

A Short Note Underlying Reflection on Psychotherapy Research

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Abstract

The text is based on two articles dealing with psychotherapy research – how existential therapists interact with research issues (Cooper, 2004; Mahrer and Boulet; 2004). Some of the topics introduced by the authors are reviewed and a number of reasons are then presented to show the importance of research on psychotherapy, independent of the theoretical framework of the therapist. Besides, these push factors were examined by leading researchers in the field of existential phenomenology and the question is still a moot point among major academics. It is argued that existential therapists may play an important and unlimited role in psychotherapy research.

Introduction

Two articles in the last edition of *Existential Analysis* (Cooper, 2004; Mahrer and Boulet; 2004) could not but spark a reply, mainly for two reasons: on the one hand, my interest in both existential therapies and psychotherapy research; on the other hand, I deem it as important to discuss the interaction between research and the existential therapies. The Editors were willing spur the debate which is fully understandable and requires a number of additional notes.

Psychotherapy research is still uncommon when speaking of existential therapies. This is all the more true, since we may be speaking of a professional and academic activity which has not come to light yet. Of course, we mean the quite new research on psychotherapy in the face of existential phenomenological frameworks. Yet, a number of problems arise, since, we can ask what is meant by research (du Plock, 2004); research has been carried out on existential therapy of which the case study is an example (Cooper, 2004); we may also argue that psychotherapy has developed from a set of theoretical bodies with different sensitivities and established therapeutic practices which evolved through decades without resorting to existing tools and methods of the mainstream psychotherapy research.

Discussion on psychotherapy research is a vast and complex one and it would be unreasonable to confine it to a mere article. Arguments put forward are only short notes that need developing in other contexts.

The main objective is to mention a number of aspects brought about by said articles; I aim at explaining why I deem it important to discuss psychotherapy research irrespective of the theoretical frameworks used and to anticipate the importance of research from the existential-phenomenological viewpoint.

Issues which stand out from the articles

The aim is not to discuss or review the aforementioned articles (Cooper, 2004; Mahrer and Boulet; 2004), but to stand a number of issues out helping us to raise the main points for a debate on psychotherapy research, and namely on existential therapies, along with a few comments.

Basically, it is argued that research is important and there is no reason why existential therapists shall not embark on it. We could not agree more with this.

Cooper (2004) mainly deals with issues relating to empirical research in psychotherapy. He introduces short notes on the most recent findings, stating for example, that there are no major distinctions as to findings relating to differences among psychotherapies; likewise, he says that therapeutic alliance is one of the most important aspects to obtain good results in therapy, irrespective of theoretical body used. According to Cooper (2004), existential therapists could easily recognise that some of the aspects referred to in empirical research texts (when combined with good therapeutic results) are indeed aspects they value in their practice. He goes further saying that the anxiety felt by existential therapists apparently make no sense at all, for

the results obtained from outcome, process-outcome and comparative studies would show the existential approaches to therapy in relatively positive light

Cooper (2004)

The author also explains why the existential field has rejected the research methods now used in psychotherapy, the challenges of research and the more active role existential therapists could play in therapy research.

Mahrer and Boulet (2004), once again raise the question to know whether existential therapists can be seen as such if they get involved in psychotherapeutic research. Very few researchers are existential therapists and few existential therapists carry out research (Mahrer and Boulet, 2004). Likewise, a crucial point is raised: the difficulty in explaining and defining the scope of an existential therapist. Finally, they put forward their view on why existential therapists may carry out research and present three different ways to do research and which may help solving the complex issues related to therapeutic research. They therefore suggest the discovery-oriented psychotherapy research as a work method.

I have pinpointed these, but I could have chosen other aspects, as well. My first impression when reading them was that they were *in-ward* written. This seems obvious, for all academic discussions usually target specific audiences – a community based on an existing and preceding tradition. But there is something more than a mere in-ward writing. First, it looks like as if we were making the community of existential therapists aware of the need to indulge in research and move on towards this goal. This undoubtedly reflects a consensual opinion: existential therapies are still a poor relation as far as the international debate on psychotherapy research is concerned.

On the other hand, although I share the line of reasoning introduced by the authors, it is my view that the premises are not quite correct. If Mahrer and Boulet (2004), express some difficulty in explaining what an existential therapist is, how can they suggest three different ways of existential therapists carry out research? Besides, narrowing down psychotherapeutical research to three distinct possibilities does not seem a fair enough stance as I shall demonstrate below. Likewise, the suggested relationship between discovery-oriented research and existential thinking seems to stretch too far, despite a possible link between them.

As for Cooper (2004), though disagreeing to a lesser extent, I am surprised that he introduces certain empirical research findings to quite existential therapists. Indeed, if they did some research they would not feel that their theoretical body would be jeopardised. As a matter of fact, surprise comes from the fact that some research is unquestionably aimed at validating the effectiveness of therapies; but that is only one aspect of a complex set of issues at stake in research work. This line of reasoning could well lead us to a less relevant argument: existential therapists are more worried about themselves and would not be prepared to revise their knowledge; they would not raise specific questions that can be of great importance to those they have a therapeutic relationship with. Obviously, I am not contending that that was the author's intention. On the contrary, Cooper (2004), put forward a number of arguments to deter existential therapists from developing pre-conceptions detrimental to research. I simply took advantage of one aspect of his text to stress a point I share when speaking of psychotherapy research: I fear that existential therapists are too inward. Ultimately, it is as if we would reverse the importance of the issue – first we would have ascertain in what measure our work as existential therapists is not questioned; then we would have to consider the importance of research and the advantages we could expect from that.

Short notes on why to reflect on psychotherapy research

I would say that a number of issues were ill raised, since my view is that it is essential to begin with reflection on a number of issues which at start

bear no relation whatsoever with the theoretical framework of our therapeutical practice. I think that the debate on research must occur on distinct, intertwining levels. The research issue enshrines a number of aspects that deal with ontological, epistemological and methodological issues.

In addition, we cannot discard one of aspects most referred to by existential phenomenology writers, i.e. the context (Heidegger, 1962; Gadamer, 1962). Our context is a political, social and cultural reality. One should bear in mind that the history of phenomenological and existential movements also meant the involvement of women and men in discussing society and underlying policies. We all know that knowledge, including scientific knowledge, cannot be dissociated from this contextual reality. As far as I am concerned, this is a major reason for us to become involved in discussing research. Ultimately, a discussion dealing with the way we perceive and build the world. From this point of view, participation becomes important, irrespective of the theoretical framework the therapist acts in. Speaking chiefly of existential therapists, one might recall that they live side by side in institutional contexts the same way other professional do and they always reflect a political, social, nay economical attitude.

We therefore need and have the ethical obligation to involve ourselves. This is the daily aspect of life soon highlighted by phenomenology as a fundamental praxis for developing our knowledge and to which the psychotherapeutical world is obviously linked. So, one could say that first of all we must *do* phenomenology before completing whatever it is, or else instead of worrying about corporatist issues.

All my knowledge of the world, even through science derives from my own vision or from an experience of the world without which science symbols would be meaningless. All the universe of science is built on a lived world.

(Merleau-Ponty, 1962). Our translation from the Portuguese version.

As to ontological, epistemological and methodological issues, the problem is raised in an identical manner as the previous argument. That is to say, these problems are always underlying our action, although implicitly, be it of a professional or academic nature.

Besides, the existential-phenomenological tradition greatly contributes to this discussion. The study on the meaning of human existence precedes the debate on the building of the scientific knowledge (Heidegger, 1962; Merleau-Ponty, 1962; Polkinghorne, 1988).

If it is true that Heidegger moves a little away from the epistemological point of view, and we therefore focus on ontology, the same does not apply to others who write on epistemology-related issues (Dilthey, 2002; Gadamer, 1962). Dilthey focussed on the differences between explanation

and comprehension, trying to create a methodology and an epistemology for the human sciences of the mind that were to be recognised in the same way as those for the sciences of the nature; Gadamer, in turn, referred, among others, to the dynamics between method and truth, using language as a background for his concept of the «fusion of the horizons» (Gadamer, 1962). For Heidegger, the theory of knowledge goes through an inversion and an inscription in the ontology of the *Dasein* in his perspective, the knowledge of the object becomes superfluous, the *Dasein* being the one where the issue of the Being arises, and through which he can express itself. For Gadamer, instead, we go back to a more epistemological and methodological concern-like attitude, which is particularly relevant for human sciences (Ricoeur, 1986).

This very short description of a number of discussions gathering authoritative scholars is but a small sample of the thinking that the psychotherapist should deepen.

This type of discussion is not new and still covers a vast tapestry of knowledge, no matter the perspective, be it rationalist, empirical, idealistic, phenomenological, hermeneutical or other. If we stand as existential therapists, we can hardly feel uncomfortable about such issues, since the majority of authors existential therapists use to back-up their knowledge, were involved in such enriching discussions throughout the years. Our knowledge is like a permanent *re-start*.

Where do we stand nowadays?

Such complex issues must be reviewed and discussed, thus pushing the therapist to make up his mind, irrespective of his therapeutical trends. Maybe this is an important feature for existential therapists, for other therapeutical trends have shown less constraints in debating psychotherapy research. Discussions still go on nowadays, and they will continue in the future, but the question is: what are we driving at?

Current authoritative texts raise at least two main issues: the not so easy relationship between the clinician and the researcher (Polkinghorne, 2000; Elliot, 1995; Silvern, 1990), and the split between scientific knowledge and human sciences (Martin and Sugarman, 2001; Pollio, Henley and Thompson, 1997; Packer and Addison, 1989).

As to the first issue, the clinician argues that the researcher does not allow for the specific features of his work (the relationship between client and therapist); by resorting to wrong methodologies, the researcher looks down on the clinician for the latter does not carry out research and does not promote dissemination of his practices

As to the second one, the discussion goes on between natural sciences and human sciences and the methodologies each should resort to so that both become equally recognised in professional as well as scholar fields.

As we can see, these issues are based on the above mentioned controversies. An enriching debate goes on covering the various fields of psychology, namely the one closest to psychotherapy.

Research made by the Dusquene University Group (Giorgi, 1985) is well known. It is based on a phenomenology which mainly backs up the Husserl perspective.

Packer and Addison (1989), along with other authors, carried out research on hermeneutics covering various psychological issues.

Once again, research work based on phenomenology (Pollio, Henley and Thompson, 1997), showed that the issue is not about replacing scientific research, but to carry out thorough studies on relevant issues accepted by their peers.

But the studies do not simply compare quantitative and qualitative research. In a study on psychology, Hein and Austin (2001) highlighted distinctive aspects featuring two perspectives in psychology: the empirical-phenomenological and the hermeneutics.

In a particularly important article dealing with practical aspects of psychotherapy research, Elliot (1995), stresses the importance of the relationship between the therapist and the researcher, and most of all, the relevant fact that issues raised are to determine the methods to be used. Thus, a number of issues will direct us to quantitative methodologies, or even to the experimental method; others will lead us to phenomenological or hermeneutical methodologies; still others are to pull us to case studies, etc. It all depends on the question raised, for it will influence the choice of the methodology to be used. There are no effective methods for all types of phenomena to be studied; likewise, there are no methodologies which are independent from the issues we raise.

The Dutch School (Kockelmans, 1987), also introduced research work based on phenomenological and hermeneutical methodologies and the editor clarifies all doubts at the very beginning:

It is often said that phenomenological and hermeneutical psychology should eliminate all forms of empirical psychology. That this notion is a flagrant misinterpretation of the genuine intention of these authors can be shown easily. First of all, no leading phenomenologist has ever made this claim. On the contrary, all of them have argued explicitly that what we call "psychology" is a complex of various disciplines, each with its own typical method: empirical psychology uses empirical methods, eidetic phenomenology employs descriptive methods, and hermeneutic phenomenology uses interpretative methods

(Kockelmans, 1987: ix).

An exploratory survey with the *PsycINFO* data base of the American Psychological Association (APA), conducted by Rennie, Watson and Monteiro (2002), made it possible to conclude that for the past decades qualitative research made great strides, although there is still a long way to go, as the authors claim.

These are but a few examples we can find in authoritative texts on research, on psychotherapy research, on the various research methodologies, and on participation of the various authors with phenomenological and hermeneutical perspectives.

But, why should one give examples of the various research works and the various ways of understanding research, if there is no concern with the logical linking between them?

The reasons behind this are quite simple: firstly, to stress the fact that research is a relevant and important issue, yet fraught with fascinating problems preceding more specific issues; secondly, to show that discussions on research go on with the participation of various authors covering the fields of phenomenology and hermeneutics and encompassing different realms of psychology and other sciences; lastly, to draw the attention to a multitude of topics needing deep thought *before* worrying about betrayal of our existential attitude.

Besides, the above mentioned articles also show how complex issues are when it comes to psychotherapy research. A complexity requiring a certain amount of initial innocence, a child's curiosity, one might say. And as we saw, this stance is all the more so needed, since, as we are aware of, there is a variety of angles from which we can tackle the problems posed by psychotherapy research.

Conclusion

It is of the utmost importance that we bet on psychotherapy research irrespective of our theoretical differences. Obviously, a number of problems arise in this area, namely as in the realms of ontology, epistemology and methodology. It is also my view that our therapeutic practice is not and cannot be dissociated from the world, i.e. from its political, social and cultural context. In other words it is question of ethical citizenship. It is vital that we participate. These principles are important and independent from our therapeutical trend.

Finally, in view of the reasons we briefly expressed, I have difficulty in understanding why existential therapists feel constrained about research work. On the contrary, examples abound in the history of phenomenology and existentialism as to participation in several debates, namely on philosophy of science. My view is that existential therapists may greatly contribute to international discussions on psychotherapy research and they

will greatly benefit from such participation within the framework of their study and scope of action.

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