

From psychotherapeutic inquiry to inquiry about psychotherapy:

New voices

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Abstract

The eight papers in this special issue, derived from trainee projects, demonstrate a refreshing degree of curiosity and investment concerning a wide range of topics relating to psychotherapy and counselling. The methodology used is less varied in that, with the exception of two that report attempts to adopt a qualitative research approach, the papers are largely theoretical accounts, illustrated by case studies. Most show a relational, intersubjective, and reflexive approach, and a willingness to explore issues that have received insufficient attention in the literature or to adopt a critical perspective towards more accepted concepts and practices. A concern with the politics of psychotherapy and of health services more generally is also much in evidence.

The completion of a written assignment as a requirement of a psychotherapy training programme may be regarded by the trainee as a tedious chore, a distraction from what is viewed as the real and serious business of therapeutic practice, or an anxiety-provoking test of their academic prowess, which again may seem of questionable relevance to their therapeutic skills. In such cases the task is likely to be undertaken with minimal commitment and creativity, but instead with the sole concern of ticking all the requisite boxes for their programme. A contrasting view would be to regard the process of inquiry involved in the assignment as essentially the same as that which is central to the process of psychotherapy itself. George Kelly (1955), with his construction of the therapist-client relationship as analogous to that between a research supervisor and their student, viewed psychotherapy and research as essentially similar activities, and such a stance has also been taken by more recent advocates of the notion of the scientist-practitioner (e.g., Aveline, 2006). The trainee who shares this view may not only see the written assignment as a core, and highly relevant, aspect of their training but as a rare

opportunity, perhaps never likely to arise again post-qualification, to invest time in exploring an issue which excites their curiosity, and perhaps even their passion. This is evident in the eight papers, derived from trainee projects, included in this special issue, which clearly address questions in which the authors are highly invested, albeit sometimes perhaps to an extent that their writing loses a certain amount of focus and discipline.

The papers also mostly go some way beyond conventional applications of research methodology or descriptive accounts of aspects of the dogma of particular schools of psychotherapy. A relational, intersubjective approach is much in evidence, as is reflexivity, particularly apparent in authors' readiness to analyse aspects of their own therapeutic work and/or their experiences as clients. In addition, there is a willingness to explore issues (including death and therapist self-disclosure) which arguably still generally do not receive sufficient attention in the psychotherapy field, as well as to adopt a critical perspective to the therapist's use of such time-honoured concepts as unconscious processes, including transference. Political concerns, both in regard to power issues in the therapeutic relationship and the broader delivery of therapeutic services, as well as ecological issues, are also clearly addressed. It is of interest that most of the therapies on which the papers, and the authors' training schools, focus are generally not what might be regarded as traditional, mainstream approaches but those with a more post-modern slant. Since the essay prize was open to trainees of any therapeutic persuasion, one might speculate whether this reflects a greater willingness to explore alternative constructions and push boundaries in practitioners of post-modern and constructionist, constructivist, or integrative approaches. One of the papers on a 'non-traditional' therapy, ecotherapy, even considers a non-traditional variant of this approach, namely conducting therapy indoors!

While there is considerable variation in the topics considered in the papers, the approaches taken to investigating these topics are less varied. Only two of the papers can be

regarded as reports of empirical studies in that they have attempted to adopt formal research methods, which in both instances were qualitative. One of these, though, provides reflections on only two cases, and the presentation of data is less than systematic, with no quotes included from material completed by the participants. The other papers in the special issue essentially provide theoretical discussions, albeit often illustrated by case examples. This perhaps reflects a degree of methodological constriction on at least a number of psychotherapy training courses.

I shall now briefly consider each individual paper.

Death, Authenticity and Responsibility draws upon the work of Heidegger, Levinas, and Yalom to consider how mortality shapes people's lives. It is also informed by the author's experience of grief, highlighting its transformative potential. The paper provides an important reminder that a therapeutic approach that focuses on the alleviation of suffering, perhaps by some form of quick fix, misses considerable opportunities for the fostering of personal growth that can arise from confronting such issues, perhaps uncomfortable to both therapist and client, as the contemplation of one's own mortality. Individuals' varied personal, and culturally-shared, constructions of death and what, if anything, lies beyond it are, after all, major determinants of the ways in which they live their lives (Rowe, 1982), and awareness of such core beliefs may be central to an understanding of a client's predicament and of their resistance to change.

I'll show you (some of) mine if you show me (all of) yours. Therapist self-disclosure: how, when and why we use it provides a historical perspective on views concerning therapist self-disclosure, evolving from concepts of the 'blank screen' to, for example, the 'analytic third'. It draws reflexively upon evocative examples from the author's therapeutic practice and personal therapy to provide a convincing argument for the judicious use of self-disclosure in therapy,

while taking care not to force the therapist's agenda upon the client. As the author concludes, 'self-disclosure is now more a case of how and when rather than whether'.

Critically explore the importance of an understanding of transference, countertransference and projective identification to your practice and development as an Integrative Psychotherapist adopts a relational and intersubjective perspective to consider the therapist's use of the concepts of transference, countertransference, and projective identification. The author draws usefully upon their own experiences both in their early career practice of integrative psychotherapy and as a client. While generally accepting the value of awareness of the processes considered, the author also notes such hazards as that the use of these concepts may lead to denial of the client's and/or therapist's 'true' feelings and sacrificing of authentic here-and-now relating. The use of an intersubjective approach is considered to mitigate these dangers.

Two papers present qualitative studies of a relatively new psychotherapeutic approach, ecotherapy. *A Wild Environment: The Power of Nature in Therapy* uses interpretative phenomenological analysis to explore eco-psychotherapists' views concerning their practices when working in natural settings with clients presenting with relational trauma. While one might expect ecotherapy to be practised outdoors, *What is the client experience of ecotherapy interventions in an indoors study?*, which presents case studies of two clients treated by the author, demonstrates that this need not necessarily be so. The conclusions that can be drawn from this study are limited by the possible bias of the clients, especially as one had already been in therapy with the author for 18 months before switching to ecotherapy, as well as by the loss of the notebook completed by the other client. However, these two small studies at least indicate that ecotherapy would benefit from larger scale research investigation.

A further two papers draw upon examples from the UK National Health Service (NHS) to make broader points about the politics of health services and of psychotherapeutic

approaches. *What does it mean to be person-centred in the NHS?*, the winner of the trainee essay prize, presents a focused and convincing argument that the person-centred approach advocated by the National Health Service (NHS) in the UK may be far removed from Rogers' original meaning of the term 'person-centred'. Although primarily drawing upon examples from the NHS, the paper has a broader applicability to services which cosmetically employ a person-centred rhetoric, as well as to those, including the NHS 'Talking Therapies' (formerly, 'Improving Access to Psychological Therapies') programme, which profess attentiveness to client choice, while continuing to be prescriptive and directive (Winter, 2007). A similar disparity may often, of course, be observed between the rhetoric of politicians and the actualities of the policies that they implement. *Reification and palliative psychotherapy*, taking an approach which Althusser (1970) would regard as analogous to psychoanalytic exploration of the unconscious, considers the oppressive and material forces underlying personal or societal ideologies relating to 'mental health'. It is argued that failure to address such forces often renders psychotherapy just as 'palliative' as is pharmacological treatment. Although acknowledging the contributions made by critical psychology and community-oriented approaches, as well as the possibility that psychotherapy organisations could foster greater understanding of oppressive forces and resistance to institutional pressures, the author takes the view that, without more general political and economic change, little reform is likely to be achieved.

Power and Psychotherapy: An Exploration Through a Psychosynthesis lens considers the common factor between psychotherapy and politics: power (House, 2012). Focusing on power differentials in the therapeutic relationship in individual psychotherapy, illustrations are provided of how measures that are well-meaning may reinforce trauma, and of how psychosynthesis may offer a way of working creatively with such trauma by approaching power as a transpersonal quality.

I look forward to hearing more from some of the new voices represented in this issue. The world of psychotherapy and counselling is likely to benefit from these authors' further contributions to its literature, and the thoughtfulness demonstrated in their papers also bodes well for their own therapeutic practice and the clients who will be fortunate enough to benefit from this.

References

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