How do therapists learn to become therapists: A literature review

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As the prevalence of psychological diseases continues to increase (WHO, 2009), the study and application of psychotherapy becomes especially important. Thus, there is a growing need to merge research in the fields of psychotherapy, education and supervision.

Developing a psychotherapeutic competence largely appears to develop implicitly (Buchholz, 2007; Jacobsson et al., 2012). To a significant extent, a psychotherapeutic competence appears to be comprised of procedural knowledge (Nielsen & Kvåle, 2000).

Main research questions: What is the scope and quality of available research? What is considered known and unknown about how therapists learn what is required of them as practicing psychotherapists?

Publications from the year 2000 until October 2014. Research published in English and German and in the Nordic languages. Search terms were conceived based on familiarity with the research literature and selected after consulting the official mail-list of the Society for Psychotherapy research.

Search performed through the ProQuest platform, including databases: ASFA: Aquatic Sciences and Fisheries Abstracts, ebrary® ebooks, ERIC, International Bibliography of Art (IBA), International, Bibliography of the Social Sciences (IBSS), Linguistics and Language Behavior Abstracts (LBA), Meteorological & Geophysical Abstracts, PILOTS: Published International Literature On Traumatic Stress, ProQuest Dissertations & Theses A&I, PsycARTICLES, PsycBOOKS, PsycCRITIQUES, PsycINFO, Social Services Abstracts, Sociological Abstracts, The Vogue Archive.

Selection criteria

A list of operationally defined criteria, conceived and employed by the first and last authors, was used to identify relevant publications among references generated by the database search terms. The inclusion criteria were as follows (see table 1): (1) A reference is relevant if the focus is on the process of learning among psychotherapists; (2) Explicit focus on how therapists and supervisors learn; (3) Explicit focus when learning takes place; (4) Review articles; (5) Empirical studies.

For the relevance rating process a sample of 422 publications was used for training consensus decision. The final inter-rater agreement (Cohen’s Kappa) was very strong (κ = 0.8). All subsequent classification of references deemed relevant for the purpose of the present study was done by either the first or the last author.

Results

The first evaluation of the relevant journal articles revealed that the research publications showed a lack of focus on the learning processes when becoming a psychotherapist. The articles focused on contents of the education and external factors, rather than variables describing the process of learning psychotherapeutic competences.

Review notes

There was a shift during the last decade from mainly theory-based studies to empirical studies on supervision. Earlier studies were mainly theory-based and the identification of factors relevant for supervision was based on clinical observations.

Today the idea of evidence-based supervision is becoming increasingly relevant.

The criterion of patient progress is brought into question as a relevant indicator for the capacities of the therapist.

During the last five years studies have emerged discussing the effects of applying new techniques and media to supervision (e.g. videos, internet-based supervision via Skype).

Little is known about the timing of learning processes. No studies could be found dealing with the question, when “learning” takes place.

Most studies focus on the content of what has to be learned and do not consider the process of how the contents are learned by the psychotherapy recipients.

Current status and trends

There remains an emphasis in the literature on what should be learned, rather than how it should be learned. Furthermore, there is a clear lack of empirical research. Only a few studies employ a quantitative approach to measure the construct in question.

Ultimately, the need to develop evidence-based psychotherapy education, as well as to evaluate the effects of new media, still remains.

References


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