



Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Behavior Therapy and Experimental Psychiatry

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jbtep

The relative importance of relational and scientific characteristics of psychotherapy: Perceptions of community members vs. therapists

Nicholas R. Farrell^a, Brett J. Deacon^{b,*}^a Anxiety Treatment and Research Centre, St. Joseph's Healthcare Hamilton, Fontbonne Building Office B249, 50 Charlton Avenue East, Hamilton, Ontario L8N 4A6, Canada^b University of Wollongong, School of Psychology, Northfields Avenue, Wollongong, NSW 2522, Australia

ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Received 13 April 2015

Received in revised form

9 August 2015

Accepted 9 August 2015

Available online 12 August 2015

Keywords:

Psychotherapy

Preferences

Anxiety disorders

Evidence-based practice

ABSTRACT

Although client preferences are an integral component of evidence-based practice in psychology (American Psychological Association, 2006), relatively little research has examined what potential mental health consumers value in the psychotherapy they may receive. The present study was conducted to examine community members' preferences for the scientific and relational aspects of psychotherapy for different types of presenting problems, and how accurately therapists perceive these preferences. Community members ($n = 200$) were surveyed about the importance of scientific (e.g., demonstrated efficacy in clinical trials) and relational (e.g., therapist empathy) characteristics of psychotherapy both for anxiety disorders (e.g., obsessive–compulsive disorder) and disorder-nonspecific issues (e.g., relationship difficulties). Therapists ($n = 199$) completed the same survey and responded how they expected the average mental health consumer would. Results showed that although community members valued relational characteristics significantly more than scientific characteristics, the gap between these two was large for disorder-nonspecific issues ($d = 1.24$) but small for anxiety disorders ($d = .27$). Community members rated scientific credibility as important across problem types. Therapists significantly underestimated the importance of scientific characteristics to community members, particularly in the treatment of disorder-nonspecific issues ($d = .74$). Therapists who valued research less in their own practice were more likely to underestimate the importance of scientific credibility to community members. The implications of the present findings for understanding the nature of client preferences in evidence-based psychological practice are discussed.

© 2015 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

1. Introduction

The American Psychological Association (APA 2006) has defined evidence-based practice in psychology (EBPP) as “the integration of the best available research with clinical expertise in the context of client characteristics, culture, and preferences” (p. 273). Among the components of EBPP, client preferences are an essential guide to treatment decisions and may directly influence treatment outcomes. To illustrate, meta-analytic reviews have found that clients who receive their preferred treatment are more willing to participate, less likely to drop out, and experience greater improvement (King et al., 2005; Swift & Callahan, 2009; Swift, Callahan, Ivanovic, & Kominiak, 2013). Unfortunately, less research has been

conducted on client preferences than other aspects of EBPP, and little is known about what potential mental health consumers value with regard to their experience in psychotherapy.

One aspect of client preferences that has received recent attention in the literature concerns the relative importance of relational (e.g., strong therapeutic alliance) and scientific (e.g., treatment efficacy) characteristics of psychotherapy. An initial investigation by Swift and Callahan (2010) assessed how much empirical support treatment-seeking clients would be willing to “give up” in exchange for stronger relational qualities of psychotherapy. Results showed that clients were willing to forego a considerable amount of empirical support to ensure the presence of relational characteristics. A later study by Swan and Heesacker (2013) conceptually replicated these findings among non-treatment-seeking community members surveyed about their preferences for relationship-oriented vs. science-based psychotherapy. Participants rated their preference for psychotherapy

* Corresponding author.

E-mail address: bdeacon@uow.edu.au (B.J. Deacon).

involving “a space to freely talk about and work through your problems with a therapist you can trust” and psychotherapy that “works just like taking medicine” in which the therapist can “choose the correct therapy to fix your particular problem” (p. 872). The authors interpreted the finding that participants preferred their depiction of relationship-oriented psychotherapy to science-based psychotherapy as “evidence of a pronounced preference for therapy guided by common factors” (p. 869). Taken together, these studies would seem to indicate that potential clients value the relational aspects of psychotherapy far more than its scientific credibility. If this is the case, the provision of empirically supported psychological treatments for specific problems may appear inconsistent with EBPP because science-based psychotherapy is not particularly valued by mental health consumers.

Both of these aforementioned studies (Swan & Heesacker, 2013; Swift & Callahan, 2010) are subject to methodological limitations that constrain the interpretability and clinical relevance of their findings. First, preferences were assessed without regard to the type of problem for which psychotherapy was sought, and it is possible that the perceived importance of scientific credibility of psychotherapy varies as a function of one's presenting problem. For example, empirical support may be more important when considering psychotherapy for an anxiety disorder associated with clinically significant distress and impairment than for a less specific and severe issue (e.g., desire for personal growth). Second, both Swan and Heesacker (2013) and Swift and Callahan (2010) pitted the scientific and relational characteristics of psychotherapy against each other as if these treatment qualities are mutually exclusive. This methodological choice is akin to asking participants how much teeth cleanliness they would be willing to sacrifice in order to ensure their dental hygienist is warm and empathic. The observation of a preference for warm and empathic dental hygienists would not necessarily imply that teeth cleanliness is not valued by dental clients, or that dental hygienists should de-emphasize teeth cleaning during office visits. The perception that science-based psychotherapy entails sacrificing relational qualities is reflected in common therapist concerns that use of science-based approaches will diminish the strength of the therapeutic alliance (Addis, Wade, & Hatgis, 1999) and other effective relational components in psychotherapy (Lilienfeld, Ritschel, Lynn, Cautin, & Latzman, 2013). In reality, science-based psychotherapy does not preclude strong therapeutic relationships. On the contrary, previous work suggests that therapeutic alliance is significantly associated with treatment effectiveness for science-based psychotherapy (Arnold et al., 2013) and may be more appropriately viewed as a consequence rather than an antecedent of therapeutic benefit (Webb et al., 2011). Accordingly, clients should not be forced to choose between psychotherapies that are adequate in only one of these two domains.

Failure to consider the methodological limitations of existing research on preferences in psychotherapy (Swan & Heesacker, 2013; Swift & Callahan, 2010) may reinforce therapist-level barriers to dissemination of science-based psychotherapy (Lilienfeld et al., 2013). For example, therapists who adopt Swan and Heesacker (2013) contention that clients prefer providers who “accentuate the nonspecific aspects of therapy” (p. 877) may conclude that science-based psychotherapies are inconsistent with EBPP by virtue of their incompatibility with client preferences. Further, therapists who believe that clients unconditionally prefer relational aspects of psychotherapy over its scientific credibility regardless of the presenting problem may eschew psychological treatments that have demonstrated specific efficacy (above and beyond relationship-oriented psychotherapies) in the treatment of certain mental disorders. For example, therapists may forego use of exposure-based therapies for anxiety disorders (Abramowitz,

Deacon, & Whiteside, 2011), thereby limiting client access to these underutilized but effective approaches (Gunter & Whittal, 2010; Shafran et al., 2009).

Accordingly, it is important to assess the accuracy of therapist perceptions of client preferences in psychotherapy. Many therapists favor their own clinical judgment over scientific evidence (Lilienfeld et al., 2013) and may conceivably rely on their judgment to surmise client preferences. Therapists who place less importance on the scientific credibility of psychotherapy, in keeping with previous research on client preferences (Swan & Heesacker, 2013; Swift & Callahan, 2010), may assume mental health consumers share their perspective. Thus, in addition to psychotherapy preferences among community members, it is important to assess therapist perceptions of these preferences.

The present study examined community members' valuation of scientific credibility and relational aspects of psychotherapy in a manner that improves upon the methodological limitations of previous research. First, preferences for the scientific and relational characteristics of psychotherapy were assessed independently, such that more of one did not have to come at the expense of less of the other. Second, these preferences were assessed both in the context of disorder-nonspecific concerns (desiring personal growth, adjusting to the end of a relationship) and specific anxiety disorders (obsessive–compulsive disorder [OCD], panic disorder). Anxiety disorders were selected for comparison with disorder-nonspecific concerns because there is arguably stronger evidence for the specific efficacy of empirically supported psychological treatments for anxiety disorders than for any other type of psychological problem (Westen, Novotny, & Thompson-Brenner, 2004). Third, this study directly compared community members' preferences for the scientific and relational characteristics of psychotherapy with therapists' perceptions of these preferences.

The following hypotheses were tested: (a) community members would value the relational aspects of psychotherapy more than its scientific credibility when considered independently of problem type, (b) community members' valuation of scientific aspects of psychotherapy would interact with problem type, such that scientific credibility would be more important for anxiety disorders than for disorder-nonspecific problems, (c) therapists would not underestimate the importance of relational characteristics of psychotherapy to community members across problem types, (d) therapists would underestimate the extent to which community members value the scientific aspects of psychotherapy across problem types, and (e) therapists who value research evidence less in their clinical practice would be more likely to underestimate community members' values for the scientific aspects of psychotherapy.

2. Method

2.1. Participants and procedure

A total of 399 participants completed the present study, including 200 community members (M age = 33.6 years [SD = 11.7], 63.5% female, 83.5% Caucasian) and 199 practicing therapists (M age = 48.6 years [SD = 12.4], 62.3% female, 87.4% Caucasian). Participants in the community sample were recruited via Amazon's Mechanical Turk, (MTurk, <http://www.mturk.com>), an online labor market where “workers” (i.e., respondents) complete tasks for small monetary compensation. Compared to convenience samples of university students, MTurk users offer researchers better sampling diversity, better representation of the U.S. population, and at least equivalent reliability and validity (Buhrmester, Kwang, & Gosling, 2011; Paolacci, Chandler, & Ipeirotis, 2010). Consistent with Swan and Heesacker (2013),

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/910296>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/910296>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)