

Book Review / Compte rendu

Zeavin, H. (2021). *The Distance Cure: A History of Teletherapy*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press. ISBN: 978-0-262-04592-6, xviii + 301 pp.

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ABSTRACT

Teletherapy refers to a range of mental health services facilitated at a distance by the use of different communications media. In *The Distance Cure*, Hannah Zeavin critically examines the history of teletherapy as a scholar of communications, culture, and technology. Her analyses show how cultural notions of what is therapeutic as well as practices and relations between clients and counsellors have been transformed by changes in media.

RÉSUMÉ

La téléthérapie désigne un ensemble de services de santé mentale facilités à distance par l'utilisation de différents supports de communication. Dans *The Distance Cure*, Hannah Zeavin examine de manière critique l'histoire de la téléthérapie en tant que spécialiste des communications, de la culture, et de la technologie. Ses analyses montrent comment les notions culturelles de ce qui est thérapeutique, ainsi que les pratiques et les relations entre clients et conseillers, ont été transformées par l'évolution des médias.

We think of human-to-human treatment as dyadic—patient and therapist—but it has always been triadic: patient, therapist, and the determinate medium, or media, of communication. (Hannah Zeavin, 2021, p. 139)

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted how most counsellors and psychotherapists do their conversational work with clients, although with a few adaptations, their work has gone on. Face-to-face dialogue—seen normally as foundational to a good working alliance—has often been replaced by conversations over shared screen time on videoconferencing software. Distance has necessarily been added to these conversations but at the same time has seemed

technologically addressed, while clients still seem to benefit. Hannah Zeavin, a lecturer in English and History at the University of California, Berkeley, examines how counsellors and psychotherapists have been addressing distance through technological developments:

Media technologies have always played a central and sometimes alarming role in our intimate social relationships, producing medium-specific forms of relating that allow for unexpected and new kinds of human-to-human communication. This book considers what happens when an explicit third communication technology again and again enters into the extraordinary relationship between patient and therapist. (Zeavin, 2021, p. 5)

The Distance Cure is an intriguing historical account of counselling and psychotherapy as refracted through Zeavin's analytic lens focused on "distanced intimacy." Distanced intimacy refers to how mental health professionals use media technologies to manage the intimacies associated with making differences in clients' lives. Distance is a construct she adapts imaginatively, at times in ways that might raise an eyebrow. For example, she likens Freud's letter writing to "telepathy" in that his letters' addressees were conjured to be imaginatively present and responsive as he wrote. Whether a prospective client engages with a podcast therapist like Esther Perel, a volunteer crisis line worker, a self-help listserv community, or a therapist over Zoom, Zeavin suggests that such varied media enable an intimate and influential presence in help-seekers' lives. Each new therapeutic communication technology transforms the experiences and ways of participating in therapy. Even therapy's most common approaches are examined through the lens of distanced intimacy, whether Zeavin considers the relationship between analyst to analysand on the couch or the "frictionless feelings" of clients using automated CBT software programs.

Zeavin brought her training as a scholar of communication, culture, and technology to sample selectively (yet research deeply) therapy's technological developments, extending to her becoming a licensed rape crisis counsellor and a Fellow of the American Psychoanalytic Association. Decades ago, Marshall McLuhan (1967) wrote that the "medium is the message," that successive technologies transformed what it meant to be human. Zeavin incorporates a similar insight in how she critically reviews teletherapy ("therapeutic interactions conducted over a distance," p. 24). She draws on a psychoanalytic adaptation of Goffman's (1974/1986) "frame theory" to examine how teletherapy frames differently the roles, activities, and ways of relating as new media technologies associated with providing therapies arise. She is also expansive on what she means by teletherapy, focusing historically on letter writing, mental health radio broadcasts, crisis hotline counselling services, self-help media, up to email and the recent proliferation

of online psychotherapy videoconferencing services. “Therapeutic” and “therapy” are somewhat loosely used words here and find their warrant based on popular uses in the media to which Zeavin refers. A significant proportion of the public has undeniably turned to radio hosts, television evangelists, and computer self-help algorithms for understanding, information, and inspiration. So, while such examples of teletherapy may seem innocuous to professionals, that is not how they are seen by many of their clients. Zeavin suggests that one upshot of such media developments is that new media can become more salient to clients than their counsellors’ professional expertise. Regardless, the public’s notions of what is therapeutic continue to be transformed by communications media.

For devotees of face-to-face dialogue in counselling, this is a provocative book that can sometimes frustrate. COVID-19-imposed Zoom teletherapy changed practice uncomfortably, though temporarily (e.g., Aafjes-van Doorn, Békés, & Prout, 2021), yet somehow a degree of communicative intimacy has seemed possible, and clients apparently are still benefitting (Barker & Barker, 2021). Here, Zeavin has cast her historic and ethnographic net widely. Thus, teletherapy, as it is reviewed, encompasses activities and media that might seem a stretch for professional readers, despite people turning to them in significant numbers for help. Practitioners reading Zeavin may question the relevance of learning about Winnicott’s very popular Second World War radio broadcasts on child-raising, why the accounts of volunteer rape crisis telephone counsellors are included, or why she focused on the automated web platforms developed by the recent multitude of mental health start-ups. Zeavin’s general message is that teletherapy develops according to how “clients” make new media technologies work for them, with counsellors seeming more challenged by (and peripheral to) the adjustments. Most histories of counselling and psychotherapy are written by counsellors and therapists (e.g., Cushman, 1995; Ehrenwald, 1976/1991). So, it can seem odd to read about our professional activities as they are chronicled critically by a cultural media scholar like Zeavin. Her focus—useful, I thought—is more on our clients and the technologies of therapy than on how counsellors regard their work. It is a book that offers much to think about when it comes to how technologies have been transforming what it means to be clients and counsellors in a broad landscape of mental health service delivery.

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