

## AN EXPLORATION OF THE WAYS IN WHICH PSYCHOTHERAPISTS DESCRIBE THEIR ONGOING DEVELOPMENT IN THEIR PRACTICE

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In this presentation I introduced my proposal to research how we might understand practising psychotherapists' experience of their ongoing learning.

### **Introduction to the problem**

My interest in this topic came about in considering the tension between the clinical case-based history of psychotherapy and the evidence-based practice environment in which we find ourselves. Psychotherapy's case-based history began with Sigmund Freud and his writing of case histories to convey his learning. The first of these case histories appeared in 1893 (Freud & Breuer, 1893/1953). In this case history, and in those following, he described his treatment of his

patients and his discoveries. Theories began to emerge from his reflections on these cases. Since Freud, these theories have changed and at times have been completely replaced (for example, attachment theory has largely replaced drive theory). Many different schools of psychotherapy have been established. However, psychotherapy has in the main retained a knowledge base that is founded on clinical work.

### **Problem**

If psychotherapy's knowledge base is founded on clinical work and individual cases, where does that place psychotherapy and psychotherapists in our current evidence-based practice research environment? I posit that in this current research environment psychotherapy and psychotherapists may be pushed into a direction which only partially serves the discipline and psychotherapists themselves, in the interests of showing that the discipline is "scientific". At the same time, it is necessary for psychotherapy to be able to articulate its knowledge base and for psychotherapists to be inquiring into the ways in which they continuously learn and develop, and to be cognisant of developments in their field.

### **Some pertinent literature**

As my focus in this study is on psychoanalytic psychotherapy and research, literature pertaining to this topic is mainly sourced from psychoanalytic publications. Wallerstein (2009) noted that the kind of science that psychoanalysis is and the kind of research that is appropriate to it, have been divisive issues from the earliest beginnings of the discipline. Current debate centres largely on the future of psychoanalysis as a science and a therapy in our age of evidence-based medicine.

Blatt, Corvelyn and Luyten (2006) describe how criticisms concerning the scientific status of psychoanalysis are increasingly being responded to by empirical research (for example Shedler, 2010), which has then contributed to a growing recognition within the scientific community of the credibility and effectiveness of

psychodynamic theory and treatment. This research is important, and on the other hand there are those within the psychoanalytic community who are concerned about an “empirical one-sidedness” (Blatt, Corvelyn & Luyten, 2006, p. 571), and therefore presumably a loss or devaluation of the traditional case-based research method. Two different cultures in the field are thus described; one more clinical in orientation, “more focused on meaning and interpretation, and relying primarily on the traditional case study method” (p. 571) and the other more “research-oriented, focused on cause-and-effect relationships, and relying primarily on methods borrowed from the natural and social sciences” (ibid.). Immediately we see here that the term “research” is applied to empirical research, although the authors go on to make a case for methodological pluralism as a way of bridging the gap.

Leuzinger-Bohleber (2006) makes a distinction between four different methods of research in psychotherapy:

- i) Clinical research (informed by the case study method)
- ii) Conceptual research (the systematic investigation of the meanings and uses of psychoanalytic concepts, including their changes in relation to both clinical and extra-clinical contexts)
- iii) Empirical and experimental research (quantitative and qualitative)
- iv) Interdisciplinary research (the exchange of psychoanalytic knowledge with the non-psychoanalytic world).

### **Research Question**

As a way of addressing the identified problem I propose the following topic: *Understanding Psychotherapists' Experience of Ongoing Learning*. The aim is to create a practitioner-informed piece of research to contribute to the current debate. It is perhaps contentious to suggest that a discipline itself develops over time the research methods best suited

to it; on the other hand Castonguay (2011) uses the term “empirical imperialism” (p. 134) to describe scientists (often treating few or no patients) who decide what should be studied and how it should be studied.

I would like to find out from the practitioners themselves how new knowledge is added, how psychotherapists evolve in their understandings of their clients and ultimately are engaged in their own formulation of theory and practice, which eventually contributes to the common and ongoing knowledge base.

### **Methodology**

To conduct this research I will be using interpretive phenomenological analysis, which has its origins in hermeneutic phenomenology, and which is an approach to qualitative analysis with a particular interest in how people make sense of their experience; it is concerned with meaning and processes rather than with events and their causes (Larkin & Thompson, 2012). Phenomenology is concerned with lived experience and is therefore ideal for investigating personal learning journeys. Hermeneutics adds an interpretive element, whereby the researcher “explicates meanings and assumptions in the participants’ texts that participants themselves may have difficulty in articulating” (Ajjawi & Higgs, 2007, p. 616). Thus, hermeneutic inquiry aims to uncover meanings and intentions that are hidden in the text (Crotty, 1998). In the context of this research the “text” is the interviews with the research participants. Subjectivity is valued and findings emerge from the interactions between the researcher and participants as the research progresses (Creswell, 2007). An important aspect of this approach is the Gadamerian assumption that our pre-understandings always go before us in interpreting any text, and that therefore the researcher needs to be able to identify and reflect on his or her own experiences and assumptions. This differs from Husserl’s stance, that it is possible to “bracket” our understandings so that they do not influence our research.

## Methods

It is proposed to undertake face-to-face semi-structured interviews of approximately 60 to 90 minutes duration, with between 10 and 15 participants, and where there is a range of clinical experience from between one to 10 or more years of experience. In accordance with hermeneutic phenomenology, questions will be grounded in stories of events, eg, “tell me about a recent experience which has led you to think about your practice in a different way”. I will also include questions designed to explore the participants’ understandings of their “story”.

## Data analysis

van Manen (1997) describes hermeneutic phenomenology as a way of exploring the structure of the “human lifeworld” (p. 101), and that the purpose of phenomenological reflection is to try to grasp the essential meaning of something. In the analysis of the data, structures of meanings (themes) are described and interpreted. van Manen describes this as a process whereby something telling, meaningful and thematic is being unearthed in the various experiential accounts. He stresses that this is not a rule-bound process but rather a process of “insightful inventing, discovery or disclosure” (p. 79); a free act of “seeing meaning” (ibid.).

Various approaches are recommended, which are not mutually exclusive and which may be used in collaboration with each other. Once themes have been identified they then become objects of reflection in follow-up interviews, whereby both interviewer and interviewee are together interpreting the significance of the preliminary themes in the light of the research question. Eventually the researcher creates a text, although this method does not view writing and researching as separate but rather as closely interrelated activities. Thus, writing occurs throughout the process and becomes a part of the method of analysis because it is in the writing that thoughts can be thought, formed and expressed. Smyth, Ironside, Sims, Swenson, and Spence (2008), in considering how to work with the data, focus on the circularity of the process of thinking, of reading,

writing, talking, mulling, re-reading, re-writing and keeping new insights in play, and in all of this trusting that understanding will come. Analysis of the data becomes not so much about pinning down findings but of engaging in a “journey of thinking” (p. 1390).

An additional element peculiar to the theory and practice of psychoanalytic psychotherapy is an emphasis on unconscious processes, which is not made explicit in hermeneutic phenomenology, although the centrality of meaning-making and dwelling with the data does not seem to exclude it. With a view to keeping unconscious processes to the fore in the data analysis process I will be guided by the concept of “holding the person in mind”. This is both a psychoanalytical concept, and more recently, as Hollway and Jefferson (2000) point out, a neuropsychology concept. Holding the person in mind in the psychoanalytical sense implies a willingness to be inhabited by that person in the service of empathic understanding, whilst at the same time still being able to think. The importance of this way of analysing data lies in the researcher having sufficient distance in order to be able to think, while at the same time engaging in an indwelling process which goes beyond conscious understandings, thereby gaining the potential for a deeper understanding of the material, and an exploration of the meanings that are made from the material.

### **Feedback from the presentation**

The presentation of this proposal has assisted me in formulating a formal PhD proposal, both by way of beginning to focus my thoughts in relation to this topic, and also by engaging with the audience feedback, which was considered and helpful. The main discussion points centred on the tension between evidence-based practice and practice-based evidence, and recommendations were also made in relation to methodological issues, particularly as they relate to hermeneutic phenomenology and the unconscious.

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