A search for integrating science, arts and practice: the legacy of Professor Eric Broekaert

It is with great sadness, but also with pride that we present this special issue in memory of our colleague and friend, Professor Eric Broekaert. This issue was originally intended as a surprise festschrift to be handed over on his retirement from Ghent University in September 2017. Regrettably, we had to redirect the objective of the special issue after Eric’s unexpected death in Rome on September 28, 2016. We know that he would have liked the idea of a special issue of “the journal” specially dedicated to him and his works, as he considered his membership of the editorial collective of *Therapeutic Communities: The International Journal of Therapeutic Communities* a major achievement in his academic career. Since 2005, Eric hardly missed a board meeting, which illustrates his dedication to *Therapeutic Communities* (which he always called simply, “the journal,” as if it was the only journal that really mattered to him). This dedication can be explained by his interest in the history and development of the international TC movement and the integration of different traditions of TC practice and research methods in one single publication.

For this special issue, we invited a number of his close academic friends and colleagues to submit a paper on the broad theme “Enabling environments: a search for integrating science, arts and practice: a tribute to the legacy of Professor Eric Broekaert.” This subject was deliberately chosen, as it illustrates Eric’s way of thinking and being. A focus on theory, as Eric was first and foremost, a Theorist, Philosopher and Historian, who was familiar with most contemporary pedagogical, psychological and philosophical theories and movements and loved to discuss them. A focus on practice, as he learnt from his former mentor Professor Maria Wens that theory should be grounded in practice, but also given his own conviction that practice needs a theoretical justification. A focus on evidence, as he learnt through his contacts with the international scientific community that in the current era, no practice (in particular TCs) can survive without empirical grounding. As a consequence, most of his scientific work has been dedicated to the empirical, phenomenological and critical-analytical foundation of the TC method. However, as he wrote in one of his last articles “it is nearly impossible to prove the effectiveness of a comprehensive and holistic treatment system like a TC, as is the case with ‘psychiatry’ and ‘education’ as general terms” (Vanderplasschen et al., 2017). A focus on integration and integrative thinking as one of the leitmotifs of his work throughout his career, which is clearly illustrated in the theoretical papers that he published as first author. Finally, a focus on arts, as this was one of his great passions and inspirations, but also given his personal belief in the therapeutic power of various forms of arts (music, theater, painting and so on), his preference for outsider art and the work of Louise Bourgeois, and his belief in the powerful role of arts in enabling environments as outlined in the article “Villa Voortman: Carte Blanche or not” (Vandevelde et al., 2015).

In many respects, this last preoccupation was perhaps the least known of Eric’s areas of interest. Eric was passionate about the arts and his life-long companion was Katie Verhegge, a Flemish Artist and Sculptor. But more than just subjective enjoyment, Eric was convinced of the power of arts to impact upon behavior and was particularly interested in the role of creative interventions in therapeutic community settings. In many ways, TCs can be said to be characterized by such interventions since they are far more commonly found in these settings than in other types of addiction treatment. They range from the brilliant “Home” exhibition, organized by the Greek TC agency Kethea, where house-shaped boxes were decorated with the theme “home” both by TC residents and well-known Greek artists with the results being displayed in a major art gallery in Thessalonikí to the annual public music and dance performances/plays presented by the residents of Phoenix House Glasgow in Scotland.
Sadly, this was for Eric’s unfinished business and there remains a dearth of research in this area. This despite his continuing interest and his irritation that such activities often seemed to be regarded as little more than a way of filling the residents’ time. There is, however, evidence in other fields and with other groups, which would suggest that this is a potential area of study in the therapeutic community world and that harnessing the power of arts’ interventions might further improve overall performance and outcomes. Eerola and Eerola (2013), reporting on a study measuring the impact of music education among school children with a history of disruptive behavior, found significant improvements after even short music education programs. In a behavioral study of musicians, Kraus and Chandrasekaran (2010) found that active involvement in music resulted in a “priming” of the auditory system, which helped the musicians process other – non-musical – information and instructions. Again, Brotons and Koger (2000) observed significant improvements in language content and fluency dimensions of spontaneous speech amongst older subjects with a diagnosis of dementia after music therapy interventions. These impacts do not appear to be solely associated with music. In a recent Iranian study, Alavinezhad et al. (2014) found both reductions in aggression and increases in self-esteem after a short painting and drawing intervention among disruptive and angry children. Moreover, these changes in behavior and/or auditory processing are not simply the result of active involvement in music and other arts. Various studies have reported on the powerful effects of simply listening to music. In a clinical study of brain activity whilst listening to music, Blood and Zatorre (2001) observed significant changes in brain activity in areas of the brain associated with pleasure and/or reward. Tellingly they noted that the areas involved were “[…] known to be active in response to other euphoria-inducing stimuli, such as food, sex and drugs of abuse” (Blood and Zatorre, 2001, p. 11818, our emphasis).

It would certainly be a tribute and fitting legacy to the work of our dear friend if this area were to become the subject of more rigorous scientific scrutiny. We are confident that Eric would be delighted at such a development. A number of contributions in this special issue touch upon the role of arts and expression in enabling environments and TCs and explore the potential of integrative approaches to improve science and practice.

The first paper in this special issue is an appreciative biographical reflection of Eric Broekaert’s career and major achievements, which was compiled by some of his closest colleagues and friends who took over some of his previous positions as a University Professor (Wouter Vanderplasschen and Stijn Vandevenelde), as the Director of a school and treatment center for children with emotional and behavior problems (Franky D’Oosterlinck), as a Head of a TC for addictions (Dirk Vandevenelde) and as the President of the European Federation of Therapeutic Communities (Rowdy Yates), or exchanged orthopedagogical practice for an academic position (Jan Naert). Eric is portrayed as a brilliant academic and go-getter, who fought windmills and always looked for new opportunities and connections.

The second contribution by the UK Psychiatrists and TC advocates Steve Pearce and Rex Haigh, with whom Eric had numerous discussions on whether and how to improve science in therapeutic communities, focuses on the application of the TC method and concepts in non-TC environments. The role and usefulness of milieu therapy is highlighted throughout the recent history of psychiatry and differentiated from “TC proper” in past and current initiatives in the field of mental health care.

The third paper by Virginie Debaere, Paul Verhaeghe and Stijn Vanheule, some of Eric’s colleagues from the Department of Psychoanalysis and Clinical Consulting at Ghent University, presents a qualitative study of subjective perspectives of former TC residents on their process of identity change from a Lacanian psychoanalytic point of view. Eric always had a genuine interest in psychoanalysis and mastered psychoanalytical theories of addiction and psychopathology. Insights in individuals’ subjective experiences regarding life before, in and after the TC may contribute to our understanding of the role of TCs in long-term recovery.

In accordance with Eric’s integrative and holistic approach, Jessica De Maeyer and her colleagues of the Expertise center on Quality of Life at the University College Ghent attempt to integrate three popular and topical paradigms into an orthopedagogical approach for supporting individuals with disabilities and/or mental health problems. The manuscript assesses the human rights paradigm, capabilities approach and Quality of Life framework and their compatibility and looks for a shared agenda that may give direction to the daily practice of health and social work professionals.
Two other papers revisit one of Eric Broekaert’s most influential conceptual papers “Towards the integration of paradigms” (Broekaert et al., 2004). Freya Vander Laenen and Tom Vander Beken, Professors of Criminology at Ghent University with whom Eric recently started a large-scale, multidisciplinary study, reflect on his integrative and empowering approach that enabled new generations of researchers to follow in his footsteps and to search for what unites us as human beings rather than what divides us. The recently started research project on multidisciplinary, strengths-based guidelines for supporting offenders with mental health problems is used to illustrate the importance of focusing on individuals’ capabilities, qualities and assets, rather than on their deficits, incapacities and problems.

Starting from the assumption that knowledge is generated by the clash of ideas and findings, Griet Roets and her colleagues from the Department of Social Work and Social Pedagogy at Ghent University reflect on how Eric perceived “ortho-pedagogy” as an academic discipline and study his integrated and holistic paradigm of education. While exploring their own, different paradigmatic position, they demonstrate how Broekaert’s orthopedagogical theories enabled social workers and pedagogues to embrace tensions, paradoxes and complexities in the development of educational practices.

Finally, two of his close colleagues at the Department of Special Needs Education, Geert Van Hove and Elisabeth De Schauwer, explore the background and origins of Eric Broekaert’s ideas and theories and their relation with arts based on a “bricolage” of interview fragments, document analyses and critical incidents. The authors highlight several similarities in the way science has affected the artistic development of the famous Belgian Choreographer, former Student and Honorary Doctor at the Ghent University Alain Platel and the role of arts, literature and movement in Eric’s academic career and personal life.

Besides seven original articles, we close this special issue with a personal contribution of two of his academic soul mates.

Vera Segraeus is one of Eric’s life-long companions with whom he established the European Working Group on Drug-Oriented Policy Research, resulting in numerous (bi-)annual meetings in collaboration with prestigious European universities to discuss the latest research on TCs and related treatment issues. In her contribution, she criticizes the male approach in TCs and substance abuse treatment in general and focuses on the importance of gender-sensitive treatment.

Håkan Jenner was a Professor of Pedagogy at the Linnaeus University in Växjö (Sweden), with whom Eric set up a fruitful Erasmus Student and teacher exchange program and who struggled with similar theoretical and research questions as Eric did in Ghent. In his contribution, Professor Jenner focuses on one of Eric’s favorite questions “what evidence do we need in TCs and substance abuse treatment in general.”

One year after Eric’s unexpected death, we are proud to present this special issue, including contributions from some of his closest Belgian and international academic colleagues and providing new insights, challenging ideas and future research perspectives. We are quite sure Eric would have liked this publication which we will foster as a souvenir of a great scholar, colleague and friend.

References


