The Growth of Telepsychology Practice in Alberta

Results from the Psychologists' Association of Alberta 2023 Technology in Practice Survey

PAA
PSYCHOLOGISTS'
ASSOCIATION of ALBERTA

Contributors

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Preamble

The Technology in Practice (TiP) Taskforce was established by the Psychologists' Association of Alberta (PAA) in September 2018 to address issues related to the intersection of psychology practice and emerging technologies. In November 2020, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the committee surveyed the membership of the PAA to obtain a "snapshot" of the use of technology at that time. In light of the increased acceptance and adoption of telepsychology in Canada and globally since 2020, the TiP Taskforce decided to survey the PAA membership again in May 2023, to obtain a current understanding of Alberta psychologists' incorporation of telepsychology into their practice.

Context

Although the profession of psychology has a long history of utilizing technology to facilitate practice (e.g., telephone-based crisis counselling; computer-assisted career guidance), the COVID-19 pandemic precipitated a widespread and rapid adoption of telepsychology as a practice modality. For the first time, many community agencies, educational and health institutions, and private practitioners were required to shift to remote service provision for most of their mental health services, with many providers turning to online video-conferencing platforms to continue working with clients (Aafjes-van Doorn et al., 2020; Pierce et al., 2021).

In the time since the PAA conducted their original technology survey in 2020, pandemic lockdowns have ended, and in-person health services have resumed in Alberta. Nonetheless, there are indications that telepsychology will remain a permanent part of the profession, with regulatory bodies and professional associations alike incorporating content about telepsychology into their regulations, standards, and guidelines (e.g., Church et al., 2023; College of Alberta Psychologists, 2018).

Research has also begun to emerge revealing potential benefits of receiving mental health services remotely, with people citing such factors as convenience, an increased sense of privacy and confidentiality, and reduced anxiety and stigma associated with this modality (Khan et al., 2021; Sora et al., 2022; Taylor et al., 2021). In addition, telepsychology has reduced barriers to accessing services for individuals with mobility constraints, those living in rural communities and the Canadian north, as well as those seeking assistance for concerns that interfere with their ability to meet in the psychologist's office. However, along with these benefits, risks with telepsychology have also been identified. These risks include

a. the potential use of platforms without appropriate safeguards for confidentiality, privacy, and security of client information;
b. less control over the therapeutic setting and increased potential for technical difficulties and disruptions;
c. limited evidence for the effectiveness of telepsychology with particular client groups, presenting problems, and for certain kinds of services (e.g., some formal assessments);
d. increased potential for inequitable service provision (e.g., some clients being unable to access services due to inadequate technology); and
e. heightened risk of psychological practice outside of approved regulatory boundaries (Church et al., 2023; Perle et al., in press).

Considering the apparent growth of telepsychology as a recognized and permanent part of the landscape of psychological practice in Alberta, in May 2023, the TiP Taskforce of the PAA conducted a new survey of Alberta psychologists' involvement with telepsychology practice.

Data Collection and Analytic Method

The 2023 survey was an online, self-report survey consisting of 22 questions about telepsychology practice (including Likert scale, ranking, and open-ended items) and six demographic items. The survey was distributed electronically to the entire membership of the PAA. The final sample consisted of 144 individuals who responded to at least some of the survey questions. Data were analyzed using descriptive statistics, as well as content analysis of responses to the open-ended questions (focusing on the explicit meaning of participants' responses).

Respondent Characteristics

Virtually all respondents (97.9%) were members of the PAA, with one respondent indicating they were not a member, and 2 respondents selecting the "I prefer not to answer" option. Similarly, most respondents were registered in Alberta as Psychologists (93%) or Registered Provisional Psychologists (5.6%), with one respondent indicating they preferred not to answer and one respondent indicating that their application to the College of Alberta Psychologists was under review.

Table 1 summarizes the distribution of respondents by age and practice experience. Every age category except for 29 years or younger was well represented in the sample, ranging from 28.9% of the sample being aged 30 to 39 years to 17.6% of the sample being 50 to 59 years of age. Similarly, apart from the category of "less than 1 year," respondents' years of practice were fairly evenly spread across the sample, with categories ranging from 14.2% to 24.8%.

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Table 1. Survey Respondents' Age and Years of Practice Categories

	n	%
Age Category (n = 142)		
Prefer not to answer	9	6.34
29 years or younger	2	1.41
30 to 39 years	41	28.87
40 to 49 years	38	26.76
50 to 59 years	25	17.61
60 years or older	27	19.01
Years of Practice (n = 141)		
Prefer not to answer	3	2.13
< 1 year	3	2.13
1 to 5 years	27	19.15
6 to 10 years	31	21.99
11 to 15 years	22	15.60
16 to 20 years	20	14.18
> 20 years	35	24.82

In addition, 81.1% of respondents reported that they worked primarily in private practice, while only one respondent (0.7%) worked primarily in a government agency. The other types of work settings accounted for 2-5% of the respondents (see Table 2).

Table 2. Survey Respondents' Primary Work Settings

Work Setting (n = 143)	n	%
Prefer not to answer	3	2.10
Community agency / mental health clinic / non-profit	7	4.90
Government agency / department	1	0.70
Hospital / medical center / primary care setting	6	4.20
Post-secondary institution	5	3.50
Private practice	116	81.12
School (K – 12)	3	2.10
Other	2	1.40

It must be noted that participation in the survey was voluntary, and this type of survey may be more attractive to individuals who practice telepsychology than those who do not, so it cannot be assumed that the respondents are representative of the entire PAA membership or all psychologists in Alberta. Nonetheless, based on the preceding demographic characteristics, it is likely that the data from the 2023 Technology in Practice Survey are representative of Registered and Provisional psychologists in Alberta who are

    a. currently providing telepsychology

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b. are members of the PAA and
c. work primarily in private practice.

However, the experiences of inexperienced psychologists and psychologists working in settings other than private practice may not be adequately represented in the sample.

Experience and Training in Telepsychology

Perhaps unsurprisingly for a voluntary survey about telepsychology, an overwhelming majority of respondents (97.2%) currently incorporate telepsychology into their provision of psychological services. A majority of participants (66.7%) began incorporating telepsychology into their practice 1 to 3 years ago, which corresponds with the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. However, approximately 30% of respondents reported they had incorporated telepsychology into their practice prior to COVID-19, and within that 30%, a sizable minority reported having 7 years + experience with telepsychology.

Most respondents (72.5%) reported taking at least some formal training in telepsychology. Among the 108 participants who reported completing at least some training, the most popular categories of training were (a) a 1-2 hour online webinar (48.2%), (b) a 3-6 hour online webinar most (28.7%) and self-directed reading of books about the topic (20.4%). In contrast, only 9.3% of the 108 participants who reported having telepsychology training had taken a formal training certificate. Furthermore, 73 of these 108 respondents (67.6%) reported completing only one type of training in telepsychology.
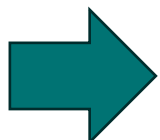
97.2% of respondents currently incorporate telepsychology into their provision of psychological services.

Service Activities

Respondents use telepsychology to provide a wide range of practice activities, with virtually all participants using it for individual counselling (91.7%) and couples/family/group counselling (47.2%). In descending order of frequency, respondents also reported using telepsychology for consultation (38.2%), providing supervision (27.8%), receiving supervision (21.5%), assessment (18%), teaching (17.4%), and other activities (7.6%). However, many of the activities reported in the "other" category overlap with one or more of the other categories (e.g., sharing assessment report results).

For most respondents, telepsychology appears to form a minority of the practice, with 70.8% of respondents reporting that they practice using telepsychology for 1 to 10 hours per week and only 9.7% of the sample reported using telepsychology for more than 20 hours per week. This

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represents a shift away from the frequency of telepsychology practice reported in the 2020 survey, where 51.6% of respondents reported using telepsychology for 1 to 10 hours per week and 20% of those respondents reported using telepsychology for more than 20 hours per week.

> **70.8%** of respondents practice telepsychology for 1 to 10 hours per week.

Furthermore, respondents tend to perceive their primary organization / setting as currently being prepared (34.7%) or very prepared (51.4%) for providing telepsychology services, with only 9% endorsing "somewhat prepared" and 1.4% endorsing "not at all prepared." This pattern of responses has changed from responses to the same question in the 2020 survey, which had the following pattern: not at all prepared = 1.6%, somewhat prepared = 29.3%. prepared = 48.5%, very prepared = 20.5%. Overall, this pattern indicates a shift away from being "somewhat" prepared and towards being "very prepared," for telepsychology practice, at least as perceived by survey respondents.
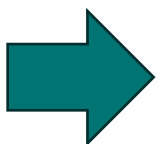
> **51.4%** of respondents report their primary organization as "very prepared" for providing telepsychology services.

Telepsychology Platforms

Respondents endorsed a wide variety of factors to consider in choosing a telepsychology platform. However, the following five features appear to be the most important to respondents, as indicated by the proportion of respondents who ranked each feature among their top three most important considerations:
1. Ease of client use/access (66.9%)
2. Encryption features (44%)
3. Affordability (36%)
4. Quality of video and/or audio performance (28.8%)
5. Canadian server location (23.7%)

However, these results need to be interpreted with caution due to an error in the construction of the question in the online survey, where several of the above features were accidentally listed twice. Different respondents may have responded to this error in different ways, thus affecting the results in unpredictable ways.

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As a group, the survey respondents reported using a wide variety of telepsychology platforms, including identifying numerous platforms beyond those listed as options (e.g., Psychology Today Sessions). The four most frequently used platforms reported by respondents are:

1. Doxy (44.4%)
2. Zoom (38.9%)
3. Jane (36.8%)
4. Owl (17.4%)

Note that this pattern of responses is largely the same as in the 2020 survey, where the same 4 platforms were the most frequently used, although the proportion of respondents listing them has increased from 2020 for all four, with Jane receiving the largest increase (from 9.4% of respondents in 2020 to 36.8% in 2023).

The same four platforms emerged as most popular when participants were asked directly what platform was their primary one for conducting telepsychology, although the rank order was somewhat different:
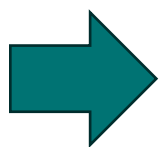
1. Jane (29.2%)
2. Doxy (21.5%)
3. Zoom (13.8%)
4. Owl (12.3%)

However, instead of indicating a primary platform, 9.2% of the respondents to this question reported using more than one platform as their primary one, sometimes specifying different platforms for different purposes.

Respondents indicated using a wide range of features offered by their telepsychology platform, with the five most frequently used features being:

1. Waiting room for participants (73.9%)
2. Servers hosted in Canada (53.6%)
3. 256-bit encryption for video (53.6%)
4. 256-bit encryption for audio (50.7%)
5. Auto reminders for clients (50.7%)

It is particularly concerning that nearly half of the respondents did not report using 256-bit encryption as a feature of their primary telepsychology platform, although it is unclear whether this is due to lack of encryption itself, lack of knowledge about the encryption feature of their platform, or some other reason (e.g., 13% of respondents checked off "don't know how to answer this question and trust the software provider"). However, if these data accurately reflect the use of 256-bit encryption by respondents, then it may suggest that fewer psychologists are using (or perhaps are aware of) the encryption features in their software now than in 2020, when the same question revealed that 65.4% of respondents reported using 256-bit encryption for video and 59.6% of respondents reported using 256-bit encryption for audio.

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53.6% of respondents report using 256-bit encryption on their primary telepsychology platform.

The platforms used by respondents also varied substantially in terms of the degree to which clients are required to set up a personal account where they disclose their information to a third party in order to access it. As seen in the table below, this appears to have shifted from the 2020 survey, when a larger proportion of the respondents at that time were using platforms that did not require any personal account information and fewer respondents were using platforms requiring extensive client information with safeguards. Alternatively, the apparent shift towards platforms requiring more information may actually be a function of existing platforms changing their features and requirements, rather than representing an actual change in respondents' choice of platform.

Table 3. Self-reported Type of Client Information Required by Participants' Preferred Teleconferencing Platform, in 2023 and 2020

	2023 Survey (n = 138)	2020 Survey (n = 168)
No personal account information	47.8%	65.1%
Limited information	31.2%	25.2%
Limited information with safeguards	5.8%	3.1%
Extensive information with safeguards	15.2%	6.6%

Satisfaction with Telepsychology Platforms

Overall, respondents appeared to be satisfied with their primary telepsychology platform. Note that, for each of these indicators, levels of satisfaction with the platform generally parallel the satisfaction levels reported by participants in the 2020 survey. Specifically:

- 90.1% of respondents rated the audio/visual quality of their platform a "good" or "excellent"
- 93.6% of respondents rated their platform as "reasonably" or "extremely" user-friendly
- 95% of respondents rated their platform as "easy" or "very easy" for their clients to use
- 94% of respondents who used the customer support feature of their platform reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with that support

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- 91.7% of respondents reported being "satisfied" or "very satisfied" with the cost of their platform in relation to its overall features and performance

This consistently high level of satisfaction with the cost of participants' telepsychology platform occurred even though there was a wide variation in terms of the actual monthly subscription fee respondents were paying for their telepsychology platform. Monthly fees per clinician, along with the comparable fee breakdown from the 2020 TiP survey, are presented in Table 4. Respondents were asked to report their fees in Canadian dollars. In light of the wide variety of available platforms, it is possible that respondents tend to choose a platform that aligns with what they are able to afford and are, therefore, satisfied with the cost of that platform. It may be that respondents perceive the more expensive platforms as providing better value for money in terms of what the platform is capable of. This possibility is suggested by the apparent shift towards using more expensive platforms by 2023, compared to the costs of the platforms used in 2020. Alternatively, the apparent shift towards more expensive platforms may actually be a function of existing platforms charging more in 2023 than 2020, rather than representing an actual change in respondents' choice of platform.

Table 4. Self-reported Monthly Subscription Fee of Participants' Teleconferencing Platform, in 2023 and 2020

	2023 Survey (n = 132)	2020 Survey (n = 198)
Free	19.0%	38.0%
$1-25	9.9%	17.6%
$26-50	22.1%	23.6%
51-75	16.0%	6.8%
$75+	32.8%	14.0%

Monitoring and Compliance with Regulations for Telepsychology Practice

Respondents varied widely in how often their platform is reviewed for compliance with regulations, reporting the following options:
- Once (23.7%)
- Annually (25.2%)
- Multiple times per year (12.2%)
- Never (2.9%)
- Don't know (36.0%)

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Although only a few respondents indicated that their platform is never monitored for compliance, the fact that 36% of them do not know about the compliance review process for their platform suggests that the actual proportion of respondents using platforms that are never reviewed may be much higher than 2.9%.
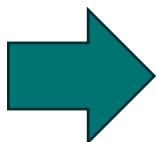
36.0% of respondents don't know about the compliance review process for their telepsychology platform.

Ninety-three respondents also provided additional information describing what they do to monitor and assess the compliance of their current platform with regulations for telepsychology practice. Content analysis of these responses revealed a wide range of activities, with the most frequent category of activities being to conduct reviews of their telepsychology platform (*n* = 38). For example, one respondent stated that they "*review privacy information and certification provided by the telespsych platform. Must continue to see certification documents related to privacy*" and another stated they "*research evolving regulations and compare with current platform to ensure compliance is met or exceeded*."

Another frequently reported category of activity (n = 27) was to familiarize themselves and others in their practice with existing and evolving regulations, standards, and guidelines for telepsychology (e.g., "*continuing to review updates from professional bodies*," "*I meet with administration regularly to review the regulations, and explain what is needed in every day use*," and "*review guidelines with an IT professional to ensure compliance*").

Some participants (n = 17) also sought information and consulted with colleagues and their professional associations to learn more about these issues, for example, "*check with colleagues, CPA and other memberships*" and "*I follow advice of PAA and fellow psychologists*."

Other less frequently reported monitoring/assessment activities included (a) consulting with IT professionals (n = 8), seeking information from other sources such as Reddit and Google (n = 5), conducting formal compliance audits (n = 3), and obtaining feedback from clients (n = 3).

Despite the wide range of activities that were reported by the sample as a whole, 14 respondents reported that they did little or nothing to monitor and assess compliance with regulations for telepsychology practice and an additional five respondents stated that they were not personally involved in the compliance review process in their work setting (e.g., "*my supervisor/employer does this for me*" and "*AHS IT only offers Zoom*").

PAA Support for Telepsychology

The survey contained an item stating, "PAA Collaborate provides access to a PAA members' forum to address telepsychology questions and concerns." Approximately half the respondents

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reported making use of this forum (45.3%), although most of those individuals limited their use to reading posts and only nine respondents (6.4%) reported actively contributing to the forum. Interestingly, these results parallel a question in the 2020 survey about whether respondents would utilize such a forum, with 52.4% of those respondents indicating that they would probably or definitely make use of the forum if it was created (the forum did not exist in 2020).
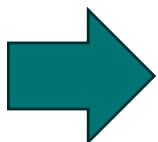
45.3% of respondents report using PAA Collaborate to address telepsychology questions.

Fifty-four of the respondents also answered an open-ended follow-up question asking respondents to identify other ways the PAA could support their telepsychology practice. Content analysis of their responses revealed the most frequent response (n = 15) to be providing opportunities for additional education and training on telepsychology. For example, "*offer no-cost training in this area*," "*collaboration with CAP on educational offerings*," and "*arrange relevant certification courses in Telepsychology, suitable for Canadian jurisdictions*." Similarly, seven participants requested additional information and tools related to telepsychology practice, such as "*more guidelines on best practice (handling emails, sending documents, etc)* " and "*sample consent forms*."

Ten participants made suggestions related to PAA becoming more involved in vetting the suitability of telepsychology platforms by providing a list of telepsychology platforms that are compliant with regulations and/or by conducting ongoing reviews of potential platforms to ensure compliance. As one respondent stated, "*it would be amazing if PAA could do annual audits/updates of the major services/providers and create a spreadsheet/checklist of what each service offers/doesn't offer*."

Some participants also requested that PAA arrange to offer discounts for more telepsychology platforms and/or better discounts than those currently being offered (e.g., "*work together with the better service providers to provide significant discounts,*" "*get me discounts with OWL*," and "*offer discounts beyond the first month of Jane*." However, one participant shared a different perspective about this issue, "*stop trying to sell one particular platform and focus on the general practices applicable to all of them*."

Finally, there were six responses to this question indicating that some participants wanted PAA to become more involved in advocacy related to telepsychology. One specific issue that respondents suggested PAA could become involved in is advocating for expanding the legitimacy of telepsychology within the profession (e.g., "*[telepsychology is a legitimate and needed ongoing service and should be supported as valid and reliable the same as in-person*"). Another issue is advocating to improve regulations related to facilitating practice with clients residing in other jurisdictions (e.g., "*advocate for change in CAP's rules around where client*

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resides. New Brunswick's cross-jurisdictional telepsychology rules would be a good model to follow"). A third advocacy issue that was present in survey responses is advocating to ensure that telepsychology is not over-regulated (e.g., "*make sure we are not being over-regulated*"). Finally, respondents suggested advocating for the creation of more thorough and detailed guidelines to facilitate telepsychology practice (e.g., "*having more firm guidelines on what is internet security …. There isn't really any clarity on what is "secure enough" for elements of our business online*").

Conclusion

Overall, the 2023 Technology in Practice survey provides a snapshot of some of the ways that some PAA members, primarily those who are experienced psychologists working in private practice, engage with telepsychology practice. In light of the voluntary nature of participation in the survey, caution must be taken in terms of generalizing the findings to the entire membership of PAA, or to other psychologists working in Alberta. Furthermore, the survey asked primarily about using computers and the internet to provide services to clients. Other emerging technologies, such as the incorporation of AI into psychology service provision were not addressed. Nonetheless, these data clearly suggest that telepsychology has become a permanent part of the landscape of psychology practice in Alberta. However, it should also be recognized that, for most psychologists who participated in the survey, telepsychology was only a minor part of their practice and was used primarily for providing individual counselling services.

Data from the quantitative and qualitative components converged to reveal a need for more professional development in the area of telepsychology. Although a large majority of respondents reported having obtained some formal training in telepsychology, most also reported receiving relatively limited amounts of training. Also, providing opportunities for additional education and training on telepsychology emerged as the most frequent category of responses to the open-ended question about what the PAA could do to support respondents' telepsychology practice. Based on the survey results, the TiP Task Force recommends that the PAA collaborate with other organizations in Alberta to develop additional training in telepsychology service provision and professional development related to ensuring the technologies used by psychologists are compliant with regulatory standards.

It was also evident from the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey that there is a desire among some PAA members for the PAA to take a stronger leadership role in the development and implementation of telepsychology services in Alberta. One potential leadership opportunity is for the PAA to coordinate with the College of Alberta Psychologists and possibly the Canadian Psychological Association to advance telepsychology practice in ways that are both beneficial to members of the profession and maximize protection of the public. Additional leadership opportunities that the PAA could initiate on its own include

   a. conducting a systematic review of how other psychology governing bodies and professional associations address telepsychology and

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b. conducting another technology in practice survey three years from now to assess ongoing trends and potential new directions for technology use in psychology practice that may emerge in the next few years.

Ultimately, the 2023 technology in practice survey suggests that telepsychology is now a permanent part of the overall landscape of psychology service provision in Alberta and, consequently, it will be beneficial to monitor psychologists' engagement with this modality for practice on an ongoing basis.

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