

A Systematic Review of the Impact of Personal Therapy on Therapists

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Abbreviations

PRISMA: Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses

Key Words

Personal therapy; Weaknesses; Clinical education; Psychological therapy; Mental health

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Abstract

Despite the high prevalence of therapists receiving personal therapy to aid in the competent delivery of psychological treatment to clients, the understanding of its impact is limited [1]. A comprehensive review by Macran & Shapiro [2] reported methodological shortcomings in earlier research literature, preventing the researchers from establishing their conclusions with certainty. This paper systematically reviewed the research literature on this topic since the work by Macran & Shapiro [2] to examine new evidence of its impact. A total of sixteen studies were identified for this review. The paper found common professional and personal benefits consistently reported across the studies, but the evidence on the effects of personal therapy on client outcomes were inconclusive. Some therapists also reported perceiving negative experiences from personal therapy. A closer examination of the studies identified in the paper indicated that they continued to possess significant weaknesses in their research methodology. The paper then proceeded to propose how the commonly reported benefits can be organized into a preliminary model that can be utilized to guide future efforts in understanding the impacts of personal therapy.

Introduction

Personal therapy has a longstanding history. It is traceable to Freud's [3] endorsement of this practice as a critical aspect of clinical education in the therapist. This endeavour can be defined as the engagement of therapists to undergo psychological therapy themselves as a client [4]. Unlike other professional fields, such as engineering and medicine, the criterion of being a therapist is blurred as it consists of different professions with varying training background [5]. For the purpose of this paper, we adopted Wampold et al.'s [6] definition of therapists as individuals in the helping profession who apply psychological therapies to alleviate the struggles faced by their clients. These individuals may include counsellors, psychologists, social workers, and psychiatrists.

Research had demonstrated that personal therapy continues to be an integral source of personal development in therapists. A large-scale survey identified that personal therapy constantly featured as one of the three main sources of enhancing clinical skills for mental health professionals [1]. In a review of demographic trends of over 8,000 clinical psychologists, Norcross et al. [7] reported that about 75% of these individuals had received personal therapy. Norcross [8] highlighted that this statistic is significantly higher than the prevalence of help-seeking in the general population, which is estimated to be between 25-27%.

Despite the high percentage of therapists turning to personal therapy for personal and professional growth, evidence of its benefits to therapists and on client outcomes are inconclusive. Macaskill [9] reported that even though two-thirds of therapists in his study found personal therapy beneficial in alleviating their stress levels and developing their clinical skills, there was no significant difference in client-reported improvements between consulting therapists who had received personal therapy and therapists who did not. Macran & Shapiro [2] conducted a comprehensive review on this issue and concluded that even though a large proportion of therapists subjectively reported that personal therapy had positive effects to their personal and professional life, this did not translate to positive effects on client outcomes. The review was neither able to establish that personal therapy improved the well-being of the therapists nor that therapists' response in laboratory studies mirrored that in the therapy room. Macran & Shapiro [2] pointed out that the mixed evidence on this issue was attributable to multiple weaknesses in the research methodologies of the studies that they had examined. These included small sample sizes, lack of reliability in the outcome measures, and the participants not being randomized [2].

Macran & Shapiro [2], as well as Macran et al. [10] strongly recommended for researchers to develop a model to guide the understanding of the how personal therapy is beneficial for the personal and professional development of therapists. To the best of our knowledge, there appears to be no progress in the development of a model to guide our understanding of the effectiveness of personal therapy. As a result, multiple knowledge gaps surrounding personal therapy, such as its purpose and the need to experience the role of being a client, continues to be unresolved [11]. The issue of a lack of a guiding model for personal therapy is a significant contrast to another source of professional development-clinical supervision. Over the past two decades, there had been a proliferation of models of clinical supervision, shedding light on effective practices for clinical supervision [12]. For example, the integrated developmental model of supervision by McNeil & Stoltenberg [13] advocates for supervisors to provide higher levels of guidance for novice therapists and to focus more on the nonspecific skills as the supervisee develops their capability. Thus, the development of such a model for personal therapy has the potential to improve and guide our understanding in this area.

The objective of this paper is to conduct a systematic review of the studies on the impact of personal therapy following the review by Macran & Shapiro [2]. Apart from examining the progress in research on this topic since Macran & Shapiro [2] published their findings and recommendations, the last two decades had witnessed a shift in theoretical orientation from classic cognitive behaviour therapy towards third-wave therapies [14]. This shift may be significant as the third-wave therapies focus less on technical adherence to treatment protocols [15]. Instead, third-wave therapies emphasize the importance of self-awareness and the therapeutic relationship, domains which are deemed to be developed through personal therapy [8].

The paper also intends to provide a preliminary basis for the development of a model to guide the understanding and research of the effects of personal therapy. It is hoped that by extracting and analysing the findings of the research literature in slightly over two decades, valuable knowledge to inform the development of this model can be obtained.

Method

Using the Preferred Reporting Items for Systematic Reviews and Meta-Analyses (PRISMA) guidelines [16], the research papers on the effects of personal therapy were gathered through a search on Library Plus and Google Scholar. Search terms that were applied included ‘personal therapy’ and items related to professional and personal development in therapists, including ‘personal practice’, ‘professional development’, ‘personal development’, ‘therapist competency’, ‘help-seeking in therapists’, and ‘therapist effects’. The screening and selection of the articles gathered to ensure relevance for this review were carried out in two stages. First, the author screened the articles based on their titles and abstracts to ensure that these papers were examining the issue of personal therapy. This was followed by obtaining the full-texts of the potentially eligible articles and reading them to select those focused on the effects of personal therapy. The reasons for excluding the articles in the final step included lack of relevance, the articles being opinion papers, and inability to retrieve them.

Results

Descriptive statistics

The above-mentioned selection process garnered 16 relevant research studies for the present systematic review (Figure 1). These studies were published between 2001 and 2020, examining 241 therapists who had received personal therapy at some point in their career. The age and gender of the participants were not always reported in the studies. Excluding the papers that did not include participants’ age, the participants in the review ranged from 23 to 71 years old. For the studies which reported the participants’ gender, there were 106 female participants and 56 male participants. The author was mindful that three of the studies [17-19] were based on the same pool of participants and had adjusted the above numbers accordingly to reflect this. 14 of the identified studies investigated the experience of personal therapy and how it impacted the participants both in terms of personal development and professional development through interviews. There were only 2 quasi-experimental studies, which examined how therapists who received personal therapy differed from those that did not do so. The studies selected for this review are listed in Appendix 1, which summarized the information on the participants, the objectives of the research paper, methods, and results.

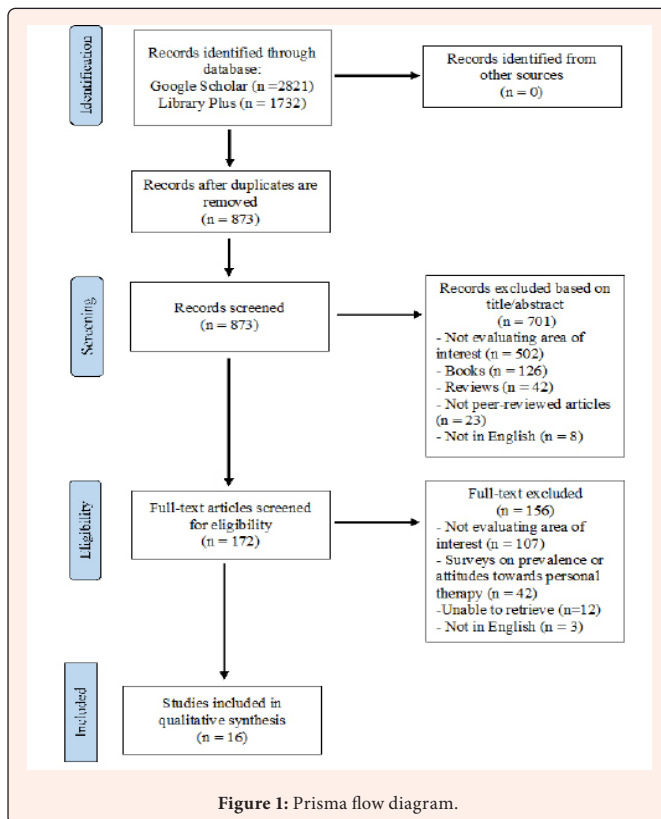


Figure 1: Prisma flow diagram.

Findings from literature

Qualitative studies

With the exception of the study by Daw & Joseph [20], all the qualitative studies generally adopted the similar research methodology of conducting face-to-face interviews, transcribing the participant’s recorded verbal responses, and analyzing the themes from the data gathered. Daw & Joseph [20] contacted their participants through post and obtained their responses on open-ended questionnaires. The results from these qualitative studies indicated that participants largely obtained personal and professional benefits from personal therapy. These findings are consistent with that of the previous review conducted by Macran & Shapiro [2]. The following paragraphs will further elaborate on the common themes reported by the participants of these studies.

i. Provision of a role model

Participants reported that attending personal therapy provided them with a model figure that helped to shape how they practiced therapy themselves. Grimmer & Tribe [21] shared that their participants observed how therapists conducted themselves professionally in various aspects of therapy, such as the manner the therapists interacted with them and managed boundaries. Participants did not adopt the practices of their therapists wholesale, but selected the aspects demonstrated by the therapists that they like. For example, one participant in the study by Rizq & Target [22] shared that she appreciated her therapist pre-empting her a few minutes before their sessions were due to end, and incorporated this into her practice. Participants also emulated the way their therapists conducted themselves in the therapy room, such as dealing with silence and the manner of asking questions [17]. It appears that the perception of the therapist as a role model is a powerful one. Some participants acknowledged that they had thoughts of their therapist when faced with challenges in their own work [23-24].

ii. Experiential understanding

Another reported benefit of personal therapy for the participants, especially when in training, is the growth in self-knowledge. Participants become aware of the intricate mechanisms of the therapy models and their own blind spots, beyond what they can acquire from books and didactic instructions, through personal therapy [20,24]. Rake & Paley [25] stated that personal therapy developed participants’ understanding of therapy techniques and of themselves by having the sessions tailored to suit their individual needs. Those who participated in Wiseman & Shefler’s [24] study further differentiated the learning gained in personal therapy from clinical supervision by highlighting that the learning process in clinical supervision is largely guided by theoretical underpinnings, which limited their ability to analyze their experience from an emotional standpoint.

iii. Self-care

Research has shown that mental health professionals are vulnerable to experiencing stress and burnout due to the emotional demands at work and other challenges that emerge in their lives [26]. Personal therapy is a valuable channel for participants to seek support, and many had benefited for doing so [27,28]. A number of participants in Bellows’s [23] study shared that personal therapy addressed their maladaptive cognitions, such as having unrealistic expectations of themselves, which contributed to their own stress levels. Participants reported benefiting from receiving personal therapy when faced with demands of their training courses or other issues in their lives [27,29]. They also acknowledged that being able to address the issues that they face personal therapy was beneficial in preventing these issues from affecting the work with their own clients [27].

iv. Client experience

Being in therapy helped participants to gain the perspective of the client, offering a deeper awareness of behaviours and issues that may affect the therapy process [30]. Participants in the various studies strived to replicate the good practices of their therapists and amended other practices in response to their own negative experiences as clients [21,30]. For example, a participant interviewed in the study by Probst [30] shared how her therapist noticed that she was experiencing morning sickness during their session and prepared her a hot drink. His willingness to break out of his position as a therapist led her to recognize the importance of being flexible in the therapeutic relationship. On the other hand,



another participant became more mindful about self-disclosure in therapy after her therapist's unsolicited advice caused her to feel emotionally invalidated [22]. In all, the appreciation of the client experience empowered participants to comprehend that the role of a therapist beyond that of a professional to one that is human [21].

v. Trusting the therapeutic process

Although the participants shared that the process of being in therapy was emotionally challenging, the benefits that they gained from personal therapy boosted their confidence in therapy as a valid tool for supporting others [25]. This was demonstrated in one of the participants, who claimed that undergoing personal therapy affirmed his belief that the techniques learnt in training have the ability to assist his clients in overcoming the challenges that they face [27]. In fact, increased belief in the therapy process had been touted as a possible reason why a significant number of therapists who had undergone personal therapy reported that it has a significant influence on their professional identity [29].

vi. Other relevant findings

Some participants shared that the experience of personal therapy was unpleasant and may even leave enduring emotional scars. All the participants in the study by Rake & Paley [25] reported that personal therapy was helpful in their learning and personal development. However, a number of them recalled being uncomfortable in their personal therapy sessions. One participant even highlighted that she continued to recall an insensitive remark by her therapist even though about twenty years had passed [25]. The studies reviewed also raised a common debate on whether personal therapy should be mandatory for trainee therapists. Despite the benefits and insights gained from mandatory personal therapy whilst in training, some participants shared that forcing the hands of trainee therapists may create unintended resistance in personal therapy [21]. Some participants questioned the ethics of seeking personal therapy when there was no issue to be addressed [22,25]. Williams et al. [28] pointed out that for participants who are undergoing systemic training, they had to rope in their family members for mandatory family therapy despite the reluctance of these family members. The participants also found themselves having to speak on certain issues in the presence of these family members despite being unprepared to do so [28]. Indeed, the debate on mandatory personal therapy for therapists in training is not a recent one. Various researchers had raised concerns since the 1970s that the stipulation for mandatory personal therapy in trainee therapists may force them to incur additional financial costs and persist with ineffective therapists in order to complete training requirements [31].

The studies by Rizq highlighted that past research efforts may have overlooked the role of participants' individual characteristics in influencing the outcomes of personal therapy [17,19]. Rizq [19] reported that participants with secure attachments perceived the relationships with their therapists as more positive and reported more benefits from personal therapy than participants with insecure attachments. The data gathered by Rizq [19] focused on participants who were undergoing training. However, qualitative interviews with participants with significant experience in the field also garnered similar results, indicating that experienced therapists with secure attachments are more likely to obtain benefits from personal therapy [17]. There had been other research efforts which had shown that certain therapist characteristics may lead to different outcomes, such as Vega's [32] findings that therapists with anxious personalities are at a higher risk for experiencing burnout. Thus, a better understanding of how therapists' characteristics may affect their experience of personal therapy differently may propel clearer directions on how personal therapy can be conducted to better meet the needs of different therapists [19].

Quantitative studies

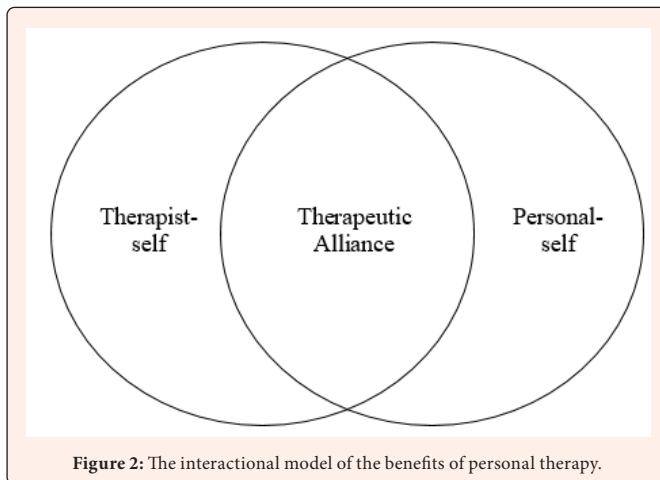
The search identified only two quantitative studies in the literature from 1999 till date. The study by Gold & Hilsenroth [33] compared the therapeutic alliance between participants who had received personal therapy and those who did not. The paper by Chigwedere et al. [34] examined the effectiveness of personal therapy and self-reflection on the personal growth and clinical competencies of participants undergoing therapeutic training. The results of these two studies were inconclusive in verifying how personal therapy was beneficial. Gold & Hilsenroth [33] reported that there was

no significant difference in clients' ratings of therapeutic alliance between participants who had received personal therapy and those who did not. However, participants who had received personal therapy rated their therapeutic alliance with clients higher than participants who did not. The study also found that clients of participants who had received personal therapy were also more likely to stay longer in treatment [33]. On the other hand, Chigwedere et al. [34] found that trainees in a CBT programme who practiced self-reflection reported higher levels of personal and professional benefits as compared to personal therapy for trainees of a postgraduate psychology programme. It has to be pointed out that the inability to arrive at a clear conclusion from these qualitative studies mirrored that of the findings by experimental studies identified in the review by Macran & Shapiro [2]. They also possess significant limitations in their research methods, including poor outcome measures and small sample sizes.

Discussion

The present review aimed to evaluate the research literature on the benefits of personal therapy for therapists since the work by Macran & Shapiro [2]. Despite the relatively high utilization rates of personal therapy, more conclusive empirical support for the benefits of personal therapy was needed [21]. The evidence of its impact on therapy outcome is even weaker [23]. It is hoped that the findings of the current paper will provide a better understanding of the benefits of personal therapy so as to better inform the practice and research of personal therapy. In addition, the paper seeks to propose a preliminary model of personal therapy, which may provide a springboard for the growth of research and practice guidelines for personal therapy. Analysis of the qualitative studies reviewed revealed common themes that emerged across multiple studies on how therapists benefitted from personal therapy. These benefits included provision of a role model, experiential understanding, and self-care. This paper proposes that the benefits of personal therapy can be categorized into benefits for the 'therapist-self', 'personal-self', and 'therapeutic alliance'. The 'therapist-self' can refer to the professional development of the therapist while 'personal-self' is associated with the therapist's own well-being. The use of the term 'self' is relevant, with various researchers noting that the therapists' main tool in therapy and the interaction with the client in the sessions is the 'self' [30]. Thus, personal therapy potentially enables the therapist to refine the 'self' further to heighten the effectiveness of the therapy sessions. The use of the term 'self' is also consistent with the aspects of personal practices and self-evaluation that are examined by various questionnaires, including the Self-focused Practice Questionnaire [35], which measures two domains, the 'personal self' and 'professional self'.

This raises the question of why the paper is proposing a third category of benefits of personal therapy- 'therapeutic alliance'. Therapeutic alliance is not a recent concept in our understanding of the therapeutic process, and can be defined as the active working relationship between the therapist and the client [36]. Although researchers often focused on how personal therapy aids personal and professional development, the results of the review indicated that the benefits of personal therapy does not fall neatly into the two categories of 'personal-self' or 'therapist-self'. There were numerous anecdotes of how benefits in the 'therapist-self' may lead to positive effects on the 'personal-self', and vice-versa. For example, the provision of a role model from personal therapy was found to provide a secondary benefit of effective coping when faced with stress at work [24]. The participants in the study also applied the positive experiences of their role as a client to inform how these can be applied into their own practice [21]. This was supported by Wilson et al. [29], who highlighted that it would be challenging to completely isolate the professional and personal attributes of the therapists. The review will be overextending itself should it try to allocate the benefits identified above into the three suggested categories. Further research, possibly through the use of factor analysis and general linear model, is needed to determine which of the benefits fall into the suggested categories [37]. In the proposed preliminary model of the outcome of personal therapy on the therapist, the paper envisions the 'therapist-self' and the 'personal-self' as distinct, but not independent entities. The overlap of the two 'selves' is the effect of therapeutic alliance (Figure 2). The idea of therapist's professional skills and personal interpersonal ability affecting therapeutic alliance is not a new one. For example, Bachelor [38] identified certain 'therapist-self' factors, such as therapist confidence and ability to set common goals, and 'personal-self' factors, such as ability to work collaboratively and listen empathetically, as important facets of the therapeutic alliance.



The lack of conclusive findings in the two quantitative studies identified in this review does not imply that there is no value in engaging in further experimental pursuits on this topic. Conversely, it indicates that researchers should construct experimental studies with better research designs and more robust outcome measures [34]. Despite the criticisms by Macran & Shapiro [2] that the studies in their review were marked by small sample sizes and lack of control, the paper found that these issues were still prevalent in recent research literature. About 44% of the studies gathered in this reviewed evaluated the impact of personal training on clinical training and 87.5% of the studies involved qualitative interviews with the participants. Only one aspect of therapist of characteristic, attachment styles, was examined for its impact on personal therapy [17,22]. This paper strongly encourages future research on the effects of personal therapy to adopt new research designs to further advance our understanding on this topic. For example, the use of diary studies and supervisor evaluations can overcome the weaknesses of retrospective recall and poorly-defined outcome measures in current studies [39,40]. Future research can also evaluate other therapist characteristics that may impact the effectiveness and experience of personal therapy. Some characteristics that had been found to differentiate therapists include number of years working with clients [41] and therapeutic orientation [31]. The therapist characteristics may be incorporated as independent variables in future. Developing this understanding is crucial in guiding the recommendations for the

best practices in personal therapy and may shed light on how to address the counter-productive impacts of personal therapy. In concluding their review, Shapiro & Macran [2] highlighted that most of the studies that they gathered sought to answer the question ‘if’ personal therapy impacted the therapist significantly. They reasoned that there was sufficient evidence from their review to indicate that personal therapy is beneficial, and suggested for future research to examine ‘how’ personal therapy might be impactful [2]. Following our review, this paper deduced that we have developed a good grasp in understanding the benefits of personal therapy. However, this paper challenges future research to answer the question of ‘why’ personal therapy has positive, and possibly negative, effects on the therapist. The various themes identified in this study and the proposed preliminary model of understanding the impact of personal therapy may provide a springboard in addressing this important knowledge gap.

Conclusion

In summary, the findings of this systematic review demonstrated that the continued utilization of personal therapy has brought about multiple benefits to the professional skills and personal development in therapists. These dual benefits should not be viewed in isolation as they are very likely to interact with each other to generate benefits to the therapeutic alliance [26]. It should also be highlighted some unintended negative effects of personal therapy surfaced in findings of the reviews. With the continued growth in our understanding of the personal therapy processes, it is hope that these negative impacts can be addressed to maximise the benefits that are obtainable by differing therapists. An important step to boost our understanding of the impact of personal therapy is to refine and improve the research methodology of the studies on this topic. By taking steps like increasing sample sizes and examining other potential moderating variables, researchers can conclude their findings with greater confidence and examine how certain factors are crucial in determining how the benefits of personal therapy can be perceived [42]. While the author hopes that the proposed preliminary model may trigger the growth in our understanding of personal therapy, the author acknowledges that this model is still in its infancy stage. There is a strong likelihood that multiple changes can be made to the model as our understanding of personal therapy continues to grow. Addressing these knowledge gaps and developing proper guidelines for personal therapy is crucial for the helping professionals. The effectiveness of the therapist is not simply reliant on the ability to apply the techniques of the chosen therapeutic modality [38]. As highlighted by Grimmer & Tribe [20], the role of the therapist is not simply a professional one but it requires the therapist to connect to the client as a human. Personal therapy provides a valuable channel for developing both professional and personal aspects of the therapist’s experience [43].

Appendix

Appendix 1: Studies examined in the current systematic review.

Study	Purpose	Sample Size and Participant Demographics	Methods	Findings
Therapists’ experience of PT				
Bellows (2007) [23]	Examined the impact of PT on professional practice	20 psychodynamic therapists in US	Semi-structured interviews	PT generally had positive influences on their practice, including development of therapy skills and acceptance of personal limitations
Daw and Joseph (2007) [20]	Investigated professional therapists’ experience of PT	48 (38 female, 10 male) licensed therapists	Questionnaire interview	Identified four main themes associated with personal and professional growth, including provision of a role model and ability to acknowledge inadequacy in self
Grimmer and Tribe (2001) [21]	Investigated viewpoints of counselling psychologists on mandatory PT	7 recent graduates (all female) and 7 current students (5 female, 2 male) in a counselling psychology programme in UK	Semi-structured interview	Participants reported multiple benefits of PT from a personal and professional perspective
Murphy (2005) [27]	Studied the experience of mandatory PT for counselling students in UK	5 Masters in counselling students (4 female, 1 male)	Semi-structured interview	PT leads to four main themes of benefits, such as addressing personal issues, self-validation and professional development



Noble and Rizq (2019) [43]	Examined experience of PT in CBT therapists and it is applied in their practice	7 (4 female, 3 male) CBT therapists in the UK	Semi-structured interview	PT improves emotional awareness and being present in practice, but may creates discomfort for non-adherence to CBT protocols
Probst (2015) [30]	Explored therapist's perceptions of utility of PT in their professional practice	30 clinical social workers in the US	Semi-structured interview	Six main themes of usefulness of PT identified including learning skills from personal therapist and being sensitive to client needs.
Rake & Paley (2009) [25]	Examined how PT impacted clinical skills and practice.	8 (6 female, 2 male) qualified therapists in the UK	Semi-structured interview	PT aided development of participants' clinical skills and self-reflection. Some participants reported detrimental effects of PT.
Rizq (2011) [19]	Investigated influence of early attachment on experience of PT in training	12 (9 female, 3 male) experienced counselling psychologists in the UK	Mixed methods (questionnaire and semi-structured interview)	Insecurely attached trainee therapists were more likely to report being detached, wary and disappointed with PT.
Rizq and Target (2008) [22]	Examined the implications of PT to counselling practice	9 (6 female, 3 male) experienced counselling psychologists in the UK	Semi-structured interviews	Identified five main themes on relevance of PT to experiencing emotions, developing boundaries and professional development.
Rizq and Target (2010a) [17]	Examined the influence of early attachment on how PT is applied in professional practice	12 (9 female, 3 male) experienced counselling psychologists in UK	Mixed methods (questionnaire and semi-structured interview)	Identified four main themes of how PT benefits professional practice, including modeling and understanding client experience. However, insecurely attached therapists are less likely to find PT helpful in addressing complex cases.
Rizq and Target (2010b) [18]	Studied the influence of early attachment on PT in counselling psychologists	12 (9 female, 3 male) experienced counselling psychologists in the UK	Mixed methods (questionnaire and semi-structured interview)	Insecurely attached therapists are less likely to trust their therapists and feel safe in PT.
Williams et al. (2015) [28]	Studied the experience of family-based PT in trainee systemic psychotherapists	4 recent graduates of systemic psychotherapy training programme in the UK	Semi-structured interview	PT was useful in addressing personal issues and informing professional practice. Some participants questioned need for mandatory PT when there is no issue to address.
Wilson et al. (2015) [29]	Investigated the impact of PT during training on clinical skills and personal development	10 (all female) clinical psychology trainees in the UK	Semi-structured interview	PT had positive impacts on the participant's personal lives and clinical skills. Some participants reported feeling embarrassed to seek PT.
Wiseman and Shefler (2001) [24]	Examined the influence of PT on the self and professional development	5 (3 female, 2 male) experienced therapists in Israel	In-depth interview	Gathered six main themes of how PT benefitted participants, including awareness of experience as a client and offering the opportunity to process past experiences.
Chigwedere et al. (2020) [34]	Compared the outcomes of PT and self-practice training in counselling and CBT students	34 (11 female, 23 male) counselling psychology students in a doctorate training programme and 41 (8 female, 33 male) students in a postgraduate CBT programme in UK	Quasi-experimental	Self-practice led to benefits in both professional and personal development in CBT students. PT led to benefits certain aspects of personal development in counselling psychology students.
Gold and Hilsenroth [33]	Examined the impact of PT on therapeutic alliance	7 (4 female, 3 male) doctoral clinical psychology trainees with no experience of PT and 18 (9 female, 9 male) trainees with experience of PT in the US	Quasi-experimental	There is no difference in client-rated alliance. Therapists who have undergone PT rated higher levels of therapeutic alliance and their clients stay much longer in therapy.



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