Therapeutic alliance in face-to-face and online counseling: Opinions of counselor candidates[1]

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to examine how counselor candidates view therapeutic alliance within the frame of traditional face-to-face counseling and online counseling. The study was conducted with the participation of 11 volunteering counselor candidates (eight female and three male) in the fourth year of their Guidance and Psychological Counseling undergraduate program at a public university in Turkey. Results obtained through content analysis indicated that the counselor candidates were largely able to cooperate with their clients in setting goals, in working towards these goals and in solving problems, and that the counselor candidates formed a personal connection with the clients. However, it was also observed that online counseling led to problems in building cooperation to achieve goals, and in allowing the counselor and client to understand one another.

Keywords: Online counseling; therapeutic alliance; working alliance; technology; digital native.

1. Introduction

Technological changes require a new way of life in Turkey, just as they do in the rest of the world. Schools are also affected by this change. Within the scope of the Fatih Project that was launched across Turkey, in addition to the 614364 laptop computers and projectors, 38688 multi-purpose photocopy machines and smart boards were put into service by students studying in 620000 classrooms in 40000 schools (Arabacı and Polat, 2013). This situation has resulted in new concepts, such as online learners, to be introduced into our lives (Bilgiç, Duman and Seferoğlu, 2011). The online learning environments that have increased with information and communication technologies, affect the entertainment and learning habits of groups called digital natives (Bilgiç, Duman and Seferoğlu, 2011; Günüç, 2011; Yıldız, 2012). Prensky (2001) defines this new generation, who speaks the in digital language of computers, Internet and video games, as if it was their native tongue, as digital natives. This generation is of a disposition that can easily adapt to all technological changes, is one that can quickly start using any technological novelty to which s/he is introduced and is one that has no fear of breaking or making a mistake while using them. Yılmaz (2012) also underlines that the university students, who are regarded as digital natives, find the Internet, which they use for entertainment and communication purposes, to be rather attractive.

In recent years, online counseling services have become notably popular. Richards and Viganò (2012) describe online counseling as the creation of relationships between counselor and clients

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in online environments, using computer-supported communications technologies and therapeutic interventions that place in the same environment. Online counseling may be practiced, subject to the availability of technological conditions, via e-mail, simultaneous correspondence (chat), voice calls, video and voice calls, and the use of avatars (Barak, 1999; Bozkurt, 2013; Zur, 2012).

In an online help relationship, psychological counselors, similar to face-to-face counseling, try to help clients solve their problems by applying their basic counseling abilities in an online environment (Brown, 2012; Flores, 2012). Even though there may be differences, depending on the adopted theoretical base, just as with conventional face-to-face counseling, forming a better relationship with the client is also attempted in the online environment; the therapeutic relation between the counselor and the client is made as in face-to-face counseling, and various types of interventions are applied to the client's problem through the internet (Barack, Hen, Boniel-Nissim, and Shapira, 2008; Cook and Doyle, 2002). As with face-to-face counseling, prior to online counseling sessions, clients are told about the frequency and duration of the sessions, ethical principles and rules (Bozkurt, 2013), as well as the limitations and possible risks of online counseling (Fenichel et al., 2002). In particular, the role of abilities such as content and emotion mirroring, summarization, the use of here and now in forming therapeutic relations, is also considered to be important in online counseling (Haberstoh, Parr, Bradley, Morgan- Fleming, and Gee, 2008). Online counseling is a very advantageous kind of assistance for various groups, such as those who can not leave home due to physical or psychological problems, for economic reasons, those who live far from the institutions where they can seek face-to-face psychological help, or to which they have to travel frequently, can express themselves better in non-face-to-face communication, or worry about being labeled when they visit mental health centers (Alleman, 2002; Cook and Doyle, 2002; Joinson and Paine, 2007; Kilroe, 2010; Shaw and Shaw, 2006; Zur, 2012). Zeren (2016) underlines that the satisfaction levels of clients who receive face-to-face and online counseling aid in this way, is high.

Therapeutic alliance is defined as the cooperation and the bonding between the counselor and the client and has been long regarded as the key component for the transformation of the client (Nath, Alexander and Solomon, 2012; Safran and Muran, 2000). Bordin (1979) underlines three basic elements concerning therapeutic alliance (Cited in Andrusyana, Tang, DeRubeis and Luborsky, 2001; Soygüt and Uluç, 2009): 1. Purpose: the client and counselor agree on identifying the aims and how to reach them. 2. Mission: the client and counselor agree on the missions or techniques applied in the process of counseling. 3. Bonding: a personal bond develops between the client and the counselor, comprising mutual trust and acceptance. These three fields are relatively crucial guides for understanding the therapeutic alliance between the client and counselor. Therapeutic alliance has initially emerged in the client based approach and in time the view that the relation between the therapist and the patient represent an important component in therapeutic transformation has been widely accepted (Soygüt and Işıklı, 2008).

As a result of the study they conducted, Cook and Doyle (2002) concluded that therapeutic alliance could be formed in an online environment, as with face-to-face environments. Anderson and Levitt (2015) established that the gender of the counselors, their self-confidence regarding their gender and their use of social effect in sessions, all have an important impact on therapeutic alliance. Andersson et al. (2012) also showed in their study, which they carried out with three different group of clients with depression, general anxiety disorders and social anxiety, that therapeutic alliance in cognitive behavioral therapy is high both in face-to-face and online environments; however, they concluded that establishing therapeutic alliance in online therapy is not as effective in the transformation of clients as with face-to-face therapy.

How is the subject of therapeutic alliance in online counseling perceived by the young generation regarded as digital natives? King, Bambling, Reid and Thomas (2006), as a result of their studies, during which they researched therapeutic alliance in telephone based and online counseling

provided to young people in Australia, concluded that therapeutic alliance in psychological help provided over the telephone is higher than in online counseling. In another study, Brown (2012) conducted with the participation of 91 youngsters who benefited from online crisis intervention provided for young people, ascertained that as there were no verbal or non-verbal signs and the feeling of privacy created in the online environment was received positively by the youngsters, therapeutic alliance was successfully established in online counseling.

Senior year counselor candidates may themselves be regarded as as members of the group regarded as digital natives. The aim of this study is to understand the opinions of counselor candidates on the therapeutic relationship between them and their clients, in the face-to-face and online counseling sessions they carry out. To this end, an attempt was made to answer the following questions: 1. What are the opinions of counselor candidates on whether they agree with the client on the goals of the counseling process? 2. What are the opinions of counselor candidates on whether they agree with the client on the solution of the problems in the counseling process? 3. What are the opinions of counselor candidates on whether a personal bond is established between themselves and their clients in the counseling process? 4. What are the opinions of counselor candidates on the effects of gender on therapeutic alliance?

2. Methodology

This study was designed using a phenomenological pattern. Phenomenology is used when the researcher wishes to obtain an in-depth idea about a particular phenomenon (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008, p. 72). In this case the phenomenon in question was the views of counselor candidates regarding therapeutic alliance in face-to-face and online counseling. Data were collected using document analysis and focus group interviews, and analyzed using content analysis.

2.1. Study Group

When creating the study group, among the purposive sampling methods, the method of typical case sampling was chosen. Online counseling is a fairly new issue in Turkey so we have worked with candidate consultants who have experience in online counseling This study was carried out with senior year counselor candidates studying the Psychological Counseling and Guidance undergraduate program at a public university, who were taking the Individual Counseling Practicum course.

Participants were eight female and three males, totaling 11 volunteer counselor candidates. In this study, instead of names, codes such as C1 and C2 were used. Their average age was 21.5. Within the scope of this course, each counselor candidate, under supervision, had to have provided at least 15 sessions of face-to-face and online counseling. The number of sessions that the participants in this study conducted was 206 in total, 141 of these being face-to-face sessions and 65 online sessions.

Table 1. Counselor Candidates' Genders and Number of Counseling Sessions

Counselor Candidate	Gender	Face-to-face	Online	Total
C1	F	11	11	22
C2	F	8	9	17
C3	M	15	5	20
C4	M	18	5	23
C5	M	12	3	15
C6	F	11	5	16
C7	F	16	6	22
C8	F	13	6	19
C9	F	7	8	15
C10	F	13	2	15
C11	F	17	5	22
Total	11	141	65	206

In Table 1, the number of face-to-face sessions is almost double the number of online sessions. Online sessions were carried out during the hours to which the counselor candidate and the client have agreed, via a computer, some initial sessions being conducted with instant messaging and subsequent sessions through video calls. With the joint decision of the counselors and the clients, some sessions that started face-to-face were continued online, while some online sessions were continued face-to-face.

2.2. Data Collection Tool

Data for the study were collected two ways: documents comprising a form containing interview questions and the analysis of data obtained from the focus group interview. When interview questions are lengthy, participants tend to answer a certain part of the question instead of answering all of it (Berg ve Luna, 2015; 150). In order to resolve this problem as much as possible, it was decided to conduct the focus group interviews only after having received the individual views of the participants in writing. Another advantage of the focus group interview is that the scope and depth of the answers to the questions is affected by group dynamics (Yıldırım and Şimşek, 2008; 151).

When devising the questions, the literature on therapeutic alliance was scanned and the questions were formed accordingly. The questions were then submitted to three different experts for review and the necessary changes were made. To make it easier to follow under which contextual research question the interview questions were discussed, the questions and categories that they are under are given in Table 2.

No categories or questions were prepared with regard to the final sub-problem of this research, which is the opinions of the counselor candidates on the effects of gender on therapeutic alliance, and this research question was not planned in advance. This subject only came to light during the analysis of the research data and was added to the research questions later.

Table 2. Categories and The Questions in the Interview Form

Categories	Interview Questions
Therapeutic alliance on goals	1. To what extent were you able to collaborate when helping your clients identify their goals? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
	2. Were you able to collaborate with your clients during the counseling process in order for them to reach their goals? Were you able to come to an agreement? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
Therapeutic alliance in problem solving	3. Were there differences or similarities in your and your clients' perspectives of the problems? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
	4. To what extent could you come to an agreement with your clients with regard to the resolution of the problems? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
	5. To what extent do you think that you and your client understand each other? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
	6. To what extent did you facilitate your client's expressing himself/herself with sincerity? Was s/he able to speak freely? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
Personal bonding	7. Did a sense of trust develop between you and your clients? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
	8. What do you think about whether the relationship you formed with your client was open and sincere? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?
	9. To what extent would your clients make positive remarks about you?

2.3. Process

2.3.1. Counseling sessions

Guidance and counseling students in Turkey receive various theoretical and practical courses related to counseling. Before graduation, it is obligatory to take counseling course under supervision. In this study, counselor candidates received training prior to the counseling sessions, on the similarities and differences between online counseling and conventional face-to-face counseling, the use of technology in counseling and ethical rules in an online environment. Both because it is free of charge and because of the security requirements it ensures, Skype was preferred for the online counseling.

2.3.2. Ethical Approval

The Yildiz Technical University Ethics Board approved this research. Participants were advised about the research using Informed Consent Forms.

2.3.3. Informing the Participants

At the end of the semester when all the sessions were concluded, the objectives of the study were explained in detail to the counselor candidates. It was stated both verbally and in writing through an informed consent form that they would be included in the research if they volunteered and that they were free to quit the research at any stage that they deem appropriate. Eleven of the 14 counselor candidates that took the course volunteered to participate in the research.

2.4. Data Collection

The counselor candidates completed the forms that were sent to them via e-mail and returned them to the researcher. The focus group meeting that was held afterwards lasted for approximately two hours. The voice recordings of the focus group meeting were analyzed and added to the data set after being transcribed.

2.5. Data Analysis

In this study, the data collected as written documents and voice recordings were analyzed using the content analysis method. Data in the interview forms and that obtained from the focus group meeting were compiled and classified and the originals were archived. While analyzing data, sentences and word groups were selected as the unit of analysis.

2.5.1. Validity and Reliability

In order to ensure the validity and reliability of the research, data were collected using both interview forms and focus group meetings, to attain data diversification. In addition, the findings were sent to the participants to ensure participant confirmation, and the findings were finalized upon their approval (Johnson, 1997; Merriam, 1995; Yıldırım, 2010).

To ensure validity and reliability in quantitative research, the role of the researcher must be defined in detail (Johnson, 1997; Merriam, 1995). In this study, the fact that the researcher is also the tutor of the course facilitated the planning and the execution of the research. Typical case sampling was therefore possible. However, it may be regarded as a disadvantage that the researcher is the tutor, evaluating the students through grades. To eliminate this, the research was conducted after the end of the semester and the submission of the grades. Moreover, it was clearly explained to the participants that their involvement in this research was completely voluntary and participation was not compulsory.

3. Findings

3.1. Therapeutic Alliance on Goals

3.1.1. Identification of Goals

The counselor candidates were posed the questions, "To what extent were you able to collaborate when helping your clients identify their objectives? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"

Table 3. Collaboration with the Clients in Setting Goals

Sub Themes	f	%
Collaboration in setting goals	9	82
Difficulty in setting goals in online counseling	2	18

Nine counselor candidates (C2, C3, C5, C6, C7, C8, C9, C10 and C11) stated that, s/he was able to collaborate with the clients in the objective identification stage, that there were no differences in this regard between the face-to-face and online environments, and that there may be

differences depending on the counselor. The counselor candidates were of the view that as the service was offered free of charge and voluntary it made collaboration easier. E.g. C8: *"It was easy to collaborate in relation to objective identification. Even though the counseling I did online lasted for a shorter time than face-to-face, we were able to make good collaboration in it as well. I do not think there was much difference."* C9: *"There was no difficulty in determining the purpose because it was free counseling."*

Two counselor candidates (C1 and C4), on the other hand, have said that identifying the objectives with the client is harder in an online environment and they had to put more effort into it.

C1: *"We did not have any difficulty with the client in identifying the objectives in face-to- face sessions. It was easy to collaborate because trust was established and the sessions advanced. I do not know whether because it was online or whether my client was a difficult case, but we could hardly identify the objectives. Maybe it is related to the client being enthusiastic..."*

C4: *"The purpose of creating goals in the online counseling was a bit more intense. I was able to help him more in this regard. It took longer to set the goal. On face-to-face counseling, I have not had difficulty in creating goals and cooperating with them."*

3.1.2. Reaching the Goals

The counselor candidates were asked the questions, "Were you able to collaborate with your clients during the counseling process in order for them to reach their objectives? Were you able to come to an agreement? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"

Table 4. Collaboration with the Clients in Reaching the Goals

Sub Themes	f	%
Collaboration in reaching the goals	9	82
Difficulty in reaching the goals in online counseling	3	27
The clients who have dropped out of the online counseling	2	18
Changes in the clients' goals	2	18

Nine counselor candidates (C1, C2, C3, C5, C6, C7, C8, C9 and C11) stated that s/he was able to collaborate with the clients in reaching the goals. The counselor candidates saw the clients' enthusiasm and their own therapeutic abilities as reasons for being able to collaborate in reaching goals. E.g. C11: *"I performed so as to let my clients gain awareness by talking to them and reflecting their feelings. In face-to-face consulting, one of my clients at first had difficulties in taking action towards reaching his/her objective. However we had no difficulties once s/he took action. In online environment also, my client had taken action towards his/her objective. I do not think there was any difference."*

Three counselor candidates (C1, C7, and C8) have stated that they had difficulties with their clients in reaching the goals in online sessions. These difficulties seem to stem from not being able to establish intimacy with the client in online environment and the client not being enthusiastic in reaching his/her goals: *"I felt the sense of togetherness much better especially at the stage where we moved on to solution choices after awareness was established. My clients also seemed happy because I shared their problems and supported them in their efforts towards a solution. I can say that the sense of togetherness was less in my online sessions. Online sessions were moving smoothly with written correspondence and I sensed that my client was satisfied, however it was as if there was a barrier between us all the time. At the point that we started video sessions, it seemed like all those unemotional written correspondences found a new life and the symbols that we used turned real. I was even irritated by some of my client's reactions (and I reckon s/he was irritated by my uh-huhs), however I perceived no problems when s/he gave those reactions verbally. I felt that the sessions flew more smoothly."* (C8).

Two of the counselor candidates (C4 and C10), have stated that their efforts towards reaching objectives in online sessions were left unfinished because their clients did not complete the sessions. *"I could only hold two sessions in online counseling. Actually, my client had opened himself considerably in the second session. However, we could not start to work on reaching the objectives because the sessions were aborted."* (C10)

Two counselor candidates (C3 and C7), on the other hand, said that the client altered the objectives that they had identified during the initial sessions afterwards. While C3 experienced with the online client, C7 says s/he experienced the same situation both with online and face-to-face clients. *"When I asked the clients about their purpose of being here they pointed to certain objectives, but at times some objectives that even they were not aware of started to show up. I provided them help in this this sense. There was no significant difference between face-to-face and online counseling in this regard."*

3.2. Therapeutic Alliance in Problem Solving

3.2.1. Perspective of Problems and Reconciliation

Counselor candidates were asked questions, "Were there differences or similarities in your and your clients' perspectives of the problems? To what extent could you come to an agreement with your clients with regard to the resolution of the problems? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"

Table 5. Collaboration with the Clients in the Resolution of the Problems

Sub Themes	f	%
Collaboration in the resolution of the problems	8	73
Difficulty in the resolution of the problems	3	27

Eight counselor candidates (C1, C2, C4, C5, C7, C8, C9, and C11) stated that, s/he was able to collaborate with the clients in the resolution of the problems. The counselor candidates saw their understanding and defining of the clients' problems and their approaching the problems from the point of view of the client and from different angles, their belief in solving the clients' problems and the client's having volunteered and being enthusiastic, as the reasons for this collaboration. E.g. C9: *"Since they came voluntarily, I worked with clients who are quite willing about the solution of the problems and who took responsibility. This way, it was easy for us to reconcile on the solutions to the problems. I do not think there was any difference in face-to-face and online sessions in this respect. As I mentioned earlier, online video call method has minor differences with face-to-face counseling session. When camera is used, it is not much different from a face-to-face counseling session."*

Three counselor candidates (C3, C6 and C10) pointed out that they experienced difficulties with the clients in the solution of problems. For example C6: *"Each one of my clients had very different problems and points of view. Despite this, I attached importance to every situation that created problems for them, as much as they did. I did not experience any difference in my online and face-to-face experiences in this regard. We could not always reach a solution with my clients. Because, while some of these were issues that could not be resolved easily, some came to a conclusion only under protest. Thus, it was not easy to reach a solution. There were no differences between face-to-face and online counseling. The factor that made the difference was the problems of the clients."*

3.2.2. Understanding Each Other

Counselor candidates were asked the question, "To what extent do you think that you and your clients understand each other? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"

Table 6. Understanding Each Other

Sub Themes	f	%
Understanding each other	9	82
Difficulty in understanding each other in online counseling	8	73
Difficulty in understanding each other in face-to-face counseling	2	18

According to the findings, nine counselor candidates (C1, C2, C4, C5, C6, C8, C9, C10, and C11) said that their understanding each other with the clients differed more according to the client rather than according to whether they were online or face-to-face. Eight counseling candidates (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C7, C9, C11) stated that they experienced difficulties in understanding each other with the client in the online environment. Counselor candidates regard the lack of non-verbal signs as the reason of this difficulty. *"In line with the reactions given by my clients, I think that we are able to understand each other. However, this may come to light more clearly in face-to-face sessions. In online sessions, since we conduct the session by written correspondence with my client, I can say that not being able to see the client's facial expression and gestures constituted a disadvantage."* (C5).

C6 and C10, on the other hand, reported that they experienced more difficulties in understanding the client in face-to-face counseling: *"When I said to my online client, could you elaborate a little bit more for me to understand better, s/he started to explain better in the second session. However, there are differences between face-to-face clients. While one client was at pains not to understand me, the other one was very inclined towards understanding. In this respect, I can say that it was harder for us to understand each other with my face-to-face client."* (C10).

3.2.3. Clients' Expressing Themselves

The counselor candidates were asked the question: "To what extent did you facilitate your client's expressing himself/herself with sincerity? *Was s/he able to speak freely? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"*

Table 7. Clients' Expressing Themselves

Sub Themes	f	%
Facilitation of the counselor candidate	11	100
The Clients' expressing themselves in face-to-face counseling	4	36
The Clients' difficulty in expressing themselves in online counseling	1	9

According to the findings, all counselor candidates think that they facilitated the clients' expressing themselves. They listed the reasons for this as: the proper use of counseling requisite skills (C1, C6, C9, C11), creation of an environment of trust (C2, C5), and the client being positively influenced by the relaxed behavior of the counselor candidate (C3, C7).

Four counselor candidates (C1, C4, C5 and C9) indicated that it was easier to facilitate the client's expressing himself/herself in face-to-face counseling. For example C5: *"By means of the trust that was established in the sessions, it was easier for the clients to express themselves comfortably. They were able to speak freely. Even though there were no big difference between face-to-face and online environments, the clients were able to express themselves more candidly in face-to-face sessions."*

One counselor candidate (C8) thought that the online client faces difficulties in expressing himself/herself due to the physical conditions: *"I believe that my clients became more relaxed as the sessions progressed. I do not perceive a difference in this respect between my face-to-face and online clients. However in online, the environment of my collocutor caused some problems. My client was staying at a dormitory. S/he was rather uneasy. S/he was trying to arrange the hours accordingly. That's why."* (C8).

3.3. Personal Bonding

3.3.1. Trust

The counselor candidates were asked the question: *"Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"*

Table 8. Trust Between The Counselor Candidates and The Clients

Sub Themes	f	%
Establishing trust	11	100
Difficulty in establishing trust in face-to-face counseling	5	45

All the counselor candidates thought that a relationship of trust was formed between themselves and the clients both in the online and face-to-face sessions. In understanding the trust with their clients, the counselor candidates (C4, C5, C6, C9, C11) took into consideration the clients' opening themselves up and sharing their secrets with the counselors. While C8 regarded unconditional acceptance as the reason of the trust that was established, C9 stated the successful preliminary interview as the reason: C9: *"An environment of trust was formed in both counseling sessions. I think this is about whether the preliminary interview was carried out successfully or not. I think that if a good preliminary interview is conducted both in face-to-face and online, the environment of trust will be formed to the same degree."*

Five counselor candidates (C3, C4, C6, C10 and C11) stated that they experienced difficulties in establishing trust with their clients; and the reason for this was the double-sided mirror and voice/video recordings in the counseling offices. For example C4: *"Something like this happened in the sixth or seventh session: my female client said, 'are they watching us behind this glass? I am thinking of this, I am pretty nervous.' It appears that there was a problem of trust not because of me but because of the physical environment, because of the room with a mirror. I realized this quite late. Trust was established when online. This is how I realized it. She told me a secret about a friend of hers. A secret that no one knows..."*

3.3.2. Open and Sincere Relationship

The counselor candidates were asked the question, *"What do you think about whether the relationship you formed with your client was open and sincere? Were there differences with regard to this issue in face-to-face and online environments?"*

Table 9. Open and Sincere Relationship

Sub Themes	f	%
Open and sincere relationship with the clients	10	91
Open and sincere relationship with the clients in face-to-face counseling	5	55
Difficulty in establishing open and sincere relationship with the clients	1	9

Ten of the counselor candidates (C1, C2, C3, C4, C5, C7, C8, C9, C10 and C11) stated that an open and sincere relationship was formed between themselves and their clients. As to the reason for this, C2 said that an environment of trust was formed and C11 underlined the positive impact of being open and sincere to the client. *"I felt more sincere when communicating face-to-face but this may be a cultural circumstance I think the client is open and sincere in online counseling as well. This is not about the client but about my own attitudes. Being open and sincere has a tremendous impact. I think they trust more. I mean my being open and sincere with both my male and female clients, whether it is online or face-to-face, affected them positively as well."* (C11)

Five of the counseling candidates who thought that they formed an open and sincere relationship with their clients (C1, C3, C5, C7 and C8), pointed out that this was easier in a face-to-face

environment. For example C7: *"I think it is easier to form an open and sincere relation in face-to-face counseling. I do not think that there is a sincere environment in online counseling because of the computer screen."*

One counselor candidate (C6), on the other hand, reported that the relationship with his/her client was not open and sincere enough: *"I do not think I was transparent in certain instances. This was because I did not want to hurt my client and stayed away from the self-disclosure technique as much as possible. Maybe it did not have to be that much. However, I believe I was not able to hold the balance in terms of being open and sincere because of my inexperience. The situation was the same in face-to-face and online."*

3.3.3. Assessments of Clients on the Counselor Candidates

Counselor candidates were asked the question, "To what extent would your clients make positive remarks about yourselves?" All of the counselor candidates have stated that all the clients would make positive assessments about them, and even that the clients have used expressions to that effect in the sessions.

C2: *"Actually, I occasionally received positive feedbacks during the sessions. My clients expressed their satisfaction at the end of the counseling sessions both in online and face-to-face environments. To see that I could help them find solutions to their problems made me happy too."*

C3: *"My clients have indicated that they benefit from the process. They said they realized what they had not noticed before. They have expressed that they are lucky for I was their counselor."*

3.4. Gender

The final sub-problem of this research was about the opinions of the counselor candidates regarding the effects of gender on therapeutic alliance. No specific questions were posed to counselor candidates on this subject. However, having seen that during data analysis such a sub category had been formed, findings on this subject were compiled.

Table 10. The Effect of Gender on Therapeutic Alliance

Sub Themes	f	%
The effect of being in the same gender	2	18
Difficulty in establishing trust with the other gender (male)	1	18

Two counselor candidates (C1 and C3) made the following remarks about the possibility of gender effecting therapeutic alliance: C1 (female) says: *"My female client was more comfortable and open. I suppose there is a gender gap stemming from cultural differences."* C1, who has observed that her female client was relaxed, described the timidity of his client of the opposite sex (male) in face-to-face sessions, due to cultural characteristics, as follows: *"We could not talk about the feelings of my male client for some time because he was shy. I started face-to-face and continued that way with my male client. At first I was feeling very sorry. Thinking, 'I wonder if I can not understand him, why am I not able to reflect his feelings.' But he was so shy. He was saying everything to me but was unable to tell his feelings. But he got more relaxed after the fourth session. He was tense at the beginning. The room was small and we were facing one another. Bu then I was able to understand his feelings. I guess it is because of gender. This did not happen with my two female clients."*

C3 (male) uses similar expressions: *"In face-to-face sessions, if I was relaxed once, the client was relaxed twice. Especially in sexual matters, my male client was quite comfortable because we were of the same sex. He was able to express himself without any shame. The male client was more relaxed compared with the female client."*

One counselor candidate C2 (female), on the other hand, pointed out that she had difficulty in establishing a relationship of trust with her client of the opposite sex (male) in face-to- face sessions. *"I believe the issue of trust differs from client to client rather than according to whether the environment is online or face-to-face. Despite being in a face-to-face environment, my client being from the opposite sex made it harder for him to trust me."*

4. Conclusion, Discussion and Recommendations

As a result of this study, it was concluded that the counselor candidates thought that they achieved collaboration with their clients to a large extent when identifying goals and trying to reach them and in the solution of their clients' problems. According to the findings, the counselor candidates were of the opinion that a personal bonding with their clients was formed. However, it was concluded that, when compared with face-to-face counseling, in online counseling some difficulties arose with regard to the collaboration in reaching goals and the client and the counselor's understanding of each other (because of the lack of non verbal clues). Another finding was that in face-to-face counseling, some difficulties were faced in building trust when compared with online. Another finding that surfaced during the analyses was that the gender of the client and the counselor could affect therapeutic alliance.

4.1. Goals

The goals, which are one of the three basic dimensions that form therapeutic alliance, means the client and the counselor agreeing on the outcomes that are planned as a result of the process (Bordin, 1979, 1994; As cited in Werner-Wilson, Michaels, Gellhaus Thomas and Thiesen, 2003). According to the results of this research, the counselor candidates who thought that they were able to agree with their clients on identifying the goals and the process of reaching them. The counselor candidates who thought that they experienced difficulties in the process of reaching the goals in the process of counseling, on the other hand, regarded the reason for this as the impossibility of creating intimacy with the client via instant messaging in online environment. One of the counselor candidates (C8), has said that s/he has felt the existence of an "invisible barrier" while conducting the sessions through instant messaging, and that this barrier has abruptly disappeared when they started the video call. In the focus group interview, all the counselor candidates stated that they did not see the online sessions conducted through video calls as different from the face-to-face sessions.

One of the three basic factors effective in the development of therapeutic alliance is the personality of the client (Summers and Barber, 2003). In this research also, the counselor candidates saw as a reason for the difficulties encountered in reaching the therapeutic goals the degree of voluntariness and enthusiasm of the client. The inability to establish intimacy in an online environment, on the other hand, may be explained by the negative impact of the technological device coming between the client and the counselor.

4.2. Solution of Problems

The counselor candidates explained their success in agreeing with the clients in the process of solving problems through their approaching the problems from the perspective of the client and from different angles, their belief in solving the clients' problems and the client's having volunteered and being enthusiastic. Nevertheless, eight of the 11 counselor candidates (73%) reported that they experienced difficulties with the client in understanding each other in the online sessions. According to the findings, the reason for this is that the non-verbal messages could not be perceived in the online environment. Bambling, King, Reid and Wegner (2008), Haberstroh *et al.* (2008), Leibert, Archer, Munson and York (2006) and Zeren (2014) have also stated that, not being able to see the clues about the client's facial expression, tone of voice and body language in online counseling is frustrating for the counselor. Unlike the findings in this research, Zur (2012) argues that not being able to establish eye contact or see the body language of the client clearly is regarded as a problem for digital immigrants, whereas digital natives feel very much at ease when using technology. The counselor candidates participating in this research, even though they answered to the description of digital natives, were understood to have different opinions from Zur (2012) in this respect.

4.3. Personal Bonding

According to the findings of this research, the counselor candidates reported that they thought that a personal bond was formed with their clients; in other words, trust was established, an open and sincere relationship was formed and the clients had positive feelings and thoughts towards them. Even so, five of the counselor candidates (45%) thought that difficulties arose when building trust in the face-to-face sessions, due to the double-sided mirror and video and voice recordings. Witt, Oliver and McNichols (2016), as a result of the research that they carried out on online avatar based counseling, underlined that disguising the identities of the participants are important in terms of privacy. However in this research, the clients clearly revealed their identities. They even had the feeling of being monitored by a person or persons other than the counselor candidate (supervisor, other counselor candidates taking the course, etc.) because of the mirrored room and the camera and voice recorder. Even though all the privacy conditions were explained to the clients and informed consent form was signed, the clients nevertheless felt apprehensive in this respect.

4.4. Gender

When the research findings were analyzed, it was concluded that the counselor candidates saw gender as a factor affecting therapeutic alliance. The client and the counselor being of the same or different sex could affect therapeutic alliance. This finding coincides with those of the research carried out by Anderson and Levitt (2015). Werner-Wilson, Michaels, Thomas and Thiesen (2003) also underline, in line with the findings of this research, that the genders of the client and the therapist have a meaningful impact on therapeutic alliance.

4.5. Suggestions for Future Research

These days many people spend some of their day and free time in the online world. It is becoming increasingly mandatory for the psychological help professionals to effectively use online counseling. Consequently, including online counseling practices in the training of counselors and carrying out new research on this subject could be suggested. Future research could be on topics such as the legal and ethical issues in online counseling, counseling with an online group, online couple therapy or avatar based psychological help.

4.6. Limitations

That this research was carried out with counselor candidates may be seen as a limitation. The counselors experience can obviously be a variable that could affect the therapeutic alliance. Participants in the research lacked this experience; however, attempts were made to compensate for this drawback with the supervision they received.

The number of the online and face-to-face sessions that the counselor candidates who participated in the research conducted is not equal. Some counselor candidates had conducted fewer online and more face-to-face sessions. Online sessions began with instant messaging and continued with video calls, and with some clients, the rest of the sessions were conducted face-to-face. These sessions were not conducted with clear-cut limits and were flexible so that the counselor candidates could gain maximum experience through different channels. However, these limits could be more strictly delineated in future research, if necessary.

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