

Is a Gradualist Approach to Clinical Training Helpful or Necessary?

Thomas E. Joiner Jr.

INTRO

This research paper explores two contrasting approaches in clinical psychology training—gradualist and anti-fragilizing perspectives—and aims to clarify their assumptions, often left unstated. Identifying them as the gradualist and anti-fragilizing schools, the paper advocates for the latter, emphasizing the importance of exposing trainees to diverse clinical challenges. The study empirically tests predictions arising from the tension between these perspectives, arguing that quality and breadth in psychology training have critical implications for public health.

METHODS

This study, drawing from a dataset of over 2,000 participants spanning 20 years, focuses on 399 patients engaged with the FSU Psychology Clinic. The participants, primarily female (69.8%), received psychotherapy for various diagnoses, with stringent termination criteria applied. Therapists, post-graduate students with varying levels of experience, underwent didactic and hands-on training, and the clinic's support structure aimed to uphold an anti-fragilizing training model. The analysis, through Clinical Global Impression scale revealed that therapist experience and initial clinical severity did not significantly predict clinical outcomes at termination, challenging assumptions about the impact of therapist experience on treatment efficacy.

There was no evidence that inexperienced therapists' patients had worse outcomes in general, including if the patients' initial presentations were clinically severe. There are reasons to favor an anti-fragilizing training model, including that it better respects and serves patients and trainees, and that the current results do not support a core assumption of the gradualist model.



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RESULTS

Table 1. Descriptives and Intercorrelations

Variable	1	2	3	4	N	M	SD
1. What is your age?	-				301	27.75	12.411
2. Therapist clinic experience	-.009	-			399	9.69	8.828
3. Clinical global impression severity at intake rated by therapist	-.075	.058	-		399	4.09	1.130
4. Clinical global impression therapist improvement rating	.063	.072	.140**	-	399	2.67	1.116

**p<0.01

DISCUSSION

In the past 25 years, drawing from my experience in psychiatric settings and influenced by psychologists like Marsha Linehan and David Rudd, I transitioned the FSU Psychology Clinic to an anti-fragilizing approach, emphasizing behavioral and cognitive therapies. Despite occasional challenges from a minority favoring a gradualist model, our documented success contrasts with the gradualist approach, which, despite its popularity, doesn't align with empirical findings and may stigmatize patients. The anti-fragilizing model, rejecting surgery analogies, asserts that behavioral and cognitive therapy skills are easily acquired, challenging the need for prolonged gradualist training, with potential ethical and social justice implications.

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