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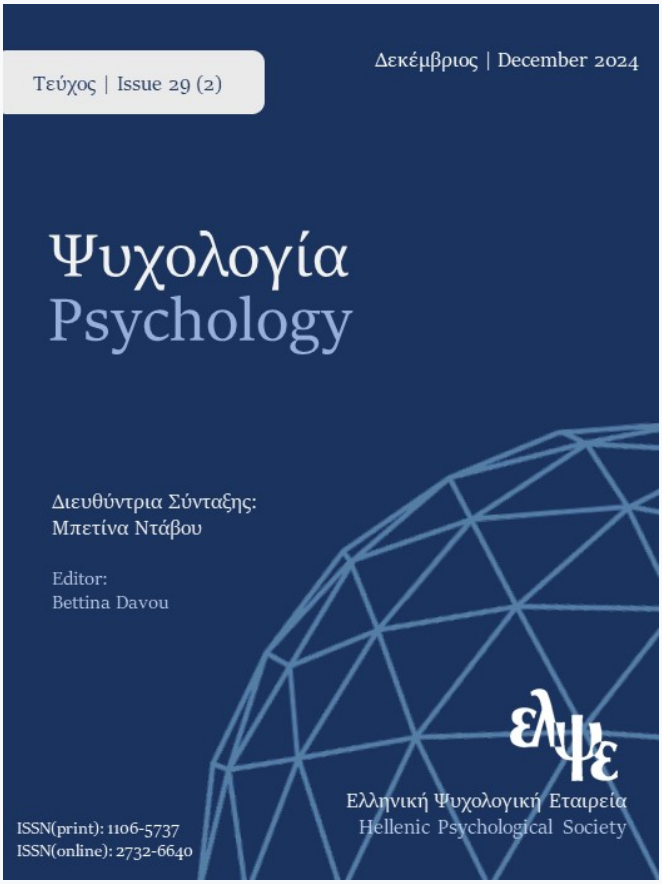

Turning challenge to opportunity: Clinical psychology investigations into contemporary mental health needs and care

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Ελληνική Ψυχολογική Εταιρεία
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ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗ | INTRODUCTION

Turning challenge to opportunity: Clinical psychology investigations into contemporary mental health needs and care

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KEYWORDS

Global macro-phenomena
Mental health care
Mental health needs
Intersectionality
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ABSTRACT

This special issue showcases clinical psychological research into contemporary mental health needs and mental health care, with important implications for understanding the impact of contemporary global macro-phenomena on mental health and consequently developing appropriate and effective mental health care and support. Parpoula & Anagnostopoulos investigate trends in Google searches for mental health professionals and treatments over the last 20 years, aiming to identify the impact of the economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic on help-seeking for mental health concerns in Greece. This type of research can inform the development of digital content regarding mental health problems and appropriate treatment and support options. Yotsidi and colleagues investigate systemic therapists' views and experiences of the enforced transition from face-to-face to online therapy during the pandemic. The erosion of the boundaries of the professional therapeutic space during online therapy alters the therapeutic relationship, affecting differentially clients and therapists. Apostolidou et al investigate the associations between intimate partner violence and other risk factors in women visiting community sexually transmitted infections' prevention and testing centres. The study highlights the potential of intersectional research, that addresses the cumulative adverse effects of several types of vulnerabilities, highlighting the need for appropriate mental health services. It is also a good example of user-led research. All three papers attempt to turn the challenges posed by contemporary global changes to opportunities for developing new ways of understanding and addressing mental health issues, pointing the way for more research in this direction.

Our world has undergone significant changes in the last few decades, including financial crises, the Covid-19 pandemic and the global climate crisis. Rising socioeconomic inequality, impoverishment of large sections of the population, forced migration due to conflicts and natural disasters have increased hardship and stress as well as insecurity and precarity, significantly worsening the mental health both of the general population and of vulnerable groups (McGorry et al., 2024). As also noted in the papers of this special issue, recent population studies provide strong evidence for the worsening of mental health and wellbeing and increasing mental distress and disorders globally over the last decade. This poses a challenge for researchers, clinicians, and policy makers to chart, understand and address the growing mental health needs and demands of the population (Moitra et al., 2023).

Digitalization is a major feature of contemporary life, with use of the internet, social media platforms and digital forms of communication increasingly gaining prominence. These changes were well underway before but were accentuated during the pandemic, due to the restrictions in face to face social and professional activities. In terms of mental health, people use digital platforms to gain information on mental health concerns and to seek available sources of help for them. Treatment and support for mental health problems is increasingly carried out online, both with professional medical and psychotherapeutic services offered remotely and with the

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development of online peer advice and support communities (Balcombe & De Leo, 2021; Mental Health Europe, 2022).

Two of the papers in this special issue address different aspects of digitalization of seeking and delivering help for mental health issues. Parpoula & Anagnostopoulos investigate trends in Google searches for mental health professionals and treatments over the last 20 years, aiming to identify the impact of the two major crises that Greek society has faced during that period, the economic crisis and the Covid-19 pandemic, on help-seeking for mental health concerns. They found that searches for mental health professionals and treatments decreased in the beginning of the economic crisis but are on a steady increase from the end of the crisis and through the pandemic period until today, as hypothesized by the authors and in line with international literature. This trend may reflect an increase in mental distress due to the adverse effects of the economic crisis and the pandemic. It may also indicate more awareness of mental health issues and greater willingness to seek help for them amongst the public in Greece, which is explained in turn by mental health education campaigns, media coverage of mental health issues and changes in mental health services over the last decade. This study showcases the potential of taking on the challenge of investigating digital help-seeking behaviour. Digital information seeking today is the first step after recognition of mental distress in oneself or their loved ones. Researching trends in this can provide information both about mental health concerns at population level but also about help seeking strategies. This in turn can inform the development of appropriate digital content regarding mental health problems, increasing mental health awareness and reducing stigma, as well as information and links for appropriate treatment and support options, increasing accessibility of mental health care. It may also guide the development of mental health services that would address population mental health needs and preferences, as well as the provision of accessible routes into these services.

Yotsidi and colleagues investigate systemic therapists' views and experiences of the enforced transition from face-to-face to online therapy during the pandemic. Shifting to online therapy has been one of the major changes introduced by the contact restrictions imposed during the pandemic, and has remained a major form of psychotherapy delivery to date, even after the restoration of face-to-face therapeutic activities. It is interesting that the therapists interviewed acknowledge the need and the positive impact of shifting to online therapy with their existing clients during the pandemic, despite their original reluctance, recognize the effectiveness and benefits for clients of online therapy, turning the challenge they faced as psychotherapists to a potential for expanding the horizons of their roles and practices. The study participants commented that they are now willing to continue using online therapy, but only in exceptional circumstances, with face-to-face being their preferred mode of therapy. It is clear, both from this study and from the broader literature, that the therapeutic setting is a crucial parameter for the development of a therapeutic relationship, which in turn influences the course and outcome of therapy. This setting radically changes in online therapy and its impact should be further investigated. The research indications to date are that the erosion of the boundaries of the professional therapeutic space, within which therapy is conducted, reduces therapist control over the process and creates a more equal, relaxed and personal atmosphere and relationship. This seems to be welcomed by clients, who are overall in favour of digital forms of therapy, but dreaded by therapists, who feel uneasy and burdened by the changes in the therapist roles they are called upon to adopt.

Both papers focus on professional mental health care, sought and delivered online, which is definitely a field worthy of investigation, as commented above. I think, however, that non-professional self-care and peer-support are equally worthy research fields. According to the World Health Organization, self-care and informal support by loved ones and peers are the main sources of mental health support for the majority of the mental health concerns of the population (WHO, 2003). Most mental health issues are addressed at this level, with only those that persist being taken a level up to seeking professional help. In recent years we have witnessed a boom in the digital self-help field, with media personalities and social media influencers discussing their mental health

troubles, expert by experience testimonies of dealing with mental health problems posted on self-help organization campaigns, self-help guides available online etc. Moreover, there is an expanse of digital platforms and communities dedicated to mental health concerns in general as well as specific disorders, in which individuals share experiences of distress and exchange helpful coping strategies. These are the rapidly expanding contemporary forms of self-help and peer-support, that are effectively transforming the field, having major impact on the ways people understand and deal with their mental distress. Research on these fields is also rapidly developing (e.g. Slemon et al., 2021; Weisberg et al., 2023), but obviously much more is needed.

The paper by Apostolidou et al investigates the associations between intimate partner violence (IPV) and other risk factors in women visiting community sexually transmitted infections' prevention and testing centres in Athens and Thessaloniki. Although not a new phenomenon, IPV has come to the fore over the last few years through the #MeToo movement, as a phenomenon that mainly affects women in the context of ongoing patriarchal societal values that give rise to discriminatory practices with destructive consequences. In this sense, the paper focuses on a highly charged, and definitely worthy of investigation, contemporary issue. However, the value and innovativeness of this study, for me, consists of two issues: investigating intersectionality and developing user-led research.

Intersectionality, addressing the combined cumulative adverse effects of several types of vulnerabilities, is mentioned but alas not much explored in the paper. For me, the participants in the study provide a very good opportunity for intersectional research (Grabe, 2020). Apart from all being women, 8.6% were trans and 21.4% were from Balkan and Easter European countries, percentages higher than the general population, indicating that many of them combine vulnerabilities in terms of sex/gender, gender identity and ethnicity. They report having experienced IPV at a much higher rate than the general population, and that seems to coincide to a large extent with experienced discrimination and involvement in sexualized drug and alcohol use. In a sense, establishing causal connections between these factors is not that important; their co-presence provides a picture of the lifestyles of these women and the multiple combined risk-factors for abuse and consequent ill health and mental health they face. Consequently, it indicates, as the authors rightly point out, the direction that mental health care of these multiply vulnerable populations should take. Accessible inclusive stigma-free non-judgmental community one-stop centers, like the community sexually transmitted infections' prevention and testing centres, where the study was conducted, seem to be more attractive to vulnerable populations, who would not easily approach specialized services. There, specialized trauma counsellors could explore adverse living situations, risk factors and experiences of victimization. Establishing networks of relevant health, mental health, and social services with direct referral routes and overall monitoring of the flow of service provision would ensure appropriate needs-adapted service delivery and continuity of care.

Regarding the second point of innovation, user involvement in research has been growing in mental health research over the last decades (Beresford, 2013). In some countries, it is a requirement for studies in the clinical field. User involvement at a minimum may consist at 'experts by experience' commenting on the questions in an interview or a questionnaire study, or on the study results and conclusions. Ideally, service users collaborate with researchers in different stages of the research process. Service users and their organisations have been arguing for decades about the need for them to set the research agenda, by defining the topics of investigation that are important to them, which are different from those of the professional experts. At the top of the user involvement hierarchy is user-led research, in which service users and their organisations lead the design and implementation of research, and of course own and have control of the dissemination and utilization of the results. This is the case of this study, the leading authors of which are members of the Greek Association of People Living with HIV – Positive Voice. This is so refreshing! More organizations in the field of health and mental health should take this as an example and mobilize in this direction.

Taken together, the three papers showcase clinical psychological research into contemporary mental health needs and mental health care, with important implications for understanding the impact of contemporary global macro-phenomena on mental health and consequently developing appropriate and effective mental health care and support. The common thread running through the three papers is an attempt to turn the challenges posed by contemporary global changes to opportunities for developing new ways of understanding and addressing mental health issues. More work in this direction is definitely needed and welcome.

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ΕΙΣΑΓΩΓΗ | INTRODUCTION

Μετατρέποντας τις προκλήσεις σε ευκαιρίες: Κλινική ψυχολογική διερεύνηση σύγχρονων αναγκών και φροντίδας ψυχικής υγείας

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ΛΕΞΕΙΣ ΚΛΕΙΔΙΑ

Ανάγκες ψυχικής υγείας
Διαθεματικότητα
Καθοδηγούμενη από χρήστες έρευνα
Παγκόσμια μακρο-φαινόμενα
Φροντίδα ψυχικής υγείας

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ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Το ειδικό τεύχος περιλαμβάνει παραδείγματα κλινικής ψυχολογικής έρευνας σχετικά με σύγχρονες ανάγκες ψυχικής υγείας και φροντίδα ψυχικής υγείας, με σημαντικές συνέπειες για την κατανόηση της επίδρασης των σύγχρονων παγκόσμιων μακρο-φαινομένων στην ψυχική υγεία και την ανάπτυξη κατάλληλης και αποτελεσματικής φροντίδας και υποστήριξης. Οι Παρπούλα και Αναγνωστόπουλος διερευνούν τάσεις στις αναζητήσεις στο google για επαγγελματίες και θεραπείες ψυχικής υγείας τα τελευταία 20 χρόνια, επιχειρώντας να προσδιορίσουν τον αντίκτυπο της οικονομικής κρίσης και της πανδημίας Covid-19 στην αναζήτηση βοήθειας για ζητήματα ψυχικής υγείας στην Ελλάδα. Αυτού του είδους η έρευνα μπορεί να υποστηρίξει την δημιουργία ψηφιακού περιεχομένου για ψυχικά προβλήματα και κατάλληλες επιλογές θεραπείας και υποστήριξης. Η Γιωτσίδη και συνεργάτες διερεύνησαν τις απόψεις και εμπειρίες συστημικών θεραπευτών σχετικά με την αναγκαστική μετάβαση στην ψηφιακή θεραπεία στη διάρκεια της πανδημίας. Η διάβρωση των ορίων του θεραπευτικού πλαισίου στην ψηφιακή θεραπεία αλλάζει την θεραπευτική σχέση με τρόπους που επηρεάζουν διαφορετικά τους/τις πελάτες/ισσες και τους/τις θεραπευτές/τριες. Η Αποστολίδου και συνεργάτες εξετάζουν τη σχέση ανάμεσα στην συντροφική βία και άλλους παράγοντες κινδύνου σε γυναίκες που επισκέφθηκαν κοινοτικά κέντρα πρόληψης και ελέγχου για σεξουαλικά μεταδιδόμενα νοσήματα. Η μελέτη αναδεικνύει τη σημασία της διαθεματικής έρευνας, που διερευνά την σωρευτική δυσμενή επίδραση πολλαπλών τύπων ευαλωτότητας, επισημαίνοντας την ανάγκη για κατάλληλες υπηρεσίες υποστήριξής τους. Αποτελεί επίσης καλό παράδειγμα καθοδηγούμενης από χρήστες έρευνας. Και οι τρεις εργασίες επιχειρούν να μετατρέψουν τις σύγχρονες παγκόσμιες προκλήσεις σε ευκαιρίες ανάπτυξης νέων τρόπων κατανόησης και αντιμετώπισης των ζητημάτων ψυχικής υγείας, δείχνοντας το δρόμο για περισσότερη έρευνα σε αυτή την κατεύθυνση.

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