

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Meeting in difference: Revisiting the therapeutic relationship based on patients' and therapists' experiences in several clinical contexts

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Abstract

Despite decades of research on the therapeutic relationship and the therapeutic alliance and their connection with therapeutic outcomes (Horvath, Del Re, Flückiger, & Symonds, 2011), only a handful of studies have examined how they are experienced by the therapy participants. The aim of the present study is to describe the therapeutic relationship from the subjective perspective of the patients and therapists involved in 3 clinical cases: (a) a 7-year-old child diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, (b) a 29-year-old woman diagnosed with a personality disorder, and (c) a 22-year-old man diagnosed with schizophrenia. We conducted semistructured interviews with patients and therapists that were later analyzed following grounded theory coding procedures (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). The results obtained reveal that the constitutive elements of the therapeutic relationship are linked to 2 dimensions of the patient–therapist meeting experience: the technical and role-related dimension, characterized by relational asymmetry, and the affective exchange dimension, characterized by relational symmetry. The article discusses the possible association between the asymmetrical technical dimension, whose roles are defined by the organization of the helping relationship, and the notion of therapeutic alliance as commonly conceptualized and assessed; on the other hand, the experience of the bidirectional and symmetrical patient–therapist affective exchange is linked with concepts such as *real relationship* and *intersubjectivity*.

KEYWORDS

alliance, children, patient and therapist perspectives, qualitative methods, schizophrenia, therapeutic relationship