Challenges encountered by psychotherapists at the beginning of their practice

Loredana Elena Proţi

Titu Maiorescu University, Bucharest, Romania

Abstract

Pursuing a career in psychology can be exciting, interesting and challenging at least. This paper explores the main issues that can occur in the private practice and the challenges of establishing a professional identity in the early days, starting from the motivations behind choosing this career and covering issues that might arise in the process. Feelings of insecurity and self-doubt are frequent amongst mental health professionals, regardless of their experience. For novice therapists, feelings of incompetence are a central feature in the development of their professional identity. Scientific studies reveal some common issues among novice therapists such as self-doubt, anxiety and feelings of incompetence due to lack of skills and experience (Thériault, Gazzola, & Richardson, 2009).

Keywords: novice psychotherapists, challenges, motivations, private practice, professional identity

Corresponding author: Loredana Elena Proţi
Phone number: -
E-mail address: mail@loreproti.ro

I. INTRODUCTION

Beginner therapists are usually focused on improving their knowledge and finding information about a wide range of disciplines like psychology, sociology, general human behavior, multiculturalism, anthropology, biology, neurosciences and medical fields. Apart from the academic and theoretical approach, working with people, helping them realize and change their dysfunctional behaviors, acknowledge their qualities and dealing with emotional problems requires a set of skills which are integrated with a lot of work, reading, personal development and continuous professional growth.

The ones who work as therapists are often emotionally overcharged and the process can be burdened with anxiety, insecurity and doubts. Feelings of insecurity and self-doubts are frequently reported amongst mental health professionals (Woodside et al., 2007). Besides, the outcome of the therapists work with clients it's uncertain. Freud (1937) was referring to the psychotherapy as one of the "impossible professions in which we can be sure from the beginning of the shortcomings of our results" (as cited in Sussman, 2011).

Furthermore, the constant need of self-awareness and self-motivation improvement leads to the realization that every individual's inner world it's unique. And this requires a unique therapeutic act (Yalom, 2011). This can shift the therapist's perspective from self-preoccupation to an awareness centered on clients needs. The positive outcome of this whole process for many psychotherapists would be to establish a professional identity and to find a personal way of work. This may include integrating and working on gaining strengths such as competency, efficiency, wellbeing, happiness, professional performance and satisfaction, positive social relationships and a sense of meaningfulness in life (Barnhart, 1980; Holt et al., 2012).

II. MOTIVATIONS TO PURSUE A CAREER IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Gilbert and Hughes (1989) suggest that there are three types of historical accidents that may influence a person's choice. The first one refers to the context of training, the learning process, the second one is related to the learning experiences and the third historical accident relates to the personal experiences and needs. Sussman (2011) states that the motivation behind this choice can be a matter of compensation and few psychotherapists might admit the need to control their clients in order to support their own fragile self.

Therapists may be attempting to heal, either consciously or unconsciously, through the relationship with clients. Some studies claim that there is a possibility to have a high incidence of mental disorders among psychotherapists and psychiatrists (Bermak, 1977). The wounded healer paradigm focuses on the need to manage one's own conflicts and the ability of being able to use

that emotional experience in the service of others. The therapist's own wounds can facilitate the positive use of counter-transference and the empathic connection with clients (Hayes & Gelso, 2001).

Another trigger to enter this professional field might be created by the unconscious motivations related to the narcissistic needs, the need to be accepted and valued by clients. Guttmann and Daniel (2001) have found some benefits gained by therapists form their work. The most fulfilling ones were found in the area of narcissistic gains, followed by vocational benefits, self-improvement and improved relationships with others.

From Freud's perspective, in Discomfort in culture (1930/2010) the vocational choice opens a channel for expressing sublimated compulsions like libidinal, narcissistic, aggressive and even erotic drives, in the limits and constraints of society and reality.

In some cases, the most common motivation on becoming a therapist appears to be the desire to help others (Norcross & Farber, 2005). On further exploration, other motivations have surfaced: the desire to be authentic and the desire to learn more about oneself. Regardless of the motives behind the choice of becoming a therapist, the main danger is the unawareness of the ones drives to be in this activity. If those motives are unconscious, the interference of the therapist needs can be detrimental to the healing process of the client (Sussman, 2011).

Concluding all the above, whichever the motivations are behind choosing to become psychotherapist, an important aspect to consider is to always be aware of those drives. To achieve this, it might be necessary to work with ourselves in private therapy in order not to adversely affect the healing process of the client.

III. ISSUES ENCOUNTERED BY NOVICE THERAPISTS

There are a number of difficulties that novice therapists face after they finish school and the process can sometimes become overwhelming. Exploring the problems that may occur earlier in a psychotherapist's career, Thériault, Gazzola and Richardson (2009) found out that the feelings of self-doubt and incompetence can be considered an important feature when developing their professional identity. These feelings can trigger a wide range of negative emotions such as anxiety, discouragement, anger, frustration and the causes are multiple: permissible fallibility, professional process issues, pressure, and personal sources of stress.

The authors also found that these issues can lead to positive outcomes in the learning process if they are perceived temporary and controllable. If they are perceived as permanent, they tend to have negative outcomes like hopelessness, professional detachment, and feelings of isolation and separation and potentially from the therapy career itself.

The transition between classroom and practice can be difficult. It is a new work environment which requires adaptation. Tryssenaar and Perkins (2001) suggest that the first year of practice is a period of professional development and constant stress. The authors defined four isolated stages in which clinical psychologists have passed through: Transition, Euphoria and Angst, Reality of Practice and Adaptation. Study finds that during the first two stages (Transition, Euphoria and Angst), participants had concerns about their competence.

The feelings of self-doubt included concerns about not being as fast, efficient and skillful as the more experienced therapists. There were also highlighted the difficulties of being fully present with the client and worrying about therapeutic abilities in front of the clients. Students have progressively adapted to the new situation, proving competence and great expectations alongside the loss of naivety and idealism.

Another survey investigating the early days of practice as a therapist found out that besides self-criticism, therapists reported having trouble with managing reactions towards clients, learning and using the helping skills and session management (Hill et al., 2007).

Another matter of importance regarding novice psychotherapists is the tendency to complement the lack of experience and skills with perfectionism, which in high doses can lead to stress and burn-out (D'Souza, Egan, & Rees, 2011).

Complementary to the theoretical and legal aspects, there is one more important tool to develop – oneself. Related on how to help students make the transition from novice to expert status, Hinojosa and Blount (1998) indicated that one concern in the foundation of what makes a competent therapist is the development of practice skills.

Carl Rogers (2008) brings to the fore the need for self-actualization in the context of learning and states that when the teacher manages to create and maintain a personal and empathetic relationship with students, it will facilitate the process of self-actualization. To strengthen this idea, other authors and researchers emphasized that one of the primary purposes of psychotherapy training in to encourage a reflective stance and continuous self-refection (Bennett-Levy, 2006; Yalom, 2011).

As a concluding thought, feelings of incompetence, comparisons with the most skilled, stress and self-doubt seem to be quite common amongst beginner therapists. Therefore early career steps in psychotherapy can be overwhelming sometimes but of central importance is how these difficulties are perceived, interpreted and dealt with (Thériault, Gazzola, & Richardson, 2009).

IV. CONCLUSIONS

In addition to a long, tedious accreditation process consisting in finalizing a psychology faculty followed by a master's degree and/or psychotherapy training, the therapist profession

requires a continuous process of self-development, compared to most professions where the self-development is an added-value.

Personal and professional growth may be maintained by attending to supplementary courses, supervision and personal therapy. Learning about laws, ethical and professional responsibilities, self-care and strategies to maintain good physical and emotional well-being might help in maintaining a balance between personal and professional life. Having access to regular peer support it's a necessary activity in private practice. Even considering all of the above, a therapist cannot be constantly prepared for every possible encounter and having access to regular peer support is necessary in private practice.

This brief theoretical paper might help practitioners reflect upon their own practice. Choosing psychotherapy as an occupation involves hard work, with many frustrations, failures and satisfaction that frequently occur after a long period of time. Reflecting on these things can bring a clearer understanding and stronger motivation to overcome obstacles in becoming a psychotherapist.

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