The Dodo-bird Debate, Empirically Supported Relationships and Functional Analytic Psychotherapy

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Abstract

The dodo-bird verdict has haunted the literature on psychotherapy outcome since its early beginnings. It is based on the counter-intuitive finding that often highly diverging treatments do not differ much in effectiveness. There is evidence that much of the common effect of different treatments can be related to unspecific factors as opposed to treatment-specific techniques. The present paper offers a short behavior analytic reflection on contemporary directions concerning effective therapeutic relationships. It suggests that the idiographic vision inherent in functional analysis may point at an alternative avenue for psychotherapy outcome research that is entirely different from those on empirically supported treatments and empirically supported relationships, and that this third direction may shed more light on the question as to what determines therapeutic change.
Key-words: Dodo-bird verdict; Empirically supported therapies; Therapeutic relationship; Functional Analytic Psychotherapy.

Since the advent of research on the effectiveness of specific treatments for specific disorders (Eysenck, 1952; Chambless, 1996) therapy advanced tremendously and it seems it will never be the same again. As a result of this work, the well-trained therapist of today, confronting a client with this or that particular disorder will be able to choose and implement the treatment-package that will most probably be helpful. The bottom line is that a treatment that has been shown most helpful in studies for clients with a specific problem and specific characteristics, will be the most indicated treatment for a client one will meet in one's office with that same problem and those same characteristics.

Critics of this development have been prolific. It has been pointed out that technique-driven protocols cannot consider the complexity of the therapeutic process and that the ecologic validity of the controlled studies is weak because the therapy settings in clinical practice vary widely (Garfield, 1996; Goldfried & Wolfe, 1996; 1998; Bohart, 2000).

The Dodo-Bird Verdict

Metanalyses (e.g. Smith, Glass & Miller, 1980; Wampold, et al., 1997; Luborsky et al., 2002) tend to corroborate Rozenzweig's (1936) verdict that everybody has won and must have prizes, a line taken from the Dodo-bird in Lewis Caroll's Alice's Adventures in Wonderland. That very dissimilar interventions have similar effects diminished the seeming importance of specific techniques. The Dodo-bird verdict came to evoke in specialists at least three standard types of reaction.

A first type consists in pointing out that the meta-analyses don't permit disqualifying the effects of techniques and that it is more ethical to use techniques that have empirical support than to speculate about unspecific variables. Continued controlled studies are necessary to show what variables or interactions contribute to therapeutic changes (Eysenck, 1994; Chambless, 2002). A second type of reaction points at unspecific variables as holding the major promise for explaining what makes therapy work (Bohart, 2000; Messer & Wampold, 2002). The therapeutic encounter in itself can have an important effect on the client and the therapist as a person makes a difference. Characteristics of the relationship compete with specific techniques as possible explanations of why

therapies work. They are often common to many different treatments, and have enough empirical support to give them a place alongside specific techniques in models about the active ingredients of therapy.

Efforts to identify core relationship variables have been examined by a task force of the American Psychological Association's division 29 and reviewed in a book organized by Norcross (2002). These empirically supported relationships are aspects of the way in which client and therapist interact, that research has been able to relate favorably to treatment outcome or process. Some chapters of the book review work on how to make the client-therapist relationship a productive context for therapy, e.g. through goal consensus, collaboration or therapeutic alliance. These data are no threat to the specific variables approach, whose proponents consider such common factors to interact with the techniques (e.g. Eysenck, 1994). It is an important tenet of traditional cognitive behavior therapy that a collaborative relationship is the propitious context for applying its techniques (Beck, 1995). However, other chapters review research concerning direct therapeutic effects of relationship conditions like therapist self-disclosure or working through alliance-ruptures.

From a topographical point of view, the subject matter featured in the latter type of research constitutes a radical break away from the technique-driven protocols. But from a functional analytic point of view it is not different from the classical research on specific techniques. Relational interpretations (Crits-Christoph & Gibbons, 2002), therapist self-disclosure (Hill & Knox, 2002) or repair of alliance-ruptures (Safran, Muran, Samstag & Stevens, 2002) are studied much in the same way as cognitive restructuring or exposure to feared stimuli (e.g. Craske & Rowe, 1997) in the traditional literature. They are pinned down in topographic descriptions, and their effects are verified in controlled studies with clients having certain problems or certain characteristics. In the process, they are transformed in specific techniques. The research leads up to empirically supported instructions for therapists, as to how and with which patients to use these newly validated types of intervention. The bottom line again is that the therapist must proceed in ways that have been shown most helpful in studies with other clients. It seems that nomothetic research easily transforms unspecific variables into specific ones. Paradoxically, the innovative research on relationships that work makes it possible for therapists to be trained in the empirically recommended uses of interventions in a way that remains very similar to traditional research on specific treatment techniques.

FAP and Empirically Supported Relationships

An example of a third type of reaction to the Dodo-bird verdict is Gifford's (2002) appeal to sort out the process by which therapies affect people. Possible examples of such processes include acceptance (e.g. Heffner, Sperry, Eifert, & Detweiler, 2002) and the intimacy of the therapeutic relationship (e.g. Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1998). This third type seems to correspond to the direction many clinical behavior analysts are taking. The therapist who works with Functional Analytic Psychotherapy (FAP; Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991), for example, needs to continuously sort out the idiosyncratic relations between events (i.e. therapist behaviors and client behaviors) that occur during his or her spontaneous interaction with the client. In certain cases these variables may include the ones focused by the empirically supported relationships movement. But the functional analytic point of view limits the meaning of topographical definitions like therapist self-disclosure or goal-consensus as much as it limits the meaning cognitive restructuring as an intervention for clients with a certain problem and certain characteristics. In a functional analysis, any of these interventions may be relevant, and may be seen as tentatives of the therapist to evoke clinically relevant behavior, to reinforce in-vivo improvement or to weaken in-session problem behavior. In

obtaining goal-consensus (Tryon & Winograd, 2002), in restructuring cognitions (Beck, 1995) or in applying Muran and Saffran's (2002) stages of alliance-repair, what counts, according to FAP, are the functional relations between what the client does and what the therapist does. These functional relations can be understood as bi-directional influences. Both client and therapist provide antecedent stimuli and consequences for the behavior of the other, evokes feelings, reinforces or weakens classes of operants (Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1991).

It is clear that a functional contextualistic philosophy does not exclude important contributions either to the empirically supported treatment movement or the empirically supported relationship movement. This counts for Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (e.g. Bach e Hayes, 2002) and for FAP-Enhanced Cognitive Therapy (e.g. Kohlenberg et al. 2002). Another brand of Clinical Behavior Analysis, Dialectical Behavior Therapy has performed brilliantly in traditional nomothetic research (e.g. Linehan, Heard & Armstrong 1993; Bohus et ali., 2000; Koerner & Linehan, 2000). However, the ideographic functional view that characterizes the work of the clinical behavior analyst during sessions calls for an additional effort to shed light on what makes treatment work and on how it does so.

What FAP (Kohlenberg & Tsai, 1987; 1991) proposes as the active ingredient of treatment slips through one's fingers at every attempt to grasp it in a topographical description. It can best be conceptualized in terms of the functional relations between client behavior in session and the therapist's responding to it, as each behavior occurs. These relations are complex, highly idiosyncratic for each case, and at times hard to predict. There are no specific and unspecific factors, but functional relations between events as they occur in the therapy room, and these derive their meaning from the broader context of the client's life.

While in applied behavior analysis, well established functional hypotheses are available to be tested (problem behavior can be maintained by positive, negative, automatic reinforcement), treatment always has to be matched to function. And function can only be determined in an ideographic analysis (Wacker, 2000; Hanley, Iwata & McCord, 2003). This does impose limits to what can be attained through standard group comparison outcome studies. Compared to functional analysis as conducted in applied behavior analysis, the continuous process of functional assessment that characterizes FAP, may be even more idiosyncratic. While this does not make hypothetic-deductive research impossible, it may be that FAP ties treatment decisions too closely to the fine tissue of client-therapist interaction to allow for traditional nomothetic designs.

In trying to assess this process, FAP-researchers have been grounding their work in the raw data, which are the concrete behaviors of the client and the therapist. Kanter, Schildkraut and Kohlenberg (2005) rated the therapist turns of speech in data from an earlier study (Kohlenberg et al. 2002) using broad categories to classify utterances by means of their content and context as either or not focusing the occurrence of problems or improvements in the therapy setting, the therapeutic process, and the therapeutic relationship. They related the categories to client's reports of therapeutic changes. The Functional Idiographic Assessment Template (FIAT; Callaghan, 2001) also allows coding client and therapist behaviors in session. The codes obtained using the FIAT have been used in lag sequential analyses to study changes over the course of time in frequencies of in-session behaviors (e.g. Callaghan, Summers & Weidman, 2003). Both approaches allow for inductive research that is coherent with the radical behavioristic philosophy that is at the core of FAP.

Research on treatment techniques as well as research on relationship variables may still hold great promises. But the needs of a nomothetic approach may be a hindrance to research on process. It may be that studying the fine tissue of therapy calls for a thoroughly ideographic and

inductive strategy. In this case, the contribution that FAP may be able to make to therapy research lays in the development of this third current of research that, clearly differentiated from the two others, focuses the functional dimension of what happens in the therapy room.

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