

Abstract

Much has been written on the intrapsychic (Erskine, 2018) aspects of the therapeutic relationship, but little on how the first impression of the therapist plays into this commitment. This study aims to uncover what it was about that first impression of the therapist's appearance that influenced the trainees' decision to enter into a working alliance with their psychotherapist.

Seven therapists trained in an integrative developmental-relational modality took part in a qualitative semi-structured interview, with the transcripts being analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (Smith & Osborn, 2003).

The findings felt influenced by the criteria put forward by the Training providers and given a free choice; the co-researchers felt the decision may have been different. However, it was essential to feel a kinship and be heard to facilitate a working alliance. There was an acknowledgement of potential judgements and assumptions, plus the influence of internal processes resulting from developmental experience. What appearance tells us is subjective, but the fundamental need for safety and feeling understood is universal.

Implications for Integrative Psychotherapy and therapy as a whole are considered, and directions for future research are discussed.