

Experiential Group Processes in Graduate Training of Psychologists: the case of “Expressive Therapies” and “Group Psychotherapies” at the University of Évora

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ABSTRACT

The training of Psychologists tries to promote the psychological understanding of the human functioning, the development of evaluation, analysis and intervention competences and, at the same time, to provide for the development of personal and interpersonal competences, crucial for the professional praxis.

Our question is how to promote in the academic context this personal and interpersonal development of the students in order to achieve the necessary competences they need to the work in this area.

In this paper we will reflect on the authors' experience of teaching two curricular units of the 2nd Cycle level of Psychology Course and on a qualitative study designed to deepen the understanding of how the experiential component of these courses is experienced by students.

Our paper will report on the specificities of students versus teachers' perceptions of the experiential activities and the development of personal and interpersonal competences. Furthermore links between the type of perceptions and the nature of the methods used in each curricular unit will be discussed.

INTRODUCTION

The debate about what are the competencies required to practice as a psychologist has led to the development and definition of a common European standard (European Diploma for Psychologists) and a clarification and specification of the competencies in different areas of practice (Lunt, 2002).

Following this perspective, educational requirements and, more specifically, the academic curricula contents can be used to infer whether psychology students are obtaining the knowledge and the skills necessary to a future practice as professional psychologists.

The psychologists' graduate training aims the psychological understanding of the human functioning, in order to promote general abilities of goal specification, assessment, development, intervention, evaluation and communication in accordance with the designed list of professional competences and profile (Lunt, 2001). But, at the same time, the education of psychologists should provide for the development of personal and interpersonal competences that are crucial for an ethical professional praxis for the promotion of an adequate attitude towards the challenges of a contextualized practice.

Generally our question, as facilitators of the processes, is how to promote in the academic context, the students personal and interpersonal competencies necessary to work in this professional area.

The concept of competences may be viewed as integrating knowledge, skills, personal values, and attitudes that are acquired through work experience and learning by doing (Bartram & Roe, 2005). Acknowledging this idea the academic training of psychologists integrates a one year Practica in a real working context which is of major importance for the students (Caires, 2001). Nevertheless, our questioning as the educators, psychologists and psychotherapists continues: in regular curricular units remains what could we do in this regard specifically, how can we provide for a context that facilitates personal and interpersonal growth of the future psychologists?

In this paper we will discuss two specific curricular units of a Psychology program taking the account of students view about their own processes. We do a preliminary analysis of data that we believe, may be relevant for elaborating this question, opened to peer review and contribution in order to further refinement and development.

Focusing on two optional curricular units of the 2nd Cycle of the Psychology Degree of Évora University: Expressive Therapies and Group Psychotherapies, we will begin by a brief description of each curricular unit (goals and contents) and then we will point out some of the features that they share and also some of the features that differentiate them.

Expressive Therapies

The aim of expressive therapies curricular unit is not only the apprehension of the proposed theoretical contents but the practical integration of this approach through several artificial expressive experiences that introduce technical competence to the students. Synthetically the objectives of learning are to understand the theoretical background

that are the base of Expressive Therapies; to know some conceptual and methodological aspects from practice: inter-modal, multi-modal or specifically in Music-therapy, Dance-therapy, Drama-therapy and Art-therapy; to demonstrate sensibility to the use of some mediators of expressive-arts as facilitators of the emotional expression and interpersonal relationship, understanding its impact to the level of the internal dynamic and relationships; to know some processes that emphasize the expressive-arts as therapeutic element; to identify necessities and choose adequate methodologies to the problematic one in cause; to know some of basic techniques that can be used by psychologists in different contexts, to reflect, analyse comprehensively and critically the practical ones;

The course contents are focused on: theoretical foundations of ET; expression and communication in therapy; practical principles; potentialities and settings; modalities and finally 30 hours of expression ateliers.

Group Psychotherapies

The aim of Group Psychotherapies curricular unit is to have a broad conceptual framework that allows a global comprehension of the diversity of theoretical models and of the unifying principles of Group Psychotherapies.

More specifically, the objectives of the course are to facilitate the knowledge acquisition about therapeutic factors and the research about the processes of group psychotherapies; to facilitate the knowledge acquisition and the reflection about small group processes; to facilitate the acquisition and practice of some strategic and technical group intervention skills; to promote the training of group dealing and small group communication competencies; to encourage an attitude of critical reflection about different models and practices of group psychotherapies.

The course theoretical contents are an introduction to the Group Psychotherapies diversity and history, therapeutic results and common therapeutic factors independent of the theoretical framework used; the small group processes principles (e. g. communication, stages of development or moments of the process); the Psychologist/ Psychotherapist role; structure features of the groups and, finally; different theoretical frameworks for Change and different models.

Focusing on the common features of the two curricular units it is necessary to state that they are both optional; briefly, they share the same organization having three components: theoretical classes, practical classes and tutorial orientation; regarding the practical classes of both courses they consist in a weekly two hour meeting, during which each student has the opportunity to actively participate in a small group and in several and different group dynamics designed to achieve the objectives of the curricular units and to promote the experience, reflection, understanding and (hopefully!) the integration of their individual and relational experience. In both courses there a focusing in experience, understanding and application of group dynamics.

Nevertheless, although in both courses group dynamics are used, in Expressive Therapies dance / movement, music, drama, painting, poetry, creative writing and guided imagery are used as facilitators of emotional expression and of intra and interpersonal awareness.

In both units, students are asked to write a theoretical piece of work and moreover to write a diary about the practical sessions, and those are the evaluation products. These diaries aim at facilitating the reflection and awareness of the work done in each practical class.

In the end of the term students were asked to add to their diaries a reflection on the processes of personal development that occurred during training and the specific contribution of the experiential component for the process of (trans)formation of perspective. Therefore the diaries are a written account of the students experiences (both internal and relational) and of students reflections of practical classes.

METHOD

The aim of this research is to deepen the understanding of how students perceived and experienced the practical component of both curricular units.

The study is of a qualitative nature as it considers the reality as a world of many interpretations where people actively make sense of their circumstances by attributing meanings, and that these meanings and subjective views of the world influence their behavior (Schwandt, 2000).

In order to understand students views of these curricular units, we analyzed students diaries of practical classes of Expressive Therapies (ET) and of Group Psychotherapies (GP).

The analysis of 143 Diaries (82-ET and of 61-GP) belonging to 143 psychology students, collected in 7 different academic years, was undertaken through content analysis.

The content analysis used a combination of processes in an iterative way: on one hand, we interrogated data having in mind our main goals (do students perceive that their personal and interpersonal growth is promoted by these curricular units?) and the concepts stated on the specific objectives of each curricular unit. This conceptually driven method helped to focus on the research questions and provided guidance for data collection (Miles and Huberman, 1994). On the other hand, the analysis was of a more grounded nature aiming to capture the richness of students voices and experiences beyond the teachers expectations. Only such open analysis allows the emergence of the critical and substantive aspects of these experiences for the students. The analysis was made by the two authors that were also the professors responsible for the each of the units and focused on the what students say they have achieved with the courses processes and on the how they achieved it.

FINDINGS

What have students achieved?

The students statements were organized into 4 categories: personal knowledge, experiential knowledge of methodology, changes in self and changes in the way of being with and looking at the other.

It became apparent that regarding to What was achieved, the contents relate mainly relating to:

- Deepening of Personal Knowledge – recognized not only by a cognitive dimension, but also by a reference about integration of emotional dimensions in a holistic experience; (e. g. *I really felt entering into my true essence; the dynamics proposed were not always easy for me to integrate but those were the ones that helped me grow as a person, to know better my limits and myself*)
- An experiential Knowledge of Methodology – which provided a greater specific competencies development;(e. g. *it is fundamental that professionals in this area pass through group creative and expressive experiences... were we can share the kind of tasks and experiences we will encounter in professional practice; it was on the “learningdoing” that we were able to fulfill our goals; having the opportunity to experience having the two roles being one of the group and being the mediator will have for sure an important impact in our future practice*)
- Relevant processes of Changes in Self – a process of personal integration (narrative and experiential knowledge) generator of development (e. g. internal questioning, anxiety release, disclosure and internal acceptance, reorganization and integration) (e. g. *To be closer to Myself; I was sharing parts of my live that I never thought I could do, and that would never happen if not here*)
- Changes in the way of Being with and Looking at the Other – the possibility of meeting with Other, openness to communication, through the experience of trust, or a safe and non-judgmental setting (e. g. *connecting with the Other and the group allowed me to see them in a different way [...] a space of trust... a safe space where thinking is permitted without judgment*)

How did students achieved what they have achieved?

We found that the descriptions of the processes that lead to personal knowledge, experiential knowledge of methodology, changes in self and changes in the way of being with and looking at the other that they stated to have achieved, may be organized into 5 categories: individual personal experience, personal experience of the group, relational process of the group, mediators and metaphors and insight.

Students refer 5 major processes:

- Individual Personal Experience – the discovery of internal corners, updating of memories, affections and imaginary, by both cathartic and reflective processes (e. g. *I emphasize discovering some “corners” of my interior; it was a space for new expe-*

riences, catharsis and group problem solving of conflicts; I discovered potentialities in the communication that were unknown to me)

- Personal Experience of the Group – the deep internal experiences (more or less intense and painful) that emerged with the continuing involvement of the group. Body movement, exposure to the group, intensification of sharing and intimacy, discovery and recognition of the other. The experience in the group of very strong bonds and feelings of mutual understanding that supported various processes of internal growth; (e. g. *to discover the Others; [...] the group was very helpful in facilitating all this process and some strong bonds were created; I really enjoyed knowing better my colleagues and to build up closer relationships, with more trust and mutual help; only after understanding that I was there with persons that I could trust, that would not let me fall, was I ready to explore something more deep in myself*)
- Relational Process Group – group Cohesion, empathy and involvement in the group, being committed to the goals and work of the group; (e. g. *there were mobilizing forces in the group tuning the possibilities for understanding; the movement and the entourage of the group; we were all equals*)
- Insight – who appeared through the reflection, through the metaphorical process, or the emotional experience of the body and its expression; (e. g. *I related this struggle with my life [...] in fact all I wanted was to be free; And I strongly rejecting... afraid of the Other judgment... of my own judgment... yes, my one judgment!)*
- Art Mediators and Metaphors – through listening and body experience real and imaginary, in relation to movement itself, with objects and with the Other, it was possible to access Inner self, often through metaphorical processes that shaped and meaning to multiple experiences. Were also valued the discovery of inner languages and stories inside that allowed the construction of harmonious dialogue with others; (e. g. *the awareness of the tiny movements of the other and myself was like disclose secrets; as if I was free from tension and angst and my body could become lighter in the end and much more serene... like a bird.)*

All the categories were present and appeared repeatedly in the majority of the diaries with the exception of the last category – Art Mediators and Metaphors. This was a category that was much more present in the diaries of Expressive Therapies and that was not frequent in the Group Psychotherapies Diaries.

Another finding and that was not expected by the authors was a clear difference in what can be named the format of the diaries. The language used and the writing style in Group Psychotherapies diaries was different from the language and writing style of Expressive Therapies Diaries.

DISCUSSION

As teachers of Expressive Therapies and Group Psychotherapies we can acknowledge *in loco* that students are touched by the practical classes and in the end of the semester we can read their vivid descriptions and reflections about the sessions written in their diaries. In this study we tried to give voice to the participants and to begin an

analysis of their written discourse in order to comprehend their perspective and to elaborate and develop our one perspective.

From their own words we may understand the importance that they attribute to the experiential processes in their training, expressed by the statements that were categorized as Experiential Knowledge of the methodology. They affirm transformations in the way they see themselves in they see the Other and they state various ways in which their personal Knowledge deepened interpreted has been related to their experiences in the practical classes (Pascual-Leone & Greenberg, 2007).

Regarding the categories related to how those changes occurred – individual personal experience, personal experience of the group, relational process of the group, insight and mediators and metaphors – it is interesting to see the match to the comprehensive review done by Crouch, Bloch and Wanless (1994) pointing out: Universality, Acceptance, Altruism, Learning from interpersonal action, Vicarious learning, Guidance, Installation of hope, Insight (Self-Understanding), Catharsis and Self-Disclosure as therapeutic factors.

The multiple lived experiences and processes of the psychology students can lead to the consideration of the practical classes setting, as an almost-therapeutic setting, that provides the necessary conditions (Rogers, 1973) for the personal and interpersonal development of a psychologist that is also trying to comprehend other individuals and groups.

The differences found between the diaries of the two courses, in terms of the more frequent reference to the use of Art Mediators and Metaphors as a process in the diaries of Expressive Therapies, and the more fluid and poetic language can be related with the specific nature of the Expressive Therapies. Some authors consider that metaphor is in itself the specific mechanism of change of Artistic-Expressive Therapies (Gorelick, 1996) as well as Symbolism (Ellis, 2001), since the understanding of the change process is constructed between imagination, game and the expressive-artistic process (Knill, 2004).

One limitation of the present study is the fact that the researchers are participants in the processes and therefore their analysis of the diaries is from that interested standpoint. But, on the other hand, the knowledge of the processes and dynamics that occurred in the practical classes and of work proposed to students is a strength to the analysis and, by the other hand, in the analysis of each relevant data in one specific diary was read and categorized in accordance with a researcher that was not involved in the classes.

Another more important limitation is the fact that the data analyzed was also an evaluation product, signed (although confidential) and written by a student to be read by the same person that gives the grades in each course. A desirability effect must be considered, meaning that the interpretation of students perceptions must take this context of data collection into account.

Despite the preliminary nature of this study it seems nevertheless to reveal the importance that experiential processes can have on psychologists training regarding development of personal and interpersonal competences.

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