Canterbury Tales of Telemental Health and Technology Pioneers: Charting the Territory

A Review of

*Career Paths in Telemental Health*

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ISBN 978-3-319-23735-0. $79.99

http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0040835

Reviewed by

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And gladly wolde he lerne, and gladly teche.

—Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales*

*Career Paths in Telemental Health* charts the respective personal career stories of a number of innovators in the emerging delivery modality the editors label, somewhat insufficiently, as telemental health. Most of the book consists of a series of case studies written by those who, by steely intention or happenstance, became immersed in delivering “old” services to new recipients—often those in underserved areas who would otherwise not have access to them—and in delivering “new” services using technology. Taken collectively, these chapters help providers see ways in which they can enhance their own service delivery, reach new client audiences, do work that stretches them, and learn to navigate a number of potential obstacles to electronic service delivery. By sentient example, they also help take away some of the fear and dread with which service providers often approach incorporation of technology into their work.

This book reminds readers, without making too big of a deal about it, that mental health professions have largely (and for some time) been laggards when it comes to infusing technology into their work (see Lanyon, 1971). Perhaps it is because mental health services are usually provided by those with stronger people than “thing” or technology interests. Despite foot dragging and frequent barrier creation, the mental health/health professions and their regulators need to grapple with the emerging evidence suggesting that patients with mental health needs may actually in many cases fare better with technology and non-colocated service delivery.
The book is not a treatise on how the use of technology in mental health service delivery can be accelerated. But it does have the potential to move the innovation diffusion (see Rogers, 1976) clock forward in fields that have been sluggish to adopt the technological innovations that have otherwise affected the lives of almost all of humanity. Contributing to this pattern are many factors, including the average age and number of years in practice of the modal members of the respective mental health professions, as well as the blisteringly anachronistic laws and rules of licensing bodies, especially in countries like the United States, where the 14th Amendment to the Constitution causes states and other jurisdictions to create, in effect, barriers to innovation adoption.

**The Book’s Structure**

This is not an integrated text on its subject matter. The first five chapters of the book (Part 1, Introduction) are packed with important and somewhat daunting information about both opportunities and limitations of practicing outside the jurisdictional boundaries of one’s own professional license, including potential legal liabilities. The idea that a provider with a national practice would potentially need to obtain and maintain a license to practice in all 50 states and the territories could be enough for neophytes to throw up their hands and focus on the familiar, if insular, status quo. The suggestion that licensed professionals could work around the restrictions by being licensed in, and limiting telemental health practice to, a couple of jurisdictions speaks to a pragmatic interim resolution but also demonstrates the reality of the barriers that the authors well illustrate.

There is only one other structural section: Part 2. Special Topics and Personal Perspectives. I must admit to having felt leery at the prospect of reading 26, often quite short, case studies (there were only 24 Canterbury tales!). And yet, collectively, these chapters are a major contribution to an emerging field because they demonstrate in a rich assortment of approaches not just that technology does not have to be used by the select few but rather how even those with considerable apprehension and personal resistance were able to expand their practices, increase access to underserved populations, and enhance their work-life balance and, in some cases, their careers by becoming technology adaption innovators. The focus of each of these chapters on the personal stories and narratives makes them—and the book—widely accessible to a variety of levels of technological sophistication. If the cases are uneven in their writing and editing and a few stray too close to the line of specific product promotion, the breadth of coverage and the authors’ enthusiasm compensate.

To be perfectly blunt, it is not clear that typical practicing psychologists closer to the end than the beginning of their careers will prioritize reading a book on *Career Paths in Telemental Health*. The book’s title will likely speak more to those in graduate school or earlier in their careers. *Career Paths* in the title, incidentally, is a little misleading in speaking more to major changes of direction of one’s work, whereas these case studies are by about providers who, at various stages of their careers, incorporated technology into small or larger parts of their existing careers.
The Cases

The standardized structure of the cases includes a quote, a short exemplary case, a brief statement of the authors’ personal history and transition to telemental health, the pluses and minuses of the described innovation, and a generally short section on evidence basis for the work. The authors, among others, include those who learned to write computer code and then create original apps, others who are working in the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs and other medical delivering services by secure video services, genetic counselors, psychiatrists now working from home, college counselors overseeing programs for students with specific disorders using video training paired with short individual sessions delivered electronically, and psychologists serving underserved rural populations. Some of these chapters provide useful advice on pragmatic concerns (e.g., how to handle the ringing of the doorbell when delivering services from home, what kind of lighting works best to avoid shadows on the screen, Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act matters, and electronic records issues).

The increased use of technology in all aspects of life is continuously accelerating. By making an assortment of approaches accessible (“gosh, I could do that”), the book will help to more broadly diffuse the technological revolution in whose midst we find ourselves. Readers will learn some of the rich possibilities, not just the barriers.

In these troubled (and troubling) times, with blatant attacks on access to mental health services for those most in need, it is useful to be reminded that progress inexorably moves ahead and that by advancing the use of technology in mental health, we are also advancing the delivery of human services. This quiet revolution is being promoted by those who, like the authors of the chapters in this book, have focused aspects of their careers on the potential positives of electronic service delivery and found a way around the obstacles. Looking back from the time when such services will have become routine and the minimal standard of care, when licensing boards will have learned how to enforce professional standards without impeding technological progress, the professions that this book targets will owe gratitude to these pioneering professionals.

References