

Introduction to the special issue on clients' perspective of change in psychotherapy

Andrés Roussos

Universidad de Buenos Aires

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Andrés Roussos, at Instituto de Investigación, Facultad de Psicología, Universidad de Buenos Aires, Gral. Juan Lavalle 2803, Ciudad de Buenos Aires, Argentina.

C1052AA

E-mail: roussos@psi.uba.ar

Trabajo aceptado para su publicación, Journal of Psychotherapy, American Psychological Association

## Abstract

The articles included in this special section are based on the works presented in a panel named *Clients talking about therapy that* took place during the 43rd International Annual Meeting of the Society for Psychotherapy Research in Virginia Beach. One of the main issues at the moment of the rounding up of the panel was the difficulty to reach an agreement about what change represents in psychotherapy research. In this introduction I very briefly present some of the debates that are currently going on about change and the role of qualitative research in that debate. The articles included are qualitative investigations that study the value of clients' perspective from different methodological strategies. The authors used in depth interviews, that allow interviewees to communicate whatever they think and this enables the emergence of new perspectives. I look forward to the translation of the information obtained among these studies, in elements for the development of applied clinical knowledge.

Key words: Client perspective, psychotherapy change.

Trabajo aceptado para su publicación, *Journal of Psychotherapy, American Psychological Association*

Correspondence regarding this article should be addressed to

andres.roussos@comunidad.ub.edu.ar

KEY WORDS: clients' perspective; Psychotherapy change

Introduction to the special issue on clients' perspective of change in psychotherapy

*Andres J. Roussos*

*Universidad de Belgrano*

During the 43rd International Annual Meeting of the Society for Psychotherapy Research in Virginia Beach, a panel named *Clients talking about therapy* took place. The works presented were qualitative investigations that reviewed the value of clients' perspective from different methodological strategies. The discussion lead by Jeremy Safran was stimulating, and challenged the audience regarding common uses of crucial concepts such as change, qualitative research and clients' views. The articles included in this special section are based on the works presented in that panel and I hope they will transmit readers the atmosphere of that thought provoking event.

One of the main issues at the moment of the rounding up of the panel was the difficulty to reach an agreement about what change represents in psychotherapy research. Change has been an important, yet elusive, concept since the origins of psychotherapy research. Researchers are still trying to find answers to: what is change? How can change be measured? Why and how does change occur?

The word change in psychotherapy research is generally used to describe growth that has occurred during a treatment, as a general notion, but, as mentioned above, an agreed operational definition is missing. Therefore, researchers have been using other terms associated with change such as: outcome, symptom reduction or modification of personality patterns; in which theoretical frameworks attempt to give strict definitions.

Moving from change to outcome or any other term associated also leaves us with the problem of how to operationalize these actions. Strupp (2013) mentions that we can have an agreement on the meaning of "symptomatic recovery" but it is more complex when we try to define "achievements of sufficient insight to handle ordinary psychological conflicts and reasonable reality stresses".

A recent enlightening debate on outcome took place in the anniversary special issue of Psychotherapy, where several researchers revisited the concept of outcome rethinking old debates with new perspectives. (Hilsenroth, 2013).

The complexity of operationalizing outcome continues to be a main concern. There are multiple reasons for this difficulty, such as the lack of a theoretical definition of outcome, that is needed before discussing how it should be measured (Stiles, 2013) and the requirement of consensusing about the clinical usefulness of the measured outcomes (Hill, Chui & Baumann, 2013).

To overcome part of this problem, Soles (2013) suggests that a "*solid empirically supported theoretical account of how people change and how psychotherapy facilitates changes is such a pressing prerequisite*" (P. 39).

The concern about outcome is paired with a difficulty equally important, the one of giving a meaning to measured changes. As Hill and her colleagues point out, quantitative data "often stop short of allowing us to imagine what the changes are like and what they mean to participants in psychotherapy" (P 73). They rescue the voice of the client and the use of quantitative instruments, as a way of defining if the outcomes are representative of a clinically significant change. The article ends with the expectancy that a new saying can occur; "Counting is nice but it is not everything; if you cannot count it, it still counts, and we have to figure out how to value it and communicate about it." (Hill et al., 2013: P.75)

Overall, quantitative change assessment is still a fundamental standard for the

development and validation of psychotherapy research as a scientific discipline. However, as Ogles (2013) mentions, the study and development of change measures only represent a small proportion of the articles published in psychotherapy research. Ogles argues that this small proportion may be partially due to the fight between qualitative and quantitative paradigms and that a significant paradigm shift is necessary to advance the assessment of change. He states that researchers should try to be engaged in incorporating both paradigms.

The articles included in the present issue seek to integrate approaches that present change as a global concept that can include cultural patterns, social validity, clinical significance and/or the inclusion of general markers from other fields. This approach requires an explicit differentiation between the associated value of an event and the event in itself. The studies included in this special issue are not solely tracing the clients' perception by the use of rating scales or checklists about their feelings or experiences but they are looking into what is important and meaningful for them in therapy.

When clinicians, researchers and clients speak of change they might assume that they are speaking about the same concept, but actually their conceptualizations might be very different. Studying the clients' perception of change and the relationship of that change with therapeutic strategies could enable practitioners to have a clearer understanding of this process. This information on clients' perception is important in order to move from an idiographic approach useful for the particular client, to a general approach where the information is useful for practitioners and researchers.

Macran and her colleagues' have observed that few researchers have paid attention to how clients' experience therapy (Macran, Ross, Hardy, & Shapiro, 1999), but only a decade later Heatherington and colleagues (2012) state that there is "substantial research on clients' perspectives on their treatment in general, and more specifically on helpful events", showing a very fast reaction to the lack of the client's testimony. However, it is still a challenge to

bridge the gap between this type of research and its clinical applications. In order to decode the clients' perception about their change in therapy, it is necessary to generate the right procedures to access and interpret the information coming from a source that does not present the information in a homogeneous and systematic way. Qualitative approaches have traditionally provided the tools that enable this type of task.

The authors in this special section used in depth interviews that allow interviewees to communicate whatever they think and this enables the emergence of new perspectives. The criteria and categories used to understand the client's narrative emerge from the clients' perspective and the different qualitative methods used facilitate a profound insight on the clients' views. Following Macran's ideas (Macran, et al., 1999) we consider that patient's perception research involves 2 important aspects. First, a recognition of the usefulness of clients beliefs for the understanding of the therapeutic process and second, the ability to translate the individual nature of the clients' experience without the interference of the researchers own values and beliefs. The works included in this special issue take into account both of these aspects.

Angus and Kagan present an intensive case study of self-narrative change in Emotion Focused Therapy for a good outcome dyad from the York II Depression Study. Client's views of self and experiences of change were assessed, using Narrative Assessment Interview (NAI) method, after session one, at therapy termination and at a six months follow-up. This study showed how the clients' views of self changed over the course of treatment. The NAI proved to be a useful tool for researchers to evaluate clients' perspective of change, offering a systematic method to capture clients' self-narrative accounts. Olivera and colleagues conducted in depth interviews with former clients inquiring about change, reasons for consultation, therapeutic relationship, and termination. The clients' clear and detailed opinions regarding their treatment, as well as their different answers to the important issue of

“How is it that therapy works?” lets us value the use of their perspective in order to help researchers identify key components of the therapeutic process. Jock and colleagues conducted an exploratory qualitative research that aimed to understand similarities and differences of clients' change perception in two different cultural contexts, such as USA and Argentina by using in depth interviews with former patients (from Buenos Aires and New York). They found that there are cross cultural differences and similarities regarding the experience of psychotherapy. These differences need to be further studied because in a moment where the empirical validation of interventions is of uttermost importance, the need for a cultural validation of interventions is also crucial. Treatments and their interventions are conceived in cultural settings, and in order to use them in other cultures we need to understand cultural variations.

Regardless of one's view of the role of client's perception, I wish that readers will find, as I did, a pool of thought provoking ideas that provide a starting point for further reflection. I look forward to the translation of the information obtained among these studies, in elements for the development of applied clinical knowledge. In closing, I thank all of the contributors to this dialogue on client's perspective on clinical change— Lynne Angus, Julieta Olivera, William Jock and Jeremy Safran—for their stimulating articles.

#### References:

Heatherington, L., Constantino, M. J., Angus, L., Friedlander, M., & Messer, S. (2012). Corrective experiences from clients' perspectives. In L. G. Castonguay & C. E. Hill (Eds.), *Transformation in psychotherapy: Corrective Experiences across cognitive behavioral, humanistic, and psychodynamic approaches* (pp. 161-190). Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Hilsenroth, M. (Ed.). (2013). Psychotherapy Outcome (Special Issue). *Psychotherapy*, Vol. 50(1).

Hill, C., Chui, H. & Baumann, E. (2013). Revisiting and Reenvisioning the outcome problem in psychotherapy: An argument to include individualized and qualitative measurement. *Psychotherapy*, Vol 50(1), Mar 2013, 68-76. doi: 10.1037/a0030571.

Macran, S., Ross, H., Hardy, G. I., & Shapiro, D. A. (1999). The importance of considering clients' perspectives in psychotherapy research, 325–338.

Ogles, B. (2013). Measuring Change in Psychotherapy Research. In M. Lambert (Ed.) "Bergin and Garfield's Handbook of Psychotherapy and Behavior Change", 6<sup>th</sup> edition. (pp. 85-133). Wiley and Sons.

Stiles, W. (2013). The variables problem and progress in psychotherapy research. *Psychotherapy*, Vol 50(1), 33-41. doi: 10.1037/a0030569.

Strupp, H. (2013). The outcome problem in psychotherapy revisited. *Psychotherapy*, Vol 50(1), 3-11. doi: 10.1037/h0094491.

Trabajo aceptado para su publicación, Journal of Psychotherapy, American Psychological Association