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**IS THERE A NEED OF MANDATORY ONE-TO-ONE
PERSONAL COUNSELLING IN COUNSELLING
TRAINING?**

**BY
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Introduction

This paper focuses on one of the debated questions in counselling training: the role of one-to-one counselling in the development of the trainee counsellor. A recent article in the *Counselling and Psychotherapy Journal* by Muller (2004) discussed the implication of the decision by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy to remove personal counselling as a requirement for accreditation, and what possible options for change this presented. Of course, any trainee counsellor would develop his or her view about the usefulness of personal counselling as a part of training, both in terms of personal and professional development.

By questioning the benefits of one-to-one counselling in counselling training Muller (2004) argued that it should be replaced with personal development groups. Such a strong statement inevitably drew responses and correspondence to CPJ. Kelly (2005) stated the opposite, while Smith (2005), apart from pointing out that it creates unnecessary division in UKCP, called the attention to the fact that Muller's suggestion is not quite an alternative to the one he intended to replace.

The research presented in this paper, after a brief review of the debate will present the findings of my research on the trainee counsellors' perceptions of one-to-one personal counselling as a part of counselling training. On this basis I will attempt to reflect on the question Muller posited.

Review of the debate

I will structure this review around the four main points that the debate seems to revolve around: a) why is it used; b) is it necessary; c) does it make trainees better counsellors; d) even if the answer is positive to all the first three questions, is there a better substitute. These questions are distinctly different. Answers to the first question should provide the perspective and qualification. This should be the basis of an unconditional yes or no to the second question. If the answer is not unconditional, then the problem becomes an efficiency and effectiveness question, firstly for one-to-one personal counselling as such (question three) and in comparison with other solutions (question four).

Why is personal counselling (one to one) used for the development of the trainee counsellors?

The consensus answer to the question is that personal counselling helps the trainee to achieve their own aims and align these with those of the training programme. Legg (1999), for example, argued that personal counselling helps development in three main areas: personal growth; gaining empathic understanding of the client's position; extending one's experiences of types of therapy. These three fields include a number of implicit assumptions. The first area suggests that the trainee, to become a counsellor, need to become a better human being – to be a therapist requires additional human qualities. Personal counselling, then is something that should bring these additional attributes, both emotional and intellectual functioning. In addition, as Cawkill (2004) argued, personal counselling encourages the trainee to deal with unresolved issues that may result in problems in a therapeutic relationship. It is equivalent to Lathwell's (2005) point in response to Muller's article, who argued 'engagement with the self is vital before we are in the role of helping others to engage with their self' (p. 36).

This argument leads to Legg's second area, that is, gaining an empathic understanding of the client's position through the use of personal counselling. Legg's argument is that the trainee, having experienced a particular bundle of emotions, can better anticipate the client's emotional reactions to the interaction and provides the confidence to see the client's viewpoint in a therapeutic relationship. Thus, as McLeod put it, personal counselling is a 'unique means of learning about the therapeutic process', due to the insight it can provide for the trainee in terms of the clients role and the effect it can have on increasing their self-awareness (McLeod, 1998). By experiencing counselling and working through personal barriers allows the counsellor to see that it is also possible for the client to do so and assess the effects correctly (Murdin and Coate, 2002)

The implicit assumption in these points is that personal counselling provides the client with empathy (note that if the trainee counsellor gains empathy from personal counselling, the same should hold true for all clients, which could be true, however, it

requires some evidence). Furthermore, there is an even more implicit assumption here, that empathy is necessary for the therapeutic process, a claim that is certainly not shared by some approaches). In addition, Legg's argument is valid only if the experience in the therapeutic process of one issue is transferable to another one and that the experience as a client is transferable to the therapist.

It also has to be added, that is Muller's point being a compulsory element, personal counselling may be an artificial element to the training (as an external learning tool) and may manifest an avoidance of self-exploration.

The third and final goal that Legg identifies as an area of development through the use of personal counselling is that of extending one's experience of different types of therapy. Legg observes that undertaking different forms of therapy which are unfamiliar to the trainee provide an opportunity for them to extend their knowledge and understanding in different theoretical models, yet also acknowledges the need for the trainee to read up on the alternatives that are available to them. Although Nelson-Jones (2002) also acknowledges the experience that can be gained from undertaking personal counselling from different theoretical approaches, yet his view is more qualified as he emphasises that the trainee should start with personal counselling for the approach the trainee is studying to give them grounding in this approach before moving on.

Is personal counselling (one to one) necessary for trainee counsellors?

This question is clearly different from the previous one, thus one would expect a different chain of reasoning. Surprisingly, however, in most cases the justification starts exactly where it begins for the previous question even though the 'necessary' is clearly more unconditional than the 'why' (which requires qualification). For example, Nelson-Jones (2002) argues for the necessity of that personal counselling in counselling training owing to the experience, insight and skills that a trainee counsellor can gain from undergoing their own personal counselling. Furthermore, personal counselling, as well as enabling the trainee to work through any blocks to become a more fulfilled and humane person, can also aid the trainee in addressing any material attached to their placement and supervision. At this point Nelson-Jones's argument does not go beyond the justification

to the 'why' question. However, by reflecting on Wilkins's objections ("relevance, coercion, cost, defining the minimum length and insufficient research evidence" (Nelson, Jones, 2004, p. 349), he observed that counselling is not always an effective training aid if it is undertaken as a result of a bureaucratic demand by the training course. Moreover, for example, in the case of person-centred counselling, it could run against the principles of the therapeutic approach.

McLeod, just as Nelson-Jones, reviews the arguments against the mandatory requirement of personal counselling in counselling training, but he states that these are far from conclusive. In effect, he takes sides with the mandatory personal counselling by referring to the role it plays in allowing the counsellor to experience what its like to need help themselves and feel ok about seeking to obtain such help 'rather than persevering with client work in an impaired state' (McLeod, 1998, p. 265).

It is important to see that although the question calls for it, neither of these two arguments is unconditional. These are qualified arguments and clearly related to the first and fourth question. Consequently, even though the authors use them for justifying the mandatory requirement, they are arguments against the necessity of personal counselling in counselling training.

The problem with the unconditional nature of the question can be illustrated with Karter's views (Karter, 2002). On the one hand he unconditionally states that personal therapy should be taken on a mandatory basis for people studying in the fields of human interaction like psychology and psychiatry (pp. 49-50), as they would not be able to cope with difficult client material if they could not cope with their own¹. However, he acknowledges that group therapy and co-counselling could also be used to aid the self-exploration and development of the trainee counsellor including group therapy or co-counselling.

Overall then, because of the highly qualified answers to the first question, the cited authors find it difficult to give an unconditional yes (or no) to whether one-to-one

¹ Karter also recognizes the possible turmoil personal counseling could create in the trainee counselor.

personal counselling is necessary to counselling training. In this manner, however, the role of personal counselling becomes an efficiency question.

Does it make better counsellors?

Mindfields College (whose courses are ‘accredited by the British Accreditation Council for Independent Further and Higher Education’) has removed the requirement for mandatory counselling from its Human Givens Diploma course. It states that the effectiveness of personal therapy as a part of the trainee’s development programme is a myth and states that counsellors do not need to go to countless hours of therapy to be a better and more effective counsellor, moreover it can actually do more harm than good (Mindfields College, 2005).

While Mindfields College could have made this step for practical reasons, thus it could be discounted, two reputed British authors, Mearns and Dryden, also questioned the assumptions presented in the views about the first question.

By referring to the findings by Aveline, Bergin and Garfield, Mearns states that there is no clear correlation between the use of personal therapy in the development of the trainee counsellor and their performance as a counsellor (Mearns, 1997). Dryden (1994) in his article on possible future trends in counselling and training, referring to unnamed research, claimed that undergoing personal therapy as part of training does not make the trainee a more effective counsellor.

These two points do not simply question the consensus argument, but also highlight a conceptual problem. The answers to the first question were not based on research evidence, but on deductions from the theoretical frameworks of some approaches (and personal convictions of the authors). The validity of those arguments, therefore, rest on the strength of the theoretical frameworks (and therapeutic traditions). There is no room in this paper to deal with theoretical conceptions of various approaches, however, it is important to point out that many of them rely on axiomatic statements. The interested reader can explore these on the approaches he or she is interested in.

On the other hand, research-based arguments can be countered with methodological criticism. McLeod, for example, points out that the empirical findings on the influence of personal counselling on the effectiveness of counsellors have been inconsistent (of the four research projects he cited two produced evidence in favour of personal counselling and two that were against) and have not demonstrated any clear benefit in terms of the increase of counsellor effectiveness and competence (McLeod, 1998). However, he also argues that methodologically such a research project is problematic as personal counselling is only one component of the training and hence it is difficult to identify 'the unique effects of this component in isolation from everything else that is happening on the course' (McLeod, 1998, p. 365).

Overall then the efficiency (and efficacy) of personal counselling in counselling training is just as allusive as the firm answer to the first two questions.

Is there a better substitute?

As mentioned in the introduction, Muller suggested 'personal development' as a less painful and more efficient tool instead of mandatory personal counselling (Muller, 2004).

Muller's claim corresponds to the characterisation of personal development groups by Sanders (2003) – that is they provide the opportunity to observe and support other members of the group and through its cohesion, the group can provide a more in-depth insight into the attitudes and prejudices that they have developed over the years. In addition, as Rose (2003) observed, groups are also appropriate for conceptualising human experience. They can present a challenge and provide rewards that personal counselling cannot (Dryden and Thorne, 1991). On the other hand, similar problems as with the effectiveness of one-to-one counselling could emerge in groups. Some group members may 'emerge with an interest and enthusiasm for group work whilst others carry with them unresolved bruises which lead them to avoid groups both for themselves and for their clients' (Rose, 2003b, p. 13) or as Dryden and Thorne (1991) put it, personal development groups are not necessarily the correct forum for every trainee (just like personal counselling) and hence groups can negatively affect trainees who are uncomfortable with the environment or require individual attention. Furthermore, Rose

pointed out that there is a difference between the competence of a counsellor and competence in disclosing and discussing your vulnerabilities to the personal development group².

There is also a practical problem that Kelly (2005) emphasised: ‘Most counselling courses run only for one day a week in which much has to be covered and the PD group, often large, is limited in time. I suspect that the PD group is not enough to bring issues into awareness, have them contained and worked through for all students’ (p. 36).

* *
*

The literature discussed above does not justify either mandatory or optional personal counselling in counselling training. There are really only two questions (and not four). Firstly, the skills that are needed for a counsellor. Secondly, whether there is any component of the counselling training that can uniquely provide a bundle of the required skills. If one-to-one personal counselling is such a component, then no matter what are the downsides, it has to be mandatory. The downsides (potential negative, harmful effects) are irrelevant, because no counsellor should practise who does not have the appropriate skills. The negative effects are then merely trade offs for becoming a counsellor. If one-to-one personal counselling is not such a component of the training (that is the skills are obtainable in other forms), then the downsides become extremely relevant.

The question is merely, what is the most effective and the least painful way to obtaining the necessary skills. This is something that can be researched with standardised methods that make comparison possible. However, such a task may manifest insurmountable epistemological and methodological problems. Firstly, it requires the identification of the skills that a counsellor needs and the sources of obtaining these skills. It is likely that different approaches would come up with different answers to this question, thus there would be incomparable sets of hypotheses for each approach. Secondly, the research would show results for the sample (and predictions for the

² It has to be added that the same argument could be raised against one-to-one counseling.

population as a whole), thus it would not be able to say anything about the individuals in the sample (and in the population). Thus Rose's point (and those of Dryden and Thorne) cited above would come back: there are trainees for whom individual counselling and those for whom other forms (such as personal development groups) would be more appropriate. This means that irrespective of such a research exercise, the administrative solution (what is mandatory or optional) would leave the problem unresolved.

The problem is not with the gap between the individual's needs and the characteristics of the sample (or population) as a whole, as it is inevitable, but with the 'theoretical' arguments for or against an administrative decision. In addition, two alternative ethical problems would remain and would become sharper. Firstly, if an administrative requirement is introduced (or maintained) in spite of doubts, then those for whom the administrative requirement is inappropriate make a sacrifice for the trainees as a whole. Secondly, if there is no administrative requirement, then the doubt about the other components' ability to deliver the necessary skills may mean that counsellors qualify without these.

On the basis of these considerations, the research presented here concentrates on the effectiveness of one-to-one personal counselling in the development of the trainee counsellors. Thus, the topic makes the assumption that trainees need to develop and that there is a question of effectiveness. The research, due to time and resource constraints, excludes the investigation of the efficiency issues.

Methodology

For expediency considerations (ensuring participation), quantitative approach, or specifically survey method was chosen (see Appendix A for the questionnaire). The research was conducted in accordance with the Ethical Framework for Good Practise in Counselling and Psychotherapy laid down by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. The questionnaires were confidential and did not request any personal information from the respondents or information about the course. The surveyed sample included a number of trainee counsellors from my own training programme, participants of other courses. Seventy people received the questionnaire and forty responded.

To ascertain whether the questionnaire would provide the correct data and insight needed, a pilot study was conducted among my fellow students (a sample of eight).

In order to analysis the quantitative data I have received back from the questionnaires accurately I have used the software package, SPSS 11.0 for Windows. This has enabled me to provide an accurate and calculated reading of the information I have received through the questionnaire.

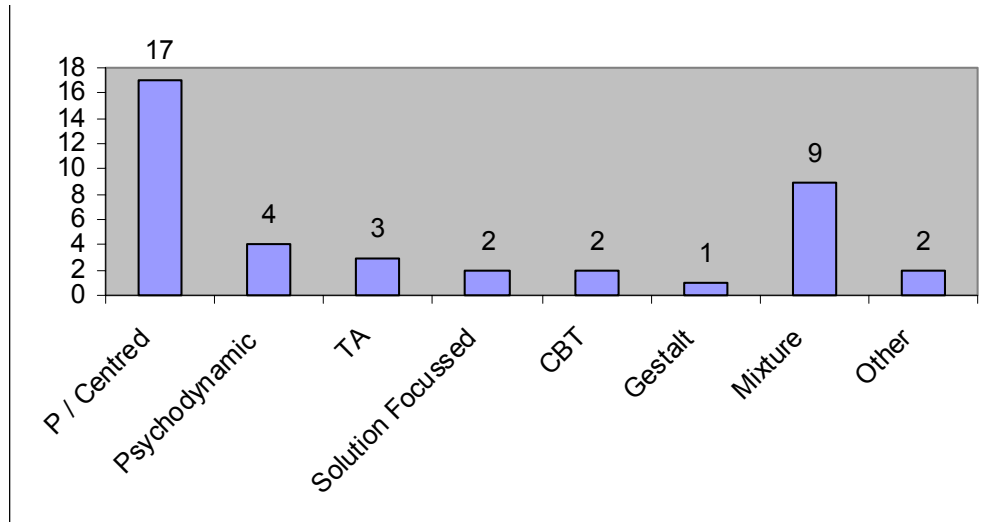
The findings

The overwhelming majority of the respondents (37) stated that personal counselling had aided in their personal growth and 35 of them claimed that it had enabled them to gain a more empathic understanding of the client's position. While this is a very strong indication of the positive effects of personal counselling, it is worthwhile stating that two trainees did not connect the two effects or at least have not yet seen the connection, which contradicts to Legg's very strongly stated assumption (Legg, 1999). This personal growth was also related by the respondents perception of themselves as trainee counsellors. 35 of them stated that personal counselling helped them to become better professionals and more than half of them (28) thought that personal counselling played a key role in their professional development. It is important to see these responses as perceptions, as Dryden and Feltham (1994) points out that 'despite counsellors' and psychotherapists' insistence on placing great subjective value on their experiences of personal therapy and its contribution to their effectiveness as counsellors, there is little to substantiate this' (p. 85). Furthermore, as it is referred above, research into these issues are inconclusive (McLeod, 1998)

The assumption that exposure to different types of therapy has a value in the personal growth of the trainee counsellor was also verified, though the results were less convincing than in the case of the previous points (28 respondents). Having said that 30 trainees stated the importance of experiencing different types of therapy. The slight increase is probably due to the trainees wanting to experience therapies other than their own approach, but had no opportunity to do so. The likelihood of this influence is confirmed by the fact that 17 respondents received person-centred counselling, while

only four-four received psychodynamic counselling and transactional analysis. Nine respondents undertook a mixture of counselling (See Figure 1).

Figure 1: Distribution of personal counselling approaches



After this positive response, it is not surprising that the majority (26) of the respondents felt that personal counselling should be part of the training programme. However, the relatively low majority also suggests that some of those trainees who gained from personal counselling thought that other components of the training programme could have delivered the skills or that the skills are unnecessary (though could be desirable) for a counsellor. This is reinforced by the fact that more respondents (30) thought that personal counselling had a crucial role in personal development. To test this, one question was designed to approach the question negatively (which requires a more reflective attitude). Indeed, 32 respondents said that their personal development would have been hindered if they did not undertake one-to-one personal counselling. Consequently, there are a number of ways in which a training programme could promote personal development (such as personal counselling, personal development or therapy groups, supervision and learning journals) the sample of trainees surveyed in this research felt not only that one-to-one counselling is an effective way of personal development, but also that its omission would hinder their development and growth.

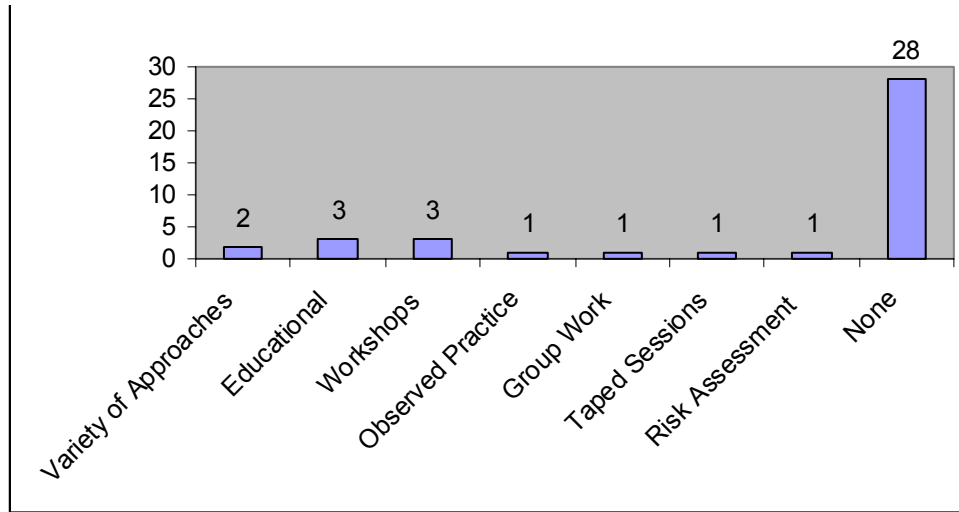
However, this positive attitude to mandatory personal counselling (or at least the implication of it) is probably a result of more of a professional attitude than personal

conviction (that is influenced by social values). When depersonalising the question by asking the respondents whether trainees would access counselling if it was not a compulsory component of the course, almost half of the respondents answered 'no' and only a quarter of them 'yes'. I will return to this contradiction in the discussion and conclusions section.

When asked about replacement of personal counselling with other means, such as personal development groups, 28 respondents felt that their training and development would suffer if personal counselling was replaced by personal development groups. This is a very strong message irrespective of the validity of these statements as perceptions count a lot in the effectiveness of learning. This outcome, however, does not discount the value of personal development groups, as thirty five trainees felt that the combination of personal counselling (one to one), personal development groups and supervision offers the best pathways to achieving their training and development goals. This suggests that whilst on their own each option may be too narrow to provide a complete and fruitful training and development programme but together they are invaluable as they each provide a vital component in the overall machinery of the trainee counsellors development and training programme and have an effective role to play.

The role of trainees in a training programme inevitably influenced the results presented above. They probably feel that they have to get on with the course and qualify rather than evaluate the complex structure of the course (maybe they are not even qualified to do this). This is witnessed by the answers to the question that asked the respondents to reflect on any additional elements that they would consider as improvements to their training programme. A strong majority did not consider any additional option, the rest of the answers were rather dispersed and only two of the respondents felt that any of these elements should be made compulsory (See Figure 2).

Figure 2: Suggestions for additional elements to be included in the counselling training programme.



Discussion and conclusions

This research study was designed to evaluate how effective is personal counselling (one to one) in the development of the trainee counsellor. This has been done through a research questionnaire which has examined the views of forty trainee counsellors' on four different composite factors that I felt would provide an insight into how effective is personal counselling in the development of the trainee counsellor.

The first variable, why is personal counselling used for the development of trainee counsellors is a composite variable of the three areas by Legg (1999) around possible aids to the trainee's development, these focus on personal growth, gaining an empathic understanding of the client's position and extending their experience of therapy. The research undertaken highlighted a positive reaction in the findings in relation to the areas put forward. A large majority of trainee's citing them as key elements in their training and development and that they had indeed had the required effect on their growth in both a personal and professionally manner.

The second variable is personal counselling (one to one) necessary for trainee counsellors follows on well from the opening variable and provides the opportunity to

examine how necessary and relevant personal counselling is to the trainee counsellor's development and training programme who took part in the research study and reflect this with the literature available.

The outcomes were less clear on these issues than in the case of the first variable. While the majority of trainees praised the role of personal counselling and recognised the contribution it made to their own personal and professional development, their attitude to the question of mandatory or not was more pragmatic. The responses of the trainees therefore were at two different levels. Firstly, as trainee counsellors they adopted the attitude of the 'ideal' counsellor to personal growth and professionalism. Secondly, as trainees, they accept whatever the administrative requirements are. Their primary aim as trainees is to qualify and to do so, they need to conform to certain rules (including adopting the language of the profession, adapting to the particular approach, etc.). Without judging the respondents, the answers to some questions do not suggest the reflective practitioners BACP advocates. This sort of pragmatism could even be dangerous. Let us assume for a moment that BACP declares personal development unnecessary for the profession...

The administrative decision on whether personal counselling should be mandatory or not causes further problems due to the dual approach of trainees. If one training provider makes personal counselling compulsory, while the other does not and the two courses are identical in all other aspects, trainees would put questions that cannot be easily answered. They may question the compulsory nature of this course element, not last because it means extra cost, time, etc. They may also force the tutor to make judgement on the philosophy of the other course. The views and considerations of BACP, the training providers, tutors and trainees on this issue could be completely different, something that cannot be reconciled, only in an administrative manner.

The third variable examines in relation to personal counselling (one to one) for the trainee counsellor, does it make them a better counsellor. The research findings from the questionnaires completed by the trainee counsellors suggested that personal counselling overall for a large majority of the trainees enable them to increase their skills, knowledge and experience thus in their own eyes making them a better counsellor.

The fourth variable is whether personal development groups were a substitute. Although the majority of trainee counsellors concurred that they felt their development as a trainee counsellor would suffer if personal counselling was replaced by personal development groups, they also advocated a combination of various methods (among them personal development groups). This may indicate that personal counselling may not be enough on its own but it is a vital and effective component in the development and training of the trainee counsellor.

The debate around personal counselling in counselling training is influenced by a huge number of factors. Personal experiences and the characteristics of the therapeutic approach create strong values about the role, usefulness and efficiency of this component of counselling training. This explains the sharp exchange of arguments raised by Muller's article. These values are often so strongly associated with other values about counselling and the attributes of counsellors that make any kind of serious dialogue or compromise unlikely. This is made even more difficult by the lack of consensus in research findings. As various research projects get different results, it encourages the development of two opposing camps on this issue. There are in-between standpoints too, but in affect they either seek compromise between two views that cannot be reconciled, hence bring no fruit or eventually they take side with one or the other camp as I demonstrated with the review of the debate. The whole structure of counselling training further influences the debate. A large proportion of trainees, in effect, make a business investment (not necessarily and not even primarily from a monetary point of view), hence they want to receive the highest possible reward for it. If the reward is merely qualifying, then they inevitably compare and question the investment requirement of courses. Counselling training is also a growing business in the UK. Training organisations compete for customers. Although reputation is undoubtedly the most important competitive advantage in this market, this has to be measured on the turnover the training organisation makes (there are exceptions to this, especially those organisations that can be considered life-style businesses). Finally, BACP's position has become problematic with its growing heterogeneity and by the fact that it is not a mandatory membership organisation, it has members coming from non-BACP accredited courses. As a result, its documents have become more and more general and less and less prescriptive.

In spite of these remarks, the research presented in this paper supports my view. The four composite variables reflect the use of personal counselling in the development of the trainee in a very positive light. In terms of the recommendations that can be drawn from this study I believe that the use of personal counselling in the development of the trainee counsellor should continue for the moment on a mandatory basis in accordance with the ethical guidelines recommended by the BACP until further research can be conducted. There is an urgent need for further study to be carried out in the area of the effectiveness of the trainee counsellor's development largely due to the wide scale of variables that fall under its umbrella and the lack of material available due to this area being a relatively new subject.

The findings of this study need to be built on and taken to a higher level from both a quantitative and qualitative point of study with trainee counsellors, lecturers and supervisors from various colleges and theoretical approaches all involved in this process to provide a wide and varied amount of opinions and information to establish not only how effective is personal counselling in the development of the trainee but also how it can best be harnessed to provide the trainee with the development they require to grow both personally and professionally.

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Appendix A

Questionnaire

Section A

A.1) Do you feel that personal counselling (one to one) has aided your own personal growth?

Yes

No

Other Please Specify)

A.2) Do you feel that personal counselling (one to one) has enabled you to gain a more empathic understanding of the client's position?

Yes

No

Other Please Specify)

A.3) Do you feel that personal counselling (one to one) has enabled you to extend your experience of different types of therapy?

Yes

No

Other Please Specify)

A.4) What model of therapy have you chosen for your personal counselling?

Please specify)

A.5) Do you feel it is important for a trainee counsellor to be allowed to experience different types of therapy and not be restricted to one theoretical approach when undertaking personal counselling (one to one)

Yes

No

Other please specify)

A.6) Do you feel that personal counselling (one to one) has aided your development as a trainee counsellor in any other ways to the ones mentioned above?

Please Specify)

Section B

B.1) Do you think personal counselling (one to one) should be a compulsory part of Counsellor training?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

B.2) Do you think personal counselling (one to one) plays a crucial role in a trainee counsellor's development?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

B.3) Do you feel your development as a trainee counsellor would be hindered if you didn't undertake personal counselling?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

B.4) Do you think trainee counsellors would access personal counselling for their own development if it wasn't a required part of their training?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

Section C

C.1) Do you feel your own experience of personal counselling (one to one) has allowed you to develop and increase your skills and knowledge as a counsellor?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

C.2) Do you feel personal counselling (one to one) has improved your effectiveness as a counsellor?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

C.3) Do you feel that personal counselling plays a key role in the development and growth of trainee counsellors and makes them a better counsellor?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

Section D

D.1) Do you feel that personal counselling (one to one) is a vital part of your training and development programme as a trainee counsellor?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

D.2) Do you feel that your development as a trainee counsellor would suffer if personal counselling (one to one) was replaced by personal development groups?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

D.3) Do you feel that the combination of personal counselling (one to one), personal development groups and supervision offers the best pathway to achieving your training and development aims?

Yes

No

Other please specify)

D.4) What other training options if any do you feel should be incorporated into the training and development of trainee counsellors, and should this be compulsory?

Please Specify)

We are training the counsellors of tomorrow.

CTPDC Counselling Training Limited

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