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CHALLENGES RELATED TO THE STUDY OF  
PSYCHOTHERAPY EXPERTS

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*El estudio de expertise psicoterapéutica podría contribuir a la comprensión de los efectos del terapeuta sobre el cambio y a la mejora de los métodos de entrenamiento de terapeutas. Sin embargo, este tipo de estudios presenta una serie de problemáticas que limitan su avance. Dentro de éstas es posible identificar desafíos en cuanto a su relevancia, delimitación conceptual, fundamentación teórica-empírica, diseños investigativos y consecuencias políticas de sus resultados. El objetivo del presente artículo es presentar tales desafíos y proponer lineamientos para poder sobrellevarlos en investigaciones futuras.*

**Palabras clave:** Expertise, Psicoterapeutas expertos, Saber experto.

The study of psychotherapeutic expertise could contribute to the understanding of therapist effects as well as to the improvement of methods of therapist training. However, there are several problems in this field that limit its progress, for example, its relevance, conceptual delimitation, theoretical-empirical foundation, research designs, and the political consequences of the results. The aim of this article is to describe these challenges and propose guidelines to overcome them in future research.

**Key words:** Expertise, Expert psychotherapist, Expert knowledge

**T**here is a collection of investigations that have questioned the effectiveness of the traditional methods of psychotherapy training and that demonstrate the scarce evidence that we have on this subject. It has been shown that the experience accumulated, formal training in psychotherapy, and supervision received by a therapist do not impact the therapist's effect on the process of change of their clients (Erekson et al., 2017; Goldberg et al., 2016; Rousmaniere et al. 2016; Whipple et al., 2020).

On the one hand, it is important to emphasize that the elements mentioned above are the basis of the training programs of psychotherapists, at least in American and European university models, so research on this subject jeopardizes a fundamental aspect of teaching in psychotherapy. Likewise, psychotherapy or therapist analysis, which has been considered a traditional part of teaching in certain approaches, such as psychoanalysis or analytical psychology, has also been questioned in the research, and evidence has been presented against its usefulness in training (Moe & Thimm, 2021).

On the other hand, there are several studies that claim that it is feasible to find a similar level of psychotherapeutic skills among experienced therapists, other care professionals, and people without formal training in psychotherapy (Atkins & Christensen, 2011; Christensen & Jacobson, 1994). This might support the hypothesis that for some people it might be possible to acquire psychotherapeutic

competencies prior to or in parallel with formal studies in psychotherapy.

For those of us who work in therapist training, whether as teachers or supervisors, this type of evidence leads us to question the effectiveness of the methods we are using and to ask ourselves about new ways to increase our knowledge of the subject through research.

However, evidence indicates that there are therapists whose therapeutic effect on their clients is greater than that of their peers (Brown et al., 2005;). They are more stable in their performance (Nissen-Lie et al., 2016; Owen et al., 2019) and better and more efficient at formulating cases (Ells et al., 2011; Hillerbrand & Claiborn, 1990), among other clinical skills. In relation to these therapists, it is worth asking the following question: If it is feasible to identify professionals with superior performance, is it possible that the keys to effective training can be found in their development?

This question is answered affirmatively by a group of researchers from different countries who have focused on the study of expert therapists with the aim of discovering new and/or better training methods (Hill et al., 2017; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2017; Reese, 2017; Ronnestad, 2016). However, research on the topic is relatively new and remains scarce (Norcross & Karpiak, 2017).

The present study consists of a review of the literature on the challenges associated with the study of experts in psychotherapy, with the aim of serving as a roadmap for future research in the field. At least five problems or challenges have been identified in this review and will be explored in depth. Finally, several suggestions will be presented on how to further advance the study of expert psychotherapists with a view to improving clinical training methods.

## RELEVANCE OF EXPERT PSYCHOTHERAPIST RESEARCH

As previously noted, the relevance of these types of studies lies in their hypothesized usefulness for the development of better training

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methods for therapists (Hill et al., 2017; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2017; Reese, 2017; Ronnestad, 2016).

However, this has been challenged by ontological, ethical, epistemological, and practical factors. From the ontological point of view, it has been pointed out that there is no such thing as an 'expert therapist', because most of the psychotherapeutic change is due to variables that have nothing to do with the therapist (Mair, 1998). On the other hand, it has also been argued that the concept of expertise is not applicable to psychotherapy due to its particularities (Shanteau, 1992).

Regarding the ethical criticism of this type of studies, it warns that they could promote the development of a therapist elite to which only elite patients could have access (Caspar, 2017). However, from an epistemological point of view, the relevance of studies that conceive therapeutic expertise as an individual characteristic has been criticized, without considering that the phenomenon can be understood as a relational emergent between therapist and patient, rather than a quality possessed by a particular individual (Laitila, 2004, 2009; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2017). On the other hand, the relevance of those studies of expertise that base their research on experimental situations in which the study of structured or routine tasks occurs in a controlled environment has been questioned, since their results would not be able to be extrapolated to psychotherapeutic practice under usual conditions (Ronnestad, 2016).

Finally, some expert research is considered to lack practical relevance for the disciplinary field (Caspar, 2017; Ronnestad, 2016). An example of this would be research that focuses only on the outcome and not on the therapeutic process, ignoring that it is in the latter aspect where relevant findings could be found to improve psychotherapy (Ronnestad, 2016). Likewise, research that seeks to train expert therapists has been questioned to the extent that most clients benefit from therapists that are competent or 'good enough' and, therefore, the 'expert' variable would not contribute to a greater extent to clinically significant changes (Caspar, 2017).

### DELIMITATION OF THE CONCEPT OF EXPERTISE

Although it is possible to find various definitions of psychotherapeutic expertise (Caspar, 2017), these have been questioned from various fronts (Tracey et al., 2014). Furthermore, there is a conceptual disintegration that reflects the lack of a unified theoretical model of the phenomenon (Hill et al., 2017).

According to Shanteau and Weiss (2014), the discussion regarding the definition of the concept could be summarized in two positions: ones with an emphasis on theoretical coherence and others with an emphasis on the empirical connection. The first position includes research that has defined expertise indirectly, based on findings from other domains. In this perspective, the concept of expertise has been understood as a synonym of years of experience, credentials, reputation, cognitive skills, etc. (e.g., Hill et al., 2017). Likewise, within this position, it has been discussed whether expertise should be defined as an individual or collaborative variable. Those who lean towards an individual definition consider that the key to expertise is in

the development and learning of the therapist (Tracey et al., 2014). On the other hand, those who defend a collaborative conception understand expertise as a relational emergent between therapist and client, not as a property of the elements that constitute the relationship (Laitila, 2004; 2009). On the other hand, some authors argue that these positions are not mutually exclusive and that there is an influence between individual competencies and relational emergence (Betan & Binder, 2010).

As for the second position developed by Shanteau & Weiss (2014), which emphasizes the correspondence with the empirical, it includes approaches that seek to define expertise according to the quality and quantity of available evidence, as is the case of Tracey et al. (2014; Goodyear et al., 2017). Within this position, experts have been defined as "those who present evidence of their improvement over time and demonstrate superior performance as measured by something that is both agreed and important, specifically customer outcomes" (Goodyear et al., 2017. p. 6).

A more conciliatory position is taken by Reese (2017), who does not consider that focusing on the theoretical or the empirical are completely opposite positions, since both contribute to the advancement of the study of expertise. Meanwhile, Shanteau and Weiss (2014) point out that the emphasis on coherence could be used to carry out the analysis of a discipline in general, while the focus on empirical correspondence should be used to analyze the expert individuals who represent it.

Finally, as we have seen, it can be affirmed that the discussion about what constitutes expertise in psychotherapy is not settled and could be further expanded to the extent that other concepts referring to therapists who have a higher performance than their colleagues are considered, for example, supershinks (Okiishi et al., 2003), master therapists (Skovholt & Jennings, 2017), highly effective therapists (Chow et al. 2015), among others. Indeed, this challenge seems to be central insofar as the rest of the elements of the research depend on it, as is the case of the operationalization of the concept, the analysis of the results, the comparison with other studies, etc.

### THEORETICAL-EMPIRICAL FOUNDATION

The third challenge that we find in the research on expertise in psychotherapy is its theoretical foundation and the formulation of hypotheses. This problem is directly related to the lack of a definition of expertise specific to psychotherapy, due to which authors have relied on definitions and theorizations belonging to other disciplinary fields (e.g., Tracey et al., 2014; Oddli et al., 2014). For this reason, the evidence is contradictory (Prado-Abril et al., 2017) and it is not yet possible to determine whether knowledge from other theories can be transferred to psychotherapy.

On the one hand, some point out that, as in other areas, therapists improve with years of experience (Oddli et al., 2017) and therefore make more efficient use of the information available to diagnose a situation (Betan & Binder, 2010; Eells et al., 2011). Furthermore, their professional development improves with deliberate coaching (Chow et al., 2015) and benefits from constant feedback (Lambert et al.,

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2002). However, there are arguments that refute the above points, stating that therapists do not improve with years of experience (Chow et al., 2015), nor with training (Erekson et al., 2017), and that their ability to analyze information does not improve substantially once certain basic technical elements of the task have been learned (Tracey et al., 2014). It has also been shown that it would be difficult for these professionals to assess their own skills (McManus et al., 2012).

One of the possible causes of the contradictory evidence regarding the phenomenon could be the lack of a common definition (Prado-Abril et al., 2017). Another hypothesis suggests that the characteristics of the areas in which generalizable aspects of expertise have been found do not coincide with those of psychotherapy (Betan & Binder, 2010; Laitila, 2004). Specifically, general expertise would have arisen from routine, competitive, or neutral tasks, with defined rules and predictable results, in which the subject intervenes on an object without major ethical consequences associated with error (Shanteau, 1992).

On the contrary, psychotherapy is characterized as an activity that intervenes on people, who are constantly changing and along with it so is the work to be done (Rønnestad, 2016). This implies that the therapist does not require a stable skill as in routine tasks, but rather the ability to constantly adapt to the situation, to be creative in the use of their knowledge and to be able to transfer it to different situations (Betan & Binder, 2010). In addition, the practice of psychotherapy involves ethical considerations that do not permit learning from trial and error, unlike other disciplines (Shanteau, 1992). Because of this, the dynamics of the therapeutic task cannot have a competitive or neutral character, but must be collaborative (Laitila, 2004).

According to Reese (2017), it is curious that an attempt is made to reduce a phenomenon as complex as psychotherapy to a minimum set of rules that define what the expert is. Although it is typical of science to try to replicate studies and reproduce the findings of other disciplines, Rønnestad (2016) warns that it is possible to commit an epistemological error by not considering the differences between the type of tasks in which expertise is measured.

The problem that arises in psychotherapy has been similarly thematized in other disciplinary areas, where the development of domain-particular theories has been sought. A particularly illustrative example is found in the field of medicine, where it is observed that it is possible to replicate findings in routine tasks, such as the analysis of X-rays (Reingold & Sheridan 2011), but not in complex tasks such as patient care. Here the individual expert is even counterproductive for tasks that require teamwork (Engestrom, 2018).

## RESEARCH DESIGN

Closely related to the previous challenges are the methodological challenges associated with the study of expert psychotherapists. First, it is possible to note the difficulty in delimiting the sample of experts, as methods based on credentials, experience, reputation, or performance have not proven to be reliable indicators of expertise in this field (Tracey et al., 2015). To address this problem, it has been suggested to use selection methods based on a set of variables rather

than a single variable (Rønnestad, 2016). An example of this is the Cochrane-Weiss-Shanteau method (Shanteau & Weiss, 2014; Shanteau et al., 2002), which is based on the variables of discrimination and consistency, i.e., being able to identify the expert from the rest of the group and his or her superior performance being sustained over time. Another case that illustrates Rønnestad's (2016) proposal is that raised by Hills et al. (2017) regarding the possibility of identifying experts according to their ability, cognitive functioning, therapeutic outcome, experience, relational competencies, reputation, and self-evaluation.

Secondly, once the characteristics of the sample to be selected have been defined, there is the challenge of which design to choose. From the qualitative side, one of the most complex studies that have been carried out is that of the team of L. Jennings and T.M. Skovholt (2016; Skovholt & Jennings, 2017) about what they have called the *master therapist*. In this research series, studies have included works of therapists in different parts of the world. Even so, this body of research has been criticized because of its sample selection criteria, namely peer nomination (Hill et al., 2017), which, as previously noted, does not correlate with higher performance (Tracey et al., 2014).

From the quantitative side, the challenge arises as to what type of design is appropriate to study the phenomenon and how to carry out the data analysis. In the case of quasi-experimental designs, it has been observed that with expert therapists the skills that emerge in controlled situations decrease in uncontrolled situations (Ericsson, 2018). However, it has also been suggested that non-experimental studies are complicated by the large number of variables involved in psychotherapy (Rønnestad, 2016), which makes it difficult to obtain isolable data.

Finally, when considering the analysis of data in quantitative research, the difficulty of isolating the effect of the therapist on the client emerges (Firth et al., 2019). The main cause of this lies in the fact that the therapist characteristics that contribute to psychotherapeutic change are closely linked to their interaction with the patient, such is the case of the type of communication, empathy, diagnosis, etc. (Baldwin & Imel, 2013). On the other hand, for those who define the expert therapist according to the outcome of the therapy, there is the added difficulty that the contribution of the therapist to the variance of change is much lower than that of the variables that do not depend on him/her, such as the characteristics of the client and his or her context (Wampold & Imel, 2015). Thus, in relation to the latter, the task of analyzing the results not only individually, but also at the level of therapeutic dyads or contextual factors should be added (Laitila, 2004; O'Shaughnessy et al., 2017).

## IMPLICATIONS OF THE RESULTS

Regarding the negative political consequences of expert knowledge in our society, it is important to consider the warning of O'Shaughnessy et al. (2017) when they point out that "those who have the opportunity to define the 'knowledge' necessary to be an expert have enormous power" (p.95), the power to bestow value upon both those who will be called experts and the objects related to their work (Carr,

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2010). In other words, the expert is empowered by an institutional power and a community that validates them to determine what is true, valid, and valuable (Carr, 2010).

The difference generated between experts and non-experts in our society creates power dynamics (Carr, 2010). In this sense, it should not be forgotten that science can contribute to the reproduction of these dynamics. This power gives a privileged place to experts when participating in political and governmental decisions, which has been considered a risk for democracy by not treating citizens as equals (Turner, 2001). In addition, it has been pointed out that the use of expert knowledge associated with psychology by governments has contributed to the psychologization of social problems and the depoliticization of social transformations by emphasizing the individual characteristics of people (Klein & Mills, 2017).

In line with the above, it should be emphasized that the power implied by expert knowledge not only has consequences in the governmental sphere, but also in the psychotherapy guild. As Tophoff pointed out in 1976, the study of experts entails the risk of generating a technocracy within the discipline. In turn, it is worth remembering that to the extent that it is delimited what an expert in psychotherapy is and what their skills and development are, it also opens the possibility to know, quantify, predict, control, and manage the subjects under such rules (Gentz & Durrheim, 2009). In the same way, when considering the market associated with psychotherapy (Gimeno et al., 2018), it would be of interest to question the economic implications of this type of study.

The political consequences mentioned above and any others that may arise from this type of studies seem to be uncontrollable. However, it is possible to take into account the experience of other thematic fields in which proposals have been made to limit the possible effects associated with epistemological violence or oppressive uses of psy-knowledge. An example of this are the critical factions within psychology (Teo, 2011), which invite us to think about the possibility of a critical psychology of expertise in psychotherapy or the development of a critical attitude necessary to understand and declare the dynamics of power related to this type of studies. Another important contribution is found in the field of culturally sensitive or competent research, mainly in relation to its concern about how to adequately refer to non-hegemonic communities in order to avoid stereotypes and the reproduction of oppressive dynamics (Sue, 2001).

### CONTINUITY OF RESEARCH ON EXPERTS IN PSYCHOTHERAPY

Faced with the challenges of research on experts in psychotherapy, it is necessary to ask how this field should be further explored. Given that some specific possibilities for advancing each challenge have already been discussed in the previous sections, this section will address the continuity of the study of the subject in a general way. For this purpose, the classification by W. Stiles (2015) will be used, which divides psychotherapy research into three groups: *theory-building*, *enriching* through critical analysis or peripheral data analysis, and *fact-gathering*.

Considering the challenges of the study of expertise in psychotherapists as a whole, it seems that the greatest need lies in theory building, that is, in being able to have an internally coherent explanation of what expertise is in this field and to be able to understand the contradictory evidence. Evidently, several of the challenges previously mentioned, such as the definition and operationalization of the phenomenon, methodological designs, analysis of results, etc., depend on this.

Despite the difficulties mentioned above, the current scenario does not imply an absence of research of this type since, as previously noted, there have been several efforts to define the concept and test certain hypotheses, especially those coming from other disciplinary fields. However, it seems that these efforts have not been sufficient in conceptual and methodological terms, which leads to the question of whether the conditions are in place to continue directly with the development of theories and whether it is possible to propose this as the main path or whether it is necessary to look for others.

According to Stiles (2015), the data collection approach can be a preliminary step to theory building. Given the characteristics of this approach, it is likely to be applicable to the field of expertise in psychotherapy since, as Norcross and Karpiak (2017) point out, the topic remains underexplored and scant in publications.

However, if we take the path of data collection, a change in the methodologies would seem to be necessary in line with Tracey et al. (2014). That is, considering what has been said about each challenge that emerges from the study of this topic, it is imperative to avoid committing methodological errors, such as defining experts by years of experience or credentials, falling into reductionism by taking psychotherapy as a set of routine tasks or a phenomenon of a single variable, without taking into consideration contextual factors, etc. On the other hand, it would be of interest to analyze data not only from the research on expert therapists, but also on therapist effects in general and to address it in systematic reviews (e.g., Heionen & Niessen-Lie, 2019) and meta-analyses. In this way, it is deemed more feasible to identify the characteristics possessed by therapists who obtain better outcomes, even when the outcome is not outstanding.

Finally, in terms of enrichment studies, these constitute a niche from which to promote critical studies that allow us to analyze the effects of this field in political terms, its history, power, and economic relations, etc. On the other hand, as Stiles (2015) points out, the focus on the enrichment of a research area also allows for non-hegemonic or alternative developments. Evidently, this would be of particular relevance to collaborative or contextual notions of expertise (e.g., Laitila, 2004, 2009; O'Shaugnessy et al., 2017), which have received less attention than individualistic notions of psychotherapeutic expertise.

### CONCLUSION

The study of experts in psychotherapy could benefit from a research agenda that considers the knowledge gaps involved and the methodological difficulties declared by the various authors. Currently, the information generated in this field of study is dispersed and lacks

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both a conceptual systematization and a coherent theoretical development. The need to develop theories, unifying or pluralistic, that allow us to understand the particularities of the psychotherapeutic expertise and the contradictory evidence is evident. However, it is considered that in order to achieve the construction of theoretical models in this area, previous data collection may be a methodological path to follow.

Subsequently, the systematization of information and the construction of theories should be carried out from the perspective of a critical analysis of the available evidence, covering its methodological, epistemological, and political aspects. This last point is fundamental since, as we have seen, among the political consequences of this type of studies is the risk of contributing to the reproduction of power dynamics based on expert knowledge.

On the other hand, and to the extent that the challenges raised here are taken into consideration, the study of experts seems to be a promising field for the development of new and/or better ways of teaching psychotherapy, a subject for which we still do not know what methodologies and tools are effective (Reese, 2017). This becomes particularly relevant in that traditional methods of learning in this area such as attending psychotherapy, supervision, gaining experience, and training in a particular theory and technique have not demonstrated a greater effect on patient change (Alfonsson et al., 2018; Atkinson, 2006; Chow et al., 2015; Ereckson et al. 2017).

Finally, we consider it necessary to affirm, as some authors point out (Caspar, 2017; Ronnestad, 2016), that although it is possible to criticize these studies as banal or unnecessary when they only focus on differentiating who is an expert from who is not, such research acquires an ethical edge to the extent that it can contribute to the need of our discipline to ensure quality care to patients who rely on the help that a therapist can supposedly provide.

# CONFLICT OF INTEREST

There is no conflict of interest.

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