

“It’s the relationship that matters:” a qualitative analysis of the role of the student / tutor relationship in counselling and psychotherapy training in the UK.

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The impact of the 'teaching alliance' in counselling training

Background to the research

- Pilot study revealed the importance of tutor / student relationships for trainees' development and confidence
- Suggested this could have a significant impact on the effectiveness of the training (including retention and outcomes)

Previous research

- Studies showing the importance of certain teacher qualities on learning outcomes (Lowman, 1995; Teven and Hanson, 2004; Benson et al, 2009)
- Fewer studies focusing on trainees in health care professions (Dobinson-Harrington, 2006; Salahuddin, 2000; Jones et al, 2008)


The nature of the course

- Counselling training is not purely an academic discipline
- It involves application of skills and reflexive abilities
- It requires personal development, self exposure/ putting oneself on the line

The study


- Focused on the student perspective
- Explored:
 - (1) To what extent positive student / tutor relationships matter to students
 - (2) Which features students particularly valued?
 - (3) To what extent these relationships have an impact on the quality of the learning experience?

Method

- Counselling trainees at one HE institution
 - Two focus groups: 8 in year 1; 7 in year 2
 - Given topic areas to consider in advance
 - Semi-structured discussion with facilitator
 - Audio recorded
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Analysis

Qualitative study

- Small sample (15 trainees in total)
 - Rich understanding of data
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Analysis – Template Analysis

Advantages of template analysis

- Identifies themes
- Allows flexibility
- Provides a structure without being too rigid
- Enables a priori codes to be used

Findings

To what extent the relationship matters:

“I think a good relationship, facilitates learning, it makes you more eager to learn....it helps me a great deal if I have a good relationship with that tutor.”

“I think it’s a good thing to have a tutor as a role model of what you want to become, so a good relationship would enhance that in most cases.”

Findings

Which features students valued highly:

- Acceptance, affirmation, encouragement and support
- Openness, genuineness and self-disclosure
- Empathy
- A sense of equality
- Tutor modelling of desired qualities and behaviours

Valued relational features

Acceptance, affirmation (or lack of it)

“For me it’s about having that confidence that if I present something, or an idea, or question or whatever to a tutor, that it isn’t going to be disregarded because it isn’t their thing.”

“You feel that if you said something they didn’t agree with, you’d be immediately judged.”

Valued relational features

Openness, genuineness

- “*Congruence*,” being “*quite genuine*,” and being “*real with one another*.”
- “*Not (being) afraid to address issues*.”
- Lack of opportunity to discuss “*what we think about what’s going on in the group*” was regarded negatively.

Valued relational features

Self-disclosure

Using “*themselves as examples*,” “*sharing their views with humility*” and who were willing to be “*vulnerable*” in their work with students.


Valued relational features

Empathy

“So, in my time as a student, I always seem to ..be more receptive to tutors who sort of were understanding of things such as workloads, study / life balance and so on, than others who were completely egocentric in a sense that they just had their job to do and this is what they were here for, and you just had to work your way around it. So I think that sort of attitude can really get in the way of a good learning relationship.”

Clear links with the therapeutic relationship

Person-centred approach (Carl Rogers, 1957)

- Empathic understanding / empathy
 - Unconditional positive regard / acceptance
 - Congruence / genuineness
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Clear links with the therapeutic relationship

Equality (Egan, 2007)

A sense of “shared exploration,” “that sense of us being colleagues as opposed to sort of, you know, tutor, kind of tutee imbalance, really.”

Students preferred tutors who did not present themselves as experts (*“speaking with wisdom from up high.”*)

Clear links with the therapeutic relationship

Tutor modelling (Egan, 2007)

“I suppose it relates to the fact that what we’re taught is that in the counselling relationship, you know, that the therapeutic relationship, that the most fundamental thing you need to get right is the counselling relationship, so I suppose in the same way that the client should learn about relationships through the relationship with their therapist, the way that we’re going to learn about relationships is through our relationships with our tutors.”

Findings

The impact of the alliance on the learning experience:


- Creation of a safe, supportive learning environment (consistency/predictability)
- Increased willingness to participate / make mistakes
- Effective management of feedback

Supportive Learning Environment

“The tutors have sort of had a hand holding role in the course, but I don’t feel in any way when I finish this course that I’m going to feel un-held because I’ve been so held. So in a way the support has been right, because I’m not frightened of it not being there.”


“And it’s hard to grow, isn’t it, if you’re not being held to a certain extent, it’s a kind of cradling feeling, or it ought to be.”

Willingness to participate/make mistakes

- *“If the relationship’s wrong then fear gets in the way and I withdraw.”*
 - *“I’m wary about saying anything in case I say the wrong thing and it produces the wrong reaction.”*
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Willingness to participate/make mistakes

“The tutor relationship that I have with my tutors is very much, it sort of has a counselling sort of context in that if I think backso that I am able to be interested and make mistakes, which are all part of learning.”

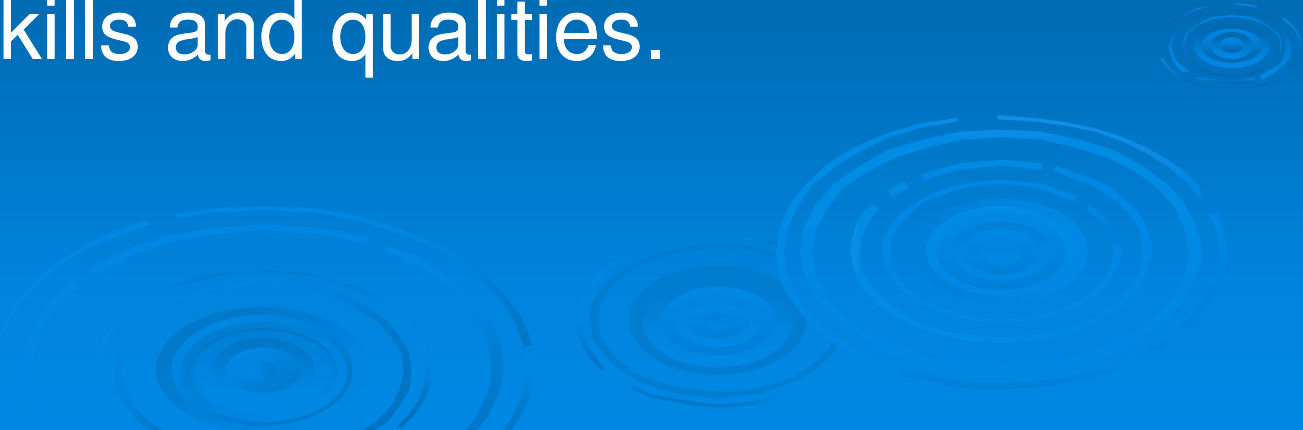


Effective management of feedback

One student *“would rather be told by this person because he’d be able to tell me in a way that made me feel that, yeah, there was some really good stuff in it.”*

The result of constructive feedback would, according to one student, be that *“you wouldn’t want to just give up afterwards.”*

Conclusions

- The teaching alliance may be more important on courses which aim to foster students' personal development.
 - The student / tutor relationship, together with students' learning, is likely to be enhanced when tutors draw on therapeutic relational skills and qualities.
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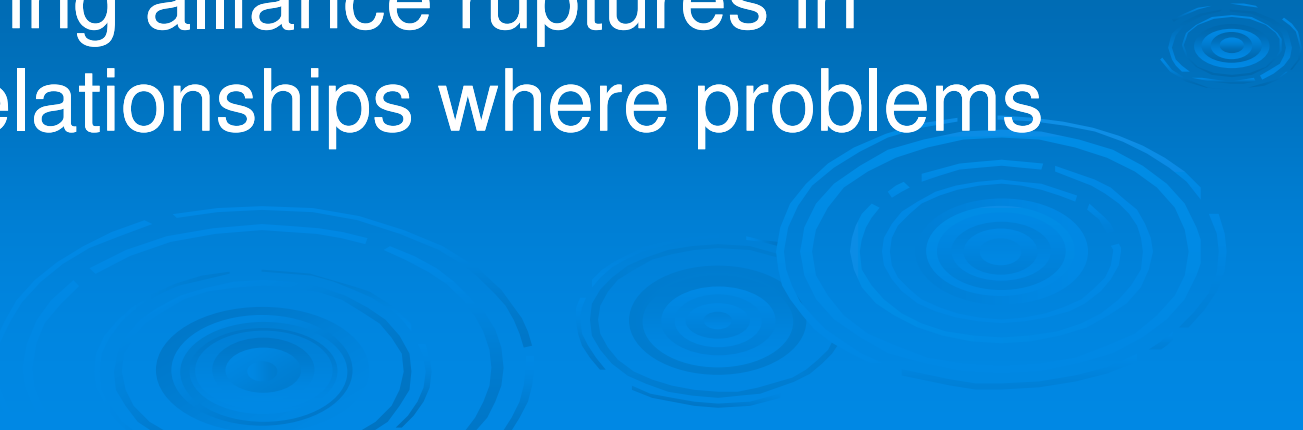
Conclusions

- Students are likely to learn more effectively if tutors provide a learning environment which provides a similar safe and containing space as that provided by an effective therapeutic relationship.

Implications for training courses

- Tutors need to place emphasis on developing relationships based on client / therapist relational features.
- A safe learning environment needs to be created using the above relational features. A regular forum for discussion of relationship issues needs to be provided.

Implications for training courses

- The use of negative relational features needs to be minimised and, if possible, discussed as they occur.
 - Tutors need to use similar skills to those used in repairing alliance ruptures in therapeutic relationships where problems arise.
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