A qualitative study of students' experience of psychological change during an introductory counselling course.

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ABSTRACT

- There is little research which examines experiences of students at earlier stages of counsellor training (i.e. stage one) and whether psychological change of students occurs at that level.
- This study explored the experiences of students on a stage one counselling training course (i.e. 12 week introductory course) in the UK, and whether that involved psychological change.
- Four superordinate themes were found: *Changes to Self*; *Self-Development/Awareness*; *A Process of Change*; and *Control*.

BACKGROUND

- Students report that they experience psychological change whilst undertaking counselling training courses.
- Most of the research on trainee counsellors has focused on the later stages of counsellor training in the UK, such as stage 2 (e.g. Certificate) and stage 3 (e.g. Diploma) courses.
- There is still a paucity of research that explores the way in which students experience counselling training at the introductory /initial level.
- Understanding how counselling training impacts on students is important for the design and delivery of courses.
- Furthermore, understanding student experiences can better inform tutors around how best to support students.

AIMS

This researched aimed to:

1. Explore the experiences of students undertaking initial counselling training.
2. Investigate if students change during and/or post this initial training.
3. Explore how students experience any change (if it occurs).

METHOD

- Purposive sample of four participants who were students on a level one counselling course (i.e Introduction to Counselling Concepts) in the UK.
- Participants were given an information sheet, a consent form and a contact details sheet.
- BPS and BACP Research Ethical Guidelines were adhered to.
- Participants produced a narrative account of their experience, specifically considering any aspect of change (if any) both during and after the course.
- Narratives were analysed using Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis - (Smith, Flowers, & Larkin, 2009).

FINDINGS

IPA: Superordinate Themes

Changes to Self	"the beginning of a new future for me"
Self-Awareness	"helped me to understand myself more"
Process	"the concepts course began a process in me"
Control	Before: Seeking More During: Losing Some After: Gaining More

DISCUSSION

- This study supports the assertion that counsellor training often results in changes to self.
- It further supports the assertion that this change begins to occur at the start of the initial/introductory training level.
- Participants were able to distinguish between an 'old self' before the course and a 'new self' after it; the change often attributed to being challenged in their own belief systems and values.
- All participants showed greater awareness and understanding of self, entering into a dialogical relationship with themselves and through their relations with others.
- Many participants were surprised by their increased awareness and what it revealed to them.
- Participants acknowledged an increased awareness and thoughtfulness in their actions. However, the enthusiasm for personal development (and change) at the beginning of the course seemed to have decreased by the end.
- Participants made a distinction between what was experienced and the learning that occurred on the course.
- Participants were "stimulated" to some extent by the course content as well as being "disturbed" on some level by the challenges they faced. Indeed, one participant found the constant self analysis too much and the thought of doing any more invoked an anxious reaction.
- Many of the participants were looking for more control within their lives before the start of the course, during the course they experienced an even greater sense of not being in control as they challenged themselves and their values. It seems that perseverance through this time did result in a greater level of confidence and self control by the end of the course.

CONCLUSION

- This study provides new evidence that psychological change occurs on the introductory/initial level counselling training.
- Participants' experienced a process of change which resulted in changes to self, increased levels of self-awareness and changed relations with others.
- The process and subsequent changes were not always experienced positively
- Motivations for attending the course seemed to influence participants' level of change and self-awareness, with those seeking change the most likely to experience higher levels of it.
- This study highlights the need for further research into this area.

REFERENCES

Smith, J. A., Flowers, P., & Larkin, M. (2009).*Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis: Theory, Method and Research.* London: Sage Publications.