



European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy

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Editorial

This year, 2020, will be forever remembered for the Coronavirus pandemic. Beyond the numbers of fatalities and the challenges faced by those directly impacted, the virus has ravaged our socio-economic, political, and psychosocial worlds, making us more sharply aware of abuses of political power, widening global inequality, and the raging injustice of racial discrimination.

The psychotherapeutic world, too, has been hugely impacted by Covid-19, the fall-out from which has amplified the existential anxiety, grief, and trauma affecting both clients and ourselves. The pandemic has also forced a shift to greater online and remote working: a transformational step for our profession. I suspect the repercussions of this momentous year will reverberate for decades to come.

As we reflect on these challenges, questions are raised about the role we play (as both professionals and global citizens) in safeguarding the interests and welfare of our clients - in and beyond the therapy room. We are nudged to continue ensuring that our practice is inclusive, geared to fighting oppression, respectful of diversity, and always ready to challenge power imbalances at every level, whether those inherent in the therapy relationship or in wider society. In future issues/volumes I would like to see us engage further with questions and issues relating to social justice.

For this journal volume, I wanted in a small way to mark the global trauma of 2020. To this end, several articles (planned for later this year) will explore psychotherapy's move to online working in the context of the pandemic.

Other contributions will, both directly and indirectly, engage with issues relating to diversity and discrimination.

In the first article, **Sandra Westland** tackles a particularly subtle form of discrimination: that experienced by large women. Adopting an empirical existential phenomenological approach, Sandra shows how society's preoccupation with weight and food tends to render invisible large women's experience of being in the world. The powerful and poignant findings reveal the all-consuming and inescapable nature of women's bodily experience. There is a deadening dissociation whereby such women strive to hide and disown their "despicable", "misfitting" bodies to minimize the shame of being objectified. At the same time, they yearn to be seen and to live their lives more fully in the world. Sandra identifies existential phenomenological therapeutic approaches with a specific focus on enhancing greater ownership of, and relationship with, the body, as one route forward.

In the second article, **Helen Noble and Beverly Cole** present the relatively new, creative non-fiction approach of 'lyric essay' to explore the first author's experience of a lifetime of musculoskeletal pain. Putting to use a mosaic of different elements – scholarly critical review, phenomenological description, autobiographical narrative, metaphor, and montage – the authors reflect on the process of 'writing the pain'. They show how creative forms deployed in lyric essays have the potential to evoke embodied experience vividly in ways that have a raw, visceral impact. This radical form of arts-based research (ABR) – further testimony to the diversity of our qualitative research methodologies – is offered as means for in-depth exploration of both therapists' and clients' experiences.

In the third contribution, **Linda Finlay** focuses on the divide between academics and practitioners, as evidenced in the fact that few psychotherapists seem to participate in research and academic writing after their training. She identifies various factors at play, from the shortage of time experienced by busy practitioners to inadequate support for those embarking on research for the first time. Many therapists seem to lack the confidence to engage in writing or research, finding the very prospect daunting, and potentially shaming. Recognising that the explicit mission of this particular journal is to open out the world of research to psychotherapy practitioners, this article makes a start by offering a step-by-step guide to writing a journal article. Novice writers are offered tips on how to structure articles and free up their writing process. The author takes a creative, and possibly foolishly bold, step when she shares something of her own process and uncertainties about writing (particularly given her dual role as editor) in an attempt to demystify the process of writing for publication. She also emphasises the urgency of transcending established dichotomies such as 'academic versus practitioner' and 'novice versus expert', arguing that such rigid lines of demarcation can be a barrier to lively, innovative research.

The next article, from **Alan McPherson**, follows on nicely from this. In it, Alan describes the significant journey he underwent when transforming his post-graduate Masters' dissertation into a published article. Using autoethnography as a research method, he reflects on his experience of creating an article for publication and becoming a researcher-practitioner. His paper engages an intriguing literary device: that of two 'voices'. First, he offers a factual, neutral, information-giving account of the process of writing his research article. But his second voice is more subjective; through it, he shares his emotional responses both 'then and there' and 'here and now'. Alan's dual-voiced account provides a graphic illustration of the challenges and personal obstacles that can be encountered by those seeking to get their research published in the psychotherapeutic field. I share his hope that his story will inspire other graduates to take the plunge.

Next, **Martin Stokley and Val Sanders** build on their interesting research contribution from last year, which

reported on a project tackling the topic of involuntary childlessness in therapists. The researchers now turn from looking at the personal impact of childlessness to considering the professional context. They note how childlessness among therapists is a neglected yet potentially significant aspect of our profession's attention to 'diversity and difference'. Building on their use of Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis methodology, Martin and Val show how, for some therapists, supervision can be experienced as a safe space in which to discuss childlessness, while for others it can be a place of alienation, anxiety, and potential judgement. In the latter case, participants report that they feel on the edge of the therapy world. The authors discuss with sensitivity and insight the issue of micro-aggressions around childlessness and highlight the need for reflexivity regarding the manner in which therapist childlessness may impact the therapy process.

Stokley and Saunders remind us that therapists have their own vulnerabilities, a theme also addressed by **Pat Bond** in her article on 'wounded healers'. This is an exploration of how therapists' personal histories of complex developmental trauma impact their practice. Pat makes use of a novel, organically emergent phenomenologically orientated qualitative 'bricolage' method. While analysing data from interviews with six experienced therapists, she also undertakes a reflective analysis of her own story. Her findings, often poignant and profound, reveal the striking diversity of participants' narratives and meaning-making. Overall, though, there is agreement that therapists who have suffered trauma need to engage a high degree of self-reflection and self-care in order to become effective 'wounded healers'. In an extended critical discussion, Pat challenges the espousal of standard treatment protocols and calls for greater flexibility in both practice and research strategies, given the diversity of trauma experience.

The theme of 'wounded healer' is picked up by **Janet Kuhnke's** own arts-based, autobiographical inquiry. In her article, Janet reveals how using examples of her own personal art, journal writing, and photography provided critical turning points in her recovery from an eating disorder. Through her vibrantly creative and scholarly narrative, she offers a critical and vivid exploration of the place of art therapy in psychotherapeutic practice. At a more personal level, she demonstrates the courage it takes to examine

“cracks in one’s façade” and the poignant value of engaging in difficult, sometimes risky self-disclosure.

In the next article, **Sofie Bager-Charleson, Alistair McBeath, Simon du Plock, and Marie Adams** – all tutors from Metanoia Institute, London – offer a ‘*meta-synthesis*’ of three published research papers on therapists’ experiences of undertaking postgraduate research. Their project comprised three analytic phases: analysing the original research data; examining the methods; and finally synthesizing the research findings to create new understandings. Their new interpretations throw into sharp relief the loss of self that student practitioner-researchers may experience, and the ways in which they are challenged to find a transformed sense of self. The authors pick up the discussion about the existence of an academic-practitioner divide. They argue persuasively that researchers in the therapy field are often disadvantaged by having limited access to journals and professional research opportunities. In such a situation, there is a critical need to do more to support postgraduate students in their endeavours. As the authors emphasize, this is part of the larger project of supporting diversity, access, and opportunity.

Next, **Zoi Simopoulou and Amy Chandler** explore the nature of self-harm as an attempt at self-care and healing. Qualitative descriptions are taken from published memoirs and young people’s personal stories of self-harm. Themes of ‘pleasurable pain’, ‘repetition’ and ‘permanence’ are traced in the different accounts. The poignant wording, images, and ambience conveyed, powerfully indicate how sustaining self-harm offers a way to sustain a sense of self and be in relationship with one’s body. Self-harm is found to bring a feeling of aliveness and reliability or constancy, which fosters a sense of self. This thought-provoking imagining provides an alternative vision of self-harm, challenging dominant narratives of self-harm as habit, addition, and coping. The authors’ reflective and layered interdisciplinary approach itself challenges fixed notions of what constitutes acceptable forms research.

In the next article, **Emily Mitchell** offers a timely and topical evaluation of integrative psychotherapists’ experiences of using online videoconferencing for their therapy instead of face-to-face work. Six semi-structured interviews were analysed using phenomenologically orientated Thematic Analysis.

Interestingly, her research demonstrates that there are both similarities and differences between online therapy and face-to-face work. Online work, it seems, is not just “second best”. The findings persuasively suggest that integrative psychotherapists are actually able to engage at relational depth and ensuring multiple levels of contact (such as developing working alliance and experiencing reparative, transference processes). The absence of physical contact remains a limitation, although it seems that integrative psychotherapists are still able to work with the body online. We need further qualitative research like this to deepen our understandings of how the online process needs to be managed given that virtual connections involve different ethics, routines, opportunities, and risks, and why it works better for some and not for others.

There are a couple more articles in the pipeline for this 2020 volume of the *European Journal for Qualitative Research in Psychotherapy*. Watch this space...!

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