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EMPIRICAL PAPER

Flexibility between immersion and distancing: A dynamic pattern with effect on depressive symptoms

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Abstract

Objective: Recent studies on immersion (first-person perspective) and distancing (third-person perspective) in psychotherapy have shown the potential of both perspectives in the treatment of depression. High levels of change were associated with transitions between immersion and distancing, suggesting that a dynamic pattern between them may result in a more adaptive view of reality. This study aimed to assess if higher flexibility between these perspectives, during clients' reflection on negative experiences in the intermediate phase, is associated with lower levels of depressive symptoms at the end of treatment. **Method:** We analyzed the flexibility through frequency and magnitude of transitions between immersion and distancing, in representative sessions of the intermediate phase of therapy in 17 cases with depression. **Results:** The results showed that the higher frequency and lower magnitude in the intermediate phase predicted lower levels of depressive symptoms at the end of treatment. **Conclusion:** Immersion and distancing seem to work as dynamic processes, and greater flexibility between them in intermediate phase of therapy, characterized by frequent and fast transitions between the two perspectives, may be an adaptive pattern due to its effect on post treatment depressive symptoms.

Keywords: immersion; distancing; dynamic systems theory; depressive symptoms

Clinical or methodological significance of this article: This study launches a dynamic and integrative vision of immersed and distanced perspectives, using a methodology of analysis that allows the evaluation of these perspectives at a more detailed level. It contributes to the scientific and clinical practice by showing the potential of the flexibility between immersion and distancing to break rigid patterns regarding the way depressive clients reflect about their negative experiences. Therefore, it provides important clinical indications for therapeutic intervention in order to promote effective change in depressive symptoms.

Distancing and immersion are two contrasting reflective perspectives through which a person may view his or her own personal experience. In immersion, the person adopts a first-person perspective, while in distancing, he or she reflects on personal events in a third-person, or observational, stance (Nigro & Neisser, 1983; Robinson & Swanson, 1993). Previous studies have found that a decrease in immersion and an increase in

distancing at the end of psychotherapy were associated with good outcomes (e.g., Barbosa et al., 2017, 2019; Couto et al., 2016). Up to now, these results have been interpreted as the consequence of a linear or progressive association between clinical improvement and the development of the clients' perspectives that are used to reflect on their experiences. In other words, success of psychotherapy has been associated with

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