

EDITORIAL ARTICLE

Shocking revelation! There are women survivors of sexual violence training as person-centred psychotherapists

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Abstract

This article introduces a new Associate Editor and her interest in researching the experiences of women survivors of sexual violence in UK person-centred psychotherapy training.

KEYWORDS

person-centred psychotherapy training, qualitative research, sexual violence, survivors

I am a sociologist, an academic, a feminist, a psychotherapist-in-training – and a survivor of sexual violence. This is the first time I have “outed” myself in a public forum as a survivor of sexual violence. I have chosen my appointment as an Associate Editor of *Psychotherapy and Politics International* as a moment for self-disclosure as I believe that in being political we also need, where we can, to be personal, and this feels like the right time for me.

1 | SEXUAL VIOLENCE

Sexual violence is a global epidemic which currently shames victims/survivors rather than perpetrators, and this includes psychotherapists, who, as Adams (2013) says, can feel shame about “personal difficulties” (p. 8). A search for academic research exploring “survivors and psychotherapy training” is largely futile: Wilson and Jones (2010) present the “case” of a graduate counselling student/rape survivor, “Mary”, who experiences reasonable responses, i.e., “a lack of interest in ... sexual intercourse and hobbies [and] anger and irritability” (p. 445). Wilson and Jones go on, somewhat smugly and simplistically to recommend that: “therapists explore and work through their own past traumas early in their careers” (p. 454). Thereafter, it appears that the library catalogue assumes the researcher means “psychotherapists working with survivors”. Whilst Adams’ (2013) work humanises psychotherapists, none of her interviewees is a survivor; Etherington (2004) reports that, when she revealed her own experiences of abuse, she met with suggestions of “over-exposure” (p. 35). It is perhaps not surprising that many psychotherapists and psychotherapists-in-training keep quiet about their own lived experiences of violence, abuse, and trauma.

In the light of this, I am interested in conducting research into the experience of psychotherapists-in-training who are survivors of violence, abuse and trauma. This work is “practice-based”, that is: “the research question is triggered by personal experience and a ‘need to know’ ... [and] a goal is to produce knowledge that makes a positive difference to practice” (Bager-Charleson, 2014, p. 2). This resonates with me. I recently found a photograph taken by the man

who repeatedly raped me when I was studying abroad in the 1990s. I stayed as silenced as I looked in the photograph for 20 years. I was prompted finally to “come out” through personal therapy. Intertwined with growthful experiences have been instances, sometimes in some of the liminal spaces of training, where I have felt shamed and unwelcome.

2 | RESEARCH

Specifically, the research will explore the development of unconditional positive self-regard (UPSR) and post-traumatic growth (PTG), as distinct from the more pathologising post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD). The aims of the work are: (a) to contribute to normalising survivors as human beings; (b) to contribute to research into person-centred psychotherapy training; (c) to contribute to person-centred analysis of UPSR/PTG; and (d) to develop a feminist person-centred sociotherapy. The rationale for the project is threefold: (a) survivors of sexual violence are routinely silenced (Freedman, 2014) and pathologised (Wilson & Jones, 2010); (b) UPSR and PTG are current person-centred research concerns (Murphy, Demetriou, & Joseph, 2015); and (c) the main text that describes and explores person-centred training (Mearns, 1997) is now quite dated and in any case doesn't address these issues.

The research will be qualitative, comprising narrative interviews (Creswell, 2013), underpinned by person-centred philosophy and methodology (Wilson, 2010) and by feminist methodology and method (Campbell, Adams, Wasco, Ahrens, & Sefl, 2010). The data produced will be analysed using a constructivist grounded theory (Charmaz, 2014) and conveyed by methods including fiction (Leavy, 2012). Following Schmid (2015), the research seeks a feminist person-centred sociotherapy in a field where feminism is currently under-explored (Proctor & Napier, 2004). This emerging project, which draws upon my own autobiography, is explained here to demonstrate my connections to *Psychotherapy and Politics International*.

Embleton Tudor, Keemar, Tudor, Valentine and Worrall (2004) observed that Rogers was “an active and pragmatic idealist, concerned not just to write or teach or theorise, but also to make things happen in the world” (p. 6), and I hope that the research I will be conducting relates not only to person-centred philosophy and theory, but also, importantly, practice. The study will place a currently marginalised status centre-stage. As Charmaz (2008) contended: “a view from the edges – or from the outside – offers fresh interpretations of the centre, and may open possibilities for renewal, change and transformation” (p. 14), and, as Worsley (2003) commented: “research needs to nurture practitioners as well as inform them” (p. 122). This research honours the woman I found in the photograph.

3 | CONTRIBUTION

Given my experience and interests, as an Associate Editor, I will seek to encourage more feminist explorations of psychotherapy and politics; more politicising of our lived experiences; and more creative methods of sharing our research. I will also be doing some of this myself, and look forward to contributing to the journal.

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