

Running Head: UNIFYING PSYCHOTHERAPY

Unifying psychotherapy: are we there, yet?

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### Abstract

The present discussion considers unification in psychotherapy in a differentiated critical light. It underscores its contribution to the understanding of how psychotherapy works – its mechanisms of change. Theoretical, methodological, clinical and ethical considerations are highlighted. The delineates how psychotherapy research can take up the concepts from the unification pathway to psychotherapy integration, and thus contribute to understanding how psychotherapy works in coherent ways. Challenges, possible solutions and perspectives are outlined.

Keywords: Unification; Mechanisms of Change; Psychotherapy; Change

The plurality of theories and techniques in the field of psychotherapy has been discussed controversially. While plurality may be a central characteristic of the psychotherapy field, it also hinders progress in a number of areas, such as when using known common factors in psychotherapy, when using comprehensive case formulations anchored in multiple perspectives and, most and foremost, when it comes to understanding change in psychotherapy. Unification, as the most recently added pathway to psychotherapy integration (Henriques & Gralha, this issue) – the topic of this brilliantly edited special issue for the *Journal of Psychotherapy Integration*, by Marquis (this issue) - makes a unique contribution to one particular question among many: the understanding of how and why psychotherapy works.

While the “why” in the question posed tends to refer to principles of change – broad mid-level abstraction concepts indicating where to look when explaining the effects of psychotherapy (e.g., fostering insight) – the “how” in the question posed tends to refer to mechanisms of change (Anchin & Marquis, this issue). The latter refers to the step-by-step changes in the client, as fostered by the therapist, explaining changes in psychotherapy (Doss, 2003; Kazdin, 2009). Both ultimately put psychotherapy on a solid theoretical basis explaining change, and help clinicians to become more effective in helping their clients.

Understanding of change in psychotherapy needs, as argued by Henriques and Gralha (this issue; Henriques, 2022), to be anchored in a model of adaptive change in humans: we need to know how humans change in the real world, what for and under which conditions, before we can make valid conclusions in terms of mechanisms of change in psychotherapies. Consideration of knowledge from basic science – from psychology and biology – is in order. With this, any variable studied should be traced back to human adaptation and its function (Kramer, Levy, & McMMain, 2024). We know, for example, that human emotion serves the function to indicate that the individual’s core goals and needs are met, or not met, which

becomes a core feature of any affective phenomenon (Schiller et al., 2024). Another such fundamental function in human adaptation is memory, and its consolidation and reconsolidation (i.e., update in memory contents) is a process phenomenon that occurs in the service of human adaptation (Else, Van Ast, & Kindt, 2018).

When it comes to understanding change in psychotherapy, the setting involves at least a dyadic therapy relationship which fosters to a certain extent these fundamental human processes, helping move the client towards healthy adaptation (and decrease and eliminate symptoms). This is where unification may take a particularly relevant place in the psychotherapy literature: for the first time since the inception of psychotherapy, scholars develop a common language around a sometimes bewildering confusion of concepts – a true tower of Babel – by taking a bird’s eye view of all the different conceptualizations, client change processes and therapist interventions. Unification offers a unique opportunity to clarify how psychotherapy works: clarify the question of the contribution to the change in the client, in the therapist, or in the interaction between the two (or somewhere else). So, are we there, yet?

### **Contributions of the present special issue**

Anchin and Marquis (this issue) provide the epistemological and methodological basis for finding consensus in psychotherapy, with a particular focus on its mechanisms of change. They argue that finding consensus based on empirical evidence requires clarification of the implications of the notions, methods and concepts, and only with this clarity, therapists and researchers can build a strong understanding of how psychotherapy works. A particularly exciting methodological avenue, and one that reflects the clinical complexity well, is the assessment of moderated mediation, which denotes the understanding of a particular changing variable responsible for change, which may differ from one group of clients to the next (for an empirical example, see Hoglend & Hagtvet, 2019).

Ciarrochi, Hernandez, Hill, Ong, Gloster, Levin, Yap, Fraser, Sahdra, Hofmann and Hayes (this issue) call for a process-based meta-approach, as a way to explain the effects of psychotherapy. They reframe the notion of “mechanisms” – too linear in their view – by the broader term of “process”, and the need for a functional-contextual lens on human behavior and experience. They call for a theory-consistent conception between client processes and therapist interventions which foster the change. Given the functional-contextual lens, explicitly drawn from Acceptance-Commitment Therapy, they define a process of change as a “theory-based, dynamic, progressive, contextually bound, modifiable and multilevel change sequence ...” that predicts outcome (Ciarrochi et al., this issue, p. 17). They outline the methodological limitations of a nomothetic approach and support an idionomic network approach to data analysis. The latter is more suitable to model context-dependent inter-individual variation and fluctuation over time, and thus links context to behavior, and affect to action, on an individual level. The role of artificial intelligence may both represent a core opportunity to improve precision and efficacy of the models to be studied, and a core challenge in terms of ethical implications. These statistical models are suited to capture the complexity of the psychopathology, supporting case formulation, and of the psychotherapy process explaining outcomes. Given the dynamic and context dependent definition of process, it may be particularly suited to model the effects of therapist responsiveness, one of the most central relationship principles discussed in the psychotherapy literature, and one which is in need of more empirical testing (Kramer, Boehnke, & Esposito, in press; Stiles, Honos-Webb, & Surko, 1998).

Henriques and Gralha (this issue) outline the contents of such a common core language on unifying psychotherapy. As such, they provide a bird’s eye view on the major theories of change in psychotherapy and develop the theoretical core of psychotherapy. Anchored in the Unified Theory, i.e., the Tree of Knowledge (Henriques, 2022), explaining

adaptive human behavior and experience overall, the authors develop three major areas of change in psychotherapy: a) fostering a therapeutic relationship anchored in dynamics of (cognitive) justification, (affective) investment and (interpersonal) influence, b) developing a shared theory of the difficulties the client presents, using the multilayered systems theory of character adaptation explaining repetitive and maladaptive behavior and experience, and c) enhancing the client's well-being, by the therapist using curiosity, acceptance, compassion, motivation, and repeated practice, undoing the client's repetitive and maladaptive behavior and experience. The authors propose both a theory of client change, and therapist interventions fostering that change productively.

De Pietro, Valentino and Dimaggio (this issue) and Ecker (this issue) focus on two core mechanisms or processes, helping to explain the effects of psychotherapy: emotion change and memory change. De Pietro et al. (this issue) argue that change in emotion, fostered by the therapist using experiential two-chair work in session with clients with severe maladaptive behaviors and experiences, is part of the common core of psychotherapy. This conclusion is consistent with the rise of affectivism in basic science to explain human behavior and the need to conceptualize behavior and experience according to the underlying individual's needs and goals (Schiller et al., 2024). Clients' awareness into these affective contents will be crucial in the context of psychotherapy. Ecker (this issue) extends the core process of change in emotion to the change in memory and distinguishes between three different therapeutic processes supporting change in semantic memory. These core memory changes are: a) memory interference (i.e., associative learning without fundamentally changing the problematic memory) and b) two versions of memory change involving consolidation and reconsolidation processes (i.e., conjoining interference and unlearning). Again, experiential interventions, fostering emotional changes in the client, are understood as core to long-term change in the client's behaviors and experiences.

Pliskin and Crehan (this issue) extend the unification perspective in psychotherapy integration to change in neurodiverse individuals, such as clients with autistic features. The authors put unification into the context of a respectful dialogue between the client's priorities and features, social-cultural contextual factors, and the person of the therapist.

Finally, Magnavita, Magnavita and Ingram (this issue) extend the unification paradigm in psychotherapy integration to training, by reminding us about the ethical boundaries of human interaction, in particular with regard to artificial intelligence (AI). Using the example of ChatGPT answering (poorly) the question of effective psychotherapy techniques, the authors argue that AI may only produce the knowledge that is at the current level of evidence – limited in the case of effective psychotherapy techniques (see Hill & Norcross, 2023). The authors remind us that the wildest dreams of what AI can deliver may remain pure, or sometimes dangerous, fantasies and such tools do not replace the empirical groundwork needed to study the effects of psychotherapeutic techniques. The question posed requires us to take a meta-perspective, leading to further questions that psychotherapy research is bound to answer: an exploratory perspective that AI cannot take. Similarly, while ChatGPT may be responding to clients' questions appropriately, it may be inadequate to develop the next generation of questions for psychotherapy research (which will have an impact on the future of psychotherapy): a human mind is needed here.

### **A call for psychotherapy research to address the unification pathway to integration in psychotherapy**

While the question in the title may suggest that the field is not at the juncture of unification, as yet, more research addressing the core issues supporting unification is needed. Which domains to focus on? Which variables are of interest from a unification perspective?

Henriques et al. (this issue) propose to classify all changes as anchored in five domains: change in habit system, in the experiential system, in the relationship system, in the

defense system, and in the justification system. Psychotherapy researchers may define candidate variables for mechanisms of change according to this classification. The multileveled model by Henriques and Gralha (this issue) suggests that there is a complementarity in these five domains implying that researchers may be well advised to test mechanisms from multiple domains in the same study. In contrast, the reality is that researchers tend to test their preferred domain in their preferred therapy approach (e.g., test changes in defense mechanisms in psychodynamic psychotherapy, changes in habits in behavioral therapy). In order to really advance the understanding of how psychotherapy works, researchers are advised to test mechanisms that have shown relevance in the related therapy approach to be tested in a different approach. For example, in order to demonstrate change in the experiential (i.e., emotion) system to be considered for unifying psychotherapy, it needs to be shown that such changes are relevant for therapy approaches associated with all five groups of approaches (behavioral, experiential, interpersonal, psychodynamic and cognitive therapies); meta-analyses indicate that this may be the case (e.g., Sonderland et al., 2023). For changes in the defensive system as a candidate variable for a mechanism of change, there is evidence that changes are relevant across several psychotherapy approaches (Babl & Perry, 2017).

Such research is vital for the empirical underscoring of unification of psychotherapy and it will be up to the careful researcher to conclude to what extent unification rests on a solid empirical basis.

### **Challenges and possible solutions**

Unification proposes coherent theoretical frameworks for understanding how psychotherapy works, but more work needs to be done before it can be translated into the practice of psychotherapy. A few challenges remain to be addresses.



When conceptualizing principles, mechanisms, and processes of change, the crucial question is, where – in which agent – the change takes place (Doss, 2003). In many cases, it is expected that change takes place in the client (e.g., the client's emotional processing transforms towards better emotional balance, or a memory in the client is reconsolidated). Specific research designs have emphasized that therapist interventions or techniques directly produce the change (see Hill and Norcross, 2023). The ultimate design for unification in psychotherapy is the study of mechanisms and processes within a unified framework taking place in the client, as fostered by the therapist using a variety of therapist interventions and techniques (Kramer et al., 2024).

Another problem which has emerged is the confusion between illustration and demonstration of effects. Therapists observing change in their own clients (i.e., in case studies) may speak to a specific theory of change, but do not represent the formal demonstration of a mechanism of change (Kazdin, 2009). Clearly, both levels of evidence are needed for knowledge in unification to progress: they go hand in hand.

Change in emotion (or change in the experiential system, Di Pietro et al., this issue) may be one of the most researched processes or mechanisms of change in psychotherapy (Sonderland et al., 2023), both from the client change processes and the therapist interventions fostering that change (Peluso et al., 2018), and fluctuation in affect may be the bedrock of any psychotherapeutic dialogue. The ubiquity of change in emotion may pose challenges to unification, and lends itself particularly well to a differentiated and multi-levelled knowledge based anchored in basic science (Schiller et al., 2024). Inconsistent theoretical models – which do not take into account affective variables - are challenges to this integration of knowledge and should be addressed carefully by theory development.

Therapist responsiveness has been described as a core principle explaining change in psychotherapy: therapist decisions and actions are influenced by the client's action, as part of

a transaction (Stiles et al., 1998). Despite this consensual definition, there are many different operationalizations of the construct of therapist responsiveness, which highlights the need for careful theory development. Sometimes, creative therapist decision and actions – i.e., using metaphors – may be the ones having a large impact on the individual client. A process-based perspective which involves a recursive and dynamic definition of change may be a particularly suited model to test the effects of therapist responsiveness in psychotherapy.

Finally, as outlined by Magnavita et al. (this issue) and Ciarrochi et al. (this issue), progress in methods should be considered under the light of ethical implications. Unification may prove to make psychotherapy both stronger from a scientific perspective, as well as more vulnerable from a socio-contextual perspective. As discussed, the use of AI may prove vital to embrace complexity, but poses the risks of mis-use of information by ill-intended agents. Advancing the science of psychotherapy from diversity to unification will require us to pay attention to the latter, while navigating the former.

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