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

Kalantzis-Aztini, A., Angelis, K., Efthimios G., Efthimios, K., Kalpakoglou Th., & Charila D.

Counselling Centre for Students, University of Athens, Greece
Institute of Behavioral Research and Therapy, Athens, Greece

ABSTRACT

Self-experiences can be considered as a basic element in the training of professionals who undertake supportive and counseling 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 “counseling” process. In such cases, the therapeutic process may be altered, the therapeutic relationship may be impaired and the quality of the counseling process may be impaired. Various self-experiences such as self-awareness, interpersonal skills and personal experiences may have a positive impact on the therapeutic relationship and the professional services provided during the counseling process.

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the requirement for trainees to undergo psychotherapy has a long tradition in psychodynamic and humanistic orientations of psychotherapy. Early behavior 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 application of therapeutic techniques (Beck, 1969; Kanfer, Reinecker & Schmelzer, 1991). In the last years, Cognitive-Behavioural self-experience groups are conducted in Greece for various target groups, such as graduate and post-graduate psychology students, psychotherapy trainees and teachers. Although traditional behavior therapy and the sound application of learning and the sound application of change could be obtained through alternative learning and the sound application of therapeutic techniques (Beck, 1969; Kanfer, Reinecker & Schmelzer, 1991), it was acknowledged in the importance of therapeutic relationship for therapeutic effectiveness (Bennett-Levy, 1995; Bennett-Levy et al., 2001).

The Behavior Therapy Institute for Behavior Research and Therapy (IBRT) in Athens, provides an educational background for the members of the group. This may lead to an improved therapeutic process for the target group, giving more space to the educational background of the members of the group. The IBRT in Athens provides a broader orientation for the participant members and future psychologists. This may lead us to consider that the structure of the self-experiencing groups was not different from the educational background of the members of the self-experiencing groups.

METHODLOGY

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.).

Table 1. The characteristics of the self-experiencing groups.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target group</th>
<th>Duration</th>
<th>Participation</th>
<th>Data available</th>
<th>Total number of participants</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IBRT trainees</td>
<td>90-75 hours</td>
<td>Obligatory</td>
<td>1995-2000</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Graduate Psychology</td>
<td>18-22 hours</td>
<td>Optional</td>
<td>1998-2001</td>
<td>56</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postgraduate Psychology</td>
<td>15-25 hours</td>
<td>Obligatory</td>
<td>2000</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Re-training program</td>
<td>100 hours</td>
<td>Obligatory</td>
<td>1999</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 2. The specific goals of 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 as a future professional? |
| Q4 | Do you consider that your experiences in the self-experience group were important for you as a future professional? |
| Q5 | Is the duration of the self-experience group satisfactory? |
| Q6 | Is the directive role of the coordinator essential for the self-experience group? |

Table 3. The 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.
- Motivating members to continue practicing.

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

- Personal sensitivity: becoming knowledgeable about important personal themes, stresses and problems.
- Emotional stability: development of self-efficacy, personal resources, coping with stressful factors in professional life and beyond.
- Development of empathy and affective rapport with others.
- Understanding and perceiving the central personal cognitive-affective and interventional patterns and schemas.
- Clarifying personal methodological structures.
- Becoming aware of personal properties and becoming acquainted with personal boundaries.
- Development of self-efficacy and personal resources; reduction of assistance behavior.
- Experiencing the patient’s role, role development, role taking behavior.
- Production of various personal influences on the therapeutic process.
- Learning and experiencing CB techniques and practicing communication skills.

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

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 consider that the techniques used allowed them to externalize feelings and experiences during the self-experiencing groups. This may lead us to consider that the 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, the first other self-experiencing groups included an adequate sensitization concerning psychological issues, such as educational background of the members of the IBRT (graduate and post-graduate psychology students and future psychologists). This may lead us to consider that the structure of the self-experiencing groups was different from the educational background of the members of the self-experiencing groups.