A multiple intelligences approach to counseling:

Enhancing alliances with a focus on strengths.

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Abstract

This qualitative study investigated the experiences of eight counselors as they introduce multiple intelligences theory and activities into therapy with adult clients. As research on the application of multiple intelligences in the field of education has revealed many positive psychological benefits, this study explores possible therapeutic benefits from incorporating multiple intelligences within therapy. Semi-structured interviews conducted three months post multiple intelligences training, were transcribed and analyzed using interpretative phenomenological analysis. The major themes that emerged included perceptions of enhanced therapeutic alliances, more effective professional work, experiences of increased confidence, positive client response to a strength-based approach, positive client responses to a multiple intelligences preference survey, and positive outcomes from the use of music. Implications include the value of further long-term research on the benefits of using a multiple intelligence approach to therapy as an integrating meta-theory, and instructing counseling trainees in the routine assessment of client abilities through the use of the multiple intelligences approach.

Key words: counseling, expressive therapies, multiple intelligences, therapeutic alliance

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Client retention and therapeutic outcomes are enhanced through responding to client preferences (Swift, Callahan, Ivanovic, & Kominiak, 2013). In order to explore possible therapeutic benefits emerging from responding to client intelligence preferences, Gardner's theory of multiple intelligences (MI) (Gardner, 1983, 1995, 1999, 2006), has been applied to therapy with adult clients. A MI approach to counseling (Booth & O'Brien, 2008; Pearson, 2011; Pearson & O'Brien, 2012) is proposed where therapists are trained in the application of MI theory, and in ways to assess clients' MI profiles, and offer treatment choices informed by clients' MI profiles, or preferences. This approach explores the possibilities of applying a theory from educational psychology within the practice of counseling and psychotherapy.

According to Gardner (2006), each person has an individual intelligence profile, which includes intelligences with which they may be most comfortable, or most able, and those that they tend to use less and may consequently have less ability in using. For counselors this theory raises the question: Can understanding how information is personally processed, and the use of preferred intelligences, increase confidence and therapeutic efficacy for counseling clients?

This qualitative study used interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) to investigate the experiences of counselors as they introduce MI theory and activities into their work with adult clients. As therapeutic alliance formation has been found to be crucial in achieving positive outcomes, there was a focus on participants' experiences of alliance formation in the three months after training in a MI approach to counseling.

A pilot training intervention to introduce counselors to MI theory and practice, that utilizes Expressive Therapies (ET) (Pearson & Wilson, 2009), was used in this study. ET modalities provide a range of treatment choices that can be offered in response to clients'

preferred intelligences, and may also provide opportunities to focus on intelligences that appear to be less well developed. Major themes from interviews with eight Australian counselors, conducted three months after the MI training, are described.

The use of MI theory as a support for, and within, counseling and psychotherapy has been suggested by Bowles (2013), Pearson and O'Brien (2012), Pearson (2011), and Booth and O'Brien (2008). To date a single qualitative study by O'Brien and Burnett (2000) has examined the effectiveness of implementing a MI approach to counseling, and this was in school counseling with elementary students. A single quantitative study (Bowles, 2013) investigated adult therapy clients' perceptions of their MI talents as they began therapy, although MI was not used in treatment. Further to this, Chan (2001) suggests that applying MI in the psychological counseling of students could achieve an integration of talent development and personal growth, and that MI can be used by integrating creative arts into counseling. To date no studies have explored the integration of MI into therapy with adult clients.

We explored any implications for enhancing therapy practice, and particularly for strengthening therapeutic alliance formation and client engagement, that could be drawn from the extensive outcome literature on using MI in educational contexts. A brief review of learning styles, multiple intelligence preferences and the subsequent offering of individualized therapeutic treatment are highlighted, along with an introduction to expressive therapies as a way to implement MI theory and practice within therapy sessions.

Learning styles

Individuals have diverse attributes that lead to preferred styles of learning (Rolfe & Cheek, 2012). Over 70 different types of learning styles have been identified (Coffield, Moseley, Hall & Ecclestone, 2004). As it has been established that individuals develop preferences for specific modes of learning (Kolb & Kolb, 2005), an investigation into

preferences for specific therapeutic modes is suggested. In the field of education, teaching is seen to be improved by matching an individual's learning style with teaching methods, and a student's awareness of a their own learning style has been shown to improve the techniques they employ in learning (Rolfe & Cheek). The importance of learning styles to educators has been highlighted (Manolis, Burns, Assudani & Chinta, 2013), and individual communication/learning/therapeutic styles are becoming of interest to counselors (Bowles, 2013; Geller, 2005; Keteyian, 2011).

Multiple intelligences theory

Harvard Professor Howard Gardner proposed that the "human mind is better thought of as a series of relatively separate faculties, with only loose and non-predictable relations with one another" (Gardner, 1999, p. 34). He emphasized that the *multiple intelligences* he identified were useful constructs, rather than physically verifiable entities (and was just as content to identify them as cognitive abilities). Other writers have referred to the multiple aspects of intelligence as clusters of cognitive ability, skills, talents, mental capacities, dispositions, strengths, preferences, and have indicated that individuals have "sensitivity to", "inclination for" and "ability to" in relation to each intelligence (Silver, Strong, & Perini, 2000, p. 11).

Originally Gardner identified seven intelligences (Gardner, 1983) and subsequently added an eighth (Gardner, 1995). Furthermore, he conceded that there might also be a ninth, although this was not fully identified through all inclusion criteria (Gardner, 1999). Gardner's intelligences are verbal-linguistic, logical-mathematical, visual-spatial, bodily-kinesthetic, musical-rhythmic, interpersonal, intrapersonal and naturalist (Silver, Strong, & Perini), with a possible existential intelligence.

In developing a MI approach to counseling, the authors have reviewed the wide application of MI in educational settings (e.g. Hoerr, 1992; Kelly & Tangney, 2006;

Quiñones & Cornwell, 1999; Smagorinsky, 1995), for signs of positive psychological outcomes. There is evidence that MI has been applied successfully in the teaching of health sciences (Lane, 2010), law education (Hyams, 2011), and economics education (Farnan, 2009). Further areas where MI has been applied include sports education (Martin & Morris, 2013), nursing education (Amerson, 2006; Denny et al., 2008), pre-service teacher education (Dixon, White & Smerdon, 2003) and in adult literacy (Kallenbach, 1999; Kallenbach & Viens, 2001).

Griggs et al., (2009) surveyed the preferred intelligences of college students, and postulated that if instructors knew the strengths of their students they could plan more suitable instruction methods. They noted that students found a MI survey to be helpful in allowing them to change their study strategies. This introduces the question as to whether introducing a MI survey to therapy clients may support them in making desired changes.

MI theory has been successfully applied in career counseling, particularly in supporting clarity in the use of the intrapersonal intelligence that lead to enhanced career choices (Mantzaris, 1999; Odeleye, 2010; Shearer, 2009; Shearer & Luzzo, 2009). Shearer (2009) argues for the use of individual intelligence profiles in providing what he calls "MI-inspired career assessment" (p. 59). The enhancement of intrapersonal awareness and responding to individual intelligence profiles may also be highly relevant within psychotherapy.

Social work educators considered that the interpersonal, the intrapersonal and linguistic intelligences were the most important for social work practice, and named the bodily-kinesthetic, musical and visual-spatial as important for culturally competent social work practice (Matto et. al, 2006). Again the question of similarly applying these concepts in therapeutic practice emerge here.

MI profiles are being assessed and used more widely in education, and there are many assessment surveys, primarily self-reports. Bowles (2013) investigated the self-perceptions of client talents, using a MI questionnaire, at the start of psychological therapy, and compared these self-ratings with a non-clinical population. He found that "those entering therapy perceived themselves to be consistently less talented in comparison with the non-therapeutic respondents" (p. 24). He argued that strength-based approaches to therapy should enhance a client's strengths, and that a focus on strengths as well as on presenting problems is more effective than a focus on problems alone. While MI was not used within the therapy sessions, Bowles' application of MI theory lends some weight to the investigation of clients' MI abilities in therapy.

Booth and O'Brien (2008) introduced the concept of matching intelligence profile to activity, in a counseling context, noting that for young clients with good visual-spatial abilities it might initially be appropriate to offer art therapy activities, or sandplay therapy. For clients who score well on the bodily-kinesthetic intelligence perhaps drama therapy, emotional release activities, and possibly use breathing exercises or mime could be offered. This study investigates these possibilities with adult clients.

The positive outcomes from introducing MI approaches, in a range of fields, provides a rationale for exploring MI within therapy. For example, a student who understands how they learn can reduce some of the anxiety associated with the pressures of learning (Doyle, 2011), and MI theory offers learners the opportunity to understand how information is personally processed. This increases confidence, and hence leads to enhanced success (Doyle, 2011). This same outcome of increased confidence may be relevant to counseling clients, who often begin the therapeutic journey with strong doubts about their own abilities be successful.

The use of MI in educational settings been used to personalize training, to enhance

inclusion, to increase the range of learning experiences, to generate more student engagement, and has contributed to the reduction in anxiety associated with learning, to increased confidence and self-esteem, to facilitate effective communication, to support critical thinking, and to build on student abilities. What emerges of significance for counselors from the MI educational literature is the concept of building on student abilities for more effective outcomes. In this way, there is applicability of MI theory in counseling, where helping clients find and use their strengths has been championed (e.g. Kaczmarek, 2006; Smith, 2006).

Improvement in overall therapeutic effectiveness when MI theory was used as a basis for selection of treatment modalities has been explored in counseling children (O'Brien & Burnett, 2000; Pearson, 2003). However, previous to the current study, the applicability of MI theory has not been explored in counseling with adult clients.

A multiple intelligences approach to counseling

Counseling styles and the different therapies bare some correlations with Gardner's multiple intelligences (Booth & O'Brien, 2008). For example, many counseling treatments generate a focus on, and use, the intrapersonal intelligence, such as emotion-focused therapy, some psychodynamic treatments, the use of journals for self-reflection, etc. This intelligence processes information related to the self, identity, and directing oneself in life (Moran & Gardner, 2007). Using and developing the intrapersonal intelligence can contribute to developing a sense of purpose (Moran, 2009), and a sense of purpose has been recognized as contributing to wellbeing (Harlow & Newcomb, 1990). An inverse relationship has been found between purpose in life and depression (Hedberg, Gustafson, Alex, & Brulin, 2010), and purpose in life and suicidal ideation (Heisel & Flett, 2004). A connection between supporting clients to develop a sense of purpose through use of the intrapersonal intelligence

and psychological wellbeing contributes to an argument for introducing MI into the practice of counseling.

Therapeutic alliances

Freud (1912/1958), Rogers (1951) and Zetzel (1956) made early claims that a positive connection with clients was a basic requirement for effective treatment. Therapeutic alliances are also termed in the literature the 'helping alliance', the 'working alliance', and the 'treatment alliance', and are described as "the degree to which the patient experiences the relationship with the therapist as helpful or potentially helpful in achieving the patient's goals in psychotherapy" (Luborsky & Luborsky, 2006, p. 63). While there is some disagreement about the exact components of alliances, there is broad agreement that the relationship in counseling is crucial (Lambert & Ogles, 2004).

The psychotherapy and counseling literature identifies the therapeutic alliance as one of the reliable ways to predict positive outcome (Luborsky & Luborsky, 2006), and as contributing to up to 30% of positive outcomes (Lambert, 1992). In the "robust empirical literature the therapeutic alliance consistently predicts psychotherapeutic outcome" (Arnd-Caddigan, 2012, p. 77).

Ceberio (as cited in Soares, Botella & Corbella, 2010) suggested that a priority in applying interventions to support the alliance, is the ability to "sense the most appropriate moment and introduce the best type of intervention together by evaluating which one best suits that particular client" (p. 177). As therapeutic alliances have been shown to bring a crucial contribution to positive therapeutic outcomes, this study welcomed participant experiences of the impact of MI on alliances.

The MI training intervention

A one-day MI training intervention was developed and conducted by the first author, to introduce participants to: (1) an overview of MI theory, (2) means for assessing their own

and clients' preferred or natural intelligences, (3) practical counseling activities that utilize each of the intelligences, and (4) session-planning in the light of a clients' intelligence profiles, i.e. matching MI activities to the client's profile. The experiential counseling activities presented during the MI training have been tested and published over many years (Pearson, 2003; Pearson & Nolan, 2004; Pearson & Wilson, 2001, 2009).

During the MI intervention participants familiarized themselves with a self-report MI preference survey the "Multiple Intelligences Test - Based on Howard Gardner's MI Model" (Chislett & Chapman, 2005), herein referred to as the multiple intelligences survey (MIS). While not claiming to be a scientific instrument, the MIS was selected for the current study as a starting point for counselors and their clients to reflect on their preferences, or what came to be referred to by participants as 'natural strengths'. While called a 'test', it consists of 70 questions that invite reflection on the individual's lifestyle, preferred leisure activities, and to a lesser extent, abilities. The MIS does not ask for a judgment about skills, it is freely available on the internet, has attracted positive responses from counselors and clients when previously used by the researchers, and is therefore considered to be client-friendly.

Participants were encouraged to include the MI intervention framework and activities in their professional work according to their own assessment of client needs and readiness.

Using expressive therapies to implement MI in counseling

Expressive Therapies (ET), an integrative approach to creative arts therapies, is a way to concretize MI theory within counseling practice. ET is a synthesis of client-centered expressive counseling principles and arts-based activities. ET has been developing since 1987 (Pearson, 1997, 2004; Pearson & Nolan, 1991, 2004; Pearson & Wilson, 2001, 2008, 2009), and provides many activities that utilize the full range of intelligences. As well as traditional verbal exchange, ET incorporates art, imagery, music, movement, emotional expression, and therapeutic writing into counseling sessions, from which counselors can

select appropriate interventions, in conjunction with more cognitive and behavioral approaches, that correspond to clients' preferred intelligences.

Method

This study utilized qualitative enquiry through the methodology of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) (Smith & Osborn, 2008) to illuminate the participants' experiences of introducing a MI approach to counseling into their daily work. Qualitative and phenomenological enquiry have been recognized as ideal and frequently-used approaches in psychotherapy and counseling psychology research (Creswell, 1998; Morrow, 2007; Sousa, 2008; Wertz, 2005). These research methods were selected as the gathering of direct experiences of practitioners, initially un-influenced by prevailing theories, provides the possibility for new meanings to emerge (Crotty, 1998). The interpretive phenomenology used to analyze the semi-structured interviews with counselor-participants is based on the work of Heidegger, and is referred to as the hermeneutic research tradition (Lopez & Willis, 2004).

Sample and sampling

The participants in this study were eight Australian counselors sharing their experiences through semi-structured interviews three months after participation in a one-day MI training intervention. Since phenomenology aims for an in-depth understanding of a particular group it is appropriate to seek out groups who can relate to the research questions, so "purposive sampling" (Chapman & Smith, 2002, p. 127) is used; in this case all participants were professional counselors with the flexibility in their practice to incorporate new methods.

Selection criteria for participants included: membership of a professional counseling association (which ensures a uniform minimum level of training, and having supervision contracts in place), experience in a counseling practice for at least three to five years (average was 5.6 years).

For data gathering in phenomenological research sample size recommendations range from six (Morse, 1994), six to eight (Kuzel, 1992), and 10 (Creswell, 1998). Achieving a reliable level of thematic saturation is the ideal (Bowen, 2008), and this was confirmed in the present study during the process of coding themes, in that new themes or patterns were no longer generated (Marshall, 1996), and the research questions were sufficiently answered (Onwuegbuzie & Leech, 2005).

Data collection

The study utilized semi-structured interviews of approximately 45 – 60 minutes to gather data, three months post intervention. The interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed. As the lead author was the training provider for the MI intervention and the interviewer, care was taken in designing the interview schedule and in conducting the interviews to make space for the reporting of any experiences that might indicate that the introduction of MI was difficult, less than successful, or lead to negative outcomes.

Bracketing

In order to "reveal engaged, lived experience" (Ashworth, 1999, p. 707) researcher presuppositions were suspended as much as is possible, or 'bracketed'. In other words, an effort was made to gain knowledge of participants' experiences, without researcher bias or the influence of previous data. This was achieved through using open-ended interview questions, and catalysts to extend discussions, so that responses were not limited by interviewer questions.

To achieve effective bracketing, the first author, who conducted the interviews, was challenged to refrain from making leading comments or frame questions based on his suppositions, attitudes, biases or opinions. A similar approach was maintained during data analysis. Analysis of several transcripts into major themes by an independent researcher was compared with the initial analysis, as a way of further minimizing bias.

Data Analysis

Interpretation of transcripts transformed participants' experiences into themes, and common themes were identified across cases, with super-ordinate themes emerging (Chapman & Smith, 2002). The first stage of IPA analysis involves reading and re-reading of transcripts (Willig, 2008). Significant responses from the reader, statements, sentences, or quotes will be identified in the transcripts (open coding). Stage two involves the identification and labeling of themes. In stage three the analysis is structured, and clusters of themes are labeled in a way that aims to capture their essence. In stage four a summary table of the themes is constructed, with quotations from participants that illustrate them (using pseudonyms). Finally an expanded narrative is written, based on the summary table.

Results

From analysis of the interviews conducted three months after the MI training intervention, when participants had trialed the MI approach, seven major themes and a number of minor themes were identified. Direct quotes from participants are included as both summaries and to provide the flavor of their experiences.

The major themes included: enhancement of therapeutic alliances (*MI helped us get closer*), more effective practice (*MI led to better professional work*), clients responding to identification of their strengths (*Clients thrive on rediscovering their strengths and talents*), positive client responses to the MI preference survey (MIS) (*Clients love the natural strengths survey*), increased professional comfort (*I felt comfortable with MI*), positive outcomes from the use of music (*People love music*), and the emergence of new therapeutic options (*MI training opened up all sorts of different possibilities*).

While interview responses primarily focused on perceptions of work with clients, participants' own positive responses to trialing the MI approach and to the MI training intervention emerged as sub themes.

MI helped us get closer

Counselors experienced the MI approach as contributing to strengthening alliances. Jenny reported: "The alliance was like cold and now it would go very warm", and Emily notes that in her outreach work MI "created a more relaxed alliance with the client". Increased psychological comfort for counselor and client, as a result of introducing the MI approach, was seen as a major factor in alliance enhancement. Elaine comments on a change she has noticed after introducing MI into her work:

"My confidence level has risen, clients are more confident with me, or more comfortable with me."

Alexandra shares her positive experience with mandated clients:

"After introducing MI, my mandated clients actually were more open, because I think they identified within themselves what their communication skills were, what their strengths were".

Harriet observed a trend in client openness after introducing MI:

"They're more open. They don't feel judged, because of this. They're actually seeing who they are."

Signs of alliance increases included counselors experiencing more 'connection' with their clients, clients being more comfortable to speak up, being more forthcoming with information, as well as clients appearing less suspicious. Alexandra sums up the impact of this decrease in suspicion in working with indigenous clients:

"When they're more open, they're actually telling me what they need to tell me, not what they think I need to hear, because with indigenous people, there's always the shame issue. So they tend to hold onto information . . . However, with this multiple intelligence now, it's different".

MI led to better professional work

Incorporating MI theory and practice was perceived by counselors to enhance their professional effectiveness. The MI approach lead to increases in treatment options as Jenny explained: "I had more tools to choose from". Furthermore, after the MI training intervention, counselors experienced enhanced confidence and comfort in working with their clients. Alexandra shares the links she noticed between the MI approach and enhanced counselor-client connection:

"I have used this (MIS) with some of my drug addiction clients, and immediately after that, we connected much better. I think because it wasn't about information I'm trying to get. It's about validating some of those strengths from the multiple intelligences. I think that definitely made me connect better with the client."

Flexibility in responding to clients was one way the MI approach supported professional work, as Genevieve reported:

"I think the impact on me [of introducing MI] has been feeling more comfortable and more confident that when people come in, you're not always going to get the same response from each person and therefore you need to be able to have other ways of tuning into where they're coming from."

General comments about practice during the three months when MI was being introduced included: "My private practice has increased and retention rates are good" (Alexandra), and "Practice has picked up" (Elaine).

Clients thrive on re-discovering their strengths and talents

The MI approach appeared to support what participants referred to as a strengths-based therapy style, and the MIS helped counselors and clients recognize abilities, strengths and talents. Genevieve draws the link to using the MI approach and enhancing a client's sense of strength in a session:

"Some of the MI stuff is really being able to enhance that (sense of strength), because

you're able to tap into where they're comfortable and what fits for them."

She takes it further in a comment on how the MI approach contributes to renewed

identity building:

"There's a real level of boosting their own sense of self, especially those that come in

really broken."

Elaine observed increases in client creativity and growth in the use of extra-therapeutic

activities:

"I think I worked in a way that encouraged the client's creativity and his abilities

outside of the therapy room."

Clients love the natural strengths survey

The MIS was the most-used component of the training intervention, leading to the most

positive outcomes. Use of the MIS stood out as even more useful than the range of MI

counseling activities. The MIS (essentially an assessment tool) appeared to also have

therapeutic value, it became a catalyst for client self-reflection, and a catalyst for clients

reconnection with their abilities or talents (in particular their ability with music). Jenny sums

up the appreciation of this tool, appreciation that was widely reported:

"Having the questionnaire (MIS) to give to the clients really brought my awareness to

what their strengths are and what they need to do. . . . every single time that I've used it,

they have loved it".

In introducing the MI survey (MIS) to clients, counselors had described MI preferences

as natural "strengths". This supported it becoming a therapeutic tool, not just an assessment

tool. The MIS also became a basis for treatment decisions, it enhanced client reflexivity and

self-awareness, and proved to be a catalyst for client self-reflection. The MIS responses lead

to the use of assigned "homework". In several cases, completing the MIS proved to be a

catalyst for clients' spontaneous, extra-therapeutic, use of music for personal wellbeing. In her comment on the MIS leading to homework, Jenny revealed:

"Well it promotes homework. So for them we come up with something and they'll say 'Oh you know actually I do love music and I didn't realize'. I say 'Well why aren't you using it?' 'Well I didn't even think about it'".

Use of the MIS was seen by Emily as initiating new useful information:

"To be honest we would not have talked about music if we had not done that survey. I had no idea about his interest. He'd completely forgotten about it. So I could imagine that facet would never have been looked at. It (MIS) opened a doorway".

I felt comfortable with MI

During interviews the participants primarily focused on their professional experiences, what they had done, observed, heard back from clients, and the meaning they had made of these. While their enthusiasm for the MI approach to counseling and its impact on them personally appeared evident through their body language and voice tone during interviews, it was not made explicit by many direct comments. The words 'comfortable' and 'confident' were frequently used. The researchers presume this may be partly due to participants' assumptions that the project aimed primarily for professional insights.

Emily reported:

"So I feel really more confident I think as a counsellor to be able to put those things [MI options] forward and not just stick with the things that I feel comfortable in my own self that I've been using, but to be able to stretch it a little bit."

People love music

In-session and extra-therapeutic use of music, offered as a result of using the MIS, was reported to make significant contributions to client wellbeing. While a range of the expressive therapies activities were described as effective, music use stood out as a major

theme. There was an increase in using music in sessions, and this supported some clients to access emotion. Extra-therapeutic use of music was important and impactful for some clients. The following client story from Jenny provides a clear account of the way engagement with music reduced depression and enhanced interpersonal connections:

> "I had one client who did the thing (MIS) and it came back that music was massive. I said 'You've never mentioned music before', and she said 'Oh that was when I was a kid'. I said 'Well why don't you do it now?' She came back to me a month later and she said she bought a keyboard and she said 'I'm playing music'. She said that with her teenage son, who is into music as well, 'We're writing songs together.' She said it's brought them closer together. She said 'Now we're having the best time'."

MI training opened up all sorts of different possibilities

Counselors' responses to the MI training program were positive, with no negative responses reported. There was a positive impact from the MI training on counselors' professional work. This was supported by comments such as: "I wish I had this tool previously". "I was very impressed with the entire program – all the tools were great". "This was an opportunity to expand the way I work."

Peer interactions during the training program were highly valued. Experiential engagement with the MI activities within the training was also highly valued and led to confidence in presenting the activities to clients. Several participants indicated that it would be preferable to participate in a training program that was longer than one day. Lorraine shared her experiences of the MI training:

> "What I found was really useful is it opened up all sorts of different possibilities as well. I found that it (counseling) became maybe more user-friendly. It was almost like softer. It was colorful".

Jenny's experience of both personal and professional benefits from the training in the following comments, echo the general participant sentiments:

"The training day changed the way I think. It's opened me up. So it's made me more inclined to explore than I did before and it gave me confidence."

Genevieve spoke of enhanced professional comfort:

"Then doing some of the exercises made me feel more comfortable in presenting those activities to the clients, so I found that really useful".

The idea of introducing visual-spatial activities into work with clients was found to be effective by several participants, as Alexandra reports:

"We were talking about dealing with conflict. So I said, what would conflict look like to you, if you had to put it in art? We had (images of) needles, syringes, black clouds, a personal black eye. I can see a lot of opportunity to expand on using the art in my therapy, and I will use more of it."

Jenny sums up the sense of professional flexibility the MI approach provides that was reported by participants:

"It would suit so many different types of therapists, it's not just one size fits all. Well no, it *is* a one size fits all because MI is going to suit everybody".

Discussion

From analysis of the interviews conducted three months after the MI training intervention, when participants had had opportunities to trial the MI approach, seven major themes were identified, and many had links with the literature. While the interviewer had specifically indicated that any negative responses to the introduction of MI would be of interest and welcome, there were no reports of difficulties, other than participant's limited training in a wide range of therapeutic modalities. The lack of difficulties or negative responses may be due in part to participants introducing MI selectively, and with care, with

clients identified as suitable, and could also reflect a preference for reporting positive outcomes.

MI helped us get closer

Over the three months between the MI training intervention and the interviews, it appeared that alliance enhancement was experienced as a result of using the MI approach. Incorporating an MI approach had an impact on counselor comfort, recognition of a client's individual interests and talents, and contributed to a wider range of therapeutic activities offered in sessions.

Counselor comfort - due to incorporating MI theory and methods - was highlighted as a major contributor to alliance increases. The literature on client's perceptions of alliances suggests that the experience of increased counselor comfort may make a significant contribution to the alliance. For example, the 'being' qualities of the counselor were found to contribute to the development of client self-esteem (Law, 2009), and counselor attending behaviors of smiling, making eye contact, sitting with an open body posture and remaining relaxed were found to be appreciated by clients and seen as making a significant contribution to alliance development (Bedi, Davis & Arvay, 2005).

Another contribution to alliance increases due to MI could be inferred from reports of clients' appreciation of the matching of their styles (intelligences) to treatment activities; the education literature reveals similar positive responses from students.

MI led to better professional work

Clear parallels emerged between the positive findings of educational research on the application of MI in schools, and the positive experiences of the current participants applying MI in counseling. Participants found the MI approach provided a wider range of interventions to use, which contributed to providing flexible responses to clients. Clients were reported to feel more included and were often perceived to be more engaged in the therapeutic process.

Active engagement of clients in the therapy process is considered a large part of successful therapy (Bohart & Tallman, 1999). One participant mentioned increases in retention, which is supported by the findings of Swift, Callahan, Ivanovic, and Kominiak (2013).

It is also possible that the MI training and collegial interactions on that day, which were highly valued, provided participants with re-invigoration in relation to their professional work, and positive outcomes may have resulted in part from this enthusiasm, rather than just the inclusion of the MI approach.

Clients thrive on re-discovering their strengths and talents

In the light of participants' perceptions of the positive impact of their client's discovery and re-connection with strengths, it is not surprising to find parallels in the literature (e.g. Bowles, 2013; Smith, 2006; Wong, 2006). Smith (2006) describes strength-based counseling as representing a paradigm shift in psychology, from the deficit model to one that stresses clients' strengths. She points out the importance of identifying cultural strengths that allow members of various ethnic groups to survive and flourish. This parallels comments from several of the current participants who found the use of the MIS particularly powerful with refugee clients and clients from ethnic minorities, who may be accustomed to viewing themselves as low on ability.

Participants noted that the identification and labeling of client abilities – viewed as strengths – through using the MIS brought a positive response. Bowles (2013) found that a client group consistently rated themselves as less talented than a non-therapeutic group, and emphasized that a focus on clients' talents is an appropriate addition to therapy, as it can support the maintenance and expansion of their skills and competence. Smith (2000) suggests that the strength-based counseling model needs to specify additional strength interventions. Perhaps a MI approach can make a contribution to these developments, in addition to identifying areas of low ability that might be developed through the therapeutic encounter.

There were no reports from participants about focusing on supporting areas of low ability or less preferred intelligences, and this may be a useful area to investigate in future research.

Clients love the natural strengths survey

When introduced by participants to their clients, the MIS initially appeared to be an assessment survey, and thus was treated with some suspicion. However when it was described as a way to identify and focus on their interests and abilities, its use generated a very positive response. Use of the MIS was reported as providing conversation starters, and becoming a catalyst for clients to reflect on and share more of their life story with the counselors. In this sense it was seen as a valuable contributor to therapeutic communication, as well as providing a foundation for treatment choices. In addition, given Bowles (2013) finding that clients entering therapy routinely perceived themselves to be less talented than a non-therapeutic population, the MIS could be used to enhance positive self-perception, as was observed by several participants, most particularly with indigenous clients.

In the Hollanders and McLeod (1999) study of therapists' styles, the participants based their combination of approaches on personal choice, on "intuitive or idiosyncratic criteria" (p. 413), not on an organized or theoretically coherent foundation. Lazarus, Beutler and Norcross (1992) suggest that the blending of concepts and methods from the various psychotherapy schools has been conducted in "an arbitrary, subjective, if not capricious manner" (p. 11). They argue that haphazard eclecticism should be replaced by particular organizing principles that are needed to guide therapists. MI may be an ideal theoretical foundation, or meta-theory, for eclecticism, and it was used this way by the current participants.

I felt comfortable with MI

The confidence and comfort that participants experienced with applying the MI approach could bring benefits in terms of reduced risk of burn-out, increased job satisfaction, and particularly in contributing to alliances. The understanding of MI theory supported counselor confidence and flexibility, and these qualities were found by Ackerman and Hilsenroth (2003) to contribute significantly to alliance building. Confident, calm and responsive attitudes are seen by clients as desirable in therapists and are perceived by clients to contribute to alliance formation (Littauer, Sexton & Wynn, 2005).

It was satisfying to the researchers to learn that, in line with their own professional experience, participants were also comfortable and engaged with MI theory.

People love music

The use of music in therapy has been found over many years to be highly effective (e.g. Cheek, Bradley, Parr & Lan, 2003; Slyter, 2012). Listening to music can reduce blood pressure (Sutoo & Akiyama, 2004), contribute to the recovery in neuro-rehabilitation (Baker & Roth, 2004), and listening to and producing music can activate brain structures involved in cognitive, sensorimotor and emotional processing (Koelsch, 2009). Engagement with music has also been shown to have a beneficial effect on psychological and physiological health.

Participants found their clients responding positively to the use of music in sessions and also wanted to use it for personal growth in daily life. A theme of clients having forgotten their previous strong love of music was evident in the interviews. Using the MIS was perceived to be an ideal catalyst for clients to recognize if musicality was a strong interest, and perhaps a talent, and becoming motivated to again engage with this love of music.

While to become a music therapist requires extensive post-graduate training, the finding on the value of music suggested that counselors and counseling interns could become acquainted with simple and safe ways to use music as part of therapeutic support. Receptive

methods, using music that corresponds to clients' musical preferences, can support relaxation, reminiscence, and discussion (Grocke & Wigram, 2006). In addition, where indicated by the MIS, suggestions could be made regarding the possible enjoyment or creation of music as homework.

The use of "cultural resources as therapy methods" has been advocated by Cooper and McLeod (2011, p. 101), and these are defined as "having the potential to have a positive impact on the capacity of a person to resolve a problem by allowing that person access to ways of making meaning, strategies for behaviour change, and a sense of identity and belonging" (p. 101). A large scale survey of ways the public coped with every-day psychological problems, such a depression (Jorm, et al., 2000), did not indicate any use of the creative arts in general, or music in particular. This suggests that having specific guidance – such as via use of the MIS – in identifying suitable cultural resources, may be of benefit for clients.

MI training opened up all sorts of different possibilities

Participants responses to the MI training were positive, and they considered the training had a positive impact on their work. Experiential engagement with the MI activities was reported to enhance participant's confidence, and this confidence may have added to the positive impact of the MI activities. Use of MI appeared to expand counselors' range of skills and experiential activities to offer clients.

The researchers had anticipated that the introduction to the expanded range of therapeutic interventions of ET during the MI training intervention would prove impactful on participants' practices. However, it was evident that it was the theory of MI, and the use of the MI survey with clients, that contributed most to practice. Several ET activities introduced during the training were mentioned in interviews as helpful, for example, Jenny found the use of body maps helpful for one client, and Harriet found use of art valuable with refugee clients

and indigenous clients, as well as use of an art response to music activity very helpful. However, it could not be said that the use of the ET modalities emerged as a major theme.

That participants did not discuss any limitations in introducing and using an MI approach may suggest that judicious selection of clients for whom this approach might prove useful was made (as was encouraged during the MI training). However, while Elaine indicated the MI activities should be used "as appropriate", she was explicit in stating that MI theory "is appropriate for application to all clients". As the interviewer was also the MI trainer, it is possible some participants may have refrained from presenting any challenging or negative outcomes, and further research is needed in order to articulate limitations and cautions in applying a MI approach to therapy.

Implications for research and counselor education

Further investigation is needed to confirm the value of, and means for applying, a MI approach with a range of specific client populations. For example, participants indicated that the MI approach was particularly useful in their work with children, with clients from Australian aboriginal communities, in group-work and in couples counseling. Furthermore, a longer term study may be able to shed light on the ideal duration and content of counselor education in MI theory and practice that produces optimal long-term MI use.

For counseling educators, implications from this study would include instructing counseling interns in the ways of assessing and making central client abilities, perhaps through the use of the MIS and ways to respond to client scores. The early introduction of MI theory and practice could allow students to use it as a meta-theory integrating the study of a range of counseling approaches and theories. Familiarizing students with experiential interventions that could be applied on the basis of Gardner's eight intelligences would be recommended. Finally, while not attempting to train counseling students to become music therapists, it would be recommended to acquaint them with simple and safe ways to use

music as a therapeutic support, and (where indicated by the MIS) make suggestions regarding the possible use of music as homework.

Limitations

A possible limitation within the study may be the inevitable consequences related to self-selection of participants. While participant numbers were relevant to phenomenological research, and will be of interest within the field of therapy, the experiences reported should not be interpreted as having external generalizablity. Limitations have also been noted in possible social desirability bias of participants due to the development of loyalty to the MI trainer who was also the interviewer.

Conclusion

The aim of this study was to gather and present the experiences and perceptions of counselors that emerge from being introduced to a MI approach to counseling, and applying this approach in their daily therapy work with adult clients. The insights gained through interviews with counselors provides some detailed findings regarding important issues as perceived by this profession in regard to the impact of an MI approach on establishment of therapeutic alliances. Participants experienced a MI approach to counseling as supporting alliances, enhancing professional counseling, contributing to strengths-based practice, contributing to professional confidence and comfort, and highlighting new therapeutic options. The inclusion of a MI approach in counselor education is recommended, along with further research to gauge optimal levels of MI training as well as the long-term impacts.

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