

EMPIRICAL PAPER

The therapeutic effects of the therapists' ability to pass their patients' tests in psychotherapy

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Abstract

Introduction According to Control-Mastery Theory (CMT)—a cognitive–dynamic relational theory of mental functioning, psychopathology, and psychotherapy—patients come to therapy with an unconscious plan to disprove their pathogenic beliefs and achieve adaptive goals. One of the primary ways patients work to disconfirm their pathogenic beliefs is by testing them within the therapeutic relationship. **Objectives:** The present study aimed to replicate and expand the results of previous studies suggesting that therapists' responses that disconfirmed patient's pathogenic beliefs were predictive of patients' within-session progress. Moreover, we wanted to investigate whether these interventions correlated with the therapeutic alliance. **Methods:** Transcriptions of 81 sessions from five brief psychodynamic psychotherapies were assessed by 11 independent raters. For each case, the patient's plan was formulated and tests identified, the accuracy of the therapist's responses to these tests was rated, and the impact of the therapist's interventions on the patient's subsequent communications and their relationship with the therapeutic alliance was measured. **Results:** The results supported the central hypothesis of the CMT that when the therapist's interventions passed the patient's tests, the patient showed signs of improvement. Moreover, the ability of the therapist to pass the patient's tests correlated with the therapeutic alliance. **Conclusions:** The clinical implications and the limitations of these findings are discussed, together with the relevance of a good case formulation for clinicians' optimal responsiveness.

Keywords: Control Mastery Theory; process research; patient's plan; testing activity; therapeutic alliance

Clinical or methodological significance of this article: This study shows the relevance of a good case formulation for clinicians' responsiveness, and the importance of clinicians' ability to disprove their patients' pathogenic beliefs for the therapeutic progress. When therapists are able to disprove their patients' pathogenic beliefs by passing their tests, patients become more able to understand themselves and address their problems, and become more involved in their therapies.

Research in psychotherapy has clearly shown that psychotherapy is effective (APA, 2012; Barkham & Lambert, 2021; Cuijpers et al., 2021; Dragioti et al., 2017) and that, if certain conditions are respected – the therapy is a bona fide treatment guided by a manual and based on a psychological theory of psychopathology and therapeutic process;

therapists believe that the treatments they are delivering are effective; therapists are appropriately trained and so on (Laska et al., 2014; Frank & Frank, 1991) – all the therapies aimed at treating a specific disorder are equally effective, independently from the theory they are based on (Steinert et al., 2017; Wampold & Imel, 2015; Wampold et al., 1997).

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