

This study reports on an investigation into female humanistic person-centred psychotherapists understanding, experience and use of their 'self' in their therapeutic relationships. Though there is a range of literature within the person-centred field on the self, there exists a lack of empirical research into the existence and experience of the therapist' self. Given that both traditional and ongoing understandings of successful outcomes of person-centred therapy put the therapeutic relationship at the heart of this endeavour, the lack of attention to the self of the therapist creates a gap in our understanding.

Based on both personal and professional interest, this study aims to develop an insight into the existence and nature of the self of the person-centred therapist. The research has been undertaken using a phenomenological approach, with data interpreted within an interpretive paradigm. This descriptive, qualitative study aims to explore the subjective meanings individuals give to their self. Semi-structured interviews with seven person-centred psychotherapists constitute the primary means of data collection.

All participants described the self as a process and were striving for greater self awareness. The way they described their self had various different components including an intra-personal aspect (including inner experiencing) and inter-personal element – as defined by their relationships. Within this description of

their self was an acknowledgement of the flexibility required and commitment to developing their sense of self.

All participants viewed themselves as an active within the relationship and the self as intrinsic to their therapeutic work. There was a uniqueness about how each viewed their self and how they involved this in a variety of ways, including relationship building, understanding their clients, creating a safe environment, modelling behaviour and demystifying the process of therapy.

Participants identify that in offering a commitment to the self and their therapeutic relationships, a process of emotional and psychological growth and professional transformation takes place. Also identified is the potential for both healing and harm through the self of the therapist being present. Thus regular supervision, personal therapy, peer and colleague support are necessary to provide aspects of holding, which in turn allow person-centred therapists to deeply enhance their capacity to be alongside clients in a genuine way.

The research identifies that understanding the self of the therapist and how it manifests in the therapeutic relationship has implications for training, supervision, continual professional development and future psychotherapy research.