

Eric Broekaert (1951-2016): the life and legacy of a TC pioneer and integrative thinker

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Abstract

Purpose – *Eric Broekaert passed away shortly after the XVIth European Working group on Drug-Oriented Research (EWODOR)-conference in Rome on 28 September 2016. He was one of the great TC pioneers in Europe, who founded the first TC for addictions in Belgium (De Kiem) and co-founded the European Federation of Therapeutic Communities and EWODOR. He was a respected Professor of “Orthopedagogics” at Ghent University and a Member of the Editorial Collective of Therapeutic Communities: the International Journal of Therapeutic Communities. The paper aims to discuss the overview of the career of Eric Broekaert.*

Design/methodology/approach – *In this obituary, the authors provide an overview of his career, major achievements and theoretical, methodological and integrative ideas, clustered around four typologies: university professor and scholar; manager and source of inspiration; TC pioneer and believer, and integrative thinker.*

Findings – *Besides his obvious merits as a TC researcher and advocate, one of his major theoretical contributions has been the introduction of the holistic, integrative approach and the idea that diverse types of interventions, as well as methodological approaches can alternatively go together.*

Originality/value – *He regarded TCs as the ultimate integration of various educational and therapeutic approaches to promote growth and quality of life among severely disadvantaged populations, such as drug addicts and children and adults with emotional and behavioural disorders.*

Keywords Education, Qualitative research, Therapeutic communities, Children and young people, Drugs, TC history

Paper type General review

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Introduction

Eric Broekaert passed away shortly after the XVIth European Working group on Drug-Oriented Research (EWODOR)-conference in Rome on 28 September 2016. A few days before, he presented his research findings and integrative theories for the last time to an international audience (see Plate 1). EWODOR was one of his brainchildren, as he was the Co-founder and first chair of this international network of drug and TC researchers. Eric was one of the great TC pioneers in Europe, who founded the first TC for addictions in Belgium (De Kiem) and co-founded the European Federation of Therapeutic Communities (EFTC). Also, he was a respected Professor of “Orthopedagogics” at the Ghent University and Chair of an assessment and treatment centre for children with emotional and conduct disorders. In this obituary, we provide an overview of his career, major achievements and theoretical, methodological and integrative ideas, clustered around four typologies of our beloved friend and mentor.

University professor and scholar

Eric Broekaert started his academic career in 1973, as a half-time research and teaching assistant at the “Laboratory for Orthopedagogy and Ortho-agogy” (as it was called in those days)

Received 22 February 2017
Accepted 15 June 2017

Plate 1 Eric presenting his last paper at the XVth EWODOR-conference in Rome in September 2016



of Ghent University. As his supervisor, the late Professor Maria Wens (1919-1988), wanted his research to be rooted in practice, he combined his university function with a job in a specialized addiction clinic until (and even after) the finalisation of his PhD research in 1980 (see below). From 1984 onwards, he became a full-time Assistant Professor and was tasked with a broad range of courses in the field of “Orthopedagogy”. In the absence of an accurate English equivalent, he would later name this discipline “Orthopedagogics”, or more recently, “Special Needs Education”, but consistently defined it as “the study of methodic, integrative, ethical and meaningful social interactions and support in pedagogical situations that are experienced as problematic, with the aim to improve individuals’ living situations, their quality of life and their participation in society through scientifically underpinned qualitative and quantitative research methods” (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2015, 26). Historically, its roots can be traced back to “Heilpädagogik”/“Sonderpädagogik” (Germany), “Orthopédagogie” (France, Canada), “Orthopedagogiek” (the Netherlands and Flanders) and – to a lesser extent – “Special Education” (that is a more narrow term and primarily related to disabilities and school problems) (UK and Anglo-Saxon countries) (Broekaert, 1997). Orthopedagogics, as we will further name this field with Eric’s favourite term, has been a recognised scientific discipline at the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences of Ghent University since 1966 (Broekaert *et al.*, 2009, 2015). Orthopedagogics is a five-year degree, consisting of two years of introductory courses in various pedagogical, psychological, medical and sociological subjects, followed by three years of specialisation in orthopedagogics and other pedagogical courses.

After the retirement of his mentor Maria Wens, Eric Broekaert was appointed Head of Department in 1985 and became responsible for all orthopedagogical topics and the supervision of students’ practical trainings and work placements. At the time Eric took over, the number of students varied between 15 and 25 per year and staffing was limited to one assistant and one secretary (his “second man” Dieter Windels). Eric steadily built up research and education in orthopedagogics at Ghent University, with a strong focus on internationalisation through annual study trips for students abroad, active participation in the Erasmus student and teacher exchange programme, and cooperation with other European scholars and universities. In addition, he stimulated master- and PhD-students to go abroad to meet international experts and to learn specific methods. The number of students in orthopedagogics increased gradually between 1985 and 2004, and boomed after the ratification of the Bologna Accords to reach 140 graduates annually. The multidisciplinary and integrative approach, its clear link with practice and Eric’s charismatic personality were further critical factors in the growth of this masters education programme (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2015).

In 1989, Eric Broekaert published his theoretical masterpiece in Dutch: “Integratieve handelingsorthopedagogiek” (An integrative theory of special needs educational acting) (Broekaert, 1989). Given its timeless nature, the book was republished unchanged in 2009, except for its title: “Towards an integrative theory of special needs education acting” (Broekaert, 2009). In this book, Eric strongly advocated and underpinned the idea of the “alternatively going together” of various theoretical and methodological approaches, always with the ultimate aim of improving educational practice with individuals (children and adults) in vulnerable situations through systematic assessment and action planning (Broekaert, 1989). He adopted an Hegelian perspective: thesis and antithesis lead to synthesis, but unlike Hegel he did not regard synthesis as an end-point. On the contrary, he argued that the integration of diverse and opposite ideas leads to new insights and educational improvement, so-called “transitions” or “flux” to cite one of his favourite philosophers (Friedrich Nietzsche) (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2015). His later theoretical manuscripts (e.g. Broekaert and Vanderplasschen, 2003; Broekaert *et al.*, 2004, 2011) clearly built on these early integrative ideas, which accumulated in 2010 in a pioneering paper on the human prerogative of care (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010). Furthermore, he embraced the work of post-modern philosophers like Foucault, Derrida and Bataille and emphasised the role of creativity and arts in education and for personal growth.

Although he supervised research projects and PhD dissertations on deaf and disability studies in the beginning of his career, his main research interest was the history and development of different types of therapeutic communities (TC) (Broekaert *et al.*, 2001). A milestone in Eric’s academic career, was the publication of his first peer-reviewed article back in 1998 (Broekaert *et al.*, 1998), with the support of his mentor and American TC Pioneer Donald Ottenberg (Broekaert *et al.*, 2005) and the Dutch psychiatrist Martien Kooyman. It would turn out to be the first article in a long list of over 150 peer-reviewed articles published in international journals. This publication in the *Journal of Substance Abuse Treatment* focussed on the core question “what cannot be changed in a TC”, resulting in ten axioms for the TC movement worldwide. Participation in the EU-funded cross-national “Biomed II-project”, aimed at improving psychiatric treatment in residential programmes for newly dependent groups through relapse prevention (IPTRP) (Kaplan *et al.*, 2001), was another crucial impetus for the development of scientific research at the Department of Orthopedagogics. Through participation in this international comparative study on the implementation of instruments and involvement in expert networks (e.g. COST A6 Evaluation of treatment, UNDCP Assessment of high risk groups in East Asia), the foundations were laid for sound studies on TCs and related subjects (e.g. the Video Addiction Challenge Test (Broekaert *et al.*, 2001), motivation for treatment (Vandevelde, 2004), the role of the social network (Soyez *et al.*, 2006), gender-sensitive treatment in TCs (De Wilde *et al.*, 2006)). These achievements would eventually result in numerous PhD dissertations supervised by Eric, always starting from the orthopedagogical question “how can we improve educational acting and current practices with a wide range of vulnerable populations”?

Through international contacts, multidisciplinary collaboration and publications in high-ranked peer-reviewed journals, Eric lifted education and scientific research at the department to a higher level and was eventually granted the title of “Full Professor” in 2004 for his merits at department and faculty level and internationally. He was also greatly honoured by Griffith Edwards’ invitation to write an editorial in *Addiction*, the leading journal in the field of substance abuse, about “What future for the therapeutic community in the field of addiction? A view from Europe” (Broekaert, 2006). He even co-authored a paper in the *Lancet* (Derluyn *et al.*, 2004), based on a study of post-traumatic stress in Ugandan child-soldiers. Since 2000, Eric was instrumental in the realisation of more than 20 PhD studies, which were diversified to new subjects linked to substance abuse (e.g. case management (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2004)), quality of life (De Maeyer *et al.*, 2010; Colpaert *et al.*, 2013) and emotional and behavioural disorders (EBDs) among children and adolescents (e.g. unaccompanied minors (Derluyn and Broekaert, 2005; Mels *et al.*, 2008; Vindevogel *et al.*, 2011), crisis intervention (D’Oosterlinck *et al.*, 2008; Soenen *et al.*, 2014), youth offenders (Colins *et al.*, 2009)). He headed the Department of Orthopedagogics for almost 25 years until 2014 and was one of the special guests at the celebration of the 50th anniversary of education in orthopedagogics in September 2015 (see Plate 2), since he was actively involved in its evolution for over 40 years, first as a student and later as a staff member. One of his last major achievements at Ghent University was securing

Plate 2 Eric portrayed on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the masters education in “Orthopedagogics” at Ghent University



a large research bid (including five doctoral grants) on strengths-based approaches for mentally ill offenders (Vandeveldt *et al.*, 2017).

Eric was praised by many for his interesting lectures and presentations at various international events; always layered with fine humour. He was rightly proud to have been an invited speaker at the prestigious Great Amphitheatre of the Sorbonne University in Paris (2008), Keble College of the University of Oxford (2011) and the Royal College of Psychiatry of the University of London (2013). As a speaker he mastered the art of connecting difficult concepts with daily life through the use of metaphor, analogies and often also jokes. He loved language and storytelling and was a specialist in deconstructing concepts to their core. For example, he deconstructed the word “Trappist” to show students and colleagues the complex genealogy of the word and its relation with how some historic realities were organised as well as with current phenomena. By doing so, he simultaneously highlighted the importance of etymology, history, language and semantics.

Manager and source of inspiration

Since its start, the university Department of Orthopedagogics was based in the same building as the orthopedagogical centre for assessment and treatment of children and adults with EBDs (Broekaert *et al.*, 2015). Eric became a Board Member of the centre in 1983 and was soon (1988)

appointed chair of the Board of Governors of “vzw OC Nieuwe Vaart”. Eric called this school and support centre for children with EBDs located in Ghent, “a therapeutic centre for children”. The centre has a long-standing history, as it was started back in 1942 as a medical-pedagogical consultation service for children with a handicap (Broekaert *et al.*, 2009). Although physically separated since 1992 when the department was integrated in the buildings of the Faculty of Psychology and Educational Sciences on another site, the centre remains closely connected to the Ghent University.

During the 1990s, Eric transformed the management of OC Nieuwe Vaart from a hierarchical model into an educational, adapted cybernetic model. He repeatedly emphasised the pivotal role of the therapeutic environment or “milieu” (Broekaert *et al.*, 2009), as apparent in following quotes: “The communication between all levels of the organization has to be as open as possible”, or “Tension has to be removed, in order to avoid burn out and anxiety among staff members. Especially disagreement with decisions needs to be brought up, in order to be able to justify it” (Broekaert *et al.*, 1990). The practice in OC Nieuwe Vaart became closely linked to the content of student courses in orthopedagogics, including emerging topics like action planning, assessment and treatment of children with EBD, crisis intervention and quality of care. Eric’s leadership in the organisation was founded on the idea of giving people the necessary space and resources to work on the problems that really matter.

To further underpin his theories on holistic and integrative orthopedagogical acting (Broekaert, 2009; Broekaert and D’Oosterlinck, 2000), Eric scrutinised holistic theories based on quantum physics, and translated these terms to the subject of orthopedagogics, e.g. internal relationships, connectedness, complementarity, simultaneity, probability, transformation and uncertainty (Broekaert *et al.*, 2011). Recently, these ideas and their further development accumulated in the book “Relaties opbouwen met kinderen en jongeren in crisissituaties” (Building relations with children and adolescents in crisis situations) (D’Oosterlinck *et al.*, 2016).

One of the most fundamental developments in OC Nieuwe Vaart was the implementation of several innovative methods. Besides the influence of contextual theory to deal with family problems and the importance of (psycho-analytical) psychotherapy for children, the daily interactions between educators, teachers and children changed fundamentally with the introduction of Life Space Crisis Intervention (LSCI). LSCI is a verbal, interactive and therapeutic method for turning crisis situations into learning opportunities for children who show self-defeating, destructive behaviour (Long *et al.*, 2003). The implementation of LSCI and research on this method in OC Nieuwe Vaart and similar organisations resulted in two doctoral studies supervised by Eric Broekaert (D’Oosterlinck, 2006; Soenen, 2014). The combination of the therapeutic milieu with clear-cut methods focussing on child development improved treatment outcomes in the centre substantially (D’Oosterlinck *et al.*, 2008; Soenen *et al.*, 2013). More recently, the psycho-physical method “Rock and Water” was introduced to teach vulnerable children mental and social skills (Ykema, 2002).

Eric’s interest in treatment of children with EBDs goes back to the reform pedagogy movement and some of the early (psychoanalytic) theories of child development (e.g. Aichhorn, Bettelheim, Redl & Wineman) and his experiences in TC. In 1989, he was a co-founder of EUSARF (the European Scientific Association for Residential and Foster Care), together with his colleague Walter Hellinckx from the competing university of Leuven. Eric was also involved in the establishment of the Centre for Children in Vulnerable Situations, a research and information network on war and migration-induced trauma in developing countries. Together with Franky D’Oosterlinck, he started the European Federation of Conflict Management in Education and Care (EFECT) in 2007. To date, OC Nieuwe Vaart is also recognised as a training centre for professionals working in schools and child and youth care, with clear roots in practice and integrative orthopedagogics as promoted by its founders.

TC pioneer and believer

Even whilst a Masters student in Psychology and Educational Sciences (1973), Eric produced a dissertation on the circumstances that led young persons towards addiction (Broekaert, 1973) and accomplished an internship at Centrum Linnaeus Parkweg, a department located within the

famous Jellinek clinic in Amsterdam, the Netherlands. There, Eric met with the psychologist supervisor Henri Boulogne, who was himself trained by Dan Casriel, who, in turn, was well-acquainted with the functioning of Synanon and Daytop Village New York, the first drug-free TC in the USA (Casriel, 1972). His interest in the TC concept was born and later that year Eric Broekaert started a PhD-study on the background and functioning of TC. Eric started working in the specialized psychiatric hospital “De Pelgrim” (1973) and was charged with the task to develop a treatment model for young drug addicts, as this population was very hard to handle in the traditional clinic. After some (failed) experiments introducing Maxwell Jones’ democratic principles, client-centred methods and a token economy system, Eric decided to go to the USA in 1976 for six months to study the TC and Synanon model more profoundly. He stayed as a resident in the drug-free therapeutic community Last Renaissance in Washington and visited a number of early, ground-breaking TCs like Odyssey House and Daytop Village (New York), Delancey Street (San Francisco) and Synanon, the cradle of TCs for addictions in Santa Monica, California. Enthused by what he saw, he returned to Belgium and convinced the board of directors of the clinic to start a drug-free, hierarchical therapeutic community (“De Kiem”) within the walls of the hospital. Together with his lifelong friend and buddy Rudy Bracke, a social worker and psychotherapist, he developed the educational and therapeutic environment in De Kiem. Staff members were trained with the help of Martien Kooyman, who had founded TC “Emiliehoeve” in the Netherlands a few years earlier (1972) (Broekaert *et al.*, 2006).

De Kiem was the first concept TC in Belgium and one of the very first treatment initiatives for drug addicts anyway, since at that time most hospitals were extremely reluctant to deal with this newly emerging population. In 1978, TC De Kiem was officially recognised by the Ministry of Health and one year later, the last “patients” left the clinic and the TC moved to a separate house in a small village nearby. In 1980, Eric defended his PhD-dissertation entitled “The Drug-free Therapeutic Community, an orthopedagogical approach of a new type of treatment of young drug addicts”, in which he studied the history, philosophy and development of the therapeutic community as an educational and therapeutic environment looking for its pedagogical essence: the milieu or environment (Broekaert, 1980). De Kiem recently celebrated 40 years of work in the addiction field and has become a template for other TC across the world (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2017).

After his training in the USA and meetings with TC experts worldwide, Eric became a globetrotter who presented his theories and research findings all over the world. He left De Kiem in 1984 to become a full-time academic, but remained closely involved and became a board member in 1991. De Kiem and the Department of Orthopedagogics developed a very intense research cooperation, resulting in numerous masters and some doctoral dissertations. Also, “TC” and “substance abuse treatment” became core subjects in students’ education, which is still unique in Belgium. Through its central position in the Belgian and European TC movement, De Kiem inspired other Belgian and European TCs, but also promoted its continuous search for evidence-based treatment in TCs for addictions (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2017). Nowadays, De Kiem is a large-scale organisation, including a therapeutic community of 35 beds and a continuum of services consisting of outpatient facilities, a welcome house, mother and child services, and prison-based groups.

Eric was a central figure in the creation and development of EFTC, becoming its first president in 1981. He organised one of the first EFTC-conferences in Bruges in 1983, which was opened by the then Queen Fabiola and contributed greatly to its reputation. This European network of TCs for addictions aims at supporting and further developing the psycho-pedagogical approach of TCs to help problem drug abusers and their families reclaim a drug-free life. Through regular conferences and meetings the TC method was further developed and spread throughout Europe (Broekaert *et al.*, 2006). Eric was to remain a stalwart supporter of, and contributor to, the EFTC for 35 years until his untimely death in 2016 (see Plate 3). During his later years, he was an EFTC honorary vice president, but unlike most others in that role, he remained an enthusiastic and active participant, never missing an EFTC conference. Also, he regularly attended the conferences and meetings of the World Federation of Therapeutic Communities (WFTC) and maintained the links between those two organisations. In 2014, he was presented with the WFTC’s Orval Hobart Mowrer Award for his outstanding leadership in the field of treatment and research and contribution to the self-help and TC movement. On two occasions, he declined to



be nominated for the EFTC Award, only accepting that honour in 2015, when the board contrived to keep the nomination process secret from him! After his unexpected death in 2016, the board of the EFTC unanimously agreed to rebrand that award as the Eric Broekaert Award.

Eric was a passionate advocate for the therapeutic community and recognised early the need to develop the scientific foundations for the methodology involved (Broekaert *et al.*, 2002). With a small group of other academics, he established EWODOR in 1983 and he was the central figure in that organisation's annual symposia. Since 1986, more than 20 EWODOR conferences have taken place in various European countries, always organised in collaboration with leading universities, including the Erasmus University Rotterdam (the Netherlands), Ghent University (Belgium), La Sapienza University Bologna (Italy), Deusto University Bilbao (Spain), University of Porto (Portugal), University of Aarhus (Denmark), Oslo University (Norway), Växjö University (Sweden), University of Stirling (UK), University of Barcelona (Spain), Aristotle University of Thessaloniki (Greece) and Trinity College Dublin (Ireland). Eric attended his final EWODOR meeting in Rome in September 2016, where he still gave a thought-provoking presentation "The Therapeutic Community Model: A Tool For Empowerment", but then was unexpectedly taken to the hospital seriously ill.

Eric was one of the very few figures in the drug-free therapeutic community movement to recognise the significant similarities between the work done in this movement and earlier work with socially and emotionally dislocated juveniles; including the work of August Aichhorn, Bruno Bettelheim, Anton Makarenko, Fritz Redl and David Wills (Broekaert *et al.*, 2001). He was also fascinated by the work of Harold Bridger, Maxwell Jones and Dennie Briggs and the democratic TC movement and strongly believed in the therapeutic milieu as tool for change. He worked tirelessly to build bridges and create common understandings between these movements and did more than anyone to bring them together within the work and outputs of the *International Journal of Therapeutic Communities* (Broekaert *et al.*, 2011). Together with his co-editors on this journal, he participated in the "Oxford Science Group for Therapeutic Communities" at St Hilda's College in Oxford in 2008. Under the leadership of Dr Rex Haigh, experts from democratic TCs and TCs for addictions met to discuss the feasibility and desirability of RCTs in TCs. Opportunities and prerequisites for starting randomized controlled research in TCs were discussed, as well as caveats and obstacles (Pearce and Autrique, 2010). This resulted in a pilot RCT in the Oxfordshire Complex Needs Service for adults with personality disorders, under supervision of Dr Steve Pearce and in collaboration with one of Eric's doctoral students (Autrique *et al.*, 2015).

Also, his latest TC research focussed on the effectiveness of TC treatment (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2013) and processes of change in TCs for addictions (Goethals *et al.*, 2015) to better understand why and how TC treatment works.

An integrative thinker

With this overview of some of Eric's major achievements, we wanted to give insight into the course of his career, his social, scientific and theoretical contributions and gripping personality. Rather than providing some clear conclusions or statements, we conclude this paper by giving Eric the floor one last time. Based on a draft manuscript he prepared on 40 years of research in TC De Kiem (Vanderplasschen *et al.*, 2017), he reflected on the knowledge and evidence that is needed to further advance TC research: "The current era is characterised by a focus on evidence-based knowledge and practice. A fundamental question in this regard is how to define different types of knowledge and how these different strands could contribute to evidence-based practice. The "classic" paradigms used in education, health and social sciences are also applicable to substance abuse treatment, as illustrated by Broekaert and colleagues in the article "The human prerogative" (Broekaert *et al.*, 2010). These paradigms are labelled as the existential-phenomenological, empirical-analytical, and critical dialectic-materialistic approach. One could say that the first one relates to interpretation and understanding by means of qualitative methods, the second pertains to explanation and causality using quantitative methods and the third one is linked to emancipation and empowerment, with no clear preference for quantitative or qualitative methods. In order to integrate these different strands and to promote choice and alternative opportunities, Broekaert and colleagues (2010, p. 233) introduced the holistic, integrative approach: "The integrative scientific point of view searches for the integration of diverse types of interventions, as well as methodological approaches. It means that various treatment modalities, paradigms of care and research methodologies can alternatively go together". According to Broekaert and colleagues (2010), the human prerogative should ultimately guide such choices. Eric regarded TCs as the ultimate integration of various educational and therapeutic approaches to promote growth and quality of life among severely disadvantaged populations like drug addicts and children and adults with EBDs.

Acknowledgements

"Eric was, and will always remain, a special man to me in many ways: a warm and charismatic personality, an absent-minded professor, a brilliant mind and scientist who often had to swim upstream, but realised some grand exploits" (Wouter Vanderplasschen).

"I will always cherish the many thought-provoking moments with Eric, who was a truly wise and warm mentor. Generous with his knowledge and friendship, humorous in a refined way, loyal and open, modest and unpretending, intelligent and sharp. Every inch a scientist and integrative thinker" (Stijn Vandevelde).

"Eric believed in the connection of people. He was convinced that a positive and cheerful encounter could be the start of something great. Eric was my friend and inspiration" (Franky D'Oosterlinck).

"With the foundation of "De Kiem" and his academic work on addictions, Eric gave indirectly thousands of drug addicts a new future. Also, he inspired many hundreds of staff members working with drug addicts" (Dirk Vandevelde).

"Eric was my inspiration to look beyond the walls of "orthopedagogics". He was inspired himself by (post-) modern philosophical thinkers and left no idea untouched. I loved his wholeheartedness to connect with people and infusing them with new ideas and perspectives" (Jan Naert).

"I first met Eric in 1978 in Rome at a WFTC conference and we were friends, colleagues and co-workers for almost 40 years. He was a huge influence on my work and thinking over those years and his death leaves for me, an enormous hole in my life. I miss him terribly" (Rowdy Yates).

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