Counselling Psychologist’s Experiences of Working Relationally with Client’s who have Experienced Abuse: An IPA Study

1. Introduction

It is argued that a relational or process approach to therapeutic work with clients who have experienced abuse should become more integrated in the use of therapeutic interventions (e.g. trauma focused CB/TMDR) to aid therapeutic outcome (Schottenbauer, Glass, Amkoff, Tendick & Gray, 2008). Indeed, the quality of the therapeutic relationship is of central importance to the therapeutic outcome, and positive outcomes have been associated with therapist’s interpersonal skills as well as client’s engagement in therapy (Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999).

The therapeutic process for clients within the population has been referred to as a ‘therapeutic roller coaster’ due to the client’s difficulty in maintaining relationships, depressed mood and self-destructive behaviors (Chu, 1992, p.351). Furthermore, backgrounds of abuse, abandonment and betrayal are often re-enacted in therapy (Chu, 1992) and relational dynamics, such as transference and counter-transference within the therapeutic relationship, can impact on the relationship and the efficacy of treatment.

2. Research Questions

- What are counselling psychologist’s experiences of building the therapeutic relationship with clients who have experienced abuse?
- How do counselling psychologists experience the relational dynamics, including transference and counter-transference, in their work with the client group?

3. Methodology

Design: Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) sits within the existential-phenomenological research paradigm and allows the researcher to gain an insight of participant’s world through analysis of the content and interpretation of the meaning behind their narrative.

Participants: Six counselling psychologists, registered with the HCPC, with experience in working with clients who had experienced abuse were recruited via online advertisements and purposive sampling. Age range = between 27 and 53 years, number of years practising post qualification = between 1.5 and 14 years.

Procedure: Semi-structured interviews were conducted (lasting between 50 & 60 minutes), consisting of eight open-ended questions. Interviews were recorded, later transcribed verbatim and analysed using IPA.

Ethical considerations: Study conducted in accordance to the BPS Code of human research ethics (2010). Study was given ethical approval by the university and pseudonyms have been used to preserve participant anonymity.

4. Results

Three superordinate themes emerged from the IPA of all six participant accounts and were generated as a result of double hermeneutic engagement with each interview transcript (Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Superordinate Themes

1. The Holding Environment
   - a). Building Trust
   - b). Boundaries: Firmness vs. Adaptability

2. The Personal vs. The Professional
   - a). Empathising vs. Detaching
   - b). Managing the Challenges of the Work

3. Internal Responses, External Communications
   - a). Holding vs. Naming Emotional Responses
   - b). Self-care

Subordinate Themes

“being able to feel what they’re feeling […] this can create trust very, very quickly with abused clients, they need to feel held and contained, they need to feel heard they need to feel that someone’s on their side” (Neil)

The Holding Environment – Building Trust (1a)

“cos very often with abuse you know it’s a lack of control, you know, they had no control over what was happening” (Paul)

The Holding Environment – Boundaries: Firmness vs. Adaptability (1b)

“I could feel that we were going in the wrong direction here, you know I’m not your friend and I’m not your daughter, I’m a therapist so let’s stick to that”. (Christina)

The Holding Environment – Boundaries: Firmness vs. Adaptability (1b)

“that’s a huge challenge you know, just to learn and teach yourself how much to keep in the room and draw the line really from empathising with the client, being with him and also separating yourself you know what you is going on […] it’s like I’ve got another level of détaching really” (Christina)

The Personal vs. The Professional – Empathising vs. Detaching (2a)

“The only clients that I was having problems with were from the organisation of the survivors of sexual abuse […] so once […] I realised […] I think that’s when my empathy held even MORE” (Becky)

The Personal vs. The Professional – Managing the Challenges of the Work (2b)

“I’ll’s very difficult. I try and not to automatically […] act on something that I am feeling unless I am pretty sure that it has something to do with my client, although you can’t always be sure about that” (Christina)

Internal Responses, External Communications – Holding vs. Naming Emotional Responses (3a)

“It’s almost like naming: Naming the thing that’s going on in the therapy, in the therapeutic relationship because if it’s going on there it’s going on in most relationships in their lives and we use that as a modelling example” (Fiona)

Internal Responses, External Communications – Holding vs. Naming Emotional Responses (3b)

5. Discussion

Participants indicated building trust as helpful in creating a “holding environment” in which therapy could take place, via factors such as empathy, safety, transparency, and self-disclosure. Whilst some participants indicated the need for consistent and firm boundaries, other participants highlighted the need for adaptability by way of empowering clients and minimising power imbalances. These findings echo the humanistic value base of the counselling psychology discipline (Cooper, 2009).

Participants highlighted the personal challenges involved in providing therapy to the client population, in terms of the impact of hearing client’s stories and the professional risks associated. Participants also described a process of ‘holding’ or ‘naming’ emotional responses, highlighting ‘reflection in practice’ (Schon, 1983).

These findings have implications for counselling psychology training programmes and organisations offering therapy to this client population, whereby self-care, making use of supervision and exploring counter-transference reactions should become more integrated components.

6. References


