

Draft of Case Study Panel Proposal for SPR-2014, 11-21-13, p. 1

A CRUCIAL BRIDGE BETWEEN PSYCHOTHERAPY
PRACTICE AND RESEARCH: DEVELOPING
THE METHODOLOGY OF A DATABASE
ARCHIVE OF BEST-PRACTICE SINGLE CASES

Daniel B. Fishman, Organizer

Psychotherapy practice always takes place within the qualitatively rich single case, while traditionally, psychotherapy research takes place in a very different setting, focusing on designs like randomized clinical trials (RCTs), which generate quantitative statistics across groups of cases. This arrangement creates an intrinsic disconnect between practice and research. The logical alternative is to intrinsically incorporate the individual case study into psychotherapy research designs. This Panel reviews two conditions for advancing this project. Condition One involves articulating and developing the internal logic and documentation of best practice in the single case. Condition Two involves increasing the capacity to generalize from the individual case via creating very large databases of high-quality individual case studies, so that cross-study analyses can be conducted in a manner parallel to the meta-analyses now conducted across groups of RCTs. In the proposed Panel, Tracy Eells will begin by focusing on Condition One, specifically by arguing for the conceptual and practical advantages of basing treatment plans upon individualized case formulation. Next Matthias Desmet and Reitske Meganck will focus on Condition Two by, respectively, first laying out the epistemological advantages of creating databases of case studies, and then describing the methodology and logistics for actually creating such databases, including an example of one already completed.

THE CASE FORMULATION APPROACH TO PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCH

Tracy D. Eells

This presentation explores the case formulation approach to psychotherapy outcome research, first proposed by Jacqueline Persons (1991). Persons argued that randomized clinical trials (RCTs) of psychotherapy do not test the theoretical underpinnings of psychotherapy models since these trials standardize rather than individualize patient problems, ignore the link between individualized assessment and treatment as described in these models, and employ standardized rather than individualized treatment. This presentation confirms the validity of these claims in light of today's research literature, expands upon them, and concludes with a redesigned case formulation approach, which generates a variety of research questions and designs.

ADVANTAGES IN PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCH OF DEVELOPING
LARGE, ARCHIVAL DATABASES OF SINGLE CASE STUDIES

Mattias Desmet

Mainstream psychotherapy research is quantitative in nature and happens in group designs. This presentation starts from the observation that this type of research 1. generally fails to live up to its ambition of providing an objective evaluation of psychotherapy processes, 2. often ignores clinical complexity and thus lapses into clinical irrelevance, 3. is a potential threat where it aspires to impose its so-called ‘evidence’ to clinical practice. We highlight the major methodological shortcomings of quantitative research in group designs, in particular problems related to measurement error and excessive reliance on aggregate statistics. On these grounds, we conclude that several methodological reorientations are necessary. In line with the position defended by William Stern and Gordon Allport in the first half of the twentieth century, we maintain that quantitative assessment of psychological variables only makes sense on the condition quantifications are interpreted within the context of individual patients’ narrative accounts of lived experience. This implies a shift away from ‘blind’ quantitative assessment of outcome- and process related variables in large groups of patients (as it was introduced to psychology by scholars like Galton and Thorndike), towards a balanced qualitative-quantitative assessment of individual patients’ subjective experiences. One of the major challenges of future research will be to develop methodologies to aggregate findings across cases, either by means of large scale research projects that combine the strengths of single case and group designs, or by constructing a well-organized single case archive.

THE SINGLE CASE ARCHIVE: AN ONLINE
DATABASE OF PUBLISHED CASE STUDIES

Reitske Meganck

The need for practice-based evidence in the field of psychotherapy research and ever more clear limitations of large-scale quantitative research designs boosted single subject research, which is also indicated by an increased presence in the literature of clinical and empirical single case studies in recent years. However, the wealth of in-depth case studies does not lead to an accumulation of evidence across cases. Reasons why meta-studies of single cases are still scarce are that 1. cases are scattered across a large number of databases, 2. titles, abstracts or keywords only mention a fraction of relevant case-descriptive information, and 3. despite huge differences in quality of case studies there are no tools to appraise that quality. This presentation discusses the construction of the Single Case Archive (SCA), an electronic database that organizes and assembles published case studies and consequently tries to attend to these issues. Additionally, it provides a rich resource for clinicians looking for clinically relevant research on a certain topic. Both the current state and the future plans of the project will be discussed. Currently, the SCA consists of 445 psychodynamic single case studies published in ISI-ranked journals. They are all inventoried on the basis of the Inventory for Basic Information in Single Cases (IBISC), a theory-neutral rating list that maps basic information on patient, therapist, therapy and study characteristics. The SCA however intends to assemble cases from different therapeutic orientations and from different sources. Moreover, besides case-descriptive information, quality indicators will be developed to facilitate scientifically rigorous meta-studies.

John McLeod, Discussant