

JADWIGA MAŁGORZATA RAKOWSKA

University of Warsaw

Faculty of Psychology

RESEARCH FINDINGS FROM THE FIELD OF PSYCHOLOGY IN THE PRACTICE OF PSYCHOTHERAPY

The common objective of the articles included in this issue of *Roczniki Psychologiczne* is to explain some psychological mechanisms of psychotherapy by drawing on research findings from different areas of psychology. The need for such analyses is justified by the status of research on psychotherapy, which shows that psychotherapy works, but it is not known how or why it does. Such analyses are carried out in accordance with the paradigm of evidence-based clinical practice, suggesting that a potential source of answers to questions or resolution of controversies arising in the practice of psychotherapy can be all the available research findings. The articles in this issue of *Roczniki* illustrate the practical execution of this suggestion by using research findings from the field of psychology in search of answers to the questions arising in the practice of psychotherapy. Four of the papers concern the determinants of the effectiveness of psychotherapeutic interventions and explain issues such as: (1) in whom and how to modify coping with stress in order to prevent the recurrence of mental disorder symptoms; (2) how to deal with negative emotions in patients; (3) under what circumstances patients have a chance to change their behavior under the influence of insight into the transference phenomenon; (4) what the effects are of psychotherapists perceiving patients in terms of stereotypical assumptions, and whether and how psychotherapists can control such perception. The fifth article refers to changes in mental functioning in patients treated with psychotherapy and answers the question of what the transformation of self-image is associated with in changing the behavior of patients under the influence of psychotherapy.

Keywords: the practice of psychotherapy, research findings on psychotherapy, research findings in the field of psychology.

INTRODUCTION

The title of the present issue of *Roczniki Psychologiczne* – “Research findings from the field of psychology in the service of psychotherapy” – conveys the objective of the articles included in it. The issue explains selected psychological mechanisms of psychotherapy using research findings from the respective fields of psychology. The objective is justified by the little usability of research on the effectiveness of psychotherapy and by the lack of research on the mechanisms of change. It is supported by the principle of evidence-based clinical practice, which requires the use of all available research findings in order to answer a practical question or to resolve a controversy concerning clinical practice. Research findings are intended either to supplement a clinician’s clinical knowledge by providing an answer to a question or to resolve controversies that cannot be resolved using the information provided in the literature, or to verify a clinician’s clinical knowledge that is available in the literature.

The articles presented in this issue of *Roczniki* look for answers to questions concerning the practice of psychotherapy that are not provided by the literature on clinical knowledge based on the theories of psychotherapy that explain how a change in the mental functioning of patients undergoing psychotherapy takes place. Four of them relate to the conditions of effectiveness of psychotherapy and the fifth one deals with the nature of changes in mental functioning achieved by patients undergoing psychotherapy. Of the four, two concern the efficacy of psychological interventions depending, respectively, on the type of patient and on the type of problem solved in psychotherapy; the third one explores the determinants of the effectiveness of one intervention depending on the type of patient and the way of using it; the fourth paper focuses on the quality of the therapeutic relationship.

THE ROLE OF RESEARCH FINDINGS IN EVIDENCE-BASED CLINICAL PRACTICE

The concept of evidence-based clinical practice requires the inclusion of research results in the decision-making process concerning the diagnosis, prognosis, and intervention. Scientific evidence is understood here as scientific findings derived from systematically collected data, through observation and experiment, by means of formulating questions and testing hypotheses (Satterfield et al., 2009). This concept assumes that a clinician should make decisions concerning

diagnosis, prognosis, and intervention with regard to a particular patient according to the following pattern. Firstly, a clinician should take into account the patient's broadly defined values manifested in his or her needs, preferences, and specific features (Satterfield et al., 2009). Secondly, a clinician should take into account his or her own resources in the form of clinical knowledge, practical experience, and skills (Satterfield et al., 2009). Thirdly, a clinician should use all the available research outcomes essential from the point of view of a particular patient (*American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice*, 2006) when a question or a controversy appears concerning the diagnosis, prognoses, and intervention.

The paradigm for conducting clinical practice was developed in order to fill the existing gap between the available research results and making practical use of them. For example, in medicine, the process of implementing a scientific discovery into practice lasts 17 years and only 15-40% of clinical decisions are based on research-based knowledge (Institute of Medicine, 2001). It can be concluded, by analogy, that the same applies to other areas of clinical practice. Conducting clinical practice in accordance with this paradigm requires clinicians to verify their clinical knowledge. Questions such as "On what basis do I choose this method to treat this patient?", "What are the research results that underlie this choice?", "Do these findings come from research conducted properly in terms of methodology?", or "In the case of which patients is this method effective, and in the case of which it is not?" serve the purpose. Asking similar questions verifies the clinical knowledge based on tradition, popularity, or authority.

THE USEFULNESS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS ON PSYCHOTHERAPY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY PRACTICE

What scientific evidence in the field of psychotherapy can practitioners find in the literature? They can find research results on effectiveness of psychotherapy. They can find out that its effectiveness has been proved in many controlled clinical trials involving adults, adolescents, and children. These trials proved a higher reduction of the symptoms of specific disorders in groups in which specified psychotherapeutic interventions were applied, compared to groups in which these interventions were not applied (Rakowska, 2005). The aim of controlled trials on the effectiveness of psychotherapy is to prove that there is a causal relationship between applying a particular intervention and the elimination of the symptoms of particular disorders. Thus, controlled clinical trials justi-

fy the need for psychological services offered at state health care units and in private practice (Rakowska, 2011a). At the same time, they have left many questions unanswered that are essential from the point of view of clinical practice, such as: Do empirically based interventions qualify for being applied in natural conditions of clinical practice? Which of them are more and which are less effective in the treatment of a particular mental disorder? Should an intervention that turned out to be effective with a population homogenous in terms of disorders be applied given that patients in natural conditions suffer from mixed disorders, and if so – how should it be applied? does the life of people subjected to such interventions change for the better?

Summing up, despite the fact that they justify the need for clinical psychotherapy practice, controlled clinical trials on the effectiveness of psychological interventions are not very useful when a question or a controversy arises concerning an intervention in an individual patient.

Psychological theories, from which psychological interventions are derived, provide the practice of psychotherapy with guidelines on how to treat patients. They explain in what way and why a change occurs in the mental functioning of patients who have received psychotherapy. However, these theoretical assumptions have not been empirically verified. It is possible that following them in practice does not lead to achieving positive results, while other mechanisms, though underestimated, have a greater potential to lead to positive changes in patients. Future research verifying the theoretical assumptions of psychotherapy concerning the mechanisms of achieving a positive therapeutic change in patients should provide information on the mediating variables in the relationship between an intervention derived from theory and its effect (Rakowska, 2011b). Thus, the information derived from the research on which mental processes mediate in the relationship between the intervention and its effect should tell practitioners what ought to be changed within patients' mental processes in order to achieve the effect. Then the information derived from the research on which variable modifies the intervention–effect relationship, defining in whom and in what conditions the effect of intervention is greater or smaller, should tell practitioners that a specific intervention is more or less effective depending on the type of patients' disorders, their characteristics, and psychotherapists' characteristics.

Summing up, the research – only beginning at present – on the mechanisms of change in psychotherapy is a promising source of information useful for clinical practice when a question or a controversy concerning an intervention in a particular patient appears; however, it is a matter of the future.

**THE USEFULNESS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS
FROM THE AREA OF PSYCHOLOGY IN PSYCHOTHERAPY PRACTICE
– EXPECTED POSSIBILITIES**

Currently, the available source of information potentially useful for psychotherapy practice is the research findings from different fields of psychology. They can provide answers to questions or resolve controversies related to practice that psychotherapy theories do not address. For example, when a patient's problem is complex, the detailed questions are what method of psychotherapy should be chosen, how to remove obstacles to its solution, and how to assess the progress. They can also be used to verify the accuracy of theoretical knowledge based which psychotherapists take decisions concerning interventions and thus prevent irrelevant decisions. For example, research findings can help to see a choice of intervention, in accordance with the theory of psychotherapy acknowledged by a clinician, aimed at intrapersonal factors as wrong when a patient's problem is conditioned by factors in his or her social environment.

Competences in conducting clinical practice based on scientific evidence involve proficiency in formulating practical questions, looking for scientific evidence, and assessing its reliability (Satterfield et al., 2009). The use of scientific evidence contained in the literature from various fields of psychology in order to find an answer to a question or resolve controversies concerning psychotherapeutic interventions requires an assessment of its usefulness and credibility. One of the criteria for assessing the usefulness of scientific evidence from that source is the answer to the question of whether it is legitimate to extrapolate the results of research carried out on a sample composed of representatives of the general population in which a majority of people have no mental disorders on the population of people with mental disorders. The evaluation of the usefulness of research findings from various fields of psychology for this aspect of psychotherapy practice requires a critical thinking ability.

Critical thinking is a fundamental ability when assessing scientific evidence: Critical thinking is the ability and willingness to assess claims and make objective judgments on the basis of well-supported reasons and research results, not based on emotions or unreliable sources. It is the ability of those who look for flaws in arguments and resist claims that have no supporting evidence. They are aware that criticism of some argumentation does not mean criticism of the person who gives the argumentation and they are willing to engage in a discussion regarding the justification of the idea. Critical thinking . . . also fosters the ability to be creative and constructive to generate possible explanations for findings,

think of implications of discoveries provided by research, and apply new knowledge to a broad range of social and personal problems. (Wade & Tavris, 2008, p. 7). The use of critical thinking thus understood to evaluate the usefulness of empirical research results contained in the literature from various areas of psychology and their reliability is the basis for the formulation of relevant answers or the resolution of controversies regarding the practice of psychotherapy, both when the aim is to verify the theory of psychotherapy and then when the aim is to answer questions or resolve controversies that are not satisfactorily addressed by theories.

In conclusion, competence in the practice of evidence-based psychotherapy includes proficiency in the formulation of practical questions, in searching for scientific evidence, and in assessing its usefulness and reliability. Research findings from different areas of psychology thus become an available resource potentially useful for the practice of psychotherapy.

**THE USEFULNESS OF RESEARCH
FINDINGS FROM THE AREA OF PSYCHOLOGY
IN PSYCHOTHERAPY PRACTICE
– PRACTICAL EXEMPLIFICATION**

The articles presented in this issue of *Roczniki Psychologiczne* share a common objective, which is to identify the areas of scientific knowledge in different fields of psychology that may potentially be useful in psychotherapy. These texts were inspired by discussions between practitioners and scientists representing different fields of psychology that were conducted during the 2nd symposium within the “Psychology and Psychotherapy” series, entitled “Psychological Mechanisms of Changes in Psychotherapy”. The symposium took place in Warsaw on November 16-17, 2012. Below, there is information concerning the areas of psychological scientific knowledge that the authors of the articles made use of and an overview of what questions related to the practice of psychotherapy they addressed.

In the article “Modifying copying with stress as a method of preventing the recurrence of mental disorder symptoms” (Rakowska, Dziurska, Ziętalewicz, Pawłowski, & Tworus, 2015), the authors use the results of research into the effects of deferred psychotherapy, psychopathology (the contribution of stress to the etiology of mental disorders), as well as research in the psychology of stress and coping with stress. The aim is to answer two practical questions concerning

the effectiveness of psychotherapy, namely (1) in case of which mental disorders it is necessary to increase the abilities to cope with stress to prevent the recurrence of symptoms, and (2) what this improvement of abilities should be based on to achieve such an effect.

In the article “Correcting emotions in psychotherapy” (Trzebińska & Gabińska, 2015) – on the basis of research results in the psychology of emotions as well as research on the effectiveness of various psychological interventions in the course of emotional reactions, answers to two questions are proposed: (1) Is a more complete awareness of self-emotions and more effective control over them in case of each emotional problem sufficient enough to solve it? (2) In what way is it possible in psychotherapy to effect a change in emotions in whose case it is the content rather than the way of experiencing that interferes with adaptation?

In the article entitled “Transference and its usefulness in psychotherapy in the light of empirical evidence” (Suszek, Wegner, & Maliszewski, 2015), research results concerning the effectiveness of psychodynamic psychotherapy as well as social cognitive psychology are used in order to answer two questions, the first of which is theoretical and the other practical: (1) Does research confirm the transference phenomenon, described on the basis of the psychoanalysis of attitudes (or other mental content) originally manifested towards significant others from one’s past on another person? (2) Under what circumstances does of the psychotherapist’s interpretation of the patient’s transference on the therapist of his or her own attitudes towards significant others in the his/her childhood in the course of psychodynamic psychotherapy lead to behavior changes in the patient, and under what circumstances does this technique not yield such a result?

In the article “Therapist’s humanization of the patient: Promoting and interfering factors” (Tarnowska, Kofta, & Jedliński, 2015), the authors use research results concerning the determinants of the effectiveness of psychotherapy as well as findings from the area of social psychology. The aim was to answer the question of how psychotherapists can increase the chances for building relationships with their patients that would be conducive to positive changes in the patients thanks to perceiving patients without previously adopted stereotypical assumptions.

The article “Changes in the self in the course of psychotherapy” (Huflejt-Łukasik, Bąk, Styła, & Klajns, 2015) makes use of research results on the effectiveness of psychotherapy and the psychology of personality concerning changes in the content and the structure of the self. The purpose is to answer the following questions: (1) What changes in self-concept in the course of psychotherapy:

the structure or the content, and what are the mechanisms of these changes?
(2) How are the changes in self-concept reflected in the patients' behavior? Do they accompany each behavior change achieved by patients in psychotherapy?

REFERENCES

- American Psychological Association Presidential Task Force on Evidence-Based Practice (2006). Evidence-based practice in psychology. *American Psychologist*, 61, 271-285.
- Concato, J., Shah, N., & Horowitz, T. I. (2000). Treatment manuals do not improve outcomes. In J. Norcross, R. Levant, & L. Beutler (Eds.), *Evidence-based practices in mental health: Debate and dialogue on the fundamental questions*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.
- Huflejt-Łukasik, M., Bąk, W., Styła, R., & Klajs, K. (2015). Changes in the Self in the course of psychotherapy. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 18(3), 449-464.
- Institute of Medicine (2001). *Crossing the quality chasm: A new health system for the 21st century*. Washington, DC: Institute of Medicine.
- Rakowska, J. M. (2005). *Skuteczność psychoterapii*. Warsaw: Scholar.
- Rakowska, J. M. (2011a). Użyteczność kliniczna interwencji psychoterapeutycznych wspartych empirycznie. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 14(1), 7-22.
- Rakowska, J. M. (2011b). Użyteczność kliniczna interwencji psychoterapeutycznych wspartych empirycznie – podsumowanie dyskusji. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 14(1), 69-89.
- Rakowska, J. M., Dziurska, A., Ziętalewicz, U., Pawłowski, P., & Tworus, R. (2015). Modifying coping with stress as a method of preventing the recurrence of mental disorder symptoms. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 18(3), 295-311.
- Satterfield, J., Spring, B., Browson, R. C., Mullen, J., Newhouse, R., Walker, B., & Whitlock, E. P. (2009). Toward a transdisciplinary model of evidence-based practice. *The Milbank Quarterly*, 87, 368-390.
- Suszek, H., Wegner E., & Maliszewski, N. (2015). Transference and its usefulness in psychotherapy in the light of empirical evidence. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 18(3), 363-380.
- Trzebińska, E., & Gabińska, A. (2015). Correcting emotions in psychotherapy. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 18(3), 329-343.
- Tarnowska, M., Kofta, M., & Jedliński, K. (2015). Therapist's humanization of the patient: Promoting and interfering factors. *Roczniki Psychologiczne*, 18(3), 407-431.
- Wade, C., & Travis, C. (2009). *Psychology*. Upper Saddle River: Prentice-Hall.