



# Integration of Psychotherapy (Schools) in China (Retrospect to the Panel at the Annual Meeting of the Chinese Association of Mental Health, Beijing, August 2016)

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## Report

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## Introduction

The Chinese Association of Mental Health had its 2016 annual meeting in Beijing, China. Hundreds of colleagues from all over China met to talk about specific aspects and issues which are relevant to their daily work. They also discussed the political aspects of professionalism in general and occupationalisation. They also offered a panel on “new perspectives and development of psychotherapy” which was presented by five speakers. All of them were engaged in psychology and/or psychotherapy and could look back on related practical experience of more than twenty years. All of them were engaged in training of psychotherapy in China. They represented the academic perspective of universities. They were also part of a specific project implemented by the government which was engaged in answering the question of

professionalism, occupationalisation, and policy. Mainland China, Hong Kong, Australia, Italy, and Germany were represented.

## Relevance of humanistic values and integration

I did not have any other information about the other colleagues on the panel beforehand or about their professional background and experience.

I myself decided to address two perspectives of development in the field of psychotherapy.

The first was the basic concepts and values of humanistic psychology/humanistic psychotherapy (like Gestalt therapy, body psychotherapy, and others) as well as the relevance of this dimension in psychotherapy (Marlock, Weiss, Young, & Soth, 2015).

The second perspective was the political framework of psychotherapy in Germany and the aspect of occupationalisation. This of course was connected with the emphasis of

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integrating psychotherapy (schools, methods and training programs).

Furthermore, I was astonished that all of us referred to the value system of humanistic psychology and humanistic psychotherapy though we had not talked about this before the discussion (Maslow, 1988). I experienced the panel as well-grounded on a solid value-base. This value-base seemed to be connected with an underlying commitment of us all.

All panel-speakers referred to the necessity of integrating psychotherapy schools and psychotherapy methods. It was pointed out that a large variety of therapy schools and therapy methods are being offered in China by representatives of different countries and societies. It was also said that our Chinese colleagues are “eager” to follow these training programs one after the other. If I remember well, there was an unspoken conviction that many of our Chinese colleagues follow these training programs one after the other, a kind of additive; they follow the two-years-training-program in method A, a two-year-training-program in method B, and so on. Our Chinese colleagues are probably quite engaged and highly motivated in the training and learning process, trying to increase, to the extent possible, their own understanding of clients, motivation for therapy, and proficiency in diagnosis and therapy. Thus, they are well informed and also practically experienced in method A, method B, and etcetera.

After the presentation of our statements, we had a panel discussion in two steps. First, we talked with each other, and then, the discussion was opened to the public. I was glad and thankful for the very competent questions asked and comments made by the speakers as well as by the colleagues and public. By competent, I mean the following:

- The questions and answers were very concrete, practical, and reasonable to professionalism.
- The questions picked up important perspectives of psychotherapy which usually are not discussed in the space of a psychotherapy-training.

- Almost all questions and answers referred to the perspective of integration and the necessity of integration.

- There was consensus that the additive way of learning methods had to be looked at very critically. Consensus about the development of psychotherapy in China has come to a point that one has to think about digesting what one has learned, one has been trained and practices when familiar with method A, method B, and etcetera.

### To become a “better person” vs. (self-) experience

By offering so many therapy-methods at the same time in the way how it is trained or taught, Prof. Yue Xiaodong stated that the academies or training societies impose something upon students in order to be a “better person”.

To be a “better person” would mean *to know* many concepts, *to know* about the large variety of therapy methods. He also stated that students are faced with an embarrassing dilemma as a result of this teaching method. The best result this could have is that psychotherapists will become very special specialists. This could also mean that psychotherapists would be perfect in specific techniques and in practicing of different tools. Being perfect in a specific technique evidently does not fulfill the values of humanistic psychology (The Association for Humanistic Psychology).

All this, and this was consensus, has to be put into contrast by discussion and (self-) reflection with an understanding which is based on humanistic values. In this respect, we all stated that:

- It is important to grow, to experience oneself in a process of personal development and self-growth instead of becoming a “better person”.
- Instead of being a special specialist, it is important especially for psychotherapists to look at the client as a person, as a human being, as a holistic being.
- Instead of practicing and using

techniques and tools only, psychotherapists have to understand their client, to understand their client as a person, instead of focusing on symptoms alone or specific diagnosis.

- This also means that psychotherapy has to relate to the client-therapist-relationship. All this is “the real essence of psychotherapy”.

- Last but not least, it is ever so important to integrate the different approaches. Of course, integration also means (self-) integration. Self-integration of course is based on self-experience, self-reflection, and self-development. Thus, it means personal growth (Adler 1997).

Referring to the importance of policy and the politics of psychotherapy, Lin Hong (Peking University Sixth Hospital - PKUIMH) stated that it is very important to minimize the gap between research and therapy.

A colleague from Australia pointed out the necessity of evidence-based (randomized control-groups) psychotherapy (Schneider 2014), but he also pointed out that science always has to be connected and integrated as art. He emphasized the importance of evidence-supported instead of evidence-based psychotherapy. *Both are necessary.* He is therefore convinced of the importance and relevance of Guanxi in the field of psychotherapy. Psychotherapists and representatives of therapy schools have to relate to each other, have to talk about integration, and have to rely on the relevance of professional Guanxi.

Our Italian colleague was convinced that when you follow all those training-programs, you learn a great deal. However, psychotherapy, especially based on humanistic values, also means not to do so much in psychotherapy (“we learn a great deal, but have to do little”). She stated this position in order to encourage the colleagues to live more consciously the client-therapy-relationship instead of relying excessively on the use of techniques.

The discussion between the panel and audience soon showed that many colleagues feel lost in all these different programs. They

follow and hope to do them well (to be a “better person” and “a good psychotherapist”). However, it also seems that they follow because it is familiar in China to follow the expectations of others and not be familiar with (self-) experiencing, self-integration, and self-development, in addition to reflecting and following one’s own orientation. This of course is a big challenge for the political system and the development of a general policy. Lin Hong from Beijing was convinced of the importance of integration, backed up and structured by politics and policy.

Integration of psychotherapy (schools) is based on internal concepts of each therapy school, the attitude and values, and the research. There are also evident differences between the schools, because each school uses different tools and methods. Each school relates to the therapist as the most important factor in therapy. For many years, science has also stated that the therapist-client-relationship is the most effective factor. It is not easy, and therefore, a challenge for each therapy school to clearly describe how therapy works when it works effectively. An extensive discussion into this perspective is relevant to development and the future. This means the discussion of integration in therapy must include a thorough discussion of the interplay of the various approaches. This discussion is related to the therapist as the most important factor of psychotherapy integration (Decarvalho, 1991) (Figure 1).

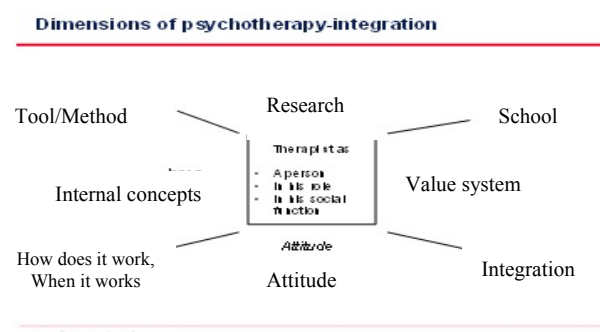


Figure 1. Dimensions of psychotherapy-integration

### Psychotherapy and social change

Due to time limitation, the reasons why

students and colleagues in China can be “seduced” by all those programs, “seduced” to follow one program after the other, could not be discussed. Another big question is how far this unconscious and more or less culturally-based motivation is connected or related to the present rapidly occurring social and cultural change in China.

There was consensus that one consequence or result of this social and economic change is that connecting to people in general, to society, and to daily life seems to be somehow “chaotic”. Part of the audience therefore feared that this “chaos” would also be mirrored in the therapy-relationship. Relationship with another person therefore is one of the main focuses of psychotherapy, both face-to-face and internet-based psychotherapy. Some members of the audience were concerned about the growing use of internet-based psychotherapy. On the one hand, it is clear that internet-based psychotherapy is part of an important development in society, but on the other hand, it is also clear that practicing internet-based psychotherapy has an enormous impact on relationship and the definition of relationship. Thus, internet-based psychotherapy is a fact, but it often still lacks sufficient relational competence.

Listening to these aspects being brought up by our Chinese colleagues caused me to remember the close codependence of relationship in China characterized by “person-to-person-relationship” on the one hand, and the “money-relationship” on the other hand.

The interplay of the “person-to-person-relationship” and “money-relationship” evidently has a big impact on the development of the self-esteem of psychotherapists. In China, there is no existing pricing-system in the field of psychotherapy. Therefore, each psychotherapist can charge whatever he/she wants to and/or what the client can pay. The process of integration of psychotherapy also requires that the therapist become familiar with the questions: What is the worth of my work (what is my worth as therapist) in terms of money?; and To what extent does this influence

the client-therapist-relationship?

Perhaps many students and therapists try to become adept at as many therapy methods as they can and are not yet conscious of the relevance of integrating this way of training and learning. Perhaps they are also not yet familiar with the fact that integration has at least two perspectives.

- First, it is necessary to find a way to understand and to handle differences and similarities between the different schools. Hence, integration also means to conceptualize what therapy in general could be, how it could function, and how it could be understood in relation to the specific social and cultural conditions in China at present.

- Secondly, integration is part of self-experience, self-exploration, and self-development of the therapist himself. To explain with a metaphor, it can be stated that various therapy-schools are meals/dishes which are nicely prepared and which are good-looking, healthy, and well-presented; however, it is also very important that these meals be digested by the therapist. Digestion means that the interplay of therapy-training and the therapist as a person must be balanced. Balancing this interplay is based on the experience that finding one’s own position and attitude towards therapy in general and towards the various schools is an indispensable ingredient of being trained and experienced in psychotherapy.

### **The challenges of politics and the occupationalisation of psychotherapy**

We also discussed the following aspects referring to politics and policy.

- How can you differentiate “psychotherapy” and “counselling”?
- What are their main similarities and/or differences?
- How can one understand these differences and which (kind of) difference is significant enough that it is relevant and important enough to be specially regarded? If you do not know this aspect, and if you do not understand the “difference of differences”, you

can get lost in the great variety of therapy schools and therapy methods (this also can be observed in western countries).

- Which department is responsible for the politics of psychotherapy and developing the related policies?
- Which professions have to present or represented the project group run by the government, which have to develop the criteria and concepts of policies?
- In which setting does psychotherapy and/or counselling function well? With what effect?
- Teamwork in psychotherapy as a profession is lacking. People or occupational groups often work and function on their own.
- Various social institutions like the police, forensics, and etc. are not familiar with the importance of psychological issues and necessity of psychotherapy. Nevertheless, it seems that they must be familiarized with this issue in the future. They must also cooperate in this respect in the future.

Psychotherapy in China is now undergoing a new phase of development. One could say that in the beginning some professionals had experience in training in psychotherapy and tried to develop psychotherapy in China by offering training programs together with psychotherapy-societies from abroad. After some time, a great variety of psychotherapy approaches were being offered. The government has already established a certain psychotherapy law, but psychotherapy as an occupation is not yet recognized as important, nor is it developed and institutionalized, which is very important. The integration of psychotherapy impacts the interplay of:

- The new holistic view on the client as a human being
- (Self-) experience, reflection, and self-development of the psychotherapist
- Occupationalisation of psychotherapy in general and the definition of the role and function of psychotherapy and counselling in society (Meneses & Larkin, 2015).
- Integration of psychotherapy, as an interplay of therapy schools, methods, and

concepts on the one hand, and self-experience and self-development on the other hand, is based on the fact that this is also a process of (self-) experience. Stating this, it seems that it could be helpful to have a specific look on self-experience. It is easy to ask for (self-) experience as part of the integration process, but it is no longer easy when you look at how experience functions, and the dependency of learning and teaching.

The more traditional the system of teaching, learning, and experiencing in China is, the more the teacher-student-model is favored. Transcultural integration of psychotherapy therefore faces the challenge of familiarization with new modalities of experience (Sollmann & Li, 2015)

### Modalities of experience

While working in China, I have observed a growing interest in reflecting intensively the importance and relevance of experience (i.e., *erlebnis* and *erfahrung*).

It can be stated that life and personal development are experience. This leads to differences in the world and in relationships which require strategies to cope with the world and other humans. This process is the basis of learning. Learning as a human being together with other human beings enables humans to grow. This process of (self-) experience means integration and co-creation at the same time (Figure 2).

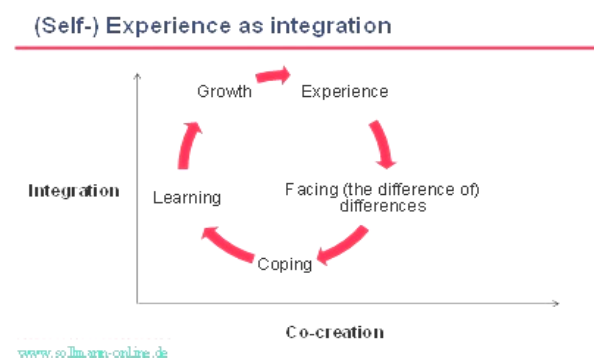


Figure 2. (Self-) Experience as integration

This was a novel concept for most of the colleagues, and yet they were quite engaged

in the discussion and eager to know and experience more in this regard. More academic research in this respect results in one of the most important issues in psychotherapy; that is to understand how it works when it works. Together with my colleagues and considering my experiences in China, we could identify three dimensions or modalities of experience.

- There is some guideline, specification, or structure/hierarchy which induces or starts the process of experience. This functions as a specification or demand. This seems to be more familiar to the Chinese. I call this the “post-experience-model”. This means that the demand or specification mobilizes, supports, or induces herewith a connected experience.

- In western countries, in addition to the “post-experience-model”, there is also a “pre-experience-model”. This means that, as a result of a process of experience, we come to some conclusion, assumptions, structure, or something of that ilk. Thus, it can be stated that the process of experience is an open process in/by which aspects which are not yet conscious or relevant can become conscious and can be related to the self as the one who is part of the process of becoming conscious. This modality of experience seems not to be recognized by the Chinese.

Finally there is what I call the “in-situ-experience-model”, which means that you are engaged in a process of experience within the group, related to a subject of discussion or development. This offers the chance to have both modalities of experience in the group simultaneously and to explore together with the group how this is handled by the group. Moreover, it provides the opportunity to

determine which modality of experience you face or choose in the here-and-now. This is more or less an inductive procedure. This also refers to the aspect of working with ambivalence/ambiguity. This of course is a very important aspect of psychotherapy in general and specifically for the Chinese society.

### Conflict of Interests

Authors have no conflict of interests.

### Acknowledgments

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