

## **CHANGING THE SENSE OF SELF THROUGH RITUAL:**

### **Psycheritual as a psychotherapeutic intervention**

**Kress, R., Kerr, M.**

#### **ABSTRACT**

In this paper we will present the results of a study into the experience of using ritual in contemporary psychotherapy\*. We have named this experience *psycheritual* as it is relevant for psychotherapy work and is a form of transition ritual which has transformative properties. Psycheritual can be defined as: *an intentional act of communication between the conscious and the unconscious, where symbolic objects or actions are used to represent and/or to affect the psychic world, and where a close connection between the body and the mind is required.*

In this qualitative study we will illustrate how the ancient art of ritual can be successfully implemented in the modern discipline of psychotherapy, particularly in the process of changing the sense of self; and that indeed, psychotherapy itself already contains many elements that are generally associated with ritual.

Our theoretical background is based in Transpersonal Psychotherapy, and we will also refer to ancient and indigenous understandings that have been drawn together into the practice of contemporary Shamanism. To put the results of this study in context, we will start our exploration with a brief review of the Transpersonal and Shamanic worldviews, and then proceed to examine how ritual already plays a part in both these traditions.

**Key words:** transpersonal psychotherapy, shamanism, psychotherapeutic technique, transition ritual, qualitative research

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## **1. INTRODUCTION**

### **1.1. On Psychotherapy**

Psychological help in one form or another has been practiced throughout human history by doctors, priests, philosophers or other wise persons who had insights into human suffering. Therefore psychotherapy is not new; it is only a contemporary word in contemporary times with contemporary definitions which take into account its history.

Frank and Frank (1991) talk about three historical roots of healing that have influenced the development of psychotherapy:

a) *Religiomagical tradition*: in ancient times, when human beings lived in close co-existence with, and immediate dependence upon, the natural world around them, their understanding of suffering was linked to malign influences from supernatural worlds. One could lose one's soul or have it

possessed by an evil spirit. Healing was performed by shamans and medicine men and women who were endowed with knowledge and spiritual powers to intervene at this level. These healers used ritual to retrieve or to restore the soul to its rightful owner, or to extract the possessing spirit.

b) *Rhetoric* was a therapeutic discipline practised in ancient Greece which, together with hermeticism, was used to influence the sufferer's subjective meaning of difficult life experiences. A distinction was made between two types of rhetoric - base and noble rhetoric, of which the noble one was healing. By using words and personal charisma, healers sought to produce changes in the soul: "... a beautiful harmonic and rightful ordering of all the ingredients of psychic life, by strengthening will, reorganising beliefs or by eliciting new beliefs more noble than the old" (Frank & Frank, 1991, p. 66; cf. Spillane, 1987, p. 217).

c) *Naturalistic science* is the youngest historical root contributing to today's theory and practice of psychotherapy. It developed mostly during the last century, particularly out of the medical and psychological understanding of mental illness and its treatment. Factors which contribute to psychological help were beginning to be investigated in a systematic way and observable facts were written down and repeated in controlled experimental settings. The two most important pioneers of this strand were Dr. Sigmund Freud and Dr. Ivan Pavlov.

On the basis of these diverse origins it is only to be expected that there are many different approaches to the theory and practice of psychotherapy, yet all the trainings need to include, among other elements, the model of personality, definition of psychological health and pathology, and theory of change (Gurman & Messer, 2003).

As this article is concerned with the theory of change, we will briefly outline this element in the four main psychotherapeutic orientations of Behaviourism, Psychoanalysis, Humanistic and Transpersonal (Grof, 2008). We will look at how each of them views a human being and instigates psychological change.

**Behavioural** therapy is concerned with the formation of the connections between stimuli and response that precede human behaviour. Behaviour is seen as a learnt response to either known (elicited) or not known (emitted) stimuli. Behavioural therapy therefore aims at changing an unwanted response by learning a new one which is better adapted and better suited to a particular situation (Miller, 1962).

**Psychoanalysis** is concerned with bringing to consciousness the unconscious material of the patient that has been repressed early in life. This is achieved mainly by the specific psychoanalytic setting. This consists of the basic rule of speaking about anything that comes to mind, the analyst's neutral attitude and interpretations of the patient's memories, dreams and fantasies, and analysis of the patient's neurotic transference. The analytic treatment is terminated when the patient successfully resolves his transference neurosis and is better able to live according to the principle of reality (Ellenberger, 1970).

In the second half of the 20th Century, **Humanistic** schools of psychotherapy brought a new worldview to the field. In contrast to psychoanalysis and behaviourism, they emphasised a person's freedom of choice and personal responsibility. Humanistic psychotherapy is non-directive and based on the principles of unconditional positive regard, empathy and congruence (Rogers, 1980). The humanistic paradigm holds that in the facilitating environment of a good therapeutic relationship, clients are naturally capable of focusing on their thoughts, feelings and relationships and can gain new insights which bring about a change in a sense of self.

**Transpersonal** psychotherapy, also known as the fourth force in psychotherapy, is concerned with the personal and beyond-the-personal aspects of a human being, taking into account the spiritual journey in all its variations. It is about being rather than doing, and about the process of transcending the personal ego into the dimension of a greater whole – a process that Jung called individuation. This process is often triggered by a crisis or a loss, and although painful, it has the potential to motivate a person to start searching for meaning. In transpersonal psychotherapy, change is perceived as a shift from personal concerns existing on the horizontal ego level to transpersonal concerns existing on the vertical level of Self, resulting in increased consciousness (Somers & Gordon-Brown, 2002; Wellings & Wilde McCormick, 2000).

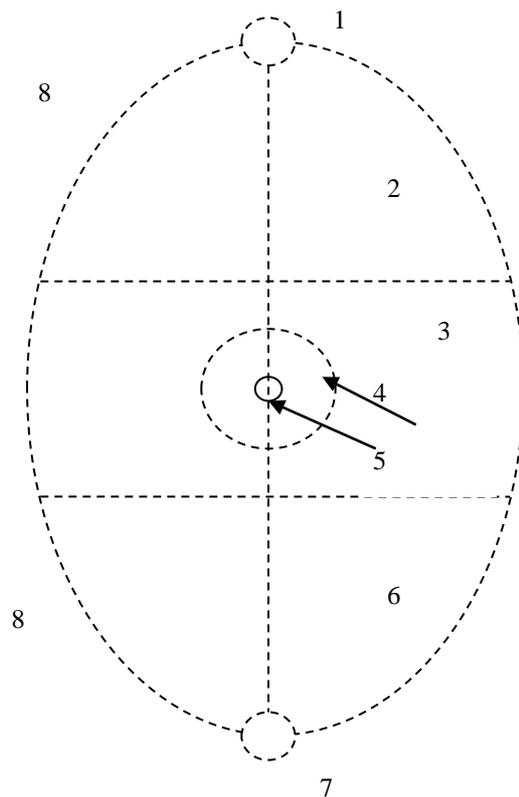
### **Transpersonal psychotherapy**

Transpersonal psychotherapy has gone through much development since its inception as Transpersonal psychology in the late 1960s (Grof, 2008; Maslow, 1979). Visser (1998), citing the corresponding authors and their methodologies, writes about the division in how the transpersonal can be viewed. Some view it as a progressive ladder-like movement or Height psychology while others see it as a regressive but ultimately transcendent spiral-like movement or Depth Psychology (Kerr 2008a).

More recent thinkers have indicated another important view in understanding the transpersonal: transpersonal phenomena that have so far been considered intrasubjective experiences could be viewed as participatory events arising from different individual or collective areas of existence that "interact with a spiritual power in the co-creation of spiritual worlds" (Ferrer, 2002, p. 117). This is close to the shamanic worldview of spirits interacting with a shaman who journeys to their worlds, but also exists independently of them (Harner, 1980 ).

One of the Depth Psychology schools which was instrumental in shaping transpersonal therapy practice was the British school of psychotherapy established in the 1970s by Ian Gordon-Brown, Barbara Somers and their colleagues. Their methodology was based on Jungian Analytic Psychology and spiritual practices of traditional contemplative schools, Buddhism in particular. The model of personality used by the British school was Assagioli's Egg Diagram (explained below, see Diagram 1) with the additional presence of Self in the darkest depths of the psyche - and in the depths of suffering (7) (Somers & Gordon-Brown, 2002; Wellings & Wilde McCormick, 2000). This presence is particularly important when working with those who have experienced the personal wounding of not 'good enough' parenting (Winnicott, 1965) and early relational traumas. In order for psychotherapy to be healing for these clients they need much reparative interpersonal work and empathic mirroring of a human soul that holds trust and hope for them. To have an understanding of a meaning-making spiritual centre at the base of the most primal wounds is deeply reassuring, and resonates with an intuitive and ancient sense of soul.

In Assagioli's holistic picture, the personality is divided into three levels of unconscious: the lower (6), middle (3) and higher (2). The lower unconscious has been well described by psychoanalysis as containing instinctual impulses, repressed feelings and traumas that cannot be part of the conscious personality. It is also called the personal unconscious or Shadow. The middle unconscious contains more recent and easily accessible personal experiences that have not yet been fully processed by and assimilated into the conscious part. It also contains the field of consciousness (4) or personality with its "incessant flow of sensations, images, thoughts, feelings, desires and impulses which we can observe, analyse and judge" (Assagioli, 1965, p. 18).



1. Higher or Transpersonal Self
2. Higher Unconscious or Superconscious
3. Middle Unconscious
4. Field of Consciousness
5. Conscious self, I or Ego
6. Lower Unconscious
7. Transpersonal Self in the depths
8. Collective Unconscious

Diagram 1: Assagioli's diagram of human psyche

At the centre of the middle unconscious is the I or ego (5) - understood as a stable point of conscious focus, and not the changing contents of our consciousness. It is this stable point, or point of pure self-awareness, that stays on the vertical axis and participates in spiritual experiences. On its upward movement, it encounters the higher unconscious, an area where illuminating insights, inspirations and intuition come from. It contains creativity and noble feelings that move us towards humanitarian activities and ethical decisions. The higher unconscious is crowned by the higher Self (1) - the spiritual centre which has both a personal and universal nature simultaneously: this is a permanent source of being-consciousness (Kerr, 2008b) which continues to exist whether we are asleep, in a faint or are under deep hypnosis. Both transpersonal centres, the Higher Self and the Self in depths (1 & 7), could be found anywhere on the orbit between the personal and the collective. They provide the main motivating and regulating principles in a psyche, ie. the supreme archetype coordinating all others.

In transpersonal psychotherapy the relationship between the personal centre (Ego) and the transpersonal centre of the total psyche (Self) is most important. It helps if we understand that this relationship goes in two phases: in the first half of one's life, the Ego's dynamic is a separation from the Self and establishment in the outer world, while in the second half of life the Ego needs to recognise its subordinate position, allowing the Self to live through it (Edinger, 1992; Washburn, 1985). What helps the conscious part of personality to walk this path of growth and maturation is contemplative practice.

The European Transpersonal Association (EUROTAS) recognises a multitude of contemplative practices to choose from, and a transpersonal psychotherapist needs to explore some to see how they appeal to him or her. These practices help to still the chattering mind by bringing focus on the breath or on an object of one's contemplation or prayer. Ultimately, they can enable the practi-

tioner to generate peace, joy and equanimity (Hanh, 1998) or in psychotherapeutic language: they help the therapist to let go of any identifications with the personality contents and to stay on the vertical axis in communication with the Self, the transpersonal source of healing. Such a therapist has training in transpersonal practices such as meditation, active imagination, holotropic breathwork, trance techniques ... to master non-ordinary states of consciousness ([www.eurotas.org](http://www.eurotas.org)).

## **1.2. On Contemporary Western Shamanism**

In the early part of this century, there has been a resurgence of interest in the magico-religious and nature-based strand of healing (described above in the discussion of psychotherapy's origins), as a contemporary model of healing in its own right. This strand has been labelled Neo-shamanism, a term which has attracted some pejorative connotations, for example, related to uncritical adoption of New-Age beliefs and cultural misappropriation of indigenous practices.

For this reason, we prefer to use the term Contemporary Western Shamanism, to emphasise the development of this strand of healing as an accessible and culturally appropriate modality in its own right. The term also acknowledges that supernatural and earth-based understandings of the psyche which have a universal resonance often have ancient origins, but can also be firmly grounded in the lived experience of Western practitioners.

As outlined above, the main maladies addressed by shamanic practice are loss of soul-parts and possession of the psyche by malign or misplaced entities.

In the shamanic worldview, soul-loss is seen as a loss of contact with a part of what makes one feel whole. It can manifest in a number of ways, such as physical illness, listlessness, depression, homesickness, existential emptiness or a feeling of something missing. Soul parts may be lost by various means. For example, the part may go into hiding to escape a traumatic life event, it may be appropriated by another, given away in a close relationship, or lost when a loved one with whom we share a part of ourselves dies (M. Kerr personal communication, Goncalves 2011; Ingerman 2015).

Possession states may occur when rejected or lost parts of others enter our psyche. In the shamanic worldview, these others may be alive or dead: the barrier between the living and dead is seen as much more permeable than conventional understandings would suggest. Possession can manifest as, for example, a sense of not being oneself, of having unexpected or unfamiliar thoughts, feelings and preferences, or acting out of character (M. Kerr personal communication, Halliday, 2011).

However, alongside healing soul loss and possession states, shamanic practice also provides a place to seek answers to questions about the soul's purpose, to find help in times of transition and crisis, and guidance on issues that concern us in daily life and work.

In Contemporary Western Shamanism, guidance in how to help heal these maladies, to restore wholeness and to follow an authentic life path is sought from human, divine or animal spirit guides, and from the elements of nature (for example trees, plants, water, rocks and the four directions). It is acknowledged that this guidance is best sought while in an altered state of consciousness - a form of waking dream. Entry into this state of consciousness is often facilitated by means of repetitive drumming or music, fasting or contemplative time spent in nature.

In the shamanic world view, all elements of the world are seen as ensouled, and therefore healing endeavours are not just confined to human ills. As Kenin-Lopsan (2010) explains: "All places on earth, such as mountains, woods, waters, the sky or the underground are inhabited by spirits, and

every place has its Master spirit. Our health, our well-being and our lives depend on these spirits" (p.12).

In line with this, contemporary shamanic practice also encompasses the intention to work towards healing non-human animals and environmental damage.

### 1.3. On Rituals in Shamanism and in Psychotherapy

As people, we are ritual makers, and much has been written on the subject - confirming that rituals are not merely part of an ancient past but belong to contemporary Western life. Many disciplines, such as Sociology, Psychology, Ethnology, Theology and Education draw on rituals, but for the purposes of this investigation, Anthropology offers the most comprehensive understanding of rituals and ritual symbols.

According to Victor Turner, (a British cultural anthropologist, who spent four years among the Ndembu tribe in North Africa), typical characteristics of rituals include: a formalised and rigidly choreographed structure, a repetitive nature which follows certain patterns, a communicative intent and use of symbols as a means of expression (Turner, 1973).

Equally relevant is Turner's classification of rituals which is as follows:

- **Seasonal rituals** which follow the rhythms of the year and are performed, for example, at times of planting new crops, harvest time and the beginning of a hunting season
- **Contingent rituals** which depend on the occurrence of particular events and are subdivided into life-crisis rituals and rituals of afflictions
- **Divinatory rituals** which correspond to a need to foretell the future
- **Health and fertility rituals** which are performed by tribal authority figures for the wellbeing of the tribe
- **Initiatory rituals** where individuals are initiated into a religious group or into worshipping a particular deity
- **Food offering rituals** to gods and/or ancestors, also known as rites of feasting, fasting and festivals

Another individual who has made a significant contribution to our understanding of rituals is a Dutch/French ethnographer, A. van Gennep. In his book *The Rites of Passage* (1960) he observes that a ritual action is divided into three phases or dynamics:

- **separation phase:** what is no longer needed is left behind, and the participant detaches from everything that does not have a relevant function in the present
- **transition phase:** in-between the old and the new, and can be difficult, scary or even dangerous. It is marked by ambiguity and often guidance is given by the elders. This phase is also called the liminal phase (Turner, 1977).
- **incorporation phase:** the participant returns to their stable everyday structure and activities, yet incorporating the changes that they have made through the previous stages.

The liminal phase is likened to death and rebirth, with a sacred component firmly placed in it. M. Eliade (1959) argues that we become aware of the sacred because it manifests itself as something completely different from the profane. He proposes the term 'hierophany' to describe "the act of manifestation of the sacred" (p.11) which can show itself to us through ordinary objects - like a stone or a tree - but in a "full manifestation of being" (p.138) and as such it reveals itself as sacred.

**Ritual symbols** are seen as a powerful means of communication, as they contain an important manifestation of the sacred. They derive their power from energies that are believed to be inherent

in persons, animals, plants, objects, relationships or even historical events (Turner, 1973). Ritual is therefore a process of mobilising, transmuting and incorporating these energies.

The main attributes of a ritual symbol are:

- it has multiple meanings
- it unifies distinctly different meanings, as within the symbol they become interconnected by analogy or by association
- it condenses various ideas, relations, actions and interconnections, which are represented simultaneously in one symbol
- it polarises its multiple meanings into normative and sensory poles

All this is relevant in our investigation, as it confirms that rituals have always played an important part in the process of transformation. There are some authors (Tolstoy, 1985) who indeed suggest that humankind went through a change of consciousness when starting to use rituals purposefully – to bury the dead and to decorate themselves in order to enhance social interactions.

Nowadays, as part of the transition from a materialistic into a more integrated consciousness, we can employ transition rituals intentionally to enhance psychological transformation.

### **1.3.1. Rituals in Shamanism**

Ritual is intrinsic to the shamanic way of working. The basis of the shamanic use of ritual is a belief that elements of the physical world already have, and can be further imbued with therapeutic power. Shamanism takes an engagement with matter beyond the symbolic - it sees the objects and places of the world as active participants in the work of healing. Sandra Ingerman, a contemporary teacher of shamanic practice illustrated this in her assertion that ‘Shamanic art does not just represent power, shamanic art **is** power.’ (M. Kerr personal communication, Ingerman, 2015). In the shamanic ontology, spirit is immanent in matter, and ritual is a participatory method of healing which naturally flows from this view of the world. There are echoes here of the vital materialism recently expounded in a Western philosophical context by Bennet (2010) but long known in indigenous worldviews.

There are many examples of the participatory practice of ritual in shamanism. It is instructive to consider some examples here: to illustrate how the border between spirit and matter is repeatedly crossed in order to weave healing strands into the web of life.

*Example - Four directions practice* (M. Kerr personal communication, Goncalves and Halliday, 2012)

This practice is used to help provide guidance on a question which is of concern to the practitioner. The group of practitioners marks a circle on the ground outdoors, using natural materials eg. sticks or stones. The four cardinal directions, North, South, East and West are indicated on the circle. An offering of prayers is made to each of the directions in turn.

Practitioners sit in the centre of the circle considering their personal questions. Sometimes repetitive drumming is used to facilitate an altered state of consciousness and allow a deeper, more intuitive formulation of the question.

Each practitioner then walks out of the circle in one of the cardinal directions and spends perhaps half an hour in the landscape of that direction. During that time he or she may notice elements of the landscape and be visited by birds and animals which might provide clues as to how the question could be answered. At the end of the time period, the practitioner returns to the centre of the

circle and repeats the process, this time in a different direction. This sequence is repeated until all the directions have been visited and consulted.

The practice is drawn to a close by offering prayers of thanks to each of the four directions, stepping out of the circle, and returning the sticks, stones etc. that made the circle to the land around.

*Example - Offering prayers and dreams to the fire* (M. Kerr personal communication, Almqvist, 2015)

This practice is performed in community, to ask a higher spiritual power for assistance in pursuing a personal hope or dream.

Practitioners spend time bringing to mind a personal wish or dream for their future. While contemplating this, they make an object which embodies their wish or dream, for example, a bundle of sticks, a woven object, or a circlet of flowers.

A fire is then made by the group of practitioners who have gathered for this purpose, and prayers are made to the fire to ask for help in this task. The materials used to construct the fire are seen as offerings, and incense may also be offered to mark the sacredness of the fire's purpose.

Participants then, in turn, offer each other's dream objects to the fire, with a prayer that their fellow practitioner receives help and guidance in their dream. This may be done without any sharing of the content of dreams with the group. In this way, the sacredness and personal nature of each dream is honoured and the practitioner is enabled to release their wish into the care of a power greater than their self. The smoke from the fire is seen as carrying the dreams and petitions to a greater spiritual power.

After every person's dream has been offered to the fire, prayers are given in thanks.

*Example - Releasing what is unwanted to the fire* (M. Kerr personal communication, Goncalves and Halliday, 2011)

This practice is used to help the practitioner to let go of something that they feel is hindering them, or does not belong in their psyche. The practitioner goes for a walk, perhaps for an hour outdoors, bringing to mind what it is they want to let go of. As they walk, they collect found materials that draw their attention, and seem in some way, to be connected with what they want to release.

At the end of the walk, they return to the company of fellow practitioners and gather the materials they have found together into an object which contains the essence of what they want to let go of. A fire is lit, and offerings and prayers are made to the fire to help in this task. Each practitioner then releases the object they have made into the fire.

At the close of the practice, prayers of thanks are made to the fire for its help. This practice is usually performed along with others.

*Example - spirit boat* (M. Kerr personal communication, Ingerman, 2015)

This ceremony is used to recover a lost part of a person's soul. A group of between 15 and 30 practitioners sit on the floor, forming the shape of a canoe. The person who is to have their soul part recovered lies in the centre of the group, as if lying on the floor of the boat. Two or three practitioners at the back of the canoe drum rhythmically, and those round the sides enact a rowing movement. One practitioner sits at the front of the boat: it is his or her job to enter an altered state of consciousness, and go on a dream journey in order to retrieve the lost soul part, while the others row and drum. When the person at the front of the boat has located the lost part, he or she carries it

back from the dream world, and physically blows it into the chest of the person lying on the floor. The drumming and rowing gradually slows down and ceases. Prayers of thanks are made, and the boat formation is disbanded.

As can be seen from these four examples, the interaction of **human agency, state of consciousness, community, physical objects, time and place** is all required for the ritual to be performed effectively.

In the first practice, there is a deliberate marking of a circle and directions, which endures as a sacred space for the duration of the practice, and is then dispersed again into the environment. The landscape around the circle is a crucial participant in the ritual. In the two contrasting fire practices, it is human intention in conjunction with the fire which constellates the specific therapeutic goal of the ritual - the fire is called upon for a different purpose in each case. All the practices are performed in a community of others with a similar intent. In the spirit boat practice, a sacred space is formed and dispersed by the constellation of practitioners' bodies.

There are boundaries of time and space in all of these rituals, which are controlled by human intention. However, once these boundaries have been set, the content of the ritual unfolds as a rich interplay between humans and the rest of nature, and between matter and spirit.

### 1.3.2. Rituals in Psychotherapy

There is an impressive amount of literature worldwide describing the healing potential of rituals used in psychotherapy (Al-Krenawi, 1999; Achterberg, 1994; Wyrostok, 1995; Roberts, 1999; Imber-Black, 2002; van der Hart, 1983; Rando, 1985; Grauf-Grounds & Edwards, 2007; Cox, 1989; Kharitonova, et al, 2010; and others). Some authors describe ways their *clients* used rituals to bring about a change in their sense of self (Orlandini, 2009; Selvini Palazzoli, 1977), while others talk about *their own* rituals preparing for psychotherapy work (Schwartz, 2001).

Some authors further suggest that the *psychotherapy process* itself is a ritual: "Anytime you have individuation occurring, you also have ritualization occurring ... The individuation process is itself a ritual process." (Moore, 2001, p.60). During individuation, a client has to allow himself to experience all three characteristics of the liminal phase of the ritual process as described by Turner (1977). These are: **submission, containment** and **enactment**, and together they are essential elements in the process of transformation.

There are also a number of aspects to the *structure of psychotherapy* that are ordered and disciplined in a way that overlaps with ritual. Wyrostok (1995) summarised them as follows:

- ritual at its simplest provides a tangible intervention which may, even as a placebo effect, offer some relief for the client, who is able to recognise that something is being done to ease their problems,
- ritual is novel and distinct from the everyday activities of the client,
- ritual has a structure: it is a time-limited activity with a definite beginning and end, which may encourage the client who is experiencing strong emotions to risk expressing them in a well contained context,
- ritual allows for the restructuring of social order and social dynamics, which is particularly useful in reinstating and maintaining a healthy hierarchy in a family or in a group,
- ritual is done in public or at least in the presence of another person, whose role is primarily to witness the client's move in the desired direction, to offer emotional support and to hear what has previously been left unspoken,

- ritual enhances relatedness: the shared experience of the ritual facilitates social bonding within a group and can be profoundly healing, particularly for someone who had previously experienced isolation,
- ritual facilitates life transitions and helps to establish a new identity, particularly for a client who wants to dis-identify with a traumatised part of himself and create a new sense of self, a new identity for the future,
- symbolism that is inherent in rituals carries the power to evoke the unconscious meanings of an event, and to bring to consciousness clients' distress or dysfunction,
- an altered state of consciousness that is often an integral part of ritual enactment has its physiological basis in the temporary dominance of the right hemisphere which synchronises cortical rhythms in both hemispheres and enables the participant to experience unity and holism.

It could be asserted that all of these features can apply equally to transition rituals and to psychotherapy.

## **2. AIM AND PURPOSE OF THE STUDY**

The aim and purpose of this study was to investigate the phenomenon of a transition ritual and to evaluate its efficacy, the role of symbols and its potential relevance to psychotherapy. There is much literature regarding the therapeutic relevance of rituals but no empirical research has been done in this area. We considered this to be the research gap that this study was going to fill, thus contributing new empirical knowledge to the scientific community.

Furthermore, we wanted to answer the main research questions:

- (a) What is beneficial about doing a transition ritual?
- (b) Is there transformation in a transition ritual (which has now been termed psycheritual) and if so, how does it manifest?
- (c) What is the role of symbols in a psycheritual?
- (d) What main elements contribute to an effective psycheritual?
- (e) What are the elements that make a psycheritual useful in a wider psychotherapeutic context?

## **3. METHODOLOGY**

### **3.1 Rationale**

The inevitably complex and personal nature of the experience of psycheritual made an idiographic, qualitative approach to data collection and data analysis the most appropriate choice. This kind of approach is best suited to the study of individuals' subjective experiences, which will be informed by their unique life histories. While such a perspective honours the richness and complexity of each person's experience, it does not preclude the researcher from drawing out patterns or commonalities in the data.

We wanted both to gather rich descriptions of personal experience and to identify themes and patterns in collective experience. For this, we chose to use a semi-structured interview procedure, and to analyse the data gathered in this way according to a modification of Glaser and Strauss's (1967) Grounded Theory.

Bryman (2012) lists many advantages in conducting interviews in qualitative research:

- ◆ they allow for a wide range of issues that people can be asked about,
- ◆ they allow for a detailed reconstruction of events and how they unfolded in

- relation to a current situation,
- ◆ from an ethical standpoint interviewing allows the interviewees to have more control over what they want to divulge to the researcher,
- ◆ interviewing is done within a contained and previously agreed setting, it is therefore less prone to undesirable reactive effects of interviewees and is less intrusive,
- ◆ they allow for longitudinal research,
- ◆ they allow access to a wider variety of people and situations,
- ◆ they allow for focused investigation of a research topic.

They also allow the researcher flexibility and freedom in formulating the research questions, depending on the chosen style of interviewing.

### 3.2. Quality criteria

There is a legitimate demand that every empirical study reaches certain standards of quality. Whether that empirical study is based on the quantitative paradigm or on the qualitative paradigm, certain criteria need to be fulfilled for the study to be regarded as scientific and worthy of contributing its new knowledge to the scientific community. In quantitative research, where the main objectives are to measure and predict, standards are achieved through the concepts of reliability and validity (Denzin & Lincoln, 1998; Gelo, Braakmann & Benetka, 2008; Gelo 2012).

In qualitative research, where the main objectives are to understand, describe and interpret a phenomenon, the classification of quality criteria is more heterogeneous and there is no single unified agreement regarding such criteria. As qualitative research has developed from social and human sciences it is obviously based on a different worldview from the natural sciences.

Some authors have proposed new terms for evaluating standards of quality in qualitative research (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Flick, 2006; see also a discussion on this in Golafshani, 2003). Guba & Lincoln (1998) for example, talk of two sets of criteria (1) trustworthiness of - credibility, - transferability, - dependability and - confirmability, and (2) criteria of authenticity; while Barker & Pistrang (2005) recommend disclosure of perspective, grounding interpretations in the data, coherence of interpretive framework and credibility checks. But such criteria have been criticised for staying too close to their quantitative counterparts from which they have “emancipated ... and pushed forward more appropriate criteria” (Mörtl & Gelo, 2015, p.384).

The debate is still ongoing and new guidelines for evaluating the trustworthiness and rigor of the process and the findings in qualitative research are being proposed. Elliott, Fischer & Rennie (1999) recognise this and suggest the following seven independent guidelines:

- (a) Owning one’s perspective encourages the researcher to make their theoretical orientation and personal anticipations explicit during the research and thus enhances its credibility.
- (b) Situating the sample encourages the researcher to effectively describe the research participants and their life circumstances.
- (c) Grounded in example directs the qualitative researcher to “provide examples of the data to illustrate both the analytic procedures used in the study and the understanding developed in the light of them” (Elliott et al, 1999, p. 222).
- (d) Providing credibility checks encourages the researcher to use multiple techniques for checking the credibility of his categories, findings and interpretations. These include prolonged engagement with and persistent observation of the data, triangulation of methods, peer debriefing and member check.
- (e) Coherence is a guideline that directs the researcher to organise the categories in such a way that the make sense and provide the reader with a coherent understanding of how they fit together.

- (f) Accomplishing general vs. specific research tasks informs the researcher that they need to distinguish their intentions clearly, whether they are about a general understanding of a phenomenon or about a specific case, and to present them to the reader accordingly.
- (g) Resonating with readers importantly emphasises that a clear and concise representation of findings is essential for the study to be of value to a wider scientific community.

In this study, we have used these seven principles as our guide as we carried out, analysed and wrote up our research. We disclosed our theoretical background as transpersonal psychotherapists interested in shamanism. We described the participants, their demographic details and the recruiting procedure. We disclosed detailed procedural steps of data collection and data analysis and in the results section we have provided numerous examples of the data. Credibility checks were many: from prolonged involvement with the data (two and a half years); peer debriefing and the coding process with supervisors; triangulation and at the end reviewing with the participants the research findings. We described codes and categories and made a graphical representation of the main concepts and presented the specific research task in detail. We also trust that our language has been clear and concrete enough as it is grounded in the expressions of the participants, and the findings of our investigation will be useful to anybody interested in transition rituals.

Furthermore, there are ethical considerations when doing qualitative research. It is essential that the researcher is sensitive and ethically aware, and stays closely connected to the participants and feels respectful curiosity for their experiencing. Barker, Pistrang & Elliott (2002) list four major ethical principles that need to be considered in any psychological research: informed consent of the participants, avoidance of harm at every stage of the research, privacy and confidentiality of the participants, and an approval of the research from an Ethics committee.

We have adhered to these ethical principles in our study.

## **4. METHOD**

### **4.1. The sample of investigation**

The invitation for a 4-hour workshop with the title *Life stages* (Hammerschlag & Silverman, 1999) went out to 10 women in Ljubljana, who were closely connected to the psychotherapy training at the Slovene Institute for Psychotherapy in Ljubljana. The inclusion criteria were:

- their age: this was specified to be between 28 and 38, because at least in the western culture this is the time when a natural transition occurs (or should occur) from a young adult into a more mature adult (Somers & Gordon-Brown, 2002).
- being in therapy or having immediate access to it: the potential of the workshop was such as to provoke unconscious personal issues that are best understood in the context of psychotherapy.
- that they hold an interest in depth psychology, are able to reflect on the experience, to introspect and to work with symbols.

The Invitation stated two main aims of the workshop:

- (a) to offer the participants an opportunity to experience a transition in the form of a transition ritual from one life stage (ie. early adulthood) to the next (ie. mature adulthood), using objects of their choice as symbols.
- (b) to enable the facilitator (R. Kress) to collect any relevant data for empirical research into potentially beneficial effects of a psycheritual, which could then be analysed and the results used in individual or group psychotherapy situations.

Additional information also included in the invitation were instructions for the participants on personal preparation prior to attending the workshop: "During the week before attending the workshop allow yourself some quiet time to reflect upon your life up to now and find an object which could symbolically represent the way you feel about yourself at your present stage in life. Then find an additional object that resonates for you and could symbolically represent you in the next stage of your life, as the more mature woman that you are becoming. Bring both objects/symbols with you to the workshop."

Post-workshop instructions included in the invitation read: "After the workshop you may experience some thoughts, feelings or dreams arising out of the psycheritual. As I would like to know about them, I would ask you to write them down. I will also be asking each of you to come for an interview a week later where you can tell me about your entire workshop experience."

The consent form was enclosed and the form explained that the workshop would be videoed and interviews audio recorded to facilitate subsequent analysis. Each participant was given an option to withdraw at any time if they so wished and each participant was assured of confidentiality. The participants were asked to bring a signed copy of the consent form to the workshop.

Seven women confirmed their participation in the workshop and this research.

#### **4.2. The Workshop**

Before we met for the workshop the room was prepared in a special manner: empty, apart from some futons and cushions to sit on, arranged in a circle. In the centre a candle and an incense stick were lit to create an atmosphere of something special happening and to help create a welcoming atmosphere.

During the introductory part of the ritual, the principal researcher (R. Kress) gave an overview of life stages, as formulated by Hammerschlag and Silverman (1999). These authors described life stages which are archetypal and experienced by every human being: Dawn, Spring, early and late Summer, Autumn, early and late Winter. She then led participants through an active imagination exercise in which they visualised a rosebush (Stevens, 1989) to deepen the connection with their inner worlds.

For the ritual, the researcher placed a stretched white scarf across the middle of the room and instructed the participants as follows:

- "Each of you has brought an object from home that symbolically represents early stages of your life. Tune into it, and when ready - one by one - stand up, move towards the threshold represented by the scarf and speak of what you have grown out of and are ready to leave behind. Put the object on the floor and take a step across the threshold.
- Here, another object is waiting for you that symbolically represents you in the next stage of your life, a stage of mature womanhood. Take it into your hands and speak from it. Find an embodied posture and let it inform you of its qualities, strengths and weaknesses. What is it like to stand your ground as a mature woman? Are you prepared for this task? What new qualities might you need to develop to fully enjoy your new position?
- Sit down at the other end of the room and wait until every woman in turn makes her way across the threshold, so that at the conclusion we will all gather at that end. Make notes or drawings if you wish."

When all the participants had crossed the threshold and the psycheritual was over, we sat in a circle again and the participants talked in a reflective way about what each of them had experienced during the workshop and particularly during the ritual.

### **4.3. Data collection**

A week after the workshop, individual interviews were conducted (and recorded) with all 7 participants. Interviews lasted for 50 minutes and the following questions were asked :

- 1) How has the experience of the ritual been for you?
- 2) What was happening with your feelings?
- 3) What was happening with your thoughts?
- 4) What was happening with your body?
- 5) What else you would like to share with me about your experience?

The primary focus of the interviews was on the individual experience of the participants and any changes they might have perceived. These pre-determined questions provided some structure to the interviewing process, but the answers were open-ended and very individual.

### **4.4. Data preparation**

The recorded interviews were carefully listened to and fully transcribed in their original Slovene. Although there are different ways of denoting what is said and how something is said (Flick, 2006) for the purposes of this investigation we were mainly interested in what was said. Then we selected all the paragraphs, called 'data extracts' by Braun & Clarke (2006), where the participants talked about the ritual.

### **4.5. Data analysis**

To analyse these data extracts we chose a modified method of Grounded Theory developed by Glaser and Strauss (1967), which followed certain procedural steps:

- 1) Reading through transcripts many times, keeping the research questions in mind: 'Is there transformation in a ritual? How does it happen? What was it like in the experience of these participants?' we made notes, marked meaningful units, tried to understand them and divided them into 'before' and 'after' where applicable. Some obvious categories started to emerge from the data.
- 2) The next step was to make open codes or 1<sup>st</sup> order codes of all seven interviews, which were firmly based on the original words of the participants, although now translated into English language and paraphrased.
- 3) Then we proceeded with making 2<sup>nd</sup> order codes, which in some cases took us away from the text into more abstract codes (especially when the narration was in 1<sup>st</sup> person singular) and in some cases stayed as key expressions as they were already an interpretation made by the interviewee that were rich in meaning. These codes were still quite descriptive.
- 4) Formulating the 3<sup>rd</sup> order codes was the next level up in abstraction. It required us to step away from the text and reflect on the emergent meaning of the codes. At this level we also grouped some 2<sup>nd</sup> order codes into code families as part of selective coding, which delimited the most relevant information and properties of the psycheritual.
- 5) This last step of qualitative text analysis involved creative and thoughtful processing of the emerged and abstracted categories, and formulating a conceptualisation that was grounded in them. The conceptualisation was illustrated in graphical and descriptive forms.

### **4.6. Triangulation**

Although not otherwise mentioned in this scientific article, the analysis was done both from the text of the 7 interviews and from 14 pictures depicting each participant in the 'before' and 'after' stages of the psycheritual. Picture analysis was done using the Documentary method (Bohnsack, 2008) and it also served as a method of triangulation therefore enhancing the trustworthiness of this qualitative research.

## 5. TEXT ANALYSIS RESULTS

In this section we present the fifteen (15) most relevant 3<sup>rd</sup> order codes that emerged from the analysis of the interview data. We selected them as relevant because the majority of the participants (4-7) talked about them as important. They are listed in alphabetical order rather than a notional order of importance since they all contribute equally to our understanding of a psycheritual.

For each 3<sup>rd</sup> order code we have listed two examples of open codes and expanded one of them with the actual text used by the participants (the latter is presented in italics). Throughout this process we stayed close to the words that the participants used during their interviews.

### Anxiety

I was fearful about showing the depth of my feelings which related to past events.

- I also felt doubt about whether some [familiar, but not acceptable issues] will stay anyway: *“There was also a little fear: can I really and completely leave behind what I don’t want anymore? Will this be enough? Maybe some will stay anyway? A little bit?”*

### Awareness

- Realisation on the feeling level and sense of self level: in order to feel more myself as a woman, as an individual, I have to give myself time to be alone.
- The ritual enabled me to look at my life from a distance, reminded me that there is a bigger picture: *“An unusual feeling ... as if I was looking at my life from a distance ... seeing that this bigger picture of ‘Who am I?’ and ‘Where am I going?’ is more important than the little every-day concerns.”*

### Containing

- The ritual contained both my feeling vulnerable and uncertain in the face of newness, and being ready for the new stage.
- Secure and contained: *“You know, when you come to a new phase, you aren’t that strong yet ... I searched for the place to put my roots down. And I felt an enormous relief - to be able to leave behind what was dragging me down ... and safe too. I felt this as the first full step, that I am where I am and that this is OK. No matter what happens ... no matter that I do not know exactly what my main focus, my next developmental step is going to be, I do know that I am OK. I was at peace with myself.”*

### Embodiment

- It encourages the participant to experience her theme in her body.
- It was therapeutic to really experience the experience, to absorb it: *“It is good to really experience the experience, to absorb it into yourself, then you can apply the same process to other things. Like if you have a problem and you deal with it in a similar way, it is more likely you come to a resolution or at least to some answers. It is the How that is important.”*

### Focus

- With rituals your feelings and body become focused onto one theme.
- I closed my eyes to focus on the essence only: *“... that’s why I closed my eyes and became focused, wanted to be able to speak without waffling, to say the essence only, to speak only what is important. And that’s what I did.”*

### Intense dreamwork

- I had two intense dreams this week, when I usually don't dream that much.
- I have had a whole cycle of dreams to do with the masculine, which has been an important theme in my life: *"I have dreamt a lot these nights. I remember them when I wake up, but then they are gone. The first three nights they were very intense and I wrote them down. They were all to do with the masculine which has been an important theme in my life."*

### Made explicit

- The contents of my thoughts moved into reality, got words and a shape.
- It was therapeutic to make explicit what we already had implicitly in ourselves: *"We had to work on something that had already been part of our past. It meant that we had to stop for a moment, think and make a decision. We already had it all within ourselves, the ritual was just the tool, a helpful method, to make it explicit."*

### Participatory process

- My inner process became more profound while I listened to the other women.
- When I listened to others I realised what I left behind: *"When I sat down on the other side and listened to other women, I saw what I left behind. When I listened to others I felt lighter, yes."*

### Resonance

- The ritual was closely connected with my current life events – ending one phase and beginning another.
- My thoughts were linked with themes from my current psychotherapy sessions: *"On the thought level it was linked. With my therapist I have been talking about trusting myself and being more conscious of myself. I listed the areas of my life that are good, strong."*

### Role of the group

- To do the ritual in a group meant I was part of something, I belonged somewhere.
- Group members shared similar feelings and connected with warm smiles: *"You know, when I spoke and when Shakti and Sunflower smiled to me, they had similar feelings - now is the time to actualise what I am saying, to make it real. I felt integrated with my future, it is already part of me."*

### Sense of self

- There were moments during the ritual when my sense of myself was not the usual I, but I was I in a different way.
- The ritual enabled me to experience a sense of myself – even if only for a moment – as a mature woman: *"Even if I am still in the previous stage, even if I am not yet with both feet firmly grounded in the new stage ... the ritual offered me an experience of how I am going to be, when I am there. I had a sense of security and peace, a sense of wholeness as a woman and of being OK as a woman. Even if I am not there yet, I had an experience of how I am going to be and this gave me hope, it was as if I already am."*

### Similar process and techniques as in psychotherapy

- It is similar with our therapeutic technique, where we also make physical steps.
- In therapy language the ritual enacted 'saying goodbye to the old script': *"There were many therapeutic aspects for me [in the ritual]. One of them was the distinction between the past as it was and which I cannot change, and knowing that the future is mine. I don't know what that was"*

*like for others, but for me it had a great therapeutic effect. In psychotherapy language we call this 'saying goodbye to the old script'.*"

### Symbol

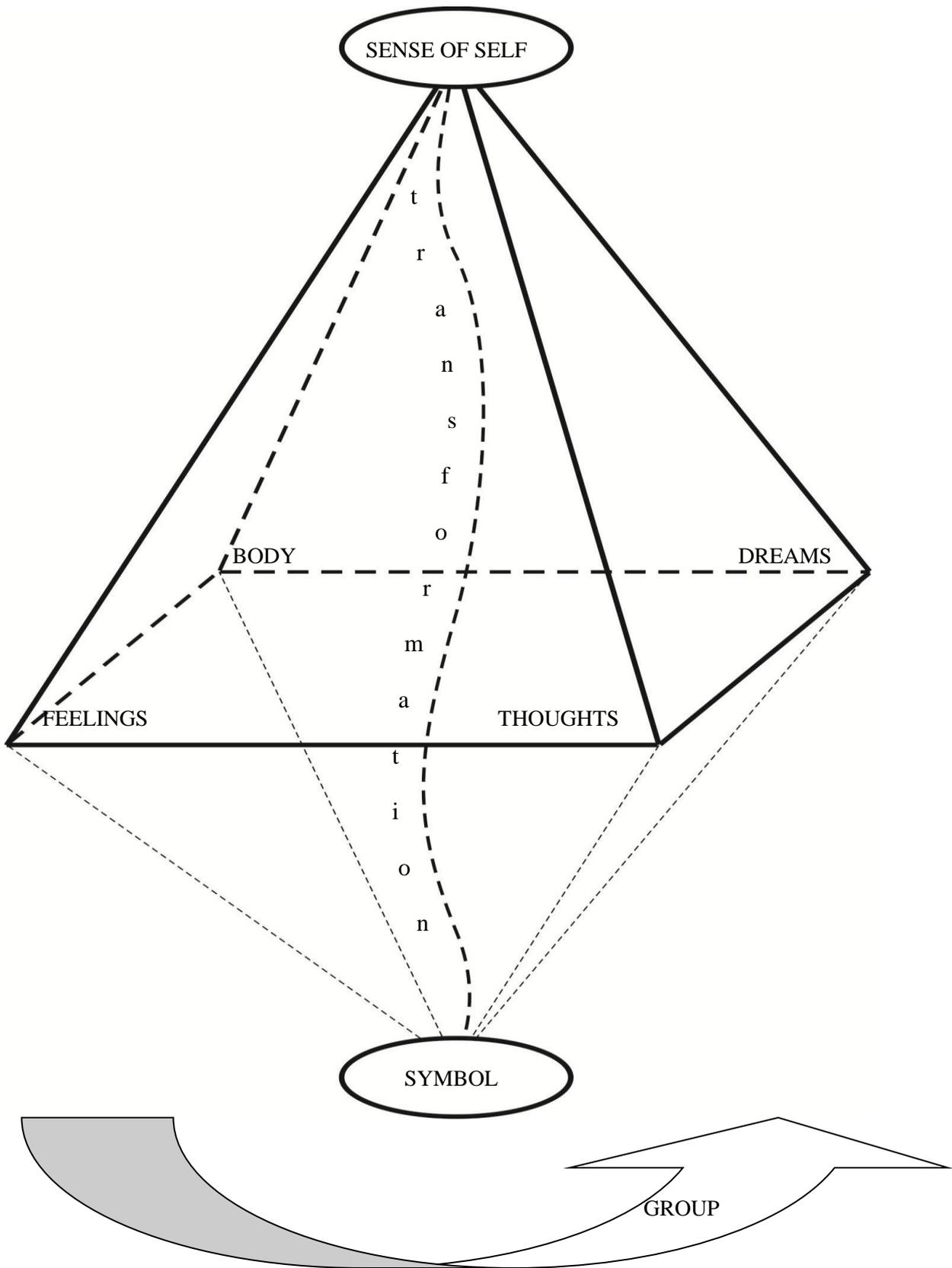
- One symbol has many meanings, it is multi-faceted.
- I felt the symbol working through me, making me strong: *"It brought peace and a feeling of safety as a woman. I am realistic and do not expect everything to be harmonious ... but I really felt the roots going deep down and I shall stay like that, regardless of the outer events."*

### Transformation

- There was an important change from a little girl dependent on others to a stronger sense of myself, more independent.
- During the ritual the everyday I changed into a more individual I: *"There were moments when I was not I. This was not a general sense of me, but only during some moments. Do I really want to say goodbye to this, is it really such a burden to me? And on the other hand: is this really my future? These were primarily signs that I was not the usual I. It was I in a different, more individual way."*

### Wholeness

- Body and mind work together in this process.
- The ritual was like a process of completing a circle: *"When I stood there, holding the symbol of a mature woman, I felt that I can trust myself, that I can be independent. That I am alone in the car and feel safe enough by myself. That the whole process is mine – I made the decision, I chose and now I am here. Completed a circle with myself. There is no assistance from outside and no fear. I think this is fantastic and really powerful."*



Graph 1: A graphical representation of the essential dynamics of a psycheritual

In keeping with the themes from the interview questions and the data emerging from the research, it became clear that a 3-dimensional graphical representation was needed in order to present the complex nature of a psycheritual. The graphical representation shows how a ritual process operates on both the conscious and unconscious levels and how a symbol has an evoking potential that brings a transformation of the person's sense of self. And in turn, the new sense of self also changes the meaning of the symbol in a way that is sometimes enhancing but sometimes confusing.

Transformation works both ways and finds expression on all 4 levels – not just through the body, feelings and thoughts, but also on a deeper unconscious level which manifests itself through dreams. This is why 'symbol' cannot be on the same level as the 4 vehicles through which transformation occurs; and also 'sense of self' with its ever-changing awareness and identifying nature, cannot be on the same level as its 4 functions.

The 3-dimensional model illustrates the transformative processes involved in a psycheritual whilst at the same time acknowledging that even this complex structure can only portray the dynamics that can be verbally expressed and consciously talked about for the purposes of this research. There is, no doubt, a deeper part that remains unexpressed, yet is part of the capacities of human psyche.

## 6. DISCUSSION

In this section we shall interweave the empirical findings of our study and our interpretation of these findings. Our discussion is based on our knowledge of the process of transition in rituals and on the explicit and implicit meanings abstracted from the analysis of the data.

### 6.1. Psycheritual in the context of contemporary psychotherapy

As psychotherapy is a process of changing the sense of self or self-identity, it is only obvious that it uses methods or interventions that are recognised as transformative. In the same way, psycheritual could also be considered as a process of transformation.

On the theoretical level, psycheritual includes many of the qualities of a transformative process summarised by Wyrostok (1995) such as being distinct from everyday life, enhancing relatedness, using symbols, and containing / facilitating life transitions. On the empirical level, its usefulness in catalysing therapeutic change is confirmed by our research results and statements given by the participants. For example:

*It can all be used in therapy, especially with clients who are already in the process of changing – it could be the final step in their therapy.*

*This physical step across the threshold could be used in various therapy situations, such as: endings of therapy, to walk the change in therapy, for reconciliation, in bereavement.*

What are these useful aspects of the psycheritual that make it an appropriate method for creating psychological changes? Our results show the following elements (examples of participants quotes for each element are given in Table 1)

a) It helps make the change process explicit, and therefore **increases consciousness**, reflexivity and agency. This applies to all the steps that participants undertook, from choosing suitable symbols at home, through verbalising the inner process, to the physical steps they undertook. For some

participants, this process began already at home when choosing the symbols, while for others the ritual offered a vantage point from which to reflect on their lives and to see a bigger picture than before.

b) It encourages **embodiment** of the symbols, and with this, embodiment of a new sense of self. This requires a mindful presence of being in the moment (Bruce et al, 2010; Preece, 2000). Our body is a powerful vehicle for holding our core beliefs about ourselves and it is important that changes happen on this level (eg. Rothschild, 2000; Van der Kolk, 2015).

c) **Containment**. While increasing consciousness and embodiment are intrinsic mechanisms of the transformative process in psycheritual, containment is better understood as an underlying precondition for transformation to occur. It is important in the liminal phase of the ritual process as it contains uncertainties and ambiguities (Turner, 1977).

Our results show that containment was experienced through a helpful and encouraging facilitator whose warm and accepting attitude gave the participants permission to be what they chose to be. It was further experienced through the group which offered a sense of security, trust and belonging (Yalom, 1985). This could also be understood in terms of the participatory process as described by Ferrer (2002).

d) **Resonating effect**. Our results show that the psycheritual is not a one-off event, but that its effects continue to echo into the future. The resonating was seen in two ways: first, the themes were closely linked with current themes from the participants' personal and professional lives and secondly, the echoing of the experience continued on all levels: feeling, thinking and dreaming. One participant reported that the echoing of the psycheritual triggered an inner parallel process that was going to continue for some time.

Element	Participant quotes
<b>Consciousness</b>	<p><i>By speaking out loud what your goal is, the conscious and the unconscious both become aligned towards it.</i></p> <p><i>I became aware of my future vision (or lack of it).</i></p> <p><i>I became aware of my strong self and that this is the foundation for the next stage in my life.</i></p>
<b>Embodiment</b>	<p><i>My body carried the authority of the new me as I embodied the symbol.</i></p> <p><i>Ritual encourages the participant to experience her theme in her body.</i></p> <p><i>To embody the symbols was very healing. Bodily sensations came in place of thoughts.</i></p>
<b>Containing</b>	<p><i>The ritual contained both my feeling vulnerable and uncertain in the face of newness, and being ready for the new stage.</i></p> <p><i>It is empowering to share with others – they witness your initiation.</i></p> <p><i>The group offered me a sense of security, and confirmed my own experience.</i></p>
<b>Resonating</b>	<p><i>The ritual was closely linked with the current inter-relational theme that occupies me at the moment – to stand up for myself.</i></p> <p><i>The experience will stay with me forever, every time I see the symbol, I remember it.</i></p> <p><i>Later the body still remembers its feelings and movement.</i></p>

**Table 1: Elements of psycheritual contributing to therapeutic change**

## 6.2. Transformation

The analysis of our results shows that transformation is an inherent part of psycheritual and it happens on all four levels of being: thoughts, feelings, body and on a deeper unconscious level which manifests itself through dreams. We have included examples of participants' quotes here (in italics) in order to illustrate more richly the facets of transformation that we observed.

The transformation that we found in our study contributed to a changed sense of self, and for these participants that meant an important transition to mature womanhood. This was an important event in their lives.

*Stepping onto the other side was a big decision, something I have been preparing to do for 5 years.*

a) **Transformation on the thought level** involved a shift from habitual critical ruminations about the self to a clearer and more focused way of thinking, particularly when considering future personal and professional choices.

*I had powerful and clear thoughts about continuing the professional path I had chosen (on the 'after' side).*

Transformation was also about consciously forming clear and concise sentences as opposed to a mindless flow of words.

*I was thinking about the discrepancy between my usual superficial waffling and my innate wisdom.*

Further, there are examples in our results indicating the participants' attempts to give meaning and to understand the nature of the new symbol.

*My thoughts changed from the meaning of my words to the nature of the symbol.*

b) **Transformation on the feeling level** confirms Turner's (1977) writings on the liminal phase. Some participants experienced anxiety and doubts in the 'before' stage which is a natural reaction to changes. It also helps one to be attentive and focused which are qualities of a mindful state.

*I felt fearful about showing the depth of my feelings which related to past events.*

*I closed my eyes to focus on the essence only; to speak only what is important.*

Feelings ranged from sadness about some childhood events, heaviness of old burdens to intense happiness that the ritual activity was happening at such a right time and about new insights being gained through it. There was also expressed determination to move forward.

*I felt sad about my emotional inheritance and knew strongly that I didn't want to pass it onto my children.*

*I felt very happy about all the possibilities ahead of me ... and this inner power to make them come true. I felt integrated with my future, it is already part of me.*

c) **Transformation on the body level.** Psycheritual engaged the body in ways that were both powerful and positive. The participants reported changes on the body level from being tense or not

being in touch with it to having relaxed shoulders, being grounded and feeling a sense of feminine sensuality in the body.

*I was not in touch with my body because I was nervous ('before').*

*I was very aware of my body as it was linked with my theme ... tension dissipated through the roots into the soil ('after').*

*My body carried the authority of the new me.*

Some of the transformation on the body level is attributed to embodiment of a symbol, such as, for example, a tree which was BS. symbol for herself as a mature woman.

*Both feet were firmly on the ground, my body relaxed and I felt grounded and strong.*

From the principle of mind/body holism (Vick, 2002) we understand that body and mind working together, contribute to a sense of wholeness which makes the participant a stronger and better integrated personality. Embodiment of the chosen symbol that is at the same time also verbalised is a powerful way of bringing about a change in the sense of self. This is supported by neurobiology research (Sieff, 2010; Wilkinson, 2010): the right brain hemisphere is accessed through embodied ways but with the verbal expression, the left hemisphere is engaged as well – this leads to a sense of wholeness through strengthening the corpus callosum.

*There were moments during the ritual when my sense of self was not the usual I, but it was I in a different way.*

#### **d) Transformation manifested through dreams.**

A psycheritual is an act that enhances awareness of self which is expressed also through dreams, partly through an increase in dreaming ...

*The ritual triggered more dreaming than usual.*

*I had two intense dreams this week, when I usually don't dream that much.*

and partly through dreams that may be shocking or offering resolution:

*In my dreams I resolved a childhood trauma, for the first time.*

The participants also reported their dreams being closely linked with their psychological realities and indicating a direction for future development. Psychological maturation is directed towards becoming whole and strengthening agency. The dreams that participants reported confirmed movement in this direction:

*In my dreams I had to stand up for myself.*

*The dreams showed me that anger/assertiveness is missing.*

Both Shamanic and Jungian understandings of the function of dreams highlight their crucial role in knowing our potential and becoming more whole. In Jung's understanding, dreams express contents we are not yet conscious of, which help us on our path of individuation. In Shamanism, initiatory dreams often guide the potential shaman in taking up their calling. Dreams provide access to the world of guides and tutelary spirits. And shamans need to understand their patients' symbols and be able to interpret their dreams in order to help them heal (Krippner, 1987).

### 6.3. The role of symbols

A lot has been written on symbols and their function in the human psyche. For Jung (1967) they are an expression of the transcendent function, where opposing forces can be reconciled. Rossano (2010) suggests they can form a bridge between the conscious mind and the forces of nature. Turner (1973) and Eliade (1959) talk about the sacred element of symbols that is mobilised through ritual. In Shamanism, the ontological divide between spirit and matter is not present in the same way that it is in contemporary mainstream Western culture. Symbolic objects in shamanism are seen as physical vehicles of psychic power that can be worked with in the material realm. As Ingerman says: '*Shamanic art does not represent power: it is power.*' (M. Kerr personal communication, S. Ingerman, 2015).

Our findings show that symbols really are a powerful agent in the process of transformation and have a multi-faceted nature and hidden evocative capacity:

*The symbol changed its meaning, I could see new attributes in it.*

*I sensed the capacity of a small symbol and a simple sentence to encompass complex meanings, less is more.*

They work on the conscious and unconscious levels and in both directions: by intuitively choosing an object as a physical carrier of an inner state of being, we allow the unconscious to speak to us and so we learn much about ourselves that would otherwise stay hidden. By leaving the old behind and embodying the new in a ritual process a symbolic object becomes empowered with a numinous quality that shapes our new sense of self in the direction of wholeness and integration.

*My sense of self changed, it was different, rather special or out of the ordinary.*

*I felt integrated, an independent female, a woman.*

## 7. CONTROVERSIES AND WORLDVIEWS

As described in the introduction to this paper, the youngest historical root of today's theory and practice of psychotherapy is founded in the natural sciences. Also, in many European countries psychotherapy is still in the process of establishing its credibility in the field of mental health – which until recently belonged to psychology and psychiatry. Therefore, it is only natural that psychotherapy has initially adopted the positivistic foundations that support the quantitative paradigm in empirical research.

However, the emergence of new schools of psychotherapy based on humanistic and transpersonal worldviews have prompted changes in the research world and a growth in the use of qualitative methods (eg. Romanyshyn 2007, Braud and Anderson, 1998) . These idiographic methods allow an open exploration of clients' lived experience. Thus, we would argue that qualitative methods deal directly with the substance of psychotherapy - the particular life experience of each client. In this way they address, with unparalleled precision, the EAP's emphasis on research-informed practice and practice-informed research (Castonguay, Barkham, Lutz & McAleavey, 2013).

We acknowledge that the results of our study might offer a challenge to the positivistic paradigm that still dominates much research and some of psychotherapy practice. The whole area of the transformative power of rituals is strongly eschewed by positivism as it is intangible, and some of it seemingly beyond the understanding of our rational mind. The researcher needs to come from a

worldview which includes metaphysical concepts, such as spiritual, sacred, healing ... He or she needs to be willing to delve deeply into a lived human experience, in order to explore it, understand it and describe it in a systematic scientific way.

## 8. CONCLUSION

Our research provides hard evidence that a sub-type of transition rituals that we have named psycheritual is a transpersonal process that leads to a powerful therapeutic shift in how participants experience themselves. All seven participants who underwent the process of leaving the old behind and embodying the new with the help of symbols reported beneficial changes in the sense of self.

As human beings, we have always been ritual-makers. Much ritual activity seems to be generated by the personal and collective unconscious levels of our psyche. However, this deep, unseen activity has real-world benefits. All the women in our study felt a conscious shift in their way of being in the world, and it would be interesting to conduct further research into the behavioural outcomes that this may have produced.

We would suggest from our research that rituals have the potential to strongly influence our present conscious lives. It seems that when we consciously undertake such a symbolic action, we gain access to a hitherto intangible, but deeply pragmatic and wise part of our psyche. This can lead us in the direction of a fuller, stronger and more integrated life.

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