

Developing a Research Mind in Body Psychotherapy

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Received 8 February 2019; revised 5 March 2019; accepted 14 March 2019

ABSTRACT

The following presentation addresses aspects of the relation between research and clinical practice in body psychotherapy (BPT) as those have been described in the related literature. It addresses the subject of case studies, as a field where the research, as well as the clinical mind, can be trained and developed. It also refers to a work in progress organized by the Scientific Committee of the Greek Association for Body Psychotherapy (PESOPS), focused on informing and encouraging its members to write and publish case studies.

Keywords: research in BPT, clinical practice in BPT, case studies and EABP guidelines, developing a research mind

International Body Psychotherapy Journal *The Art and Science of Somatic Praxis*

Volume 18, Number 1, Spring 2019 pp. 100 - 105

ISSN 2169-4745 Printing, ISSN 2168-1279 Online

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This presentation is based on a pre-congress workshop given by Dr. Herbert Grassmann during the EABP Congress in Athens in 2016. Dr. Grassmann emphasized the need to develop the field of research in the EABP National Associations and introduced us to questions such as:

1. How could we, as psychotherapists, and especially as body psychotherapists, explore our own existing research skills, thus cultivating a research-friendly attitude?
2. How could we share and compare our tools with others?
3. How could we communicate to the scientific world what is really clinically important within the practice of body psychotherapy?

The workshop was received with great interest, and the request emerged to form a group, or network, where research topics could be addressed, where we could reflect on how to conceptualize what happens in the therapeutic process, and how we can train ourselves to describe and translate our work for other professional contexts.

In preparation for this presentation, I chose an orienting idea with which I have felt connected since my student years – *Die Fröhliche Wissenschaft, La Gaia Scienza / The Gay Science, The Joyful Wisdom* – by Friedrich Nietzsche. The book begins with a self-appeal to the affirmation of life and thought – *amor fati* – to love one's own destiny or fate. Nietzsche writes:

"My equation for human splendour is *amor fati*: not wanting something to be different from what it is, neither in the future nor in the past, nor in all eternity. Not only to

tolerate that which is necessary, even less, to conceal it – but also to love it" (*The School of Life*, 2016).

Nietzsche claimed this approach long before the importance of mindfulness in the healing process had been acknowledged and documented by neuroscience research.

According to scholars of his work, in "*La Gaia Scienza*" Nietzsche explores the controversy between art and science, a central nucleus of his personal and philosophical search to find new, healthy solutions to living. In his work, both art and science are driven to co-exist in an ideal, transformed state, a connection already obvious in the title and structure of his book, which opens with lyrics.

What Nietzsche explored is, quintessentially, freedom of thought. His cognitive intention was to perceive the world from as many angles as possible, while, at the same time, realizing the limitations of each perspective. In *The Joyful Science*, he was especially sensitive to the contradiction between embracing the richness of life and "pure knowledge" or the fallacy of "absolute truth."

How Could This Idea Be Related To Our Field of Work?

It is this attitude of *open mind* in the process of exploring different aspects of a subject – here the vastness of psychological experience – which potentially governs the three central fields of psychotherapy: clinical practice, supervision, and research.

1. In *clinical practice*, through an attitude of authentic interest and acceptance, and through the particular orientation of our approach, we encourage patients (or seekers), to find an exploratory, receptive attitude towards their past and present experiences, which will facilitate their capacity to process and their future journey through life.
2. In *supervision*, we invite supervisees to recognize, reflect, and creatively explore issues related to their own position – and participation – in the therapeutic context. This reflective view can either facilitate fresh perspectives or can emphasise the conformity of received and conventional knowledge.
3. In the *research* process, researchers or students are invited to enter into an open dialogue with their research subjects, and by thoroughly studying the various associated factors, to organize their understanding in the search for useful conclusions or solutions.

In all three fields, clinicians, supervisors, and researchers are asked to relate to their subject with an attitude of witnessing, acknowledgement, and receptivity – *amor fati* – in order to be available to explore the various, often contradictory, angles of their project.

Research, in this sense, is defined as the process of thorough study and analysis of the factors surrounding a problem or issue, in order to find solutions. Focusing here on the relationship between the practice of psychotherapy and research, research in psychotherapy generally concerns the investigation of the effectiveness, and the mode of action, of psychotherapeutic interventions (Cavana, Delahaye & Sekaran, 2001; McLeod, 2011; Timulak, 2009).

According to the related literature, and as it is also revealed in discussions among colleagues, many psychotherapists feel distant from any research topics and activity, especially in their workplace. Factors that contribute to this attitude of psychotherapists on any aspects of research (Caldwell and Johnson, 2014) are:

- No participation in any research activity during training or very little;
- The whole process of conducting research is experienced as complex and difficult to access;
- Hesitation, a sense of inadequacy, or a lack of formal qualifications for the research process.

Many clinicians feel they do not have the formal qualifications to engage in research, and/or they may think that psychological research is not practically useful for people with real problems. Added to that, there is a general attitude of critical scepticism and doubt concerning issues of transparency, especially when it comes to the social-political-economic framework in which research is conducted. There are many references to the links between research and the profits and interests of the pharmaceutical industry (van der Kolk, 1987; Frances, 2013; Papadopoulos, 2017).

Aspects of Common Ground Between the Practice of Psychotherapy and Research

In psychotherapy and in body psychotherapy, both clinical practice and research methodology can parallel each other, share common values and methods, and create rich possibilities for mutual benefits. In terms of encouraging a stronger connection with practical, simple, research for clinical body psychotherapists, authors Caldwell and Johnson, who are active in both areas, focus on the common perspectives between the two fields: they seek to clarify their common ground, and emphasize the attitudes that both fields can adopt. They argue that there are ways of approaching both clinical and research practice that are highly compatible (Caldwell and Johnson, 2014; Johnson, 2014). Some central aspects they focus on are:

- The mediating quality in both therapist and researcher roles;
- Adopting a phenomenological, constructivist perspective;
- An open-minded approach; exploratory attitudes; not being attached to any conclusions, diagnoses, or results;
- Critical thinking – the attitudes and values of a good clinician are essentially the same as those of a good researcher;
- Linking values, attitudes, and skills in body psychotherapy with specific research methodologies.

What Fosters Cultivating a Research Mind in Body Psychotherapy?

Discussion during Dr. Grassmann workshop at the Athens Congress, and exploration in triads between therapists, clients, and researchers revealed the following aspects as important steps in the process of befriending an open-minded research perspective:

- The importance of mindfulness in the therapeutic setting;
- Differentiating between the roles of therapist and researcher;
- Stepping out from the therapist/client system;
- The contribution of the “inner researcher”;
- Formulating appropriate questions, or work hypotheses, in an open attitude that is not attached to conclusions or dogma;
- Learning to describe the way we work – such as the embodied enquiry – to the scientific community, and to the broader public;
- The need to document and publish our findings.

Case Studies

The EABP Science and Research Committee believes case studies to be a legitimate and appropriate part of qualitative research in both psychotherapy and body psychotherapy. Thus, one of the central goals for familiarizing body psychotherapists with the spirit of research in the actual practice of body psychotherapy is to mobilize and encourage practitioners to write case studies, following the standardized methodology described in the *EABP-SRC Guidelines*.¹ As well as being a useful tool in everyday practice, this methodological standardization could be the basis for publication in scientific journals, and presentations at conferences that would help to strengthen the scientific background and reliability of body psychotherapy.

A *case study* is – essentially – a piece of structured information (research) that contributes something to the current background of (psychological) knowledge and practice. *Case study methodology* is simply a set of principles for ordering and thus acquiring clinically useful or socially important knowledge from case material (Edwards, 2010).

Case studies are an invaluable record of the clinical practices of a profession, demonstrating the connections between theory and practice, and providing valuable teaching material showing both classic and unusual presentations. Although a case study does not provide specific instructions for managing multiple clients, it is a description of a particular clinical interaction that can help us frame questions around the theory and practice of body psychotherapy. Case studies can help confirm, expand on, or even contradict material that we were taught, or material that was not taught.

Trainees in traditional counselling, psychotherapy, and clinical psychology training courses are usually asked to produce a case study, presentation, or report as a part of their course work, or as a part of their completion presentation. Because of the nature and importance of the psychotherapeutic relationship and of acquiring basic knowledge and information, as well as of developing the “craft” of good, competent clinical practice, many psychotherapists are generally not trained, either in research protocols, or in writing for publication. Thus, they may hesitate to start the work of preparing a case study for publication.

This is the “great divide” between research and practice – and case studies are an excellent bridge over this divide (Young, 2018).

The *EABP-SRC Guidelines* are intended to guide the aspiring novice writer or trainee easily and effectively in the publication of a clinical study. They are not intended to be prescriptive, so they *suggest* what trainees can or could do, instead of what *must* be done (EABP-SRC, 2014).

Selecting a Case and Finding a Focus

If we look more closely at the initial stages of developing a case study, we can understand that it is – from the beginning – a form of a research.

When designing a clinical study, we need, for example, to choose either: a) one or two topics or questions around which the study will be structured or; b) a particular piece of work with a client that was challenging, and will possibly be interesting to others, in that it demonstrates something new, different, or unusual. In order to do this, we have to re-examine the case material and ask ourselves:

¹ These Guidelines are to be found on the EABP website www.eabp.org

- Why is this particularly interesting?
- Why would it be useful to choose this case for study?

In other words, it is helpful to activate our personal investigative mind-set. As a result, valuable answers to the following question may emerge:

- What did I learn from this case, that was perhaps unexpected or confirmed in some way, or even helped to understand deeper some psychological theory or aspect of the theory associated with psychotherapeutic practice? (Edwards, 2010)

A “Work in Progress” Activity

In acknowledgement of the added value that the *Guidelines* methodology and tools offer our work as clinical psychotherapists, and to build on the workshop mentioned above, the Scientific Committee of the EABP Greek National Association decided to organize a series of informative meetings for our members. The goal is to promote reflection, and a constructive dialogue on the issue of case studies. Following a well-received introductory meeting in April 2019 titled *The Research Mind*, two more meetings are planned in 2019.

Our concept is based on the central idea that significant practices in our everyday psychotherapeutic work, such as *taking notes, and organizing the session material*, as well as *preparing a case presentation for supervision*, already engage our capacities to look at our work from a meta-perspective. In this sense, we activate and train our research mind and critical thinking skills, which are also the basic tools needed to design and write a case study. In addition, writing a case study presents similar challenges to those encountered by therapists in their practice.

Taking a step at a time, the next meeting plans to focus on the use of everyday practices. We intend to invite participants to reflect, in a mode of self-inquiry, on relevant questions we have prepared, as well as offer theoretical input. We aim to open a dialogue to explore the experiences shared by colleagues from different body psychotherapy modalities.² In a following meeting, we plan to focus on writing a case study, reflecting on the EABP guidelines, discussing questions and comments from the participants who are in the process of writing, or intend to write, a body psychotherapy case study.

We believe that reflection and communication on this issues can encourage a practitioner’s intention to design, present and/or publish a case study, which would strengthen their therapeutic identity.

² The Body Psychotherapy modalities represented in Greece are Reichian Vegetotherapy and Character Analysis, Biosynthesis, and Bodydynamic.



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