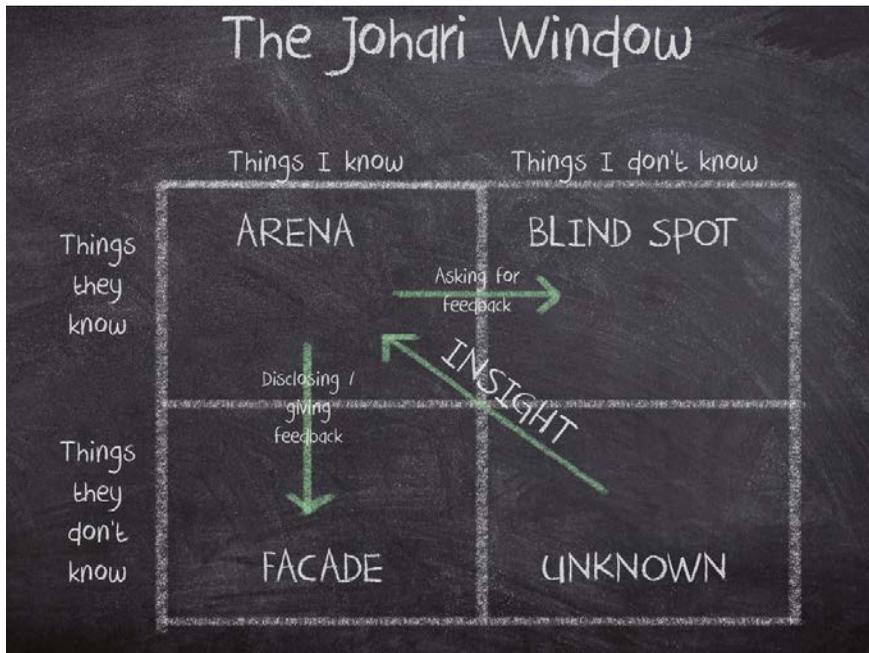


Academic Article

Psychotherapists’ Lived Experience of Psychological Blind Spots: Findings from a Hermeneutic Phenomenological Enquiry

By Melanie McGovern



psychotherapists’ understandings of the phenomena of ‘Psychological blind spots’ and ‘Moments of self-awareness’ by means of an exploratory qualitative study. For the purpose of this article, I intend to highlight a portion of the main themes including a number of meta-themes of psychological blind spots. This will exclude the findings from moments of self-awareness. The aim of this study was to explore a cohort of experienced psychotherapists, and to seek a greater understanding of their lived experience of psychological blind spots. This naturalistic exploratory study took a hermeneutic phenomenological epistemological stance to generate descriptive knowledge and analytical concepts through semi-structured interviews and dialogic engagement with the participants, including reflections and the transcribed text via analyses (van Manen, 1990, 2014).

“Most people identify themselves almost exclusively with their consciousness and imagine that they are only what they know about themselves. Yet anyone with even a smattering of psychology can see how limited this knowledge is”

(Jung, 1961/1995, p.330)

The ubiquity of blind spots is evident. At some point in our lives we all have become aware of another’s opacities or reluctance to look at self, whilst negating the possible bias of our own world view. Now in the second decade of the 21st century it is our responsibility to refocus the lens which informs our reality and guides our

judgements unwittingly.

The purpose of this article is to disseminate my doctoral research results. However, the size of the article does not lend itself to discuss all the findings. Therefore I will focus on the findings germane to this issues theme of ‘Equality, Diversity and Inclusion’. The research proposed a study of

Psychological blind spots

“Vision waits for us, ready to give itself; we use countless techniques to cut ourselves off from it” (Kennelly cited in Romanyshyn, 2013, p.30).

Nietzsche, Plato, Shakespeare and Freud were all aware of the deep non-conscious processes of the human mind which many are oblivious to (Kahn, 2002). We are called to bear witness to those hushed whispers which

would otherwise be forgotten (Romanyshyn cited in Brooke, 2015). In *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell reminds us of the beauty and power of being in touch with the underworld of our mind (Kahn, 2002). For Jung, psychology means, first and foremost, an empirical investigation of the unknown part of the psyche which manifests in many ways (Von Franz, 1975). Romanyshyn considers creating awareness of non-conscious motives, ideas and fears not only an ethical imperative but a productive one (2006).

Consciousness, no matter how extensive it may be, must always remain the smaller circle within the greater circle of the unconscious, an island surrounded by the sea; and, like the sea itself, the unconscious yields an endless and self-replenishing abundance of living creatures, a wealth beyond our fathoming (Jung, 1954, p.178).

Much of our mental life is not obvious to us and therefore we remain ignorant of our motives (Kahn, 2002). Motivated cognition influences distort self-perception that help to create blind spots (Vazire and Carlson, 2011). Previous research asked clients to rank in order, sixty factors in therapy according to their degree of helpfulness (Yalom 1980). The research concluded that the single most frequently chosen item was by far “discovering and accepting previously unknown or unacceptable parts of myself” (Yalom 1980, p.354). Further research shows that “many aspects of ourselves are hidden from conscious awareness” (Vazire and Carlson, 2010, p.107). Hoedemakers (2010) stated the need for more research to identify elements that unfold outside our direct awareness.

Hillman states that an area of unawareness generally lies hidden behind one’s routine, dogmas, fixed beliefs and values (Drob, 1999).

In order to maintain mental homeostasis and protect the conscious mind from the effects of inner conflicts, the ego utilises miscellaneous defence mechanism

(Wagas, 2015)

Therefore, psychological blind spots may be stored knowledge we are unaware of, but that influences our everyday behaviour and conscious experience (Norman, 2010). Furthermore, a blind spot may be defined as a prejudice, or subject area, that one has but is often unaware of (Webster, 2010; Cambridge, 2017). It could also be an area of ignorance or direction in which somebody’s vision is obscured (Encarta, 2019). They are the part of our mental life which we are unaware of and may include impulses, ideas, wishes and fears that operate unwittingly and influence our everyday behaviour (Kahn, 2002).

Motivated Cognitive Barriers

People’s perceptions of their own personalities, while largely accurate, contain important omissions. Some of these blind spots are likely due to a simple lack of information and awareness, whereas others are due to motivated distortions in our self-perceptions. (Vazire and Carlson, 2011, p.104).

Despite one’s awareness of their feelings, thoughts and behaviours, informational and motivational barriers often prevent one from seeing oneself accurately (Carlson, 2013). Two major barriers to self-knowledge exist: informational barriers (i.e., the quantity and quality of information people have about themselves) and motivational barriers (i.e., ego-protective and

coping mechanism) (Carlson, 2013). These operate together and are the primary explanations for blind spots in self-knowledge (Vazire, 2010). Broad, (1968) stated that sometimes it is a conscious and deliberate process to block awareness and other times it is habitual. It is important to re-think some psychoanalytical and unconscious concepts in light of modern neuroscience (Leuzinger-Bohleber, and Solms, 2017).

In order to maintain mental homeostasis and protect the conscious mind from the effects of inner conflicts, the ego utilises miscellaneous defence mechanism (Wagas, 2015). Techniques were developed for distorting or rejecting from consciousness some features of reality, to avoid the unbearable psychological pain (anxiety) from consciousness (Erdelyi, 1985). In poor self-awareness, avoidance and defensive attributions to external causes are clear (Silvia, and Duval, 2001). Research by Twenge, Catanese, & Baumeister, (2003) has demonstrated decreased self-awareness among individuals in negative social situations is a defensive strategy designed to buffer the self from the acute distress (and feelings of rejection).

Illusion of Objectivity

There can never be absolute freedom from prejudice, for even the most objective and impartial investigator is liable to become the victim of some unconscious assumption upon entering a region where the darkness has never been illuminated and where he can recognize nothing. (Jung, 1954, p.168).

Blind spots in people who are confident of their objectivity are common in everyday life (Pronin & Kugler, 2007). Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002) found that people thought that blind spots or cognitive biases were more prevalent in others than themselves. “Because our peers

and especially our adversaries often fail to share our views, we inevitably infer that they are less objective than we are” (Pronin, Lin, and Ross 2002, p.378). Research shows that individuals maintain an illusion of objectivity (Bazerman and Banaji, 2005); that is, they incorrectly view themselves as more objective than others (Epley et al., 2006). This asymmetry in perception of bias arises from naive realism (Pronin, Lin, and Ross, 2002). This fosters the impression of an objective self in a world of biased others (Pronin, Linn and Ross, 2002). However, the tendency to see bias in others, while being blind to it ourselves, has been shown across a range of cognitive and motivational research (Pronin, Gilovich & Ross, 2004). Pronin & Kugler’s, (2007) study found that only after being educated about the importance of unconscious processes in guiding judgment and action and the fallibility of introspection did participants cease denying their relative susceptibility to the bias blind spot.

Reflexivity

My own interest on this topic originated mostly from my psychotherapy practice, where several of my clients have undergone moments of heightened awareness that encouraged an opening of their blind spots and ultimately challenged their personal perspective, including their worldview. Through awareness, I personally grew cognizant of the obstructions to knowledge that had impeded my growth. Blind spots akin to implicit fear (‘stay in the comfortable job’), latent self-views (‘not being good enough’) and placatory styles of interpersonally relating had eclipsed my awareness for most of my life (McGovern, in press). Illumination of my blind spots highlighted the depths of my shadow. Genuine curiosity including

*F*ocussing on the phenomenon of psychological blind spots two main categories emerged

passionate interest on this chosen topic would prove the bedrock of my doctoral research. Throughout the research process, it was important for me to remain transparent, acknowledge my implicit assumptions (Kafle, 2011) and ensure they fed into the research in creative, useful ways (Kelly, 2019).

Hermeneutic Phenomenology

I sought out a research methodology and design that resonated with my chosen topic whilst also remaining loyal to my natural research disposition. This engendered fidelity and heightened the truth value of the research (Levitt, Motusky, Wertz, Morrow, and Ponterotto, 2016). Ultimately, therefore, it was the dialogical, reflexive and richly expressive methodology of hermeneutic phenomenology, with its epistemological underpinnings in making visible that which is invisible (Seth, 2017) that would facilitate and enable expression of the essence of psychotherapists lived experience of psychological blind spots. It rejects the ideology of suspending personal opinion (epoche) or bracketing (Annells, 1996), with a move towards interpretation (Van Manen, 1990), as interpretations are all we can have (Kafle, 2011). Therefore it places importance in the hermeneutic engagement with texts, either as a source or expression of the phenomenon being studied (King, 2020).

Findings and Discussion

Focussing on the phenomenon of psychological blind spots two main

categories emerged; ‘Blind self’ and ‘Blind self – other’. The former emphasising psychotherapists understanding of a blind spot in relation to self, the latter was where one experienced a psychological blind spot in relation to another. ‘Blind self’ manifested as one evaded an emotion or other in the context of themselves. At times this was achieved by unconscious habituation and other times it was an unbeknownst reaction to a situation. ‘Blind self – other’ presented where another, be it through dynamic interpersonal relationship or a brief encounter, invited this area of unawareness. (Figures 1 and 2)

Blind Self –Other

From the category ‘Blind Self – Other’ emerged two main themes; ‘Polarised perspective’ and ‘Familial opacities’. Blind spots within the context of the family were of note.

Polarised Perspectives

From the theme of ‘Polarised perspective’ emerged three meta-themes; ‘Seeing subjectively – blind to the bigger picture’; ‘Concealed judgement’; ‘The enemy is within not without – everyone is my mirror’.

Seeing subjectively – Blind to the bigger picture

There is no thought or perception that is not mediated by a complex unconscious perspective, but not even a psychologist is prepared to regard their statements, at least in part, as a subjectively conditioned confession. (Romanyshyn, 2013, p.26)

The findings disclosed participant’s experience of psychological blind spots as a ‘particular perspective’ or ‘polarised vision’. Participants described the blind spot as ‘seeing in one direction’ which gave ‘a slanted, subjective view’. Jung stated (1954) just as he finds himself shaped

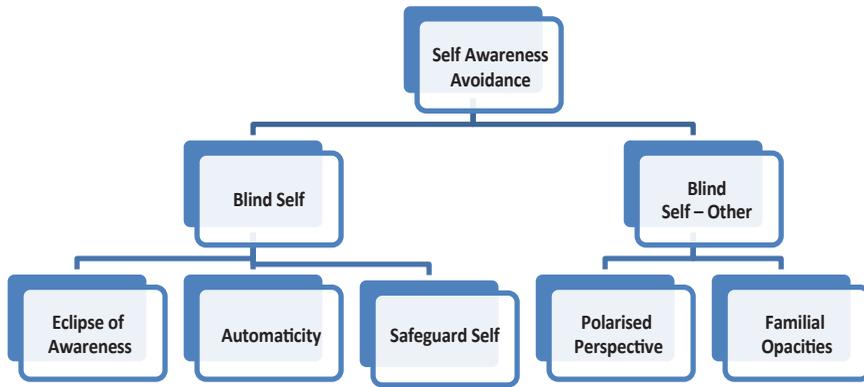


Figure 1: Hierarchy of psychological blind spots themes

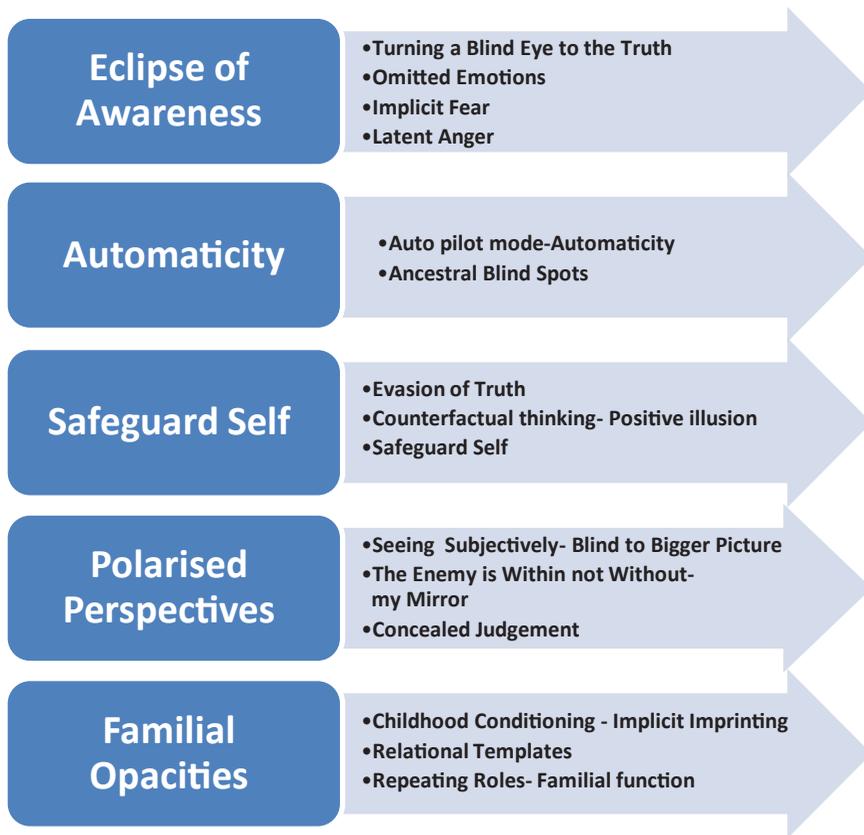


Figure 2: Themes and meta-themes of psychological blind spots

by external and objective social influence, so too is he influenced by internal and unconscious forces, which he summed up under the term the subjective factor. In subjective self-awareness, the focus of attention is directed outward (Duval, & Wicklund, 1971). The person will neither be aware of the viewpoints of others, nor will he/she be even cognizant of

oneself as a distinct entity to be compared against standards (Duval & Wicklund, 1971). One therapist shared their understanding; “It’s like I’m coming from a particular perspective that I believe to be a fact or truth or obviously the only way to think or see a thing” (Participant 5: Annabella). Pronin, Lin, and Ross (2002) stated that one’s peers and adversaries

see events and issues through the distorted prism of their world view and often see themselves in a positive light.

Concealed Judgement

“Prejudice cripples and injures the full phenomenon of psychic life.” (Jung, 1961/1995, p.33).

Various participants noted how concealed judgement in the form of ‘preconceptions’, ‘ignorance’ and ‘biased opinions’ presented as blind spots that people were not aware of. Biases typically operate unconsciously, thereby leaving their influence hidden from introspection (Wilson & Brekke, 1994). Personal and theoretical prejudices are the most serious obstacles in the way of psychological judgment (Jung, 1954). Tunnel vision manifested for the participants in the form of ‘social prejudices’, ‘latent judgements’ and ‘narrow mindedness’. Therapists experienced psychological blind spots as implicit attitudes and a non-conscious resistance to a different perspective. This finding confirmed the literature that found bias blind spots are easy to recognise in others but often challenging to detect in one’s own judgements (West et. al., 2012). “When one fails to see or understand their unconscious prejudices, they are apt to think no bias has occurred and that their decision was indeed objective and reasonable” (West et al., 2012, p.515). However, bias and preconceptions are a natural and universal part of being human, and it is important to differentiate bias from malicious intent (Sandeem, et. al. 2018). One participant referred to the power of supervision in challenging concealed opinion. The following is a fitting exemplar of how one can judge without awareness; “My supervisor said, you have to let go of the judgement because you don’t ever really know the full circumstances. And sure enough, as weeks unfolded, she was right.”

(Participant 4: Samantha). In this case, the insight of her supervisor was fundamental to bringing awareness to the blind spot.

The enemy is within not without- Everyone is my mirror

“Our ordinary life still swarms with projections. You can find them spread out in the newspapers, in books, rumours, and in ordinary social gossip. All gaps in or actual knowledge are still filled out with projections.” (Jung, 1938/40, p.83).

In reduced self-awareness, avoidance and defensive attributions to external causes are prevalent (Silvia, and Duval, 2001). The research findings evidenced participants’ awareness of blind spots as a form of ‘*projection*’ or ‘*attribution*’ where one ascribes their personal opinions or irritations onto another unconsciously. Consciousness, instead of being widened by the withdrawal of projections, is narrowed, because society, a mere circumstance of human existence, is set up as an aim (Pronin, Lin, and Ross, 2002). Existential/Analytic psychotherapists have used the expression implicit world projection to state the ways one projects their world designs from meaningful fore-structures and backgrounds of their lives (Tratter, 2015). “Projection is involuntary transposition of something unconscious in ourselves into an outer object” (Von Franz, 1975, p.77). In addition, projection is attributing to others one’s own unacceptable thoughts, feelings or intentions (Cramer, 2015). Numerous participants experienced this blind spot as ‘*attacking another as opposed to dealing with self*’ or ‘*ascribing something of self onto another*’. This finding added to the existing literature by exposing the qualitative essence of the experience which presented for one therapist as ‘*the enemy is within not without...I had deeper awareness*

and realisation that any person that irritates me or that annoys me; that’s coming from within me, it’s not them ... I realised that everyone is my mirror’ (Participant 7: Joe).

This quote aptly elucidates the participant’s lived experience of a blind spot; ‘What one is not aware of in himself, he may recognize in another’ (MacIntyre, 2004). Jung expressed that, “A person realizes that he himself has a shadow and that his enemy is in his own heart” (1954, p.198) and ‘Everything that irritates us about others can lead us to an understanding of ourselves’ (1961/1995, p.275).

Blind Self

‘Blind self’ emerged as a category under psychological blind spots. This predominately emphasised blind spots in relation to self. Themes such as; ‘Eclipse of awareness’, ‘Automaticity’ and ‘Safeguard self’ were found in the data set.

Automaticity

Various participants understood psychological blind spots as a form of automaticity. A number of therapists used the terms ‘*recurring blind spots*’ or ‘*repetitive behaviour*’ to describe their sense of automatic reactions. This finding validated the literature where previous studies have shown that low self-focus was associated with automaticity (Silvia, and Duval, 2001). Attention typically operates on automatic; we go with familiar habits (Palmer, 1998). Many participants likened their blind spot to the notion of being ‘*on a treadmill*’ and ‘*sleepwalking through life*’. This custom like any other may eventually become so strong that it cannot be overcome by deliberate volition (Broad, 1968). A fitting quote shared by a participant disclosed his understanding of psychological blind spots as a form of auto pilot living. This image creates the notion of repetitive behaviour in unawareness; ‘*Like being on the treadmill of life...I*

liked that metaphor or that image because it feels like the automaticity or the habitual or the auto pilot of life that when we have a break or we stop, we can be a little bit more mindful’ (Participant 6: Jacob). The sobering reality is that placement of attention is largely habitual (Palmer, 1998). Research on self-awareness show how impenetrable this automatic evaluation process can be (Silvia, and Duval, 2001).

Ancestral Blind Spots

Philosophy attempts to recover the original sense of things by a kind of archaeology, by striving to move backwards through the genetic constitutions that lie within the categorical formations we inherit (Sokolowski, 2000, p. 167).

A small number of therapists interpreted psychological blind spots as being inherited from previous generations. Freud believed in genetics and the preserving of memories that were experienced by our ancestors (Easthope, 1999). In addition, Jung affirmed that the mind is an active principle in inheritance (Von Franz, 1975). It consists of the sum of the ancestral minds, the unseen fathers whose authority is born anew with the child (Von Franz, 1975). The idea that blind spots can be handed down from one’s ancestors was understood as a blind spot. A therapist avowed; ‘*I think these blind spots carry through generations. It’s very important to break that*’ (Participant 7: Joe).

Clinical Implications

Nowadays, the loss of systems of meaning and value, as well as feelings of insufficiency within a more closely intertwined, globalised, mediatised and technically dominated new world is challenging our level of awareness (Leuzinger-Bohleber, and Solms, 2017). Psychoanalytical therapists Robert Stolorow stated the crucial aspect of therapy is making the invisible

visible (cited in Kahn, 2002). May (1967) affirmed the uncovering of blind spots, the creation of self-awareness and actualizing the potentialities of one's being are the primary concern of psychotherapy. Jung concurred stating psychotherapy means, first and foremost, an empirical investigation of the unknown part of the psyche which manifests in many ways (Von Franz, 1975). All participants in this study discussed the heightened sense of awareness and potentiality to change through the revelation of a blind spot, although it is sometimes a challenging and arduous task.

Conclusion

We must always inform the Kaleidoscope of knowledge in order to recognise commonalities as well as differences to individual conceptualisations of the unconscious and enable further discussions. This is a prerogative for any innovative advancement of psychotherapy as an internationally acclaimed science (Leuzinger-Bohleber, and Solms, 2017, p. 9).

Counselling psychologists are recognizing therapy as a culturally contextualized practice whereby counselors' own beliefs, expectations, values and bias blind spots influence professional practice and research (Ridley, Mendoza, & Kanitz, 1994). The one constant that therapists can count on is that they will carry their own lifetime of accumulated cultural assumptions, experiences and biases wherever they go (Sandeem, et al., 2018). The culture and identity of Ireland has essentially transformed producing the environment for a multicultural Ireland (Banks, 2008) that strives for equality, diversity and inclusion of its entire populace. Given the multicultural demographics of our current social landscape, there is an increasing need for cultural competence and creation of awareness is paramount

for this to transpire. Cultural competence has been described as the appropriate response to the dilemma of misunderstandings and impasses preventing effective practice as a result of cultural gaps between service systems, practitioners and clients (Williams, 1999; Martin & Miracle, 2001). CORU is Ireland's multi-profession health and social care regulator. It specifies "demonstrating cultural competence" as a means of promoting social justice in practice within the *Code of Professional Conduct and Ethics* (2011, p.5). One of the defining properties of psychotherapy is the fundamental concern with issues of social justice, equality and a commitment to working with diversity and oppressed groups. "If the world is always revealed according to the way one stands within it, this self-disclosure as a world is especially apparent when that revealed world is uncluttered with social platitudes and empirical literalism" (Brooke, 2015, p.136). Supervision, according to Brown & Bourne (2002), is the primary means by which to explore reflective practice. It necessitates 'hard systematic thinking and soft initiative insight' (Drew & Bingham, 2001, p. 221). Self-focus attention engendered through supervision or reflection increases self-attribution (Silvia, and Duval, 2001) which is fundamental for the disclosure of blind spots.

Where are the answers to deal with the psychological problems raised by the development of modern consciousness? Future work that explores poor self-knowledge is necessary to help "shed light on these blind spots" (Gallrein et. al. 2016, p.2). If each of us can attempt to disembark the treadmill of life, create a morsel of awareness, be it through therapy or other and challenge the negative content of our polarised vision including concealed judgements, it would be a worthy

moral achievement. The withdrawal of blind spots is an arduous task that demands much rigorous honesty with self. Psychological blind spots present in various guises, some more obstinate than others but most an impediment to growth, awareness and cultural competence. In this ever-changing world we exist in the praxis of equality, inclusion and acceptance of diversity feels like an ethical urgency. In the responsible position that psychotherapy holds it is more than a duty of care to question not only our own subjectivity but others short-sightedness in a timely and appropriate manner, for it is only through the potency of awareness that we have the potential to change. 

Melanie McGovern

Melanie McGovern, Doctoral researcher and IACP accredited therapist. Her primary professional qualification was as an ophthalmic optician. She held the position as head optometrist in a busy practice before deciding to return to college to further educate completing diplomas in nutrition and holistic counselling and psychotherapy. Melanie continued on to attain a first class Masters degree in psychotherapy and counselling. She works as an integrative psychotherapist from her private practice in Salthill, Galway. Currently, her work is based on evidence-based practice including mindfulness based cognitive therapy. However, as her practice matures existential philosophies and reframing of old psychodynamic theories have developed. Melanie is the current recipient of the 2020 IACP research bursary.

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