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**Research article**

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## **Psychological Characteristics of Psychologists' Adaptation to Online Counseling During the COVID-19 Pandemic**

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### **Abstract**

**Introduction.** Practicing psychologists need to adapt to new conditions of a forced transition to the online counseling. Until now, however, no data are available about adaptation to online counseling among Russian practicing psychologists during the COVID-19 pandemic; innovativeness among psychologists has been scarcely investigated. This study aims to identify the factors of adaptation to online counseling among psychologists during the COVID-19 pandemic. The main hypothesis is that psychologists' innovative qualities are associated with their successful adaptation to online counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic. The additional hypotheses were that psychologists' successful adaptation to online counseling is associated with work experience, region of residence, modality of counseling, and a positive attitude towards working from home. This study represents the first attempt to examine the factors of psychologists' adaptation to online counseling during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods.** The study sample comprised 312 counseling psychologists from Russia. To examine adaptation and innovative qualities the authors used the original questionnaire for Studying Individual Attitudes Towards Innovation (N. M. Lebedeva, A. N. Tatarko). Descriptive statistics procedures, Chi-square test, and Cramer's V test were used.

**Results.** Psychologists scored high on innovative qualities and had an average level of willingness to take risks for success. Psychologists' innovative qualities are associated with successful adaptation to online counseling. No associations were found between adaptation and both work experience, and psychologists' region of residence. Gestalt therapists scored highest on adaptation to the online format; cognitive-behavioral psychologists scored lowest. The assumption that there is an association between the modality of counseling and adaptation was confirmed. Positive attitudes towards working from home were generally associated with successful adaptation among psychologists. Counseling psychologists who had no problem with blurring the work/home boundaries enjoyed working from home.

**Discussion.** Well-developed innovative qualities, possibilities for comfortable working at home, and the modality of work contributed to successful adaptation to online counseling for most

psychologists during the COVID-19 pandemic. Major recommendations for future research, as well as study limitations are discussed.

### Keywords

Internet counseling, online counseling, psychological counseling, psychologist, adaptation, innovative qualities, personality innovativeness, COVID-19, self-isolation, working at home

### Highlights

- Well-developed innovative qualities are characteristic of psychologists. They are highly creative, future-oriented, with average levels of willingness to take risks for success.
- Innovative qualities are associated with psychologists' successful adaptation to the online format of counseling.
- Work experience and region of residence are not associated with adaptation to online counseling.
- The modality of counseling, the desire and ability to work from home, the ability to manage work/home boundaries are associated with counseling psychologists' adaptation to remote working.

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### Introduction

The COVID-19 coronavirus pandemic has become a global challenge for all the areas of social life. An increased need for psychological help (Krakhmaleva, Kuz'mina, & Ermolova, 2020) and impossibility of working in a face-to-face format have affected practicing psychologists and determined the rapid transformation of the format of work. Uncertain prospects of returning to the usual offline format required new forms of work.

Practicing psychologists' inability to adapt to such an unstable environment may lead to a decrease in the number of clients, and sometimes even finish their career. During the pandemic, online counseling has become one of the main challenges for psychologists. Many academic and practicing psychologists generally had negative or suspicious attitudes towards it (Glueckauf et al., 2018; Topooco et al., 2017).

The ability to change individual behavior in a situation of uncertainty, to be creative in solving new problems is of particular importance for a counseling psychologist, as it helps to successfully

adapt to changes in the environment. 'Innovative qualities' and an 'innovative potential' are complex terms combining the qualities of creativity, openness to new experience, flexibility, and proactive personality. We believe that these qualities should be examined among practicing psychologists in the context of adaptation to online counseling.

### ***Problem formulation***

An individual's inclination towards innovation is a psychological characteristic that determines his/her willingness to perceive new experience and to adapt to the changing environment. For a long time many authors examined innovative personality traits and recognized them as central for predicting individuals' attitudes towards innovation, and also their ability to innovation activity (Zhuravlev, 1993; Klochko & Galazhinskii, 2009; Klochko & Krasnoryadtseva, 2010; Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2009; Sovetova, 2000; Terekhova & Popov, 2015; Shemelina & Bykova, 2019; Aldahdouh, Korhonen, & Nokelainen, 2019; Aldahdouh, Nokelainen, & Korhonen, 2018; Ali, 2019; Nisula & Kianto, 2016; Wisdom, Chor, Hoagwood, & Horwitz, 2014). Some authors distinguished structural components of this complex phenomenon, including 'willingness to innovation', 'innovative activity', and 'innovative potential' (Zagashev, 2010; Klochko & Krasnoryadtseva, 2010; Nesterov, 2007).

The study of innovative qualities among practicing psychologists appears to be one of the important areas of research, as psychological practice itself is a process of creativity (Makhlova, 2012), which is characterized by uncertainty, creativity, ability and desire to make decisions under conditions of insufficient information. As with any modernization process, the client consultation process includes an initial creative understanding and understanding of the problem, the discovery of resources and problem-solving strategies, and further development of new solutions and possible transformation of these strategies. To successfully complete these steps, the consultant needs to have certain personal characteristics. Thus, a previous review of more than a hundred empirical studies has shown that the success of a counselor's psychological assistance is associated with his/her individual adaptation and creativity in solving problems (Beutler et al., 2004).

An overview of relevant literature demonstrated that counselling psychologists have a high level of creativity (Kostrigin, 2014) and are open to new experience (Aver'yanov, 2018). However, there is a lack of data (e.g., Ikiz & Asici, 2017) on innovativeness and innovative potential of counselling specialists as an individual integrative characteristic (attitude towards innovations, ability and willingness to introduce and develop innovations) (Terekhova & Popov, 2015).

Under changing conditions of life counseling psychologists should develop the ability to change and transform the environment and to adapt to new conditions, as they are among the first to encounter actual mental phenomena in society. Today, the main needs of clients are primarily associated with overcoming anxiety during the pandemic, building new meanings, forms, and strategies of behavior in the context of a changed world (Efremova, 2020). Therefore, the innovative qualities of a psychologist, his/her adaptation to the transforming conditions of life are of key importance.

Thus, this study aims to identify the factors of adaptation to the online format of work among counseling psychologists during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Innovative qualities are associated with openness to new experience (Klochko & Galazhinskii, 2009; Terekhova & Popov, 2015). Our main hypothesis (1) suggests that counseling psychologists' innovative qualities determine their successful adaptation to online counseling during self-isolation.

Based on data from recent studies on forced online counseling during the pandemic (Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020), our additional hypothesis (2) suggests that psychologists' adaptation to the online format is associated with the region of their residence and work experience.

There is an evidence that representatives of different modalities of psychotherapy adapt and relate differently to online counseling (Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020; Perle et al., 2013). Therefore, another additional hypothesis (3) suggests that self-assessment of the success of adaptation to the online work is associated with counseling modality that psychologists adhere to.

Finally, the fact that 'passion' for home-based work was one of the most reliable predictors of a positive attitude to the distance learning process among higher education teachers (Rogozin, 2020) enabled us to formulate another additional hypothesis (4) suggesting that a positive attitude towards working at home is associated with adaptation to online counseling among practicing psychologists.

## Methods

The study comprised 312 psychologists practicing in Russia and representing the following communities: Professional Psychotherapeutic League (PPL), Zigmund.Online service providing online trainings with psychologists, BrainBild online service providing psychological services and distance trainings, International Professional Association of Psychologists (IPAP). Informational support of the survey was provided by the Psychological Book store.

The main stage of data collection was preceded by a pilot survey of practicing psychologists of the IPAP (n = 23) in May 2020. The results of this survey enabled us to change the structure of the questionnaire and reformulate several questions. The main phase of the study was conducted via Google Forms in the summer of 2020; it was anonymous and voluntary. No compensation was offered to the survey participants.

Due to the current coronavirus restrictions during the study, and technical difficulties and complications associated with remote measuring innovative potential and adaptability to online counseling among psychologists, we decided to use online self-assessment inventories. To examine innovative dispositions among specialists, we used the diagnostic tool for Studying Individual Attitudes Towards Innovation (Lebedeva & Tatarko, 2009). We chose this diagnostic tool because of its reliability and internal consistency. Besides, it has a small number of items, which is critical for Internet surveys. The scale of self-assessment of innovative personality traits consisted of 12 statements characterizing an individual with whom respondents needed to compare themselves by choosing the following answers: 'he is not like me at all', 'he is not much like me', 'he is a little like me', 'he is like me', and 'he is very similar to me'. Each statement refers to one of three scales – 'creativity', 'risk for success', and 'focus on the future'. Then we calculated the arithmetic mean for each scale and the general index of individual innovativeness (the arithmetic mean for the three scales). The values obtained varied from 1 to 5.

Additionally, we developed an original questionnaire, which contained questions about respondents' place of residence, their experience of work, specialization, experience of online counseling before and during self-isolation, attitudes towards this form of work, difficulties they faced, the way they adapted to the online format of working, and the specific characteristics of counseling during the pandemic (competition among psychologists, clients' desire for being consulted online). This paper presents some empirical results of this study.

## Results

The respondents' places of residence distributed as follows: 42 % of respondents ( $n = 131$ ) lived in Moscow or the Moscow Region, 39.4 % of respondents ( $n = 123$ ) lived in other regions of the Russian Federation, and 18.6 % of respondents ( $n = 58$ ) lived in St. Petersburg and the Leningrad Region. We did not collect any other socio-demographic information about the respondents.

Most of the counselling psychologists had private practice (67.3%;  $n = 210$ ) and were specialized in face-to-face counseling (41.35 %;  $n = 129$ ). At the time of the study, psychologists had from 6 to 15 years (39.7 %;  $n = 124$ ) or up to 5 years of working experience (39.1 %;  $n = 122$ ).

A third of psychologists (32 %;  $n = 99$ ) noted that they applied an integrative or eclectic approach; 16 % of respondents practiced cognitive behavioral therapy (CBT) or gestalt psychotherapy.

Most of the specialists interviewed in our study had some experience of online counseling before the pandemic (82.4 %;  $n = 257$ ) and started to work more often in this format during self-isolation (75.6 %;  $n = 236$ ). At the same time, half of the respondents had a positive attitude towards online counseling before the pandemic (49.7 %;  $n = 155$ ). As the pandemic started, they either did not change their opinion (53.5 %;  $n = 167$ ) or began to relate to online counseling even better (39.4 %;  $n = 123$ ). If psychologists experienced difficulties in the process of online counseling, they asked their colleagues to help them (72.4 %;  $n = 226$ ).

A considerable part of practicing psychologists believed that they had adapted to the online format of work (80.8 %;  $n = 252$ ); 14.1 % ( $n = 44$ ) of respondents found it difficult to answer. Several respondents (5.1 %;  $n = 16$ ) did not adapt. More than half of the specialists (57 %;  $n = 178$ ) did not feel 'more exhausted' after online consultation, 30.5 % ( $n = 95$ ) noted this feature for themselves. Some psychologists (12.5 %,  $n = 39$ ) found it difficult to answer. During the pandemic, most respondents did not have problems with time management. Thus, 79 % ( $n = 246$ ) of practicing psychologists did not notice any problems in structuring their time after the transition to online work.

Interestingly, the psychologists had different opinions about blurring the work/home boundaries in the context of home-based online counseling. Thus, 59 % of respondents ( $n = 184$ ) noted that they did not face such a difficulty. However, 35 % of ( $n = 109$ ) of psychologists noted that they had such a problem; 6 % ( $n = 19$ ) found it difficult to answer. When asked whether they generally like to work from home; 69.2 % of psychologists ( $n = 216$ ) answered in the affirmative.

On average, all the psychologists showed a high level of the development of innovative qualities ( $M = 3.74$ ). More than half of the respondents (54.2 %;  $n = 169$ ) had a high level of innovativeness, 44.5 % of the respondents ( $n = 139$ ) had an average level of innovativeness, and 1.3 % of the respondents ( $n = 4$ ) had a low level of innovativeness. The respondents also showed a high level of creativity ( $M = 3.95$ ) and focus on the future ( $M = 3.85$ ) and had an average level of willingness to take risks for success ( $M = 3.4$ ).

To test the hypothesis that the innovative qualities of psychologists are associated with their adaptation to online counseling, we compiled a contingency table and applied the Chi-squared test with Yates continuity correction. We used Cramer's V test to determine the strength of correlations. Hereinafter, we considered the group of psychologists who found it difficult to answer the question about their adaptation as a group of 'unadapted' psychologists. We believe that such an uncertainty means that these specialists did not fully adapt. These groups of respondents were further combined for the convenience of statistical processing.

The results obtained in the sample of counseling psychologists ( $df = 1$ ;  $\chi^2 = 6.732$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; Cramer's V test = 0.155) indicated the presence of a correlation (Akoglu, 2018) between the level of the development of innovative qualities and the sense of adaptation to the online format of work (Table 1).

<u>Adaptation</u>	<u>Level of development of innovative qualities</u>		<u>Significance</u>	
	High	Average/low	$\chi^2$	Cramer's V test
Adapted	146 / 86.4 %	106 / 74.1 %	6.732	0.155
Did not adapt	23 / 13.6 %	37 / 25.9 %		
Overall	169 / 100 %	143 / 100 %		

We also analyzed the relationship between the specialists' successful adaptation and the region of their residence ( $df = 2$ ;  $\chi^2 = 2.512$ ), their experience of work ( $df = 2$ ;  $\chi^2 = 0.564$ ), and the presence of discussions of online consultation problems with colleagues ( $df = 1$ ;  $\chi^2 = 0.221$ ). In all these cases, we found no significant relationship among the variables.

As Table 2 shows, we found a significant relationship between the psychologists' adaptation and the modality of counseling ( $df = 5$ ;  $\chi^2 = 11.171$ ;  $p < 0.05$ ; Cramer's V test = 0.189). Most often, Gestalt therapists scored highest on adaptation to the online format; cognitive-behavioral psychologists scored lowest.

<u>Modality</u>	<u>Adaptation</u>		<u>Overall</u>
	Adapted	Did not adapt	
Gestalt	46 / 90.2 %	5 / 9.8 %	51 / 100 %
CBT	33 / 66 %	17 / 34 %	50 / 100 %

Table 2

*Relationship between adaptation to online counseling and the modality of counseling*

<u>Modality</u>	<u>Adaptation</u>		<u>Overall</u>
	Adapted	Did not adapt	
Systemic	27 / 87.1 %	4 / 12.9 %	31 / 100 %
Eclectic/integrative	79 / 79.8 %	20 / 20.2 %	99 / 100 %
Other	34 / 81 %	8 / 19 %	42 / 100 %
Psychoanalysis	33 / 84.6 %	6 / 15.4 %	39 / 100 %
$\chi^2$	11.171		

Table 3 shows the relationship between the specialists' adaptation and their general attitude towards working from home. We obtained a significant result ( $df = 2$ ;  $\chi^2 = 70.538$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; Cramer's V test = 0.475).

Table 3

*Relationship between adaptation to online counseling and attitude towards working from home*

<u>Positive attitude towards working from home</u>	<u>Adaptation</u>		<u>Overall</u>
	Adapted	Did not adapt	
Yes	200 / 92.6 %	16 / 7.4 %	216 / 100 %
No	28 / 45.9 %	33 / 54.1 %	61 / 100 %
Do not know	24 / 68.6 %	11 / 31.4 %	35 / 100 %
$\chi^2$	70.538		

Further, we found (Table 4) that adaptation to working online is also associated with the experience of blurring or preserving the work/home boundaries related to the transition to online counseling from home ( $df = 2$ ;  $\chi^2 = 28.819$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; Cramer's V test = 0.304).

Table 4  
*Relationship between adaptation to online counseling and the experience of blurring the work/home boundaries*

<u>Blurring the work/home boundaries</u>	<u>Adaptation</u>		<u>Overall</u>
	Adapted	Did not adapt	
Yes	76 / 69.7 %	33 / 30.3 %	109 / 100 %
No	166 / 90.2 %	18 / 9.8 %	184 / 100 %
Do not know	10 / 52.6 %	9 / 47.4 %	19 / 100 %
$\chi^2$	28.819		

We should note that psychologists who did not experienced the blurring of the work/home boundaries related to remote working often had a positive attitude towards working from home (Table 5). Statistical verification of this observation revealed a significant relationship between the above parameters ( $df = 4$ ;  $\chi^2 = 47.539$ ;  $p < 0.01$ ; Cramer's V test = 0.276).

Table 5  
*Relationship between a positive attitude towards working from home and the experience of blurring the work/home boundaries*

<u>Positive attitude towards working from home</u>	<u>Blurring the work/home boundaries</u>			<u>Significance</u>	
	Yes	No	Find it difficult to answer	$\chi^2$	Cramer's V test
Yes	55 / 50.5 %	154 / 83.7 %	7 / 36.8 %	47.539	0.276
No	19 / 8.4 %	10 / 5.4 %	6 / 31.6 %		
Find it difficult to answer	35 / 32.1 %	20 / 10.9 %	6 / 31.6 %		
Overall	109 / 100 %	184 / 100 %	19 / 100 %		

## Discussion

Most psychologists who were interviewed had already some experience of online counseling before the pandemic and, of course, started working more often in this format during self-isolation. We should note that about half of the respondents were generally positive about this format of counseling before the pandemic and did not change their opinion. These results contradict some previous reports (Glueckauf et al., 2018; Stoll, Müller, & Trachsel, 2020; Topooco et al., 2017). Our results require further testing in a larger and more diverse sample of practicing psychologists.

Specific characteristics of our sample could also determine the fact that most specialists believed that they had adapted to the online format; if there were any difficulties with the online format, they asked their colleagues to help them. A considerable part of the psychologists were members of professional communities with a developed system of supervision, intervision and group professional training, which formed reliable professional connections with colleagues and could help practitioners in adaptation. At the same time, we found no significant relationship between these factors.

Despite the existing evidence regarding the phenomena of increased fatigue and stress resulting from working online among psychologists (Stoll et al., 2020), only one third of counseling psychologists recognized the presence of stress in our study. Also, most of the respondents had no problem with structuring their time while working from home, which may be explained by the fact that a considerable part of the psychologists interviewed in our study had previous experience of online counseling. Therefore, they avoided some of the difficulties related to the pandemic and working online. Types and forms of online counseling, which are widely represented in the psychological services market today, could also affect the results obtained in our study (Cooper & Neal, 2015). We may assume that compared, for example, with counseling via correspondence on online portals or on social network or messenger sites, video and audio conferencing cause greater fatigue. This factor requires further clarification in future studies.

The hypothesis suggested that a positive attitude towards working from home is associated with better adaptation to online counseling has been confirmed. Moreover, we found that a positive attitude toward working from home is negatively correlated with an experience of blurring the home/work boundaries. In other words, practicing psychologists who successfully manage work/home boundaries do not experience difficulties when conducting online consultations at home. The way they manage these boundaries is of interest for further research. Thus, we may assume that unfavorable conditions for working from home or the lack of self-organization to manage the boundaries of professional roles prevents some psychologists from adapting to the online format, which, in turn, leads to the fact that specialists generally do not want to work in this way. Also, the relationships obtained in this study enable us to conclude that specialists who need to change the environment for changing roles experience difficulties when they are forced to work from home.

Interestingly, despite the fact that most of the counselling psychologists did not face the problem of blurring the work/home boundaries in the context of the transition to online work, still more than a third of respondents felt difficulties related to this format of working. Such results may be explained by different family and living conditions of the respondents. Thus, compared to specialists who have a workroom at home and/or does not have younger children and elderly relatives living together, those living with preschool children or with elderly relatives in cramped

conditions, having objective difficulties with a separate workroom and maintaining silence during consultations, experience much more inconvenience in terms of maintaining the setting, ensuring the safety of the consultative process, respecting boundaries, and being a professional during the working day. The gender of the respondents could also affect a positive attitude towards work from home and the management of the home/family boundaries. In our country women bear a considerably greater parental and home load (Makarentseva, Biryukova, & Tret'yakova, 2017). This could increase pressure on female psychologists during self-isolation and reduce their desire and ability to work from home.

Hypotheses suggested that there is a relationship between the region of residence and experience of work and adaptation to online counseling have not been confirmed. The results differ from the data from a previous study (Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). The researchers found that the experience of work and region of residence influence the attitude towards online counseling and its acceptance. Such differences may be explained by the fact that the authors of the study interviewed psychologists from North America and Europe, where socio-cultural and economic conditions were different. We, in turn, conducted a study among specialists living and practicing exclusively on the territory of Russia, which, of course, provided a more homogeneous pattern of psychologists' living conditions and practice.

The relationship between the approach that counseling psychologists adhere to and their successful adaptation to the online format of work is interesting. Previous study on the adaptation of counselling psychologists to the online format during the pandemic has shown a similar result (Békés & Aafjes-van Doorn, 2020). However, in our study, Gestalt therapists scored highest on adaptation to the online format; cognitive-behavioral psychologists scored lowest. This differs from previous results of some authors (Perle et al., 2013). In addition to the fact that representatives of the Gestalt approach more often considered themselves adapted to the online format, they were less likely to find it difficult to answer, which can be explained by the characteristics of this approach. Thus, increased attention to emotional and bodily reactions, holistic perception of personality, the practice of concentrating on the present (Perls, 2004) with constant practice could lead, on the one hand, to better adaptation in the changed conditions, and on the other, to a better awareness of their emotional state and sensations.

Practicing psychologists have shown high innovative potential, characterized by a high level of creativity and orientation towards the future, and an average level of willingness to take risks for success, which correlates with the results of other authors (Ikiz & Asici, 2017). Our hypothesis that the innovative qualities of psychologists are associated with successful adaptation to the online format of work was confirmed. We should note that such results may be explained by self-selection of respondents. Initially more open and active respondents could have a desire to take part in the study of the attitude towards online counseling during the pandemic without material reward.

### **Conclusion**

Thus, Russian psychologists painlessly survived the forced transition of work to the online format, showing a high level of the development of innovative qualities. Their ability to adapt to changed working conditions was mainly associated with innovative personality dispositions, the ability to organize a remote working process, the desire to work from home, and the modality of psychological counseling.

The data we have obtained can be used to develop recommendations for arranging psychologists' work in an online format, as well as in trainings for the development of creativity, flexibility, and innovativeness in the community of practicing psychologists.

The limitations of our work are primarily related to the small sample size, the use of a self-report survey form, and the lack of sociodemographic information about the psychologists interviewed in the study.

Further research can focus on studying the innovative potential, the ability of psychologists to adapt in the rapidly changing conditions of the modern digital world in the context of online counseling and other means and methods of work using a larger and more diverse sample of specialists.

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#### Author Contributions

**S. I. Skipor** designed and conducted the study, interpreted the results, analyzed the sources, and wrote a literature overview.

**A. E. Vorobieva** designed the study, interpreted the results, wrote the Discussion section, and carried out a critical revision of the content.

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