

Essential competencies in a clinical psychologist for a functional application of face-to-face and online psychotherapy

Competencias esenciales del psicólogo clínico para la aplicación funcional de psicoterapia presencial y en línea

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Abstract:

A systematic review is presented, aiming to identify and compare the psychologists' clinical skills and abilities in clinical practice in person and online. The collected literature was found through some databases like PubMed, Elsevier, Redalyc, SCielo, and Scholar Google, with articles that were both in English and Spanish were considered, mainly published between 2000 and 2020. In the selected browsers, the next set of words were selected in both languages: clinical skills, clinical competence, psychotherapy, clinical psychology, and telepsychology, those who were found mainly on the title, the abstract, and the objectives. The obtained results are a compilation of seven articles found in Europe and America, which refer to the requirements to practice appropriately as a mental health professional. However, it was observed that coupled with the little information on the subject, the features that are repeated within the investigations are very general characteristics for the face-to-face setting and almost nil for the perspective of a psychologist who seeks to perform psychotherapy online.

Keywords:

Profile, abilities, skills, values

Resumen:

Se presenta una revisión sistemática, con el objetivo de identificar y comparar las habilidades y habilidades clínicas de los psicólogos en la práctica clínica en persona y en línea. La literatura recopilada se encontró a través de algunas bases de datos como PubMed, Elsevier, Redalyc, SCielo y Scholar Google, considerándose artículos tanto en inglés como en español, publicados principalmente entre 2000 y 2020. En los navegadores se colocaron en ambos idiomas las siguientes palabras: habilidades clínicas, competencia clínica, psicoterapia, psicología clínica y telepsicología, las que se encontraron principalmente en el título, el resumen y los objetivos de las publicaciones. Los resultados obtenidos son una recopilación de siete artículos encontrados en Europa y América, que hacen referencia a los requisitos para ejercer adecuadamente como profesional de la salud mental. Sin embargo, se observó que aunado a la poca información sobre el tema, los rasgos que se repiten dentro de las investigaciones son características muy generales para el escenario presencial y casi nulas para la perspectiva de un psicólogo que busca realizar psicoterapia online.

Palabras Clave:

Perfil, habilidades, destreza, valores.

INTRODUCTION

When speaking of psychotherapeutic work or even the general work of a professional in the health sciences or any other field, work based on skills is usually mentioned, or great importance is given to them. These usually characterize the work of excellence on the part of a professional. However, it all goes back to this question: What are competencies? What are they for in the workplace? How are they developed?.

Sternberg and Grigorenko (2003) mentioned that the concept of competence is derived from the cognitive sciences. Understood as a specialized knowledge that the professional acquires, according to his/her characteristics and the environment. On the other hand, some authors declare that this term does not have a universal definition. However, it is considered "the new paradigm of education" since the competencies generated a demanding perspective for the labor field such as the student one, which is necessary for the global

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and developmental requirements (Amador, Velázquez, & Alarcon, 2018).

Marger and Bertoglia (2010) mention that the oldest notions about competencies refer to them as a complex system, in which they are shown as the integration of experiences, where skills, abilities, and knowledge converge to meet a particular demand successfully. Authors add that when talking about competencies, values and attitudes are involved that guide the application of skills and abilities, and also emphasize the importance of their effectiveness in the face of environmental demands and the different components of knowledge, doing, and acting, thus providing the possibility of meeting the challenges involved in education, daily life and professional (Marger & Bertoglia, 2010).

Regarding the skills of the psychologist or the same characteristics that the therapist must find essential for his work or even prioritize to carry out a good process with his patients, Oblitas (2008) mentions the next ones:

- I. Acceptance: an essential characteristic that attributes to the therapist the concern and interest shown towards the patient, something that is important for the patient to perceive and not only in a verbal way, but also in the gestures, expressions, and even the tone of voice used, which should also vary throughout the therapeutic process.
- II. Empathy: The ability to understand the feelings of the other, since this helps to create or improve an excellent psychologist-patient relationship and be beneficial in obtaining more information.
- III. Honesty: The author comments that this aspect of the psychotherapist should be evident and open during treatment; however, it should be treated with care, since if it is misused, it can generate a confusing perception to the patient if the words are not used as much at the right time.
- IV. Credibility: This quality is essential to be able to carry out a good process because it is not only the words expressed by the psychologist that are involved but also the confidence that he or she can generate based on his or her experience, the training of the psychologist, the capacity to handle varied situations within his or her work environment, the dynamism of the work and even the therapist's motive for his or her patient.
- V. Flexibility: Fundamental quality of the psychotherapist to adjust to the needs of each patient.
- VI. Self-awareness: Recognition of the therapist as a person with feelings, problems, and thoughts must prevent these things from influencing the therapy and the relationship with the patient.

Certain variables should not influence the therapeutic outcome, such as age, marital status, or even having children; however, they could affect the relationship with the patient since some may consider it an inability to understand the situation they find themselves in. Therefore, in order to generate more outstanding overall quality during the

therapeutic process, it is crucial to take into account three personal areas that have a positive influence: the competence of the therapist, the power that the therapist has in the session, and the intimacy generated between both individuals (Oblitas, 2008; Cormier & Cormier 1994).

Telepsychology

The name used to describe the use of technological tools for psychological service has changed over time. It has been called differently depending on the author or publication, such as cybertherapy, online therapy, online psychology, and cyberpsychology. However, telepsychology has been chosen because it fits the meaning. Telepsychology is defined as the provision of psychological services using advanced technology that we have today, from information and telecommunication through information processing and what is telecommunication through information processing by electrical, electromagnetic, electromechanical, electro-optical or electronic means of communication. The attention in telepsychology must comply with the same ethical and professional standards that psychotherapy provides in a face-to-face way, and the psychologist is in charge of assessing if he or she has the necessary conditions and knows the tools to provide an online service. A psychologist who is committed to providing telepsychology services is committed to making sure that he or she has the clinical skills to provide good service and that he or she will adapt to the technological changes that arise because technology is continuously changing (Ramos et al., 2017).

De la Torre and Pardo (2018) mention that one of the outstanding characteristics of online psychotherapy is the ease with which it can be applied and used in different ways in a clinical context, and highlight the uses of telepsychological intervention such as the following:

As psychological therapy: development of psychological intervention at a distance employing a video conference and does not include the combination of face-to-face sessions, in case this is considered.

As a complement to psychological treatment in a face-to-face manner: this may occur if it is required to interview or meet another member of the client's context and it is difficult for him/her to attend in a face-to-face manner.

As a follow-up to face-to-face therapy, following up online can be beneficial and can facilitate the patient's adherence to the phase in which the changes are maintained.

As a counseling service: this is usually used when there is no psychological problem or disorder, but what is required is information, orientation, and training in specific and concrete strategies.

The American Psychological Association [APA] (2013) mentions that psychologists understand the need to consider their competence in the use of telepsychology and the patient's ability to understand the advantages and disadvantages of an intervention through the use of specific technologies. The

APA encourages psychologists to use telepsychology to provide remote therapy to individuals or organizations, and by doing that, the professional should make an effort to master the professional services that his offering.

Face-to-face psychotherapy VS Online psychotherapy

Macías and Valero (2018) mention that face-to-face interventions present greater effectiveness; however, nowadays, the technological changes are taking place quickly, which become an ally for the incorporation of the technologies to all the areas of the daily life of the people. Likewise, they emphasize that online psychotherapy is a fact. However, there is still a long way to go in investigating the use of technology in the professional practice of psychology, also all the applications that can be applied, such as artificial intelligence or virtual reality to act continuously with human beings in the service of scientific advances to be continuously improving and increasing the effectiveness of therapeutic models that already exist.

METHOD

Objective

This article aimed to identify and compare the characteristics of the psychologist's clinical skills in clinical practice in a face-to-face and online manner. We also looked forward to observing these aspects from authors who carry out both research and publications focused merely on theory.

Search strategy

The literature was collected through the following data sources such as PubMed, Elsevier, Redalyc, SCielo, and Google Scholar, articles that were both in English and Spanish, published from 2000 to 2020, were considered. For the search in the different platforms, the following keywords were used, which had to be found in the title, abstract or objective in both languages English and Spanish: clinical competencies, clinical skills, psychotherapy, telepsychology, clinical skills, clinical competence, psychotherapy, and clinical psychology.

Inclusion criteria

For selecting the articles, those reporting clinical skills or competencies in psychologists who professionally practice clinical psychotherapy in the private or public setting were selected, and it was not considered a specific area.

Exclusion criteria

Those articles that do not report clinical skills or competencies in psychologists who professionally practice psychotherapy in the private or public setting were not included; Such as those that report results of individual or group interventions in therapists or patients with clinical and non-clinical conditions.

Procedure

The analysis of the data was carried out by extracting the following parameters: 1) year of publication, 2) authors, 3) country of origin, 4) tests 5) competencies or skills described.

RESULTS

Seven articles were found in various countries such as Colombia, Costa Rica, Spain, the United States, and Mexico, which met the inclusion criteria; some used some tests to obtain the results. These tests are the Scale of Self-Perception of Professional Competence of the Psychologist, which has 26 items that evaluate how competent the psychologist is in research, evaluation, diagnosis, intervention, and health promotion, on the other hand, the Scale of Frequency and Importance of Professional Tasks Performed in the Clinical Process, which is composed of 33 items that evaluate the professional tasks performed by the clinical psychologist. The following information is extracted from the items already mentioned:

An investigation carried out by Pilar (2010) had objectives to investigate the relevance of generic competencies, the level of development, the tools used to acquire them, and the organization of time in self-employment. This study was carried out in a group of 83 students in the third, fourth and fifth years of psychology studies in Spain, applying a questionnaire divided into four blocks corresponding to each of the objectives set. The results show that the students' importance concerning the competencies with the same development is not consistent since they perceive a high level in the importance of the competencies. However, they respond not having developed them at the same level. The students' most relevant competencies were: resistance to stress, self-confidence, decision making, written and oral communication, adaptation, basic knowledge, ability to learn, achievement motivation, ethics, applying theory to practice, work motivation, and responsibility. Finally, the students rated the following skills as less necessary: leadership, entrepreneur profile, use of a second language, and technologies management.

In their study called "Therapeutic Skills," Bados and García (2011), at the University of Barcelona, mention that it has been known for many years that the psychologist must have empathy, unconditional acceptance, and authenticity as well as active listening, which is they are in charge of promoting the relationship between the therapist and the patient. Likewise, they highlight that there are other different characteristics, such as:

Cordiality: it consists of expressing, verbally and non-verbally, the patient's interest and, if necessary, provide encouragement and approval.

Competence: it is that capacity that the therapist requires to help his patients resolve their conflicts and improve their self-confidence. That is related to their level of therapeutic experience. This ability will cause the client to increase his confidence in the therapist.

Trust: it is associated with improving treatment results and is determined by the client's perception of the therapist's various characteristics.

Attraction: the client will interfere with the attraction through the therapist's kindness and cordiality and the similarities they have between them.

The degree of directivity: is defined by the degree to which the therapist gives instructions, information, and feedback. Excess and deficit of this ability can be damaging.

An investigation carried out at the School of Psychology of the University of Costa Rica decided to replicate part of the project carried out by Tuning Latino América, where various schools from various countries participated, to investigate the general and specific competencies of 15 subject areas (university majors). However, the present study directed by Salazar and Prado (2012), decided to make some adjustments such as choosing the sample that was made up of 73 students in the 4th and 5th semester of psychology, 56 teachers, 62 graduates, and 34 employers (institutions that recruit graduates of psychology). Among the adjustments is the application form, since only the students who were in the course received the face-to-face application (pencil and paper), and the other participants were sent a survey by email. Among the most relevant results, it was found that the five most essential competencies: a) assume the ethical commitment of psychological practice, b) establish a relationship between knowledge and practice, c) understand and intervene before human problems concerning sociodemographic characteristics of a society, d) respect both individual and sociocultural diversity, e) understand the foundations and ethical principles of psychological practice. On the other hand, the least valued competencies are: f) ability to design psychometric tools, g) know the epistemological foundations of science, h) integrate technological tools into practice, i) understand the biological content of human psychological processes.

Finally, researchers highlighted that, on average, there is a 20% difference between the importance of skills and their level of development. In addition to that, the skills with the most significant discrepancy between their importance and compliance are the following, adding that none of them was considered within the essential competencies: 1) Ability to work in multi and interdisciplinary teams to provide knowledge, 2) integrate and apply knowledge from other disciplines, 3) integrate technological tools into practice, 4) design psychometric tests, 5) mediate or negotiate in various areas of job performance.

The Latin America Tuning project (2011 -2013) had the participation of different countries, such as Argentina, Brasil, Panama, Nicaragua, Costa Rica, Cuba, El Salvador, among others, and 11 universities, both public and private, to elaborate meta-profiles, a reflection of future scenarios in different areas or careers, including psychology. To describe the results is important to mention that the researchers postulated 19 specific competencies, and after being judged, the list was adjusted, comprising 24 competencies in total. They approached the meta-analysis as a series of domains (Fields of knowledge, practical and theoretical-practical) that the psychologist should fulfill. Now, the authors clarify the importance of seeing the

domains and the profile as a mutual interrelation (Rodriguez et al., 2013), which are:

Ethical Domain: Respect diversity, understand ethical foundations and principles, assume the commitment to practice

Epistemological Domain: Understand the link between scientific and understand epistemological foundations and understand various psychological theories' epistemological foundations.

Interdisciplinary Domain: Integrate and use knowledge from other disciplines, understand the biological substrate from a bio-psycho-social perspective, work in multi and interdisciplinary teams.

Disciplinary Domain: Critically reflect, understand, and explain psychological processes, understand human transitions, identify and understand the explanatory theories of biological processes, establish relationships between the theoretical and practical.

Professional Domain: Carry out specific research, perform diagnoses and evaluations, understand and intervene in the face of psychological problems of the human being, mediate and negotiate in different areas of practice, carry out counseling and psychological guidance, design and develop programs that promote psychological well-being and provide information on the results of professional actions such as evaluation, diagnosis, intervention, and research to different audiences.

Mallen, Vogel, and Rochlen (2015), who belong to the Iowa State University and the University of Austin, Texas, carried out a study called "The practical aspects of online counseling: ethics, training, technology and competence" in it mentions that even though the psychologist is extensively trained in giving face-to-face therapy, he may not be successful at the moment of wanting to transmit that knowledge to an online environment. They also mention that the most effective way to gain experience is by practicing through different technologies. This article does not explicitly mention the skills or competencies that a psychologist who attends in person must have. However, it does mention that the mental health specialist who wants or is interested in providing services online should be receiving training in establishing assertive communication at a distance through the use of technologies. Moreover, include in their training the gain of experience knowing how to communicate with the client and interpret text messages, emails, and everything that the patient manifests. In 2016, Morán wrote an article that clarified more globally and practically, seeing its professional evaluation, analyzing the advantages, limitations, and disadvantages that the employee's competencies generated during practical work. Within what was observed in this research, it can be mentioned that the skills or competencies generated a positive impact on the training and performance of employees, together with the ability to evaluate clinical situations more easily. However, it is plausible to mention that the evaluation was carried out during the regular working hours of the employees, so it was observed that when carrying out the work during this time, it had generated a particular bias in the standard actions

of the professionals, since the interruption of the clinical activity, it forced the employment situation, generating doubtful reliability of some encounters with those evaluated. The work used sources, such as MiniCEX, DOPS, CbD, and 360°, evaluations of high validity and reliability. However, even taking into account the previously mentioned limitations, favorable results were obtained regarding the evaluation.

Finally, in a study conducted by Orozco, Ybarra, and Romero (2018) in which competencies such as diagnosis, evaluation, research, health promotion, and intervention were evaluated, it was found that the self-perceived competencies to a greater extent were those of diagnosis, research, and evaluation, and the least perceived as competition in health promotion. Likewise, an analysis was made of the difference between psychologists with a bachelor's degree. In this comparison, it was found that participants who only have a bachelor's degree report competencies mainly aimed at intervention and evaluation, unlike those who have a postgraduate degree who reported competence in diagnosis, research, and health promotion, however, these differences were not significant.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSIONS

This article aimed to identify and compare the characteristics of the psychologist's clinical skills in clinical practice in a face-to-face and online manner by observing the perspective of diverse authors who carry out both research and publications focused on the review of theory. The results show that as time goes by, the competencies a psychologist should have increased, and on the other hand, inquisitors agree on the idea that society is evolving, changing and the use of technology is increasingly necessary. However, it was found that it is still not explicitly established which are the skills that a psychologist should have to provide his/her services virtually and that these are effective.

Ramos et al. (2017) mention that if a mental health professional, who has all the resources, in addition to his or her professional experience giving psychotherapy, has the objective of providing psychotherapy online as well, he or she should start by expanding and strengthening his or her capabilities. Attending courses, talks, conferences or workshops, will allow him or her to enter the world of technologies to be able to apply and manage them in all the platforms that exist today, according to the possible ways in which the expert can provide services.

The information gathered from the different articles found, which meet the criteria for inclusion, and knowing that it has increased the need for the application of online psychotherapy due to how the world has been handling the health crisis generated by the coronavirus or COVID-19. There is a lack of information in Mexico and other countries about the competencies that a health professional should have to give psychotherapy online and how this differs from face-to-face skills. On the other hand, the articles that were analyzed agree with each other in the competencies and skills that a

psychologist should have, such as empathy, basic knowledge of the subject, responsibility, leadership, and the ability to work in a team.

In conclusion, part of the lack of research on the subject of competencies in the two different modalities of therapy has to do with the results found in the different studies cited in this article, which first set out a lack of definition on what it is, what they include, how they are developed or what they are. Due to the uncertain meaning of competencies, an equivocal analysis of what they are is reflected since some authors attach abilities, other values, or skills. Therefore, when investigating the subject, gaps in knowledge are identified, noting that there are still discriminated competencies, such as the use of technologies and the design of psychometric tests, which are necessary today for the performance of online practice.

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