

Therapists' emotional skills under research spotlight

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How are you feeling? is a query normally reserved for the client in a therapy session. But Massey University psychology researchers are asking therapists that question to find out how socially and emotionally astute they are.

This neglected area of research is getting attention from three clinical psychology doctoral researchers who are exploring various aspects of how therapists' [emotional intelligence](#) – as opposed to the type of [therapy](#) they use and the qualifications they have – plays a significant role in rapport-building with clients and providing effective therapy.

Dr Shane Harvey, director of the Turitea Psychology Clinic at the Manawatū campus and a co-supervisor of all three projects, says it may seem a given that people working as therapists and counsellors would possess highly-developed emotional intelligence.

Yet core skills such as emotional awareness – often defined simply as 'intuitiveness' or 'sensitivity' – are not part of textbook knowledge or clinical training. He says little has been done to train and evaluate emotional intelligence qualities, or to measure their impact on client outcomes.

"Social-emotional skills are like the black box of therapeutic practice," says Dr Harvey. "When students on any [clinical psychology](#) programme go through a selection process, they are assessed on their knowledge and experience and undertake selection exercises to identify their ability to

work with others."

"But do they have the social-emotional skills, an intuitive sense? This is not an area that is easily accessible, yet we believe it's important in terms of therapeutic outcomes."

Verena Boshra is exploring the relationship between therapists' social-emotional skills, the therapeutic process and client outcomes. She is seeking 50 clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, psychotherapists and counsellors to describe their own inter-personal styles. Clients too will be asked about their experience of therapy with these therapists. A subsidy towards their therapy will be offered.

"Being a therapist is a social-emotional practice that involves regular interactions using a range of emotions that either hinder or enhance aspects of the therapeutic process and client outcomes," says Miss Boshra. She says she is passionate about her research and hopes that her findings will contribute to greater awareness of "what works" in therapy, as well as improved clinical training.

Andreas Marwick's doctoral study aims to pinpoint the range of "emotional competencies" that therapists bring to their work, and to develop a mapping and profiling framework that will help potential clients identify a therapist's personal style and find the right fit for their needs. The method will be used to associate the therapist's profiles with therapy outcome scores, he says.

In Amanda Johnsen's research, film is being used to determine whether training in emotional awareness can improve a therapist's ability to tune in and respond to a client's emotional state. She is using the Subtle Expression Training Tool (SETT) as a training tool so she can assess responses to facial emotional expressions in a filmed [therapy session](#). Ms Johnsen wants to recruit 50 therapists in New Zealand – including

psychologists, psychotherapists, and counsellors – for her online survey, which involves responding to a filmed therapy session.

Call it emotional awareness, intuition, sensitivity or perceptiveness - the research projects will collectively help build a better understanding of an important element of therapy, says Dr Harvey, author of *Warming the emotional climate of the primary school classroom* (New Zealand: Dunmore Publishing Ltd, 2012) based on his PhD study of the emotional awareness of teachers.

"We'd like to think that these skills can be learned, through awareness and contextual practice," he says. "What we know is that modality [therapeutic method] is important, but someone has to deliver it.

And that "someone" is not only a trained professional but a human being, whose own emotional skill set is often overlooked as a key element in a therapy, he says.

Provided by Massey University

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