

PROLOGUE

"Towards an inhuman society?" That was the question with which Mearns and Thorne (2000) opened the introduction of their book 'Person-centred therapy today'. Their question continues to remain as relevant today as it was 12 years ago. In an era of global financial crisis and shrinking resources, managed-care has become the dominant approach for delivering mental health care. Counsellors are forced to become quick and effective and are often mandated to apply time-limited, evidence-based or cost-effective interventions, especially those which promise immediate and observable changes. Delays in rehabilitation frequently result in clients distrusting counsellors' skills and the counselling process as a whole. Furthermore, the advent of World Wide Web coupled by recent technological advancements threatens to change once and for all the way counselling and psychotherapy are conceived, raising - among others- difficult ethical questions. We do not seem to be far away from the Orwellian scenario of the counsellor-free counselling, where all that is needed is sitting in front of a computer and using a program tailored to the client's specific needs or condition (see Therapist-free therapy, 2011). Despite the concerns expressed by eminent scholars and mental health professionals as regards the hazards that may result from the "impersonalized" and medicalized approach to mental health, (e.g., Yalom, 2002), traditional approaches, which have laid the foundations of modern counselling and psychotherapy (psychoanalysis, person-centred approach), are now increasingly met with skepticism (if not criticized) as lacking scientific rigor and empirical evidence or - worse - as unnecessarily costly, unfocused, and time-consuming.

Nevertheless, this special issue begins with hope. By presenting the work of internationally distinguished and Greek researchers in the field of person-centred counselling, we aspire to show that the Person-Centred Approach (PCA) is a vibrant force in the world of counselling and psychotherapy, one of the most integrated psychological perspectives of the human condition as well as a preferable alternative paradigm to the medical model of mental health (Joseph & Worsley, 2005a). The aim of this issue is to introduce recent research initiatives in the person-centred approach as well as to enhance the dialogue between international experts and researchers in this field. To achieve these goals, the issue brings together five studies in the PCA tradition from four different countries (Germany, Greece, United Kingdom, and USA) that have used both qualitative and quantitative research methodologies. The methodological rigor with which these studies have been conducted represents the best answer to those who criticize PCA for being naive and overly optimistic or for not meeting the modern standards of evidence-based research and practice and, consequently, strive towards its further marginalization.

In the first article, Jeffrey Cornelius-White and Chris Carver in Effects of an encounter group for counsellors-in-training on development of person-centered core conditions, embarked on investigating how encounter groups foster the development of empathy, unconditional positive regard and authenticity. The researchers investigated the development of these core conditions in counsellors-in-training who participated in a 16-week encounter group facilitated by one of the authors. Qualitative and quantitative methodologies were employed, that incorporated participants' self-report, observer's content analysis and ratings, and facilitator's disposition ratings to provide a diverse array of viewpoints. The results showed large self-perceived development on self-report quantitative measures. Observer ratings on students' journals, facilitator's ratings on a measure of therapeutic dispositions, and correlations between the measures, all showed that classical person-centered encounter groups can provide for substantial development along the core

conditions for counselors-in-training. The paper concludes with a brief discussion of the implications of these findings for future research.

In A pilot person-centred group counselling for university students: Effects on social anxiety and self-esteem, Stephanos Vassilopoulos and Andreas Brouzos investigate the efficacy of a 10-week person-centred group counselling intervention for university students. Thirteen participants were pre-tested by completing standardized scales measuring social anxiety symptoms and self-esteem and repeated the same measurement after the group intervention. They were also asked to answer to a few open-ended questions designed to elicit their general group and leadership experience, both after the group termination and at six-month follow-up. The results indicated that while the students evaluated their group experience as overly positive and with a permanent effect on them, their scores on standardized measures did not appear to have changed significantly as a result of the group intervention. Vassilopoulos and Brouzos discuss possible reasons for the apparent discrepancy between quantitative and qualitative data and make suggestions for future research and practice.

Paul Wilkins in his article entitled, Person-centred sociotherapy: Applying person-centred attitudes, principles and practices to social situations, groups and society as a whole, offers theoretical support and rationale for extending person-centred practice into social domains in order to promote a sense of social inclusion. The author argues that the causes of emotional and mental distress are not intrinsic, endogenous, solely interpersonal and a response to relationships with significant others, but that their origin is social and/or environmental. He goes on by examining the roots of emotional and mental distress and social disharmony and explains how the implementation of a "person-centred sociotherapy" could prevent or at least mitigate the ill-effects produced by these. This paper concludes with the presentation of some examples from within the person-centred community which are described as potentially "sociotherapeutic".

In The promotion of mental health in early childhood institutions (ECI) under a person-centred perspective, Klaus Froehlich-Gildhoff and Maike Roennau-Boese investigate the implementation of a project financed by the German Ministry of Education and Research and its effects on the mental health of children coming from disadvantaged areas. The project was based on the holistic and multidimensional intervention program "Empowering Children!" and addresses ECI situated in areas with a high level of diversity (e.g., high percentage of immigrant families, high poverty levels, etc.). The authors, after examining the theoretical 'fit' between the PCA and the concept of resilience, present findings suggesting that implementing the project within a person-centred perspective, and with a specific focus on participants' resilience, can result in positive effects on self-esteem, behavioural stability, and cognitive development of children who participated in the program.

The final paper of this special issue, by Michael Behr and Martina Becker, is entitled, Scales for experiencing emotions: Awareness, appraisal and regulation of one's own emotion. These authors report the development of a multidimensional test assessing the experience, evaluation, and regulation of emotions. Based on the person-centred theory of personality and on concepts of emotional intelligence, seven construct-related factors of a preliminary study were replicated: bodily experience, overwhelming emotions, imagination, self-control, congruence, lack of emotions, and regulation of emotions. These factors proved to be independent from each other and showed satisfactory psychometric properties. The authors suggest that their test could have clinical utility and could be used during the initial phase of

counselling as well as for measuring changes in personality resulting from person-centred interventions.

This collection of papers clearly shows the expansion of research and practice in PCA, particularly the application of PCA in various fascinating areas such as promoting resilience in early childhood institutions or developing psychometrically sound scales for verifying changes in psycho-structural variables within psychotherapy-outcome research. Although much must be done in the future, this issue proves that current person-centred counsellors and psychotherapists do not hesitate to use the language of psychopathology and psychology to communicate to a wider audience, and to reach the new generation of psychologists and mental health counsellors (Joseph & Worsley, 2005b). Thus, by collecting and disseminating evidence for the effectiveness of person-centred approaches, there is hope that PCA might become less marginalized from mainstream psychological approaches in the years to come.

It is hoped that this special issue will both highlight and encourage international research on person-centred counselling and psychotherapy. Arguably, the most important contribution lies in its underlying message: That counselling, in its purest form, was and will always be a deep, personal, and authentic relationship between two persons: The counsellor and the client.

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