INFLUENCE OF THERAPIST BEHAVIORS ON THERAPEUTIC ALLIANCE

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ABSTRACT: A number of recent studies have investigated the relationship between therapist and client gender and conversation in marriage and family therapy. There has also been recent empirical investigation of therapeutic alliance and its influence on therapy outcome in marriage and family therapy. However, there has been limited investigation of the influence of interactional patterns on therapeutic alliance. It seems probable that therapy conversation (which seems to be influenced by gender) will influence therapeutic alliance and subsequent outcome.

KEY WORDS: therapy process; therapeutic alliance; family therapy; theoretical orientation.

RELEVANT LITERATURE

Therapeutic relationship seems to be addressed in most approaches to marriage and family therapy, but it has been conceptualized differently across traditions.
Systemic Conceptualizations of Therapeutic Relationship

Systemic family therapy theories such as structural-strategic and family of origin suggest that therapists should serve as leaders in therapy. Structural family therapy, which refers to the process of cultivating therapeutic relationship as “joining,” encourages a partnership with the family in which the therapist acts as a leader: “The therapist is in the same boat with the family, but he must be the helmsman” (Minuchin & Fishman, 1981, p. 29). The Bowen (1978) perspective suggests that therapists should coach clients to achieve differentiation. In these systemic therapies, the therapist is an active participant who is likely to challenge clients and give them advice.

Post-Modern Conceptualizations of Therapeutic Relationship

Challenging and advice giving have been referred to pejoratively by post-modern theory as “taking an expert stance,” which is discouraged. The post-modern tradition emphasizes collaboration with clients. In solution-oriented therapy, the joining process is described as attempts by the therapist to make the client feel comfortable: “Our goal during the joining period is to show nonjudgmental interest in them and help them feel comfortable” (O’Hanlon & Weiner-Davis, 1989, pp. 81–82).

Individual Psychotherapy Conceptualizations of Therapeutic Relationship

The discrepancy between conceptualizations of therapeutic relationship is also demonstrated in individual psychotherapy. For example, psychoanalytic theory suggested that therapy features transference and countertransference between therapist and client, while client-centered therapy emphasized unconditional regard (Bordin, 1994).

A Pan-Theoretical Conceptualization of Therapeutic Relationship

Despite these different conceptualizations about the role of therapeutic relationship, Bordin (1979, 1994) suggested that the therapeutic relationship was influenced by an alliance between therapist and client that transcended theoretical orientation (he referred to it as a “pan-theoretical” perspective). Bordin suggested that both the therapist and