



Article

Case Study Research in Humanistic and Integrative Psychotherapy

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ABSTRACT

This paper will reflect politicization of psychotherapy research and its impact on humanistic and integrative psychotherapy approaches like Transactional Analysis. The author will reflect on the steps in developing recognition and the role of on case study methodology in developing research evidence base for psychotherapy, bridging the gap between research and clinical practice and developing an individualised treatment. The gives a brief outline of different types of case studies and reflect on their foci, strengths and limitations, and ethical implications, with some examples of their use.

Investigación con Estudio de Casos en Psicoterapias Humanísticas e Integrativas

RESUMEN

Este artículo reflejará la politización de la investigación en psicoterapia y su impacto en los enfoques de psicoterapia humanista e integradora como el Análisis Transaccional. El autor reflexiona sobre los pasos en el desarrollo del reconocimiento y el papel de la metodología del estudio de casos en el desarrollo de la base de pruebas de investigación para la psicoterapia, tendiendo un puente entre la investigación y la práctica clínica y el desarrollo de un tratamiento individualizado. Ofrece un breve esbozo de los diferentes tipos de estudios de caso y reflexiona sobre sus focos de interés, puntos fuertes y limitaciones, e implicaciones éticas, con algunos ejemplos de su uso.

Palabras clave:

Investigación de estudios de caso

Terapias integradoras y humanísticas

Análisis transaccional

Humanistic and integrative psychotherapies have been present in the field of psychotherapy practice from the 1950s onwards. They were inspired and influenced by the development of humanistic psychology and the work of theorists such as Abraham Maslow (Maslow, 1943) and others, and as a response to both psychoanalysis and Skinner's behaviourism, in different therapeutic approaches such as Transactional Analysis (Berne, 1964), Gestalt psychotherapy (Perls, 1969) and Client Centred psychotherapy (Rogers, 1951). They in turn inspired the development of other integrative and humanistic approaches. Integrative psychotherapies have followed a movement for psychotherapy integration, which is attempted in different ways (Castonguay et al., 2015; Mahrer, 1989). Transactional Analysis is one of the first humanistic therapeutic approaches and theories that embraced integration of different models: cognitive and psychodynamic, rooted in a humanistic philosophy (van Rijn & Cornell, 2019; Vos & van Rijn, 2023). However, research in humanistic and integrative approaches has not followed the same rapid development. Most research, historically, as well as in the present, takes place in institutions such as universities and, to a lesser degree, statutory mental health services. This is not surprising because they are the only settings that have access to dedicated researchers and are able to design and implement complex quantitative studies, favoured by medical and psychology journals, and providers of statutory treatments in psychotherapy. This has had an enormous impact to the detriment of both the available research evidence and the recognition of these approaches.

Approaches that have been easier to study due to a shorter number of sessions, or because they have been easier to manualise (like CBT, IPT etc) have been recognised by statutory guidelines. Approaches that had limited evidence had been marginalised and the lack of research has been interpreted as lack of effectiveness, despite the findings of the large body of research equivalence in outcomes between all bona fide therapies, the so called 'Dodo bird effect' (Lambert, 2013; Lambert & Bergin, 1994; Lambert & Ogles, 2004; Wampold, 2001; Wampold & Imel, 2015). These findings have been replicated in different studies and meta-analyses, but have not affected the statutory perception of humanistic psychotherapies. To that end, it remains important to continue to develop research evidence base for individual therapeutic approaches. In Transactional analysis, the European Association for Transactional Analysis funded a step-by-step approach to providing that evidence for its approach. The research has involved an evaluation of practices of transactional analysts internationally, (Vos & van Rijn, 2021c); as systematic review of the approach specific psychometric instruments, as well literature (Vos & van Rijn, 2021a, 2021b) and finally an explorative meta-analysis of the state of the Transactional Analysis research (Vos & van Rijn, 2022). All of these research steps build towards developing an RCT, which is still seen as a gold-standard of research into the efficacy of psychotherapeutic approaches, and show the role that professional umbrella organisation have in developing research evidence needed for purposes of recognition.

However, methodologies used in efficacy research could be considered incompatible with practice and research in humanistic and integrative psychotherapies, most likely to hold a more

nuanced constructivist and phenomenological epistemological positions. Unfortunately, the focus by the statutory agencies on only one type of methodology, favoured by the medical field, has increased the gap between research and practice, and disenfranchised many bona fide humanistic and integrative therapies with large international memberships and practiced broadly in independent and not-for-profits sectors. Psychotherapy is a complex social science, sensitive to socio-cultural contexts and tailored to individuals. Personalized medicine is gaining prominence in the field, yet psychotherapy is judged by outdated standards of "one size fits all" politics.

Many international psychotherapy researchers and societies have endeavoured to change and influence the politics of research and related clinical guidelines. Nearly 10 years ago, on the occasion of the 25th anniversary of the journal, 'Psychotherapy Research', three former editors first looked back at: (i) the controversial persistence of efficacy equivalence in psychotherapy ('the Dodo verdict') (ii) the connection between process and outcome in psychotherapy; (iii) the move toward methodological pluralism; and (iv) the politicization of the field around evidence-based practice and treatment guidelines. They also looked forward to the next 25 years, suggesting that it would be promising to focus on three areas: (i) systematic theory-building research; (ii) renewed attention to fine-grained study of therapist techniques; and (iii) politically expedient research on the outcomes of marginalized or emerging therapies (Stiles et al., 2014).

However, ten years later, despite the developing research evidence in humanistic and integrative psychotherapies and continuing evidence for equivalence among treatments, non-equivalence has been increasingly enshrined in treatment guidelines in multiple countries in the form of lists of treatments that have reached criteria for the number and quality of RCTs. Politicization of research is still more evident when the approaches, like Transactional Analysis, that have developed a considerable body of evidence in both qualitative and quantitative research remain marginalized in many countries.

Case study research is of particular interest as a methodology that remains close to clinical practice, process and outcomes in psychotherapy, and offers a significant insight and evidence for humanistic and integrative psychotherapies among others. There is a currently an online database that archives peer reviewed published case studies and contains over 3000 cases. (Meganck et al., 2022).

I will now offer some reflection on the developments in case study research and their different aims and foci. Some of the better known case study approaches are theory-building case studies (Stiles, 2007; Stiles, 2017), Hermeneutic single case study efficacy design (HSCED) (Elliott, 2002), consensual case studies (Hill, 2012), narrative models (McLeod, 2010; Sunday et al., 2020) and pragmatic case study methodologies (Fishman, 1999).

Theory Building Case Studies

Theory building research is more characteristic of natural sciences than psychotherapy. It is distinctive from fact gathering research currently favoured by the policy makers and relevant to

the relational and context dependent mental health intervention such as psychotherapy.

Theories in psychotherapy are usually focused on treatment, and sometimes at theoretical explanation of the process of change. However, they are rarely tested by research, with the consequence that outdated theories are not replaced and continue to coexist, resulting in the unwieldy number of theoretical approaches, that are often not significantly different from one another.

Building explanatory theories requires logical coherence to the theory, developed through hypothesis and observation, tested through subsequent observations and modified when this is required (Stiles, 2009; Rennie, 2000). For example, in transactional analysis, if the theoretical explanations about how mental health difficulties, such as suicidality, develop and become resolved in therapy, diverge from systematic observation, the theory would need to be changed. Like in natural sciences, this does not need to be tested in multiple cases in order to make changes to theory, because each case requires repeated observations. This may require only a small change in theory, but it would lead to a process of continuous theoretical building and development. As an example, the early focus in transactional analysis on a 'no suicide contract' (Stewart & Joines, 1987), in the light of current research (Bryan et al., 2015; Bryan & Rudd, 2018) might need to be reviewed and adapted to a more systematic way of addressing and working with suicidality in complex cases. Case study research would be best placed to examine this issue.

Theory building case studies can incorporate different methods (quantitative and qualitative) and researchers aim to use empirical observation of cases in relation to theory to construct explanation of a rich and context bound therapeutic process.

An example of a theory, developed and tested by a body of research is assimilation theory (Stiles, 2001, 2006), a theory of the process of change in psychotherapy, that has been examined in over 40 case studies for example, (Basto et al., 2017; Basto et al., 2018; Caro Gabalda & Stiles, 2021), and others, as well as specifically within transactional analysis psychotherapy. In transactional analysis, it was used to examine the empathic transaction as one of the key interventions in relational transactional analysis (Douglas et al., 2022). It was also used in examining a theoretical concept of 'life script' (Berne, 1972), and its emergence in clinical supervision (van Rijn et al., 2022, 2023). The research of life script in clinical supervision, both confirmed the 'script system theory' (Sills & Mazzetti, 2009), and led to some variations within the theory, showing that understanding of the historical roots of the problematic experiences was not necessary in observing and addressing script themes in supervision, and that there were limitations in how far clinical supervision can go in addressing them.

Theory building case studies have also been used in examining the use of new technologies in counselling with young people (van Rijn et al., 2019, 2021) and the process of change in a medium of avatar assisted therapy. They observed how meaning bridges between the therapist and the client could be developed through the medium of the virtual world, and highlighted a difference in how that was achieved in different ways with an autistic client, who used the virtual world to develop an internal

and relational understanding of his strengths; and a depressed teenager who used the virtual world in a way more akin to other creative therapies, such as sand tray.

Each of these cases built up the detail of the stages and the process of psychological change. In that sense, while not focusing on outcomes, but the process and theory of psychotherapy, theory building case studies build evidence for psychotherapeutic approaches and interventions, and are also able to offer guidance to practitioners, thus building the research/practice gap.

Consensual Case Study Research

Consensual case study research is closely related to theory building research, but, rather than theory it is focused on technique and the therapeutic relationship, rather than theory. It was developed by Clara Hill (Hill, 2012; Jackson et al., 2012) who argued that therapist techniques, client involvement, and the therapeutic relationship were inextricably intertwined.

An example of her work are case studies on a well-known technique in humanistic psychotherapy, known as 'immediacy', where the therapist shares their experience with the client in order to facilitate the therapeutic process. (Hill et al., 2008; Kasper et al., 2008). As well as a client and a therapist as participants, the research team involved independent 'judges' who coded the transcripts. There were follow up interviews with both participants and outcome measures were used during therapy, and at follow up. This nuanced analysis showed that one client showed more engagement with the therapist after 'immediacy' interactions, and that it helped her to express emotion, but she also felt a bit pressured by the therapist's disclosure. The second case showed that therapist immediacy supported the development of the therapeutic relationship, helped the client express her immediate feelings and concerns to the therapist, and provided a developmentally needed relational experience. This technique was investigated in the further studies, including in long-term psychotherapy (Mayotte-Blum et al., 2012).

Consensual qualitative analysis could also be used in larger samples and in mixed method research. For example, a paper by (Halamová et al., 2022) of coping mechanisms during the COVID-19 pandemic used questionnaires in a sample of 1683 participants.

This type of research, focused on technique and observation of the process in psychotherapy, can be used in clinical practice and provide a useful reflective and teaching tool.

Pragmatic and Narrative Case Studies

Pragmatic and narrative case studies have some similarities, in that they provide evidence of everyday clinical practice. Pragmatic case study format developed by Daniel Fishman (Fishman, 1999), follows the principles of clinical thinking in everyday practice and involves presentations of:

- The case context and treatment method,
- the client and their circumstances and history,
- the therapist's guiding conception in treatment,
- the assessment,

- the formulation and Treatment Plan,
- the course of therapy,
- the therapy Monitoring and the use of feedback
- Concluding evaluation

In writing about this approach to case study research McLeod (McLeod, 2010) also highlighted some of its weaknesses and suggested that pragmatic case studies also needed to offer a space for the therapist reflexivity, reflection on the therapeutic relationship, as well as an inclusion of the client's perspective on the case, thus ensuring transparency about ethical procedures.

The format of pragmatic case studies already resembles the format of case studies used in the qualification assessment of Certified Transactional Analysts (https://eatanews.org/eata_handbook_2024/). In 2023, EATA made a decision to develop those procedures to include an option of choosing a pragmatic case study as a research project in the clinical certification and qualification process (CTA), in order to develop further research evidence for everyday research.

Narrative case studies, similarly create a retrospective narrative of the case, using multiple sources to create a rich case material. Those could be therapist and client diaries, interviews and notes. In that sense, narrative case studies are not structured in a defined way, as the pragmatic case studies, but provide a more free flowing, in depth, narrative of a case (Etherington, 2000). In that sense, they are the most similar to historic case studies developed by the early psychoanalysts.

Hermeneutic Single Case Efficacy Design (HSCED)

Hermeneutic Single Case Efficacy Design in case study research, was developed by Robert Elliott (Elliott, 2002), as an attempt to develop a method for establishing causal efficacy in qualitative, case study research. The research design is modelled on the structure similar to a legal system in the USA and the UK, where a rich case data is presented to two groups of adjudicators. One group of adjudicators focuses on presenting an evidence of efficacy of psychotherapy with an individual case, the other looks for other explanations of outside of psychotherapy (for example, impact of medication, life changes etc.). The final decision, on hearing the evidence, is reached by a third group, the 'judges'. The case, with its evidence and findings is presented in published papers, allowing for replication. As well as developing evidence of efficacy, HSCED design can also highlight efficacy (or lack of them) of particular interventions. That can also lead to the development of therapeutic theory an technique.

There have been a number of HSCED cases published in transactional analysis psychotherapy (Benelli et al., 2016; McLeod, 2013; Widdowson, 2001, 2012, 2016), alongside other humanistic therapies, such as emotion-focused therapy (MacLeod et al., 2012). In total, 11 case studies of transactional analysis for depression were used in a meta- analysis (Benelli & Zanchetta, 2019). The results showed that, on average, transactional analysis for depression had a large effect on depressive symptoms: $g=0.89$, with a 95% confidence interval. In 2022, a study also investigated helpful and hindering therapeutic

processes identified by HSCED studies, using qualitative meta-synthesis (Stephen et al., 2022).

This approach to case study research demonstrates how qualitative, clinician-oriented research can support the development of research evidence base in humanistic and integrative psychotherapies.

Ethics in Case Study Research

Ethical consideration in case study research is multilayered. Confidentiality is limited in small, single case samples that use transcripts as data, and offer rich context-based description. For that reason, researchers usually involve the participants in the discussion of the material and the analysis, and include that data in published material (Van Rijn et al., 2023). That process also reflects the principles of humanistic psychotherapies where therapists aim to empower and collaborate with their clients throughout treatment.

Discussion

As well as reflecting on the wider political context that currently guides and limits psychotherapy, I have given an overview of case study methodologies that can support, challenge and develop humanistic and integrative psychotherapies like transactional analysis. Case study research provides an opportunity to research therapeutic theories, practice and outcomes at depth, whilst remaining close to naturalistic practise. These research projects are conducted on a relatively small scale, and therefore do not demand the financial resources of randomised control trials. However, they provide fine grained an in-depth analysis, that is of no lesser quality than quantitative trial. In addition to that, they have a capacity to provide answers to more complex questions, in addition to questions about efficacy. They bring to light how clinicians work in practice, what theories and techniques they use, and how they evidence process of change. The inclusion of clients in feedback, and transparency of conclusions are also distinctive in this type of research, and increase client empowerment. For these reasons, with its closeness to all aspects of clinical practise, case study research has a real potential to impact development what happens in real world clinics.

However, in order for these methods develop further and reach their full potential, they need a wider recognition from the statutory and health insurance agencies, in synchrony with the development of personalised medicine. If we no longer accept that in the treatment of psychical illness one-size-fits-all treatments are the best practice we should not be using it in the development of clinical guidelines for mental health treatments for psychological problems. Case study research shows how humanistic and integrative psychotherapies, with their focus of the development and idiosyncrasies of each patient, have also developed research methodologies and evidence of their treatments. They are available in peer-reviewed journals and databases, making techniques and study designs transparent and replicable. Their wider use has a potential to develop treatments and alleviate mental health symptoms in the society.

Conflic of Interests Disclosure

The authors declare that there are no potential conflicts of interest regarding the research, authorship and/or publication of this article. There is no economic benefit from the direct application of this research.

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