



## Young people's experiences of mobile phone text counselling: Balancing connection and control<sup>☆</sup>



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### ABSTRACT

Mobile phone text counselling offers an opportunity to engage young people via a familiar and accessible medium. Interviews conducted with young people highlighted aspects of text counselling they perceived as valuable including privacy and autonomy, having control over the counselling process and maintaining anonymity. Participants appreciated the accessibility of text counselling and felt comfortable communicating through text. Despite the anonymity, they also felt they got to know the counsellor as a 'real person' and experienced a relational connection with them. Text counselling may help young people balance their contradictory needs for autonomy and connection and facilitate their engagement with counselling support.

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## 1. Introduction

Young people are growing up in a world in which access to communication technologies, not available in previous generations, is likely to shape their experience of relationships. As youth culture embraces the rapid advances in technology, there are opportunities and challenges for counsellors and others working with youth to keep pace with their young clients' priorities and expectations. As yet, there is still relatively little research which looks specifically at the way that young people experience counselling using communication technology and even less that looks specifically at how interactive counselling delivered by mobile phone might work for this group of clients. This article offers a window into the experiences of adolescent clients who had used a mobile phone text counselling service with a particular focus on those aspects which they highlighted as valuable to them in these encounters.

### 1.1. Youth and communication technology

The rapid increase in the use of mobile phones and other communication technologies has given rise to concerns that these might impact negatively on relationships between people. Fears have been strongest in relation to youth where issues such as cyber-bullying (Smith et al.,

2008; Tokunaga, 2010) and mobile phone 'addiction' (Walsh, White, & Young, 2008) have received attention. There have also been concerns raised about mobile phones reducing the capacity for genuine intimacy and for emotional reflection (Turkle, 2011) as well as having other negative effects on the cognitive abilities (Abramson et al., 2009) and mental health of young people (Thomé, Härenstam, & Hagberg, 2011).

In spite of these disquiets, there is little doubt that mobile phones have become a particularly significant form of communication amongst youth. Ito (2005) notes that mobile phones are uniquely suited to young people's needs, being "lightweight, less intrusive, less subject to peripheral monitoring, inexpensive, and enable[ing] easy contact with a spatially distributed peer group" (p. 3). Ling and Yttri (2002) argue that mobile phones have become an important way of establishing and defining group membership for youth and especially important in defining the difference between themselves and the 'older generation' (p. 162). This form of communication has been recognised to create valuable spaces within which young people can communicate without adult surveillance and control (Green, 2003). Green points out that while older people who are not immersed in new communication technologies might misinterpret young people's disengagement from their immediate surrounds as a kind of cognitive or social deficit, for young people their phones are experienced as an important way of connecting to others.

In New Zealand, where this research was conducted, mobile phone text is one of the most widely used forms of communication technology. In 2012 there were reported to be 5,020,000 mobiles in this country

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where the population is 4,433,087 (TNS Global Market Survey, cited in *New Zealand Herald*, 2012). Because phone calls from mobile phones remain relatively costly, text messaging, which is much cheaper, has become a standard mode of communication for young New Zealanders. Text messaging or SMS (Short Message Service), as it is sometimes called, is also widely used in other countries around the world.

### 1.2. Counselling using communication technology

Some of the doubts expressed in relation to youth and contemporary communication technologies are echoed in concerns about the use of these modes of communication to provide counselling. Non-verbal cues, which are understood as central to allowing trust and mutual understanding to develop between the client and therapist, are not available through many of these technologies (Anthony, 2006). With the quality of the therapeutic relationship being at the heart of counselling (Lambert & Ogles, 2004) some have expressed reservations about whether mobile phones or other communication technologies can provide the necessary relational connection between the counsellor and the client (Helton, 2003). However, in recent years, an increasing number of researchers have pointed out the potential advantages of using contemporary communication technologies to provide counselling. Some evaluations have provided evidence for the success of technology based programmes that have operated in circumscribed ways to assist compliance with treatment, address psycho-education goals or facilitate other limited interventions (Agyapong, Farren, & McLoughlin, 2011; Preziosa, Grassi, Gaggioli, & Riva, 2009). But research has also shown that there may be some advantages to using these technologies to facilitate more complex therapeutic goals including those that build on the therapeutic relationship (Richards & Vignano, 2013). Alleman (2002), for example, has challenged the idea that meaningful emotional communication cannot take place without people being physically present to one another. As he explains:

The kind of words people use and the way they put them together in print can say a lot about how they feel even when they cannot hear or see the person with whom they are communicating. Those of us who have ... written a love letter know that being limited to text does not mean being deprived of expressiveness. (p. 200)

Furthermore, people may experience some relational advantages with anonymity, with the absence of non-verbal cues making it easier for them to talk about embarrassing issues (Leibert, Archer, Munson, & York, 2006). Suler (2004) describes this as the 'online disinhibition effect', noting that disembodied forms of communication may encourage more emotional expression and self-reflection. Using communication technologies has also been found to enable clients to experience a more equal relationship with their counsellor (Suler, 2004).

Helton (2003) argues that ideas about communication and relational development have not kept up with the changes in technology and that those who are not familiar with these changes may find it difficult to understand what it takes to develop quality relationships with others in this new context. While researchers and professionals struggle to make sense of how counselling relationships might work through contemporary communication technologies, young people who have grown up alongside these developments are in a good position to offer insights into this potential from their own experience.

### 1.3. Young people and counselling

Young people have not often been asked about their experiences of counselling. This is perhaps a result of beliefs that they are not able to comment with authority about their experience (Prout, 2007; Zirkelback & Reese, 2010). However, there is increasing awareness that young clients, like adults, are active agents in counselling, making meaning of this in their own way and extracting what they need from

the experience (Duncan, Miller, & Sparks, 2007). The relatively small number of studies that do explore what is important to young people in their counselling experiences suggests that their priorities may be somewhat different to that of adult clients. There appear to be two main sets of concerns for younger clients. The first is a need for a genuine relationship within which they can express themselves openly. As Dunne, Thompson, and Leitch's (2000) research shows, young people seem to have less interest in problem solving and assign greater value to being able to talk, express their feelings and relate to the therapist. This is echoed in other research which notes aspects such as being listened to, experiencing kindness or caring, not being judged, and being treated as an individual as central to young clients (Freake, Barley, & Kent, 2007). In essence, one of the most important aspects of counselling for young people is to have a sense of real connection with their counsellor (Bolton Oetzel & Scherer, 2003).

Young people however also have other priorities, which might in some instances act as a barrier to their engagement with an adult counsellor. Young people seem particularly aware of and sensitive to power relationships and at times may experience counselling with an adult negatively as an attempt to undermine their independence (Hanna & Hunt, 1999). They value an equal relationship with their counsellor, object to being patronised and have a strong requirement for a counsellor who respects their autonomy (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Sagen, & Holgersen, 2011; Bury, Raval, & Lyon, 2007; Everall & Paulson, 2006; Freake et al., 2007). Privacy and confidentiality, particularly in relation to parents, are also major concerns (Collins & Knowles, 1995). In our recent research, we found that young people prioritised their own agency in counselling and that this was seen as a precondition to their willingness to engage in the process (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013).

This body of research suggests that while young people might be looking for a genuine and supportive relationship in counselling, they may also feel that they need to protect their autonomy against the power that the adult world wields over them (Gibson & Cartwright, 2013). These two, sometimes incompatible, priorities may present a challenge for young people in having their needs met in counselling and perhaps goes some way towards explaining the difficulties of engaging and holding young clients in counselling (Block & Greeno, 2011).

The limited research available on young people's experiences with counselling using technology suggests that there might be potential for this form of communication to be a good fit with the priorities and concerns of young people. Callahan and Inckle (2012) conducted interviews with counsellors and a focus group with young people about online and mobile phone counselling (acknowledging that they were not sure whether or not the young people they interviewed had actually used this counselling). Their findings suggest that online therapeutic conversations with young people dealt with a greater variety and more sensitive topics than face-to-face sessions. They also concluded that young people might feel less intimidated talking to an on-line counsellor and more able to exercise their own power in this context (Callahan & Inckle, 2012). In interviews about young people's own use of internet counselling, Hanley (2012) found that while the initial stages of counselling were centred on setting up a relationship, other factors such as being able to control the session became important as it proceeded. King et al.'s (2006) research asked young people who had used an online counselling service about their motivations and experiences. Their findings suggested that young people felt safer, less emotionally exposed and relatively better protected from feared negative responses from their counsellor, such as boredom or judgement, compared to face-to-face counselling. Young people also seemed able to establish an effective therapeutic alliance in online counselling (Hanley, 2009, 2012; King, Bambling, Reid, & Thomas, 2006). While this small body of research on young people's experiences of internet counselling is highly relevant to the current research, these studies do not address mobile phone texting in particular. To the best of our knowledge there is no research that looks specifically at young people's experiences of using a mobile phone text interactive counseling service.

This absence might be partly due to the fact that there are, as yet, relatively few services that use mobile phones in this way. There are also likely to be challenges in recruiting young clients of an anonymous service as well as ethical concerns about maintaining the privacy and confidentiality of users of these services (Callahan & Inckle, 2012).

This paper used open-ended narrative interviews to explore how young people experienced text counselling. The thematic analysis looks specifically at the aspects of this experience that the participants identified as fitting well with their priorities and concerns.

## 2. Method

### 2.1. The setting

The text counselling service from which participants for this study were recruited is run by a youth development organisation called Youthline. The text counselling service was started in 2004 as what was expected to be a relatively small scale addition to their existing telephone and face-to-face counselling services. This form of counselling has rapidly become one of Youthline's most popular services, receiving between 10000–20000 texts per month (Personal Communication, Youthline, Clinical Manager). The text counselling service is staffed by volunteers who undertake an initial six month training which includes the opportunity to work together with a more senior counsellor. Once they are judged to be ready to become 'solo counsellors' they continue to have professional support available onsite as well as on-going supervision and training.

The text counselling service takes the form of an interactive text conversation drawing from a strength-based person-centred approach to counselling. Young people can use their mobile phone to text free to the service from anywhere in New Zealand. Their message will receive a response up until midnight at which point it will be held over to the next day. Text conversations commonly involve about 12–15 incoming texts that are responded to by a counsellor (Guy, 2012). As counsellors work in shifts it is unlikely that a client will have the same counsellor if they text on another occasion. It is also possible that a client might engage with more than one counsellor during a single 'session' if this extends over the end of a shift. Some continuity is maintained through counsellors having access to the text history associated with each client's telephone number. Youthline notes that young people use the text counselling service to get information, to problem solve an issue, for general support and to "talk it out" (Guy, 2012). The primary issues addressed in text counselling are recorded by the organisation as including difficulties in peer relationships, family relationships, partner relationships, suicidal feelings and ideas, depression and sadness (Youthline, 2013).

### 2.2. Participants

Twenty-one young people took part in this study. This included 16 young women, four young men and one self-described 'gender fluid' participant. Because anonymity is built into the text service it is not known to what extent the predominance of young women in the sample reflects the gender distribution amongst text counselling clients. The statistics gathered for other counselling services offered by Youthline (including telephone and face-to-face counselling) do, however, suggest that these are accessed more frequently by young women than young men (Personal Communication, Youthline, Clinical Manager). Participants were aged 15–18 years and had used the Youthline text counselling service within the past year. Participants came from all areas of New Zealand. Seven participants identified as Māori or Pacific Islander, seven were migrants from other countries and seven identified as New Zealand European. Many participants said they found it difficult to identify the precise occasion on which they had last used the text service or accurately pinpoint exactly how many counselling 'sessions' they had had. According to their recollections,

however, length of time since they had used the text service was anywhere between the day previous to the interview to a year before. Six participants said they had used the service only once, most said they had used it 'a few' times and two participants reported using it over 20 times. These figures however do not reflect the number of times participants texted during any particular episode of use and one participant, for example, reported that a single 'session' had extended over a three day period. The majority (14) said they had had some experience of face-to-face counselling in addition to text counselling. For almost all of these this was through their school counselling service. Participants reported having sought help for problems were largely similar to those reflected in Youthline statistics including difficulties in peer relationships (6), family relationships (6), partner relationships (5), suicidal feelings (5), death of a loved one (3), depression (1), panic attacks (1), academic pressure (1) pregnancy fears (1) and drug use (1). Some participants described more than one of these problems co-occurring or prompting the use of text counselling on different occasions.

Clients who had used the text counselling services were sent a brief text about the research at the end of their 'session'. They were asked to send a text message to the researcher to find out further information about the study. This recruitment strategy was used over six months but produced less than optimum results as counsellors responded inconsistently to requests to notify their clients about the research. We decided to adopt a different strategy in which text messages were sent to all clients who had had text communication with the organisation at the end of each day over a period of two weeks. This produced a larger number of potential participants more quickly. The research was also advertised via the Youthline website and at some of the organisation's presentations to school students. Because of the variety and inconsistency of recruitment methods it cannot be known exactly how many clients received information about the research. One hundred and thirty-four clients made contact with the researcher to request further information about the research but only 21 (15%) went on to complete an interview. Some potential participants did not respond to attempts to contact them or did not arrive for planned interviews. Ethical considerations related to the participants' continued need for privacy and confidentiality were a priority for the researchers during this process and every effort was made to ensure the confidentiality of all communications about the research with participants. However it seemed that anxieties about this remained a deterrent for some potential participants. In keeping with the New Zealand law, informed consent was provided by those over 16 years and the small number of 15 year olds who took part (two) was willing to seek permission from their parents.

### 2.3. Data gathering

Twelve participants were interviewed face-to-face at a private venue of their choice. Others, at their request, were interviewed via Skype or telephone. An open ended narrative-style interview method was used in order to better tap the way that young participants themselves experienced text counselling and to minimise superimposing well known professional assumptions onto their accounts. This method involved asking participants simply to talk about their experience(s) of text counselling. They were encouraged to give detailed accounts of their experience through prompts such as 'tell me more about that' or 'what happened then?' As they recounted aspects of the process they prompted to recall details of the texting process, the content of the conversation, how they had felt during this experience and whether they had found it valuable or not.

### 2.4. Data analysis

The data was analysed using Braun and Clarke's (2006) approach to thematic analysis informed by an interpretivist paradigm (Morrow, 2005). The first author had conducted the interviews herself which

provide a good starting point for immersion in the data. The recordings of the interview were transcribed and reading and re-reading these provided a further opportunity to identify key ideas contained within the interview. Following this we undertook a thematic analysis which involved a more systematic process of identifying codes which represented the various ideas contained in the data. These codes were then grouped into themes which captured their shared meaning. The researchers discussed the themes consensually to ensure that they accurately reflected the data. In this paper we summarise the themes that reflected those aspects of text counselling which were highlighted by participants as important to them (including any responses that reflected on the value or lack of value they found in aspects of text counselling). We recognise that it is inevitable that our interpretations of the data are shaped in part by our own academic understanding of counselling and by our experiences as professionals working with adolescent clients. We were, however, also influenced by an approach that recognises the power relationship which has silenced the voices of young clients and is concerned to make their views more visible to professionals (Evans, 2007).

This research was approved by the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee.

### 3. Findings

This discussion describes aspects that participants identified as being important for them in their experience of text counselling, acknowledging both positive and negative views on their experience. All but two of the participants spoke about finding value in text counselling, often comparing it positively to other modes of counselling they had used.

#### 3.1. Privacy: 'My parents won't know'

The fact that text counselling could be used privately emerged as a very important issue for the participants we interviewed. For young people, seeing a counsellor or therapist often involves parents who might need to pay for sessions or arrange to take them to appointments. However, for most of these participants the difficulties they wished to speak about either involved their parents or were related to issues they did not wish their parents to know about. Being able to talk to someone about a problem without their parents becoming involved was emphasised by many participants as one of the most valuable aspects of text counselling. The following participant, for example, explained that she was not getting on with her parents and chose text counselling above telephone counselling because of the privacy it provided:

Yeah. I kind of thought texting was a lot easier just because Mum and Dad were at home and I didn't want them, like [to hear] me talking on the phone [because] they would get curious as to who I was talking to. I didn't really want them to walk in and ask who I was talking to and I couldn't exactly say Youthline, because then they would be like oh what are you talking to Youthline for? So I kind of thought texting sort of was a bit safer.

While the previous participant had suggested a specific reason for not wanting to confide in her parents other participants implied that they simply felt 'awkward' about their parents knowing about their difficulties or the details of their lives. A number of participants suggested that this was because they feared their parents intruding into their lives:

Well I felt that since there were like my parents in the room it was like a really awkward environment so I would rather use text. They probably would have taken the phone from me or would have like listened in on the conversation. I felt text was a more secretive and a more protected way of talking to someone.

Text seemed to be seen as a way of by-passing adult control over the young person's life more generally as the following participant describes:

No because I was in my bedroom and my parents were asleep and if they had heard me talking about it I would kind of be in a bit of trouble. If I get a call at night from anyone, even if it's my best friend, I will get in trouble; 'Why are you getting a call so late at night?'

It seemed that for these young people, parental involvement in their psychological distress was seen as uncomfortable and potentially undermining of their autonomy. One of the most valuable aspects of text counselling, from their perspective, was that it enabled them to seek help without their parents' knowledge.

#### 3.2. Autonomy: 'Adults won't intrude in my life'

A number of participants were concerned that seeing a counsellor could result in unwanted professional intrusions into their lives. For the young participants who had these concerns, text counselling seemed to pose less risk that an adult would actively intervene in the young person's affairs against their wishes than did face-to-face counselling. One participant explained how she had been reluctant to tell the school counsellors about the way her mother hit her because she feared that social workers would become involved and remove the children from the family:

It just feels because I have younger siblings, they might take my brothers and sisters away from me. ...but the message I got from [Youthline], they actually asked me what kind of advice I am looking for. They didn't step over the line, go overboard about things. Yeah, and just helping me make decisions about stuff.

Several other participants described how they chose to contact Youthline when they were suicidal rather than speak to a face-to-face counsellor. One participant spoke about how he texted Youthline as he was making his way down a bush walk looking for a cliff to throw himself off. He explained that he chose to text Youthline "because they can try and make me feel good but they can't find me." While in fact Youthline does have a clear policy of intervening actively to manage any risks to the young person and mechanisms to trace callers in an emergency, it appears that from these participants' perspectives, the potential for this kind of intrusion is less visible in the medium of text counselling. Only one participant spoke about a text counsellor having suggested that they call in other adult resources to help her manage her suicidality. She explained that this experience resulted in her being less inclined to raise the issue of suicide again:

And that doesn't help. It really doesn't. If anything, if um ... it makes you withdraw a lot more because all of a sudden it's, it gets really scary where it's like oh my gosh, no I can't do that, then everyone will find out, then my parents will find out, and they really scared me that time. And so I don't bring that up anymore. Even if that's something on my mind, I don't bring that up.

It seemed that for these young people to feel safe enough to reveal information about their difficulties, they needed to believe that this would not result in the unwanted intrusion of the counsellor or other adult authorities into their lives. While one participant had experienced this through text counselling, for most, the possibility of professional intrusions seemed to be less visible to them than in other modes of therapy.

#### 3.3. Control: 'I can manage the process'

Several participants spoke about how text counselling seemed to allow them better control of the process than they had experienced in other forms of counselling. One participant explained, for example,

how text counselling allowed her to manage the pace of the interaction: “Yeah, and like if you are talking to someone on the phone or face you are expected to reply, and if you are texting I guess you can reply in your own time”. Another participant explained how she felt more able to manage and plan her responses through text rather than in face-to-face talk:

Like I find it easier in like writing stuff down. Yeah, I feel more secure. I don't know why, but it's just like cause you can see the words that you're writing... in text you have time to process everything so you can like think about what you are going to say, but in [face-to-face] counseling you have to think really fast.

Other participants described how they felt that once they entered into a counselling relationship they feared that they would lose their ability to control the situation and would be unable to resist the counsellor's pressure to 'open up'. Text counselling, on the other hand, allowed participants to close down the process when and if they chose:

So I just like texting and like, I can just open up when I am texting and I will be like okay: 'I need to close the door now'.

For other participants being able to end the text session when they chose was also important. Several spoke about how they simply stopped texting at the time they felt they had had enough. As one participant explained: “I was like, ‘Oh I'm going to tell her I was like okay.’” This same participant went on to explain how text was preferable to other forms of counselling because “[You don't have to] go on talking and talking yeah. Now we'll be finished in two minutes. So something about that quick, you can do it and be done with it.”

While counselling is often based on egalitarian principles, the position of young people in an adult world may make it difficult for them to believe that they have the power to regulate the encounter according to their needs. The technology of mobile phones which forces a time delay between a message and a reply and offers the client the option of not replying to a message seemed to promise a degree of power not normally available to young people.

### 3.4. Anonymity: 'They don't know who I am'

Many participants emphasised the value of anonymity in their interactions with text counsellors. One participant explained that the anonymity had been the initial appeal of using the Youthline text counselling service:

That's never gone through my mind to do anything like that, but I kind of thought that maybe, 'cause they seemed like the only person that I could talk to because they didn't know me and they didn't know like where I come from and what things have happened in my life'.

The anonymity of the interaction seemed to work to decrease participants' fears of being judged as the following participant explained:

Yeah. And so they wouldn't judge me or anything or what had happened. I think it was just to have somebody that doesn't know you and doesn't really know your situation until you tell them. And they are able to help and not sort of look at you like you are weird.

Several highlighted the difficulty of talking about problems either at home or with friends. The appeal of text counselling was that it was outside of their normal social ambit:

Maybe I used Youthline because like it's very anonymous and I trusted people, even though I don't really know them. It's kind of hard for me to talk to other people that I know because I am scared that they might judge on what I'm doing and stuff. That's why I kind

of, I heard about Youthline at school. So I used the Youthline just to help a bit, because it's very hard to tell people that are in our family.

Even counsellors who operated within their usual social context were seen as more likely to judge them because they knew who they were and other things about them beyond the specific problem in question:

It's like cause I trust our counselor, but at times it's just if like I thought that they would judge me cause she knows me and she knows what I was going through before, because my mum called the school and stuff. That's why sometimes I just text Youthline because I trust them more, because they don't really know me and I know that they won't judge me.

The anonymity in text counselling seemed to offer participants a space outside of their normal social world and within which they could suspend their anxieties about being judged.

### 3.5. Accessibility: 'It's there when I need it'

While traditional counselling approaches often emphasise the importance of a consistent and reliable frame which involves predictable session times, the young people who took part in this study spoke about how they valued the way that text counselling could be flexibly integrated in their lives as and when they needed it. Many participants spoke about the wide variety of places in which they had been able to use text counselling. They spoke about using text counselling under their duvets in bed at night, at their classroom desks, from social gatherings and even from a movie theatre. One participant described how she had texted throughout a bus trip to school during which she was being unmercifully bullied. Another explained how he had texted Youthline from his kitchen to try and get advice on how to manage an escalating drunken conflict between family members who were in the room with him at the time. In a number of these cases, participants emphasised the value of text counselling being continuously available for them *in the moment* of dealing with a difficult situation, rather than providing an opportunity to reflect retrospectively on difficult events as is often the case in counselling. One participant described in detail how text counselling had kept her company over two days in which she had been terrified she was pregnant:

When I first told them [the Youthline counselor] went ‘Wow you must be going through a hard time because you don't have anyone to talk to [about pregnancy fears]’. And you know I think I stopped texting them. And then later I texted them that I was at the doctor and the doctor said to me ‘Oh well, do you want me to do a blood test, be 100 per cent?’ I got him to do the blood test and everything and then yeah I texted Youthline and they said that's really great.

As one participant succinctly put it: “[Text counselling] is not like every so often, it's just like whenever you need it.”

Some participants also spoke about how they had particularly appreciated the length of time that the text counsellor had stayed engaged with them:

I thought they probably won't reply much. But they kept coming back and replying and I thought they would give up on me because I was a hopeless case, but they just kept coming back with ideas of how to cope with it, how to deal with it, ideas to approach my parents about how I am feeling.

For some the text interaction had continued over several days. For other participants their need was relatively short lived and a few participants described how the moment when they needed help had passed quite quickly. As one participant explained: “When I get real angry I take my phone and start texting, and then when they reply I am like: ‘Oh I don't feel angry anymore.’”

These examples point to the way that young participants valued the way that text counselling flexibly fitted in with their lives at the points at which they needed it. One the one hand it was available during a period of crisis but on the other hand, it did not constitute an on-going commitment to counselling.

### 3.6. Texting: 'It's our way of talking'

Most participants in this study were eager to explain that text was a comfortable and legitimate form of communication in their adolescent world. During the interviews most participants lapsed into describing texting as 'talking'. This language conveyed their understanding that for them, text was talk. As one participant put it: "It's our way of talking: Mostly like all the time we are texting. Yeah even like when we are sitting next to each other, we are kind of just like texting." Participants seemed aware that there could be some generational difference between their own views and those of adults and took pains to explain this in the interview:

I think it's just because my generation is used to texting and it's easier for us and more convenient, and it feels like it's just the same as talking.

A number of participants echoed the idea that the lack of face-to-face contact allowed them to 'talk' more openly. Several spoke about their own difficulties in talking about personal and emotionally laden subject matter while sitting right in front of an adult counsellor:

I think it is yeah, and not having to see them face to face it's not as embarrassing I think as well. I find it embarrassing talking face to face about my problems with [a counselor], cause I sort of don't know how to act or move around or like ...

Another participant elaborated on how texting relieved her of the pressure of watching her counsellor's response and fearing any response that suggested judgement: "I guess texting is like is less confrontational. You don't have to actually see what people think, like how they are responding to what you are telling them." Another participant suggested that the discomfort with face-to-face communication was a broader concern for young people, explaining that they had become less used to talking directly to one another:

I think [I prefer] Youthline, because it's the 21st century, people are texting all the time, I notice if I look into somebody's eye they look everywhere around the room.

Other participants elaborated what they thought were some of the additional benefits of using text to talk about a problem rather talking directly to counsellor. One participant, for example, explained that writing down her problems in a text worked as a kind of catharsis. She explained this was so comforting that she sometimes sent texts to herself:

When I don't use [Youthline] I just kind of text myself, when I'm venting, really long ones.... Like, it would be like if I was talking to someone but really I'm taking to myself....Like sometimes it's better like with Youthline because you are actually talking to someone.

Text also seemed to offer some participants an opportunity to self-reflect on their own difficulties rather than simply rely on the counsellor. As one participant explained: "It feels like kind of almost talking to yourself but not really yourself, someone else. For me anyway..."

There were, however, a small number of participants who said that although they had used text counselling, this was not their preferred mode of communication. These participants seemed to position themselves as 'different' to their peers. One participant joked about being a "bit of a grammar Nazi" and objected to using abbreviated 'text-speak'. Another participant also spoke about how text did not seem to

be able to convey emotional meaning; describing the texts he had received from Youthline as feeling 'cold and unemotional'.

While for this small minority of participants text was not seen as an effective form of communication, the majority seemed to feel that text was their natural and most comfortable medium. Participants also highlighted additional benefits provided by text including reducing anxiety associated with the physical presence of the counsellor as well as providing opportunities for catharsis and self-reflection.

### 3.7. Personal: 'I got to know them as a person'

In Youthline text counselling, clients are normally given no information about the counsellor and unlike telephone counselling do not even have a voice to associate with this experience. Yet, surprisingly most participants spoke about having had a good sense of the counsellor 'as a person'. Many participants seemed to be able to turn the disembodied texts into a real person. One participant described how he experienced the counsellor as though they were familiar to him:

It's not like a text, but she's like a person.... It's a person like um she's kind of like um my, like my sibling or someone from my family the way she talked.

It seemed from some participants' comments that they searched around for a way of conceptualising *who* the counsellor was, relying sometimes on people they knew to construct an image:

Yeah. Instead of some like random it's kind of just like, sometimes the texts that come through kind of reminds me of one of my friends. Sometimes it's just like, 'Oh it sounds like someone I know who said that.'

In some cases the way participant imagined the counsellor seemed to be informed by their own needs. One young woman who was having difficulty resolving her conflicted loyalties to her boyfriend and her mother spoke about her experience of two counsellors over the two days she had engaged with Youthline. She imagined her first counsellor to be a young man who was similar to her boyfriend:

Yeah, just something made it feel like it was a guy. Yeah, he actually seemed like he cared. Yeah, so it was sort of, I think that's why it felt like it was my boyfriend, because even though my boyfriend didn't want to talk to me, this person seemed like what I wanted my boyfriend to be doing.

The next day, as she continued the text counselling session, she imagined her counsellor to be an older woman and she felt that this person was able to give her mother's point of view. Most participants seemed to have some impression about whether their counsellors were men or women or whether they were older or younger. It is not perhaps surprising that a few participants believed their counsellors to be young given the ethos of Youthline which promoted itself as being staffed by younger people. The following participant describes how this was important to her:

'Cause what they told us is that some people at Youthline, most of them are our age. And I mention what is happening and they have an idea, they get what's wrong. That's the good thing. That's why I kind of trusted them because I knew that they would be in our generation and stuff.

But other participants seemed equally sure that counsellors were older than themselves and were surprised when they discovered different:

[I thought the counselors were] much older actually. Yeah I reckon they are older, yeah. So when Youthline actually came to [do a presentation at] my school they looked younger than what I thought.

And I'm like okay they can't be what I think they are. So I'm like 'Okay they are like our age!'

Some participants seemed conscious of the exercise of imagination involved in picturing their counsellor in the absence of any cues, recognising that it may partly have been a function of their own needs and expectations:

Yeah. I always picture a girl because like a girl, if that person understands me, she must be a girl. She can see what I'm going through. But if I find out it's a boy I would be like 'Oh okay. There goes my thinking of boys then....' Cause back then I didn't really feel comfortable talking to a boy. I felt like they don't understand at all.

It was likely that some participants had to deal with a number of different counsellors, especially if their 'session' extended over more than a day. Some participants seemed to gloss over this problem with ease, creating a unified sense of a counsellor out of their different experiences. One captured her ability to do this in spite of her apparent awareness of how the system worked:

Yeah, I kind of had a thought that this probably isn't the same person. But they sort of understood like the other person did. And so there was still that feeling of comfort and trust that I had with the other person. Yeah so it was quite good.

Another participant seemed partly aware of the possibility that the counsellors might be different but nonetheless referred to them as composite 'they':

I thought at the time it was the same person. And they really thought, and know how I was feeling. They were like my friends, like how they get worried with you, so they text you back right away. It made me feel that way.

For a small number of participants the idea of a shift between one counsellor and another was uncomfortable:

I think it would help to know that you are texting the same person, and if maybe you text them like in the future, if you could maybe like request maybe the person again, so they, if they can remember or at least they know a bit of what you've been through, then you are not having to start from scratch.

For a minority of participants the absence of the physical person remained a barrier and they missed the presence of a real person:

I think it's just knowing that there is physically someone you know that you talk to and you get, you sort of get to know them and they become part of your, they help, they're right there and yeah personally I prefer that. Yeah, being able to look at someone and know that they're there if you need a hug or anything you can get it, whereas over text you can't get those things.

In spite of the minimal cues available for the clients to get a sense of their counsellor as a real person, it seemed that this remained an important part of the text counselling experience for most participants. These participants seemed to be able to use their imagination to create a sense of the counsellor and to imagine the kind of person they felt most comfortable talking to. Some participants were able to do this even across a range of different counsellors. There were, however, a small number of participants for whom this did not work.

### 3.8. Connection: 'They are there for you'

Developing a relationship with the text counsellors seemed very important to many of participants in this study. Although some obtained

advice and were helped to solve problems through text counselling, the majority of participants seemed to be seeking a sense of connection with someone. They spoke about their difficulty in reaching out to others and described how they felt text counselling had been able to offer this as the following participant's comment suggests:

Yeah like they are there. Cause like when my mum is in hospital and my dad's at work and my brother is irritating me, I feel like there's no one I can go to for help. But then if you text them.... I feel like I'm not by myself.

For a number of participants the connection to Youthline was described as being similar to a kind of constant friendship that extended from an individual counsellor to the organisation as a whole:

Because it sounds like, if no one was there, but then like I need to talk to people about stuff and I texted Youthline and I felt like I had another friend that can understand me.

While most participants seemed aware that the relationship was not a 'friendship' they conveyed their sense that it felt this way to them. One participant explained how she felt a sense of genuine loss on ending her text counselling interaction but still retained a sense of a continued relationship with Youthline:

It was a weird feeling, just that I kind of felt as though I was losing a friend but then I think when I told them that yeah everything is fine now, they sort of said that if there is ever anything else don't hesitate. So I kind of felt as though I still had them....

Not surprisingly given that the sense of connections was important to participants, the main area of criticism that the young people expressed in relation to text counselling was when the response was too slow or the service was unavailable during the night:

Maybe they should have more people, because it's really distressing getting that, all our operators are busy at the moment. Yeah, because you get to that point, should I, shouldn't I, should I, shouldn't I, you finally get the courage and then like nothing.

As participants had an expectation of the ready availability of text counselling, times when they waited for a response from counsellors or when the service closed overnight were difficult for a few. One participant pointed out that things often felt at their worst during the long hours of the night and that was when he would have most liked to have made use of the text counselling service. One of a very small number of participants (two) who said they preferred face-to-face or telephone counselling explained that for her the waiting between texts was intolerable:

I remember with texting, because there is quite a break in-between when you text and when they text and you text back, that for me it didn't really work, that I would be waiting for a reply and I kind of expect things immediately and that doesn't always happen.

However the majority of participants seemed to express a degree of acceptance with the situation as the following participant suggests:

'Cause I understand sometimes that Youthline, some people, the people that text me are quite busy texting other people, so I understand that'.

These young participants seem to value a real relationship as a counter to feelings of isolation. Text counselling provided this sense of connection, especially when other social networks were felt to be inadequate. While a small number of participants in this study still preferred face-to-face contact it seems that most felt they had established a

sense of connection with the counsellor and an on-going relationship with the organisation itself.

#### 4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings of this study suggest that mobile phone text may fit well with the priorities and concerns of young people. The aspects which participants found as valuable with text counselling mirror some of those found in research on young people's experiences of counselling more generally insofar as they seem to reflect their need for control and autonomy (Binder et al., 2011; Gibson & Cartwright, 2013) as well as their strong emphasis on a relational connection (Bolton Oetzel & Scherer, 2003). This research, however, suggests that text counselling, from the perspective of young people, might offer greater opportunity than face-to-face counselling, for the young person to protect their autonomy. Participants valued text counselling because they could by-pass their parents' authority and felt that they were assured of privacy. This is consistent with reasons that young people value mobile phones more generally (Green, 2003). The potential for adult intrusions as a result of counselling seems less visible to young clients using text. They also felt better able to control the process and anonymity allowed them to evade the possibility of negative judgements. Counsellors may underestimate the extent to which young people feel themselves to be subject to control and authority from the adults around them, including their parents and the counsellors themselves. Young people may also feel pressure to conform not only from adults but also their own peer groups (Warrington & Younger, 2011). Text counselling seems to offer young people a 'space' in which they can temporarily escape some of these social constraints.

This research also showed very clearly that young people emphasise and value the relational aspects of their experience of text counselling. One of the most noteworthy insights emerging from this research is the extent to which young clients seem able to use their imaginations to envisage not only a person behind the anonymous text messages they receive but *the person* that they feel would be most useful to talk about their problem with. This capacity to imagine a relationship has been noted in online research more generally and it has been acknowledged that problems might arise when discrepancies between the imaginary person and the real might arise (Oksman & Turtiainen, 2004). In text counselling where the client is unlikely to ever have face-to-face contact with their counsellor, this possibility does not pose the same problem. Significantly, the act of imagining a counsellor has to transcend not only lack of knowledge of the individual but, for participants in this research, the fact that some may have had more than one counsellor involved in the same 'session'. The sense of connection participants described seemed to be associated as much to the organisation as a whole as it did to any individual within it. Thus many participants seemed to feel that they had established an on-going relationship with Youthline itself. It may be that in minimising the risk of loss of autonomy and allowing the possibility of a relationship of their choosing, text counselling offers an environment in which young people feel safer to confide their problems and have their needs met.

The priorities of young people in text counselling also highlight their immersion in a different communication culture to the one in which most adults might feel at home. Most of the participants who took part in this study seemed to feel that text was a 'natural' and comfortable mode for them and that face-to-face communication was, on the whole, more awkward and less secure. In addition to the familiarity of text as a way of talking, young people's heavy use of mobile phone technology may mean that they are more comfortable with spontaneous and evolving social arrangements rather than pre-planned events. While counselling is often premised around a reliable frame which includes regular meeting times, the young people in this study seemed to anticipate their needs being met more flexibly and immediately. Professionals may not always be aware of young people's need for counselling to fit better with the ebb and flow of their lives.

This research also echoes some of the findings of the existing research into the use of communication technology in counselling with youth. These findings include those that relate young people's abilities to express themselves openly, avoid judgement, form a good relationships and assert their own power in online counselling (Callahan & Inckle, 2012; King, Bambling, Lloyd, et al., 2006). This research does, however also point to several advantages for mobile phone texting over other forms of communication technology. Mobile phone texting is, for many young people, a deeply familiar mode of communication which may facilitate the sense of connection necessary for an effective counselling relationship. Mobile phones are light, portable and are more likely than computers to be individually owned by a young person. Text counselling might thus allow greater scope for the autonomy and flexibility that young people value. While the findings of this research largely point to the value that this might have for young people, it is important to acknowledge that this approach may not work for all young people and may not be enough for some. Research suggests that young people may approach counselling with quite different priorities and concerns (Gibson & Cartwright, in press). Even in this small sample there were some people that were not comfortable with the very same aspects of text counselling that the majority valued. Given that those who participated in this study were those who *chose* to use text counselling, it is likely that there are a greater number of people who would choose not to use this service because they do not feel comfortable with the medium. As Green (2003) notes it is important not to homogenise young people and to recognise that not all people of the same age have same the relationship with technology.

The intention of this study was to develop an understanding of how young people experienced text counselling rather than to reach conclusions about the effectiveness of this intervention. The findings do however suggest that text counselling was perceived as a good fit with their priorities by most of the young people we interviewed. There are, however, questions about how much can be achieved therapeutically in text counselling. Williams, Bambling, King, and Abbott (2009) suggest that e-counselling may be better in terms of rapport building but less effective in facilitating therapeutic tasks. Certainly, the relationship seemed more important than other aspects of the interaction to participants in this study. However, the opportunity to 'talk' about a problem, engage in some problem solving and receive support may be a helpful early intervention and could be used to facilitate young people's access into other more in-depth interventions. While we do not believe that text counselling should take the place of face-to-face counselling, this research suggests that it may be a very useful addition to the range of counselling options available to young people.

It is possible that where adult professionals have come more recently to this technology they may find it difficult to imagine how this form of interaction is experienced by those who have grown up with it (Green, 2003). In some sense there may be a 'cultural difference' between adult counsellors and their young clients that needs to be bridged. For counsellors who work with young people it is important for them to grasp the changing world within which their clients operate and to open themselves to the possibility of learning from them, what best meets their needs.

This is a small scale exploratory study and, as with most qualitative research, is not intended to produce statistical generalisations about the value of text counselling for young people. Instead, it provides a context for understanding how this form of counselling might fit with young people's priorities and concerns and, in this way, may have relevance for other similar services elsewhere. The findings are obviously limited by the use of a self-selected sample and there is the possibility that those who had had more positive experiences of text counselling would be more inclined to participate in the study. Some of these limitations are unavoidable given the challenges associated with researching clients of a service that promises anonymity in which clients cannot be formally identified and tracked as they might be in other mental health or counselling services. The challenges we

experienced in recruiting participants to this study may also reflect the difficulty of engaging young people more generally in adult initiated projects. The same concerns for autonomy and privacy that made text counselling appealing to the young participants may also deter them from participation in research which involves personal contact with an adult researcher. In spite of the challenges of engaging young people in research, it is important that we continue to seek out opportunities to hear young people's voices on their preferences and priorities in order that we might better meet their needs.

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