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Reflections on Becoming a Therapist

In this article, we aim to explore the learning process a trainee encounters, both from the perspective of two of the tutors and also from one of the second year students, Chris, who provides a personal narrative of his learning experience and highlights some significant points along his journey to becoming a therapist. We hope these reflections will be of some benefit to both trainees and facilitators involved in psychotherapeutic training.

Some context

As Course Leaders on a BACP accredited course (Postgraduate Diploma in Counselling & Psychotherapy & Higher Education Diploma in Therapeutic Counselling) at Leeds Beckett University, we are tasked to lead the course team in reviewing and rewriting the course on a 5-year cycle. In the last review we created 6 new modules with appropriate aims and learning outcomes. The two theory modules were 'Relational Framework' in Year 1 and 'Becoming a Therapist' in Year 2.

These titles and module content were designed to reflect the relational philosophy and integrative nature of the course, highlighting the joint responsibility of the teaching team and the trainee in shaping and developing a reflective and 'work-ready' professional.

As you can imagine the theory element of a course does not exist in isolation, as the BACP Gold Book suggests it should develop in tandem with personal development, practical relational skills and the use of appropriate interventions. The intention is for all these elements to blend together to create the finished product, a reflective practitioner, possessing a well-reasoned practice rationale.

Anyone attending practitioner training knows the myriad of challenges that a trainee will encounter, which can impact on their value system and often shake the foundations of the world they have previously resided in quite comfortably, up until that point. As a consequence of this, we ensure that during the interview and selection process, applicants are informed of the potential challenges training will undoubtedly present, when they embark on the journey to becoming a therapist. It seems good ethical practice to note that each student will have a set of personal challenges, most of which will appear without warning, but most importantly, will also help shape them as emerging practitioners. As tutors, we are repeatedly reminded that when trainees are faced with difficult, challenging events, these can often provide a significant and memorable learning point, if sufficiently embraced and absorbed, which can form part of an accumulated resource, which we often refer to as wisdom. Wilkins (1987) notes that personal development helps develop the practitioner, but, more than this, it is about becoming a fuller, more rounded person (2).

Theory sessions are no exception to this process and can present their own unique and important challenges to students, as they struggle to find the right combination of theory, which works with clients, but also resonates with their own developing philosophy.

Over the 2-year life span of the course students are presented with around 50 weekly sessions offering the main theoretical perspectives: Psychodynamic (defenses, attachment, transference); humanistic (Person-Centred, Gestalt, and TA); and CBT. The integrative trainee's task is to firstly, select elements of

approaches which they feel are aligned to their personal values and skills, and then to blend them into an individualised '*modus operandi*'. In effect, trainees create a 'relational framework', which they are required to express clearly and coherently as a practice rationale, which forms part of the course assessment process. This practice rationale, together with a case study and reflections on personal development, also prepares the emerging practitioner with a route-plan/ template, when applying for BACP accreditation. The intention is that the overall learning experience helps the trainee to develop a level of confidence, which enables them to articulate how they work as a therapist to clients, employees and other professionals.

However, there is much more to this process than simply being an academic task. Even though the course selection process aims to present the course challenges for discussion and review, the actual personal challenges a trainee faces are, by their very nature, entirely unpredictable. Not accounting for what life may throw at a student, attending weekly sessions of theory alone may push some sensitive buttons, notwithstanding the intimate exchanges experienced in a Personal Development Group.

It is inevitable that changes will take place to trainees on a personal level and in relation to how their view of 'self in the world' develops as an emerging professional. The expectation and hope is that, through supervision and reflective practice an employable and appropriately proficient practitioner will emerge within a 2-year timescale. I see that this stage of development corresponds to the *exploration* stage as suggested by Wilkins (3) where the newly trained practitioner has accumulated a range of professional and personal experiences, though will still meet new challenges after leaving the course. It can also challenge the tutor's own philosophical beliefs, in relation to how trainees learn and develop, and whether we need to direct this process, and if so, to what extent, or for a Person-Centred therapist/tutor, whether we have sufficient faith in this approach to be non-directive and trust in the trainee finding their own way through this potential maize, by modeling a way of being and accompanying them on their journey.

What tutors think happens in theory sessions:

It's about finding your feet as a trainee, engaging a learning cycle that can feel rather deskilling and risky for much of the time. I suspect at times it may feel like being bombarded with different perspectives some on what therapy looks like. Some of which overlap and others that present as dichotomous, again confusing. I often field questions such as 'why can't someone tell me what I am supposed to do as a therapist?'. Then, after being exposed to a particular theory, there is the inevitably some personal reactions to it e.g. transference, own conditions of worth, which may provide indicators to inform the trainee in selecting what to include in their relational framework. I expect learners to ask why such elements of theory have had an impact and to reflect on the message this provides and then how to use this knowledge best in their journey towards becoming a therapist.

The above is a tutor's perspective, now I introduce Chris to share some personal narrative in 'becoming a therapist'.

During the interview process, prior to enrolling on the course, I was asked how prepared I was to undertake the challenges of such a course, challenges that meant it wasn't something you could do as an add-on to the rest of one's everyday life. My response to this question seems somewhat naive

and uninformed now as I approach the end of the second year. I told the interviewers, confidently, that I had made practical changes which would allow me the time to commit to one day a week at university and one day a week on placement and as such I could face the challenge of becoming a therapist.

The point of the question that I had missed was to become brilliantly clear to me over the summer break and has now created the catalyst, not only for my emerging practice rationale, but has also had a huge impact upon me as a person.

In the beginning, I felt a strong sense of unwillingness to any notion of change in the person I believed I was, I was happy with me and I'd done ok so far; hadn't I? Because of this I often found the personal development sessions particularly difficult throughout much of the first year. Reflecting on this now, I feel my resistance towards the idea of personal development was related to fear and anxiety about what would be left if I let go of the defences I had learned to rely on for most of my adult life. It seemed as though the personal development sessions were asking me to venture into the realm of the unknown, to explore parts of the "self" I might not have been previously aware of and to allow myself to trust the process. I found this incredibly difficult to overcome as I couldn't define what the process was, I just didn't know if there was a process, or what that meant for me.

Looking back, I think the reason I was so afraid of the process and of change within me was because I came to the course with a strong belief in scientific approaches and a need to be able to test and demonstrate results, based on sound evidence. For that reason, I felt very much as though I would be inclined to favour Cognitive Behavioural approaches and this would be the route I would take as a practitioner. As we began to explore the theory behind each approach the more I felt assured that CBT was for me with just a dash of other approaches thrown in to cement an integrated and relational philosophy.

However, whilst working on my first attempt at defining who I am as a therapist I became aware of something in the periphery of my consciousness, something that I couldn't explain and yet was evolving within me. It was a feeling that somehow all the theory, working in my placement and the exploration of what becoming a therapist meant was leading me to a place I had never been before, these were truly uncharted waters for me. At first I was not altogether comfortable with this growing awareness and I felt torn between what I believed in and what was becoming ever more clear.

Working with clients, gaining an understanding of theories and using the newly acquired knowledge as interventions, seems high on the list of priorities for a trainee. I was no different in this respect and I was always aware of feeling I needed to be "doing therapy" and trying to help clients reach an objective by the end of our time together. Like a dry sponge in an oasis of theory, I would try to soak up every bit of knowledge and suggestion given to me by the course tutors and supervisor. I would cling on to the references and soundbites ready to apply them in practice and I often felt I was attempting to "shoe horn" the clients' narratives into the theory, or vice versa. However, I began realise that a "blank screen" approach wasn't in tune with my values and philosophy. I wanted to hear my clients, to explore the delicate intricacies of the client-therapist relationship, to be able to work with them here, now, in this moment and without an emphasis on achieving results.

The most significant moment in my journey of becoming a therapist was a seemingly innocuous event. My placement is in a college counselling service; therefore, I was not able to work with clients

through the summer, nevertheless I had agreed to continue working with my supervisor which would allow us opportunity to write our collaborative statement and look at further personal development. I had also received a book voucher from my placement by way of a thank you and wanting to put this to good use I emailed Brian to see if he could recommend a book worth buying that would benefit me both now and in the future. Brian's recommendation, Yalom's *The Gift of Therapy*, has been nothing short of life changing, both personally and professionally.

As I began to read I felt as though Yalom was speaking directly to me, it was as if he had heard the ever-growing voice within me and offered a path to allow me to explore what it was about becoming a therapist that I had so naively missed in my interview.

"If the therapist doesn't change, then, neither does the patient" (4)

This one sentence, which stood out more than any other in the book, was to become the turning point for my way of being. I was transfixed by it, I reflected on it over and over; I knew that I was letting go of my own obstacles to change and this was beginning to feel much more natural and incredibly powerful and moving. But, I had never considered that I could be changed by my clients, that I might learn things about myself that I had never previously known, or that my work with clients could be therapy for me too. Was this actually possible? Is Yalom right in his belief that the therapist is sometimes "surreptitiously taking in some of the good stuff of therapy"? And why had I not seen or felt this in the first year of my placement?

There was an overwhelming sense of excitement, it was a feeling of awakening, had I discovered a way of becoming a therapist which fitted with my growing awareness of the importance of the client therapist relationship rather than the method or theoretical approach?

There seemed to be so many questions, yet I knew the answers could only be found by working with clients.

As I returned to my practice placement my need to keep to a rigid structure of therapy, where I strived to fit in to the parameters of a particular model or way of doing things based on what I had learned that week, had all but vanished. Instead I challenged myself to just be in the here and now with my clients, to allow myself to be spontaneous and free flowing, to apply the use of self in the therapeutic encounter. I was learning to trust my fledgling knowledge and my ability to apply it, where necessary, in practice. And, as Yalom suggested, I dared myself to try and invent a new model of therapy with each of my clients; based the uniqueness of each client.

As trainee therapists, we are constantly told to "trust the process", to engage in a journey of becoming a therapist. For me that journey seemed fraught the danger, there were times I felt I couldn't overcome the fear and anxiety I experienced when faced with the idea of letting go of my habitual defences. The safety of a more scientific approach, like CBT, meant I could hide behind the theory and the agenda setting of being a therapist. But most of all I couldn't define what the process, I was supposed to trust, was.

All of this changed with one book, one sentence in a book. I realised all the theory, placement practice, personal development and personal therapy the student encounters whilst in training allows the student to formulate an approach to being a therapist, a way to define what they do. But the process one must learn to trust is within us, it's trusting the self we were, the self we are and

allowing the self to experience and be changed by our clients. The message I would give to students at the start of the process would be; Allow yourself to be immersed in the theory, it will take you on a journey. Listen to your supervisor, they know a thing or two. Give personal development a chance, you won't always have that many therapists in one room. But, most importantly; Allow your clients to matter to you, don't be afraid to be changed by them and let them inform how you practice as a therapist.

References

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Authors' profiles

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Permission from Chris Morris (student contributor)

I hereby give my consent and agree fully to working collaboratively with Brian on the following article. Chris Morris - Christopher Morris: c.morris2623@student.leedsbeckett.ac.uk