CONFERENCE REPORT

Becoming a hopper: Research-practice-training synergy

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Going the distance: From psychotherapy research to practice and back

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def: Synergy comes from the Greek word synergia, meaning:

(Source: http://vipdictionary.com)

1. joint work and cooperative action. Synergy is when the result is greater than the sum of the parts. Synergy is created when things work in concert together to create an outcome that is in some way of more value than the total of what the individual inputs is.

2. the interaction or cooperation of two or more organisations, substances, or other agents to produce a combined effect greater than the sum of their separate effects.

(Source: Adams, 2013; Oxford Dictionary, 2013)
STARTING WITH A CHECKLIST

This was my first foray as an academic into the world of the overseas international conference. And what a journey leaving OR Tambo at 10:30pm and arriving at the other end of the earth at 10:30pm Brisbane time. A day on planes is sufficient time to cover all the anxieties of a novice academic’s presentation: Is my presentation on my memory stick? (Yes). On the other memory stick? (Yes). Have I “gmailed” the presentations to myself? (Yes). Have I got my passport? (Yes). Have I got my payment confirmation of conference registration? (Yes). Can I back out now? (NO!)

A MIXED BREED?: PSYCHOTHERAPISTS AND RESEARCHERS

Prior to the SPR Brisbane conference, I had heard many aspiring and registered psychologists bemoan the stranglehold of research and evidence-based research on the profession of psychotherapy. Pillay and Kritzinger (2007) found that a sample of 137 South African clinical psychologists took between six months and 14 years to complete their masters’ dissertation with the average respondent taking three years instead of doing so within the stipulated two year time frame; and almost 30 per cent of respondents took more than one year longer. Furthermore, about one-third of the respondents held a negative or indifferent view towards research. Alarmingly, almost three-quarters of the clinical psychologists surveyed felt that their research had a minimal bearing on their practice as clinical psychologists despite their clinical training being couched within the “scientist-practitioner” model of training. My main impetus for writing this report is to argue that the practising psychotherapist has much to offer and gain from research!

1. Research is an organised narrative of therapists and clients.

When I perused the programme of the SPR Brisbane conference, presentations abounded on what clinicians did with clients in the privacy of their consultation rooms. Amongst over 280 presentations from 28 countries, compelling presentations included the impact of adolescent suicide on the family, how the therapist’s attachment style will interplay with the attachment style of their clients, and even the impact of the TV series *In Treatment* on the profession.

2. Research is a platform to ensure psychotherapeutic work with clients radically changes society on a macro-level.

Research as a way to change society is not a grandiose delusion of academia. One need only look at Project Air: A Personality Disorders Strategy that aims to enhance the provision of treatment and treatment options for people with personality disorders, their families, and caregivers taken up by the provincial New South Wales
government in Australia to see the change potential. In response to the 1-3.5% of
Australians with Borderline Personality Disorder, project research has spearheaded
national treatment guidelines (Australian Government National Health and Medical
Research Council, 2013).

Brin Greyner, of the University of Wollongong, spoke of how weekly
psychotherapy that is strategically offered to patients with personality disorders
for a year saves the Australian government millions of dollars a year and actively
challenges the revolving door effect so prevalent amongst patients who have multiple
hospital admissions without much improvement (refer to http://ihmri.uow.edu.au/
projectairstrategy/ourresearch/index.html). Indeed, research when undertaken in our
South African context holds the potential to formulate relevant treatment guidelines
and inform our government health policies.

3. Contemporary research can predict and inform actual sessional success with clients.
Christopher Muran of Adelphi University, through his research on the therapeutic
alliance between client and therapist, has found key optimum predictors of treatment
outcome. For example, three sessions are needed with adolescents to determine
whether the client will buy into therapy and at termination enjoy a successful outcome.

4. Research introduces a fine-grained understanding of how to train psychotherapists.
The main reason for me trekking Down Under was to meet and learn from the
leading international researchers in the professional development of psychotherapists
(Skovholt & Rønnestad, 1995; Orlinsky & Rønnestad, 2005). It was exciting to
attend a pre-conference workshop where the formidable quarto of David Orlinsky,
Louis Castonguay, Bernhard Strauss and Jan Carlsson presented an ambitious
research project: The longitudinal study of psychotherapy trainees: Designing a
collaborative SPR project. The proposed project is set to involve four phases focused
on interrogating the development of psychotherapists within their initial training
contexts across the world through a number of mechanisms: a detailed report on
programme conceptualisation, self-reports of trainees, supervisor’s reports of the
trainee’s progress and potentially the personality or cognitive assessment of trainees.

5. Research, alongside theory, training, and practice brings about synergy for psychotherapy.
Specifically, Fishman (2013) advocates for a conscious and concerted synergy in the
profession of psychotherapy arguing that “research helps to identify and document
‘best practice’ principles and procedures; practice is most effective when it
incorporates these; and training is most effective when the didactics taught to trainees and their clinical practicum experiences are based on the best practices identified with research” (p. 9). As advocated by Louis Castonguay of Penn University, by pooling resources, clinicians and researchers can use university psychology training clinics as a hive for both practice and research.

6. Presenting one’s research makes psychology become alive!

What SPR Brisbane offered was an opportunity to share two aspects of my work as a psychologist. The first being my key research interest of the professional development of psychotherapists (Laidlaw, 2010), and second, my therapeutic work with clients: *Children who run with a “wolf”: Short-term psychoanalytic therapy of junior primary school children utilising a puppet as a transitional object.* I found that beyond the nerves, the advantage of presenting offers the clinician the opportunity to feel personally and professionally affirmed beyond the privacy of the consulting room. One experiences a sense of belonging to something really big that is meaningful; that psychology matters to people across the globe from South Korea to Memphis, USA.

As I write this report, I am visualising all the locked cabinets of case files and reports. Evidence of help archived away – gathering dust and disintegrating into yellowed faded pages. A rather distressing thought! The one thing that I realised sitting in Queensland, listening to presentations from psychologists from around the globe, is that South African psychologists have much to offer. Claire Cartwright from the University of Auckland used her training workshops on countertransference with master’s students at different universities (Cartwright, 2011; Cartwright & Read, 2011). Data based on her workshop evaluation forms were collected to see how trainee psychotherapists work with clients and to see the benefits of the therapist becoming aware of, and working with their own personal feelings conjured up in the therapy room. Besides the gems regarding countertransference, I walked away with this key realisation: Any aspect of our work as psychologists whether teaching students, conducting parenting workshops, presenting at a ward conference or even sharing our personal lived experiences in this profession is pre-research material. And, more importantly, this material constructed into research will ultimately return to grow the profession.

THE KANGAROO HOP

Besides feeding a kangaroo by hand and seeing joeys snuggled in their mothers’ pouches, the take-away from SPR Brisbane, for me, was the image that Programme Chair Hadas Wiseman, of the University of Haifa offered a kangaroo jumping across the world map from Freud’s office in Vienna to a research hospital in the United States of America to a school in Australia and then back and forth. Indeed, the discipline of
psychology is actively shuttling from practice to research and back again. Become a member of SPR and I hope to see you hop over to SPR Denmark in 2014!

BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE

Christine Laidlaw is involved in teaching introductory psychology for first year psychology students, psychopathology courses for third year and honours students as well as supervising master’s students’ research in the Department of Psychology at Unisa. As a registered Clinical Psychologist she has a part-time private practice in Pretoria and Johannesburg. Her current doctoral studies are in describing a career lifespan professional therapeutic developmental model of South African psychologists. Her interests include personality development, psychopathology, psychoanalytic therapies, sandplay and social constructionism.

REFERENCES


