously ill patients would probably find it necessary to receive detailed care from a psychiatrist; they already had no fear or shame on receiving psychiatric care due to probable previous exposure to the actual psychiatric sessions. The second question was asked to gauge volunteers’ feeling on the relationship between telepsychiatry and overcoming cultural barrier in order to prove/disprove our research proposition. Average score of degrees of agreement was 4.1, which indicated an “agree” level among varied degrees of agreement. In other words, surveyed volunteers on average agreed that they felt that telepsychiatry helped them to overcome cultural barrier in receiving psychiatric treatment.

3. Conclusions

We believe that this result proves the validity of our research proposition. However, the small number of sample subjects can be a liability in our claim, which should require further research with much larger sample. However we posit that this research should have its merit in terms of investigating the role of telepsychiatry in overcoming cultural barrier in more traditional societies. We can infer that Korean people tend to think that telepsychiatry helps them to break out of burden of fear and shame brought up by the Confucian cultural heritage. We conclude that doctors in Korea should consider telepsychiatry as one of mental treatment methods since it can help overcome cultural barriers that discourage patients from seeking mental health care.
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References