Reviewer's report

Title: The working alliance in a randomized controlled trial comparing online with face-to-face cognitive-behavioral therapy for depression

Version: 2 Date: 22 September 2011

Reviewer: Thomas Berger

Reviewer's report:

The authors responded appropriately to all my suggestions. The manuscript benefited from adding WAI mid-treatment scores. However, there are still some issues which makes me suggest to accept the paper after minor but essential revisions.

Minor essential revisions:

1. Abstract (Method): It could be mentioned that therapist ratings of the WAI were also administered.

2. Abstract (Results): The statement that "significant correlations were found between clients' ratings of the working alliance and therapy outcome in both groups" could be more specific. Results show that only the working alliance at post-treatment is significantly associated with outcome in both groups.

3. Abstract (Results): The sentence that "results from multiple regression analysis showed a significant influence of the pre-treatment depression score on the post-treatment depression score in the face-to-face group and a significant influence of the pre-treatment depression score on the depression change score in the online group" could also be reformulated or even deleted. Just by reading the abstract it does not become clear why the authors investigated the pre-treatment score as a potential predictor since the whole paper is about the alliance. It should become clear that WAI scores were not predicting post-test or change scores anymore, when controlling for pre-treatment scores.

4. Method (Procedure / Exclusion criteria): One of the exclusion criterion was: "other psychiatric disorder". Which one? Others than psychotic and bipolar disorders? If yes, how were they assessed? Low symptom severity is another exclusion criterion. The reader could be provided with the cut-off score.

5. Method (Outcome measures): I am not sure if it is good to present the WAI under the title "outcome measure" because by adding WAI mid-treatment scores, the WAI is not just an outcome measure anymore.

6. Discussion: From my point of view, the fact that the WAI at mid-treatment was not substantially and significantly correlated with outcome in the online group should be discussed in more detail. To some extend, the discussion ignores these results. For instance, the authors write that "our results are in line with previous research by Knaevelsrud and Maercker, who found correlations
between the working alliance early in the treatment and treatment outcome in an online setting”. BTW, wasn't it the working alliance late in treatment in the Knaevelsrud and Maercker study? However, the discussion should also be about questions such as "why is it, that the mid-treatment WAI was significantly correlated with outcome in the FtF group but not in the online group?"

**Level of interest:** An article of importance in its field

**Quality of written English:** Acceptable

**Statistical review:** No, the manuscript does not need to be seen by a statistician.

**Declaration of competing interests:**

I declare that I have no competing interests