Value and limitations of research

Research in psychotherapy and counselling
Ladislav Timulak
Sage 2008, £19.99
ISBN 978-1412945790
Reviewed by Els van Ooijen

This book is not a ‘how to’ guide, such as Doing Practitioner Research by Fox et al, nor an overview of current research such as Cooper’s Essential Research Findings in Counselling and Psychotherapy: The Facts are Friendly. Rather it aims to help evaluation of research by clarifying its nature and how and why it is carried out.

It is in three parts: outcome research, process research, and context and practice. This structure works well, as there is much cross-referencing and signposting. Parts I and II start with an introduction to the ‘instruments’ used, followed by chapters devoted to particular methodologies. The concluding chapter of each part offers a concise synopsis. Individual chapters are well balanced; the various methods are clearly explained and illustrated by relevant examples. These examples illustrate how different methods are used and are also of interest in their own right. Results are summarised in helpful tables. Part III discusses the context of research and the link with practice.

By far the largest section is on outcome research, of which Timulak says, ‘paradoxically this... does not contribute much to the development of new therapeutic approaches, but rather validates existing ones’. Within the current climate of evidence based practice it is therefore important to appreciate that an over emphasis on outcome research could lead to a loss of creativity and development. Another important point is made about randomised controlled trials (RCTs), generally considered to be the ‘gold standard’ of outcome research. In order to minimise differences between therapists, RCTs tend to study ‘manualised’ therapies, delivered according to a written procedure. This is a serious limitation, as few counsellors and therapists are likely to follow a manual in their everyday practice.

Process research, often favoured by students, practitioners and those of meagre resources, can be rather time consuming and may involve complex ethical considerations. However, its advantages are that not only is it much closer to counselling and psychotherapy practice, it can also inform that practice and give voice to the views of clients. Timulak shows that there is a great deal of methodological development happening in process research, and that it is possible to combine innovation with ‘scientific rigour and practical relevance’.

Timulak emphasises that it should not be forgotten that research in therapy and counselling is inevitably affected by who is doing the investigating. In other words, the worldview of investigators, their view of the nature of human beings and their therapeutic paradigm, will all affect the questions they seek to answer. Timulak’s aims, to clarify research and its value for practice, and to alert people to its ‘limitations and potential misuse’, have certainly been achieved. This book deserves a place in every professional library and I recommend it to anyone who is interested in understanding more about research.

Dr Els van Ooijen is a psychotherapist in private practice and visiting lecturer at the University of Wales, Newport

Eclectic reader on personality disorder

Personality disorder: the definitive reader
Gwen Adshead and Caroline Jacob (eds)
Jessica Kingsley 2008
£22.99
ISBN 978-1843106401
Reviewed by Gabrielle Brown

This is an invaluable collection. The title ‘definitive reader’ belies the eclectic range of papers chosen. It is widely applicable across clinical practice, beyond the limits of a diagnosis of ‘personality disorder’. In fact, personality disorder is used as a focus for thinking about all disturbing, conflict-inducing clinical communications, and both professional and organisational responses.

Only two of the papers originally appeared in psychotherapy publications; the majority, taken from psychiatric journals, are rendered accessible to a wider audience here. Adshead and Jacob are both psychatically trained psychotherapists, based in Broadmoor and elsewhere, and the collection proves the value of multidisciplinary practice.

The papers are grouped in three sections: aetiology, clinical implications, and treatment and management. Refreshingly, papers from the 1940s onwards are presented. This historical scope dispels the prevalent impression of personality disorder as a recent ‘bolt on’ to therapeutic traditions – a ‘new’ concept, requiring ‘expertise’ beyond the scope of established knowledge and technique. The collection confirms the continuing relevance of earlier writers and their works, among them Winnicott, Tom Main, Kingsley Norton and Adshead herself. For instance, Winnicott reminds us that dependence itself naturally generates ambivalent feelings: mothers know the small baby ‘treats her like scum’, but must find ways to provide care untainted by resentment.

Each paper has a brief introduction, giving the context of its genesis and pointing to its insights. Each section ends with points to be considered in reflective practice. Again, these are more sophisticated than the section title indicates. Therapists are asked to think about what we ‘do’ with our hate, what the real boundaries of our services are, and whether reflective space is available. Practical solutions are suggested in...
Guilt: an exploration
Caroline Brazier
O Books 2009, £11.99
ISBN 978-1846941603
Reviewed by Sue Rowe

This book feels like a guilty pleasure in its own right! I forgot I was reviewing a professional book and became completely immersed in the characters and story. Reading it was like curling up on the sofa with a good novel.

Caroline Brazier explores the huge subject of guilt by telling the story of a group of children growing up in the 60s, in a London I recognise well from personal experience. Her descriptions of the daily lives, experiences and emotions of the main characters are so vivid I could almost smell and taste the school playground again as I read, and relived, the childhood terror of getting into trouble with teachers and parents.

Mostly, the children’s guilt does not occur as a result of heinous acts. The story is more about the kind of guilt, shame and fearful feelings that arise following relatively minor misdemeanours that become blown out of proportion by young minds which can only understand part of a whole picture.

Although entitled Guilt: An Exploration, it goes further than that. It looks at all the other emotions that accompany guilt: shame, secrecy, regret, envy, and the painful journey from childhood through adolescence, where sexuality rears its ugly head (and it is ugly to these children when they first discover what adults actually do).

The first two thirds or so of the book are set in the 60s and the last part jumps forward to when the main character is almost 30 years old and returns to her old haunts to look back. In so doing, almost by chance, she discovers the momentous outcome of a decision she made back then. Every so often the narrative is paused for commentary on what is happening in the story and to explore the wider issues. It keeps you guessing right until the end.

Free from theoretical jargon and academic language, this book is a delight to read, very thought provoking and hard to put down. Ordinary lives, written about in ordinary language, make for an extraordinary book which offers its reader, professional or lay, a valuable insight into human nature.

Sue Rowe is a trainer, supervisor and BACP accredited counsellor

Critique of happiness agenda

Psychotherapy and the quest for happiness
Emmy van Deurzen
ISBN 978-0761944119
Reviewed by Val Simanowitz

Recently, I have noticed that clients in their first encounters with me state, ‘I just want to be happy.’ My initial response is a sense of discomfort, a feeling which combines a sense of inadequacy and irritation.

It is therefore a relief to find this well argued and convincing book which refutes the misguided belief (reinforced by Lord Layard’s recently adopted proposals to Government for free ‘happiness’ therapy) that the pursuit of happiness is the purpose of therapy. Van Deurzen states that whilst life can be joyful and exhilarating, it is always a difficult challenge, and that not only is human misery a part of the human condition but that we can gain inspiration from the struggle we have in dealing with it.

The aim of the book is to question what counselling and therapy can offer those who seek to understand their lives better and suggests that we need to avoid falling into the trap of believing that our aim is to make people’s lives happier. Rather, we can enable people to understand themselves and their relationships better and what it means to live the good life.

Van Deurzen reflects on the fact that in our modern world, science and technology are in the ascendancy. They have made aspects of our lives easier and safer. However they have potentially destructive consequences and often make people’s lives increasingly complex and stressed. She argues that though we cannot deny this mechanical knowledge, we need a radical review of our lives to ensure that it serves rather than controls us. She contends that artists and philosophers still have an essential part to play, as they have never sought to eliminate human suffering but to illuminate and understand it. Van Deurzen suggests that in many ways therapists are filling the vacuum left by priests and philosophers, and asks us to examine our new role.

At present about half of therapists accept the cognitive revolution. They adopt evidence based manualised cures and believe that wellbeing can be cultivated, measured and taught as a skill. The other half follows the dynamic or humanistic therapies based on insight and catharsis. This book aims to move beyond these two paradigms and rethink therapy in a more radical fashion. It seeks to integrate the learning from both these branches by taking the widest possible perspective within a philosophical framework.

I found some of the main
Emotional influence and the benefits of crisis and catastrophe. However, generally I found this a passionate and thought-provoking book, particularly in our present economic climate, which may also be an opportunity to rethink our meaning.

Val Simanowitz is a counsellor, supervisor and trainer.

Engaging guide to EMDR

EMDR essentials: a guide for clients and therapists
Barb Maiberger
Norton 2009, £18.99
ISBN 978-0393705690
Reviewed by Joy Kay

Eye movement desensitization and reprocessing therapy (EMDR) is becoming more widely spoken of in the UK, and in some areas it is even available as a specific NHS referral.

At the same time most people have only a vague idea of what it is, so this clear and engaging demystification of EMDR is both welcome and timely. It is also an enjoyable and rapid read.

Maiberger begins with a brief story of how she first experienced EMDR and went on to train as an EMDR therapist. Thereafter the book is divided into two main parts: ‘An inside look at EMDR therapy’ and ‘Transformational stories’.

In part one she immediately engages our attention with a detailed re-run of a real life EMDR session. In the next six chapters she takes us through the significance of, and rationale for, each component of that session and the place it takes in the whole careful process. At the end of part one any prospective client will have a very clear idea of how the basics of eye movement desensitization were discovered, developed, researched and eventually renamed ‘eye movement desensitization and reprocessing’.

Prospective clients will also understand what ‘trauma’ is and its symptoms, and they will know how to find a therapist, and what questions they may want to ask that therapist. (In the UK and Ireland this is best done using www.emdr-uki.org).

Those who are interested will be able to catch up on the current brain function research that shows what is going on as therapy proceeds. In part two, readers will find out how unprocessed memories can affect a person in later life in many ways, and they will also become more familiar with the regular pattern of a session, known as the protocol.

This book will be a useful addition to the library of EMDR therapists, and also for enquiring clients and interested colleagues who may be considering the training. It will be a welcome addition on the GP practice bookshelf where referral to EMDR therapy by either GPs or the practice counsellor is a possibility. All can enjoy the prospect of an intriguing read.

Joy Kay is an accredited EMDR therapist

Working with sound in therapy

Listening to music in psychotherapy
Mary Butterton
Radcliffe 2008, £21.95
ISBN 978-1857757415
Reviewed by Gillian Ingram

The aim of this book is to raise awareness and the need for research into the use of music in psychotherapy. Mary Butterton, a music graduate and counsellor, references both psychoanalytic thinking (Bollas, Winnicott) and neuroscientific research (Trevarthen, Malloch, Schore). She argues that right brain to right brain relating between mother and baby is the beginning of early developmental emotional and mental health.

Sound – and hence the importance of music – is one of the earliest links between mother, foetus and the newborn baby. The skills of ‘communicative musicality’ (Malloch) inherent in this activity can then be replicated therapeutically by client and therapist many years later. In demonstrating the use of CDs brought into the consulting room by the client, Butterton offers a framework for working through early traumatised infantile preverbal states. By using the tone, pulse and rhythm of music chosen by the client, a tuned in therapist/mother can interact with a responsive patient/baby and can access benign early relational patterns which have been laid down securely before the trauma. Traces of the felt experience of an early patterning of ‘good enough’ self-in-relationship will have been lodged in the right brain hemisphere and will be matched in the musical patterning chosen by the patient.

Butterton demonstrates this in the case of Liz, a client with early loss and current painful fibromyalgia. Over the ten years she saw her she used the conventional talking and music therapy but completed the work by asking Liz to bring her own CDs to sessions, ranging from Elgar to Queen and then to Dvorak and Bach. This process of sharing the music and then shifting to left brain functioning in using words and symbols between patient and therapist enabled an integration of hitherto blocked and split off feeling states. Butterton suggests that this process can in itself create new neural pathways and can enlarge the individual’s capacity for further depth in relating, not only to other people but to more profound aesthetic experiences in the arts in general.

For clinicians working with patients with ME, and somatised states which may imply buried preverbal distress, this all sounds extremely helpful and informative. The earlier sections of the book which contain more generalised considerations about the meaning of music for individual people, and its more philosophical, sociological and aesthetic aspects, are interesting but not as gripping or moving.

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as the clinical sections. Overall the book is a welcome addition to the study of links between neurobiology and object relations psychodynamic practice. Gillian Ingram is a psychodynamic counsellor and supervisor.

Self-help guide to dealing with death

Coping with your partner’s death: your bereavement guide
Geoff Billings
Sheldon Press 2008, £7.99
ISBN 978-1847090539
Reviewed by Melanie Crewe

The content and style of this self-help book surprised me, as, from the title, I had expected it to include material on Elisabeth Kubler-Ross’s five stages of grief. There is a small section on ‘Death and your feelings’, but this is not the focus. Instead it takes a practical approach, beginning with the tasks that need to be dealt with following a death.

A chapter on new domestic skills and routines aims to encourage the bereaved person to attempt any tasks previously undertaken by the deceased. Some readers may consider the instructions on how to perform household tasks condescending, whilst others may find such advice useful. The chapter on neighbours, friends and relationships, may prove useful in normalising hurt feelings that can occur if others act in unexpected or unhelpful ways.

Chapters on safety and health contain sensible advice, provided that dwelling on security and safety does not serve to make the reader overly anxious about living alone. The book also considers issues of moving on, encouraging the person to make new friends, take up new activities and think about the future. Appendices contain practical lists and draft letters that may be useful in sorting out the estate of the deceased.

The book is organised into short chapters, interspersed with case studies. It could be a useful support for anyone losing a partner, especially if their relationship had been one in which roles and responsibilities were narrowly defined. The book does not specifically address the needs of ethnic and sexual minorities. Melanie Crewe is a case manager for Doncaster IAPT.

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Now available to purchase – Essential research findings in counselling and psychotherapy: the facts are friendly, by Mick Cooper.

Big ideas about the body

Bodies
Susie Orbach
Profile Books 2009, £10.99
ISBN 978-1846680199
Reviewed by Margaret Akmakjian-Pitz

This book examines what is happening to bodies in our time and challenges even those who believe they are not in the least body conscious.

Part of a series entitled Big Ideas – other titles include Complaint, Democracy, Critical Time, Moral Relativism, Tyranny of Choice, and Violence – this slim, highly readable volume by ‘the most famous psychotherapist in Britain (aside from Freud)’ (The Times), deals with clinical and moral concerns about our strange and dangerous attitude towards our bodies.

Orbach asks provocative questions and gives some rather shocking details about the present and about what she sees as a frightening future in body terms. Along the way she touches on (but never too slightly) the conundrum of a man who demanded the amputation of his perfectly healthy legs, the attraction of avatars, the importance of touch, the myth of the Government’s obsession with Body Mass Index (which makes George Clooney obese), cutting, nutritional theory, torture and a whole lot more.

For example, if diets worked you’d only need to diet once. Diet companies depend on 95 per cent recidivism and Orbach wonders what forces prevent prosecution by the Trade Descriptions Act. And she wonders if Serena Williams really can’t play her best tennis if her skin looks less than perfect.

The author looks at the many possible reasons for our obsessions, pointing out that there has never been a simple, ‘natural’ body. Our tastes change and with it the ‘ideal’ shape. We desperately want to belong, so we crave the images brought to us by the ‘merchants of body hatred’.

This book is good value, with footnotes to each chapter, eight pages of suggested further reading and a decent index. And it leaves one with the pertinent question: do I see my body as an ‘it’ – or is it simply where I live? Margaret Akmakjian-Pitz is a psychotherapist in private practice.