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: 2 October 2011

Reviewer: Brjánn Ljótsson

Reviewer’s report:

By adding the mid-treatment WAI-score to the paper, it is of much larger interest. However, there are still some issues regarding the formulation of objectives and how the statistics are used to answer the research questions. In my pdf I can’t see what revision that have been made to the manuscript. Have the authors not used "track changes" or a similar function?

MAJOR COMPULSORY REVISIONS

p16. Second paragraph & Table 4. It doesn’t make sense to add all three WAI composite scores (mid-treatment, post-treatment and therapist post-treatment) into the same regression model. They should not compete with each other. I agree with with the other reviewer's point that the simplest solution would be to let the different WAI scores predict the residual BDI gain scores, then the multiple regressions could be dropped and also the BDI change score as outcome. Table 3 with BDI-pre as covariate in all correlations between the WAI-scores and BDI-post would suffice to present the results. It would make the data interpretation much more straightforward without losing any informative value (following this recommendation would of course require some rewriting).

MINOR ESSENTIAL REVISIONS

Abstract. Results: Instead of writing about the influence of pre-treatment score BDI on post-treatment score (not part of any research question), it is enough to state that WAI did not predict outcome when entered into a multiple regression analysis together with BDI baseline score.

Abstract. Conclusions: Add a sentence about the failure of the WAI to predict outcome.

p7. Second paragraph. I am unsure how to interpret the second part of the second objective of the study, specifically "which treatment was the better predictor of the therapeutic alliance". I am guessing that what the authors mean to say is "if the predictive value of the alliance on the treatment outcome differed between the two treatments". This is never formally tested. Perhaps skip this part of the second objective?

p8. Second paragraph. Remove all double reporting of data that is found in Table 1 (essentially the whole paragraph)
p15. The second paragraph ("Therapy outcome...") repeats information in the analysis section - suggest removing.

Table 3. I changed my mind about adding the BDI-pre correlations to Table 1 - it doesn’t make much sense. Right now this addition does not seem to be alluded to in the text, which makes it easy to remove.

p15. Last paragraph (cont’d on p16). Remove double-reporting of correlations already in Table 3. Summarize the important (significant) results perhaps with intervals of correlations.

p18. First paragraph. If the authors want to use reference 47 in this context they should state clearer that it refers to online romantic relationships.

DISCRETIONARY REVISIONS

p5. Last paragraph: "...were not allocated at random to..." -> "...were not randomly allocated to..."

p7. Second paragraph "...was based on the German CBT treatment manual..." -> "...was based on a German CBT treatment manual..."

p10. First paragraph. Just double-checking if ref 32 pertains to both the "Biographical Information Questionnaire" and "Dutch Screening Device for Psychotic Disorder"

p12. Second paragraph. "Life-review" is written with and without hyphen.

p14. Third paragraph. "Depression levels were measured in terms of..." -> "Treatment outcome was assessed as..." (or similar)

Level of interest: An article whose findings are important to those with closely related research interests

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