

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

Rebekah Woodhouse  
Newman University, Birmingham  
WOOD417@newman.ac.uk

Supervised by Dr Kevin Hogan,  
Newman University, Birmingham

- **Introduction/Context**
- Spirituality- challenges to defining when/if separated from religion
- Experiential- *'feelings, thoughts, behaviours that arise from 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 its 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

- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research In Psychology, 3*(2), 77-101. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1191/1478088706qp063oa>
- Dein, S. (2013). *Religion and mental health: Current findings*. Royal College of Psychiatrists.
- Dein, S., Cook, C., Powell, A., & Eagger, S. (2010). Religion, spirituality and mental health. *The Psychiatrist, 34*(02), 63-64. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1192/pb.bp.109.025924>
- Delaney, H., Miller, W., & Bisonó, A. (2013). Religiosity and spirituality among psychologists: A survey of clinician members of the American Psychological Association. *Spirituality In Clinical Practice, 1*(S), 95-106. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/2326.4500.1.s.95>
- Gubi, P. (2004). Surveying the extent of, and attitudes towards, the use of prayer as a spiritual intervention among British mainstream counsellors. *British Journal Of Guidance & Counselling, 32*(4), 461-476. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069880412331303277>
- Hill, P., Pargament, K., Hood, R., McCullough, J., Swyers, J., Larson, D., & Zinnbauer, B. (2000). Conceptualizing Religion and Spirituality: Points of Commonality, Points of Departure. *Journal For The Theory Of Social Behaviour, 30*(1), 51-77. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1111/1468-5914.00119>
- Hofmann, L., & Walach, H. (2011). Spirituality and religiosity in psychotherapy – A representative survey among German psychotherapists. *Psychotherapy Research, 21*(2), 179-192. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10503307.2010.536595>
- Hunt, J. (2018). An exploration of how trainee counsellors who are practising believers of a world religion or faith tradition experience undertaking counsellor training. *British Journal Of Guidance & Counselling, 1*-12. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2018.1436690>
- Jafari, S. (2016). Religion and spirituality within counselling/clinical psychology training programmes: a systematic review. *British Journal Of Guidance & Counselling, 44*(3), 257-267. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2016.1153038>
- Pargament, K. (2001). *The Psychology of religion and coping*. New York: Guilford Press.
- Religion in England and Wales 2011*. (2012). Retrieved from <https://www.ons.gov.uk/peoplepopulationandcommunity/culturalidentity/religion/articles/religioninenglandandwales2011/2012-12-11>
- Ross, A. (2016). Identifying the categories of spiritual experience encountered by therapists in their clinical work. *British Journal Of Guidance & Counselling, 44*(3), 316-324. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/03069885.2016.1145192>
- Saunders, S., Miller, M., & Bright, M. (2010). Spiritually conscious psychological care. *Professional Psychology: Research And Practice, 41*(5), 355-362. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/a0020953>
- Shafranske, E., & Malony, H. (1990). Clinical psychologists' religious and spiritual orientations and their practice of psychotherapy. *Psychotherapy: Theory, Research, Practice, Training, 27*(1), 72-78. <http://dx.doi.org/10.1037/0033-3204.27.1.72>
- Swinton, V. (2017). The spiritual in counsellor training. In G. Nolan & W. West, *Therapy, culture and spirituality* (pp. 159-174). Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.