Learning from triads: training undergraduates in counselling skills

Kate Smith

This is the peer reviewed version of the following article:

Smith, K. 2015. Learning from triads: training undergraduates in counselling skills. Counselling and Psychotherapy Research,

which has been published in final form at doi: http://dx.doi.org/10.1002/capr.12056

This article may be used for non-commercial purposes in accordance with the Wiley Terms and Conditions for Self-Archiving
Learning from triads: training undergraduates in counselling skills

Smith, K*.

*corresponding author Kate.smith@abertay.ac.uk

Keywords: counselling; psychotherapy; skills; training; undergraduate

Introduction

Since the beginning of the Rogerian movement (Rogers, 1951), students training in psychotherapy and counselling have been required to take part in ‘live’ demonstrations of therapy. This practice is now common to all modalities of counselling skills training (Hill, Stahl & Roffman, 2007). Training in counselling and psychotherapy is provided in both private organisations and voluntary agency contexts, as well as higher and further education institutions, with a range of delivery formats e.g. part-time, full-time, online, postgraduate, and undergraduate. Universities deliver around 50% of training (BACP, 2015). In the UK around 35 university programmes have integrated counselling skills training into undergraduate degrees (UCAS, 2014). For some students, entry on to an undergraduate course may represent the first step towards professional training in counselling or clinical psychology, while for others, it is simply training in transferable skills.
Generally courses providing undergraduate training in helping skills combining theory, skills practice, and personal development aspects, have been shown to be effective, with even relatively short-term training shown to increase students’ abilities to self-manage and help others (Payne & Woudenberg, 1978), and to develop conceptual and practice skills, and self-awareness (Korn, 1980). In addition, the practical application of skills during training has been found to significantly increase the use of skills during helping events compared to training in which students simply observe or analyse skills (Klevans, Voltz, & Friedman, 1981). More contemporary research has focused on the pedagogy of training in counselling skills (Hill & Lent, 2006), and the measurement of outcomes (Hill & Kellems, 2002). One study, which examined the effectiveness of undergraduates who had trained on a ‘helping skills’ course (Hill, Roffman, Stahl, Friedman, Hummel & Wallance, 2008), found good evidence for a range of skills being perceived as improved by clients and counselling students, as well as improvements indicated by objective measures of intervention such as the number of words used during sessions.

In 2013 a report by the Higher Education Academy stated that there was a clear need for an evidence base for best practice in teaching counselling and psychotherapy (Rutten & Hulme, 2013). To date, research into skills training has largely focused on effectiveness (Baker & Daniels, 1989; Baker, Daniels & Greeley, 1990; Buser, 2008); and the indirect psychological impact on the undergraduate student (e.g. Naar, 1974). Although the arguments for and against training within university contexts are discussed within the literature (e.g. Wheeler & Miller, 2002), specific pedagogical activities in undergraduate settings have not been well researched.

A deeper understanding of counsellor training requires an examination of the ways in which delivery and content impact upon learning. While it is generally accepted that
instruction and modelling, practice and feedback, and space for reflection are all essential (Hill, et al, 2007), other variables such as class size, tutor input, and teaching and learning activities may be important, and student perspectives on training may provide guidance for educators for best practice.

This study focuses on one particular aspect of the training - skills training exercises - and the impact of this practice on the overall learning experience of students. Skills training generally involves small groups of students turn-taking in applying particular counselling activities to each other, with reflective learning facilitated by feedback input from the perspective of the client, counsellor and observer(s) (Inskip, 1996; Swank & McCarthy, 2013). Sharing of the experience of applying skills, observation of others, and experiencing the different counselling styles as a client, creates a situation where the trainee can appreciate counselling from all perspectives (Hill, et al, 2007), making counselling personally relevant, increasing empathy towards clients (Anderson, Gundersen, Blanken, Halvorson, & Schmutte, 1989) and broadening an understanding of counselling processes such as boundary maintenance and self-disclosure (Barnett, 2011; Hill & Knox, 2001). Being in the role of the client, in particular, may involve disclosure of personal ‘problem’ material to peers, and so this pedagogical practice involves risk and relationship management for which students may be unprepared (Latham, 1997). While institutional ethical considerations usually mean that use of personal material is not compulsory, Hill and colleagues (2008) found that during their study into the effectiveness of training, peer-counselling students voluntarily used personal difficulties rather than making up problems when in the role of clients.

This awareness of safety and risk and its role in the training environment (as opposed to the counselling environment per se) has not been subject to a great deal of research (but see Payne (2001) for a discussion of the role of safety in dance therapy for postgraduate
trainees and Robson and Robson (2008) for experiences of students personal
development groups), and no studies look at how peer-counselling in counselling
training might be best provided or developed within the undergraduate training cohort.
Consideration should be given to responsibility of the training institution towards their
students, as teaching and learning practices may involve voluntary engagement in self-
disclosure practices in a context where students may not be able to make an informed
choice, and disclosure is implicitly required by the context (Haney, 2004; Seawright &
Seawright, 2012). Counselling training is a potentially fertile ground for the divulgence
of problematic stories and emotions and students may find themselves in a context
where the role, and ratio, of trainers to students potentially precludes suitable
monitoring of problems. In a qualitative study exploring the experiences of training for
counselling undergraduates (Truell, 2001), two of the six students interviewed reported
that the most stressful experience on the course was self-disclosure, with little perceived
support from trainers due to blurred boundaries between students, and between students
and tutors. Along with the stresses of disclosure, and perceptions of support roles, the
suitability of students who have self-selected to study counselling, may be a concern as
the course may provide an arena for the presentation of unaddressed emotional needs
and potentially challenging material (Guy, 1987). Self-disclosure may be implicitly or
explicitly encouraged by tutors and peers, and be seen as evidence of emotional
maturity or successful processing of events (Perillo, 1997). For students, potentially
high-risk subject matter such as mental illness, relationships and interpersonal issues,
sexual abuse, physical health, substance use or misuse, and sexuality, may be current
(Storrie, Ahern & Tuckett, 2010), and moral perspectives and socio-cultural beliefs may
also be challenged by peers. In a skills training context inappropriate disclosure or
inappropriate response to disclosures either within or out-with the course context could
lead to emotional distress, on-going interpersonal problems, a break-down or rupture in the training group, loss of confidence and a negative impact on the learning experience. This is of particular concern to an undergraduate cohort that is undertaking a three- or four-year period of study and who may share time both within the programme and socially.

This research study explores the experiences of undergraduate students training in counselling skills as part of their Psychology and Counselling undergraduate degree. The aim of the research is to examine the perspective of students engaged in triads, and ask what challenges may arise for this group in terms of self-disclosures, with the objective of informing on teaching in further and higher education.

Method

Semi-structured interviews were carried out on a cohort of students focusing specifically on the experience and impact of self-disclosure during training. The interviews and analysis were carried out by the lead counselling tutor on the undergraduate programme. The initial research question was based on a professional observation of the different dynamics between a group of undergraduate students compared to a group of mature postgraduates on a comparable course. The undergraduate students were less engaged with disclosure, reporting it as difficult, and how it could impact on their relationships with their cohort outside the classroom.

Participants

Twelve participants (identified as A-L) were recruited from a cohort of 20 undergraduates approaching the end of their second year of a BSc Psychology and
Counselling. Their counselling-specific training had comprised one introductory module, and at the time of interview, between two and three counselling skills modules (approximately 25% of their full-time timetable). Ages ranged from 19-26 (mean 20.58, sd 1.98), and included two males and 10 females.

The training provided in the counselling skills modules was embedded within a three-hour long, weekly session. The sessions themselves involved a taught component, followed by a description or demonstration of an intervention or skill e.g. person-centred counselling, followed by the use of empathic reflection in practice. Students were then split in to ‘triad’ working groups of three/four, and practised the skill on one another with the roles of client, counsellor and observer(s). Following the skills practical, student personal development groups provided the opportunity to reflect on the theory and skills with semi-structured tasks. It is important to note that while the use of personal material was not compulsory, it was encouraged when in the role of a client in the triads.

Data collection and analysis

Semi-structured interviews, each lasting approximately 45 minutes, were conducted by the researcher following guidelines laid out by Whiting (2008). The development of interview questions was guided by Agee (2007) and focused on preparedness and preparation for triads, on-going training experiences and disclosures, changes and learning over time, and reflections on the process. Interviews were audio recorded and transcribed as soon as possible following the interview. Thematic analysis followed a process of open-coding for initial meaning units within the text followed by categorisation of themes. Returning to the text to verify the categories allowed for the adjustment and removal of repeated or over-
lapping conceptual units. Then a stage involving axial coding (linking categories), and
higher order or ‘selective’ coding was undertaken to establish a conceptual framework
to best exemplify the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

**Ethical considerations**

British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP) ethical guidelines for
counsellors underpinned the research process (Bond, 2004), which was given approval
by the university’s Ethics Committee. Participation in the study was voluntary, and
informed, written consent was obtained.

Specific ethical considerations related to the relationship between the researcher, a
member of university staff, and the students. The potential impact of this relationship
was two-fold. First, it would influence the students’ perception of their obligations to
take part, and to report particular aspects of their experience in favour of others. Second,
the tutor would be influenced by what was said and the study would become a platform
for specific feedback (which should occur through formal programme-level channels
and meetings arranged by the institution). In order to mitigate this blurring of
boundaries between the course and the study, student recruitment occurred outside of
class through emails sent to potential participants, and statements were made to clarify
the purpose of the study and provide assurance of neutrality and confidentiality.
Participants were also encouraged to bring issues of complaint to the termly programme
meetings, as what was divulged during the study was not fed directly into teaching.

Reflections from the author:

As the lead tutor and co-ordinator of these students’ triads, I approached the project as a
way of addressing my personal concerns about a teaching practice that appeared to be
commonplace. I wanted to ask questions of the students, not as a tutor in conversation, but in a way that allowed more exploratory and honest accounts. Although triads were the activity on this course with which I had least involvement (the main facilitation of skills practices being carried out by other tutors), I had the job of ‘designing’ the practical work, and also of facilitating post-triad reflective discussion. Questions in my head during the research revolved around bias in the reports, and bias in the analysis: ‘Are these students telling me what I want to know, or messages they want me to hear?’ ‘What am I not seeing, am I blindsided by expectation?’ Participants were assured that all comments would be treated with equal value both in the study information and verbally prior to- and during the interviews. It was also verbally clarified that participation (or not) would have no impact on their studies: for example, opinions and experiences of triads were not made available to, or discussed with, the triad tutors. I also approached the interviews from the perspective of acceptance and respect for what was being presented, to minimise, as far as possible, interpretation from my perspective: to honour participants’ contributions at ‘face value’. The systematic analysis of the transcripts involved an extra layer of complexity for me, as there were aspects of the accounts that were expected, but also aspects that were surprising. I was also aware of my professional position, and the risk of finding evidence of poor or unethical practice. I was prepared to follow ethical guidelines but was also aware that in the long-term I may have to accept that the teaching of the course might have to change. On the other hand my involvement with the students allowed me to share their context and knowledge, which, I believe, enhanced my understanding of the students’ perspectives and experiences.
Results:

Three theme clusters emerged from the data (table 1), the first relating to the functioning of the cohort including relationships inside and outside the class, premature intimacy of the cohort, and overall group dynamics. A second cluster existed around the personal impact of disclosures, which included the impact of saying too much, the consequences of breaches of trust, and a third concerning the impact on learning. The quotes reported are identified by participant letter (A-L), and the transcript line number.

(insert table 1 about here)

Functioning of the cohort:

This theme was indicated by an awareness in the participants that there were both shared and individual rules on how to manage what was divulged during the triads:

A275: ‘It’s just clear that you wouldn’t take that outside (the group), like maybe you could look at someone and say “alright?” but I wouldn’t think of bringing it up.’

H121: ‘Some of us just got it, like in that early discussion group, it all clicked and we were like permission to share, it kind of made it easy that the rules were talked about.’

E332: ‘I still monitor what I can say, like I have to prepare for triads to get a problem that’s the right size, sometimes I don’t want to talk and that’s okay, it’s not a problem.’
Reports indicate that the group functioned on very personal level from early on. This was felt to be an unusual experience for students, and unlike that of other groups. A strong sense of positive group identity pervaded many of the reports.

D254: ‘You look at other students and I mean, they are not like us, we’re really unusual because we have like grown up really fast together.’

An awareness of the impact of intimacy, which came out of disclosure, was viewed positively and negatively by participants.

K176: ‘Trust is a big deal for me, I know I can trust everyone, I feel really close to the class, I’ve told them stuff I wouldn’t say to my mum.’

This related to discussions around the ideas of sharing with friends and sharing with peers on the course, with some students distinguishing between them.

C344: ‘I walk in here and I don’t think about it, but I definitely have my friends, like X, and then there are people I will work with, but then I wouldn’t see them from one week to the next except in class but they are easier to work with, you know?’

Some of the students reported negative feelings around the formation of sub-groups within the teaching cohort, impacting on the way triads worked.

G401: ‘I think we have now got our little groups, cliques, and if we don’t get made to work with other people we don’t, and if I’m with X (student) then we tend to just not do our work.’

**Personal impact**


This theme cluster concerns the ways in which being on the course has impacted on the students personally, in particular the impact of what is said, when too much might be shared, and the consequences of breaches of trust.

Students sometimes felt that they were managing a tension between their social presentations of themselves and the ways that they were expected to be open and honest on the counselling course.

B316: ‘I’m not sure I want to be like, “I know all about you, and you know all about me”, it doesn’t make me feel good sometimes that someone knows your underneath.’

This was highlighted by important aspects of the emotional experience and how these were managed by others on the course.

C167: ‘My eyes were red from crying, and everyone knew why, but it was fine, I mean they knew but no-one made a fuss when I saw them later.’

The students were very aware of the real or potential impact of sharing too much with peers. Sometimes sharing left the students with sense of reduced safety.

B105: ‘At first when I got the whole story out I felt okay but then the worries set in about what people thought and where they would take it, I mean like I’d hate to think that they were down the pub telling everyone, “Oh yeh there’s this girl on my course with an alki for a mum.” ’

There was awareness of the need to limit what is said in triads.
I56: ‘God, I have to be careful because if I am on a rant it all comes out, I don’t hold back and I had to learnt to just think of how it would sound, and what I can talk about in like 15 minutes….sometimes the sessions would just be one person going on, and that means you get in to a lot of ****.’

There was also a need to ensure that the listener was not overloaded, or too concerned.

D320: ‘To be honest I don’t think he’d cope with it all, I didn’t want to tell him all about it and then he’d not know what to say and that would be just awkward.’

E178: ‘There’s a limit, not just time, but like a limit on how much you put on people, they are going to be thinking about it all day.’

Sometimes what was shared in the triads left a mark, and this impact left long-term feelings of discomfort and concern:

K365: ‘I just felt for her, really, really bad, like so sorry that this had happened, and I didn’t know what to say, and when I saw her later I wanted to say “are you okay?” but wasn’t allowed and so I’ve never even said anything to her.’

Putting trust in others, and being placed in a situation where trust is required, presented problems especially at the start of the training. Several participants mused about when and where breaches were being risked, that someone might take the information out of the group, but also that under some circumstances breaches should occur for the benefit of other students.

G214: ‘My feeling was that you couldn’t talk about it outside, like you would never talk about it outside but this time we all left together and were in the hall before I thought ooh no shut up.’
B115: ‘Do I say something, like when is it appropriate to like say to X (tutor) that there is an issue?’

This perceived risk was matched in many reports by a sense of trust:

C12: ‘We’ve all been like so trusting over the last year or so that no-one would break that now, it’s like a pact between us.’

The role of the tutors was again important in terms of emotional support, and for formal and informal advice. They were seen as a resource.

E54: ‘So I spoke to X (tutor) about it, and she was great, she suggested that I went to student services, which I did and I’ve been going there for four weeks now.’

**Impact on learning**

This theme reflects the various ways that the triads impacted on learning in the group.

The triads were approached with various levels of trepidation, but recognised as an important aspect of training.

G62: ‘I can still remember oh my gosh when X (tutor) said we were going to be counselling each other, I was so nervous.’

H300: ‘You have to be careful with feedback, you want them to be honest but you don’t want to say anything negative to them.’

E51: ‘You can’t learn without it.’

Some of the students reported going through a stage of withdrawing from the group, not wanting to take part in the triads or reverting to role-play as a client.
B201: ‘There was definitely a stage where I went right back and thought, these aren’t people who need to talk to me right now, I don’t want to engage you know?’

For some, the major challenge was to understand the need for skills practice, and why taking the role of the client is so important to personal development.

I329: ‘I kept looking for the learning, you know like what is it that I have got from this, and I still can’t put my finger on it.’

Ultimately many of the students summarised their experiences as being hard going but worth it, with the positive aspects and learning far outweighing the negative.

A197: ‘.at that point I really got it, it clicked and I thought I had really learnt something significant, not just about counselling, but about me and them, it changed me.’

Discussion

The key themes for the participants in this study were around aspects of managing personal and group processes and boundaries while engaging in counselling skills training, with clear links being drawn between the experiences in triads and those of self-awareness and relationships within and outside the cohort. As was found by Truell (2001) and Latham (1997), aspects of the risks of structured intimacy and the use of personal material in triads were clearly impactful, but results also indicate participants’ awareness of the complexities of confidentiality and the impact of trust on relationships. The participants appear to have taken the first steps towards building a therapeutic community, developing interpersonal awareness, and boundaried and trustful
relationships with one another in a way similar to that reported by Payne and Woudenberg (1978), and Korn (1980). Overall the interviewees revealed themselves to be highly self-aware, and aware of the emotions of their peers.

One further important aspect, which was highlighted in the Truell (2001) study, is the sense of the tutors being a continued and stable presence in the group. Teachers of counselling should be aware of this role when running courses of this type.

The key issue of the personal impact of training, both in the short and long-term, is an established part of postgraduate training and has been well explored, e.g. Folkes-Skinner, et al, (2010). However, this is less so for undergraduates, and this study reveals the tensions within and between students, who manage their learning activities by deliberate personal choice-making in terms of disclosure and sharing. This leads to a sense, at times, of voluntary disengagement.

Researchers approaching evaluations of teaching practices have tended to examine outcomes of training, and although this was asked about in interviews, the participants in this study talked less about effectiveness, but more on the experience and challenges of the practice. Triad work on this course functioned as a way of developing counselling intervention skills, but also as a catalyst for personal reflection and development, and it was the impact of this secondary role, which appears to be paramount in the reports. Although it brings inherent stresses and challenges, self-disclosure in triad training was a personal choice for the students, and appears to be an appropriate learning activity for this undergraduate group.

The implications of these results are that teachers and teaching providers need to be aware of the demands placed on undergraduates undertaking training of this type, and should monitor students closely, and also make efforts to clearly describe these demands to students thinking of entering the programme. For students during training,
it may be that the individual interactions and group dynamics become the focus of the learning rather than the skills themselves, and adaptations to teaching and learning - for example by allowing discussions within the group, and individually with tutors - could support this process and mitigate potential problems. There is also variability between students in the ability and willingness to engage in skills practices, which has implications for institutions offering and assessing a teaching and learning activity that not all students are able to fully engage, and so programme providers should consider the impact of this during evaluation of learning.

Limitations:

Limitations include the use of participants from a single undergraduate course from a UK institution which means that the experiences reported were to some extent shared. The cohort was also relatively young for students of counselling, and this further reduces the generalisability of the findings to other groups. The implications of the relationship between the researcher and participants is discussed in the methods section, and include the assumption of ‘face-value’ in the reports of participants, and also possible bias on the part of the investigator.. An objective measure of effectiveness of the counselling training in improving skills was not the focus of this project and participants did not evaluate the training, as opposed to the experience of training. More exploration of participant perception of skills learning would constitute a valid focus for a follow-up study. In addition to finding no evidence for overall effectiveness of practical skills training, this study failed to provide evidence for learning being enhanced by reflective engagement, and future
research should focus on widening understanding of the impact of pedagogical approaches on academic performance.

Conclusion

While reflective experiential learning is potentially important as both the means and the ends of counselling skills training, there are potential pitfalls, and little published guidance on how this should be managed for undergraduate courses. In this paper the experiences of students who self-disclosed during practice triads were reported, and highlights the personal and academic impact of this kind of learning activity.


Truell, R. (2001). The stresses of learning counselling: Six recent graduates comment on their personal experience of learning counselling and what can be done to reduce associated harm. *Counselling Psychology Quarterly, 14*(1), 67-89.


Author Biography:

**Kate Smith** is a lecturer in counselling at Abertay University, Dundee. She is a registered counsellor with the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy. Her doctoral studies were on the impact of narrative on autobiographical memory for people with depression, and her other research...
interests include the social and emotional effects of diabetes, and ethical training issues in mental health.
Table 1: Emergent themes and theme clusters

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Theme cluster</th>
<th>Theme</th>
<th>Participant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Functioning of the cohort</td>
<td>Group rules</td>
<td>A, B, C, D,E,F, G, H, J, K, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Depth of group engagement</td>
<td>B,D, J, K, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not just friendship</td>
<td>A, C, D, E, G, H, K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Process of group development</td>
<td>A, B, E, H, J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Challenges of learning activity</td>
<td>D, E, F, H, I, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Problems within the group</td>
<td>A, B, C, E, F, H, J, K, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Formation of sub-groups</td>
<td>C, E, G, F, H, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Personal impact</td>
<td>Social versus group presentation of self</td>
<td>A, B, D, H, J, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional impact</td>
<td>C, F, G, H, J</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Self-policing</td>
<td>A, C, D, G, H, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Policing for others</td>
<td>A, B, C, D, G, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Emotional hang-over from triads</td>
<td>C, D, G, J, K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Need for tutor support</td>
<td>A, B, C, D, E, F, G, H, J, K, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Not wanting to take part</td>
<td>B, E, F, K</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Role of triads in learning</td>
<td>A, C, I, J, L</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Outcomes of the course</td>
<td>A, B, D, E, F, G, H, I, K, L</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>