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ABSTRACT

‘Negative Capability’: an exploration of therapists’ capacity to be in uncertainty in clinical practice.

The dissertation is focused on a phenomenological exploration of uncertainty within the practice of psychotherapy. Currently there is considerable emphasis on bringing more certainty into psychotherapy, with evidence-based practice, regulation and accredited trainings. But is this emphasis really in tune with what is important to the process of psychotherapy? For both therapists and clients, one of the fundamental elements of psychotherapy is uncertainty. This project is dedicated to exploring and finding meaning within this elusive, but inescapable, phenomenon.

In the corporate world, where my first research was undertaken, the most successful people were considered to be those who could deal with ambiguity, and were able to tolerate a certain level of uncertainty. In the artistic world, the poet John Keats noticed a quality he called ‘negative capability’, the capacity to be in uncertainty, in people of significant artistic achievement. But how this quality might translate in clinical practice in the contemporary psychotherapeutic world?

The premise of the project is that the psychotherapists’ ‘negative capability’ could be a key facilitating factor in effective therapy. However, because it is such an everyday aspect of practice, it has become taken for granted, and is therefore in danger of being overlooked, which could have significant consequences, at this defining period in the development of psychotherapy as a profession.

The research identified ‘negative capability’ as a defining aspect of being a psychotherapist, that distinguishes psychotherapy from other professionals, and also that the therapists’ different relation to being in uncertainty, at the start of therapy, is also what differentiates them from clients.

The aim of the project is to articulate ‘negative capability’ in such a way as to make this largely implicit aspect of clinical practice, more explicit.

However, the capacity to be in uncertainty is implicit by nature, because it is a ‘negative’ or ‘not’ quality, and, almost by definition, ephemeral. Therefore attempting a description is a paradoxical challenge because of the danger of potentially making what was previously uncertain, certain, thereby smothering the original phenomena through the research process.

In this project, ‘negative capability’ is described as a process of movement between being ‘with’ and ‘in’ uncertainty. The psychotherapist can be termed a ‘double agent’ as they can naturally inhabit these different modes uncertainty. A significant aspect of the psychotherapists’ skill is being able to hold the tension between the two, and in having the agility to fluently move between ‘in’ and ‘with’ uncertainty, as appropriate for the client.

The research also proposes that psychotherapists have an inherently expanded capacity for being in uncertainty, which can be developed through experience, therapy and training, into a capability.

Two research methods were employed in parallel: an Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis of interviews with senior practitioners on their relation to being in uncertainty in clinical practice,
and a live Heuristic Analysis of the researcher’s experience of being in uncertainty, as documented through the process of this project.

The products are 1) communicating ‘negative capability’ within the profession, through workshops, published articles etc., and 2) a post-graduate University ‘negative capability’ module, for trainee Psychotherapists and Counselling Psychologists, that has been run, and developed, over the last three years.