

ETHICAL BEHAVIORS OF LATIN AMERICAN PSYCHOTHERAPY RESEARCHERS

ANDRÉS J. ROUSSOS

Universidad de Belgrano, CONICET, Universidad de Buenos Aires

MALENA BRAUN

Universidad de Belgrano

ADELA LEIBOVICH DE DUARTE

Universidad de Buenos Aires

ABSTRACT: THE ETHICAL PRACTICES OF psychotherapy researchers in Latin America were surveyed online. Of the 114 psychotherapy researchers to whom the survey was sent, 76 responded (67% response rate). Seventy-seven percent of the respondents had not received formal training in research ethics, yet 84% indicated that formal training is useful for the prevention of scientific misbehavior. Researchers admitted to various ethically questionable practices, the most common of which were related to authorship. None reported having fabricated or falsified data. The need for adequate training and evaluation of research projects is addressed.

KEY WORDS: scientific misbehavior, scientists' perceptions, Latin America ethical training, research ethics, protection of research subjects, authorship practices

Received: August 9, 2010; revised: November 19, 2010

EMPIRICAL RESEARCH ON PSYCHOTHERAPY is quite new in Latin America due to its long psychoanalytic tradition. Less than 20 years have passed since the Latin American chapter for the Society for Psychotherapy Research was founded, with few trained researchers as members at that time.

Methodological and ethical standards for research in psychotherapy still do not exist, and hence there is no formal training in research ethics for Latin American research teams working within this field. In the last 10 years, debates about bioethics and ethics of research have proliferated; however, relevant laws, regulations, and guidelines remain confusing, unknown, or nonexistent (Rodriguez Yunta, 2004; Sotomayor, 2008; Leibovich de Duarte, 2000; Winkler, 2006). There are no formal training requirements in research ethics, and

in most cases a researcher's only training is via the mentor/trainee relationship (Muñoz del Carpio Toia, 2008; Winkler, 2006). This is of particular concern given the importance of confidentiality, respect for the sensitivities of psychotherapy clients, and the complexity and delicacy of the therapist/client relationship. Given the current state of research ethics in Latin America, and the lack of empirical information about researcher's training and practices, we undertook a study among psychotherapy researchers to inquire about their beliefs and behaviors concerning the ethics of research on psychotherapy. The aim of our study was to learn the current state of affairs in the following areas: ethical training, knowledge of rules and regulations, and the extent of ethical misconduct.

Methods

An online survey was sent to 114 psychotherapy researchers members of the Latin American chapter of the Society for Psychotherapy Research (SPR). This society is an international scientific entity dedicated to research in psychotherapy; SPR has 1271 members of whom 185 belong to the Latin American chapter. Seventy-six completed surveys were received (67% response rate). The survey included 44 questions, mainly multiple choice and Likert type, and a few open questions. No personal identifiable information was collected. The project was approved by the review committee of the School of Psychology which is not, strictly speaking, a research ethics committee. The lack of formal research ethics standards and protocols for research in Clinical Psychology is addressed in the present study.

All the Latin American countries that have SPR members were represented in this study: Argentina (44%), Brazil (25%), Chile (21%), and Uruguay (9%).

Results

The survey showed that 77% of the respondents had not received formal training in research ethics, yet 84% considered that "formal training is useful for the prevention of scientific misbehavior." Also, 75% reported not knowing of the existence of any formal courses in research ethics in their countries. Among those who

TABLE 1. Percentage of Researchers Who Admit Engaging in Specified Forms of Misconducts (n = 76).

Form of Misconduct Admitted to by Respondents	Percent
Inappropriate assignment of authorship	23.7%
Witnessing an ethical transgression and not reporting it	23.7%
Carelessness in data storage and interchange, with risk to confidentiality	15.8%
Using private information of research subjects without obtaining their consent	10.5%
Inappropriately receiving authorship credit	6.6%
Using others' words or ideas without obtaining permission or giving due credit	5.3%

have received formal ethics training, when asked their opinion regarding the quality of the training received, 43% said it was poor, 26% said it was fair, and 12% said they didn't know.

With regard to research legislation, 50% of the researchers reported not knowing whether their country has specific legislation on ethical issues in research and 13% affirmed that there was none. With respect to the ethical oversight of research projects, 29% reported that there was no ethical oversight of research projects in their institution (hospital, university). SPR, as an international professional society, explicitly mentions that authors are expected to conform to the ethical guidelines of their professional bodies and the laws of their country.

The respondents admitted to engaging in various ethically questionable practices (see Table 1).

Unethical authorship practices (assigning or receiving undeserved authorship) were the most prevalent forms of misconduct reported. The most common reason given by respondents for unethical authorship practices was that those in a position of authority demanded their inclusion as authors even though they didn't meet the criteria for authorship. Some respondents also reported that it was a usual practice in their organization that all the members of the team had to be included. Others justified their action as a way of enhancing the curriculum vitae of team members.

The other most common form of misconduct was failing to inform authorities upon witnessing a transgression. Whistleblowing is hazardous to the whistleblower in any culture (e.g., Glazer & Glazer, 1989), with the investigation often turning to investigate the whistleblower instead of the transgressor, and the whistleblower often being ostracized within his or her institution and profession. Moreover, whistleblowing is viewed as an especially reprehensible act in the Latin American culture.

Carelessness in data storage and transmission of clinical records was also frequently reported, and given the confidential nature of most of the data used in psychotherapy research (i.e., the patient's clinical material), this is an issue to be addressed with urgency. The most common act of carelessness in data transmission was sending clinical information via e-mail without encryption.

Another issue mentioned by researchers was the use of private information without consent. This is a controversial area in psychotherapy research in Latin America because, historically, clinical vignettes have been used without the patient's consent (Roussos, Braun, & Olivera, 2010).

It is important to note that none of the respondents reported having fabricated or falsified data.

We asked researchers for their suggestions of ways to enhance responsible conduct in research. The most frequently mentioned were the development of comprehensive and clear regional standards to guide researchers, and that researchers have opportunities to receive adequate training.

Discussion

We do not know if the misconduct that was disclosed reflects the actual situation or if there was under-reporting. However, even if under-reporting occurred, the results call our attention to the fact that the researchers who were surveyed admitted to a significant amount of unethical research conduct. How to prevent these unethical practices remains a challenge that will demand the thoughtful creation of guidelines, training programs, and research oversight.

It is important to note that the purpose of this research was not to estimate the percentage of "bad apples," but to understand the characteristics and pressures in the research environment that foster unethical research behavior. Our purpose is not to excuse researchers' ethical breaches, but to bring about modification of the structural causes of this behavior.

Best Practices

Clear guides for researchers should be provided, describing standards and specific tools and approaches for conducting research in a responsible way. While the basic standards could be developed by the Latin American chapter of the Society for Psychotherapy Research, further responsibility falls to the local research institutions.

The results of this study point out the need for the development of local training for students and researchers in ethical conduct of psychotherapy research, and for

a system of ethical oversight of research projects. This is one of the greatest challenges for both researchers in psychology and relevant authorities in Latin America (Roussos, Braun, & Olivera, 2010). It is imperative that such a system of training and oversight be carefully geared to the actual needs and challenges of psychotherapy researchers, and not be simply another layer of frustrating bureaucracy for researchers to endure.

Research Agenda

It would be useful to carry out this research with different populations, such as psychotherapy researchers in other parts of the world, or other researchers besides psychotherapy researchers. (The survey used in this study, which is in Spanish, and an English translation of it, appear at dx.doi.org/10.1525/jer.2011.6.1.51.) Can the differences that appear be explained by differences in the research regulations and training capabilities of the countries involved? Are psychotherapy researchers comparatively worse trained in research ethics than other researchers using human subjects?

Educational Implications

The respondents had little knowledge of ethical requirements and laws pertaining to research on psychotherapy. They reported that it was hard for them to find guidance of this kind. It appears from the study that there are few courses available to these authors that discuss ethical issues in psychotherapy research, and that no formal ethics training is required for researchers. There is an urgent need for the development of a formal training system and the establishment of requirements for researchers to certify that they have been adequately trained.

Acknowledgments

We wish to thank all the Latin American members of the SPR who dedicated their time to answer the survey. Special thanks to Julieta Olivera for her invaluable help and to the organizers of the 9° Congreso Latinoamericano de Investigación en Psicoterapia of the SPR in Reñaca, Chile, for inviting us to present the results of the present study.

Author Note

Address correspondence to: Andres Roussos, Universidad de Belgrano, Zabala 1857 CP (1428), CABA, Argentina. Phone: +54-11-488-5400. E-MAIL: andres.roussos@comunidad.ub.edu.ar.

Authors' Biographical Sketches

Andrés Roussos is a researcher in Clinical Psychology, specializing in the study of psychotherapeutic processes and interventions. He is chair of the Clinical Psychology Department at the Universidad de Belgrano and research methods professor at the Universidad of the Buenos Aires.

Malena Braun, a psychologist, is a researcher at the Universidad de Belgrano, specializing in Research Ethics.

Adela Leibovich de Duarte is a clinical psychologist and psychoanalyst. She is Professor Emerita and researcher at the Universidad de Buenos Aires and Chair of the Project Committee on Clinical Observation at the International Psychoanalytical Association. Dr. Leibovich de Duarte participated in the evaluation of research projects for international committees.

References

- GLAZER, M. P. AND GLAZER, P. M. (1989). *The whistleblowers: Exposing corruption in government and industry*. New York: Basic Books, Inc.
- LEIBOVICH DE DUARTE, A. (2000). La dimensión ética en la investigación psicológica: Investigaciones en psicología. *Revista del Instituto de Investigaciones, Facultad de Psicología, UBA*, 5(1), 41–61.
- MUÑOZ DEL CARPIO TOIA, A. (2008). Regulación de la investigación clínica y comités de ética en Perú: Crónica de cambios. *Acta Bioethica*, 14(2), 193–199.
- RODRÍGUEZ YUNTA, E. (2004). Comités de evaluación ética y científica para la investigación en seres humanos y las pautas CIOMS 2002. *Acta Bioethica*, 10(1), 37–47.
- ROUSSOS, A. J., BRAUN, M., & OLIVERA, J. (2010). Problemáticas éticas en la investigación en psicoterapia. *Revista Argentina de clínica psicológica*, 19(1), 23–40.
- SOTOMAYOR SAAVEDRA, M. A. (2008). Regulación de la investigación bioética en Chile. *Acta Bioethica*, 14(1), 79–89.
- WINKLER, M. I. (2006). Formación ética: Teoría, hallazgos y sugerencias. In M. H. Kottow Lang (Ed.), *Bioética e investigación con seres humanos y en animales* (pp. 81–92). Santiago, Chile: CONICYT.

