Professional ethics: Building trust in counselling practice and research

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Why trust matters?

• Deeply embedded in our conscious and sub-conscious awareness
• Directs attention to our relational and professional responsibilities as counsellors
• Fills the gaps in dominant ethical principles or provides the foundations upon which professional ethics can be founded?
• What do clients want?
What do clients want?

• Safety
• Competence
• Compassion
• Respect
• Explicitly and sufficiently boundaried and agreed expectations of each other (?!?)
• Humility
Above all - what do clients want?

• Someone to **trust** with what troubles them
What does **trust** mean?

- Interviewed clients
- What follows is informed by what clients tell me
- The difficulty of really understanding the client’s experience
- Become the client in strange and troubling circumstances
- Will draw on an example of receiving counselling in such circumstances
Counselling in an unfamiliar culture

• Issue
• Method
• Outcome
• New insights
• Did it matter that there were some unresolved issues?
Two dimensions of trust

- Existential – sufficient competence to address the risk and uncertainty that is emotionally and cognitively troubling me to make my existence unacceptably painful
- Relational – the ability to construct a relationship of sufficient resilience and quality to support the counselling and withstand the challenges of difference and inequality
A provisional definition of trust

• ‘a relationship of sufficient strength and quality to withstand the existential challenges of:
  • Risk, and
  • Uncertainty

And relational challenges of:

• Difference, and
• Inequality’
What does this mean in practice?

- **Sufficient** – ‘good enough for its purpose’ – marginal to the full life of the client – a catalyst to changes beyond counselling

- **Strength** – resilient and sustainable – capable of being maintained throughout counselling – supported by commitment from the counsellor’s *vocation* and professional *boundaries*
What does this mean in practice?

- Quality – enough respect and rapport to provide the emotional foundations and sense of reward to withstand the discomfort of the client’s self-generated challenges and the challenges from the counsellor. Walking the tightrope between being supportive and collusive. ‘No’ can be therapeutic.
  
  – Insights from neurology – relationship – reward – and plasticity
Existential challenges

• The starting point: the prompt of psychological pain to seek counselling and the desire for relief and problem-solving

• Risk and uncertainty to be approached from these expectations

• Occupational hazard – losing appreciation of client’s hopes and purpose.
Client’s experience of risk

• Risking loss of face and self respect – threshold partially crossed in the act of seeking help
• Facing the experience of pain more intensely as everyday psychological defences are dropped
• Being left in a worse state than when counselling started due to incompetent or unethical practice
• Sense of hopelessness reinforced
• Becoming caught up in the counsellor’s dysfunctionality
Counsellor’s experience of risk

- Being taken to areas of own pain and trauma in order to work with client’s issues
- Becoming stuck and/or deskilled and losing credibility in own or others’ opinions
- Becoming overwhelmed with the demands of the client – neediness breaks boundaries – irrationality distorts what has been established – stalking and worse
- Therapeutic risk taking vs professional misconduct
Client’s experience of uncertainty

• Client’s assessment of the counsellor
  – How helpful will you be to me and my concerns?
  – What will be demanded of me?

• Will the benefits outweigh the demands?
  – What if I start to feel worse?

• Typical questions with therapeutic potential
  – Am I the only person who is struggling with this?
    Am I uniquely alone in my failure and pain?
  – Is my situation as hopeless as it feels?
Counsellor’s experience of uncertainty

• How to respond to the client’s explicit and implicit questions in ways that increase the likelihood of a positive outcome from the counselling?
• Uncertainty is the prompt for attentive listening
• All therapeutic theory is to be treated with pinch of doubt so that it does not become a barrier to careful listening to the client
• Good theory aids listening rather than pre-determines our responses
Counsellor’s experience of uncertainty

- Counsellor's uncertainties resolved in dialogue with client in different ways:
  - Explicitly with client
  - Internal reflection by counsellor
  - Professionally boundaried consultations with supervisor and colleagues with relevant expertise

- Uncertainty can be disabling in excess but in moderation is the prompt for good and therapy – responsive to the client
Relational challenges

- Difference
- Inequality
Client’s experience of difference

• Will the counsellor reach out and strive to understand me in ways that I can recognise myself?
• Will the counsellor regard any differences between me and other clients as deficiencies or failures? Will I be judged and blamed?
• Will my counsellor understand the importance of my values and culture to me?
Counsellor’s experience of difference

• Making the imaginative leap into another person’s experience as the platform for therapy
• Difficulty of perceiving difference when too similar to client
• Difficulty of understanding when too different
  – Gender, relationship and sexuality, age, social position, work, sense of self, faith, culture etc
  – Balancing professional humility in face of difference with sense of purpose and direction towards healing
Client’s experience of inequality

• Dependency of being the help seeker – relative powerlessness may vary considerably
  – watchful trust (+ve) or blind trust (-ve)
  – projections on counsellor as wholly healed and therapeutically powerful
  – Unrealistic expectations and over dependency

• Prior conditions and contractual terms to receiving therapy v terms based on negotiation
Counsellor’s experience of inequality

- Excessive and inappropriate claiming of power to meet personal psychological needs – often the start of boundary erosion/abuse
- Appropriate self knowledge about responses to powerlessness and powerfulness
- Using the counsellor’s power to create security, safety, and therapeutic direction
- Dangers failing to use power - abuse from powerlessness
Trust in research ethics

- Risk
- Uncertainty
- Difference
- Inequality
How does trust fit with principles?

• Being trustworthy
• Autonomy*
• Beneficence*
• Non-maleficence*
• Justice*
• Self-respect

* Key principles of bioethics adopted by NICE (2008)
What trust for clients is NOT

• Nostalgia for the for revival of the respect for professionals because of their social standing and education – *no going back*

• A concern to put the counsellor at the centre of all that is good and beneficial in the counselling experience – de-centring the counsellor is essential to understanding the therapeutic alliance or partnership and the counsellor in the context of the client’s life
What an ethic of trust offers?

- Insight into the relational ethic required of counsellors and researchers in counselling
- Greater understanding of the varied and reciprocal nature of ethical context of the therapeutic relationship
- Offers insight into the ethical basis of challenges faced by both clients and counsellors
References
