Making Sense of Current Difficulties: Thematic Analysis of Clients’ Early Recollections as Autobiographical Stories

Nikolina Likomitrou, BSc, Katerina Mavroforou, BSc, Christina Moschakis, MSc, Varvara-Maria Nikolopoulou, MSc, MEd.

Training and Research Institute for Systemic Psychotherapy www.logopsychis.gr

Background

Early recollections have been used both as an assessment and as a clinical tool. Therapists from a variety of approaches have emphasized the enduring nature of themes in early recollections. Recent studies confirm this enduring nature of themes in the telling of memories and past experiences (see Josselson, 2000; Singer & Bonalume, 2010; Thorne, Cutting, & Skaw, 1998). From a narrative perspective, clients’ stories are constructed and constantly re-edited in order to make sense of experiences. Early recollections can be seen as autobiographical stories told to make sense of the current self –narrative (Androutsopoulou, 2013).

Aim

This narrative study explores common themes between clients’ specific early recollections and current-concern stories.

Method

Seven (7) clients’ written early recollections were analyzed using a thematic narrative analysis framework (Lieblich, Tuval, Maschiach, & Zilber, 1998; Riessman, 2008) and were then compared to their case records and written self-characterizations following the triangulation method. Central common themes were “detected” by the exploration of word repetition and content commonalities with regards to the self, to others and to events. All data were collected during the first year of therapy.

Main Findings

Several common themes were “detected” among clients’ early recollections and current-concern stories as compared with their case records and written self-characterizations.

Table 1. Themes in the Seven (7) Case Studies: Central and Secondary

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Central Theme</th>
<th>Secondary Themes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Client A.</td>
<td>Neglected self-needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client B.</td>
<td>Always being nice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client C.</td>
<td>Perfectionism and order</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client D.</td>
<td>A lonely life-observer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client E.</td>
<td>Trapped in other’s will</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client F.</td>
<td>Detailed narratives lacking emotions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Client G.</td>
<td>Body image issues and low self-esteem</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discussion

These findings are in line with Androutsopoulou (2013) who supported that central themes run across all self-narratives, including early recollections. “Detecting” theme commonalities among early recollections and current-concern stories may be of therapeutic value in allowing clients to better make sense of their experiences and current difficulties, and in enhancing both a sense of continuity and change. Themes that are judged as “restricting” by clients and therapists can be more easily revised once their centrality and endurance is detected. Mosak and Di Pietro (2006) have provided extensive evidence that successful therapy outcome is reflected in differences when re-telling recollections following treatment (see also Clark, 2002). These differences can be detected in both the form and content of early recollection narratives (Androutsopoulou, 2013).

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References