

Counselling Students Responses to Conducting Role-Play Activities Online: An Evaluation of MSc University Students

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Key Words

Counselling Training; Virtual Counselling; Role-Play; Online Learning;
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Abstract

The transition to remote learning in response to the COVID-19 Pandemic was unprecedented and unanticipated, resulting in professional courses delivering content and conducting skills-based practice online. For counselling students, placements also transitioned to online, meaning previous skills acquired through face-to-face learning required adapting for remote working.

This project sought to evaluate UK based counselling students experiences of participating in online role-play activities. Through purposive sampling, individual semi-structured interviews were conducted and analysed applying Thematic Analysis.

The findings indicated participants identified fundamental differences between planned online content compared to the unanticipated transition they experienced due to the Pandemic. Whilst varying attitudes were shared, all participants recognised the value of skill acquisition for future employability and all recommended an element of online practice should be embedded in future course delivery.

Whilst limited to a specific sample, key recommendations were identified, including the importance of involving students in course development, recognising the importance of diversifying role-play practices for skill development and the application of a transitions model to facilitate

understanding of the student experience. Though making some progress towards understanding this unique experience, further evaluations conducted with students from different counselling fields and institutions are required to further strengthen the recommendations made.

1. Introduction

This evaluation explored postgraduate counselling students experiences of conducting online role-play activities, following their course delivery transitioning to online in response to the COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Pandemic. As such, an exploration of counselling training, online counselling and the subsequent response to the Pandemic will be discussed to provide context for the necessity of the project.

1.1 Postgraduate Counselling Training: Simulation Learning

For this project, key discussions around counselling training will focus on Stage Three: Core Practitioner Training, with acknowledgment that the BACP (British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2021c) recommend students complete the first two stages prior to embarking on core training. Whilst studied at varying levels, these courses all consist of a combination of theory based lectures, skills practice, placement experience, clinical supervision and personal therapy (BACP, 2021c).

A key element of the skills practice involves role-playing activities, also commonly referred to as simulation learning, experiential learning and peer and live assessment (Billings, 2012; Speedy, 1998). Role-playing facilitates

students practicing core skills that they can apply in practice, ranging from developing a therapeutic relationship, decision making, interviewing skills and multicultural training and learning (Fowler & Blohm, 2004; Pomerantz, 2003; Rapisarda et al., 2011). This can take different forms, such as the counsellor and client being observed by the class in fishbowl training (Hensley, 2002; Kane, 1995) and the more commonly thought of dyad or triad role-play, whereby students take turns in the role of the counsellor and client, as well as an observer (Fowler & Blohm, 2004). The BACP (2021a) advocate such practices form an integral component of counsellor training, providing students with an opportunity to both practice and reflect on their counselling knowledge and skills, which Billings (2012) argues underpins high-order learning as students are able to practically apply their knowledge to real-life scenarios.

However, the literature suggests in-person therapeutic skills do not automatically translate to online working, attributable to the unique nuances between the two, such as managing risk, legality issues and reading non-verbal cues (Mallen et al., 2005; Stoll et al., 2020). Yet, as the COVID-19 Pandemic escalated in England, individuals were encouraged to work from home where possible (Public Health England, 2021). This included many counsellors transitioning their work online (Békés & Doorn, 2020), inherently meaning counselling students on placement also moved to online placements (Pelden & Banham, 2020).

1.2 Online Counselling

Online counselling has become increasingly utilised in recent years, largely attributable to the change in how people communicate, ease of accessibility and perceptions around increased anonymity (Fang et al., 2018; Hanna & Mwale, 2017). This type of therapy can take a variety of forms, from synchronous sessions via video, to text exchanges via email or chat forums (O'Connor, 2020). Fang et al. (2018) conducted a qualitative content analysis study encompassing email transcripts and chat exchanges between student counsellors and undergraduate clients. Whilst the study didn't explicitly explore counselling students views, it did provide evidence into the perceived value of online counselling.

Hanley's (2006) qualitative study exploring practitioners perceptions of online counselling recommended key areas of training required of counsellors before working online, including core counselling skills, rapport building and legal aspects. However, given the urgency of the transition to online working, counsellors were required to adapt their practice and deliver therapeutic interventions through alternative platforms, such as online and via the telephone. Békés & Doorn (2020) recognised that many counsellors have minimal training and experience delivering therapy online and as such, the likelihood is this additional training occurred after the fact. This was supported by Shklarski et al's. (2021a) mixed methods study, which found only 18.5% of therapists had accessed online training before or during the Pandemic.

The BACP (2020) recognised this need and members were encouraged to reflect on their competency and engage in appropriate training sessions, however, these were also delivered through the potentially unfamiliar medium

of online. Whilst this could be seen as a valuable opportunity to model online working, it likely produced a barrier for some individuals without the digital competency or confidence to engage remotely (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

1.3 Responding to the Pandemic

At the time of writing, the BACP (2021c) website states distance learning does not facilitate sufficient feedback from staff and other students and as such any Stage 3 online courses are not recognised for accreditation. Whilst emergency regulations were implemented in response to COVID-19 (BACP, 2021b), guidelines state that this short-term measure does not qualify students for online or telephone working post the Pandemic. However, with research suggesting a steady increase in the delivery of online counselling even prior to the Pandemic and more counsellors planning to continue practicing online in the future (Békés & Doorn, 2020; Pattison et al., 2014), there could be an opportunity to learn from the transition to online learning and practice.

Whilst the majority of United Kingdom (UK) based University courses typically adopt a blended approach to learning, incorporating both face-to-face and online activities (Fowler & Blohm, 2004; Hiltz & Turoff, 2005; Watts, 2016), globally countries responded in varying ways to University closures. UNESCO (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization, 2021) reported more than 1.5 billion students worldwide were affected by education establishment closures due the Pandemic. Crawford et al. (2020) presented a desktop analysis of higher education providers across twenty countries,

finding that whilst all but three countries reported full campus closures, only eight transitioned to fully online teaching.

In response to the first UK lockdown in March 2020 (Public Health England, 2021), courses of various disciplines were delivered through online platforms (Watermeyer et al., 2020). Whilst aiming to minimise disruption to learning (Vlachopoulos, 2020), Hodges et al. (2020) published an article expressing concern that this remote teaching would likely be compared to online learning, an approach with proven effectiveness comparable to face-to-face learning, such as that delivered by the Open University (Weinbren, 2015). Bozkurt and Sharma (2020, pp.2) echoed this, advocating that whilst the correct terminology should be used to reflect the differences between 'emergency remote teaching' and 'online learning', it is the experience that students remember above the content delivered.

In their work on adults in transition, Schlossberg (2011) created a transition model which explored three key areas: Understanding the transition, Coping with the transition and Applying the stages. The transition to online learning for the students was undoubtedly an unanticipated transition, however, what Schlossberg's model (2011) clarifies is it is not whether the transition was anticipated or unanticipated but rather how the transition influenced the students' lives, for example in relation to their relationships, responsibilities and routines. This further supports Bozkurt and Sharma's (2020) recognition of the need to shift the focus beyond that of content delivery and more towards the learners experience.

1.4 Evaluation Context

This project centred on students studying a Masters in Counselling Children and Young People (CCYP) at an English University. The course is run over two years, with the students studying modules that support them in developing a theoretical knowledge and practical skills. The credits and clinical hours attained through course completion count towards accreditation with the BACP (2021a). In response to the COVID-19 social restrictions, the majority of the course had been delivered online for the September 2019 cohort, following the first six months of the course running face-to-face.

1.5 Aim

The aim of the project was to employ individual semi-structured interviews to evaluate CCYP students experiences of conducting role-play activities online. The objectives included answering the following questions:

1. How have students experienced online role-play activities compared to their previous face-to-face role-play activities?
2. If students find online role-play activities beneficial, what elements make them so?
3. Do students believe online role-play activities should be included in future course development and if so how?

2. Method

Having framed the problem under discussion, the following of Macfarlane's (2009) iterative research phases will be discussed in this section: Negotiating access, Gathering data and Creating understanding through analysis.

2.1 Approach

Utilising a qualitative approach, individual semi-structured interviews were completed. Focus groups were considered, however, given the aim was to explore students individual experiences, providing participants with an opportunity to speak individually was necessary (Robson & McCartan, 2016). An interview approach seemed appropriate as during discussions participants frequently discussed the influence of other students. Whilst these experiences may have otherwise been omitted from a focus group, it is important to acknowledge how the content may have altered if focus groups were adopted (Fox, 2017).

When initially planning, a quantitative approach was considered, through distribution of a questionnaire to students. However, given the small cohort size and the focus of the evaluation being to gain personal accounts of the student experience, a qualitative approach was deemed most appropriate.

2.2 Ethics

Ethical approval for the evaluation was obtained from the Faculty's Ethics Board of the University (FHSRECDPROF21LY).

Ethical principles remained at the forefront throughout, ensuring appropriate ethical conduct was in the best interests of the participants and respected their autonomy whilst causing no harm (Beauchamp & Childress, 1994; Carpenter, 2018). As such, the interviews were completed virtually within a secure online platform to negate risk surrounding COVID-19 and safeguarding procedures were reviewed in the event of a disclosure taking place. After deliberation, it was decided that identifying the student cohort and course was necessary for the purposes of understanding the context of the findings. However, all individuals details were pseudo anonymised to protect their identity.

2.3 Recruitment Strategy

Using purposive sampling, students from the 2019 CCYP cohort whom had experienced both face-to-face and online role-playing were recruited through an advertisement posted on their online course portal. Following receipt of an expression of interest, prospective participants were emailed the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form, detailing that participation would be anonymised, personal information retained confidentially and that involvement was entirely voluntary, having no impact on their studies.

Following receipt of the signed Consent Form, a mutually suitable time to conduct the interview was arranged. As the interviews were not conducted in person, additional measures were agreed, including a request participants conduct the interview in a private space free from distraction. Participants were also informed prior to consenting that the interviews would be recorded.

2.4 Participants

Whilst aiming to recruit eight participants, equating to a quarter of the total cohort, six students consented to participate. A further student expressed interest, however, they did not meet the inclusion criteria of having engaged in both face-to-face and online role-play activities during the duration of their course. Considering Malterud et al's. (2016) Information Power approach to sampling, six participants proved sufficient during the process as the participants held a significant amount of information about the topic under study.

2.5 Procedure

The interviews were conducted over a month period and ranged from twenty-two to forty-two minutes in duration. Each interview followed the semi-structured schedule, following which each participant was emailed a debriefing letter and the interviews were then transcribed. All data was handled in line with General Data Protection Regulations (GDPR; Information Commissioner's Office, 2021), including data only being accessible to the author and being stored only for as long as was necessary. Additionally, all participants were allocated a pseudonym (Participant A-F) to protect their identity and identifiable information omitted.

2.6 Analytical Approach

Braun and Clarke's Thematic Analysis (2006) was applied to the data. This approach was most appropriate as the participants were not being asked to discuss their lived experiences, which would suggest an Interpretive Phenomenological Approach (Smith et al., 2009), nor did the project aim to generate new theories or analyse narratives, which would indicate Grounded Theory (Robson & McCartan, 2016) or Narrative Analysis (Phoenix, 2013).

The evaluation aimed to evaluate participants experiences and therefore, the identification of themes and subthemes apparent across the data set was deemed the most effective way of achieving the aim. The analytical process started at transcription through familiarisation with the data. From this, initial codes then initial themes were generated which were reviewed, resulting in the final themes being defined (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

3. Results

The final phases of Macfarlane's (2009) model will be explored in this section: Creating understanding through analysis and discussion, Dissemination and Reflection of personal learning.

3.1 Reflexivity

Acknowledging the importance of Positionality, the dual-roles of being a Lecturer and a Doctoral student were considered (Jacobson & Mustafa, 2019; Jones & Bradbury, 2018). Whilst only teaching a small number of sessions throughout the course, it was important to consider the possibility of students

feeling coerced into participating due to the potential power imbalance (Clark & McCann, 2005). To circumvent this, voluntary participation was reiterated. This pre-existing relationship did become apparent during interviews, as on occasion, responses would be given with an expectation of prior knowledge. This also aided some discussions, as further prompting questions could be asked. Additionally, the participants were aware of the authors role as a student and reflected on their own experiences of being at the early stages of their dissertation projects, thus suggesting a degree of relatability.

An additional consideration was that of the interviews being conducted online. Hanna and Mwale (2017) acknowledge both the benefits and potential complications of online interviewing. Two particular concerns reflected in this project were internet connectivity and privacy. When conducting the first interview, the participant experienced significant connection issues. Whilst eventually resolved, this caused undue anxiety and likely influenced the shorter interview duration in combination with the limited experience of the author. Additionally, some interviews were disrupted, however, this added to the discussions around speaking honestly about distractions and learning how to do so within clinical practice. This was likely due to the parallels of the interview being conducted in the same online space as the participants practiced their online role-plays and perhaps differences in the discussions would have taken place had the interviews been conducted face-to-face.

3.2 Analysis and Discussion

This evaluation was conducted with a cohort whom experienced face-to-face lectures for the first six months of their programme before transitioning to online. As participant E explained, 'our particular year is very unique that we've had half and half' (lines 219-220).

The below two themes and associated subthemes were identified through Braun and Clarke's (2006) six stages of Thematic Analysis.

An Extra String to your Bow	Skill Development for Future Employability
	An Added Crutch
	Reflecting Back: Influence of Others
	Feeding Forward: Recommendations for Others
Muddling Through	A Different Context
	Isolating
	Lacking Authenticity due to Missing Physicality

Table 1: Table showing the two themes and associated subthemes identified through Thematic Analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006)

Each theme and subtheme are presented in relation to data extracts from interview transcripts, labelled with the associated participant identifier (A-F) and discussed alongside relevant literature.

3.2.1 An Extra String To Your Bow

All participants acknowledged value in their online experience, although this varied considerably. Whilst some participants benefitted from gaining additional skills, others saw value in the practical ease of online learning.

‘if I was at uni I wouldn’t get home for two hours after I’d left and like having to pay for petrol as well... everything just seems easier when you’re online’ (F, lines 192-194).

Feijt et al. (2020) reported similar benefits identified from their qualitative survey of trained mental health practitioners, citing flexibility and reduced travel times as key aspects, alongside effective treatment. Overall, four distinct areas of perceived benefit were generated from the data.

Skill Development for Future Employability

All participants shared they had developed skills for counselling online that would have otherwise not been obtained if the course had remained face-to-face. Whilst the participants had varying perceptions of how likely they were to apply this after graduating, it was recognised that the experience had prepared them for online placements and the potential of working online in the future.

‘the way I look at the whole experience now is, it’s added an extra string to my bow’ (B, lines 234-235).

‘it’s just made us more skilled, in the sense that going forward, if a lot of things do go online, we’ve had that experience at uni whilst we’ve got the support as well’ (C, lines 65-66).

‘I don’t think I would have ever been interested in learning about online stuff but I do see the value in it because it’s like, everything’s changing and it’s a really good skill to have alongside face-to-face counselling’ (D, lines 119-121).

As Anthony (2015) acknowledges, it can no longer be assumed that the face-to-face setting will be the only environment from which future counsellors practice. Written prior to the Pandemic, Anthony’s paper placed significance on training postgraduate student practitioners within the online domain to prepare them for future working. The participants reflected on this, recognising the benefits of the experience for employability, given the likelihood of online counselling becoming integral to future therapeutic delivery (Callahan, 2020).

An Added Crutch

Participants also reflected on the practical benefits of learning online. In particular, it was seen as an opportunity to access additional support through having prompts available, unseen by those on the other side of the screen.

‘So suddenly being able to...hide those notes or you know, have kind of key words to remember written around my study made it a lot easier’ (A, lines 34-35).

‘It was also quite helpful because it meant you could have your notes in front of you and you could look at them, so that was, so you have these little crutches that help’ (B, line 54-55).

Furthermore, participant A (line 15) felt ‘the medium of the computer took away a lot of the anxiety’, which was also echoed by another participant.

‘if I was to get negative feedback in person, I think I would get very awkward about it and probably go like red, but I think being behind a screen and not having your camera on so they can’t see your reaction and I think made it easier to accept’ (F, lines 48-50).

These reflections prompted one participant to suggest commencing with online practice may actually support new students in alleviating initial performance anxiety when role-playing. Conversely, participant D saw online working as another barrier to overcome, having already worked on overcoming face-to-face role-play activities. These mixed perceptions of online working coincide with research relating to counsellors transitioning to online, with those reporting previous experience or training feeling more confident than their colleagues without this prior experience (Békés & Doorn, 2020; Shklarski et al., 2021a).

Reflecting Back: Influence of Others

A significant thread throughout the data was that of the influence of peers in supporting online role-play activities and facilitating growth.

‘when we moved online doing the triad work you get new skills off of people like the way that they talk and the way they relate to people ... you just see other people’s like tactics and ways of working and you’re like oh I’m going to steal that because that’s really good’ (D, lines 261-267).

‘I think at first, I was really kind of put off by triad work online... so when we would have our different lectures and your put into the breakout

rooms, it was again that chance again to kind of get to know other people. So I think that kind of helped me further on into the fish bowls' (F, lines 28-32).

This evidenced the powerful influence of peers and the importance of continuing to nurture this when online to strengthen group cohesion and provide opportunities for learning through observing others (Arkorful & Abaidoo, 2014). Within the literature, role-play learning is typically positioned within the role of the counsellor, with the observers primary role being to provide feedback (Lendrum & Tolan, 1995). However, the participants placed value in observing others practicing online techniques as a way of developing their own skills.

Feeding Forward: Recommendations for Others

There was an evident narrative of initial apprehension about the unexpected transition, through to all participants recommending online role-play in future course delivery. Shklarski et al's. (2021b) mixed methods study also identified a shift in psychotherapists perceptions of online working through continued exposure. The amount of recommended online content varied significantly between the participants, from 'at least have one lecture on it, about online counselling and how to do it' (D, lines 281-282), through to 'I think like 50 50 really, so you can get even practice of doing both' (F, line 115).

'a lot of people might be counselling online in the future and a lot of people might need help with this, so let's integrate it into the course and bring out this new perspective' (D, lines 168-170).

‘even the trained counsellors, that are already trained saying that you know the difficulties they’ve had kind of moving to the online stuff and ermm, so to have it in there as part of training I think it’s yeah, a good idea’ (E, lines 190-192).

This reflection on the difficulties faced by counsellors is evidenced throughout the literature (Békés & Doorn, 2020; Shklarski et al., 2021a), with trained psychotherapists sharing a sense of feeling unprepared. In response to this, the participants recommended some specific guidance.

‘But I think actually having like set, maybe like some set lectures where you can actually talk, ask questions and get support maybe practice’ (F, lines 111-113).

‘maybe a little bit of education about how to successfully do a counselling session online and how to like, what sort of tools you can use’ (D, lines 149-151).

The majority of participants discussed introducing activities that could be used online. This was similar to Shklarski et al’s. (2021a, p.60) findings, which acknowledged counsellors working with children have to ‘think more outside the box and be creative’ to facilitate online engagement.

3.2.2 Muddling Through

All participants expressed a degree of not knowing ‘what was going to come... so they just had to muddle through’ (B, lines 134-135). Feelings of apprehension were shared, with participant E stating ‘I was really upset. I was

really, really upset' (line 17). This initial apprehension is a common thread throughout current literature on the impact of the Pandemic for counsellors working online (Békés & Doorn, 2020; Shklarski et al., 2021a; Stoll et al., 2020).

A Different Context

A stark evaluation of the experience by all participants was that 'the context is completely different' (E, line 109) to if the online practice had been a planned, deliberate teaching approach, as opposed to an urgent response to a Pandemic (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020).

'it probably isn't something that they've really had to teach before, it's not really something that's going to come up because it's probably only really come around recently because of the lockdown' (F, lines 97-99).

'we were sort of told you know, we've had to really sort of adapt this to be able to do it online, so I think we've probably missed out on a lot of creative work' (C, lines 96-97).

Participants recognised a significant shift at the time of the transition to online learning, not only in their role as a student but also in their personal lives, such as having 'kids at home' (E, line 90). Their responses to change could be understood in the context of Schlossberg's (2011) model stages: Situation, Self, Support and Strategies. Each participant experienced the transition uniquely based on them individually, their support and their coping strategies, which could suggest that even with more preparation, they likely would have

still experienced a sense of muddling through due to the rippling impact of the Pandemic.

Considering Schlossberg's (2011) third stage, support, a number of the participants referred to the influence of peers disengaging.

'if you're put in a group with two people that don't really want to do the triad and end up talking about something else, you've then lost that learning... whereas if you were in class that wouldn't happen' (C, lines 251-253).

'I know that a lot of people don't really feel comfortable putting on their camera, which is fair, but when you can't see someone's face it definitely makes it harder to talk to them' (E, lines 181-182).

The literature recognises the conflicting perceptions of individuals participating in online activities at home. Hanna and Mwale (2017) discussed how having a researcher in the participants home environment could feel uncomfortable, whilst others argue some find comfort in online invisibility (Fox, 2017). Although based on researcher participant dynamics, this can be reflected on in the context of the educator and student dynamic, as well as between peers.

Isolating

Isolation in the learning experience was a prominent thread throughout.

'you underestimate how much you learn from other people being, just being in the environment with other people and those small

conversations. And I think when that goes, it can be quite isolating for the learning side of things' (C, lines 82-84).

'I think when you're doing it in a room on your own, I think you feel quite alone and you really don't know what other people are doing... there was an element of sort of being quite self-conscious' (E, lines 68-71).

Although in relation to the experience of online role-play activities, a sense of isolation may have been prominent throughout various aspects of the participants lives due to social distancing (Evans et al., 2020). Bell et al. (2020) identified the wellbeing of helping professionals as a fundamental issue during the Pandemic, acknowledging that personal experiences as well as confidence in adopting online modalities had a significant impact.

Whilst recognising a sense of isolation, participants provided suggestions as to how this could be reduced or circumvented.

'learning to be a bit more social online that I've got a bit better at. And then also acknowledging it as well, because what I needed was to acknowledge how different it is online' (D, lines 200-202).

Participant C (lines 207-208) placed emphasis on the importance of building 'quite strong relationships face-to-face' initially. Participants associated their confidence role-playing online with the social element of their course, echoed by Fuller's (2012) exploration of the role empathetic interpersonal relationships play in shaping the student experience.

Lacking Authenticity due to Missing Physicality

Coinciding with the felt 'distance between everyone' (D, line 77), participants also reflected on the online role-plays feeling 'less authentic...less real' (B, line 79).

'it didn't feel as real. It just didn't feel as, I don't know, I don't think people put as much effort into them' (C, lines 28-30).

The majority of participants attributed their personal attitude as a reason for why the role-plays felt less authentic.

'I was very much oh this isn't going to work, you know, how are the role-plays you know, it's never going to work online how can you build a therapeutic relationship, how can you even pretend to do that online...I was very negative about it' (D, lines 29-31).

'I think probably a lot of it was my own blocking, negativity. I think I was quite resistant to it...I was putting up some real barriers and a real blockage there myself' (E, lines 92-103).

Other participants attributed the lack of authenticity to the absence of a 'sense' (E, line 35), 'energy' (B, line 89) or 'vibe' (C, line 220; D, line 63).

Participant A (line 90) in particular reflected on the perceived inability to see 'facial expressions' when online.

'And I think that will be limitation for me when I get back to a real setting, is that, I won't have seen children, you know with their body language' (A, lines 46-49).

Through their qualitative questionnaire, Paterson et al. (2019) explored counselling students perceptions of online counselling. The study identified a variation in what online counselling meant to participants, ranging from perceiving it as a technical tool to seeing it as no different to the in-person alternative. Similar findings were evidenced in the evaluation, as the students whom acknowledged perceiving online working negatively, typically raised more concerns regarding its application. This was mirrored in Békés and Doorn's (2020) and Shklarski et al's. (2021a) research which both found professional experience working online was positively associated with more positive attitudes toward online therapy.

3.3 Strengths and Limitations

The validity of the evaluation could have been enhanced through inclusion of students in the recruitment process. Interestingly, only one of the two cohorts volunteered to participate. Whilst both groups received the same lecture content and completed the same online activities, there is the possibility the second group experienced this differently. Of the group participating, discussions occurred amongst this group regarding participation. Therefore participants inadvertently became involved in advertisement, which proved beneficial in improving uptake. This indicates that formal involvement in the recruitment process would have likely strengthened the project.

It is important to also reflect on the influence of the evaluation being conducted with counselling students working with children and young people. Shklarski et al. (2021a, b) found that participants working with children were

less likely to agree that remote and face-to-face therapy can be equally effective due to the additional planning and creativity required to engage children online. Given these noted differences, different results may have been obtained from interviewing adult counselling trainees.

Additionally, it is essential to acknowledge the potential influence of the participants backgrounds on the findings. The evaluation was conducted with a cohort studying one postgraduate course at one University and therefore further exploration of other institutions and other courses, including other courses taught at different post-graduate levels, would be beneficial to consider external factors, such as students facing poverty and those from remote areas (Adedoyin & Soykan, 2020; Kapasia et al. 2020).

Alongside this, further exploration of the influence of different approaches to teaching and learning would be beneficial, with recognition of the varying guidance implemented by different regulating professional bodies for therapeutic courses. The project specifically focused on the training of counsellors working with children and young people utilising a variety of integrative approaches. It would therefore be useful to explore whether the therapeutic modality in which students are training in influences their skill development when conducting role-play activities online compared to in-person.

An evident strength was that of the reflective responses of the participants. This was likely due to the course and significant time dedicated to reflexivity. Given this, it would be interesting to explore the experiences of students on other Postgraduate courses whom have studied online during the Pandemic.

Furthermore, the project is a highly topical and contemporary piece of evaluation given the continually developing response to the Pandemic. This is mirrored in the approach, as the interviews were conducted online. This negated a number of logistical issues typical of in-person interviews (Hanna & Mwale, 2017), however, it must also be acknowledged that conducting the interviews on the same online platform students had been using may itself have impacted on participant uptake, as those whom struggled using the system may have been less willing to participate.

3.4 Implications of findings

Of the three implications for practice identified, the first acknowledges the importance of involving students in Postgraduate counselling course development. Given the changes to training and practice in response to COVID-19, students are in a unique position to offer their insights into what has been of value and therefore should be active participants in future course development. Alongside this, the second recommendation is recognition that diversifying practices, including an element of online role-play activities and taught content, contributes to students skill development and therefore should be implemented as part of future course delivery. Finally, the implementation of a transition model, such as Schlossberg's model (2011) should be utilised to facilitate understanding of the student experience throughout the duration of their programme.

An additional implication for policy is the recognition that students studying counselling courses during the Pandemic have gained invaluable skills in counselling online which should not go unnoticed. Whilst the participants

agreed that specific training would be required following qualifying, they also reflected on the skills gained that would have otherwise not been attained. It is therefore recommended that this skill development be formally recognised by the BACP.

4. Conclusions

Individual semi-structured interviews were successfully conducted to evaluate counselling students experiences of conducting role-play activities online. The students identified fundamental differences between online and face-to-face role-play activities, largely related to the unanticipated transition and the subsequent different context they found themselves learning in. Despite this, students still identified value in their experience for skill development and future employability and consequently recommended the inclusion of online role-play activities in future course development.

Whilst this evaluation has taken some steps in identifying potential course developments, further evaluations conducted with students from different counselling fields and institutions is required to further strengthen the recommendations made.

Dissemination

Findings have been disseminated amongst colleagues involved in the Doctor of Professional Practice course and will also be shared within the Psychology Department.

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