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Exploring the Experiences of Psychologists and People in Custody using Telepsychology: A Multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis

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Research suggests that there are promising results for the effectiveness of telepsychology interventions, with similar effect sizes compared to the traditional face-to-face format. Research has tended to focus on the effectiveness of telepsychology rather than the more nuanced, relational psychological processes that occur between client and therapist when using this modality. This study aimed to address the paucity of research examining the experiences of people in custody and therapists in a forensic setting using telepsychology.

Semi-structured interviews were completed with 4 dyads of psychologists and people in custody who engaged in telepsychology sessions together. Data was analysed using a multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Approach (IPA). The superordinate theme, “Contact without the Closeness” describes how both psychologists and people in custody experienced telepsychology as a satisfactory and effective modality in the absence of face-to-face sessions. However, participant accounts suggested that although satisfied with having virtual contact, there existed a reduced closeness and human connection in interactions. People in custody described attempting to adjust to this alternative way of attending psychology, grappling with feelings of distrust towards the modality, and the resulting censored engagement with the process. Psychologists described an awareness of elements of the therapy process such as body cues, emotional transference, and human connection that could be less available in a virtual capacity, and the ways in which they adapted for this. These findings highlight the usefulness of, and potential limitations for using telepsychology in a forensic context. Findings are discussed in the context of previous research, and implications for clinical practice are discussed.

Keywords: Telepsychology, people in custody, forensic psychology, care modality, therapeutic alliance, multiperspectival Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA).