

The Use of Text Messaging for Peer Support Among Counselling Psychology Graduate Students

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The journey through graduate school to become a counselling psychologist is inherently challenging. Consequently, many students face emotional stress. Peers offer a unique source of support through a shared understanding of their experience. This pilot study used focused ethnography to understand how counselling psychology graduate students engage in emotional support with a peer through the use of text messaging within a naturalistic context. A three-member peer support group, comprising the researchers, served as the convenience sample. In this manner, the researchers both took part in and analyzed the experience of text messaging based peer support. Transcripts of emotional peer support interactions were obtained through sampling the participant-observers' naturally occurring text message conversations. Elements of Braun and Clarke's thematic analysis (TA) and Elo and Kyngäs' content analysis (CA) were used to categorize the raw data. The main findings indicate peer support bilaterally encompasses action, connection, disclosure, hearing, initiation, shared happiness, and solidarity. Within a support conversation, supporters predominantly used connection statements, whereas supportees mainly utilized emotional disclosure. These preliminary findings suggest that text messaging offers an immediate, intimate, and readily available platform through which peers can actively create a supportive dialogue.

Keywords: Peer support; text messaging; counselling psychology; graduate students; focused ethnography

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The journey through graduate school to become a counselling psychologist is inherently challenging (El-Ghoroury, Galper, Sawaqdeh, & Buftka, 2012). Outside of everyday life demands, counselling psychology students must also balance coursework, research, practica, and professional activities (Tompkins, Brecht, Tucker, Neander, & Swift, 2016). Consequently, many students experience emotional stress which can result in a myriad of concerns, including emotional exhaustion, fatigue, and burnout (Clark, Murdock, & Koetting, 2009; El-Ghoroury et al, 2012). Peers, through a shared understanding of their experience, offer a unique source of support (Montgomery, Mossey, Adams, & Bailey, 2012). Studies pertaining to the practice of peer support

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through text messaging have shown such messaging to be a helpful way to provide encouragement, connection, and a sense of community (Horstmanshof, 2004; Sindahl, 2011).

In recent years, the use of text messaging for peer support has gained considerable momentum, particularly among students (Harley, Winn, Pemberton, & Wilcox, 2007). Such factors as immediacy, intimacy, and accessibility have contributed to text messaging as a preferred modality of communication (Harley et al., 2007; Horstmanshof, 2004). However, it remains unknown how counselling psychology graduate students use text messaging to seek and provide social support with one another. Among the types described in the literature, the researchers chose to focus on arguably the most important and common form of social support—emotional support, which is characterized by a reciprocal exchange of caring, trust, and empathy (Langford, Bowsher, Maloney, & Lillis, 1997). The purpose of this pilot study was to answer the question: how do counselling psychology graduate students engage in emotional support with peers using text messaging?

Methodology

The present pilot study represented the preliminary stages of focused ethnography, a method used to derive an understanding of the shared experiences within a specific naturalistic context (Cruz & Higginbottom, 2013). A three-member peer support group, comprising the researchers (enrolled in the first year of the Master of Science in Counselling Psychology program at the University of Calgary), served as the convenience sample. In this manner, the researchers acted as participant-observers (Tedlock, 1991), both taking part in and analyzing the experience of peer support via text messaging.

First, the research team prepared the data for analysis by obtaining transcripts of peer support interactions through sampling the researcher-participants' naturally occurring text message conversations from September 2016 to May 2017. The samples involved a supportive reciprocal exchange of caring, trust, and empathy (Langford et al., 1997). The researchers excluded conversations that reflected other forms of support (e.g., informational support; Langford et al., 1997). For the purposes of this study, the researchers defined a naturally occurring "conversation" as a longitudinal string of bi-directional text messages between two participants. The research team analyzed a total of three conversations, with each conversation consisting of a minimum of three reciprocal text messages sent back and forth.

Next, the researchers analyzed the raw data using content analysis (CA) and thematic analysis (TA). Following CA procedures described by Elo and Kyngäs (2008), the researchers selected individual phrases within text message conversations as the unit of analysis. The research team then assigned codes to each unit to reflect the function of each phrase; for example, encouragement, help-seeking, and affirmation. The researchers coded conversations individually through inductive and deductive processes (Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Specifically, the research team assigned codes inductively by allowing specific units of data to inform the creation and naming of general preliminary categories. In essence, the researchers asked, "what is the phrase doing or saying in this instance?" The research team also assigned codes deductively by connecting general knowledge of communication micro-skills from the researchers' background in counselling psychology to specific examples within the data. In this manner, existing counselling terminology helped inform coding schemes. The research team then met to corroborate codes for accuracy and agreement (LeCompte, & Goetz, 1982). Finally, the researchers clustered codes into higher order categories for both conversational supporters and supportees (Table 1; Elo & Kyngäs, 2008). Following Braun and Clarke's (2006) procedure for TA, the research team interpreted these higher order categories and their relationships as themes with written descriptions relating back to the

research question. To ensure rigour and quality, the researchers tracked each step of data collection and analysis through memos allowing for others to independently audit and check the study findings (Yin, 1989). To note, the researchers acknowledged reflexivity in promoting rigour in that their stance as students of counselling psychology partly informed interpretation of the data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2008).

Findings

The main findings indicated that, for these participants, text messaging provided an open, two-way avenue in which emotional support can take place. Specifically, it bilaterally encompassed seven main themes (Table 1): (1) action – statements involving direction. For supporters, this included suggestions about inquiries pertaining to such things as school tasks and emotional distress. For supportees, this included providing feedback or reciprocating the suggestions; (2) connection – supportive statements that showed emotional presence; (3) disclosure – revelation statements. Supporters primarily used such statements to create a safe space for concerns and vulnerable emotions to be expressed and reciprocated, whereas supportees used disclosure to seek support; (4) hearing – acknowledging presence and active involvement in the conversation; (5) initiation – the start of a conversation. Supporters often used initiation as a means to check in on the well-being of supportees. Conversely, supportees sought out assistance; (6) shared happiness – statements used to express happiness or excitement for one another; (7) solidarity – statements expressing comfort in their shared experience and space.

Within a supportive conversation, the researchers noted a difference between supporters and supportees in the type of supportive statements utilized. Specifically, supporters predominantly used connection statements which embodied reassurance, encouragement, validation, empathy, care/concern, optimism, and normalization. However, supportees mainly relied on emotional disclosure. Sindahl (2011) suggested that text messaging as a modality of communication can facilitate self-disclosure early in a conversation, which may help explain the observed tendency towards emotional disclosure by supportees. Overall, similarities in categories emerged between the types of statements made by supporters and supportees, however the proportion of expressed statements between parties appeared to vary by type (Table 1). To note, in the vast majority of conversations, supportees successfully sought and received support. Only in one circumstance support could not be provided.

These preliminary findings demonstrate a sample of how counselling psychology peers may seek out emotional support through text messaging. Results suggest that counselling psychology students can readily engage in and actively create an emotionally supportive dialogue through text messaging using statements with identifiable themes (Table 1). From these findings, the researchers posit that peers may use text messaging to build a support network for navigating the difficulties associated with undertaking graduate studies within mental health programs. Importantly, this modality of support provides an immediate and intimate avenue of outreach, and is consistent with previous research which demonstrated text messaging as a potentially helpful form of peer support (Sindahl, 2011; Timmis, 2012).

Limitations and Future Directions

There are limitations to this study. One is that these findings are neither representative of their cohort of counselling psychology students, nor counselling psychology graduate students in general. Rather, the findings provided insight into how students within this context might participate in emotional support. Another is that our clinical interest and training in counselling

psychology, as well as our innate sensitivity and awareness to emotional distress, may have influenced our text interactions.

Future studies exploring how an entire cohort supports one another via text messaging might provide a richer understanding of how counselling psychology students engage in this method. Additionally, looking at the different types of disclosures, the degree of emotional distress shared, and how emotionality is addressed may shed light on the kinds of emotional challenges counselling students encounter. Furthermore, the comparison of text messaging to other similar modes of communication (e.g., email) may elucidate the effectiveness of text messaging for capturing emotional content. Overall, the study findings provided insight into the nature of text messaging-based peer support among counselling graduate students and may be useful as a first step to help inform current and future peer support initiatives or research aimed at reducing stress.

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Table 1*Themes of Support for Supporters and Supportees*

<u>Conversational Role</u>	<u>Theme</u>	<u>Examples</u>
Supporter	<u>Action</u> : Includes the subtopics of information providing, action plan, and advice giving (42 instances)	“Do not make any changes you are not comfortable with” “Worry about assessment after tomorrow night.”
	<u>Connection</u> : Includes the subtopics of concern/care, empathy, encouragement, validation, reassurance, normalizing, and optimism (101 instances)	“I believe in your hard work and ability to do a great presentation on Thursday.” “Oh no :(I’m sorry to hear; I feel you!” “That is what happens sometimes, and that’s okay.”
	<u>Disclosure</u> : Includes the subtopics of disclosure and reflection (24 instances)	[... keep yourself focused on the goal of graduating]. “I have to remind myself of this regularly.”

	<u>Hearing</u> : Includes the subtopics of agreement, affirmation, and acknowledgment (28 instances)	“Absolutely... We can only do what we can do and ultimately you are here for a reason.”
	<u>Initiation</u> : Includes the subtopics of help seeking, follow up, inquiry, offer of support, update, and invitation (49 instances)	“Hey, how’s it coming along? Hanging in there?” “I’ll try my best to explain!”
	<u>Shared happiness</u> : Includes the subtopics of shared happiness, well-wishing, appreciation, and celebration (47 instances)	“Congrats!” “Yay!” “Sleep well and feel better soon” “All the best on your interview!”
	<u>Solidarity</u> : Includes the subtopics of commiseration, solidarity, and similarity (14 instances)	“Yes, I know exactly what you mean.” “I’m the same way.”
Supportee	<u>Action</u> : Includes the subtopics of information providing, action plan, self-care, decision making, and advice giving (19 instances)	“Yes, let’s study together! I want to stay focused and efficient with our time.” “Don’t bog yourself down with editing papers. I’m not saying don’t, because it’s useful to share --- but don’t be pressured to help everyone.”
	<u>Connection</u> : Includes the subtopics of praise, encouragement, reassurance, empathy, and optimism (24 instances)	“Well done! I’m sure you’ll do great!” “Ah that’s super rough :(so sorry to hear.”
	<u>Disclosure</u> : Includes the subtopics of disclosure, reflection, and explanation (72 instances)	“I’m hating my life right now.”

Hearing: Includes the subtopics of confirmation, acknowledgment, agreement, and affirmation (14 instances)

“Sounds like a deal.”

Initiation: Includes the subtopics of follow up, help seeking, inquiry, update, expression of needs, probing, and declining or accepting support (42 instances)

“Our ethics assignment doesn’t need to be handed in until tomorrow before midnight, right?”

“I would definitely love to chat about it.”

Shared happiness: Includes the subtopics of well-wishing, appreciation, celebration, and shared happiness (46 instances)

“Thank you!”

“Best of luck!”

Solidarity: Includes the subtopics of commiseration, solidarity, and togetherness (9 instances)

“Yes, we will survive!”
