

Handout: Making use of a critical analysis of a research paper in an essay or dissertation: notes

These notes discuss different levels of critical appreciation of one of the seminal papers in the history of psychotherapy research:

Strupp, H.H. and Hadley, S.W. (1979) Specific vs nonspecific factors in psychotherapy: a controlled study of outcome. *Archives of General Psychiatry*, 36, 1125–1136.

1. A brief acknowledgement of the knowledge value of this study might take the form: 'Strupp and Hadley (1979) found that untrained non-professional counsellors were equivalent in effectiveness to highly trained professional therapists'
2. A more complex summary of the knowledge value of this paper attempts to:
 - Affirm the value of study
 - Explain its significance
 - Briefly describe the study and findings – selecting/highlighting the key points
 - Point out the limitations of the study
 - For each limitation, explain how it might lead one to understand the findings in a different light
 - Provide a summing-up
 - Explain its significance

A more detailed account of the Strupp and Hadley (1979) study might take the following form:

The research carried out by Strupp and Hadley (1979), known as the 'Vanderbilt Study', remains one of the most important investigations of the effectiveness of non-professional counsellors. In this study, male university students experiencing problems in depression, self-esteem and social relationships were randomly allocated for up to 25 sessions of counselling with either highly experienced professional therapists, or with university academic staff who were selected on the basis of their 'warmth, trustworthiness and interest in students'. Clients (15 or 16 in each group) were interviewed before, on completion of therapy, and at one-year-follow-up by expert clinicians, and completed a number of questionnaire measures. Therapist ratings of improvements were obtained, and some sessions were tape recorded. In addition, there were 'waiting list' and 'no treatment' control groups. Analysis of this comprehensive set of data revealed no significant differences in the effectiveness of the therapy delivered by the professional therapists and the non-professional volunteers, although it was clear that different processes were taking place in each of these conditions. Strupp and Hadley (1979) argue that these findings can be explained in terms of 'non-specific' factors: 'the positive changes experienced by our patients...are generally attributable to the healing effects of a benign human relationship' (p. 1135), and conclude that their results support the idea that, in the right circumstance, non-professional therapists can function at levels of effectiveness that are comparable to those achieved by professionally-trained specialist therapists.

Point out the limitations of the study

For each limitation, explain how it might lead one to understand the findings in a different light.

While acknowledging the thorough and comprehensive way in which the Strupp and Hadley (1979) study was carried out, it is important to note a number of aspects of the study that raise questions about the interpretation of its findings. First, the researchers experienced some difficulties in achieving a sample of clients. Only the first 10 clients in the study were students who had actively sought therapy. The remaining clients were recruited through an advertisement. Although this set of clients reported similar levels of psychological problems, it would seem likely that they might view the therapy received as less urgent, and themselves as less needy and in crisis, and therefore be more satisfied with non-professional help. The extent to which these 'volunteer' clients can be considered to be typical of clients seen in everyday practice is difficult to determine. Second, the clients seen by the professional therapists were, on the whole, slightly more disturbed than those seen by the college professors, and made slightly greater gains. In addition, the sample size was relatively small. It may be that a larger sample size may have generated sufficient statistical power to detect differences in outcomes between the two groups – it would seem likely that this would have shown the professional therapists to have been more effective. Third, there was a close fit between the issues faced by these clients, and the role and status of the non-professional helpers assigned to them: young men feeling isolated at university meeting with older men who had proved themselves capable of coping with the university environment. It may be that, in circumstances where this level of matching was not present, non-professional counsellors might turn out to be less effective.

Summing-up

The findings of the Strupp and Hadley study (1979) call into question the assumption that professional training is a necessary condition for effective therapy. Despite some methodological issues, this is a carefully-conducted

study, and the main thrust of its findings are clear. However, further research is certainly needed to determine more explicitly the characteristics of effective non-professional counsellors, for example in relation to their similarity to their clients. Further research should also be based on larger sample sizes, and clients who are typical of routine users of counselling services.