**Using Deliberate Practice to Teach Therapists to Navigate Resistance and Ambivalence**

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Psychotherapists inevitably encounter interpersonal situations in therapy that are very difficult to deal with and navigate effectively such as client noncompliance, opposition or resistance to change, failure to make progress, client hostility and/or criticism directed at the therapist or therapy. These can often lead to therapeutic impasses and strong emotional reactions in therapists (anxiety, helplessness, frustration, etc.). And stepping out of the typical and automatic negative reactions (reduced empathy, control, persuasion, defensiveness, etc.) to these situations has been characterized as quite an intractable problem for therapists (Binder & Strupp, 1996; Westra, 2012). In addition, there is mounting evidence that how therapists navigate these impasses is critical to client outcomes. For example, in a prospective study, responses to video vignettes of difficult interpersonal scenarios were predictive of actual client outcomes when those trainees later went on to see clients (Anderson et al., 2016). MI skills in particular have repeatedly demonstrated efficacy in being effective in managing these impasses. That is, the ability to use MI skills in navigating specific moments of resistance with curiosity, support and empathy differentiates more from less effective therapists (Aviram et al., 2016) and as such can be considered a key ‘therapist effect’. Stated differently, a major benefit of training in MI is that therapists will be more likely to respond effectively in key moments (of resistance, ambivalence) where poor responding often leads to impasses and alliance ruptures. However, such responding is very difficult, particularly at moments where the client is challenging the therapist/therapy and as such therapists need specific training in this and need to practice.

Process coders make better therapists. We had noticed this effect for a long time in our clinical training program at York University where we specialize in research on therapy process (in my case, process markers of ambivalence, resistance, as well as coding empathy and MI adherence). Practicum supervisors would remark that the students coming out of these research labs were better clinicians than average in their external clinical practicums. We speculated that this might be due to the hundreds, if not thousands, of hours they spent watching and dissecting video recordings; making them more attuned and ‘plugged in’ to the therapy process and empirically supported indicators of good and poor process. We wondered then if this might not just be good for process research but might actually be an approach to clinical training!

At the same time, Deliberate Practice is now emerging as a major innovation in counsellor training (Rousmaniere, 2016). Deliberate practice derives from the science of expertise and involves repeatedly practicing specific skills with expert feedback (similar to methods used in any performance activity such as a musician, surgeon, or pilot). How does a musician get better? They practice with a coach and then repeat. When applied to psychotherapy, one context in which deliberate practice may be particularly promising is in training therapists to identify and navigate specific moments (or process markers) of resistance, ambivalence, criticism, etc. that are highly predictive of outcomes. Doing so not only has a very good chance of improving client outcomes, but may also result in enhanced performance and improved therapist confidence in managing challenging (and usually stressful) clinical situations. Moreover, it is worth noting that while therapist adherence to a specific theoretical approach to therapy has not been consistently found to be related to client outcomes (Webb et al., 2010), therapist responsivity to process markers and impasses does seem to be a key factor differentiating more and less effective therapists (Aviram et al., 2016; Westra et al., 2016). Stated differently, therapists very much need process navigation skills to complement training in model specific approaches.

I have developed specific deliberate practice training materials to help therapists navigate difficult situations using videotape vignettes/simulations for repeated exposure and practice. Using methods of deliberate practice, trainees will be able to encounter a wide range of challenging clinical situations (and not have to wait until they inevitably encounter these with actual clients), become aware of and navigate their own reactivity in these complex encounters, and slow down the process to brainstorm and practice alternative responses that are empirically indicated based on extensive process research (by my lab and many others). Emphasis is placed on using videotape and other exercises to slow down and break down the complex process between client and therapist to help therapists identify moment-to-moment markers of ambivalence and resistance and then brainstorm effective responses to enhance client engagement. Doing this in a group allows therapists to get feedback from the presenter but also other’s responses. Therapists also view recommended ideal responses in order to model and shape effective responding (and contrast these with poor or ‘typical’ responses). Therapists are also helped to manage their own emotional reactions in these often challenging encounters. And they also have the chance to apply and extend learning to manage specific scenarios and client resistance statements they have encountered in their own clinical work and unique context.

As a scientist, I am now actually testing this new approach to evaluate whether it is more effective than traditional workshop training. Initial pilot testing found large effects from pre to post deliberate practice training. Trainees showed large increases in empathy and in MI-consistent responding to video vignettes of ambivalent, resistant, and critical clients from pre to post-workshop. They *also* showed improvements in their emotional reactions to difficult clients, including feeling more positive, less afraid, and less uncertain about how to respond to challenging resistant clients. Their overall satisfaction with the workshop was extremely high.

So come prepared to roll up your sleeves and improve through practice!

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