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Therapists' perceptions of their roles and functions in imago relationship therapy.

Gerrand, Melanie

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ABSTRACT

Couple therapy research demands a shift in focus from quantitative to qualitative studies that explore therapist behaviours such as the role of the therapist due to the significant gap between research and practice, where research is often irrelevant and inaccessible to clinicians, and errors in practice are repeated and perpetuated as a result of lack of insight into therapeutic functions. Research on couple therapies also lacks focus on recent modalities such as Imago Relationship Therapy (IRT), a formative and recent modality of couple therapy in South Africa and internationally that requires empirical research and evaluation. Studies addressing therapist qualities and skills necessary in dealing with diverse populations such as South Africa are also lacking. The subjective experiences and perceptions of eight Imago relationship therapists practicing in a South African context were thus explored and described within a qualitative paradigm to provide an in-depth account of their role. Semi-structured individual interviews were used to explore their role, and responses recorded and analysed using thematic content analysis. Findings highlighted underlying complexities of this role as a result of evident contradiction, irony, and paradox within participants' experience. Firstly, the core function of establishing safe connection for the couple proved ironically 'unconnecting' and theory-driven in nature, which also provides a sense of safety and reduced responsibility for the therapist. The role of the Imago therapist was also indicated to be a part of participants' identity and life philosophy. The second theme highlighted the inherently paradoxical nature of the role because perceptions of a 'non-expert' and 'background' role in fact requires active and expert therapeutic functions as they remain acutely connected to the couple's process. Thirdly, the intuitive nature of this role was reiterated as participants' experienced both favourable and limiting therapeutic encounters in a positive and congruent way, which has implications for increased therapeutic growth. Finally, although participants' experience of their role in South Africa highlighted IRT's underlying theoretical orientation of universal connection, they did not seem aware of this underlying theory as informing practice. This raises questions about implications on their role given the importance of theory in influencing the way the therapist thinks about the client. Findings generally contribute to narrowing the research-practice gap providing insight into the practice of Imago therapy, which may in turn add to richness of theory.

Key words: Imago Relationship Therapy, couple therapy, role of the therapist, safe connection, couple therapy research, history of couple therapy, qualitative research, thematic content analysis.