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Digital Boundaries: a review of clinical and ethical issues in telepsychology among Mental Health Professionals

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ABSTRACT

With the COVID-19 epidemic starting in early 2020, the unintentional mass migration to online therapy has drastically changed the landscape. Because of this, mental health professionals need to be conscious of the fact that their traditional ethical obligations still hold even while using technology to offer a service. This scoping study examined the applicability of telepsychology among mental health practitioners as well as its ethical and clinical concerns. There is general agreement in this study that providing mental health treatments to clients via telepsychology is a realistic and practical option both before and after the epidemic. There was a clear pattern that the most prevalent clinical concerns were restricted nonverbal communication between the therapist and the client, communication difficulties in the therapeutic relationship, unsuitable to some mental health disorders, and clinician exhaustion. On the other side, privacy, and secrecy, insufficient telepsychology training and instruction, boundary-related concerns, insufficient telepsychology rules, and handling emergencies were significant ethical issues. These findings open the door to telepsychology, a workable method of providing mental health and psychosocial treatments that aim to reach clients across geographic boundaries and continue the transformative job of fostering change, healing, and growth among clients. Understanding these problems makes it easier for mental health practitioners to respond to future public health emergencies and other natural catastrophes.

RESUMO

Com a epidemia de COVID-19 a começar no início de 2020, a migração involuntária em massa para a terapia online mudou drasticamente o cenário. Por isso, os profissionais de saúde mental precisam de estar conscientes do facto de que as suas obrigações éticas tradicionais ainda se mantêm, mesmo quando utilizam a tecnologia para oferecer um serviço. Este estudo de escopo examinou a aplicabilidade da telepsicologia entre profissionais de saúde mental, bem como suas preocupações éticas e clínicas. Existe um consenso geral neste estudo de que fornecer tratamentos de saúde mental aos clientes através da telepsicologia é uma opção realista e prática, tanto antes como depois da epidemia. Havia um padrão claro de que as preocupações clínicas mais prevalentes eram a comunicação não verbal restrita entre o terapeuta e o cliente, dificuldades de comunicação na relação terapêutica, inadequação para alguns transtornos de saúde mental e exaustão do médico. Por outro lado, a privacidade e o sigilo, o treinamento e a instrução insuficientes em telepsicologia, as preocupações relacionadas aos limites, as regras telepsicológicas insuficientes e o tratamento de emergências eram questões éticas significativas. Estas descobertas abrem a porta à telepsicologia, um método viável de fornecer tratamentos de saúde mental e psicossociais que visam alcancar clientes atrayés de fronteiras geográficas e continuar o trabalho transformador de promover a mudança, a cura e o crescimento entre os clientes. A compreensão destes problemas torna mais fácil para os profissionais de saúde mental responder a futuras emergências de saúde pública e outras catástrofes naturais.

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Introduction

By employing telecommunications technology to deliver psychological services, the field of telepsychology is defined (Joint Task Force for the Development of Telepsychology Guidelines for Psychologists [JTFDTGP, 2013] cited in Cooper et al., 2019). Even if telepsychology's techniques have been utilized by therapists for a long time, it is possible that its consumers were unaware of it. Telepsychology has been practiced by professionals who have worked with clients over the phone, on a mobile device, on a computer, and by fax. The provision of psychological services via tools and methods including interactive videoconferencing, email, chat, and text, as well as Internet use with blogs, self-help websites, and social media, has been made possible by advancements in telecommunications (Campbell et al., 2018). Synchronous refers to interactive contact with customers that takes place in realtime over the phone, through videoconferencing, or other similar means, whereas asynchronous refers to communication that takes place through e-mails, faxes, or discussion forums. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which began in early 2020, an involuntary mass switch to online treatment became prevalent and obvious, which disrupted the typical face-toface procedure. Because of limitations imposed to handle the epidemic, many psychotherapists were obliged to accommodate clients online and undertake evaluations and psychotherapy interventions through the Internet, despite past opinions and misgivings about this practice. As time went on, a lot of mental health practitioners unintentionally gained an in-depth understanding of this sort of treatment as offering it at once became a necessary and accepted practice (Bekes et al., 2021).

There is strong evidence to back up the usefulness of telepsychology. The most notable instance is the more than 50 years of suicide emergency hotlines, which have used simple phone technology to prevent suicide. Research indicates that individuals with post-traumatic stress disorder, major depressive disorder, generalized or specific anxiety, and similar conditions have been successfully assessed, counseled, and treated using telepsychology. Technology advancements, the expansion of social networks, and online shopping have made it simple to access the effectiveness of this technique and its substantial contribution to the provision of psychological services. Modern consumers right now, especially the younger generation referred to as "digital natives," are used to interacting with one another, chatting, buying, socializing, and playing games, up to the point of having sexual affairs onscreen. This implies unequivocally that communication over the Internet is widespread, well-known, speaks the consumer's language and lies within the consumer's comfort range (Zur, 2012). With the rise of telepsychology, mental health service providers have the responsibility to be cognizant that their traditional ethical obligations still exist even if they are using a different technological platform to provide a psychological and psychiatric service. Additionally, professionals in the field are required to be mindful of the various ways in which people use

digital communication and how those activities may affect the way services are provided. (Martin, 2011; Weisband e Reinig 1995, cited in Gamble et al., 2015). Mental health service providers should always take note of the ethical issues of online communication in the same way they do traditional client contact (Kramer et al., 2014). With this consideration, it is unethical, in most circumstances, for a psychologist or other mental health professionals such as a counselor and psychiatrist to accept a client as a friend on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and other social media sites or have online conversations not within the boundaries of the therapeutic relationship. Similarly, a psychologist would refrain from having a meal with a client or going to their celebrations such as birthdays. Furthermore, on the issue of privacy and confidentiality, some risks may be raised in using technology; for instance, it is unlikely that a client would unintentionally photocopy their therapy assignments and worksheets and provide copies to all of their friends and significant others. So, Psychologists must be aware of what confidentiality means not only within the confines of traditional, in-person treatment but protecting confidentiality in the online environment brings with it additional challenges, such as threats from hackers and another unauthorized intrusion of confidential information (Crabbe, 2008; O'Harrow, 2000 cited in Godine & Barnette, 2013). This is a troubling issue for psychologists and other mental health professionals since often it is not only our personal information that is at risk but also the personal information of our clients. As mental health professionals, we have an ethical responsibility to preserve the confidentiality of our clients, regardless of the medium being used for record-keeping or communication (APA, 2002).

Telepsychology also has the probability of reaching those who might not otherwise be open to receiving psychological services. Treatment over the Internet may encourage those with stigmatized disorders, for example, depression, anxiety, or post-traumatic stress disorder, to seek the help they would not seek in person (Berger et al., 2005). Online psychotherapy may also appeal to patients with "self-described discomfort" (Rochlen et al., 2004) in expressing their feelings and emotions, such as men since researchers have discovered that the exclusion of face-to-face interaction in counseling may increase self-disclosure (Recupero & Rainey 2005). The benefits offered by telepsychology services are numerous, nevertheless, there are legal, ethical, and clinical issues associated with its use that must be taken into account by those considering utilizing it. However, the ethical and clinical concerns that telepsychology can bring up for mental health service providers are rarely reviewed. The American Psychological Association (APA), the Australian Association of Psychologists (AAP), the Psychological Association of the Philippines (PAP), and other professional organizations have all developed guidelines for the most ethical and effective practice of telepsychology. However, little is known about the ethical and clinical concerns related to the practice of telepsychology. To fill this vacuum and determine how mental health practitioners uphold ethical principles among their clients in this context, this research was created.

Examining various clinical and ethical difficulties in telepsychology among mental health practitioners is the study's main goal. The following was specifically looked into by the researcher: 1. What is the perceived viability of telepsychology in the practice of psychology among mental health professionals? 2. What are the clinical and ethical issues mostly encountered by mental health professionals in conducting telepsychology? 3. What are the implications of clinical and ethical issues in the practice of telepsychology among mental health professionals?

Methodology

Research Design

The researcher used key sources to search for associated articles from EBSCOhost, Gale, Google Scholar, and ProQuest. The themes, subthemes, findings, and research conclusions were developed using a scoping review technique. Scoping reviews are frequently used to classify and organize the body of literature and studies already published on a certain topic according to their type, characteristics, and volume.

They are very useful for synthesizing research data (Peters et. al., 2017). Smit e Scherman (2021) quote Grant e Booth (2009) who claimed that scoping reviews are preliminary assessments of the size and potential reach of the corpus of existing research material.

The type and amount of scientific evidence that is now accessible are its key objectives. More often, it is usually best designed for the following reasons: when a body of literature has not yet been comprehensively reviewed, to label the body of literature with relevance to time, location, source, and origin, to clarify working definitions and conceptual boundaries of a topic or field; and lastly, to identify gaps in existing literature/research.

Sources of Data

The researcher used several journal databases for the current study, including EBSCOhost, Gale, ProQuest, and Google Scholar. The EBSCOhost interface allows access to transdisciplinary databases, electronic books, and journals. Within the subject areas that each database is intended to cover, these databases are especially useful for discovering journal articles and other publications on a certain topic.

The top journals and reference materials are accessible to academic researchers and students with Gale Academic One File, which also streamlines study with practical features and innovative search capabilities. Similar to other search engines, Google Scholar indexes research papers from academic publishers, professional associations, institutional repositories, pre-print servers, and academic journal articles that are published online. The

last database collection is called ProQuest, and it provides access to thousands of journals, periodicals, newspapers, dissertations, and other publications.

Data Collection Process

Data extraction from the included studies was done systematically. The data outlining the study's features and characteristics, particularly focusing on ethical issues in telepsychology, the study aims, results, and instruments used to assess ethical issues were extracted by the researcher.

To reduce the possibility of bias, the lead author did the extraction, and the assistant of the researcher validated it. According to the study objectives, the inclusion criteria are as follows: a. Research articles must be published in English regardless of country of origin, and they must be from the years 2015 to the present; b. The study title must contain the following keywords: (telepsychology or ethical issues in online counseling or mental health services); c. Quantitative or qualitative studies with reported issues in online mental health services or telepsychology; d. Study populations must include psychologists, counselors, or any other mental health service providers from any country.

Data Abstraction and Analysis

The collected literature was assessed and examined by the researcher to abstract and analyze the data. The emphasis was on studies that could directly address the research questions. The themes and subthemes were developed using first-and second-cycle coding. To gather information about each article's focus, the data were gathered via in-depth article reviews.

Results and Discussion

Viability of Telepsychology among Mental Health Professionals

Before the Pandemic

Feasible and Available Telepsychology Services even before the pandemic

Telepsychology was already being practiced before the pandemic. According to the assessment of research, even before the pandemic, many mental health practitioners considered telepsychology to be a very practical method of providing clients with mental health therapy. For instance, Cipolletta e Mocellin (2018) noted that one of the most cherished benefits of telepsychology was the elimination of geographical borders.

Acceptable to most psychologists and other mental health professionals

Before the pandemic, many mental health practitioners considered telepsychology to be a very acceptable method of providing psychological therapy, according to the reviewed literature and research. The evaluation of internet therapy's psychological traits and features is crucial in determining if mental health service providers would embrace it. Since there is less social stigma associated with using telepsychology than traditional in-person therapy, it is more acceptable. (Menon & Rubin 2011; Teh et al., 2014, quoted in Cipolletta & Mocellin (2018). Additionally, it was shown that the online disinhibition impact affected a client's decision to employ online modalities. Users were either categorized as possible clients for online therapy or as those who would utilize it if they were having issues at work or school. Respondents' agreement that regional restrictions on the Internet may be removed may also assist to explain why they thought online therapy was a valuable and preferred option. (Grimaldi & Goette 1999, cited in Cipolletta & Mocellin (2018).

During the Pandemic

Feasible and Available Mental Health Services despite of COVID-19 Pandemic

According to the reviewed study, telepsychology was seen by many mental health practitioners as a highly practical method of providing psychological therapy to clients, particularly during the physical isolation and distance limits brought on by the epidemic. This magnifies the findings of Hardy et al. (2020), highlighting several other positive aspects of teletherapy, such as increased comfort for both therapists and clients, greater flexibility, and improved connectivity through ongoing care and connecting with clients in their homes, which were thought to be a workable substitute for in-person psychotherapeutic interventions in humanitarian settings during the COVID 19 pandemic (Ibragimov et al., 2022). As a result, scheduling is quite simple in telepsychology, and clients' visits may be scheduled back-to-back, in addition to its effectiveness in arranging time off from work or childcare. (Perrin et al., 2020).

Technical requirements should be met before practicing telepsychology.

In performing telepsychology, there are several technical prerequisites. The technical expertise and logistical infrastructure that the therapist has access to, as well as the client, determine the viability and effectiveness of this therapy. The use of videoconferencing by mental health practitioners is becoming more common, according to research findings. (Perrin et al., 2020) but in the future, complete, context-specific rules should be produced after additional evaluation and research of communication infrastructures. (Ibragimov et al., 2022; Hardy et al., 2020).

Digital competence among professionals in the delivery of telepsychology.

A therapist's competence as to the platform's technicalities and their awareness of their respective skills are important in telepsychology. Digital literacy and a definite level of technological competence are required for therapists. For example, the effects of camera and volume settings, internet bandwidth, screen resolutions, and a hostile videoconference environment on assessment results are very important (Adjorlolo et al., 2021). Similar to this, a review of the available research determined that it is appropriate for psychologists and other mental health service providers who intend to offer online counseling and other behavioral treatments to complete specialized training that allows them to obtain an equivalent certification to practice (Cipolletta & Mocellin 2017).

There are apparent Pros and Cons of Utilizing Telepsychology

Some of the other advantages of telepsychology in the practice include: it helped generate more consideration, more authenticity, and the opportunity to self-monitor; it saved time and allowed more efficient use of resources; the presence of home and family helped build rapport and embed positive behavioral change; it alleviated isolation and the distance to care for remote communities; and it intensified mental health care needs due to the pandemic (Hardy et al., 2020; Keenan et al.,2022; Goldschmidt et al., 2021). While its advantages are overwhelming, some of the disadvantages of implementing telepsychology were constraints related to the internet or digital technology such as a stable connection; technology is unpredictable and can limit or even exclude access to care; when technology 'collapses', clients claim to be disruptive and unsure about what to do, they feel 'excluded' from meetings when audio or video are not working properly (Perrin et al., 2020; Keenan et al., 2022).

Clinical Issues of Telepsychology among Mental Health Professionals

Limited observation of nonverbal communication

One of the most often highlighted clinical aspects of telepsychology is the lack of non-verbal cues in therapeutic interactions, leading to insufficient assessment and proper intervention. Mental health professionals characterized the impact on the relationship as one where nonverbal cues and body language would not be as easily read and subtle cues would be missed. Thus, online therapy was characterized as one of reduced quality due to the lack of face-to-face interactions and "personal connection" as the ability to tune into clients, especially with their nonverbal gestures, is of utmost importance (Hertlein et al., 2015; Hardy et al., 2020). Furthermore, because audio-only platforms lacked nonverbal warning signs of such

danger, doing risk assessments and emergency treatment on them would be more challenging. (Ibrigimov et al., 2022).

Challenges in communication between the therapists and client

Many studies in this review also see challenges in communication between the client and the therapist, which can lead to misconceptions and miscommunication, especially when utilizing text-based media but also when using telephone or videoconferencing. Hertlein et al. (2015) noted in their study that several of their mental health participants agreed that messages sent to their clients may be misinterpreted or misunderstood, thus compromising client care and the therapeutic process. Keenan et al. (2022) also pointed out that in telepsychology, there is a greater risk of miscommunication, reduced trust, and patients not fully expressing themselves, including themes of miscommunication, confusing gaps, and silences in conversations, or patients not feeling they could adequately express themselves. Lastly, many therapists struggled with connecting emotionally with patients. (Bekes et al., 2021).

Telepsychology is inappropriate for some mental health conditions.

Clinical problems such as past trauma, substance use disorder, severe psychopathology, situational partner violence, and suicidal thoughts may impede mental health practitioners from treating clients via telepsychology (Hardy et al., 2020). Perhaps mental health practitioners believed that treating these problems via telepsychology would be either too hazardous or too challenging. This was reinforced by the research of Ibrigimov (2022), which found that not all patients and cases are suitable for telepsychology, particularly those who have experienced sexual abuse, personal or relational violence, geriatric, and pediatric clients, or those who have severe mental health issues in which their academic, occupational, and adaptive functioning are already impaired.

Clinicians' Fatigue

Another clinical issue that arises in this review is the therapists' worry for their personal lives, particularly as it relates to dealing with exhaustion and stress. This included the feelings of fatigue, grogginess, and lethargy that therapists experienced while performing telepsychology. This presents an alternative viewpoint, suggesting that perhaps watching oneself on a screen is not advantageous for all mental health care providers and requires additional consideration.

The disadvantage of utilizing some therapeutic techniques.

There are recorded disadvantages to utilizing some therapeutic techniques and providing some psychological services (e.g., testing and assessment) remotely (Lin et al., 2021).

For instance, it appeared that some practitioners preferred brief therapy. Thus, the focus of psychodynamic treatment methods was mostly on teaching their clients coping mechanisms to deal with present-day concerns and pressures rather than addressing underlying and intrapsychic issues (Gabbard, 2017; cited in Goldschmidt, 2021). Some mental health professionals, especially those with training in Freudian psychodynamic theory, found this change to be difficult. Concerns regarding the rigidity of the aforementioned therapy were raised because many practitioners had to adapt and offer therapies that were solution-focused and psycho-educational. Additionally, some clients did not like this paradigm change since they favored the depth and insight emphasis of Freudian or Neo-Freudian psychodynamic theories.

Ethical Issues in Telepsychology among Mental Health Professionals

Privacy and Confidentiality Issue

In telepsychology, the most hotly contested issue is the potential breach of confidentiality and privacy. Because unencrypted communication tools are easily breached and because potential confidentiality breaches might happen at any moment and are beyond the psychologist's control, clients and other stakeholders are worried about the safety and security of this platform (Hardy et al., 2020). It also includes concerns about who could view and hear the video or feedback and the authenticity of the user (Hertlein et al., 2015) and because of limited space available at home, some clients were at risk of having their sessions overheard by others. (Goldschmidt et al., 2021).

Inadequate Training and Education on Telepsychology among Mental Health Practitioners

As far as telepsychology is concerned, training and education are largely required to ensure the appropriate technological capabilities as well as clinical and therapeutic competencies unique to the online setting. Most of the research concludes that there is inadequate training and education in telepsychology among mental health professionals. Participants, for example, in the study of Hertlein et al., (2015) cited the workings of the computer and potential issues with its use, some of which relate to confidentiality. Numerous psychologists and other mental health service professionals employ telepsychology without enough training in using online psychotherapy treatments and evaluation techniques or understanding its technological underpinnings. (Naal, 2021). More specifically, in forensic practice, competencies in videoconferencing and its applications are needed for other practice areas, such as testing and assessment, informed consent, and, importantly, whether the

technology accurately, reliably, and validly addresses the psycho-legal questions (Adjorlolo et al., 2015)

Boundary-related issues

Upholding professional boundaries is not easy in the context of telepsychology. Thus, endangering the connection between the therapist and the client -for example, mental health professional participants in the study of Hertlein et. al (2015) cited the potential for dual relationships in that clients might be able to contact their counselors via social media. They reported that the boundary issue might be tied to the 'overuse' of the computer, thus making the counselor more available and at risk of being perceived as available at any time. Additionally, according to Hardy et al. (2020), boundary-related problems revealed service providers' discomfort with client-clinician interaction and standard family boundaries.

Inadequate Telepsychology guidelines and policies

Professional board regulatory guidelines and practice standards in telepsychology are considered incomplete or absent. One study concluded that psychologists are not sufficiently clear about online counseling and that online counseling services may infringe on the rules of ethics and professional conduct in the field of psychology (Cipolletta & Mocellin, 2017). It was seconded by Keenan et al. (2022), who noted that regardless of how long they had been working, practitioners in their research stated that the telehealth standards, rules, and protocols were either lacking or incomplete.

Addressing emergency issues is difficult.

When the patient and therapist are placed in different locations, concerns about an emergency or crisis scenario involving a threat to oneself or others such as suicide, homicide, or murder can be difficult to detect and handle. In the study of Hardy et al. (2020), participants who are mental health service providers expressed concern over their inability to ensure safety among couples and they believe that this task is far more difficult online. There was the potential for having sessions with individuals who are at risk, such as those who are suicidal or experiencing other potential crises. Thus, there is difficulty in 'monitoring self-injurious behavior,' "safety of the client,' and a compromised ability for the counselor to intervene immediately (Hertlein et al., 2015).

Implication

Grounded by the findings of this scoping review, clinical and ethical issues emerged, homogenizing into different themes and subthemes. Further, we cannot deny the benefits and advantages of telepsychology practice, especially during the pandemic, along with its

disadvantages and negative consequences. On the aspect of clinical issues, results suggest a limited observation of nonverbal communication between the therapist and the client and challenges in communication in the therapeutic relationship. Further, it has been seen that telepsychology is inappropriate for some mental health conditions, and clinicians experienced a relative amount of fatigue in the conduct of telepsychology. On ethical issues, there is a possibility that privacy and confidentiality would be compromised in telepsychology. Furthermore, inadequate training and education on telepsychology among mental health practitioners are also highlighted across mental health practitioners. Boundary-related issues, and inadequate telepsychology guidelines and policies provided by different professional organizations have been seen. And lastly, emergency issues such as experiences of violence and suicide are hard to address in this context.

The COVID-19 epidemic led to the introduction of several technical platforms that allow people to connect and learn from one another. At this time, the Philippines is amid contemporary technology. Additionally, these tools enable all facets of psychological practice, including psychological evaluation and counseling. These findings imply a considerable amount of research for further study and validation of telepsychology in the practice of Filipino mental health professionals, clients, and other stakeholders. To solve these systemic issues, it is further necessary for the government and private practitioners and organizations to work together, particularly on the issue of providing adequate training for further developing this technique.

The discrepancy between studies on the effectiveness of telepsychology for diverse cultural groups and other elements that have distinct effects on in-person practice, education, and training results. Numerous developments in the discipline, most notably in the fields of integrated behavioral health, skill-based psychology, diversity training, and intercultural education and practice, have elevated mental health to the forefront. Another chance to enhance their profession for the good of those they serve is provided by telepsychology for psychologists and other mental health service providers (Cooper et al., 2019).

Conclusion

This research investigated the viability and clinical and ethical issues of telepsychology among mental health professionals. In this study, there is a consensus that telepsychology is a viable and feasible mode of offering mental health services to clients before and during the pandemic. There was a clear trend across studies that limited observation of nonverbal communication between the therapist and the client, the challenges in communication in the therapeutic relationship, inappropriate mental health conditions, and clinicians' fatigue were the most identified clinical issues among mental health professionals. On the other hand, privacy and confidentiality, inadequate training, and education on telepsychology among

mental health practitioners, boundary-related issues, inadequate telepsychology guidelines and policies, and emergency issues were prominent ethical issues.

Psychologists and other mental health professionals are one such population that is increasingly benefiting from the emerging technological applications for mental health, especially during the times of pandemic. Video conferencing and other telepsychology tools are one way this support is being delivered and embraced by these professionals. While a substantial amount of progress has been made in the field of psychology about telepsychology and its benefits and risks, there is still much to be discovered. It would certainly be beneficial for both the field of psychology and its prospective future clients for more robust studies to be conducted so that the field can begin to consider both the benefits of telepsychology and its inherent risks from a broader perspective. Recognizing the clinical and ethical issues in the current pandemic may help mental health professionals, institutions, and governments cope with future public crises and other natural disasters. In addition, these results pave the way for telepsychology, a very feasible mode of delivering psychological services that aim to reach clients across spatial limitations to continue the life-changing work of effectuating behavioral change, healing, and growth among clients and other stakeholders.

Limitations and Recommendations

There are a few drawbacks to this study. Only articles written in English were initially taken into account. Some of the emerging issues that are not covered in this scoping review include computer-mediated and self-help therapy articles, social media, robots and artificial intelligence, internet-based group psychotherapy, online forums and support, open chat, therapy for children, adolescents, and adults, and Android or IOS psychosocial support mobile applications. Since it is outside the purview of this study to describe how these clinical and ethical hazards could be managed in practice or to offer detailed suggestions for clinical therapy, more thorough research on the aforementioned subjects should be done. A systematic study on the efficacy, effectiveness, and efficiency of online psychotherapy is needed in the future, as well as practice guidelines, and legal and ethical frameworks. More research in the rapidly expanding field of telepsychology appears to be critical.

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