

# The Role of Creative Complexity in Psychotherapy

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### Abstract

*Complexity has been identified in the creativity literature as the ability of some individuals to move between opposing personality traits and/or thinking styles that are segregated in most people. The flexibility to inhabit both sides of polarities within oneself is a relevant factor in psychotherapy. This paper explores the role of complexity as it relates to the processes of the client, therapist and the therapeutic relationship. Specifically, it is suggested that the process of complexity be considered in understanding transference, counter-transference, and projective identification. The parallel between the process of creative complexity and the processes identified in effective psychotherapy are viewed side by side one another.*

The intention of this article is to creatively play with and explore the role of complexity as a core agent of change in psychotherapy. Complexity refers to the ability to move between opposing personality traits and/or thinking styles within one individual (Haller & Courvoisier, 2010). The reference to “creative complexity” is the implementation of this concept within a therapeutic relationship. Complexity is recognized as a core component of creativity, which involves alternating between convergent and divergent thinking in efforts to produce something novel and useful (Bronson & Merryman, 2010). Complexity describes a dynamic process. It speaks to intrapsychic movement. That movement seems to be essential for one’s mental health, effective psychotherapy and the creative process. The ability to shift between opposing cognitions and affects is crucial to innovation and integration of self and/or ideas (Pine, 1985; Blos, 1962; Spiegel, 1959). It may be assumed that the specific traits, structures or styles on either side of the set of polarities are already developed sufficiently. However, it is the inflexibility to move back and forth between opposing cognitions and affects which typically gene-

rates symptoms and obstruction of the creative process. McMullen (1978) and Csikszentmihalyi (1996) have each identified various sets of polarities that creative individuals seem to move between. Haller & Courvoisier (2010) produced the first empirical research to support complexity as its own construct.

In a similar vein, in Duncan, Miller, Wampold and Hubble’s second edition of *The Heart and Soul of Change: Delivering What Works in Therapy*, process, as opposed to content, is once again brought to the forefront as the commonality of effective therapy. Specifically, they provide empirical research to affirm Rosenzweig’s common factors perspective. Just as creativity research has moved away from trying to isolate specific personality traits to focusing more on creative process, psychotherapy outcome research has provided overwhelming evidence that no specific approach or theory stands above the other in therapeutic effectiveness. Rather, it is the commonalities in interpersonal processes that facilitate positive change in psychotherapy. It has taken decades for psychologists in both creativity research and psychotherapy outcome research to understand and accept the powerful importance of the process of complexity.

In applying the concept of creative complexity to clinical work, it is helpful to look at Hecker and Kottler’s (2002) work on creativity in the therapeutic process. Creativity is seen as central to the process of psychotherapy because it is a moment-by-moment experience. They identify the importance of convergent and divergent thinking and intuition. These styles of thinking and perceiving are experienced at various moments and to varying degrees in the context of the “person, the process and the product.” Carson and Becker (2004) have helped to clarify these concepts:

“Creative therapy involves a synergistic combination of the unique personalities involved in the therapy, the process of therapy (the way in which change and growth occurs, often involving novel, original or imaginative methods), and the product of therapy (that which is dif-