Testing a Deliberate Practice Workshop for Developing Appropriate Responsivity to

Resistance Markers: A Randomized Controlled Trial (**November, 2019; paper in submission**)

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Deliberate practice (DP) has been proposed as a major innovation in counsellor training (Rousmaniere, 2016). Derived from the science of expertise, it involves repeatedly practicing specific skills with expert feedback (similar to methods used in any performance activity such as with musicians, surgeons, or pilots). When applied to psychotherapy, one context in which DP may be particularly promising is in training therapists to navigate specific moments of resistance, criticism, etc. Half of the community therapists (n=44) in this study were randomly assigned to a traditional workshop, and the other half (n=44) participated in an experimental workshop of the same material, but using DP strategies. The content in the two workshops was the same (in fact, the traditional workshop was one H. Westra has been doing for years to positive feedback) and the major difference was that in DP there were more opportunities to practice with feedback.

The results of this study were very supportive of the deliberate practice (DP) workshop over traditional training on many measures. Here is a summary of the major findings (see figures as well):

* No difference in satisfaction with the workshops and both groups showed large increases in skills from pre to post workshop.
* However, post-workshop, the DP group demonstrated significantly better performance on a video vignette task (responding to resistance and ambivalence statements) and in interviews with volunteers who were ambivalent visavis significantly less observer-coded resistance.
* The DP group retained these advantages at 4-month follow-up, while the traditional group showed significant erosion of skill over time.
* Moreover, other advantages of the DP training only became apparent at follow-up testing including significantly higher empathy ratings by both expert coders and ambivalent interviewees.
* And at follow-up the DP group reported significantly greater practice of the skills since the workshop, compared to the traditional training group.
* The only measure to not decline over time (worsen) in the traditional group was self-reported confidence in using the skills learned in the workshop. All actual performance measures declined.

These findings strongly support the continued investigation of DP focused on process as a possible means of improving therapist skill in enhancing appropriate responsivity to resistance and ambivalence. The findings over time are particularly compelling in suggesting that the advantages of DP become more pronounced over time, relative to no DP. The traditional group followed the expected course, which is skill development followed by erosion over time (without continued support/coaching and practice). The finding that confidence in the skills remained high despite clear erosion of skill on multiple performance measures is very concerning since it suggests that therapists do not notice this erosion. In other words, one’s own self-assessment is subject to well-documented bias and is not a reliable source of feedback; underscoring the need to obtain expert feedback and patient feedback to improve performance. Moreover, the findings suggest that while practice needs to be deliberate (effortful), it may not need to be exclusively solitary. That is workshops can potentially be revised to incorporate the opportunity for ‘individual’ feedback in a group setting in order to shape more effective responding. Finally, it is very important to note that while DP trainees performed relatively better than those in traditional training group, the average score on expert assessments of performance was “fair” (less than 3/5), even in the DP group and there was much variability in performance; suggesting the need for continued skill development of course.

There remains much to be discovered but the results of this study have made us optimistic about the potential to improve clinical skills especially through the use of expert, process feedback. We have also been very impressed by the therapist enthusiasm for improved skill development and intend to continue to develop and offer this ‘tested’ DP workshop and other workshops (also to be tested) focused on acquiring expert feedback through identification of key empirically supported processes and markers. Stay tuned….

Figure 1 – Rolling with resistance in vignettes over time by training group

Figure 2 – Observed resistance in volunteer interviews over time by training group

Figure 3 – Volunteer experienced empathy over time by training group