

Purpose and focus of Research

Beyond Transference and Countertransference: A Study into the Meaning and Impact of the therapist's personal process on their work with clients.

Research Context:

This is a Doctoral Research Project (D.Psych) conducted through the Metanoia Institute in London, under the auspices of Middlesex University.

Research Focus:

While every therapist has a separate story to tell, anxiety, shame, fear and a sense of isolation often feature in the emotional personal and working lives of therapists. There can also be joy, excitement and deep pleasure, all of which the therapist will bring into the room with them. If the therapeutic dyad is a co-creation (Ogden, 1997), then it is logical that the emotional frame within which the therapist is living must have an impact on therapeutic work. How do therapists manage their experience and how do they make meaning of their internal world within the context of their working lives?

Following several personal crises in my own life I realised that however I tried, I could not keep the impact of these events entirely outside the therapy room. While I might be able to 'bracket off' (McLeod, 2001, p.41) my anxiety or distress, I could not make it actually go away. I had to ask myself a number of questions: how present am I with my client when in a distressed or anxious state? When can my distress actually lead me to be more empathic and open to my client, and when might it inhibit me? When do I avoid particular aspects of my client's experience because it taps too deeply and painfully into my own, and when might I try to lead a client into a particular area of inquiry for the sake of finding relief to my own distress? If I am excited, or happy, what might I avoid with my client in order to

maintain my sense of well being? When, and how, might I use my client to enhance my own sense of self-worth, and when does my personal experience actually enable and inform me in ways that might lead me to a deeper and more meaningful understanding of my client? How can I tell the difference?

In asking myself these questions I realised that other therapists were often facing personal struggles not directly related to their professional lives, but which no doubt had an impact on their ability to remain focused on their clients. In the course of informal and conversational inquiry with colleagues it became clear that every therapist struggles at times with archaic distress, as well as the more immediate traumas of life events such as widowhood or illness. Sometimes the news is good, though distractingly exciting, such as becoming pregnant or learning of the birth of a grandchild. I wondered when, and if, these therapists felt inhibited in their work during these periods, or whether they sometimes experienced a deepening of the work.

In an effort to preserve the essential anonymity of the therapist, perhaps the research concerning therapeutic process has erred on the side of discretion. When considering the literature focusing on client work, the reader often assumes that the therapist is working from a position of personal stability simply because it is rarely stated otherwise. This is an idealised position that does not take into account that therapists also have personal lives, and they don't always go well.

Individual Interviews

The research study is international (UK, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, United States) and will include individual interviews with ten therapists from each of four orientations, including psychoanalytic, person centred and other humanistic approaches, integrative and cognitive behavioural. While I will have a few set questions, the interviews will generally have a loose structure to enable some freedom of thought and expression among the participants. They will last approximately one hour. The interviews

will be transcribed and then studied. Confidentiality will be maintained at all times and names, locations and any other identifying features will be disguised in any written or published work which results from the research.

References

McLeod, J. (2001). Qualitative Research in Counselling and Psychotherapy. London, Sage Publications.

Ogden, T. H. (1997). Reverie and Interpretation. London, Karnac.