'Out on the edge of my comfort': Trainees counsellors/psychotherapists perceptions and experience of spirituality in therapy.

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• **Introduction/Context**

• Spirituality- challenges to defining when/if separated from religion

• Experiential- ‘*feelings, thoughts, behaviours that arise form the search for the sacred*.’ (Hill et al 2000)

• Nature of spirituality is subjective and individualised, even within religion. (Pargament 1998)

• Spiritual beliefs and practices broadly beneficial for psychological health (Dein, Cook, Powell & Eagger, 2010)

• However, complex relationship mediated by culture, ethnicity (Dein 2013)
• **Spiritual Climate**

• UK population: 75% population have a religious affiliation (2011 Census)
  • Predominantly Christian, Muslim and Jewish.

• Counsellors and Psychotherapists are generally less religious than their clients. (Delaney, Miller & Bisonó, 2013)

• Psychological practitioners acknowledge the importance of client spiritual beliefs (Ross, 2016)

• Perception that counsellors are suspicious of spirituality (Gubi, 2009)
• Integrating Spirituality

• Integrating spirituality into therapy occurs along a continuum (Saunders, Miller & Bright, 2010)

• Avoidant care -> Spiritually conscious -> Spiritually integrative -> Spiritually directive

• Training:

• Minimal coverage on training programs (Jafari, 2016; Swinton, 2014)

• Trainees experience anxiety when speaking about personal faith during training (Hunt, 2018)

• Supervision:

• Trainees more comfortable speaking about personal faith in supervision (Hunt, 2018)
• Aims
  • Explore perceptions of spirituality and it's impact on the therapeutic process
  • Explore trainee experiences of integrating spirituality into therapy
  • Explore trainee experiences spirituality within training and supervision
• **Research details: Data**
• Qualitative study
• Participants: currently studying on Integrative Counselling FD *or* Integrative Psychotherapy MSc *and* currently seeing clients
• Purposive sampling
• 5 Female, 1 Male, Age range 28-57
• All White British
• Client hours range from 30 - over 200
• 2 identify as Very Spiritual, 4 as Somewhat Spiritual
• Research details: Method
• Purposive sampling
• 6 Semi-structured interviews, audio-recorded and transcribed
• 2 phone interviews, 4 face-face, all in private rooms
• Thematic Analysis- identify patterns across participant narratives (Braun and Clarke, 2006)
• 2 Overarching themes, 5 Themes
• **Findings**

  • Overarching Theme 1: Spirituality supports clients but needs a warning
    • Theme 1.1: Spirituality provides a sense of solace
    • Theme 1.2: Spirituality creates a sense of conflict
    • Theme 1.3: Into the wilderness to find the streams
      • Sub-theme 1.3.1 'It's a bit like sex!'
  • Overarching Theme 2: Spirituality is relevant but undervalued
    • Theme 2.1: Training is like turning over stones
    • Theme 2.2: Spiritual formation through supervision and reflection
• Spirituality supports clients but needs a warning:

• ‘It’s bit of a thorny issues and needs wrestling with’ [Sky]

• ‘It’s important that we don’t shy away from it’ [Lucy]
• **Spirituality provides a sense of solace**

• Sense of ‘connectedness’ [Millie] and ‘belonging’ that positively influences the self

• ‘Connecting with a higher being’ [Lucy], ‘connected to my world’ [Dave]

• ‘I define it as something that makes you feel at peace, gives you some kind of peace, something to believe in’ [C1]

• But; viewed negatively when constructed with religious ‘dogma’, ‘rules’ and practices
  • Potentially evidencing underlying psychopathology
  • Dave and Josie characterised some beliefs and practices as psychosis or paranoia
• Spirituality creates a sense of conflict

• Client conflict’s with internalised spiritual beliefs and spiritual communities: ‘wrestle’ with ‘marrying beliefs’ [Lucy] or having to ‘compromise’ [Sky]

• ‘I’m a Christian. I’m not supposed to be depressed. I’m supposed to be full of joy. I’m supposed to forgive. That can be a real pressure to admitting, acknowledging where they’re at.’ [Sky]

• Trainee conflict’s:

• ‘If a client has a different views to myself, it will put up a barrier.’ [Dave]

• ‘The sense that your values might clash with those of the client and you might struggle to keep it out of your client work’ [Josie]
• Into the wilderness to find the streams

• Trainees report clients isolation followed by empowerment when exploring spiritual beliefs
  • ‘She felt empowered, it was her decision, it was using her faith.’ [Sky]
  • ‘The realisation...that was very powerful.’ [Lucy]
  • ‘That’s really important I think, that she’s able to discuss what she thinks might happen [when she dies].’ [Lucy]

• BUT! ‘It’s a bit like sex!’
  • A sense of wariness about integrating spirituality was expressed.
  • ‘It’s a bit like sex the degree to which people bring it up. You don’t want to probe, it’s a very personal private thing for a lot of people, you wouldn’t want to bring it up.’ [Josie]
• Spirituality is relevant but undervalued

• ‘I’ll make my own mind up. I don’t want dogma on the subject but I’d be interested to hear what there is on the subject because there is a definite gap.’ [Josie]
• Training is like turning over stones
• Training on spirituality has been ‘minimal’, ‘almost zilch’
• ‘I noticed that we circled around that and we always put that one the side and ignored it.’ [Sky]
• BUT: when spirituality is engaged with it may be revelatory.
• ‘For me, [the training] has changed the importance of it and made me realise how important [spirituality] is.’ [C1]
• ‘There is a process ...I’m engaged with by just doing this training that feels profoundly alchemical’ [Millie]
• Therapeutic spiritual formation through supervision and reflection

• Opportunities to explore spiritual issues in supervision weren’t taken

• ‘It’s like there’s no trust and openness to be able to bear, it’s already been disapproved of, therefore, let’s not take it any further.’ [Sky]

• ‘But it’s a part of their practice so I didn’t really bring it up in supervision. Again, it just felt awkward, but because I was able to reflect on it myself in my clinical notes I was just a bit more aware.’ [Dave]

• BUT: participation in the study supported reflection.

• An opportunity to ‘think out loud’, ‘to chew over’ [Millie], ‘really made me think’ [Lucy]
• **Conclusion:**

  • Spirituality constructed as a framework for meaning and purpose, that provides a sense of connectedness and belonging.
  
  • Participants reverted to religious language and concepts when speaking about spirituality.
  
  • Trainees feel ill-prepared to explore client spiritual beliefs and desire more training (Hofmann & Walach, 2011).
  
  • Exploring spirituality empowers client’s.
  
  • Supervision and reflection are under utilised for therapeutic spiritual formation.
• **Implications**
  
  • Spirituality might be the elephant in the room
  
  • Barriers to incorporating spirituality in training to be reviewed
    • Barriers to course content
    • Inter-relational barriers
  
  • Deeper understanding of trainee perceptions and experiences of supervision around spirituality
References


