

HABILITATION THESIS REVIEWER'S REPORT

Masaryk University

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| Applicant | MUDr. David Skorunka, Ph.D. |
| Habilitation thesis | Narrative Sensitivity; Towards an Integration of Psychology and Psychotherapy in Medicine |
| Reviewer | Professor Emeritus Dr Arlene Vetere, PhD, Dip Clin Psychol, FBPsS, FACSS |
| Reviewer's home unit, institution | Family Therapy Section, Faculty of Social Work, VID Specialized University, Oslo, Norway. |

I have thoroughly enjoyed reading Dr David Skorunka's Habilitation Thesis. It is an inter-disciplinary scholarly document that integrates theory with research and medical practice. The style of writing is clear and accessible to the reader and the arguments are presented with sufficient critical analysis. There is a strong reflexive thread to the thesis and the questions around medical and research ethics are engaged with in a consistent manner.

The thesis explores some of the inter-personal challenges facing modern medical practice and broadly, how a 'narrative' informed approach can afford some solutions. Dr Skorunka argues that a narrative approach supports the biopsychosocial model of medical practice and at the same time he offers a critical analysis of how and why narrative informed research has been slow to be incorporated into medicine. The first two parts of the thesis review the integration of narrative into the established psychotherapies, the different manifestations in therapeutic practice, and the emergence of narrative medicine. Dr Skorunka offers a careful reading of the development of the psychotherapy field as the context for the emergence of a focus on narrative, and the key principles of coherence, integration and pre-dispositional representations in memory. It was not clear to me if Dr Skorunka conducted a systemic literature review or a narrative review, so called. If a systematic review, I should have liked to see the sources and search terms. If a narrative review, I should have liked to see the rationale for inclusion and exclusion of literature.

The literature reviews explore, analyse and synthesise the history of theory development that led to the intra-disciplinary and inter-disciplinary integration of models and practices with narrative as a unifying theme. The reviews offer a substantive critique of modern attachment theory, trauma theory, reflective functioning, life cycle theory, stress theory, current medical training and practice, along with a wide range of psychotherapies. In this wide ranging scholarly account, Dr Skorunka explores how and why the profession of medicine, in its policies, procedures and trainings, neglects to address the existential issues of death, dying, loss and suffering. He expresses concern for medical personnel who are regularly exposed to distress and suffering and how in his research on narrative writing we

may see an approach to self-care and care of others that offers many opportunities for further development. He emphasises the importance of therapeutic collaboration in medical practice and looks beyond evidence based medicine to point the way to exploring the relationship between clinical practice and the best available medical evidence.

The third part of the thesis presents an innovative and longitudinal small scale mixed-methods research design. The literature reviews support the development of the research question, and there is a good fit with the chosen methodology. The research explores the impact of prompted narrative writing on reflection, with participating medical interns, at years 2 (50) and 5 (42) of training. In particular, the research aims to identify and elaborate facets of narrative sensitivity in students, and to assess change in narrative sensitivity during undergraduate medical study. It seems the research on the impact of narrative medicine is conducted primarily outside the Czech Republic – thus Dr Skorunka’s research on the development of narrative sensitivity begins to redress the balance by its specific focus on the Czech Republic context. Dr Skorunka provides a clear description of the use of thematic analysis, incorporating elements of content analysis in an innovative approach to analysis. The results are presented in terms of ecological validity and within an appropriate critique of the analytic methods.

The thesis engages with the training and supervision needs and requirements of medical staff and discusses how a narrative approach can promote reflexivity and doctor-patient relationships in practice, whilst at the same time, recognising the limitations of an exclusive focus on narrative. Reflective practice and narrative writing have been utilised internationally in some medical trainings, and Dr Skorunka discusses the difficulties involved in the evaluation of these trainings, the desired outcomes and crucially how to transfer narrative competence to clinical practice. He attempts to bridge the gap between the averaged data of the randomised control trials and the unique experience of each individual patient, and with his balanced critique of narrative medicine, he goes a long way to outlining future directions for medical training. The work of the thesis contains the foundations for a book and I hope Dr Skorunka may be encouraged to convert his thesis! Thank you for asking me to read the thesis.

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

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Could Dr Skorunka tell us what is a ‘story’? How is a story constructed, and how do we learn to tell a coherent story? What might support that learning with particular reference to undergraduate medical training?

Could Dr Skorunka discuss the ways in which we might support medical trainees to transfer their narrative competence from the training environment to clinical practice?

Could Dr Skorunka tell us how he thinks the concept of ‘narrative’ can act as a unifying construct across the psychotherapy paradigms, and inform the biopsychosocial model of medical practice?

Are there aspects of an approach to narrative medicine that can support medical personnel as they are regularly exposed to distress and suffering in the workplace?

Conclusion

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

Date: 10 October, 2022

Signature:

