GESTALT THERAPY TRAINEES' EXPERIENCE OF PERSONAL THERAPY: A QUALITATIVE EXPLORATORY STUDY

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Abstract

Personal therapy is widely regarded as an important component of psychotherapy training, offering trainees opportunities for personal development and greater understanding of the therapeutic process. However, its perceived benefits, challenges, and place within professional training remain subjects of discussion. The present study explored the experiences of Gestalt therapy trainees engaging in personal therapy, with particular attention to its perceived influence on their personal and professional development. Seven Gestalt therapy trainees participated in the study by completing an online self-administered questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions. The written responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis. The findings suggest that participants perceived personal therapy as contributing to self-awareness, personal growth, boundary-setting, and professional development. Participants also described how experiencing therapy from the client's perspective helped them better understand clients and incorporate aspects of their therapeutic experience into their own practice. However, the responses also highlighted challenges, including financial considerations, changes in the therapeutic relationship, and difficulties associated with establishing personal boundaries in professional contexts. Participants' views concerning the requirement for mandatory personal therapy were not sufficiently consistent to establish a shared position. These findings provide an exploratory insight into how Gestalt therapy trainees understand and experience personal therapy and highlight the importance of further research into its role in psychotherapy training.

Keywords: Personal therapy, Gestalt therapy trainees, psychotherapy training, personal development, professional development, reflexive thematic analysis.

Introduction

Personal therapy has long been regarded as an important component of psychotherapy and counselling training. It is often considered a valuable learning experience that complements theoretical knowledge and supervised clinical practice by providing trainees with an opportunity to explore their own experiences, emotional processes, interpersonal patterns, and responses within a therapeutic relationship (Murphy et al., 2018; Norcross, 2005). Through experiencing therapy from the client's perspective, trainees may develop greater self-awareness, deepen their understanding of the therapeutic process, and become more aware of the personal factors that may influence their work with clients.

Previous research has identified several perceived benefits of personal therapy for psychotherapists and trainees. These include personal growth, emotional well-being, the development of psychotherapeutic skills, and a greater understanding of the client experience (Åstrand & Sandell, 2019; Grimmer & Tribe, 2001; Messina et al., 2018; Oteiza, 2010; Råbu et al., 2021; Rizq & Target, 2008). Personal therapy may also provide trainees with an opportunity to reflect on their own relational patterns and emotional responses, potentially informing their developing professional identity. However, the experience is not necessarily positive or without difficulties. Previous studies have discussed potential psychological and interpersonal challenges associated with personal therapy during training, including distress and family or marital strain (Macaskill & Macaskill, 1992), as well as experiences of harm within therapy (Pope & Tabachnick, 1994). Concerns have also been raised about the possible effects of trainees' personal therapeutic processes on their clinical work, particularly when unresolved personal difficulties become difficult to manage alongside professional responsibilities (Macran & Shapiro, 1998).

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More recent research has continued to explore the complex and sometimes contrasting experiences of trainees engaging in personal therapy. Studies have highlighted that, alongside perceived professional and personal benefits, trainees may encounter practical, financial, and emotional challenges (Ivey & Waldeck, 2014; Moller et al., 2009; Murphy et al., 2018). Furthermore, attitudes towards personal therapy may vary according to trainees' backgrounds and theoretical orientations (McMahon, 2018). Research has also suggested that the relationship between personal therapy and trainees' clinical effectiveness may be influenced by their satisfaction with the therapeutic experience (Li et al., 2024). These findings indicate that personal therapy should not necessarily be understood as a uniformly beneficial experience, but rather as a complex process shaped by individual, relational, and professional circumstances.

One of the central debates in psychotherapy training concerns whether personal therapy should be a mandatory requirement. Although many training programmes incorporate personal therapy into their professional development frameworks, questions remain regarding the ethical implications of making it compulsory. These include concerns about trainees' autonomy, accessibility, financial burden, and the extent to which mandatory participation can guarantee a meaningful therapeutic experience (Edwards, 2018; Malikiosi-Loizos, 2013; Murphy et al., 2018). Consequently, the discussion extends beyond whether personal therapy is beneficial and also considers the conditions under which it should be required, supported, and made accessible to trainees.

Gestalt therapy provides a particularly relevant context for exploring these questions because of its emphasis on awareness, contact, relational processes, and the integration of bodily, emotional, and cognitive experiences. Grounded in a holistic understanding of the person, Gestalt therapy emphasizes awareness of experience in the here-and-now and the ways individuals make contact with their environment and with others (Perls, 1969; Perls et al., 1951; Spagnuolo Lobb, 2020). From this perspective, the therapeutic relationship is central to the process of change, while awareness and acceptance of present experience are considered important aspects of therapeutic work (Beisser, 1970/2013). For trainees, experiencing personal therapy may therefore offer an opportunity not only for personal exploration but also for developing an experiential understanding of relational and therapeutic processes that are central to their professional approach.

Although previous research has examined personal therapy among counselling and psychotherapy trainees and practising therapists, including studies involving Gestalt practitioners (Oteiza, 2010; Rizq & Target, 2008; Maruniakova et al., 2017), research specifically exploring Gestalt therapy trainees' experiences of engaging in personal therapy appears to be limited. This represents an area worth further exploration, particularly given the importance of relationality and experiential awareness within the Gestalt approach. Understanding how trainees perceive the influence of their own therapeutic experiences may contribute to a more context-sensitive understanding of personal therapy as part of professional development.

Against this background, the present study explores Gestalt therapy trainees' experiences of engaging in personal therapy, with particular attention to their perceptions of its influence on personal and professional development, the therapeutic relationship, and the challenges associated with this experience. By examining trainees' written accounts, the study seeks to contribute to the discussion surrounding the role of personal therapy in Gestalt psychotherapy training.

Research aim

The present study aims to explore Gestalt therapy trainees' experiences of engaging in personal therapy, with particular attention to their perceptions of its influence on personal and professional development, their relationship with their personal therapist, and the challenges associated with the experience. Additionally, the study explores trainees' perspectives on the requirement for personal therapy within professional training.

Research questions

The study is guided by the following research questions:

1. How do Gestalt therapy trainees describe their relationships with their personal therapists?
2. How do trainees perceive the influence of personal therapy on their personal development?
3. How do trainees perceive the contribution of personal therapy to their professional development and emerging therapeutic identity?
4. What personal and professional challenges do trainees associate with engaging in personal therapy?
5. How do trainees perceive the requirement for personal therapy within their professional training?

Methodology

Research design

This study employed a qualitative exploratory research design to explore Gestalt therapy trainees' experiences of engaging in personal therapy. A qualitative approach was considered appropriate because the study aimed to understand participants' subjective experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding the personal and professional dimensions of personal therapy. Data were collected through an online, self-administered questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions. The responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, following the approach developed by Braun and Clarke (2006, 2019, 2021).

Participants and Sampling

Seven Gestalt therapy trainees participated in the study. Participants were recruited through convenience sampling. An invitation to participate was shared in two Viber groups for Gestalt psychotherapy trainees associated with the training context involving the Centre for Counselling and Psychotherapy Cortex in Tetovo and the Institute for Creative Development, Education and Psychotherapy "Mladen Kostic ASPECTI" in Skopje.
The inclusion criteria were that participants were enrolled in Gestalt psychotherapy training, had reached at least the second year of training, and were at the clinical stage of their education. The participants were female, and their ages ranged from 26 to 48 years, according to the demographic information available for the sample.

Data collection

Data were collected using a self-administered online questionnaire created through Google Forms. The questionnaire included six open-ended questions designed to encourage participants to reflect on different aspects of their experiences of personal therapy.
The questions addressed: (1) participants' relationships with their personal therapists; (2) the perceived impact of personal therapy on their personal lives; (3) its contribution to their professional development and emerging therapeutic identity; (4) difficulties or challenges encountered during the process; (5) their perspectives on the requirement for personal therapy within professional training; and (6) any additional reflections they wished to share.
The open-ended format allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words. The questionnaire was completed online, and the written responses constituted the data analysed in this study.

Ethical considerations

Participation was voluntary and before completing the questionnaire, participants were informed about the purpose of the research and the voluntary nature of their participation. They were also informed about confidentiality, the use of the collected information for academic research purposes, and their right to withdraw from participation.
No financial compensation was provided. The collected responses were treated confidentially and stored securely, with access restricted to the researcher. Identifying information was not included in the presentation of the findings.

Data analysis

The written responses were analysed using reflexive thematic analysis, drawing on Braun and Clarke's (2006, 2019, 2021) approach. This method was selected because it provides a flexible framework for identifying and interpreting patterns of meaning across qualitative data while recognising the active role of the researcher in the analytical process.
The analysis involved familiarisation with the responses through repeated reading, the generation of initial codes, and the development of potential themes. These potential themes were then reviewed in relation to the coded extracts and the dataset as a whole. The themes were subsequently refined, defined, and named to capture patterns relevant to the research aim. The findings were organised thematically and illustrated with selected extracts from participants' responses.
In keeping with reflexive thematic analysis, themes were understood as interpretative outcomes developed through the researcher's engagement with the data, rather than as categories that simply emerged independently from the responses.

Researcher reflexivity

The analysis was conducted by the researcher, who was solely responsible for familiarisation with the data, coding, theme development, and interpretation. The researcher's background and involvement in Gestalt psychotherapy training and practice informed their engagement with the research topic and provided relevant contextual understanding. At the same time, this background was recognised as a potential influence on the interpretation of participants' accounts. In line with reflexive thematic analysis, the researcher acknowledges that the themes

represent an interpretative engagement with the data rather than an entirely objective or researcher-independent account of participants' experiences.

Results

The analysis of the participants' written responses resulted in three broad themes: (1) Personal Therapy as a Resource for Self-Development, (2) Translating Personal Experience into Professional Practice, and (3) Challenges and Complexities of Engaging in Personal Therapy. Together, these themes reflect participants' perceptions of the contribution of personal therapy to their personal growth and professional development, as well as the challenges they associated with the process.

Theme 1: Personal Therapy as a Resource for Self-Development

Participants generally described personal therapy as a positive experience that contributed to greater self-awareness, personal growth, and a better understanding of their needs. Their responses referred to becoming more aware of themselves, reflecting on their experiences, and developing a clearer understanding of their personal functioning.

"It has a positive impact, I see myself as more educated in this profession, especially because of the therapy. I feel more prepared in this aspect". (Participant)

Some participants also connected personal therapy with changes in how they approached everyday relationships and responsibilities. They described becoming more attentive to their own needs, managing their time and priorities more effectively, and establishing clearer personal boundaries. One participant, for example, reflected on becoming more productive, developing a better balance between work and personal life, and learning to attend to their own needs.

"Since therapy, I've learnt how to put boundaries, and others respect the way I function. I value time a lot more; I am more productive because I don't waste it". (Participant)

These accounts suggest that participants experienced personal therapy not only as a space for exploring personal concerns but also as a process that could influence their everyday functioning and relationships.

Theme 2: Translating Personal Experience into Professional Practice

A second theme concerned the perceived relationship between personal therapy and participants' developing professional identities as Gestalt therapists. Participants described how experiencing therapy from the client's perspective helped them better understand the therapeutic process and the experiences of their future or current clients.

Several responses highlighted the value of experiencing therapeutic exercises and interventions personally. One participant explained that being a client provided a valuable learning experience and that they remembered exercises and techniques from their own therapy that they could later incorporate into their work with clients.

"A lot of what we learn comes when you're a client yourself because you experience the exercises or therapy firsthand. This makes the lessons memorable, and most of the time, you remember and apply the same techniques with your clients". (Participant)

Other participants referred to increased preparedness, authenticity, and a deeper understanding of clients. One response also emphasised the importance of body awareness, recognising bodily sensations, and attending to present-moment experience. These reflections are particularly relevant to the experiential and awareness-oriented foundations of Gestalt therapy.

Overall, participants perceived personal therapy as contributing to their professional development by offering experiential learning and opportunities to reflect on the therapeutic relationship from the client's perspective.

Theme 3: Challenges and Complexities of Engaging in Personal Therapy

Although participants predominantly described positive experiences, their responses also indicated that engaging in personal therapy could involve practical and relational challenges.

Financial considerations were mentioned by some participants. While one participant described therapy as a considerable financial expense, another referred to still working through the financial aspect of the process. At the same time, these comments were accompanied by recognition of the perceived value of personal therapy.

Relational experiences were not entirely uniform. One participant described an initially supportive relationship with their personal therapist that had, over time, become less connected. This account illustrates that the therapeutic relationship may be experienced differently over the course of therapy and that participants' experiences were not exclusively positive.

A further challenge concerned changes in personal and professional relationships following the development of clearer boundaries. One participant described difficulties with people at work who did not respond positively to these changes. This suggests that personal development, although experienced as beneficial, may also influence existing interpersonal dynamics.

Participants were also asked about the requirement for personal therapy within professional training. Their responses varied in focus and interpretation. One participant explicitly expressed the view that every therapist should engage in personal therapy to improve their therapeutic approach. Another described the importance of periodically engaging in personal therapy because of the nature of therapeutic work. Other responses focused on body awareness and the role of somatic experience, while some participants did not clearly address the question as intended.

"Every therapist should pursue personal therapy to improve their approach to therapeutic work with their clients". (Participant)

Consequently, the responses do not establish a unanimous position regarding whether personal therapy should be a compulsory requirement of professional training. Rather, they indicate that participants recognised its value, while expressing different perspectives on its role and requirements.

Discussion

The present study explored Gestalt therapy trainees' experiences of engaging in personal therapy, with particular attention to its perceived contribution to personal development, professional development, and the challenges associated with the process. The findings highlight three interconnected dimensions: personal therapy as a resource for self-development, the translation of personal therapeutic experiences into professional practice, and the practical and relational complexities of engaging in personal therapy.

Personal Therapy and Self-Development

The findings suggest that participants generally perceived personal therapy as a valuable opportunity for self-reflection, increased self-awareness, and personal growth. Their accounts referred to becoming more attentive to their own needs, establishing clearer boundaries, and developing greater awareness of their everyday relationships and responsibilities.

These experiences are consistent with the broader literature on personal therapy in psychotherapy training, which has emphasised its potential contribution to therapists' self-understanding and personal development (Norcross, 2005; Grimmer & Tribe, 2001). Within the Gestalt framework, these findings are particularly relevant to the emphasis placed on awareness, personal responsibility, and contact. Personal therapy may provide trainees with an

opportunity to explore their patterns of relating and become more aware of how their personal experiences influence their interactions with others.
However, the findings should be interpreted as participants' perceptions rather than evidence that personal therapy necessarily produces particular developmental outcomes. The brief written responses also limit the extent to which the underlying processes of personal change can be explored.

Personal Therapy and Professional Development

A second important finding concerns the perceived contribution of personal therapy to participants' professional development. Participants described the experience of being a client as helping them understand the therapeutic process from the other side of the therapeutic relationship. Some also referred to remembering therapeutic exercises and interventions from their own experiences and recognising their potential relevance to their work with clients.
This finding is consistent with discussions of personal therapy as an experiential component of psychotherapy training. Experiencing the therapeutic process as a client may help trainees develop greater sensitivity to the client's position, including the vulnerability and uncertainty that can accompany the process of seeking psychological support. It may also encourage reflection on the therapeutic relationship and the therapist's responsibilities.
From a Gestalt perspective, participants' references to authenticity, body awareness, and present-moment experience are particularly noteworthy. Gestalt therapy places importance on awareness and the integration of bodily, emotional, and relational experience (Perls et al., 1951; Perls, 1969). The participants' reflections suggest that personal therapy may offer opportunities to experience these principles directly, rather than learning about them exclusively through theoretical instruction.
Nevertheless, the present study does not establish whether personal therapy leads to improved therapeutic competence or better client outcomes. It captures trainees' own perceptions of how their experiences relate to their developing professional identities.

Challenges and Complexities of Personal Therapy

Although participants predominantly described personal therapy positively, their accounts also indicated that the process may involve practical and relational complexities. Financial considerations were mentioned by some participants, suggesting that the cost of ongoing therapy can be a relevant consideration during professional training.
The data also included an account of a perceived decline in the quality of the relationship with a personal therapist. This is important because it demonstrates that trainees' experiences of personal therapy are not necessarily uniformly positive. The therapeutic relationship may change over time, and the value participants attach to personal therapy does not exclude the possibility of dissatisfaction or disconnection.
Another participant described difficulties in workplace relationships following changes in personal boundaries. This account raises an important consideration: personal development may influence established interpersonal dynamics, particularly when individuals begin to communicate their needs or limits differently.
These findings support a more balanced understanding of personal therapy in psychotherapy training. Rather than presenting it exclusively as beneficial or assuming that all trainees experience it in the same way, training programmes should recognise the practical and relational circumstances that may shape trainees' experiences.

Perspectives on Personal Therapy as a Training Requirement

Participants were also invited to reflect on the requirement for personal therapy within professional training. Their responses did not demonstrate a clear consensus. While one participant explicitly supported the view that therapists should engage in personal therapy, another referred to the importance of periodically returning to personal therapy. Other responses focused on the value of body awareness or did not directly address the question.
This variation is important in the context of ongoing discussions about the role of personal therapy in psychotherapy training. Personal therapy may be regarded as a valuable opportunity for self-exploration and professional development; however, the present findings do not provide sufficient evidence to conclude that all participants support making it compulsory.
The distinction between recognising the value of personal therapy and supporting its formal requirement should therefore be maintained. Further research could explore trainees' and trainers' perspectives on the educational, ethical, and practical implications of requiring personal therapy during psychotherapy training.

Contribution of the Study

The study offers an exploratory account of how a small group of Gestalt therapy trainees understand and describe their experiences of personal therapy. By focusing specifically on Gestalt trainees, it draws attention to the relationship between personal therapeutic experience and the approach's emphasis on awareness, embodiment, authenticity, and relational contact.
The findings also indicate that personal therapy may be understood by trainees as more than an individual developmental activity. Participants connected their experiences with their emerging professional identities and their understanding of the client's position. At the same time, the accounts highlight the importance of acknowledging financial, relational, and workplace-related complexities.
Given the exploratory nature and limited scope of the study, these findings should be viewed as context-specific insights rather than generalisable conclusions about all Gestalt therapy trainees.

Limitations of the Study

Several limitations should be considered when interpreting the findings of this study.
First, the study involved a small sample of seven Gestalt therapy trainees. Although this provided an opportunity to explore individual experiences in an exploratory manner, the findings cannot be generalised to the wider population of Gestalt therapy trainees or psychotherapists.
Second, participants were recruited through convenience sampling within specific Gestalt psychotherapy training networks. Consequently, the findings may reflect experiences associated with this particular training context and may not represent the perspectives of trainees from other programmes or professional backgrounds.
Third, all participants were female, which limits the diversity of perspectives represented in the study. Future research involving participants of different genders and from a wider range of training contexts could provide a broader understanding of trainees' experiences.
Another limitation concerns the data collection method. The study relied on a self-administered online questionnaire containing open-ended questions. Although this format allowed participants to express their experiences in their own words, the absence of individual interviews meant that the researcher could not ask follow-up questions or explore particularly brief or ambiguous responses in greater depth.

Furthermore, the researcher's involvement in Gestalt psychotherapy training and practice represents an important consideration in the interpretation of the findings. While this background provided contextual familiarity with the research topic, it may also have influenced the analytical process. The study therefore acknowledges the interpretative role of the researcher in developing the themes.
Finally, the findings represent participants' subjective accounts of their experiences. The study did not assess changes in therapeutic competence, clinical performance, or client outcomes. Therefore, conclusions regarding the effectiveness of personal therapy as a training intervention should be made cautiously.

Conclusion

This study explored the experiences of seven Gestalt therapy trainees engaging in personal therapy, focusing on its perceived contribution to personal and professional development and the challenges associated with the process.
The findings suggest that participants generally viewed personal therapy as a valuable resource for self-awareness, personal growth, and the development of clearer interpersonal boundaries. Participants also described how experiencing therapy from the client's perspective contributed to their understanding of the therapeutic process and their developing professional identities.
At the same time, the findings highlighted practical and relational complexities, including financial considerations, changes in the therapeutic relationship, and challenges associated with establishing personal boundaries in professional settings. Participants' responses regarding the requirement for personal therapy during professional training were varied and did not establish a unanimous position.
Overall, the study offers an exploratory perspective on the role of personal therapy in Gestalt psychotherapy training. It highlights the importance of considering both its perceived developmental value and the individual circumstances that shape trainees' experiences. Further research involving larger and more diverse samples, as well as in-depth qualitative interviews, could provide a more comprehensive understanding of how personal therapy is experienced and understood within Gestalt psychotherapy training.

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