

Title of Symposium:

Person-centered therapists and researchers confronting personal and ideological challenges

Participants: Hubert de Condé, George Fragakis (Prem Adri), and Emmanuelle Zech (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium).

Moderator: Emmanuelle Zech

Title: Person-centered therapists and researchers confronting personal and ideological challenges

Abstract: (300 words)

In this symposium, we would like to present lines of research that are currently being conducted at the Person-Centred Research and Training Lab (PCLab) at UCLouvain (Belgium). In our team, we try to find ways to better integrate who we are as a person, researcher, trainer, and PCT therapist. This question is expressed in several research projects.

How to become a (more) congruent therapist, researcher and practitioner? How do we proceed to better consider these different identities? How do we deal with the fact that we live in a highly privileged Western context and with our intention to acknowledge the diversity of viewpoints, some being mainstream but contradictory to ours, some being marginalized and at times, very personal matters.

Three research projects will be presented. They address these challenges using different methodologies, at the intersections of quantitative and qualitative methods, case studies and systematic literature reviews.

The first research project addresses how therapists will --or not-- integrate their personal life and who they are as a person into their professional practice and development. In line with PCT, this research tries to understand how therapists might become more “fully functioning” persons over their career and life development. The second project tries to understand how and why a PCT therapist reacts during two therapies when clients bring life experiences that resemble those he has lived but also, conversely, values that conflict with his own; Does he remain empathetic, congruent and respectful? The third project addresses how we can demonstrate, with the same positivist weapons commonly accepted in research, that most researchers and theorists in the field of bereavement are mistaken and should take into consideration models and research designs that are more respectful of the diversity of lived experiences, at the risk of pathologizing and marginalizing the bereaved.

Keywords: PCT research; ideologies; theory; design; methodology

First Talk

Title: The process of therapist congruence: an exploration of personal and professional development through a life-story method

Authors: Hubert de Condé, Jochem Willemsen and Emmanuelle Zech (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium).

Abstract:

Motivation: This study builds on a self-integrated approach to therapists' Personal and Professional Development (PPD), defined as the dynamic integration of personal growth and professional competencies. Prior research underscores the importance of the person-of-the-therapist in therapeutic effectiveness and highlights how significant personal and professional experiences shape therapists' lifelong development. Based on a literature review, a conceptual model of integrated PPD was developed.

Problem: This study aims to examine this model phenomenologically through the concept of congruence, understood as the alignment between lived experience and self-awareness, enabling deeper integration of previously incoherent or threatening experiences.

Methodology: We will recruit 4–5 person-centered therapists with 5 to 20 years of clinical experience and postgraduate training in person-centered psychotherapy. Participants will be contacted through professional networks and associations and will partake after giving informed consent. A qualitative life-story method will be used to collect rich, subjective narratives of developmental experiences. Each participant will complete two life-story interviews (1 hour each) and a final debriefing interview (1 hour). Interviews will explore how therapists experience the process of congruence and how they integrate personal dimensions within their professional development. Data will be analyzed through intra-case and inter-case comparison.

Results: Preliminary results will be presented, illustrating how therapists describe their developmental pathways toward greater congruence. Findings will identify meaningful personal and professional experiences that contribute to their PPD, as well as common themes and individual differences across cases.

Discussion: Results will be discussed considering existing research on therapist growth, emphasizing the interaction between personal lived experience and professional growth. This study may help refine the proposed conceptual model of integrated PPD and offer insights for professional training, particularly regarding how therapists are experiencing congruence throughout their life and career.

Keywords: Personal and Professional Development, Person-of-the-therapist, Congruence, Life-story Method, Therapist Growth.

Second Talk

Title: Between allies and adversaries: Navigating value conflicts and shared wounds in the therapeutic relationship

Authors: George Fragakis et Emmanuelle Zech (Université catholique de Louvain, Belgium)

Abstract:

Motivation: This research emerged directly from my personal experiences as a therapist. Two case studies led me to realize how unequipped I was to manage ideologically and emotionally challenging encounters. In these moments, the only reliable guide was not an external model, but myself, in dialogue with supervision, personal therapy, contemplative and spiritual practices. Afterward, I found that psychotherapy research on value conflicts is strikingly limited. This led me to see that the gap I had experienced in my training was not personal, it reflected a broader absence in the field.

Problem: The study explores how ideological polarization and biographical echoes between therapist and client challenge the maintenance of core therapeutic conditions and influence the therapeutic relationship, particularly within politically and morally charged contexts.

Methodology: Study 1 analyzes 51 audio-recorded sessions (2018–2022) with a priest experiencing incongruence between the rhetoric of his religion and his homosexual identity. Study 2 analyzes 88 sessions (2017–2020) with a client affiliated with a far-right neo-Nazi party associated with violent attacks against gay men. In both cases, the therapist's reflective journal supplements the session data. Using PRM analysis, we track moment-to-moment shifts in the therapist's congruence, unconditional positive regard, empathy, and judicious transparency.

Results: We examine how ideological distance and shared wounds and longings invite or inhibit empathic attunement, and how boundary management supports or undermines safety. By detailing interactional patterns that sustain core PCT conditions under intense ideological strain and shared wounds, these studies attempt to clarify the dual therapeutic dynamic of being both allies and adversaries within the therapeutic relationship.

Discussion: We present the quantitative findings analysis and invite feedback on the interpretability and relevance of these patterns. This input will help refine our focus on key relational episodes where value tensions and shared wounds may shape or disrupt therapeutic conditions.

Keywords: value conflicts, shared trauma, therapeutic relationship, person-centered therapy, PRM analysis, interpersonal process

Third Talk

Title: On the decolonization of bereavement theory, research, and practice

Authors: Emmanuelle Zech

Abstract:

Motivation: Over the last century, bereavement, grief processes and interventions have increasingly been conceived within the epistemology of Evidence-Based Medicine. This has led many to conclude that pathological grief exists and requires to be “treated”. There are, however, divergent voices, including myself, that have challenged these conceptions and raised interrelated epistemological, methodological, ethical, and clinical practice concerns.

Problem: These voices can be grouped into two main categories. The first remains within a positivist framework but seeks to correct false assumptions about bereavement that persist in science, practice, and popular discourse. The second calls for a paradigmatic shift in the conception of bereavement science, rooted in social constructivist or postmodern perspectives since bereavement and grief are shaped by the historical, epistemological, and socio-cultural contexts that influence theorists, researchers, practitioners and lay (and bereaved) people alike.

Methodology: As a first step to decolonizing bereavement studies, together with international colleagues, I call for the systematic investigation of the effects of sampling and recruitment strategies on the (non)representativity of bereaved samples and how they perpetuate biased outcomes that may disenfranchise and pathologize grief reactions. Several systematic reviews (scoping and meta-method) are currently performed.

Results: Preliminary results of these reviews will be presented, illustrating how sampling biases –although sometimes acknowledged--, remain under-reported and under-investigated, and at times even misreported in this field. Results will also examine how bereavement research procedures shape who is studied (overwhelmingly WEIRD female), how they are recruited (mainly through non-random or self-selected sampling), and what conclusions are subsequently drawn (with a concentration on “symptoms” of grief and the reinforcement of partial narratives implying the medicalization and psychologization of bereavement and grief).

Discussion: We will discuss whether bereavement knowledge has largely been constructed within a single dominant paradigm that produced biased or incomplete findings. Future lines of research will be proposed.

Keywords: Decolonizing studies; bereavement; research; grief; biases; WEIRD

Authors bio

Hubert de Condé is a clinical psychologist and psychotherapist, teaching assistant, and PhD student at the Psychological Sciences Research Institute (IPSY) at UCLouvain. He holds a Master of psychological science in Clinical Psychology and a Postgraduate Certificate in Integrated Psychotherapy, and he is currently training as a Person-Centered psychotherapist. He is also consulting as an independent therapist in Brussels and Louvain-la-Neuve. His doctoral project, supervised by J. Willemsen and E. Zech, focuses on the integration of the personal and professional aspects of therapists and how these develop over time while practicing this complex profession.

George Fragakis (Prem Adri) is a clinical psychologist, person-centered psychotherapist, and researcher currently undertaking a full-time doctoral program and serving as a teaching assistant at the Université catholique de Louvain (UCLouvain). Since 2017, George has contributed to counseling and psychotherapy education and research at institutions such as UCLouvain in Belgium, the College for Humanistic Sciences (ICPS), and the European Institute of Counseling and Psychotherapy (EICP) in Greece. His research bridges academic inquiry and clinical practice by integrating psychotherapy with inclusivity, intersectionality, socio-political awareness, spirituality, and an in-depth exploration of power dynamics and value conflicts within therapeutic relationships. George has been elected to the Boards of Directors of the World Association for Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapy and Counseling (2025–2026), the Association Francophone de Psychothérapie Centrée sur la Personne et Expérientielle (2022–2025), and the Panhellenic Association of Person-Centered and Experiential Professionals (2019–2024).

Emmanuelle Zech is full professor of Clinical Psychology and Psychotherapy at UCLouvain. In 2004, she was appointed to a position on the psychology of adversity. She has developed a line of courses and training in person-centered and experiential counseling and therapy (PCEP) at the undergraduate, graduate and post-graduate levels. She has chaired the Research Center for the Study of Health and Psychological Development (2008-2014). She coordinates the Person-centered research and training lab (PCLab) and has developed a helping skills e-learning platform on Open Moodle and a video-equipped relational competences laboratory in the Faculty and Research Institute building. She was dean of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences (2022-2024). Her research interests deal with the psychology of bereavement and grief, the psychotherapeutic processes involved in the therapeutic relationship, especially how therapists can deal with difficult therapy or personal experiences, the effects of psychiatric and (psycho)pathological diagnosis, the efficacy of different training methods on helping skills learning outcomes, and the determinants and consequences of informal caregiving. She retains PCT practice at the research and training consultation center of her research institute.