

A Review of Literature Relevant to a Study of Students' Views of their Learning on a Psychodynamic Psychotherapeutic Course

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on the literature underpinning the use of an analytic framework based on aspects of both psychodynamic theories and socio-cultural understandings of the learning process to underpin a study of students' perceptions of facilitating factors that enable learning of psychodynamic psychotherapy. Psychodynamic approaches to psychotherapy have within them no intrinsic theory of learning. To study the learning process, as reported by students, therefore requires reliance on an external theoretical model that is sufficiently compatible with psychodynamic theory and that does not distort either the research process or the interpretation of data in a way that is unrecognisable to adherents of a psychodynamic perspective. Psychodynamic learning cannot be undertaken on an instructional basis but only by authentic learning tasks grounded in the personal interests of learners. It is for this reason that a sociocultural constructivist view of the learning process was chosen as being appropriate to integrate into a framework through which to view psychodynamic therapeutic learning. The research sought to explore how learners created and applied perceptions of what helped learning. A qualitative case study design was employed with eight randomly selected participants from Higher Education institutes. Analysis of data from interviews, observations and document collection, using a framework derived from sociocultural understandings of learning as well as psychodynamic theories, enabled the emergence of nine themes: autonomy; self-changes; closeness; encouragement/discouragement; individual learning process; listening; ambivalence about judging the tutor; private life; self-esteem and confidence. The over-arching theme that emerged was the tutor-student relationship, understandable in sociocultural constructivist terms as enabling learning within a Vygotskyian zone of proximal development and the Bowlbian concept of provision of a safe base from which students journeyed towards autonomous independent learning.

Keywords: Psychodynamic psychotherapy, Sociocultural constructivism, Students' views, Lenses, Framework.

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Introduction

The research, on which this paper is based, focused on students' perceptions of factors that facilitated their learning during training as psychotherapeutic practitioners. Eight students were selected randomly from volunteers, double interviewed and data were analysed qualitatively. This paper focuses on the literature used in the research, underpinning the use of an analytic framework based on aspects of both psychodynamic theories and socio-cultural understandings of the learning process to underpin a study of students' perceptions of facilitating factors that enable learning of psychodynamic psychotherapy. It is clear that learning takes place within the social context of a course of learning, but psychodynamic approaches have no intrinsic theory of learning on which to base a study of the learning process. Psychodynamic learning cannot be undertaken through didactic pedagogy but only by authentic learning tasks grounded in the personal interests of learners. A sociocultural constructivist understanding of the learning process assumes the salience of individuals' own views of themselves and their worlds. It is also compatible with psychodynamic theory in that both place reliance on the autonomy of the individual. It is for these reasons that a sociocultural constructivist paradigm was seen as an appropriate underpinning to be integrated into a framework through which to view psychodynamic therapeutic learning.

A qualitative case study design was employed with eight randomly selected participants from Higher Education institutes. Analysis of the research data from interviews, observations and documents, using a framework derived from sociocultural understandings of learning as well as psychodynamic theories enabled the emergence of nine themes: autonomy; self-changes; closeness; encouragement / discouragement; individual learning process; listening; ambivalence about judging the tutor; private life; self-esteem and confidence. The over-arching theme that emerged in the research was the tutor-student relationship, understandable in sociocultural constructivist terms as enabling learning within a Vygotskyian zone of proximal development and the Bowlbian concept of provision of a safe base from which students journeyed towards autonomous independent learning.

Psychodynamic theory enables understanding of human development and how theoretical concepts inform the practitioner (Heller & Northcut, 2002), on which psychotherapy training depends. Pedagogy associated with sociocultural constructivist theory enables learning in the presence of the more informed other (Berk & Andersen, 2005) in the 'zone of proximal development'⁴ (Vygotsky, 1927) and suggests that the tutor, as the more informed other in the teaching relationship, understands the next steps in students' learning and scaffolds (Dodge, 1998; Helle *et al.*, 2009; Van Rooij, 2009) and models the basic concepts of psychodynamic theory in the ZPD, in which the student constructs her learning and understanding. The efficacy of the frame of analysis used in the study suggests that a framework that integrates lenses from the two different paradigms might be useful in the future for those wishing to adopt a theory of learning and teach the psychodynamic approach to psychotherapy.

This article addresses the literature that was selected to inform the research. The research itself is the subject of a separate journal article.

Overview of relevant literature

In order to study the reported experiences of students studying on the psychodynamic counselling

⁴ Referred to as ZPD throughout the article

training course it was first necessary to explore aspects of psychodynamic theory relevant to psychodynamic counselling theory and also socio-cultural understandings of learning before considering how elements of both paradigms could be woven into a clear conceptual framework for the study as a whole.

Literature relevant to psychodynamic theory

In this particular study it was really important to take account of the theory underpinning the training course in order to understand and interpret students' responses.

The authors are aware of the significance for the student of transference^{5/6} (Cutler *et al.*, 2004; Borbely, 2009), from present or earlier relationships (Watkins & Dryden, 2008; Ayala & Hinojos, 2010) and psychodynamically this transference could have a high importance in which tutors could work for the benefit of student learning (Loewenthal & Snell, 2006). Thus, in the research, some consideration is given to the implication for students and their relationships (Mitnick *et al.*, 2008), participating in this research. The psychodynamically trained educator, could also be aware of the countertransference phenomenon (Fauth & Williams, 2005; McCarthy, 2004) stimulated by student transferences (Ferenczi, 1926, Watkins & Dryden, 2008). Sharing of feelings in countertransference and appropriate disclosure (Bridges, 2001; Davis, 2002) are some of the many difficulties lying in store for therapist trainees. At some point, however, in order to fulfil their potential, trainee therapists must learn to accept the insignificance of their anxieties⁷ (Freud, 1915).

Psychodynamic psychotherapeutic education (Christopher & Maria, 2010) typically utilise a tripartite model of training (Eagle, 2008), including classroom teaching, providing psychotherapy under rigorous supervision (Moncayo, 2006) and personal development (Cozolino, 2006; Harris, 2008) and analysis on the part of the trainee (Moldawsky, 1990), including both coursework and supervised experiences with real clients. Yet the authors have not found research which explores the association between teaching and learning on such courses, for example the association between students' relationships with classroom instructors [tutors] (Attwood, 2010) and skills acquisition and professional development (Jones *et al.*, 2008).

More current research (Schore 2011, 2013) re-configures Freud's seminal topographical postulation of three layers of (un)consciousness containing the id, ego and superego structures, as a three-dimensional hierarchical model comprised of amygdala, cingulate and orbitofrontal areas of the right cortex of the brain found to be responsible for exteroceptive sensory input, which comprises visual, auditory, tactile, gustatory and olfactory functioning⁸ (Schore, 2011, 2013).

Research (for example Burgner, 1985) shows the deleterious effect on the child's development of an

⁵ The relationship between therapist and client is theoretically widely explored in the psychodynamic approach. We know about the crucial effects of this relationship for the development of the therapeutic process. These effects are mainly described by the terms "transference" (phenomenon of projections of the client onto the therapist).

⁶ '...What are transferences? They are new editions or facsimiles of the impulses and phantasies which are aroused during the progress of the analysis; but they have this peculiarity...that they replace some earlier person by the person of the physician [therapist]...' (Freud, 1905).

⁷ '...Every beginner in psycho-analysis probably feels alarmed at first at the difficulties in store for him. When the time comes, however, he soon learns to look upon these difficulties as insignificant...' (Freud, 1915: 37).

⁸ Schore's Right-Brain Dual Corticolimbic-Autonomic Circuits (Schore, 2013)

absent father, quoting a relevant formulation by Laplanche and Pontalis (1973)⁹. There are other differences between Freud and Klein including the nature of the death instinct (Mills, 2006), which Klein suggests is innate or intrinsic to human nature (Klein, 1971). Indeed this belief was eventually to distance Klein from the objects relations school. In this study, there is evidence of students' preference for the theories of Klein.

With the advent of neuroscience, there is empirical evidence in the research, of the significance of attachment and relationships in the child's development, students and therapists can more freely accept and use this understanding to inform of their clients' issues and development. Equally tutors can begin to understand how students' familial experiences play their part in students' construction of learning and that this understanding is part of what students describe as their relationship with the tutor being a facilitating factor in their learning.

The theories of attachment (Bowlby, 1971), including the concepts of secure base and attachment types (Bartholomew and Horowitz, 1991), are central both to the research and indeed to psychodynamic psychotherapy training courses in general. Throughout training on psychodynamic psychotherapy courses, acknowledgement is given to Bowlby for his seminal work on the importance of attachment.

Current research (Schore, 2011), building on the pioneering work of Bowlby, Stern, Winnicott and others, highlights the importance of empathic interaction between the mother and child for the development of that child into a loving human being. Schore, paraphrasing Gerhardt (2004), asks the questions:

'...The babies who are born now and in the years to come will be the adults who nurse us in old age, who manage our industry, who entertain us, who live next door. What kind of adults will they be? Will they be emotionally balanced enough to contribute their talents, or will they be disabled by hidden sensitivities?...' (Schore, 2013)

Schore (2013) suggest the answers to these questions can only be determined with an understanding of the part played by how babies experience being loved and valued during infancy. Presently, neurobiological research (Schore, 2011) provides evidence of brain activity stimulated by the mother's verbal and non-verbal responses, involving chemical manufacture (particularly oxytocin, dopamine and noradrenaline) and released in both mother and baby, which affects the centre (amygdala) (Schore, 2000) of the right hand brain. This is the area of the brain found to be involved in the baby's ability to establish the '...maintenance of long-lasting social and emotional attachments...' (Schore, 2013).

Entering an age when neurobiological research evidence confirms the importance of the early postulations of Bowlby's attachment theories, the research provides material for increased understanding of the importance of the attachment process for future generations of psychotherapists. The research discovers there is evidence of students placing much importance on the application of attachment theories, both to themselves as part of their personal development and to understanding their clients' processes.

⁹ '...We are led to assign an essential role in the constitution of a given Oedipus complex to the other poles of this relationship, the unconscious desires of both parents, seduction and the relations between the parents, as well as to the subject and his instincts.... It is the different type of relationship between these three points of a triangle which... are destined to be internalised and to survive in the structure of the personality...' (Laplanche & Pontalis (1973: 286).

A problem sometimes encountered with psychodynamic psychotherapy, is its anecdotal and individualistic nature, which is some clients need considerably longer than others to access unconscious material. In today's society, with pressure for value for money and need for empirical evidence before resources become available for such therapy, this is problematic. However, this has now been addressed by the development of Dynamic Interpersonal Therapy [DIT], based on the historical concepts of the psychodynamic approach but substantially more structured (Malan & Osimo, 1992)¹⁰ with a target sessional therapeutic longevity of twelve to sixteen sessions (Blatt & Luyten, 2009; Lemma *et al.*, 2011).

The DIT programme has been developed in response to the criticism that the psychodynamic approach does not produce standardised verifiable results and therefore might encounter problems in attracting government funding for its use in the NHS. Students report a preference for working with underlying causes as well as presenting issues or effects, the goal of the psychodynamic practitioner. This new model would certainly challenge freshly trained students. However they would be able to benefit from DIT training once they become fully-fledged counsellors. This new model (2010) is developed for use in the NHS within the IAPT¹¹ services, as results suggest it is promising in its acceptability and effectiveness (Lemma *et al.*, 2011).

Since the turn of this century, there can be considered the current drive by Higher Education establishments to focus on the therapeutic relationship with movement away from previous historic analytical thinking. Indeed, tutoring psychodynamic courses now has the central focus on interaction with the therapist, perhaps highlighted by the paradigm shift to relational psychology '...to understand attachment origins of the capacity to receive, feel and express the emotions of love for another, utilise relational perspective of interpersonal neurobiology [as] structural and functional development of the early bonds of mutual love...' (Schore, 2013).

In summary, events have overtaken those who wish to maintain purism of historic analytical psychodynamic thinking and practice, with a marked move to relational psychology encompassing and furthering the original Bowlbian attachment processes. This is no better illustrated than by postulations of the importance of the mother's gaze in the development of the baby's parasympathetic 'quiet love' and sympathetic 'excited love', two concepts originated by Kohut (1971) and further developed by Schore (2013), who proposes that the '...mutual gaze 'gleam' is an overt biogenetic expression of the mother's love. Her excitement resonates and amplifies the infant's 'excited' love...' (Schore, 2013). The research discovered that on this is predicated Schore's research providing empirical evidence that mother-infant mutual love is the neurobiological source of all forms of adult love as well as the capacity to form long-lasting mutually satisfying bonds in later adult life.

Literature related to socio-cultural understandings of the learning process

The second main paradigm for the research is a constructivist view of learning (Grier-Reed *et al.*, 2010) and in particular the sociocultural constructivist theories of Vygotsky, who draws freely on the work of such international contemporaries as Sigmund Freud (Vassilieva, 2010).

As further evidence of connection is Vygotsky's publication *Crisis in Psychology* (1927), claiming that the

'...crisis stems from the sharp contradiction between the factual material of science and its methodological and theoretical premises; a contradiction deeply

¹⁰ David Malan (1992) was amongst the first to tailor the psychodynamic approach to short-term work.

¹¹ Improving Access to Psychological Therapy

rooted in history of knowledge, revealing a dispute between the materialistic and idealistic worlds...' (Vygotsky, 1986:13).'

In his investigation into the crisis of arriving at and understanding a definition of psychology, Vygotsky (1927) also considers how the wide base of psychoanalysis and by implication its derivation, the psychodynamic approach to psychotherapy, is problematic in the sense that the libidinal drives of Freudian psychoanalytic theories '...became a metaphysical principle amidst all other metaphysical ideas, psychoanalysis became a world view, psychology a metapsychology...psychoanalysis has its own theory of knowledge...' (Vygotsky, 1927). Vygotsky considers these two domains irreconcilable and yet attempts to understand the two and somehow bring them together.

There is recognition that many students might learn most effectively through collaborative methods (Blumenfeld, *et al.*, 1994). Indeed the importance of the culture, which immerses the learner and the role of others in assisting learning (Vygotsky, 1978), is becoming increasingly acknowledged (Billett, 1996). How the more experienced other facilitates the student learner in the ZPD is known as scaffolding, which is a focus of this research. Vygotsky did not propose the term 'scaffolding', which Wood *et al.*, (1976) introduced some decades after Vygotsky's death. Scaffolding is the process of describing the '...gradual release of responsibility from the expert to the learner...' (Bodrova & Leong, 2001: 11) by decreasing assistance, thus enabling the student to become fully responsible for her performance (Van Rooij, 2009). Simultaneous with this time the unchanging nature of the learning tasks increases the level of responsibility the learner requires to achieve her goals (Elliott, 1999).

Frame of analysis constructed from both paradigms

The research established Vygotskyian thinking encapsulates three major concepts. Firstly that genetic analysis has importance in learning, in that the origins and history of phenomena can only be properly understood in interconnectedness and how and where they occur in human development (Vygotsky, 1978). This has resonance with Freudian thinking in that regression as a defence occurs if psychosexual stages are not completed (Freud, 1963), which postulation Erikson (1980) underscores by proposing that resolution of psychosocial tensions¹² is the driver of human development. The focus on social factors, is linked in that Vygotsky (1978) theorises that learning and development take place as a result of experiences of cultural influences and in societal contexts. As the learner's context changes, so does learning opportunity and hence there can be no blueprint describing the changing dynamics between external and internal aspects of development, as this is an individualised process.

Spontaneity is included in Eriksonian psychosocial theories of development, based on Freudian libido-focussed stages of development, which suggest the early learner can be encouraged to take initiatives and try out new ideas. The learner can imagine a future situation, one that is not immediate reality. Initiative is the attempt to make that non-reality a reality (Erikson, 1980). Fantasy, curiosity and imagination leading to initiative-taking (Stern, 1997) can be encouraged; often this manifests as creativity and play, which psycho-dynamically has high importance. The importance of play is researched by Vygotsky from many perspectives. In connection with imagination he proposes the representation of '...children's play is imagination in action which could be reversed; we can say that imagination in adolescents and schoolchildren is play without action...' (Vygotsky, 1978).

Representation has significance psychodynamically when considering objects relations theories (Ferenczi, 1926; Fairbairn 1944; Kernberg, 1990; Klein, 1946), which generally espouse the relationship between people and particularly mother and child and use of an object in a transitional

¹² Erikson (1980) proposed resolution of psychosocial tensions was the means by which humans developed

sense (Winnicott, 1965).

The research discovered that foregrounded in Vygotskyian theory is the relationship between interpersonal and intrapersonal communication (Richardson *et al.*, 2004) and here there is a relevant cross-paradigm reference and connection to psychodynamic theorists, for example Winnicott (1965) and Bowlby (1971). This cross-paradigm connection, involving interpersonal and intrapersonal communication, is particularly significant in the work of Lemma *et al.*, (2011), who are currently developing brief dynamic interpersonal therapy [DIT] for use by clinical practitioners as a part of Improving Access to Psychological Treatments [IAPT] service within the NHS. The interpersonal and intrapersonal planes help form the framework through which data can be analysed.

Influence of Freud and Vygotsky

Thus can be noted both Freud and Vygotsky have an influence that far surpasses their original contribution in their context. That Freud '...provided the undisputed starting-point of the modern psychodynamic study of the human personality...' (Guntrip, 1973: vii) is generally accepted by psychoanalytic and psychotherapeutic thinkers. That Vygotsky's theories turn out to be instrumental in shaping the learning processes in '...understanding that human cognition and learning as being social and cultural rather than individual phenomena...' (Kozulin *et al.*, 2003: 1) is universally accepted when considering knowledge as information rather than the product of concept-formation. Where the development occurs is in the application of Freud's and Vygotsky's postulations by theorists and practitioners who discover areas that original propositions have not visited. This can be considered the strength of development, which happens on a continual basis by theorists and practitioners who apply original thought to changing circumstances and contexts.

Students' perceptions

The research proposes that the constructivist paradigm rests on an understanding that the tutor needs to know exactly where the student is in her stage of learning. Some important findings emerge from research into students' perception - for example Dochy *et al.*, (2005) show that, in general, students value having their views taken into account when designing learning activity (Stetsenko, 2005).

Students' understanding of facilitative factors, including stated preferences (Smith, 2006) for how they learn, do matter (Struyven *et al.*, 2008). Use of portfolios (Segers *et al.*, 2008) and learning aids, including worksheets which are used widely in psychotherapy training courses, is highlighted in Doppelt and Schunn's (2008) research as being enabling for students and therefore beneficial assessment tools,

Seeking students' perceptions and how these might change throughout the life of the course (Postlethwaite & Maull, 2007) is important because of the Vygotskyian framework of constructing knowledge. What is important is the act of finding out students' perceptions, rather than the perceptions themselves (Menon, 2002), which is also a conclusion of the research.

In constructivist terms, Wearmouth (2002) notes there is recognition that:

'...at the centre of each account 'dwells a protagonist' (Bruner, 1990) and turning points are important because they result in change in protagonists' orientations to the world. They represent crises points brought about almost invariably by an access of new consciousness. It is at these points that the canons of logical consistency are 'violated' and the 'engine of drama' (Bruner, 1986) is built...the depiction of reality not through an

omniscient eye that views a timeless reality, but through the filter of the consciousness of protagonists in the story...' (Wearmouth, 2002: 28).

Students relate their stories in their own idiosyncratic and individualistic ways, termed 'subjectification'¹³ (Bruner, 1986). They use their own lenses, which they form from their sociocultural experiences and as such are the central characters in their stories. There is no universally accepted truth to students' stories, only their representation, clearly postulated as others '...see only the realities of the characters themselves...viewing only the shadows of events we can never know directly...' (Bruner, 1986: 25). When learning is deconstructed and reconstructed new understanding emerges, which might challenge previously unconscious defence mechanisms of coping strategies, a concept from the psychodynamic therapeutic paradigm.

In the research, we acknowledge that interaction with the interviewee and the relationship dynamic can affect the interviewee (Christopher & Maris, 2010). This has the potential to influence responses and thus understanding this process assumes importance. We cannot ignore the presence of these different roles and believe the research is richer for such acknowledgement and understanding.

There is evidence in the research that students find talking about their course experiences to be affirming and enabling (Middlehurst, 2001; Tabin, 2006). To ask questions in a detached way, from the aspect of solely interviewer, can counter the importance of the relationship and be detrimental to understanding and utilising the process (Wheeler, 2006).

To offer critical analysis of paradigm choice (Barnett, 1997) for this research gives an opportunity to consider conflicting interpretations of the application of postulations of historic theorists in a modern context. Freud and Vygotsky are the two 'founding fathers' of the two paradigms under discussion. Theorists following the two original thinkers offer more modern interpretations acceptable to students who have reservations about applying historic thought to modern circumstance. However this research concludes that it does not lessen the impact of the leading thinking of Freud and Vygotsky but places it in historical context. Some of the practices of early theorists are certainly taboo today, including for example sexual relationships with patients, drug abuse and using mentally challenged patients as 'guinea-pigs'. These practices, without the controls and boundaries (Bridges, 1999; Sinsheimer, 2007) of modern day thinking, if not widespread, were found during the time and in context of the two theorists, Freud^{14/15} and Vygotsky.

¹³ 'Subjectification' is a word originated by Foucault to describe the construction of an individual subject or how an individual turns himself into the subject (Foucault, M. (1984) *The Foucault Reader: An Introduction to Foucault's Thought*, P. Rainbow (Ed.), 3rd edn., London: Penguin.

¹⁴ Dr Tylim offers commentary on Freud's seemingly incongruous behaviour as an analyst '...Freud allowed the Rat Man access to his private life, violating technical principles he was in the process of formulating. The Rat Man must have elicited a strong countertransference pull on Freud. How else can we understand Freud's gratifying his hungry patient by inviting him to a meal? What about Freud's financial support to the Wolf Man? Freud often disregarded his own recommendation that analysts avoid taking into treatment patients they have met before either socially or in medical settings. The analysis of his daughter Anna was certainly an unorthodox one. In the process of creating psychoanalysis, Freud took a few side trips into forbidden territory. Today's Freudian analysts may classify these incursions as loaded with unethical potentials. How do psychoanalysts reconcile the tendency toward stretching the frame with the ethical demands of their profession? When does a humane act or a kind gesture become a crossing over or a violation of boundaries?' (Tylim, 2004: 610).

¹⁵ Further evidence of Freud's pro-bono activities are offered in literature which recognised examples of him offering free clinics to patients in Vienna (Cresci, 2010).

Conclusion

This research with which this literature review is associated, examined the nature of student development on psychotherapy courses from a number of viewpoints. The literature that was reviewed included suggestions that proposed the student could be supported and encouraged in her learning by the tutor through mediation of sedimented knowledge about the psychodynamic theory and practice (Borbely, 2009).

Literature relating to a psychodynamic paradigm, together with associated socio-cultural understandings of the learning process, was able to illuminate how the student moved towards becoming an autonomous learner by the process of scaffolding (Grant, 2011). Additionally, it became apparent; her ability to undertake personal development was dependent, to some extent, on her early familial experiences (Skynner & Cleese, 1993). Some of the literature indicated that psychodynamic therapy has changed over time in terms of clinical practice and definition and amendments have been made to seminal theories of Freud and Vygotsky. This literature included the authors' proposals that clinical practice or operation generally defined the tradition and development of the psychodynamic psychotherapeutic approach to psychotherapy (Binder, 1999; Cutler et al., 2004).

In conclusion, some of the issues from the literature that informed our thinking for the research included the application and use of elements of the two paradigms, the developmental nature of psychodynamic and psychoanalytic thinking, how socio-constructivism had informed learning, considering students' perceptions and views and mostly how Vygotsky's and Freud's original thinking had influenced both subsequent theorists and practitioners alike.

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