

Getting the Feel of Therapy: Investigating Therapists' Social-Emotional Skills for the Therapeutic Process and Client Outcomes

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Verena Boshra, a Clinical Psychology student from Massey University used an SRA award towards a research trip to the United States of America. Throughout this trip, she received comprehensive training on the Social-Emotional Intelligence Profile, met with many experts in the field and gave presentations at universities to disseminate her research concept as well as build international networks. Her novel research is the first to examine the importance of therapists' social-emotional skills for the therapeutic process and client outcomes. Her study has broad implications for therapist training and enhancing therapist-client interactions.

During undergraduate psychology classes, we were taught about the different kinds of mental health problems and various treatment modalities that have been used to help those who experience these problems. The literature has predominantly been focused on these areas as well. That is: what is the problem and how can we fix (or at least help) with it?

As I began my doctoral study, I was introduced to 'Social-Emotional Intelligence'. Social-Emotional Intelligence describes a set of skills that enable people to be aware of their own and others' emotions and then draw on that information to manage their social interactions effectively. I was intrigued by this concept as it seemed to make a lot of intuitive sense. If I can be attuned to how I'm feeling and accurately read how those around me are feeling too, then I could use that as a guide to determine what I should say and do as well as how I should say and do it. As I researched this concept further, I found that the majority of work in this area was found in the organisational domain where people had been using it to answer questions like: What makes a good boss? What are the characteristics of an effective leader? How can we increase the profitability of our business? This all made sense to me as well, because it's not difficult to see how an individual that possesses high social-emotional intelligence would be competent across these leadership and managerial roles.

But social-emotional intelligence is about a lot more than that. Its relevance extends beyond just leadership and organisational success. In fact, it is relevant for all the social interactions that take place in our day-to-day lives. Can you think of a situation where it would not be advantageous to know how you are feeling, read other peoples' emotions and make your next move based on the culmination of both of these? I certainly could not. What I did think about though was the relevance of all of this for therapists. Therapists are in a unique, professional role where they deal with aroused emotions on a regular basis. For example, they often interact with clients who present with anger, sadness or anxiety.

As a doctoral student in clinical psychology, it really puzzled me that despite therapists' regular engagement with emotions, no one had investigated the importance of their social-emotional skills for the therapeutic process and client outcomes. Instead, most of the literature I found focused on mental health clients' problems and the effectiveness of different treatment approaches that are to used alleviate these. This was surprising as quite a few studies had indicated the importance of considering therapists' contributions for both the process of therapy (e.g. the working relationship) and client outcomes. The few studies I found that did focus on therapists' contributions investigated demographic factors such as: whether therapists' age, gender, years of experience and training made a difference in therapy. There was nothing that specifically focused on the relationship between therapists' social-emotional skills, the therapeutic process and client outcomes. Armed with this knowledge, strong supervision and a great passion for a 'what works' perspective in psychology, my project was born.

The Sylff Research Abroad is a fantastic initiative that enabled me to embark on a short research trip in the United States of America. The objectives of this research trip included: (1) receiving comprehensive training on the Social-Emotional Intelligence Profile (SEIP) which I am using to assess therapists' social-emotional skills for my doctoral study, (2) meeting with experts in the field to establish their views on what I am doing and use their suggestions to strengthen the contribution of this research (3) building international research networks to allow for future cross-cultural comparisons, (4) presenting my research at several university-based institutions to disseminate my research concept and (5) understanding student therapists' views on the relevance of social-emotional skills for their practice.

To carry out these objectives, I spent two fruitful weeks in Denver, Colorado and one week in Los Angeles, California. During those three weeks, I was fortunate enough to receive training and support from Dr. Belsten from the Institute of Social and Emotional Intelligence and meet with many field experts whose generosity, time and interest taught me many lessons that I will never forget. I returned home with so much more knowledge, confidence and motivation to produce research that will be useful for therapists and the practice of therapy. For me, this project represents so much more than a mere component of my doctoral qualification. My vision for this work is far-reaching and this entire project represents only the very first, investigatory step.

Knowing whether therapists' social-emotional skills are important for the therapeutic process and client outcomes carries significant implications. Firstly, it will advance the current state of knowledge as there is a scarcity of inconsistent research in this area. Furthermore, since research has identified that social-emotional skills are both teachable and learnable, if this particular study indicates that they are important for the therapeutic process and client outcomes, then with further investigation, these skills can be incorporated into clinical training programmes both in New Zealand and overseas to positively influence how therapists interact with their clients.

The highlight of my research trip would have to be meeting with experts from a

variety of institutions. Specifically, I enjoyed hearing about their views on the study of social-emotional skills and how relevant they felt this area was for their practice. Each expert I met with displayed passion for their field of work, a high level of professionalism and a genuine desire to help. Many provided me with important research considerations and suggested useful resources. It was inspiring to think that one day, I would be able to assist a student in the way that all of these wonderful individuals helped me.

I wish to extend my heartfelt thanks to the SYLFF foundation for providing me with this amazing learning opportunity as well all the experts and students who kindly gave of their time and knowledge for the benefit of this research. It would not be what it is today without you. As Isaac Newton once said, "If I have seen further, it is by standing on the shoulders of Giants."



From left to right: Dr. Laura Belsten (Founder and President of the Institute for Social and Emotional Intelligence), Dr. Jorge Cherbosque, (Co-director of the Staff and Faculty Counseling Center at UCLA), Dr. Fernand Lubuguin (Director of the Professional Psychology Clinic at the University of Denver), Dr. Danielle Keenan-Miller (Director of the Psychology Clinic at University of California Los Angeles).



From left to right: Dr. Anita Rowe (Co-founder of the Emotional Intelligence and Diversity Institute), Dr. Jacaranda Palmateer and colleagues, (Director of the Health and Counseling Center at the University of Denver), Dr. Lee Gardenswartz (Co-founder of the Emotional Intelligence and Diversity Institute).



With Susan Jester (Associate Director at the Frances L. Smith Community Clinic, Chapman University) and students.