

## HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

### Masaryk University

**Applicant**

MUDr. David Skorunka, Ph.D.

**Habilitation thesis**

Narrative Sensitivity: Towards an Integration of Psychology and Psychotherapy in Medicine

**Reviewer**

Evrinomy Avdi, ClinPsyD, Professor in Clinical Psychology

**Reviewer's home unit, institution**

School of Psychology, Aristotle University of Thessaloniki, Thessaloniki, Greece.

I very much enjoyed reading MUDr. David Skorunka's habilitation thesis with the title '*Narrative Sensitivity: Towards an Integration of Psychology and Psychotherapy in Medicine*'. Overall, I consider the thesis makes an important contribution to both the theoretical literature on the importance of narrative and narrative processes in psychology, psychotherapy and medical practice and to research on this topic. The theoretical part of the thesis covers a broad literature that spans across diverse -yet related- disciplines in a systematic and thorough manner, and provides cogent arguments for the relevance of narrative competence in the training and professional development of medical professionals. The research part of the thesis adopts an interesting focus and provides insights into the processes associated with the development (or rather in this case the deterioration) of narrative sensitivity through the trajectory of training of medical students in the Czech Republic. Below, I outline some thoughts on the thesis and some questions primarily on the design and interpretation of findings in the research study.

### **Reviewer's questions for the habilitation thesis defence** (number of questions up to the reviewer)

With regards to the introduction to the theoretical part of the habilitation thesis, I very much appreciated the reflexive account of the personal stories within which the author operated in undertaking this study. I particularly liked the fact that these 'stories' were presented as fragments, each of increasing complexity and with increasing evidence of self-reflection, all building a picture of the author's personal narrative in getting to where he is now.

In the first two chapters, the author presents in some depth a broad range of theories that centre on the concept of narrative and its fundamental role in several aspects of human functioning, including meaning-making, social relating, psychological development and psychotherapy. He then outlines the way the concept of narrative has been formulated and developed in all the main psychotherapy schools. Although this part of the thesis does manage to provide a good overview of the narrative metaphor and the concept of narrative in several different disciplines, I found that the discussion of the relevant literature at points lacked depth and some important literature was missing. I believe that this is inevitable, when one aims to cover such a breadth of literature from different disciplines, and I wonder whether a more focused aim would have allowed a more in-depth review that would have allowed a more thorough integration of the disparate literature in narrative. Some of the key work that was missing, in my view, from this part of the thesis includes reference to the concept of narrative coherence as developed in the literature on adult attachment and studies from an attachment perspective (e.g. Mary Main's work), work on narrative and trauma (e.g. Lyons-Ruth's work), work on the self in narrative theory (e.g. Guilfoyle's work).

A key issue that arose for me from this part of the thesis, which I believe should have been more clearly articulated and discussed in the study, concerns the author's definition of 'narrative'. The author does not articulate *his own* position with regards to the concept of narrative and, as a consequence, some important questions remain unanswered, namely: how is narrative defined in the thesis? which aspects of narrative are considered central for the purposes discussed? how is narrative 'quality' defined and examine? In the relevant narrative literature, different aspects of narratives are considered important, e.g. narrative coherence; the plot; the protagonist's agency; the different narrative types; the interactional processes, such as positioning, implicated in narrative construction; the ideological context of narrative production, etc.

A second, and related question, concerns the author's position vis-à-vis the underlying epistemology. Different narrative approaches, in my view, can be positioned along a continuum with regards to epistemology, ranging from phenomenological, to constructivist, to social constructionist approaches. The author does provide a very useful presentation of the implicit and explicit assumptions regarding narrative in different schools of psychotherapy but I think that this presentation may have concealed nuanced but important differences in the way that the 'narrative' is defined, conceptualized, operationalized, studied and used in different psychotherapies. It would be useful for the author to articulate more clearly the

epistemological assumptions her draws upon in approaching narrative defining narrative sensitivity and, in the study section, in studying narrative.

The literature presented in Chapter 3 lies outside my area of expertise, but I generally found this chapter very clear and informative, and convincing in the argument developed regarding the relevance of narrative competence for medical practice, training and professional development. My only question here concerns the examples of patients' experiences presented in the Tables in this section, as it is not clear where they are drawn from and the context in which they took place and were recorded. These vignettes provide sometimes evocative illustrations of the phenomena/ issues discussed in the thesis but it is not always clear what they aim to illustrate. For example, it was not clear to me how the vignette in Table is understood by the author and what aspects it tries to illustrate or illuminate? In other words, I think that these 'stories' would have been more useful had they been better contextualized and discussed in a little more depth.

With regards to the theoretical background to the research study, I was unclear about the differences between trainings in narrative medicine and other approaches that seem to me to have similar goals, such as for example practices that aim to promote reflexive practice, Balint groups, or training in active listening and counselling skills.

Also, I would have liked some more integration of the key findings from the research literature (both quantitative and qualitative) on the impact of narrative medicine training on different aspects of medical education and, later on, on actual practice.

I liked the aims and focus of the study and believe that the study does contribute to further our understanding of the development of a 'medical identity' during training, with important implications for medical education, and I also found the longitudinal design a strength of the study. One question that arose for me in reading the study's findings concerns the nature of the analysis in terms of it being deductive or inductive, i.e. to what extent the themes that arose from the analysis were developed in a 'bottom up' approach?

In addition, I found the issues discussed in the theme concerning negative aspects of narrative sensitivity similar to the concept of a reduced mentalizing capacity. In all, I did wonder whether the concept of mentalizing or reflective function was relevant to the study, and I would have liked to see some discussion on the differences and/ or points of convergence between narrative sensitivity and mentalizing/ reflective function.

Another issue with regards to the analysis of the research material concerns the context of data collection and the positioning of students with regards to the photo-elicitation task used to collect their narratives. More specifically, the finding that narrative sensitivity seemed to decrease, as medical students move through their training, might have been affected by the fact that the task was quite open and students may have thought that what was required of them was some evidence of their medical understanding in terms of the depicted underlying disease processes. In other words, some reflection on the way data was collected and its context would have been a useful inclusion in the thesis.

In sum, I found the habilitation thesis engaging, well written, cogently argued and I very much enjoyed reading it; I believe it makes a contribution to an important area of training and I look forward to seeing this work develop further.

## **Conclusion**

The habilitation thesis entitled Narrative Sensitivity; Towards an Integration of Psychology and Psychotherapy in Medicine by MUDr. David Skorunka, Ph.D. **fulfils** requirements expected of a habilitation thesis in the field of Social Psychology.

Date: 11/11/2022

Signature: Prof. Evrinomy Avdi

