Today's emphasis on evidence-based practice illuminates both the hopes and the limitations of a purely scientific approach to psychotherapy research. Although few would argue that embracing science as a way of better understanding the efficacy of psychotherapy is misplaced, the general approach taken in psychotherapy research often delimits the potential understandings that otherwise could be reached. After all, when a manualized treatment approach is merely compared to placebo when one is assessing relief from an identified syndrome, the only factors present are the treatment and the syndrome. More important, there are several factors that are absent, including the human participants in the process and the process itself. Although progress in evidence-based practice research has undoubtedly enhanced our appreciation of some psychotherapeutic factors, the human factors—the common factors—continue to be only marginally appreciated.

Similarly, when books are published regarding a specific approach to psychotherapy, they typically describe the approach and focus upon its most promising applications and the evidence supporting it. Rarely does such a book manage to meaningfully probe the grand human mysteries that contribute to the approach's success or failure, such as clients' creative use of whatever the therapist provides to meet therapeutic goals (e.g., see Bohart & Tallman, 1999). Indeed, many books that purport to explore the efficacy of a treatment approach resemble lines of pharmaceutical research in which successes are flaunted while limitations and failures are downplayed or omitted. Thus, the selling of an approach seems primary, rendering a true understanding of the human change process secondary. Case Studies in Emotion-Focused Treatment of Depression: A Comparison of Good and Poor Outcome is a measured exception, a work that thoughtfully and conscientiously explores its cases in unparalleled depth, allowing the authors to reach meaningful conclusions that too rarely appear in such books. More impressive, equal space is devoted to exploring cases with poor outcomes as to those with positive outcomes.

Although emotion-focused therapy (EFT; also known as process experiential therapy) infrequently appears in texts covering major systems of psychotherapy, its potential as a truly integrative psychotherapy is exceptional. Described as “a neohumanistic experiential approach to therapy reformulated in terms of modern emotion theory and affective neuroscience” (Greenberg & Goldman, 2007, p. 379), EFT utilizes insights and techniques from therapeutic approaches as seemingly diverse as person centered, Gestalt, family systems, cognitive, constructivist, and narrative, among others. Such a compelling interwoven hybrid of psychotherapeutic thought deserves our attention.

This book opens with a brief overview of the EFT treatment protocol in which the authors detail treatment principles as well as the case studies' assessment measures (a respectable variety of both process and self-report measures). This section is less than 20 pages in length. Thus, this book certainly is not the place to begin an exploration of EFT;
Emotion-Focused Therapy for Depression (Greenberg & Watson, 2005) provides just such a valuable introduction. However, given that this is a book of case studies, the brief introduction serves as a reasonable way to orient oneself for what is to come and, as such, succeeds in succinctly crystallizing some of EFT’s primary tenets.

The heart of this book is formed by six case studies, each of which is carefully described, explored, and assessed. However, the chapters do not follow a rigid format, that is, adhere to an unchanging pattern that implies a sameness of psychotherapy process across clients. Instead, by following the unique threads of each case and allowing major themes to emerge from the therapy material itself, the reader appreciates how clients bring different emphases and challenges to the therapy office and how therapy differentially affects clients.

The case of David, who participated in EFT to address major depression, provides an example of the authors' approach to case studies. After presenting the client's history and their case formulation, the authors specify the central importance of developing a working alliance, assisting the client in exploring emotion, and helping the client to generate new emotional responses to his life situation, at all times illustrating their perspective through generous transcripts and considerate discussion. Their outcome assessments—including formal measures of the working alliance, self-esteem, depression, and client-reported change—highlight some of the client's improvements in an empirically respectable fashion.

Equal critical attention is paid to unsuccessful cases, for example, Richard, who reported increased depression and more dysfunctional attitudes at treatment's end. In this chapter, the authors use many pages of therapy transcripts to reach conclusions regarding client factors that perhaps contributed to the poor outcome: remaining at the contemplation stage, having difficulty achieving distance from his own experiences in order to identify and label them, not having established a coherent life narrative, and not having achieved adequate ability to process emotion. Notice the specificity and depth of these conclusions. Not only do they provide comprehensible conclusions, they also specify hypotheses that can be gainfully explored in future research.

The six detailed case analyses lead inexorably to the general conclusions that the authors share at the end of the book, factors that suggest reasons why treatment was effective or ineffective. Client factors discussed include early environment, ability to regulate affect, client agency, self-disclosure, cognitive flexibility, life goals, the presence of coherent life narratives, and stage of change, among several others. Although therapist factors are not explored in the same meaningful fashion as are client factors, the authors add needed value to the field of psychotherapy research when they clearly state that “effective treatment is not just a function of delivering a particular type of therapy well but is also very much contingent on specific client factors external to therapy that either support or thwart clients' progress in therapy” (pp. 183–184).

The authors do not stop there. Instead, they use their conclusions to generate several commendably specific recommendations for improving therapy. The importance of assisting clients in developing their narratives, their abilities to process emotion, their self-focus, and positive introjects all are emphasized, as are methods by which therapists can assess clients' stages of change and help them to overcome hopelessness.

This book strikes a perfect balance between the scientific and the pragmatic, respecting empirical approaches to psychotherapy research without neglecting active reflection and practical suggestions for practicing clinicians. It is highly recommended, both to practicing psychologists and graduate students. It offers an honest, open, and rich exploration of an important integrative approach to psychotherapy and, in the process, models a thoughtful manner of assessing both the promise and limits of our psychotherapeutic efforts. It accomplishes this laudable goal not only by testing the techniques but also through a clear appreciation of the client factors at play in every session.

References


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