



Women's Therapy Centre

Discovering bits and pieces of me:

Research exploring women's experiences of psychoanalytical psychotherapy



"Girl With Two Mothers" - © Paula Rego

Women's Therapy Centre - 2005

Summary of the findings

In 2003, the Women's Therapy Centre launched a research project, which sought to obtain evidence of the effectiveness of psychoanalytic psychotherapy directly from women who had attended therapy at the Centre.

Key Implications of this Research Project

- Psychoanalytic psychotherapy is an effective intervention for women experiencing mental or emotional distress, enabling them to progress in their lives.
- Psychoanalytic psychotherapy can provide women with the tools and skills with which more to effectively process their emotional lives.
- Women value the opportunity to access psychoanalytic psychotherapy in a women only setting, in their own language and with a black therapist.
- Women frequently come to the Women's Therapy Centre after many years of extreme emotional unhappiness and great difficulty.
- Psychoanalytic psychotherapy allows women to develop a greater awareness of themselves, their own needs and to work towards self-acceptance and understanding.

It is crucial that psychotherapy services listen to the voice of the client. This project has provided vital insights into what helps women to engage in therapy and what makes it difficult. This will help the Women's Therapy Centre and other agencies to improve services for women experiencing severe emotional distress.

Background to the project

The voice of the psychoanalytical psychotherapy client is rarely heard outside the consulting room. If clients are asked to evaluate their experience of psychotherapy they are typically given a standardised questionnaire. This research project provided women with an opportunity to describe, in their own words, what it felt like to be in therapy at the Centre and to examine what they did or did not gain from their experience.

Between 2003 and 2004, one-to-one interviews with 47 women who had attended therapy at the Centre were carried out by two female researchers (using a flexible topic guide). 76 women were initially approached to be interviewed. These women had ended therapy at the Centre during the same one year period. Interviews lasted for approximately one and a half hours and were audio-taped.

Interview data was analysed for themes with a particular focus on the process and outcomes of therapy. Every effort was made not to impose a psychoanalytical interpretation on the data and to retain the women's voices. Regardless of whether they had found therapy a positive experience, the women taking part in this project felt positive about contributing to a process that sought to evaluate therapeutic services. However, these interviews were not always easy or comfortable for women.

The self-defined demographic profile of the 47 women interviewed was as follows:

- Age: 25 - 66 years, with a mean age of 37 years.
- Ethnicity: white British, 30%; white European, 26%; black and minority ethnic groups, 44% (black, Irish, Turkish, Kurdish, Asian).
- Sexual orientation: heterosexual, 74%; lesbian or bisexual, 11%; unsure or unwilling to be defined: 15%
- Disability: physical or mental health related disability, 19%
- The majority of women had no children (55 %).
- Employment: employed, 55%; unemployed, 32%; full time student or retired, 13%.

The women had been in therapy for between one month and eight years. 62 percent were in individual therapy, while 38 percent were in group therapy, or attended group therapy preparation.

At the time of approaching the Centre these were the women's self-reported presenting difficulties:

- Depression: mild, 17%; moderate to severe, 55 %
- Suicidal thoughts or actions, 30 %; self harm, 6 %
- Anxiety, 60 %; panic, 30 %
- Eating problems, 36 %
- Drug and alcohol problems, 15 %

The majority of women had experienced abuse in childhood, either physical (36 percent), emotional (47 percent) or sexual (at least 36 percent). A further 30 percent had experienced domestic violence or rape as adults.

The Women's Therapy Centre

The Women's Therapy Centre was founded in 1976 in order to address women's psychological and mental health from a feminist perspective. There is a longstanding interest in the ways in which the external and internal worlds are interwoven. The clinical approach is psychoanalytic and group and individual psychotherapy are offered. Psychoanalytic psychotherapy sets out to understand the underlying causes of a wide range of difficulties. Many clients come with long psychiatric histories and diagnoses of acute and enduring mental health problems. Psychotherapy offers substantial help with following and making sense of thoughts, feelings and ways of relating to oneself and other, within the context of the relationship with the psychotherapist or the psychotherapy group. The aim of this work is lasting psychological change, brought about through increased insight.

The Centre has a commitment to working with women who would not usually have access to therapy. Half of the spaces are reserved for women from black and minority ethnic communities; therapy is offered in languages other than English and women pay fees according to their means on a wide sliding scale.

Women were usually offered weekly individual therapy sessions for two years, a place in fixed term group with a particular focus for up to a year, or a place in an ongoing "general" therapy group for a minimum of two years.

The Experience of Psychotherapy

Women's decision to seek therapy was prompted by feelings of depression, suicidal thoughts, panic attacks or generally "*feeling terrible*". These feelings often affected women's ability to undertake basic tasks, such as going to work, caring for children and interacting socially. Recent events or decisions also prompted women to seek therapy. These included relationship breakdown, death of a family member or friend and wanting to address childhood sexual abuse or rape.

Approaching the Centre was rarely women's first attempt to obtain help. Prior to contacting the Centre, most had made GP appointments regarding their difficulties, at least a quarter had received help from secondary mental health services and over three quarters had accessed other forms of counselling or therapy. Women were attracted to the Centre because they were aware that therapy was offered in a women only setting, in languages other than English, or with a black therapist. Very few women were aware that the Centre offered psychoanalytic psychotherapy.

Women were generally happy with their first contact with the Centre in spite of the frustration of sometimes having to leave messages on an ansaphone or cope with closed waiting lists. Women felt "*daunted*", "*scared*" and "*frightened*" prior to assessment sessions.

When exploring the data, three distinct groups of women emerged, characterised by the feelings of satisfaction they felt about their experience of therapy at the Centre:

- 29 of the 47 interviewees felt that their experience of therapy had led to positive, often very profound, changes in their lives. However, they found therapy to be a challenging and uncomfortable process. The majority of these women stayed in therapy until the end of their agreed contract.
- 11 of the 47 interviewees felt dissatisfied with therapy, but they also felt that they had gained something from the experience. Almost all these women left therapy before the end of their contract.
- 7 of the 47 interviewees felt that they had not learned or gained anything from their experience of therapy. They had all left therapy before the end of their agreed contract.

Therapy was perceived by all interviewees as a very difficult and *"hugely challenging"* process. The following factors were identified in the interviews with women as key elements in enabling them to engage with this very difficult process:

- Feeling safe enough to open up in therapy: through awareness that their difficult and sensitive experiences were accepted, that sessions were confidential and that the Centre and therapists were skilled and knowledgeable in women's issues.
- A sense of belief or hope that the process of therapy would lead to positive change: through understanding what was taking place in their sessions.
- A connection with the therapist or therapy group: through "clicking" with their therapist or other group members in some way and feeling that they were cared for. Some women felt that being able to access therapy in their mother tongue or with a black therapist made the process of developing a connection easier.
- Sessions developing at an appropriate pace and depth: at a pace that felt safe, yet challenging.

While women did not always feel that the overall process was easy to comprehend or communicate, the interviewees were very eloquent in describing what took place within their sessions. Every woman who experienced at least some sense of personal change was able to vividly outline incidents in specific sessions, or more general processes that occurred over many sessions, and link them with ways in which they had changed.

The consistent style of the therapists and the therapy setting, the dedicated therapy space, the therapists' non-judgemental attitudes, the therapists' use of silence and questions (which could be gentle or probing) and the persistence of the therapists were experienced by clients as:

- Providing women with a space of their own to disclose past, painful experiences.
- Being a place where they could be "real" and express emotions they felt unable to express in their everyday lives outside the sessions (group therapy in particular).
- Leading women to discover new aspects of themselves, at many different levels.
- Being a place where women could reflect on their lives and develop understanding.

In group therapy the therapist encouraged members of the group to work with and gain from each other via their interactions. Group therapy provided women with:

- A space where interactions in the group could reveal patterns of behaviour which took place outside the group.
- A space to try out new ways of relating to others.
- A space where acceptance by others could help women to accept themselves.

In individual and group therapy women were able to explore many different, interwoven aspects of their lives. For some women this was a very slow and gradual process.

"I just want now to be with my children ... [to see] how they are growing up and to see the better life for them ... I have more happy times with my children and this is very important for me ... I can see the smile in my children when they see me get up or do something for them."

The Experience of Change

The experiences of the women who reported positive benefits from therapy are summarised below. For many of these women, the key sequence of positive change was that they developed a greater sense of self acceptance and self worth, which led to them being more connected up with who they were and what they wanted, that in turn enabled them to have more confidence in making decisions and taking action within their own lives.

Internal changes spoken of by interviewees included:

- Becoming more able to feel, identify and express emotions.
- Being able to make connections, (for example between feelings and behaviour or between past and present experiences) and gain a greater understanding of their behaviour.
- Learning about alternative ways to process and express emotions.
- Re-evaluating their perceptions of themselves and their past experiences, this often led to women becoming more self-accepting.
- Shifts in feelings and mood states. Women often spoke of something being "freed up" inside them and of feelings of panic, anxiety and depression diminishing. These shifts could be particularly dramatic following a disclosure of painful experiences. However, for women who have experienced severe depression, one of the interviewers noted that these shifts were not always dramatic, linear and final. "Recovery" from depression is a long and complex process.

External changes noted by the interviewees included:

- Newer, healthier ways of relating to partners, children, parents, work colleagues or friends.
- A greater capacity to move forward in their lives, e.g. in work or education
- Improvements in everyday functioning (especially for those with severe depression).

Some women felt that they did not benefit from therapy at the Centre or that it made them feel worse. Even those who did benefit from therapy in some areas of their lives found other symptoms could worsen (e.g. drug or alcohol use or over eating). The latter was often linked to women becoming more connected up, through therapy, with their buried and painful feelings.

Women who were satisfied with therapy felt that it had helped them gain the "*skills*" and "*tools*" to continue to work through issues themselves after therapy had ended. Receiving psychotherapy at the Centre was an important experience for many clients.

"I think in the beginning I went with issues I probably needed to deal with superficially or there and then. And then we started digging and digging and digging and going further and further and further into who I was or who I am really, and understanding myself.And it was almost like tentative mental steps in the beginning and then it became more and more exciting. So it was always a mental dance and I felt that every single step I was discovering something different."



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Accessing Psychotherapy at the Women's Therapy Centre

Any woman may refer herself by phone, by email or in writing, regardless of where she lives. Professionals are welcome to contact the Centre on behalf of a patient or client, but the Centre usually suggests that the woman herself also makes contact, in keeping with the Centre's self-referral policy. Requests for psychotherapy are received by the Centre's appointments and referrals office. Whenever possible, a consultation with a psychotherapist is offered. This may involve a wait of up to four weeks. Waiting lists are kept short in order to minimise delays. When the waiting list for a consultation is closed, the Centre staff will try to suggest an alternative. Although the waiting list often has to be closed, it re-opens frequently as new consultation times become available, so it is worth phoning again to see if the list has re-opened.

Appointments and Referrals

Tel: 020 7263 6200

Email: appointment@womenstherapycentre.co.uk



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This is a summary. The full report can be found on the Women's Therapy Centre website at <http://www.womenstherapycentre.co.uk/report>.

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