



Homeopathy and Psychotherapy: Clarifications on Differences and Similarities. A Comparative Analysis of Related but Distinct Disciplines

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Abstract: Homeopathy is a medical discipline based on the law of similarity and treats patients through the administration of diluted and dynamized substances, while psychotherapy is a therapy based on the word, etymologically meaning "cure of the soul." The two disciplines have similarities and differences, so this article provides clarifications to distinguish them and foster an interdisciplinary dialogue based on conceptual order and scientific rigor.

Keywords: Homeopathy, psychotherapy, cytotoxic effects, holistic medicine, homeopathic medicine.

INTRODUCTION

Homeopathy is a medical discipline founded about two centuries ago by Samuel Hahnemann. It cures the patient through the administration of ultra-diluted doses and its theory is based on the principle that like cures like, *similia similibus curentur* [1], while "psychotherapy (also called talk therapy) refers to a variety of treatments that aim to help a person identify and change troubling emotions, thoughts, and behaviors" [2]. Even in the homeopathic conversation the word is used clinically, but homeopathy is not a "talk therapy", it is not a psychotherapy, it is not a cure for the psyche. In fact, homeopathic therapy is applied in the treatment of numerous diseases, as reported in the literature: "Many studies have been published on the value of homeopathy in treating diseases such as cancer, depression, psoriasis, allergic rhinitis, asthma, otitis, migraine, neuroses, allergies, joint disease, insomnia, sinusitis, urinary tract infections and acne, to name a few" [3]. Homeopathic medicine, similarly to narrative medicine, recognizes the clinical significance of narration, therefore the word homeopathically acquires a medical-narrative meaning, not a psychotherapeutic one. Psychological aspects and words are homeopathically important for making a global diagnosis, not for doing "talk therapy" or psychotherapy. Homeopathic psychology facilitates the study of the personality of the major constitutional homeopathic remedies [4, 5]. The study of homeopathic remedies and constitutions is based on a comprehensive vision of the individual, from the Latin "individuum", indivisible. In the individual, therefore, psyche and soma are united and indivisible. The psychosomatic unity is carefully considered both in the diagnosis and in homeopathic therapy. The narrative approach facilitates the global framing of the individual and is aimed at understanding the person who becomes ill totally, not separately, since each organ is inevitably connected to the other and to the entire individual constitution. Narratives, therefore, are important and

are integrated into homeopathic care: “Both osteopaths and homeopaths learn that narratives are integral to both 'diagnosis' and the healing process itself” [6]. It is important to reiterate that the homeopath does not only cure with narration, listening and words, but prescribes homeopathic medicines, integrating narratives into a compassionate care [7]. To achieve this important integration, listening and words must be used skillfully and narrative competence is fundamental: “Homeopaths have always demonstrated that they possess narrative competence, the ability to narrate and listen to other people's stories, the ability to converse empathetically and humanely, professionalism, the will to communicate in order to delve deeper, study and fully understand the patient's overall pain” [8]. A full understanding of overall pain, and not just physical pain, allows the doctor to identify the appropriate therapy, which is maximally personalized and perfectly coherent with the holistic vision of homeopathy. The homeopathic approach does not take place on the basis of a sectoral, psychocentric or somatocentric vision, but on the basis of a broad, comprehensive, total vision. This explains why a homeopath must explore various fields of medical knowledge. Homeopathy, in fact, has a very broad field of action, and scientific research confirms this, so much so that some ultra-diluted homeopathic remedies are even tested on cancer cells [9]. It is true, there are extremely serious and rigorous studies that are aimed at understanding the efficacy of homeopathy in the treatment of cancer, and these studies should be encouraged, not discouraged, because they represent a hope that scientifically and humanly must be cultivated [10]. Based on what has been said, it is easy to affirm that some similarities between homeopathy and psychotherapy exist, but differences also exist. Despite these differences, sometimes the two disciplines are overlapped, and sometimes confused, but some authoritative scholars do not confuse them and approach the subject seriously and intelligently. In a very interesting and intelligent article, it is proposed to reposition individualized homeopathy as a psychotherapeutic technique [11]. While understanding the reasons that justify this “repositioning”, and while appreciating the possible future recognition of individualized homeopathy as a psychotherapeutic technique, we believe that homeopathy and psychotherapy should be distinguished. Our study intends to contribute to providing clarifications in order to distinguish the two disciplines, which use different methods and are not superimposable, but have some “similarities”, so that they can dialogue and compare constructively. With this work, we intend to contribute to stimulating dialogue and a comparison based on conceptual order and scientific rigor.

METHODS

To undertake our study, we conducted a bibliographic search, including biomedical databases, PubMed/Medline, and Google Scholar. We then conducted a conceptual analysis based on the selected and consulted scientific articles. Finally, we worked to create a clear conceptual framework within which we could identify the similarities and differences between homeopathy and psychotherapy. For the sake of complete transparency, some brief excerpts from the original articles are quoted faithfully, in quotation marks.

RESULTS

The analysis of the literature has highlighted that the relationship between homeopathy and psychotherapy presents points of contact which, however, do not allow for methodological

overlaps between the two disciplines. Davidson and Jonas state: “Almost entirely neglected has been the study of individualized homeopathy (IH) as a form of psychotherapy” [12]. Furthermore, the two authoritative authors maintain: “Recent research into the therapeutic components of IH is reviewed; similarities and differences between IH and other forms of psychotherapy are also described”. And they add that “IH includes elements found in humanistic therapy and narrative medicine and additionally incorporates idiographic material in treatment selection”. Finally, the conclusions are the following: “It is possible that IH entails specific psychotherapeutic processes in addition to possible therapeutic action of the homeopathic remedy, but the relative contributions of each remain to be determined” [12]. In an article by Tarro and De Giorgio it is clarified, right from the title, that homeopathy therapeutically uses homeopathic medicines, but also narratives, which are integrated into compassionate care [7]. In an article by Riebel we read: “This article sets forth a theoretical model for psychotherapy. Distinction is made between allopathic techniques, which oppose the problem, and homeopathic techniques, which prescribe the problem as a means of treatment. Five techniques are reviewed: psychoanalysis, catharsis, Gestalt awareness techniques, Rogerian acceptance, and paradoxical intention strategies”; furthermore: “The hypothesis is advanced that these techniques constitute a homeopathic approach to psychotherapy, in that (in different ways) each calls on the client to continue to have or to intensify experience already present” [13]. Regarding paradoxical intention, De Giorgio states: “Homeopathic medicine is founded on the Hippocratic law of similarity: *similia similibus curantur*. Like is cured by like. This therapeutic law is also found in Franklian logotherapy, in particular, in the technique of paradoxical intention according to which the phobic patient is invited to desire that exactly what he fears happens” [14]. In an article by Johannes et al. it is stated: “In this article we examine elements suggesting homeopathy may inherently contribute to the humanistically allied psychotherapeutic process, particularly with relation to the person-centered approach” [15].

DISCUSSION

Our discussion, based on the results of our bibliographic research, has a threefold starting point. First point: many studies have been published on the value of homeopathy in the treatment of various pathologies, including the treatment of cancer [3]. Second point: there are in vivo, in vitro and clinical studies that highlight the effects of homeopathic medicines [16]. Third point: there are similarities and differences between homeopathy and psychotherapy [12]. These three points are important to clearly distinguish homeopathy from psychotherapy, in fact, the former uses remedies that are also studied in vitro [9] and in the total absence of psychological conditioning, the latter uses words, so much so that it is also defined as “talk therapy”. Homeopathy also uses words, but not for psychotherapeutic purposes. The therapeutic tools of homeopathy are homeopathic remedies, not words. Some ultradiluted remedies have even shown cytotoxic effects on breast cancer cells [9], and this demonstrates that the effects of homeopathy are also found in the laboratory, under the microscope, in the total absence of any type of psychological conditioning or placebo effect. Although homeopathic remedies produce effects that can be detected in in vitro experiments and in the total absence of suggestive influences, homeopathy is often considered a therapy whose efficacy is attributed only to the placebo effect. In addition to the comparison between homeopathy and the placebo effect, the comparison between homeopathy and psychotherapy is quite frequent, but the second comparison is not at all

demeaning since it attributes a further value to homeopathic medicine. Homeopathy extends its field of interest also to the psychological sphere [4] and, based on what is stated in an intelligent and authoritative article, homeopathy could be repositioned as a psychotherapeutic technique [11]. We appreciate this idea, but we believe that a potential repositioning of homeopathy as a psychotherapeutic technique could occur by integrating psychotherapeutic techniques with all other homeopathic medicine techniques, since the former can be integrated into the latter, not vice versa. Homeopathy, in fact, is a discipline with a very broad clinical vision that can accommodate other "similar" approaches. The homeopathic approach focuses on the globality, the totality of individual symptoms, including psychological symptoms, but its focus on psychological symptoms does not have psychotherapeutic purposes. The goal of homeopathy is to understand the relationship between psychological and somatic symptoms, grasp the meaning of psychosomatic unity, and treat the patient completely, not just in specific areas. It is clear that the homeopathic approach is neither psychocentric nor somatocentric. The aim of the homeopath is to observe the human being in his spiritual-mental-corporeal totality, without diagnostically dissecting the individual, who is not divisible: "individuus". The observation of the homeopathic doctor, therefore, is not sectorial, it is not oriented predominantly or exclusively towards the body, but it is not oriented predominantly or exclusively towards the psyche either. The homeopath looks at the totality, including the psychological dimension in the vision, and this leads us to think that the scientific comparison between homeopathy and psychotherapy is very useful for mutual enrichment. In homeopathy, as in psychotherapy, communication is important: "The homeopathic model is based on holism and comprehension of the totality of the patient and uses patient-centered communication with a high degree of physician co-operation, empathy, hopefulness, enablement and narrative competence, all of which can improve outcomes" [17]. The good homeopath, therefore, must be able to communicate and must possess a high level of narrative competence [6, 7, 8, 17]. Hahnemann, the undisputed founder of homeopathy, about two centuries ago, in paragraph 84 of the *Organon* had clearly highlighted the importance of narration, of listening and of the homeopathic doctor who "writes everything with the same expressions used by the patient and the relatives. If possible, he lets them say everything without interrupting them, unless they make useless digressions" [18]. In the note to paragraph 84 Hahnemann explains why it is counterproductive to interrupt the patient and the relatives: "Every interruption breaks the train of thought of the narrator" [18]. Homeopathy, since its origins, has recognised the importance of narrations and the homeopathic doctor is more similar to an expert in narrative medicine than to a psychotherapist. Narrations are integrated into the homeopathic treatment by the doctor who is guided by the totality of the symptoms. In paragraph 7 of the *Organon* it is specified: "In other words, the totality of the symptoms must constitute for the doctor the essential and only guide to recognize what he must remove in each disease with his art, so that the disease is cured and the state of health is restored" [18]. The passage just quoted allows us to understand that homeopathy is applicable "in every disease", and not only in mental illnesses, and its effectiveness depends on many elements that must be considered from time to time. From time to time, therefore, the homeopath must personalize the therapy, individualize it, adapt it to the man and not to the psyche because, to quote Viktor Frankl, "the man is greater than the psyche" [19]. We believe that homeopathy and psychotherapy, precisely because of the attention that both pay to the psyche, can compare each other constructively, but, in order for the comparison to be scientifically provable, we support

the need to recognize their similarities and their differences. If homeopathy and psychotherapy are similar, it does not mean that they are the same. We acknowledge that some psychological techniques, such as paradoxical intention, can constitute a homeopathic approach to psychotherapy [13, 14], that homeopathy can contribute to the humanistically oriented psychotherapeutic process [15], that individualized homeopathy could be repositioned as a psychotherapeutic technique [11], but we also acknowledge that classical homeopathy has a precise, clearly distinguishable identity, strengthened by approximately two centuries of history and cures of serious and less serious illnesses. If nowadays homeopathic remedies are also tested on cancer cells [9], it means that homeopathy has a potential that can be exploited in many fields, including oncology. That said, it must be emphasized that, to homeopathically cure any disease and to homeopathically explore the psychological dimension of the human being, it is necessary to use the homeopathic method and homeopathic psychology [4, 5, 20], not psychoanalysis and psychotherapy. By acting with clinical coherence, homeopathic remedies can cure serious and less serious disorders, resolve difficult situations, and cure anxiety and depression [21]. In the interest of clarity, we believe the topics covered in this article should be further explored in the future by authoritative scholars who take into account the similarities and differences.

CONCLUSIONS

A clear distinction must be made between homeopathy and psychotherapy: the former is based on the law of similarity and treats patients through the administration of ultradiluted substances, while the latter is a therapy of words, etymologically, a "cure of the soul." The two disciplines have similarities and differences, but despite their similarities, they are not superimposable. We believe that, to foster an interdisciplinary dialogue based on conceptual order and scientific rigor, it is necessary to clearly distinguish the two disciplines. Homeopathy, like psychotherapy, can have advantages and disadvantages, and the choice of their therapeutic use must be carefully evaluated on a case-by-case basis. One of the advantages of homeopathy is that it addresses the individual as a whole and includes the psychological aspect in a broad diagnosis. In this inclusive approach, it is necessary to use the classical homeopathic method and homeopathic psychology, not psychotherapy, which is important in treating the psyche.

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