

TRANSFORMATIVE JOURNEYS:
Psychotherapists' reflections on being changed
by their clients' stories

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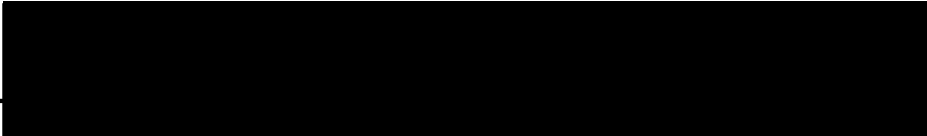
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CERTIFICATE OF ORIGINALITY

I certify that I am the sole author and that the substance of this thesis has not already been submitted for any degree and is not being currently submitted for any other degrees.

I certify that to the best of my knowledge that any help received in preparing this thesis, and all the sources used, have been acknowledged in this thesis.



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ABSTRACT

Research in counselling and psychotherapy over the past twenty years has reflected a major focus on gaining a deeper understanding of the client's experience and worldview, and on understanding the role of the therapeutic relationship. Studies on therapists' experience of therapy have focussed predominantly on the negative impact of working with particular clients, usually with a trauma history, and the consequential experience for the therapist of burnout, compassion fatigue and vicarious traumatisation. Much less common has been a research focus on therapists' experience of positive change from their work.

This study was informed by the phenomenology of Heidegger (1962) and the philosophical hermeneutics of Gadamer (1975), resulting in a hermeneutic phenomenological approach being used as methodology. Researcher reflexivity was also an integral component of the research process, such that the experiences and cultural context of the researcher were fore-grounded throughout the study, and the ways in which these aspects informed process and outcomes were made transparent. By incorporating reflexivity, the study became a collaborative one between researcher and participants.

The aim of the study was to uncover new meanings about how therapists are influenced by their clients and their clients' stories. Purposeful sampling was used and the study involved reflexive interviews with ten therapists, each on two occasions, which produced over fifty hours of interview material. All interviews were audio taped and transcribed. Engagement with the texts produced from the transcribed interviews focussed particularly on the language used by the therapists to describe and reflect on their experiences. The text was then analysed using two Gadamerian-based approaches or analytical pathways (Fleming, Gaidys & Robb 2003; Turner 2003).

What emerged from the Gadamerian textual analysis/interpretation were possible new meanings and understandings about what happens for the therapist in therapy. Seven dominant 'horizons', or shared understandings, of transformation were uncovered in this study. They were: 1) *deep presence in the therapeutic relationship*, 2) *loosening boundaries: humanising the experience*, 3) *stepping aside from the professional self*, 4) *parallel journeys: stories changing shape*, 5) *spiritual re-awakening: invitation for healing*, 6) *felt sense and embodied connection*, and 7) *interacting with other spaces and landscapes*. These expressions represented the therapists' understandings of transformation as revealed in the reflections on their experiences.

In revealing this phenomenon, the present study adds to knowledge regarding therapists' positive transformative experiences. The therapists' reflections often highlighted a link with their own life journey, either professional or personal. For some therapists, the transformative experiences were perceived as invitations for spiritual re-awakening and growth, and for others they served to renew a connection to body and to place.

This study, in exploring new understandings of the meaning of the therapy experience and in considering how the therapist makes sense of and integrates this experience, also highlighted the importance of reflective practice, both for the therapist as an individual practice and in supervision. How to integrate these 'shared understandings' of transformation into counsellor training and development, and into practice, is reflected upon and discussed in the context of the experience of empathic connection in the therapeutic relationship.

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