



Cognitive-Behavioural self-experience groups in the training of mental health professionals and teachers



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ABSTRACT

Self-experience can be considered as a basic element in the training of professionals who undertake supportive and counselling roles with people who seek or need their help, such as teachers, psychologists, psychiatrists, social workers etc. The quality of the support and the professional services provided may be influenced by a number of personal factors. If the professional is not aware of the influence of these factors, they can negatively affect the quality of the "counselling" process (Lairaiter & Willutzki, 2003). In the last years, Cognitive-Behavioural self-experiencing groups are conducted in Greece for various target groups, such as graduate and post-graduate psychology students, psychotherapy trainees and teachers. In this poster the structure of the group program will be presented in detail, as well as the results of its evaluation. The structure of each group included exercises aiming at the increase of self-awareness concerning the "professional self". The length, the structure and the number of participants varied according to the specific needs of each group. All participants considered the self-experiencing groups as a positive experience, helpful for their training, for their practice and for their personal life as well. They also referred that the approach and the techniques used were helpful and that participating in the self-experience group helped them to realize the importance of self-awareness and was a source of motivation for further personal work. In addition, the majority of the participants reported that they would prefer to participate in a more extended self-experience program. According to these findings, it seems that self-experience programs are helpful in enhancing professional and personal self-awareness and that further research should be conducted on the optimization of these programs (content, structure, duration, etc).

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the requirement for trainees to undergo psychotherapy has a long tradition in psychodynamic and humanistic orientations of psychotherapy. Early behaviour therapy did not consider personal therapy as a prerequisite for becoming a therapist, because it was thought that therapeutic change could be obtained through alternative learning and the sound application of therapeutic techniques (DiGiuseppe, 1991; Gray, 1991; Kanfer, Reinecker & Schmelzer, 1996; McNamara, 1986; Wright, 1991).

Although traditional behaviour therapy rejected the idea of self-experiencing work for the trainee, this view has changed during the last 15 to 20 years, especially within cognitive therapists: some of the leading figures have suggested that self-application of cognitive and behavioural techniques is very helpful in effectively learning cognitive and behaviour therapy techniques (Beck, 1995; Kanfer et al., 1996; Padesky, 1996). In addition to the acknowledgement of the importance of the therapeutic relationship for therapeutic effectiveness some authors have underscored the importance of personal sensitivity and selfreflection of the therapist on his/her personal qualification and effectiveness (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001). Some authors suggest that it is important for therapists working with patients who have longstanding personality difficulties, to be particularly aware of their own feelings and motives and interactional schemas for not becoming enmeshed with the client (Bennett-Levy et al., 2001).

Personal sensitivity and self-reflective work may be very helpful in developing important personal qualities and interpersonal competencies such as a self-reflective working style, self-knowledge about 'blind spots', interpersonal sensitivity and empathy for the client and his or her role (Beck J., 1995; Bennett-Levy et al., 2001; Kanfer et al., 1996; Lairaiter & Fiedler, 1996; Lieb, 1998).

In the last years, CB self-experiencing groups are conducted in Greece for different target groups (Table 1). The first CB self-experiencing groups were conducted in the Institute for Behavior Research and Therapy (IBRT), as a prerequisite for the Diploma in Cognitive Behavioral Therapy. Such groups are also conducted for graduate Psychology students in the University of Athens; the participation in these groups is optional for students participating in the course of "Psychology of Communication". CB self-experiencing groups are also incorporated as an obligatory part in the curriculum of the postgraduate course in Clinical Psychology in the University of Athens. Finally, CB self-experiencing groups constituted an obligatory part of a re-educating program in career counseling for second grade teachers.

METHODOLOGY - SUBJECTS - RESULTS

Table 1. CBT self-experiencing groups in Greece

Target group	Duration	Participation	Data available	Total number of participants
IBRT trainees	50-75 hours	Obligatory	1993-2000	37
Graduate Psychology students	18-22 hours	Optional	1998-2001	56
Postgraduate Psychology students	15-25 hours	Obligatory	2000	15
Re-educating program in career counseling	100 hours	Obligatory	1999	20

Table 2. The 8 questions of the evaluation questionnaire for the self-experiencing groups

Q1. Do you consider that your experiences in the self-experience group were important for your education?
Q2. Do you consider that your experiences in the self-experience group were important for you as a future professional?
Q3. Do you consider that your experiences in the self-experience group were important for you in your personal life?
Q4. Does the structure (planning, content) of the self-experience group serves its purposes?
Q5. Is the duration of the self-experience group satisfactory?
Q6. Is the directive role of the coordinators essential for the self-experience group?
Q7. Did the techniques that were used allow the development of communication and confidence among members, leading you to externalize feelings and experiences?
Q8. Did the self-experience group prompt you to continue the self-experience practice?

Table 3. General goals of the self-experience groups

- Understanding the importance of self-experience in the practice of professionals who undertake supportive and counseling roles
- Awareness and elimination of the resistance mechanisms concerning the disclosure of sensitive personal areas
- Achieving a degree of personal disclosure
- Self-mirroring: understanding the differences between self-perception and the perception of others
- Enhancing group dynamics
- Motivating members to continue self-practice.

Table 4. Specific goals of the self-experiencing groups for the IBRT trainees

- Cognitive sensitization: self-perception, self-knowledge, self-awareness
- Personal sensitivity: becoming knowledgeable about important personal themes, stresses and problems, and hot spots
- Emotional stability: development of self-esteem, personal resources, coping with stressful factors in personal life etc.
- Development of empathy and affective rapport with others
- Experiencing and perceiving central personal cognitive-affective and interactional patterns and schemata
- Clarifying personal motivational structures
- Becoming aware of interactional properties and becoming acquainted with personal boundaries
- Development of self-esteem and personal resources; reduction of avoidance behavior
- Experiencing the patient-role, development of role-taking behavior
- Reduction of noxious personal influences on the therapeutic process
- Learning and experiencing CB techniques and practicing communication skills

DISCUSSION

Members of all target groups considered their participation in the self-experiencing group important for their education, their future professional practice and their personal life. Career counselors reported more benefits from the group concerning their personal life. This is probably due to the longer duration of the particular group as compared to the other groups. IBRT trainees reported less benefits for their personal lives, as compared with the other groups, probably because of the specific goals of this particular group (see Table 4), which mainly concern the therapeutic process. Career counselors seem to consider that the structure of the group didn't serve adequately its goals, while members of the other groups appear satisfied concerning this issue. It should be mentioned that self-experiencing groups were lately incorporated in the re-educating program in career counseling as an obligatory part, which made career counselors strongly defensive at the beginning. Additionally, their educational background doesn't include adequate sensitization concerning psychological issues, as opposed to the educational background of the members of the other groups (psychologists, psychiatrists and future psychologists). This may lead us to differentiate the group program for this target group, giving more space to the introductory phase, in which the goals of the group and the expectations of the members are discussed. Satisfaction concerning the duration of the self-experiencing groups seems to depend on the number of hours. The longer the duration of the group is, the greater the satisfaction referred by its members. Career counselors refer that the duration of the group (100 hours) was satisfactory, as opposed to the members of the other target groups (15-75 hours), who claimed that the duration should be prolonged. As far as the directive role of the coordinators is concerned, career-counselors scores are once again differentiated. All other groups claimed that the directive role of the coordinators was essential for the self-experience group. All group members consider that the techniques used allowed them to externalize feelings and experiences and promoted confidence and communication among members. Finally, all group members report that their experience in the self-experience group prompted them to continue the self-experience practice. This result is really encouraging, indicating that members of the groups realized the importance of self-experience and probably discovered some personal issues worth investigating. Self-experience group evaluation is continued, incorporating more detailed questions, in order to provide essential feedback concerning the group program and process.

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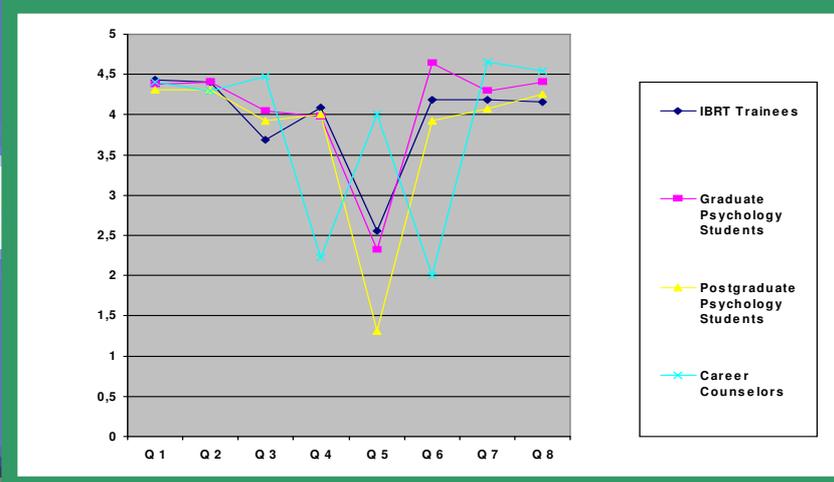


Figure 1. Scores of the members of the four self-experiencing groups in the 8 questions (see Table 2) of the evaluation questionnaire.