





# Telepsychology in France Following the COVID-19 Crisis

## From Changes in Practice to Ethical Considerations

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**Abstract:** *Introduction:* In cyberpsychology, telepsychology means providing psychological services using telecommunication technologies. Telepsychology has been increasingly implemented since the late 1990s. The Covid-19 crisis led to an acceleration in telepsychology practices, as evidenced by the major survey of psychologists' online practices of the eHealth project group of the European Federation of Psychologists' Associations (EFPA) in 2020. The crisis also allowed professional psychology organizations to frame telepsychology practices and disseminate existing recommendations more widely. *Methods:* This article aims to report on the specific situation in France, based on several sources of data: the original approach of the Fédération Française des Psychologues et de Psychologie to French psychologists; data provided by the EFPA's e-health project group's European survey; and data from a survey carried out in France. *Results:* The resulting analysis underlines the importance of ethical issues for the necessary regulation of practices. *Discussion:* The ethical dimensions of telepsychology call for sustained reflection about the professional framework of psychologists' regulation in this evolving context. *Conclusion:* A discussion about the regulation of telepsychology is already going on in Europe, though it varies from country to country. The lack of training of psychologists in telepsychology remains to be addressed in the future.

**Keywords:** telepsychology, France, Covid-19, recommendations, ethical considerations

## Introduction: An Evolution of Telepsychology Practices?

Telepsychology and remote practices were undoubtedly shaped by the specific context of Covid-19: The health crisis led many psychologists working in institutions or private practice to adapt their working methods to the confinement constraints. They often had to use new means of communication and familiarize themselves with technological tools in their daily professional practice. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, these changes took place simultaneously as the fragility and psychological problems of the population were increasing because of the crisis. Nevertheless, this major shift in psychological practice toward remote care had already been underway for some time before the crisis.

Along with the spread of information and communication technologies throughout society, there had already been a

significant shift toward remote care, covering a range of listening, counseling, and support practices. This development contributed to a growing awareness of the notion of “mental health” and led to a diversification of tools and services (as evidenced, for example, by the explosion in the number of websites dedicated to telepsychology) (Mathieu-Fritz, 2018).

Telepsychology services were being offered using different media (apps, websites) and employing different types of communication (written, verbal, and videoconferencing). The frameworks of these remote interventions are multiple (psychological assessment, individual or group psychotherapy follow-up) (Haddouk, 2016). The use of these digital tools made it possible to provide greater accessibility to people who, because of geographical distance or physical or mental disability, had difficulty accessing a mental health service.

Some international studies have assessed the effectiveness of telepsychotherapy, albeit often with populations

with specific disorders, such as generalized anxiety disorder (Watts et al., 2020). The literature also contains several meta-analyses of the effectiveness of telepsychology (Hilty et al., 2013; McClellan et al., 2021). However, these studies are not exhaustive and need further development.

In this context, an initiative led by the Fédération Française des Psychologues et de Psychologie (Lise Haddouk and Benoît Schneider) proposed an inventory of current practices with four main objectives: 1) to support French psychologists in the Covid-19 crisis, at a time when many were turning to telepsychology unprepared; 2) to take stock of research and practice in the field of telepsychology; 3) to attempt to identify changes in psychologists' practices during the Covid-19 crisis, with a particular focus on highlighting French specificities in an international context; 4) to contribute to ethical reflection by analyzing the institutional mechanisms that regulate the practices of psychologists and professionals in the field. The direct support for psychologists included 1) disseminating scientific and ethical information – still currently available on the website of the Fédération Française des Psychologues et de Psychologie (#psychoenaction; FFPP, 2020a), 2) drawing up a charter for platforms offering telepsychology services (2020), 3) preparing a recommendation sheet for the Haute Autorité de Santé (2020), and 4) organizing a 2-day teleconference on telepsychology in January and March 2021. In this context, a collective work was published to disseminate this approach in France (Haddouk & Schneider, 2022).

To enrich our approach, we drew inspiration and input from the international contributions of our EFPA colleagues, regarding both data from surveys carried out in various European countries (eHealth Project Group, led by Tom Van Daele) and ethical reflections (Board of Ethics, led by Fredi Lang).

This paper further details this French approach, which we think can constitute a useful case study for international reflection. Compared to other European countries, France was initially relatively unprepared for the coming changes in practices and training. Paradoxically, however, an initial consolidation at the regulatory level at the onset of the pandemic proved to be beneficial for the uptake of technology in psychological practice.

## Evolution of International Research and Practices

Since 2013, the American Psychological Association (Joint Task Force for the Development of Telepsychology Guidelines for Psychologists, 2013) and the Ordre des Psychologues du Québec (OPQ, 2013) have defined telepsychology as providing psychological services via telecommuni-

cations. Scientifically, telepsychology first developed in North America with the introduction of clinical research protocols via videoconferencing in the United States (Maheu & Gordon, 2000) and Canada (Bouchard et al., 2004), with the main goal of making psychotherapy accessible to populations geographically distant from care structures. Numerous studies have since validated the effectiveness of this type of treatment, often with a CBT approach targeting different disorders such as panic disorder (Bouchard et al., 2004, Bouchard et al., 2020) or anxiety and depression (Stubbing et al., 2013). From an epistemological perspective, the research produced in North America is generally behavioral in nature, although other studies, particularly French ones, have also made room for psychodynamic approaches (Haddouk, 2016). However, this work deserves further investigation, especially as recent research has shown that telepsychology not only has the potential to improve access to care, but that practitioners' attitudes toward this innovation also play a critical role in its adoption (Connolly et al., 2020; Parisi et al., 2021).

## The Evolution of Practices in the European Context

Mental health interventions using telepsychology have accumulated evidence over the last decades (Varker et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2017; Nelson et al., 2011). Before the Covid-19 crisis, many professionals remained skeptical or took a wait-and-see approach.

The physical distance and containment measures associated with the pandemic created a demand for remote care services. This context has thus represented an indisputable turning point for telepsychology, since it led many psychologists to acquire (initial) experience with technology in their clinical practice and invited patients to adapt to this new care modality (Wind et al., 2020).

The EFPA established the Project Group eHealth in 2015, which set up an online survey on the use of online consultations in Europe conducted between March 18 and May 5, 2020, to document the specific challenges faced by psychologists in the context of the unfolding pandemic (De Witte et al., 2021). Table 1 presents extracts from the detailed results obtained in the 18 participating countries.

The results show significant differences in the practice of online consultations before the crisis. France and Belgium had the lowest rate of all the countries surveyed (just under a quarter of psychologists). Many countries doubled this rate during the crisis. However, there were also different levels of reservations about future practice. The most frequently mentioned reservations by professionals, especially in the open question, concerned relational aspects, practice with certain age groups such as children,

**Table 1.** Availability of online consultations as of 2020 survey date

Country	N	Previous experience	Current service	No intention to offer service
Belgium	250	23.7	66.8	16.4
France	250	24.8	41.2	38.8
Germany	167	28.9	49.7	27.5
Italy	250	37.2	77.6	12.8
Netherlands	81	46.9	80.2	3.7
Norway	250	33.6	74.8	14.0
Portugal	250	37.7	58.8	22.4
Spain	31	58.1	64.5	16.1
Sweden	250	51.2	47.6	26.8

Note. The number of subjects was limited to 250 participants drawn at random when  $N > 250$ .

the difficulty of dealing with nonverbal behavior and emotions, (non-)relevance for certain target groups or disorders, and the effectiveness of the technique.

The qualitative analysis was carried out at the national level by 14 native researchers who were experts in psychology and familiar with the local context of each participating country, each of whom processed anonymized data relating to their country based on a coding model common to all countries, with coding instructions. Any coding ambiguities were discussed with the principal investigator, and a consensus was reached. This led to an aggregated dataset and frequency analyses to compare responses within and between countries.

The following sections discuss some factors contributing to these differences between countries.

## The Specificity of France in the European Context

Using the data from the same survey (De Witte et al., 2021), we examine the comparative specificity of France based on two types of data: 1) the motivations expressed for (not) setting up online consultations and 2) the relationship between these expressed motivations and prior training in telepsychology.

Regarding the *motivations for starting telepsychology*, we observe (Figure 1) a heterogeneity of responses from psychologists in different European countries. Compared to France (49%), public health is reported as a more important reason in the United Kingdom, Belgium, Denmark, and Finland (around 75%). Another important motivation is access to care (56%), where in France the percentage is also lower (40%). Motivations such as “client demand” or “income” are mentioned by a quarter of respondents. France, Austria, and Portugal stand out for their “openness to telepsychology” motivation, which seems stronger than in the other countries.

We explored ten possible reasons for not starting telepractice (Figure 2). In France, as in other European

countries, the main reasons given were: “Not as effective as face-to-face” and “I am not equipped.” However, with an average of 15% or more, these motivations are more common in France than in other European countries (around 5%). Motivations such as “I don’t like telepsychology,” “I don’t see the added value,” “Clients do not want online consultations,” and “I don’t know how to use this technique” seem to be more common in France (around 5%) than in other European countries (on average 3%).

It is interesting to relate these findings on psychologists’ motivations and fears regarding telepsychology to data gathered on training (Figure 3). Countries in which psychologists had little experience with telepsychology before the Covid-19 pandemic are those in which telepsychology-specific training had not been disseminated to the broader professional community. On a smaller scale, Italy and Germany also had not widely disseminated telepsychology-specific training. Similarly, online consultation was only moderately practiced in these countries before the Covid-19 pandemic.

Furthermore, in preparation for the colloquium in 2021 mentioned in the Introduction, the FFPP and the Association des Enseignants-Chercheurs en Psychologie des Universités (AEPU) organized an online survey in the spring of 2020. The survey targeted practitioners who may or may not have had telepsychology experience before the Covid-19 crisis (Schneider & Gaucher, 2022) (see Table 2).

The survey focused on (1) respondents’ practices in using distance learning and (2) their perceptions of the conditions of “distance internships” for students, in the specific context of the Covid-19 crisis. Part (1) aimed to assess the extent to which psychologists had integrated distance practice into their activities at the time of the survey and how they envisioned it in the future. The questionnaire was posted online between January 25 and March 8, 2021. We received 519 questionnaires, 511 of which were usable. The 397 responses from practitioners represent 77.7% of the overall total.

This has allowed us to compare some of the data from the two surveys in this rapidly evolving field. A comparison of

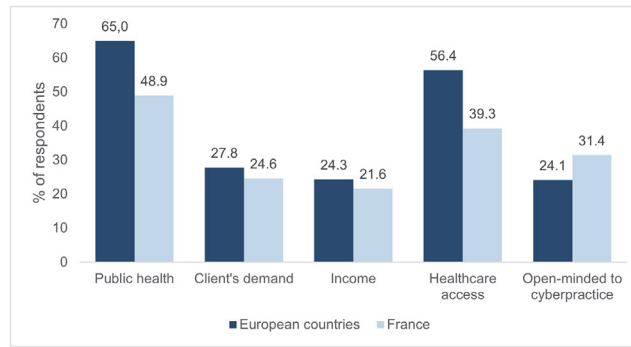


Figure 1. Motivations for commencing with online consultations.

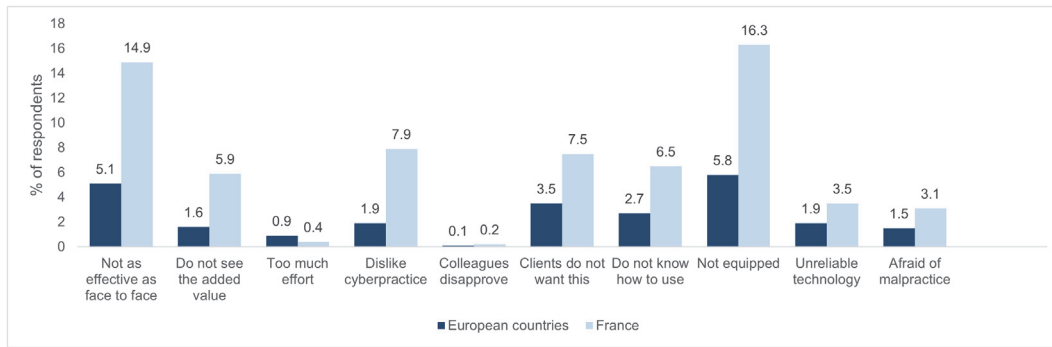


Figure 2. Motivations for not commencing with online consultations.

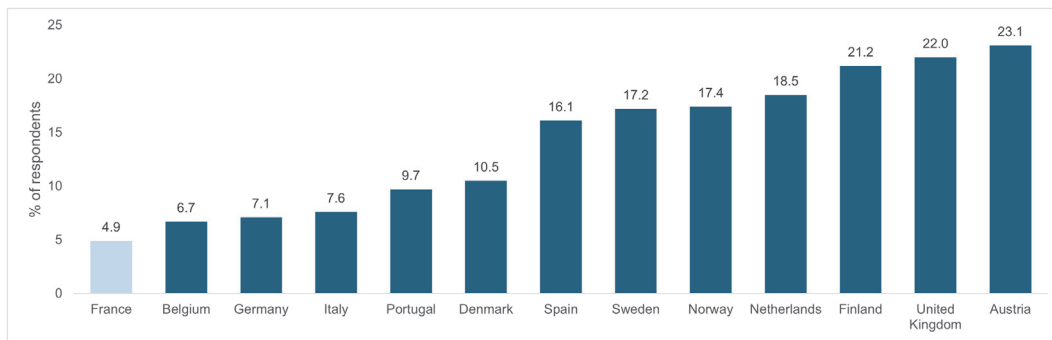


Figure 3. Psychologists with prior specific training in telepsychology and/or online consultations.

Table 2. Overview of psychologists' time working remotely (% of total working time) and different functions (% compared to total study sample) (FFPP-AEPU survey with N = 397 practitioners, 2021)

Time working online	None	< 10%	10–50%	51–90%	> 90%	Total online
Before	92.9	6.0	1.0	0.0	0.0	7.0
During	28.2	33.5	21.2	10.6	6.5	71.8
After	54.4	30.7	14.4	0.5	0.0	45.6
Functions	Internal meetings	Patient consultations	External meetings	Colleague consultations	Administration	Other
Before	4.8	3.5	4.0	0.5	0.1	1.0
During	57.4	39.5	33.8	19.4	15.4	13.4
After	35.0	19.9	24.6	8.6	10.1	5.0

the results of the two surveys shows a significant increase in the use of telepsychology in France, particularly since the Covid-19 pandemic. This trend seems to have continued beyond the Covid-19 crisis, as shown by the 2021 survey. It appears that telepsychology is becoming a complementary tool in the daily practice of psychologists.

## Ethical Considerations: The Dynamic Between Regulation and Normative Rules

Against the background of extremely rapid developments in technologies, practices, and knowledge related to telepsychology, the ethical dimensions of this field of intervention call for sustained reflection: How to regulate the professional framework of psychologists in this emerging and evolving context?

These questions must first be addressed in the context of practice regulation. In France, regarding state regulation, the practice of online consultations among psychiatrists has been encouraged nationally through telemedicine, with political and financial support from the state. As early as 2009, telemedicine was recognized by the French “Hôpital, Patients, Santé et Territoire” law, and in 2018, the funding of teleconsultation and tele-expertise became part of common law. However, teleconsultation in psychiatry remains moderate (Massé et al., 2006), although it has risen sharply with the Covid-19 crisis, as it has for psychologists (DiMaggio, 2020).

From a regulatory point of view, the use of the professional title in France is regulated, but not the practices. The regulation of telepsychology practices is therefore a question of use standards. Many countries and institutions more advanced than France have been producing “recommendations” for many years, such as those of the APA (American Psychological Association) for telepsychology published in 2013. The EFPA produced its first guide on the digital practices of psychologists in 2006, which has been updated in 2023 (EFPA Board of Ethics, 2023). EFPA’s eHealth Project Group has proposed 25 recommendations for 2021 aimed at three categories of actors: psychotherapists, health services and regulators, and developers.

Unsurprisingly, the general observation seems to confirm a link between the level of recognition of psychologists’ activities and the framing of digital activities. Norway and Sweden, for example, have a reimbursement system for digital interventions as well as guidelines from their national health authorities on which platforms to use. In France, therefore, the framework for psychologists’ activities is not very restricted by the state. However, when a

reimbursement scheme for psychologists’ consultations was introduced in 2022, the framework decree defined the conditions under which remote practices were authorized (the initial interview must be conducted in person, and no more than 20% of the psychologist’s activity may be conducted remotely). In addition, the Haute Autorité Santé (HAS), a government institution whose mission is to formulate “recommendations of good practice” that are potent reference standards, offers a framework in the context of telemedicine, including mental health practices such as telepsychiatry, which is original in Europe. The HAS has also widely adopted the recommendations the FFPP itself disseminated to psychologists.

In France, the profession also has a Code of Ethics. Although not enshrined in law – which weakens it – it is widely accepted by the profession and has been consolidated by case law. The code is regularly updated: The 2012 update first mentioned the case of online consultations, albeit modestly (in only one of its 55 articles), and the 2021 update did not give it greater prominence. Thus, the collective normative support remains weak.

However, the outbreak of the Covid-19 crisis presented an opportunity for the FFPP to adopt an original approach called “Psychoenaction.” This initiative aimed to create a dedicated website that is regularly updated and organized in “dossiers” (FFPP, 2020b, 2020c) to answer the various questions and expectations of psychologists, institutions, and clients in telepsychology. Two of the dossiers proposed were explicitly dedicated to telepsychology: 1) One presented a set of recommendations for psychologists regarding telepsychology, based on the work mentioned above (in particular the EFPA documents). 2) The other reported on an initiative initiated by the FFPP and the SNP (Syndicat National des Psychologues) to promote the quality of online consultation platforms and ensure the protection of users, whether professionals or clients; this created a model charter to structure the relationship between psychologists and the platform they use. This charter has since been adopted by seven platforms and supported by 13 professional organizations. This approach and these recommendations have been widely disseminated and adopted by the HAS, as mentioned above (FFPP, 2020c). However, it is currently difficult to assess the long-term effect of these initiatives, especially since we do not have a refined assessment of the long-term impact of the increase in telepsychology practices and their methods some 2 years after the crisis.

These elements illustrate that the ethical questions surrounding the use of telepsychology in France have arisen rapidly since the Covid-19 pandemic. The lack of regulation of these new practices underscores the importance of ethical reflections on telepsychology in France, but also more broadly in Europe and worldwide, especially since

the very principle of teleconsultation challenges the notion of boundaries.

In France, a more sustained reflection on the various aspects of the digital practices of psychologists would seem to be beneficial in establishing clearer benchmarks, notably in the forthcoming code of ethics. Such an approach should be based on the meta-code of the digital practices of psychologists proposed by EFPA and adapted to the practices of professionals in France.

## Strengths and Limitations

This article assesses the use of telepsychology in France, in the specific context of the COVID-19 pandemic, to contribute to our knowledge about the purpose of telepsychology research and its relevance in the European context. The French data stem from a national survey we conducted to enable a comparison with a European survey to which French psychologists also contributed.

The interest of these studies lies in the fact that they are innovative in Europe – and here in France in particular – and have allowed us to take an enlightened first approach. The limitations of our data stem from the comparative design of the studies within their specific frameworks, as they are based, for example, on different questions posed to participants not recruited in the same way. Further, they were conducted in the particular context of the pandemic, which makes it possible to report on the emergence of new trends while also making it difficult to assess their evolution over time.

This type of survey should, therefore, be repeated in the (more or less) near future, though the critical methodological analysis should first be based on the criteria of contextual change we chose to focus on, taking care to consider, at a comparative level, changes common to and specific to the countries under consideration. That is why our results suggest establishing national and international monitoring of the use of telepsychology and the populations concerned. Our results also show that professional and ethical regulations must be strengthened in the future, especially in France.

## Conclusion

The societal changes experienced since the Covid-19 pandemic have impacted clients' requests for help and the psychological practices of professionals. Among these developments, the remote practices of psychologists have experienced significant growth, not only in France but worldwide. Although telepsychology exists as a field of clinical practice and as a field of research developed within the broader field of cyberpsychology, most work has been done in North America over the last 30 years.

In Europe, there is some discussion about the regulation of telepsychology, but this varies from country to country, depending on the extent to which these practices were accepted before the Covid-19 crisis. In France, the results of the surveys we have presented show that psychology professionals are open to these practices but are poorly trained, both clinically and regarding theoretical knowledge, although the links between information, training, and acceptance of telepsychology are recognized (Connolly et al., 2020; Haddouk et al., 2023; McKee et al., 2021; Parisi et al., 2021). Among the many problems related to the regulation of telepsychology, the lack of training of psychologists in telepsychology remains an issue that needs to be addressed in the future. This includes knowledge of the data generated by both digital communications and the current and future healthcare system. It is worth noting that some initiatives are beginning to emerge in Europe, such as the CYBER Erasmus Mundus Master program (Cyber, 2022).

Ultimately, however, any regulation and training must be considered in light of the ethical issues raised by these new forms of practice. It, therefore, seems essential to observe the professionals' practices to better understand the situations they face in cyberspace. The two research projects we have relied on are based on the collection of professionals' experiences. It seems commendable to continue such initiatives more regularly, especially in the wake of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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The data presented in this study are available on request from the corresponding author.

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