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**A Qualitative Exploration of the Impact of Personal  
Development in Counselling Training on the Student  
Counsellor's Significant Relationships: Should Counsellor  
Training Come with a Stronger Warning or More Support?**

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Dissertation Submitted to the University of Liverpool for the Degree of  
Master of Arts (Counselling Studies) in Part Fulfillment of the Modular  
Programme in Counselling Studies.

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## **Abstract.**

A small scale qualitative research study set out to explore the impact of the personal development element of counsellor training on the student counsellors' significant relationship. Six qualified counsellors shared their own experiences of training, and the impact it had on their relationships, in a semi-structured, one to one interview. The data gathered was subjected to a form of grounded theory. The study concluded that the personal development element does have an impact on students' relationships; some survived and others ended. Whilst this was generally perceived by the participants as positive, the study found a number of factors, resulting from personal development in counselling training, which did contribute to various stresses being placed on the participants' relationships.

## **Declaration.**

I declare that this work is original and has not been submitted previously in support of any qualification or course.

Signed.....

Karen Ann Collins

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I would like to acknowledge my partner Pam for allowing me to use her as inspiration for this research project. I would also like to thank her for all the support she gave me whilst I was completing this dissertation, not least for all the tears she dried, meals she cooked and cups of tea she brewed. She remains my inspiration and my support in all things.

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Karen Collins.

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## **Introduction.**

This small scale, qualitative research study set out to explore the impact of the personal development element in counselling training on the student counsellors' significant relationships. It focused primarily on the relationship of the students' life partners; however, inevitably reference is sometimes made to other types of relationship.

Since my first short course in counsellor training I have been fascinated by the personal development aspect of the counselling profession. My interest continued throughout my training and into my work as a counsellor trainer. A new dimension appeared when I observed the process from the opposite side, as my partner went through counsellor training herself. It was then that the embryonic idea for this research came into being.

Many counsellor trainers, half joking-half serious, suggest that training courses, particularly at diploma level, should come with a 'health warning'. As counsellor trainers, both my colleagues and I, warn at the beginning of training that, 'if you last the duration of this course it will change your life and it could significantly affect your personal relationships'. We do this for several reasons:

- As a result of our own experiences in counsellor training.
- As a result of our observation of students in training and the stresses observed on both students and their relationships.
- It is widely believed that personal development is an essential element in counselling training, and is responsible for the growing self-awareness needed to

practice safely. However, this brings about change and this change may impact on students' relationships.

For the purposes of this study, I will briefly discuss the personal development element of counsellor training, why it is important, and why it is believed to impact on the students' personal relationships, before going on to give the rationale for the study.

The personal development element of counselling courses allows student counsellors to work on themselves and facilitates the integration of new learning and insights (Rothery, 1992). It usually takes the form of a personal development group (PDG) where usually, (although not always), a facilitator and between 5 and 15 students meet once a week for the duration of the course, for unstructured group work (Lennie, 2007). It is however, a misapprehension to believe this is where all personal development is undertaken. There are generally three components to counselling training: theory, skills and personal development (including PDG and personal therapy). These elements are not insular and exclusive, but rather complement each other to develop a more rounded and grounded individual, and therefore, counsellor. When discussing personal development I will be referring to the students' own personal development, which may have come about as a result of any or all of the components of the course, rather than to the PDG exclusively, unless stated (Wilkins, 1997).

Personal development has long been established as an essential part of counselling training (Mearns, Dryden, McLeod and Thorne, 1998; Johns, 1997, 1996; Tolan and Lendrum, 1995), although Johns (1996) argues it is sometimes a neglected part of training. It is considered important for instigating growth and developing self-awareness, which impacts on the student personally and professionally, enabling them



to become more competent counsellors (Rothery, 1992). Regardless of orientation, reflective, self-aware counsellors minimise detrimental effects upon clients and make the best counsellors (Johns, 1997). Working out what is going on for counsellors and why they react/feel as they do, is an important part of the process of counselling work, since “an unaware counsellor leading an unexamined life is likely to be a liability rather than an asset” (Dryden and Thorne 1991, p.3).

The personal development process brings about changes within students, manifesting, for example, in changes in manner, assertiveness, behaviour, demeanour, even appearance. Something as simple as re-writing a script or recognising a condition of worth can wreak havoc emotionally and practically. If one person in a relationship changes, this will have an impact on the relationship itself (Learner, 1990; Berne, 1968). This process was depicted on the big screen in the 80’s with the release of the highly acclaimed film *Educating Rita* (1983). It portrayed a mature student ‘Rita’, entering higher education, which ultimately ended her relationship and left her ‘between worlds’. This is a phenomenon often observed when mature students enter education and their partners struggle with the metamorphosis of the emerging, more confident, loved one.

In the above example, the personal development and growth is a by-product of the course, rather than an integral and explicit part of it. In counsellor training, however, personal development is not a by-product of the course but a requirement, without which, a student would be highly unlikely to pass the course. This is not always an easy or comfortable process (Wright, 2004).

The above is well known to counsellors and trainers alike. I went through it as a student; I teach it as a counsellor trainer. Whilst understanding the process from a professional

point of view, and having experienced it personally, I was unprepared to experience the process from the opposite side, when my partner went through counsellor training. This new perspective began to ring alarm bells. Questions were raised that needed addressing, not just to satisfy curiosity, but because professionally, trainers are as accountable, to some degree, for what they expect students to go through, and for the students' clients as they are for their own clients (Clarkson and Gilbert, 1991, p.143).

As personal development is considered the "corner stone of counsellor training" (Spenser, 2006, p.113) and it is a widely acknowledged phenomenon that counsellor training impacts on students' relationships (Thorne and Dryden, 1991), I assumed it would be well documented. I found however, relatively little research carried out on personal development in counsellor training and the effect it has on students, compared with its assumed importance in counsellor training (Murphy, 2005; Flynn-Piercy, 2002; Donati and Watts, 2000; Johns, 1996). There was even less research on the impact personal development has on students' relationships. I was therefore left with what Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.31) refer to as the "tacit" knowledge from my own and colleagues observations, and lots of anecdotal material from students, qualified counsellors and lecturers, which had spread much like an urban legend, rather than explicit empirical knowledge, which is open to 'critical reflection'.

A question of ethics began to formulate. It could be argued, that whilst training counsellors, who undergo rigorous personal development for the good of clients, that we have not considered the implications for the student and their family and friends. At the very least we may be allowing significant strains to be endured by people who may not have the support students receive as members of counselling courses. I began to reflect on my own experience.

When my partner began to train, I quickly became aware that the personal development she was undergoing was having a major impact on our relationship. I observed the zealotry of her thirst for the personal development process in all areas of her life. Her desire to get things right culminated in exhausting personal development. Every old pattern of behaviour discovered, or negative feedback received, meant she had something to work on, regardless of culpability. Every disagreement between us was identified and examined and attempts to rectify it undertaken. As a qualified counsellor myself I understood what was happening. I was able to temper her zealotry to some degree with a reminder that 'sometimes a cigar is just a cigar' and that sometimes it's okay to let things go. It was still a very intense time in our lives, as Dryden and Thorne (1991) argue "if things go well they will not go smoothly" (p.3). Students choose to go into training and to embrace the changes that occur with the support of their training establishments; their families and friends do not. As McLeod (2003b) suggests, the growing self-awareness students gain through training, may come at a "cost" of the "strain felt by pre-existing family and other relationships in the 'real' world" (p.viii).

Again, however, it is an assumption that students receive or utilise support whilst training. Lecturers and tutors, although supportive, may believe students need to go on their own journey and experience the process for themselves. Generally peers on the same course, although supportive, may be going through similar dilemmas and although there is now usually the provision of a PD Group this can be fraught with dynamics that may prohibit some students from sharing in this arena (Lennie, 2007; Spenser, 2006; Flynn-Piercy, 2002; Rothery, 1992.)

This leaves personal therapy, a controversial subject at the present time, since it is not mandatory for students on all courses to undergo personal therapy. This was the

support, both my partner and I, used during our respective training. For me 40 hours personal therapy was a condition of the course, and was also required for accreditation by the BACP at that time (Murphy, 2005). For my partner it was not a requirement, but personal choice, as this requirement has been removed. Murphy (2005) flags up discrepancies (discussed later) from the BACP as to whether personal therapy helps students with their personal development or not leaving “confusion as to the role of personal therapy in training” (p.27).

Implications of this research study can also be considered in a wider context: Many clients attend counselling who undergo a form of personal development as a result of their personal therapy. Regardless of orientation, the goal of counselling/therapy is change (Carey et al, 2007). This often necessitates clients challenging less than perfect relationships and their roles within them. Often relationships break up and counsellors assume the relationship was already doomed. If however, this process is similar to the process counselling students go through, and is as much a result of the process as it is of the content, this may have implications for supporting the client during this process. Strategies could be put in place for the client to recognise their partner’s frustration at the new person emerging. I believe this would make for more ethical practice, both for clients in counselling and students in training.

For the reasons stated above, I believe this research is relevant for several reasons. I believe, as others do, that personal development in counsellor training is of the first importance and is essential to promote professional development and protect clients. I believe counselling training does have an impact on students’ relationships, especially those they are in close contact with. However, how and why is unclear at present since there is little empirical evidence to support this belief. Research in this area may clarify

the situation and help move our understanding of it, moving it from the anecdotal to the empirical.

As a consequence, a qualitative small scale study exploring the impact of personal development in counsellor training on the student counsellors' significant relationships has been undertaken. The study focuses, in retrospect, on the training experiences of six professionally qualified counsellors, explored in one to one interviews. It focuses on the relationship with life partners. The rationale for this choice was the intention to focus on relationships where even subtle changes are noticeable. The two relationships that most closely fit this remit are life partner and children. Relationships with children can be problematic at the best of times, for reasons other than training, i.e. age, hormones, growing up, etc. and this could cloud the issue. Therefore, I chose to focus on the life partners.

Areas of particular interest are:

- Change in students as a result of personal development.
- The impact of the personal development element of counsellor training on the student counsellors' significant relationships.
- Students' understanding of the possible impact on relationships, prior to or in the initial stages of training and possible support available for them.
- Support for the student's family if the training has a detrimental effect on them.
- The extent of counsellor trainer responsibility.

## **Literature Review.**

Having given consideration to the arguments for and against an in-depth literature search before initiating the research study (McLeod, 2003), I completed a relatively thorough, though not exhaustive, search. I utilised the electronic data bases provided by University of Chester, searched the paper journals at the university, my own, and those of several colleagues, to generate books titles and articles relating to the effects of the personal development element of counselling training and the impact it may or may not have on the student counsellor's personal relationships. My rationale was to allow myself the space to formulate my own ideas rather than be over-saturated or influenced by other's from the outset.

### **Main search terms.**

The following terms were input into the electronic data bases accessible to the University of Chester, including the library catalogue, both separately and in various permutations:

'Personal development', 'counsellor training', 'counselling training', 'student counsellors', 'counselling students' 'trainee counsellors' 'significant relationships' 'impact of training on significant relationships' 'relationships'.

'Psychotherapy' was substituted for the term 'counselling'. 'Counselling' and its variants were input with both one and two Ls to cover English and American spellings. A second search was completed after the data collection and analysis were underway. This

included a wider internet search for anything linked to the study, and to track down specific journal articles that I had leads for, from other research articles and books. I accessed book stores online i.e. [www.amazon.co.uk](http://www.amazon.co.uk), [www.alibris.co.uk](http://www.alibris.co.uk), and [www.thebookdepository.co.uk](http://www.thebookdepository.co.uk), which were a valuable asset sourcing related book titles.

### **The results of the literature search.**

The literature search was surprising. There was no need to worry about over-saturation by other research, since there was little research undertaken in the area of personal development and its impact on students (Macran and Shapiro, 1998). There was even less on how it may or may not impact on students' personal relationships. Like Flynn-Piercy (2002) I "was surprised to discover so little information dealing with the effects of counselling training on the students intimate relationships" (p.18).

There were a number of writers commenting on the "lack of consistent research evidence" available (Johns, 1997, p.63; Donati and Watts, 2005; Macran and Shapiro, 1998; Williams and Irving, 1996). A number of research articles available were American and whilst accepting their relevance, as McLeod (1999) argues, there is a need for research that reflects counselling practice in England.

In related research, Donati and Watts (2000) identified a need for further research into the place of personal development and therapy in training, yet in a second paper five years later Donati and Watts (2005) continue to argue that counsellor personal development still remains a 'poorly defined' area of training. Macran and Shapiro's (1998) study suggests a way to address this problem may be to focus on the student's

process of therapy and personal development using qualitative methods. In an attempt to add to the minimal amount of literature in this area Grimmer and Tribe (2001) and Murphy (2005) followed these recommendations. Murphy argues that although Grimmer and Tribe's "study scores highly in credibility and trustworthiness" (p.28), it did not lead to an integration of the findings for informing future counsellor training and this is an essential element. McLeod (1999) argues this can be a problem in the counselling field and suggests that there needs to be an integration of theory that informs practice.

Whilst detailing the lack of research in various areas of personal development, and offering some insights into personal development itself, the above research rarely touches on the impact that personal development has on students' relationships. In fact, it often deals with the semantics of concepts rather than the phenomenon itself. The findings of the literature search and the related subjects will be reviewed in order to outline the context of this research study. I will discuss the literature related to personal development and its importance in counselling training, the literature on the 'thorny' subject of personal therapy and its link with personal development, and whether personal development in training brings about change in students. The literature directly relevant to this research study and whether personal development in training has an impact on counselling students' relationships will then be discussed.

### **Personal development.**

It is generally accepted that personal development is an essential aspect of counsellor training (Wheeler, 2000; McLeod, 1998), and is considered important not just for the benefit of counsellors but also their clients (Johns, 1997, 1996; Skovolt and Ronnestad,



1995; Orlinsky, 1994; McLeod, 1993). Wheeler (1996) states that, “personal development can be defined in terms of self awareness and change” (p.75), and Johns (1996) adds that these changes will “influence the whole person”. Wilkins (1997) states that to be an effective therapist we need to be complete and ‘real’. He goes on to argue, however, that the purpose of personal development is not to make us perfect but ‘good enough’ (Jacobs, 1988). The more students can connect with the personal development element of training courses, the more self-aware they become. This not only helps facilitate the student’s understanding, recognition, and awareness of their own personality, thoughts, feelings, behaviours, attitudes (culturally and personally) to others, but facilitates the student being able to monitor themselves and their work with clients (Wheeler, 2000; Pope and Kline, 1999).

At present the criteria for how trainers decide how and whether a student has reached an acceptable level of personal development is also under-researched and open to debate. Spenser (2006) highlights this and suggests that in order to maximise the learning potential of students through personal development a number of areas need to be addressed. She asks, “If we believe personal development training is so important to being a caring professional counsellor”, then, “how do we assess students’ personal development?” (p.109). Wheeler (2000, 1996) suggests that trainers need to make explicit what they are looking for in terms of personal development and how to assess it fairly. Hensley, Smith and Thompson (2003) recommend “standardised instruments” are needed to help assessment, however, they suggest that before we get that far, “ethically and legally, we first need to develop an understanding of how these areas relate to clinical competence” (p.228). This area is still being debated.

Spencer (2006) also discusses how students experience personal development. She argues that not all students learn in the same way and therefore need different inputs to develop, stating “one size does not fit all” (p.113). She further argues that we need to “accommodate the diverse needs and learning styles” of individuals since not everyone is comfortable in groups, structured or otherwise (p.108). This is supported by Lennie (2007) who noted that some students found personal development groups damaging. This suggests a variety of different learning experiences need to be presented, as unstructured group work is not the only way to negotiate personal development (Lennie, 2007; Spenser, 2006).

One way a student could meet personal development needs, if they are not met within group work, is with personal therapy. Its inclusion on courses as a requirement is however, an issue of debate (see below). Spenser’s paper is written in an attempt to add her ‘voice’ to those mentioned earlier who believe that more research into personal development and related issues are needed. She acknowledges her paper raises more questions than it answers, but, it serves to remind us that there is still “a lack of clarity in relation to personal development training” (Spencer, 2006, p.108).

Clarity in how trainers assess trainees in relation to personal development, and how they provide growing experiences, it is argued, is important since it has implications for who does and who does not qualify as a counsellor. The responsibilities of gatekeeping (defined by Brear, Dorrian and Luscri, 2008), have been highlighted by Behnke as an “ethical responsibility, particularly with students undertaking clinical practice” (Cited in Brear, Dorrian and Luscri, 2008, p.93). The empirical evidence supporting the view that personal development or personal therapy does categorically make better counsellors is mixed (Murphy, 2005). This challenges the ethics of insisting students undergo personal

development or therapy just because it worked for me (Mearns et al, 1998), or as Spenser (2006) says so elegantly in her poem, “Is it just because ‘you said so?’”(p.108).

### **The link between personal development and personal therapy within training.**

Personal development in counsellor training is a result of many elements of the course and the students’ interaction with it (Mearns, 1997). A controversial element is whether students should undergo personal therapy during training, and its relevance to personal and professional development. It has been argued that the issue “has generated considerably more discussion than research” (Clarke, 1986, p.542). I did, however, find a growing amount of research literature devoted to this subject. Historically, it was usual for students to undergo therapy whilst training. This originated from psychodynamic therapies where it is believed that in order to become a competent therapist one needed to be aware of one’s own processes, in order to deal with transference issues within the client-counsellor relationship (Wiseman and Shefler, 2001; Rothery, 1992). It also offers students support whilst going through the rigours of psychodynamic training. In 1998 in a letter to the editor of ‘*Counselling*’ the BACP’s professional magazine of the time, four of our most prominent names in counselling challenged this idea and it was subsequently dropped as a requirement for accreditation by the BACP (Murphy, 2005).

The letter entitled ‘£1200 personal therapy- financial scam!’ (Mearns, Dryden, McLeod, and Thorne, 1998) sparked both debate and research, questioning whether it should be mandatory for student counsellors to have personal therapy during training. The letter suggested there was no empirical evidence to support the belief that personal therapy

worked in fostering personal development. The letter may have been misrepresented in some cases, being used to support the view that therapy in training is not necessary rather than, there simply is no empirical evidence to support it. The authors appear to argue against dogma, suggesting the subject should be thoroughly researched before putting students to the inconvenience and financial burden of a process, for which there was no evidence to suggest was of benefit, either to themselves or their professional ability.

The relevance of personal therapy for student counsellors in the context of this research study is that issues are often raised for students whilst they are going through counsellor training. As Wheeler (1996) states “education and training will lead to shifts in attitudes, perception and response modes” (p.74). Thorne and Dryden (1991) suggest this can cause quite severe reactions including depression. These issues need to be dealt with for the psychological health of the student. Whilst it is sometimes assumed that the place to do this is the PDG, it is not always as simple as this. Johns (1996) states that a personal development group is not to be confused with a “therapy group”. She argues that “deep feelings will be triggered and expressed and personal work may begin” during the PDG, however, these should then be taken elsewhere, perhaps to personal therapy (p.118-119). Dryden, Horton and Mearns (1995) also suggest personal issues should be restrained to issues specific to counselling and those relevant to the group. If personal issues should be tackled elsewhere, personal therapy could be the obvious place.

Personal therapy no longer has to be a requirement on counsellor training courses, since after removing this requirement, the BACP has implied that it is not necessary. Murphy (2005) identifies a contradiction here, since in 2003 the BACP suggested that therapy is

important in raising self-awareness and reducing 'blind spots' to make for more ethical practice in counselling (Murphy,2005). If this is true for qualified counsellors, it may be argued, it is more so for students. Murphy concluded that there was a case for therapy being mandatory in counselling training and suggests it is "an effective method of achieving professional development" (p.32). He further argues that 40 hours may not be enough, and perhaps therapy should continue over the length of the course. Grimmer and Tribe (2001) found a positive outcome of therapy was of "emotional support during crisis" (p.296). Other studies, however, have varied in their findings in how effective personal therapy is during training. Macran and Shapiro (1998) state the literature pool is "small and the data tends to be weak" (p.19). One consistency they found was that most therapists believed they had benefitted both professionally and personally from therapy.

Thorne and Dryden (1991) argue that unless there is a requirement for students to undertake their own personal therapy there is no "guarantee" they will deal with difficult issues. Johns (1997) however, argues that mandatory therapy "misses the point". She argues that the "optimal value" of counselling is, "at a time of readiness" (p.64), therefore, forcing students to undertake therapy before they are ready may be useless and possibly unethical. Murphy (2005) supports this view suggesting "that the readiness of the trainee is essential for productive development to take place" (p.28). We can't force someone to accept support in training any more than we can force clients to do so. At present it is left to the individual training establishments to decide if therapy should be mandatory or not on their courses.

## **Change in the student as a result of personal development in training.**

The process of therapy/counselling is change. Regardless of why clients come to see us, (i.e. I'm unhappy, someone died, I'm too fat, thin, placid, scared, stuck, don't know what I want etc.), the one thing all disciplines agree on is that if therapy is to be effective clients will undergo some form of change (Carey et al, 2007). In my own experience, as a result of this, relationships are often put under pressure and sometimes these relationships end. Relate warn clients that therapy doesn't always fix your relationship, it explores what you both want, and sometimes it's not to stay together. The process clients go through, of finding out about themselves, their needs and patterns is very like the personal development element of training without the theory. When students truly engage in training, the experience can be likened to a very intense and speeded up form of personal development which mimics or "mirrors" the therapeutic process (Flynn-Piercy, 2002). This process is observable in training by trainers (Mearns, 1997) and in the narratives of students (Harding Davies, Alred, Hunt and Davies, 2004).

As Johns (1996) states "all personal development is about the ways we learn and change" (p.40) and that this "influences the whole person" (p.40). This is relevant to this research study, since, if students don't change, it could be argued, that it won't impact on the students' relationships. However, if they do, then as argued previously, in the experiences of clients in counselling, it stands to reason this will affect their relationships and this could become problematic.

## **The impact of training on the students' relationship.**

If training works properly, students change significantly as a result of their training (Harding Davies et al, 2004) and this can have a significant effect on their personal relationships (Fear, 2004; Flynn-Piercy, 2002). Mearns (1997) recognised the impact of personal development on "other relational living" (p.120) from, a combination of a speeded up form of personal development, and support students get in various forms, as a result of undergoing the course. This can cause problems between partners and Mearns argues that whilst "the relationship is thus in crisis" it "carries the twin possibilities of danger and opportunity" (p.120). The evidence is inconclusive as to whether the "danger" or "opportunity" he mentions, has most impact on the students and their relationships. For example, Looney et al (1980) suggest strains on partnerships were higher than usual, yet later research by Guy (1987) suggests his participants found a positive element.

Cawkill (2002) discusses the effects of personal therapy on student counsellors' personal relationships on psychodynamic training courses. He identified a number of anxieties that may arise for the partners of counselling students whilst their partners are in training. He argues that the partners may feel jealous of, or excluded by, the growing relationships that students develop whilst in training and the confidentiality that is implicit in these. He also noticed that the partners were often threatened by the students' relationship with their own therapist. He acknowledged that this is important in training. Whilst accepting that if the students are to become successful counsellors they need to build "a good relationship with their personal counsellor", but this should not be "to the detriment of their relationship with their partner" (p.42). This may be true of all relationships that develop during training.

Williams and Irving (1996) argue “that in training more attention needs to be paid to risks, with steps being taken to minimise the possibility of negative outcomes and to deal with the consequences” (p.4). Both Mearns (1997) and Cawkill (2002) recognise that counsellor trainers have a responsibility to outline the pitfalls of counselling training and Mearns uses the “health warning” mentioned earlier in his practice. Whilst Mearns argues there is little that can be done except “helping trainees to consider their own actions” (p.120) Cawkill suggests it is the responsibility of the students themselves to be open and help their partners through.

Two studies were identified that explored directly the impact of personal development in counsellor training on the students’ relationships. These were a heuristic study (Flynn-Piercy, 2002) and a quantitative study (Wright, 2004). Flynn-Piercy’s study most closely resembled this one. She undertook a heuristic investigation of the impact of personal development training on the student counsellors’ intimate relationship. Flynn-Piercy (2002) and her co-researchers all reported that participating in personal development had resulted in changes within themselves and this had had an impact on their relationships. The study also highlights the fact that they were all unprepared “for the profundity of what was revealed during the process”, both in themselves, and for their partners (p.55). Whilst these changes, particularly enhanced communication skills, were perceived as positive, it was acknowledged that some of the partners were “personally de-stabilised” (p.55) and that this may have actually threatened the relationships. Even with this taken into account Flynn-Piercy concluded that the effects of personal development in training on the student’s intimate relationship “ultimately seemed to be positive” (p.57).



The study discussed a number of findings suggesting that personal development did bring about change within student counsellors which had the biggest impact on the student's intimate relationship. It highlighted that the possibility of the students' personal relationships being affected or "de-stabilised", was considered by the co-researchers to have been only superficially mentioned before hand and not made explicit by the Relate trainers. It also found that the participants felt that they had to deal with their own relationship issues which may have come about as a result of the training they were doing. They felt that there was only limited facility to obtain support on the course and they therefore had to seek help outside of the Relate training programme.

A limitation of this investigation is that, as a study that focused on Relate counselling training, it was contextual. A difference in Relate training from general training, is that the Relate specialises in dealing with relationship issues and focuses more on the dynamics of interpersonal relating, than a general course may do. Therefore, the counsellors from the Relate training programme may have a repertoire of counselling skills, and a deeper understanding of relationship issues, with which to support their own relationship. This could affect the results in assessing the impact of training on the students' relationship as positive rather than negative.

Wright's (2004) quantitative study focused on 200 student counsellors and their significant others. The term "Significant other" was defined differently from the present study meaning "those affected by the students' changes" (p.42). Her findings were similar to Flynn-Piercy (2002) in many respects. She found that students did change as a result of training and that this did have a significant impact on their relationships. This was particularly evident with their partners. She also highlighted changes in

relationships with friends, parents and children, however, she suggested that in the case of children this was not as apparent as expected. Wright concluded that overall the changes were seen as positive by the majority of participants, but did acknowledge the potential for relationships to be de-stabilised.

Wright (2004) highlighted another finding of Flynn-Piercy (2002). She found that very few students were prepared for the impact counsellor training would have on them and their relationship. She did however qualify this, suggesting that it may not have been the case that the training establishment had not prepared the students for change, but that they may not have taken this on-board. She stressed the importance of students being prepared regarding it as “crucial” (p.43).

### **Summary of the research discussed.**

There is little research relating to the impact of personal development during counselling training on the student counsellor’s significant relationship. What there is suggests that it does in fact have an impact; however, as yet the research varies on whether this impact is positive or negative. There was more research and debate on the importance of personal development in counselling training and the impact this has on student counsellors generally. Although this seems to be considered positive in personal terms, professionally, evidence has yet to establish a link between the personal development and therapy and improved outcomes for clients. There is evidence of a growing body of research on issues around whether therapy is necessary during training and its implied link with improved counsellor competence; as yet no firm conclusions can be drawn. There was, however, a general call in for more empirical evidence to inform practice and training in all areas relating to personal development.

## **Research Design.**

When deciding how to proceed with this research study both quantitative and qualitative methods of investigation were explored. The subject of the study came about primarily from my own observations in both my professional and personal life. Banister, Burman, Parker, Taylor, and Tindall (1994) argue for a process described as “personal reflexivity” in qualitative research, which allows for the “individuality of the researcher” and “reveals rather than conceals, the level of personal involvement and engagement” with their research topic, (p.150). Etherington (2004) further clarifies the use of “reflectivity” suggesting that we gain “knowledge not only about the topic of our inquiry but also about how we acquired that knowledge” (p.46). Since the study emerged in a sense from my own experience, after reviewing the methodology, I chose a ‘qualitative’ rather than a ‘quantitative’ study.

This does not discount the value or validity of the quantitative approach and I am aware that quantitative studies have added significantly to knowledge in the counselling arena (McLeod, 1994). The quantitative or old paradigm, however, believes there is one truth and one reality and focuses on uncovering this objectively. This method is useful for collecting data from large numbers of participants and therefore, making assumptions that are often applied to wider contexts. In doing this, the type of data that is collected is often reduced to yes or no answers, rating scales or simple one word descriptions’ i.e. happy, sad, confused, and this can lose the richness of human experience and ways of relating (McLeod, 2003a).

It was however, this richness that I was interested in exploring; a richness that includes the inner personal world of the research participant, including thoughts, feelings and emotions. This calls for a relatively flexible approach that captures the complexities, and subjectivity in the narratives of human experience. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest this is the subject of qualitative research. The qualitative or new paradigm accepts that there is more than one reality and Banister et al (1994) argue that “Qualitative research recognises a complex and dynamic social world” (p.142). It focuses on smaller numbers of participants since it generates much larger amounts of data, however, it allows that data to be explored in more depth. I, therefore, felt that the qualitative approach addressed the aims of this study more effectively than the ‘quantitative’ method.

Although the validity of qualitative research has been called into question previously McLeod (2000) suggests that it is becoming more accepted as the most effective way of investigating certain types of topics. Since historically, there has been little research carried out into the remit of this study, there is as yet, no established precedent set on how I should proceed. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest that a qualitative method can go some way to explaining “previously unexplored phenomena” (Murphy, 2005, p.28).

A qualitative, semi-structured, one to one interview, methodology was chosen for this study. The rationale for this choice rested largely on the inexperience of the researcher in carrying out this type of research project. I wanted a method of data collection that would allow some flexibility within the interviews, but not so much that I may lose focus and stray from the main topic. I decided on the interview guide format as discussed by Patton (1990). This provides a guide for the interview which outlines topics relevant to

the area being explored. These topics are arrived at by a process of brainstorming relevant ideas derived from the researchers' knowledge of the subject and relevant literature. These ideas are grouped and refined into main categories for exploration, (Maykut and Morehouse: 1994). Whilst having a general focus, this method allows scope for following new leads should they arise. This seems appropriate since there is little research available, which can prepare me completely, for the direction the interviews may take.

### **Provisions for trustworthiness.**

Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest that trustworthiness questions, "to what extent can we place confidence in the outcomes of the study?" and "Do we believe what the researcher has reported?" (p.145). Along with Lincoln and Guba (1985), they argue that trustworthiness is important, regardless of the type of research undertaken since research results need to be believable. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) further argue that a detailed explanation of data collection, analysis, procedure and outcomes is necessary to provide the transparency needed to trust in the outcomes of research.

At the outset I considered my objectivity in carrying out this research study. I questioned my own immersion in the subject matter of personal development in counsellor training and how this may impact on student counsellors' personal relationships. Having undergone personal development in my own training, and by proxy in my personal relationship, I am engaged with the subject at a deep level and I acknowledge that I am passionate about the importance of personal development, not just in training, but in counselling generally. This suggests a level of subjectivity. Maykut

and Morehouse (1994) outline a process whereby the qualitative researcher can be “an in-depth researcher” yet “can also remove him/herself from the situation to rethink the meanings of experience” (p.25) in a more objective manner. I will attempt to replicate this.

To this end I considered the provisions of trustworthiness and transparency outlined by Lincoln and Guba (1985), as discussed by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p146-148).

These were:

- Multiple methods of data collection: Including interview data, field observations and reviews of relevant literature.
- Building an audit trail: Detailing and recording every step related to the process of carrying out and deriving the outcomes of the study, from conception to presentation. This includes use of a research journal and should allow others to follow the process and replicate the study.
- Working within a research team: This allows discussion, discovery of bias or blind spots to emerge, and monitored by others.
- Members’ check.

I decided to incorporate a version of these ideas into my work in a revised form. I incorporated multiple methods of data collection, as outlined above, and building an audit trail. An issue that arose for this study is that I am not working as part of a research team and I am unable to change this. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) suggest that this problem can be addressed and bias minimised by an outside person who walks “through your audit trail periodically, raising questions when necessary” (p.147). Therefore, as well as having a research supervisor, I have taken the precaution of

periodically discussing the process of this research with two colleagues, who have offered feedback as I have proceeded. In terms of members check, unfortunately time restraints did not allow alterations of text after discussion of the outcomes with participants. Fortunately none were requested; three participants wished to be notified of the outcomes.

I have attempted to be transparent from the outset in my actions and intentions, when designing, carrying out, analysing and disseminating the outcomes of this study. A journal was kept and all notes, transcripts, data and analysis have been kept and archived.

### **Ethical considerations.**

I work to the “Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy” as set out by the BACP (Bond, 2004). In following these guidelines the wellbeing of participants is paramount. Steps have been taken to ensure the protection of client identity and confidentiality. Identifying material has been removed from extracts used in the outcomes section of this study. Informed consent from participants was elicited. Information was given to the participants, in writing, outlining the study. It included both my responsibilities towards them and the procedure for them to withdraw from the study if they so wished (Appendix C). Before commencement of the interview, I checked this information had been received and understood, and provided participants with the chance to ask questions. Formal consent was then obtained in writing from the participants and was signed by both participant and researcher (Appendix D). In order to further ensure the participants were satisfied with the taped interview and the data collected, they were offered the chance to have a copy of their audio tape, on completion,

and a copy of the transcript, once this was completed if they wished. Three participants requested a copy of the audio cassette. Three participants declined. No participant requested a copy of the transcript.

A second ethical issue addressed before commencement of the interview, was to clarify with participants that they had access to their own personal therapy at the time of the interview. We then discussed the participants own responsibility in seeking help should anything significant arise as a result of the interview. The rationale for this was simple: anytime we open up old wounds we face the possibility of repercussions, and the study asks participants to reflect on events that may not have been pleasant at the time.

### **Limitations.**

Qualitative research can generate a vast amount of data, therefore, only a small number of participants are interviewed (Rudestam and Newton, 2001), and this can call into question the validity of the outcomes. The aim of qualitative research is to explore “human experience” (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994), and I believe this study goes some way to doing this. Although “contextualised” (Lincoln and Guba, 1985) the intention of the study was to begin to explore a topic, that at present is predominantly unexplored, rather than to discover absolutes applicable to, all counsellors, in all settings. This said if the outcomes do support the anecdotal evidence discussed, then the study may go some way to generating discussion and ideas for future research, on the assumption that it may apply to a wider cohort.



A further limitation of the study is researcher inexperience. I have attempted to limit the impact of this in several ways:

- I have attempted to use researcher reflexivity. Etherington (2004) suggests that reflexivity requires self-awareness and is a dynamic process. She argues, however, this does not mean it is “subjective”.
- By careful consideration of bias that may occur as a result of either inexperience, or my own immersion in the topic (discussed above).
- I attempted to follow the research procedures and protocols, where appropriate to this study, as outlined by more experienced researchers, particularly Maykut and Morehouse (1994).

## **Methodology.**

### **Sample.**

#### **Criteria for participant selection .**

When considering the sample for this study I identified a meta group of candidates who have experienced personal development in counsellor training and who may have experienced a possible impact from this on their significant relationships. This included anyone who had previously, or who was at present, undergoing counsellor training or the partners of such people. By proposing a small scale research study of six to eight people, I was concerned that the larger meta group of participants, whilst providing maximum variation, may present a wide range of variables making data analysis cumbersome. Maykut and Morehouse (1994) argue that it is not necessary to have a completely random sample but simply a “range of experience on the phenomena in which we are interested” (p. 567). On closer examination of the larger group, there appeared to emerge logically, four smaller groups which if considered may meet this requirement. These are outlined below:

- The training group: counselling students who at the time of interview are training to become qualified and would be reflecting on their experiences as they were happening. A sub-group here are students who had not finished their courses.
- The qualified counsellor group: counsellors who had already undergone training and would therefore be reflecting on their experiences in retrospect.

- The mixed group: containing both counsellors in training and qualified counsellors.
- The partners of the counsellors/trainee counsellors group: Participants in this group would be reflecting on the training their partners had undergone and how this had impacted on their relationship.

I then considered each group in-depth raising the following points:

- The 'mixed group' may give results representative of each stage of the process which can be useful (Banister, 1994, p.146). I thought that in the case of this small scale research study it may also present too many variables.
- I considered that within the 'training group' there were too many extraneous variables. Student counsellors develop at different rates throughout training. They would still be within the process on which they are being asked to reflect and heightened feelings/emotions may colour their views during the interview process. They may not yet know how the course is impacting or has impacted on their relationship.
- In the 'qualified counsellor group' these variables may have diminished to some degree. Qualified counsellors could be considered to have reached a minimum level of development in order to have qualified. Time would have passed after the end of their course, allowing them to reflect upon their experiences and have some idea of how their training had impacted upon their significant relationships; ideally, they would have worked on any issues that had emerged.
- During training, students are introduced to the importance of research and the ethical considerations raised. It could be argued that counsellors, who have completed their training and have more experience of the counselling profession,

will have a deeper understanding of the potential issues that may be raised and therefore, be better able to give informed consent.

- Kvale (cited in McLeod 1994, p.81) argues that in qualitative research interviews, the “process of being interviewed may produce new insight and awareness”. This seems plausible. Talking to an interviewer about subjects that are likely to be quite intimate and highly emotional can be much like the therapeutic process. I therefore assessed the qualified counsellor group as being more likely to have a stronger support network in place, enabling them to cope with the type of material or insight uncovered during interviews, than either the ‘training group’ or the ‘counsellors’ partner group’.

Having considered the above, I chose to interview qualified counsellors who had qualified for a minimum length of one year. I felt this would give them some distance to reflect upon and resolve relationship issues which may have arisen as a result of their training. I decided that the theoretical orientation of the counsellor was not an issue, provided that the training had included a personal development element. The counsellor must have attended a minimum of twenty sessions of personal therapy. This figure was chosen arbitrarily based on my own belief and assumption that it establishes to some degree the participants ability and willingness to engage in personal development.

### **The participants.**

I advertised for participants with flyers (Appendix A) within several agencies and posted flyers in various colleges and universities where counselling and continuing professional development courses are undertaken. I used word of mouth throughout my own

personal and professional networks, asking colleagues to pass on flyers to anyone who they felt may be interested.

I had a number of responses from possible participants, who then completed an initial questionnaire, (Appendix B). The questionnaire established whether the participants were suitable to take part in the study, based on the criteria discussed above. Nine met the above criteria. One chose not to continue. Of the eight suitably qualified volunteers, I randomly chose two, one woman and one man, to complete practice interviews. The remaining six participants, four women and two men, completed the research study.

The participants came from varied backgrounds both personally and professionally. Personally, they varied in ethnicity (white and black participants from English, Welsh, and British/Jamaican backgrounds), culture, age (between 30 and 60 years), sexuality (homosexual and heterosexual participants). One participant was disabled. Professionally, the participants varied having completed their diplomas between 18 months and 25 yrs. In practice they had varied experiences in large and small organisations including the National Health, and in private practice. There were representatives in both the paid and voluntary employment sectors. Orientations varied in terms of person-centred, psychodynamic and integrative, however, no research participant who completed the study came from a strong cognitive behavioural base. Regardless of whether it was mandatory or not, all the participants had exceeded the requirement of a minimum of twenty hours personal therapy stipulated by the study, either during their own training or afterwards.

## **Data collection.**

I initially carried out two practice audio taped interviews, with selected participants in order to establish how the interviews would proceed. This allowed me to rework questions or prompts and see if anything, of which I was previously unaware, came to the fore. The interview was metaphorically split into two sections. There was a settling in period which allowed participants and myself to relax. Introductions were made and brief background information was exchanged. The interview proper started when I asked the question, "How do you feel the personal development element of counsellor training impacted on your relationship?" This question was asked of all participants.

The practice interviews highlighted a number of points:

- A need to be clearer about the difference in personal development, as referred to in this study, and the personal development group, generally.
- The interviews were shortened, from between 60 to 90 minutes in duration, to between 30 to 60 minutes.
- Discussion was added to the interview guide, on personal therapy, as this emerged as relevant for the practice participants.
- The words positive and negative were flagged up to be avoided. The rationale for this was that they could create bias. The participants may have felt that I was looking for a particular outcome and tried to provide this.
- A question was added towards the end of the interview asking participants if there was anything else they would like to add before ending. This I felt was

respectful in allowing the participant to fully engage with the study and feel they could add thoughts of their own that had not been touched upon before.

- I decided not to take notes in the research interviews, since during the practice interviews it detracted from the process briefly, and I was concerned it could affect continuity. I made notes as soon as possible after the interview was over.

One to one audio taped interviews were then carried out with the remaining six participants. The interviews took place over the period of approximately six weeks. Participants were interviewed in the order they were available to take part in the study. The participants chose where they would like to undertake the interview. The interviews took place, either, in the participants' work place, the participants' own homes, and in one instance, my home. As above, the interviews took the form of a semi structured interview lasting between 30 and 60 minutes, (Appendix E).

### **Data analysis.**

Following transcription of the audio taped interviews the data was analysed utilising the constant comparative method (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994; Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Glaser and Strauss, 1985). The "big paper process" set out by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.126-149) was adapted to allow for the physical restraints put on the researcher by illness at the time of analysis. Computer files were substituted for the "wall paper and scissors" approach described, and the physical "cut and paste" method became computer "cut and paste" method. However, paper printouts of these files were used to allow for a feeling of immersion in the research data. As six participants were interviewed the data did not attain saturation point, however, a process of diminishing

returns was seen and it is therefore debatable how much more data would have been uncovered. The data analysis process was as follows:

- The interviews were transcribed and assigned a coding system linking participants to their data, as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994, p.127). This protected participant anonymity and ensured data identification. For ease of visual identification each participant's transcript was printed on coloured paper specific to them and when excerpts of their transcript were later transported to category files they were copied in this colour.
- The transcripts were printed out onto coloured paper.
- The printed versions of these transcripts were read thoroughly several times. Points of interest were identified and marked with different coloured highlighter pens: direct questions asked (green), answers to specific questions (pink), points of interest, experiences, and participants' meanings related to the exploration of the research title (purple), anything interesting that needed further consideration (yellow). Mistakes and typing errors or things needing checking (orange).
- From this raw data, 'units of meaning' were identified by a process of sifting through the participants' thoughts and feelings, with the focus of the study in mind. Larger categories then began to emerge.
- The smaller units of meaning (with their identification and colour code attached) were then assigned to separate computer files labelled with the larger category title.
- Once all the data was transcribed these files were printed out and read thoroughly several time and the look/feel alike criteria was used. The look/feel alike criteria refers to the process whereby the researcher compares two units of



data together to see if they are enough alike to fit into the same category. If they are not then the new data is either placed in an already existing category (again using the look/feel alike process) or a new category is created.

- The categories were then reassessed and reworked to create propositional statements (Appendix F). Rules for inclusion were constructed for data and data was assessed to see whether it was representative of the specific category within which it was placed.
- This data was then analysed providing the outcomes delivered in the next section.

## **Presentation of Outcomes.**

Fifteen propositional statements were derived from the data analysis procedure as outlined by Maykut and Morehouse (1994). On review these fifteen statements were found to fall into three categories (see appendix F). They are:

### **Changes within participants as a result of personal development in counsellor training and how this impacted on the participants' significant relationships.**

- Participants changed as a result of personal development, and this impacted on the participants' significant relationship.
- Participants' perceptions of their partners changed as a result of counsellor training.
- Participants observed changes within their partners, as a result of changes within themselves, which impacted on their relationships.
- The participants' experience of personal development in counsellor training was perceived to have helped the participants' relationship.
- The participants' personal development was perceived by themselves as contributing to making them better partners/people.
- Change within the participants also impacted on other relationships.

### **Tensions within the participants' personal relationship as a result of personal development during training.**

- Personal development was perceived by the participants to have caused tensions whilst in counsellor training.
- Participants' attempts to instigate change within their partners caused tensions within the relationship.
- Tensions arose as a result of the participants' partners feeling threatened by the personal development the participant encountered.
- Health warnings at the beginning of training did not promote understanding for the participants on the impact counsellor training may have on their relationships.

**The relevance of personal therapy to personal development in counsellor training and how this was used as support.**

- Participants viewed personal therapy as an integral part of their personal development process.
- Participants viewed their own personal therapy as a beneficial component of their counselling training.
- Participants' experience of the personal development group was not always positive.
- Participants' views on whether personal therapy during training should/should not be mandatory.
- Knowing what I know now I would still chose to go through counsellor training.

The outcomes for this study are presented below. A simple coding system to identify the origin of data has been used, and is as follows: (T/CA-1). T identifies the data is from a

transcript, the letters CA refers to a participant and the number 1 identifies the data can be found on page 1 of that particular transcript (Maykut and Morehouse, 1994, p.127).

**Changes within participants as a result of personal development in counsellor training and how this impacted on the participants' significant relationships.**

An analysis of the data revealed that the participants felt they had undergone a number of changes as a result of the personal development element of counsellor training which had an impact on their personal relationships.

Participants changed as a result of personal development, and this impacted on the participants' significant relationship.

When asked directly, how personal development had impacted on the participants' significant relationship a number of varied answers were forthcoming. On closer examination these answers were identified as being related to changes within the participants themselves, (both intra and inter personal), which had impacted on their relationship with their partners. A number of themes emerged, from the changes reported by the participants, which were apparent across interviewee's narratives. Changes included "gentler ways of being", greater reflexivity, enhanced self awareness, a new ability and willingness to listen, enhanced communication skills, growing self worth, to put self first, the ability to challenge, to sit back and observe, and be more considerate of others. Below are brief excerpts from the participants in response to the above question:

- *I had to learn to hold back you know not, not to kind of come in and tread on the sensitivities of people and to really listen and hear.... (T/CA-5).*
- *I think it made umm, it made me more reflective anyway, (yeah) and made me I suspect more considerate ... easier to be with. (T/G-3).*
- *I think it really switched on my emotional thinking, I think for a long, long time it was missing. (T/S-4).*
- *I felt even closer to him umm during that, and I think that was more about me moving my position, because I always felt that I coped through life but I was just a little off centre, a little hard on myself, a little bit you know critical and therefore probably critical of others. And so in the understanding of all of that I .....we're not looking for perfect people I'm not looking to be perfect I'm just looking to be good enough. (T/CB-3).*
- *I realised that I wasn't really happy either so and I was going to respect my own happiness as well... (T/CC-4).*
- *It had a lot of impact on my relationship I think I expected to be growing as a person and I expected the relationship to grow too..... it helped in ways for me to get to know myself and be able to say I'm not just going to settle for somebody umm I know my patterns I can see what I go for in relationships now. (T/D-5).*

I concluded, from the analysis of the interviews, that these changes had one of the biggest impacts on the participants' relationships, regardless of whether the relationships survived or ended.

Participants' perceptions of their partners changed as a result of counsellor training.

What also became evident from the analysis was that for some participants not only did the participants intra and inter personal relating change, but also their perceptions of the people they were relating with:

- *(My husband) was someone who who's feeling could be umm you know, could be seen in the way in the way he would behave but if you asked him to talk about them, he was he was reticent about that, very uncomfortable actually in talking about feelings, but could demonstrate them in other ways and I that it took me a long time to learn that about him and I remember at that time when I was in training I was in the learning phase ... (T/CA-6).*
- *You know why does he not understand? I basically understand now he, he doesn't he thinks in a different way....' CB went on to recount how this change in expectation of her husband allowed her to alter her relating style communicating more effectively, '....I'm not looking for a solution I'd just like you to listen to me, perhaps give me your opinion, and I think that that changed umm the balance a little bit of our relationship. (T/CB-11).*
- *so I learnt he's a very he's a very different person from me in that way I'm the emotional one and he's the doer the practical one and that knowledge helped me... (T/CC-7).*

This process seems to have enhanced the relationships for these participants particularly where the realisation altered expectations and then behaviour towards the partner as illustrated in the last two examples.

Participants observed changes within their partners, as a result of changes within themselves, which impacted on their relationships.

Participants reported changes in behaviour or attitude of their partners, which they saw as attributable to the changes within themselves impacting on their partners; rather than attempts on their part to instigate such changes (discussed below).

- *I think in a sense some of what I've learnt has kind of rubbed off on... (name removed). (T/CB-5).*
- *He felt as if he grew as a person in being with me. That's because some of the ways I changed towards him in a way changed him. (T/S-8).*
- *Initially in our relationship my problem was that if I did find something difficult I almost felt that I got a person back at me, who was blaming me, 'but why would you worry about that? Why would you do that?' But with I think*

*my attitude changing, he changed too.... I think that you know we have kind of blended now, and it is better...* (T/CC-5).

The participants' experience of personal development in counsellor training was perceived to have helped the participants' relationship.

All six participants concluded that, in retrospect, the personal development they went through as trainees ultimately helped them and their significant relationships.

- *I think it tweaked our relationship for the better, which was umm, almost a gratuitous almost sort of like, you know, a spin off .* (T/CB-4).

*Then later, I think that's it, I think, I not only as a counsellor listen, but as a person in my relationships, I am more willing and more open about listening to others and others opinion s.* (T/CB-12).

- *I think it helped. It helped me to umm pin point more where things were going wrong. It helped me to take seriously the things that weren't, were happening at different points... helped me to take them seriously and recognise the impact of them on me and the children umm .....it helped me to know what I wanted when in a relationship and what I didn't want, and it helped me to sort of draw my own boundaries of what I was prepared to put up with.* (T/S-10).
- *I do recall it being quite stressful at times, quite tense umm.. but but throughout I mean I've still... it didn't kinda rock our marriage but strengthen it ...it was one of those things where I felt I know this is hard but I think...I hope I'm sure I'll come through the other end.* (T/CA-3).

This was the case even when it had initially hindered the relationship:

- *I think in the beginning it hindered it, (yeah) definitely umm, yeah helped it umm and it was critical while it was hindering it, yeah (yeah) it could have gone either way I suppose, yeah (yeah) although you don't realise it at the time, you're too busy frolicking in joys of a new discovery right.... I believe it was because she felt excluded yeah (yeah) as I have no doubt it was yeah, and once I included her it went ok yeah.* (T/G-7).

Or when the relationship ended as a result of it:

- *Umm I'll say two things. One it helped me and I would say it ended the relationship but that was a good thing to me (yes) yeah. (T/CC-10).*
- *Helped and hindered helped in ways for me to get to know myself, and be able to say I'm not just going to settle for somebody, umm I know my patterns I can see what I go for in relationships umm... I know what I think the difference is. I'm just more insightful.....umm so it helps, hinders in the sense of I don't know I can't really say it hinders, it does and it doesn't (yeah), I would of said if you'd asked me this while I was with (Name removed) I would have said yes it definitely hindered, but I'm a different person to who I was then so. (T/D-12).*

Although these seem paradoxical statements, in the cases where the relationships ended, the participants felt that the relationships were not for them and that they were now able to recognise their own patterns of relating. This empowered them by giving them choice.

The participants' personal development was perceived by themselves as contributing to making them better partners/people.

When asked directly if the participants felt the course had made them, either a better partner, or potentially a better partner, five of the six participants said 'yes' they felt that training had made them better partners or people. This was based on two distinct criteria.



Firstly; the changes they had identified within themselves made it easier for others to be with them:

- *I think that PD made me a better person, I have no doubt it got rid of, or it was part of a process... that made me into a better.. well I would think an easier person to be with right..... I think easier to be with in a sense that, urm, that I got rid of the gremlins that had driven me for years, urm my biggest gremlin being (word removed for identity purposes) yeah (yeah) that I'd spent my life trying to prove that I was as good as others because of it. (T/G-4).*
- *I think it has actually Karen, yeah, I really do think it has made me a better partner. Ummm it's made me....very much more reflective all-round than I otherwise would have been, it's also made me more accepting of my own emotions and the fact that they, they come and go, and that I'm not overwhelmed by them you know. It's all about me really and I think that's a process that's still going on very much so yeah... (T/CA-9).*
- *Yes yeah yeah I I feel much more of a wholer person than I was, (yeah) There was a large part of me cut off (yeah) and un-thought about and not looked after, and umm , now I feel much more content and much more of a whole person and with much more knowledge about myself. (T/S-9).*

Secondly; they were more aware of what they wanted:

- *so yeah, I think it's it's really, I think I'll be a better partner because people can only work with what they know, and if I can't , if I'm not able to say umm that I'm unhappy, then someone else can't you know try to redress that. But umm or we can't work it through but I think now I'm in the best position and I I'd certainly be unhappy in that position, I it would come down to me being very unhappy so... (T/CC-6).*
- *There's a lot more of my needs and wants and I and I need to realise, that I meet .. can meet them. So it benefits me that I know this stuff an it can help in the future. (T/D-8/9).*

Change within the participants also impacted on other relationships.

Although this study focused primarily on the relationship of their life partner, at times the participants mentioned in passing, instances of how their personal development in training impacted on other relationships in their lives. For example:

- *The two people that I've had the most difficulty with are my children because I have changed..... they used to press certain buttons in mum and mum would go sort of running off to dad to ask for money and things, (both laugh) and the course actually kind of again gave me permission no you don't have to do that. (T/CC-8).*
- *I remember coming back to the group and saying, 'I said no' one time, to somebody who was always expecting me to say yes, and I always did umm and how uncomfortable I felt really saying no umm and talking about that and umm but also feeling good that I can could actually say no because it's something I'd never really given myself permission to. (T/CC-4).*
- *I think then our relationship changed, (with wife) while throughout the training, I think throughout the counselling training process yeah (yes), umm and as did most of my relationships I suspect, yeah (yes), because personal development sessions if they're good yeah tend to be probably freer and less err demanding whilst being very intimate... (T/G-2).*

### **Tensions within the participants' personal relationship as a result of personal development during training.**

One finding/theme that stood out when the data was analysed was that although the participants viewed the personal development overall as positive, the personal development and the resulting changes did cause tensions within their relationships during the time they were training. As well as, changes in the participants, several other themes running through the interviews, were identified as possible reasons for these tensions.

Personal development was perceived by the participants to have caused tensions whilst in counsellor training.

This was the case for all participants:

- *There's the sense that, you know, when you're challenged and you find out about yourself and you become more self-aware, umm you want to do things differently, and change is not easily accepted by people around you because it's different to how they know you. (T/CC-6).*
- *Yes I was trying to kind of fathom the depths of everything, I think that was one of the things that lead to tension between us umm because I I was almost ... a bit like when you kind of poke at a sore, you know, I wouldn't let go sometimes and that actually could be quite damaging... (T/CA-5).*
- *I think yeah I think although my partner would say she really enjoys the changes in me, (yeah), I think she found the whole counselling thing quite hard because she found it so 'secretive' her word, 'confidential' I would say.....for a time it was tense and fragile and fractious. (T/G-5).*

This was evident in the participants' narratives regardless of whether the relationship ended because of the training or survived in spite of it.

Participants' attempts to instigate change within their partners, caused tensions within the relationship.

Participants discussed the desire, on their part, for their partners, (and other relationships), to share and engage with the new learning that they were discovering, and to change as a result of this:

- *I think I wanted her, I think I probably wanted then her, my wife, to change and want her to have some of the good of what you were discovering for yourself, (yeah), And so you wanted her to be more reflective and think about who she was and where she was, and where she'd been and where she was going yeah... (T/G-6).*

- *It just felt as if the gap was getting bigger and bigger, and I do think that a lot of things that I said, was kind of come on you know, CHANGE ! (Laughs), do you know what I mean. It was just like come on change! (T/CC-7).*
- *Yes Yeah especially (Name removed) yeah I think I expected (him) to be a bit more talkative, a bit more understanding, a bit more able to understand me and who I was, umm and it frustrated me that he didn't at the time especially when I was umm working a lot on my abuse issues . (T/D-7).*
- *I did recognise things that were coming between us that perhaps if he was willing to seek some help on umm might help us to stay together. (T/S-8).*

The study identified tensions relating to an attempt of the participant to use their newly acquired skills to bring about these changes. Sometimes this was simply a result of being on the course, and using their newly acquired skills; sometimes it was a result of deliberate attempts to change partners:

- *My partner was quite angry with me at times when I just thought ... an an and again it was about me kind of putting into practice, some of the stuff that I'd learnt on the course, umm so I might of sounded like I was being his therapist or something, and he did not like that at all but I found that the language my language sometimes changed because I was (yeah) (CC laughs) I went into counselling mode umm and he just got really quite angry with that. (T/CC-6).*
- *The points where you know if we fell out that umm, I could have become his therapist I would actually say to him, you know, you need to get, you perhaps need to get some help, umm (yes) and so I was conscious of of of not doing that (yeah) but then because I'm sort of using analytic skills in my work I tended to do it with him anyway. (T/S-7).*
- *Yeah so I did used to try and force him in ways to just sit down and listen to me, or I'd say something to him and he'd just sit there and I thought he I felt he was in a comer half of the time... cus there was never any answers. (T/D-7).*

Where the relationships had endured and been enhanced, it appears the participants' partners had attempted to stop this happening:

- *He would go, well actually his eyes would glaze over, (both laugh) after about the third question and umm, you know, I knew then I mean he just he doesn't*

*like and I'll quote him 'don't give me that psychobabble' and I don't think he needs it.* (T/CB-4).

- *Yeah I think I did. I think also I learnt very early umm to keep my analysis to myself it was not appreciated.* (T/G-5).
- *I may have tried to change him, but I don't think I was successful (both laugh). Umm... My husband is quite a force to be reckoned with, he's a very strong character himself ummm...you know hugely supportive and encouraging but also quite stubborn..... so I think I may have tried to get him to change in certain ways perhaps umm but I certainly didn't try for long.* (T/CA-6/7).

However, smilingly the participants admitted sometimes they still fell into the trap of trying to do this now.

Tensions arose, as a result of the participants' partners feeling threatened, by the personal development the participant encountered.

One participant had to learn to communicate with his partner, who struggled with his over zealousness in adhering to confidentiality issues. He eventually learnt the difference in what he could share and could not share, in order to allay her apprehensions related to what she perceived, as the *secrecy* of the counselling profession. By his own admission it was only when he *felt the chill wind*, that he realised his relationship was in jeopardy and chose to work towards saving it:

- *It was then I was capable of sharing a bit, enough probably, yeah (yeah) of what was going on for me and what I was doing, Yeah (yeah) for her not to feel excluded. If she'd have continued to feel excluded that would have been really bad news I suspect...* (T/G-5/6).

For others partners it was the level of discovery that caused problems.

- *He struggled with me able to get to know myself a lot more because he he didn't want to get to know himself as much as I did, and I think that fear of me*

*getting to know myself was scary. He feared I'd end up leaving (yeah) and that's what's happened.* (T/D-9).

- *I think he struggled (yeah) although he's quite an emotional person compared to my ex-husband, umm I think he still struggled with taking some of it seriously ... of understanding some of the things I would say to him had a big impact on me, that happened in our relationship... he felt as if I umm made a meal out of them, for want of a better word, but it was more me staying with the, the hurt and the pain of what had happened...* (T/S-9).

The analysis tended to suggest that in the cases where the partners were seen by the participants as supportive, and where lines of communication were kept open, generally things fared better:

- *We talked ...and the one thing I do recall is that we just we clung on to it you know, we weren't prepared to quit (yes) over it all, and so clearly whereas it tested our relationship it didn't, it didn't rock it to the extent that we realised we couldn't be together or anything like that, nowhere near any of that.* (T/CA-8).

Health warnings at the beginning of training did not promote understanding for the participants on the impact counsellor training may have on their relationships.

The study found that 'health warnings' were often given at the beginning of training:

- *certainly we were told at the beginning and advised you know that support was necessary so that kind of tells you if you're going to go home to an empty house you know maybe this course isn't for you.* (T/CB-14).

However, this was not always taken on board and accepted:

- *I wasn't totally aware about, umm well yeah you know, you want to be a counsellor and you think they might tell you at an interview, and I think they probably did tell me at the interview, that I'd have to go through this stuff (referring to personal development) but you don't know what it is until you do it.* (T/CC-8).

- *Quite a lot of people didn't quite make it out the other end or their relationship didn't make it out the other end. If you think about it at all you're too arrogant to think that your relationship could ever be in danger anyway as it's lasted this long. (yes) It's never going to sink in. (T/G-8).*
- *I think they should come with a health warning I think that it could be detrimental to relationships... maybe there is wisdom in not knowing too much about them I think maybe that's about people realising their potential and not being put off (yes) at the beginning with well you know you'll have to do this and this might happen. (T/CB-13/14).*

In some case participants also expressed a desire for more information and support:

- *I think the support I think the emphasis should really be given to people who are doing counselling training about how significant an impact it might have on them you know umm their lives depending because it brings up so much I mean it took me all the way back to childhood and it brought up so much. So I do think, I don't know how you would work it, but in quite a way some support could, would be useful. (T/CC-10).*
- *Certainly I think it's an area that tutors perhaps could focus on a bit more in the training, to actually reassure students in some ways, that that they are going through a huge change and transitional process and to normalise that in some ways umm. So that that when students are experiencing this that tutors are aware of of that, without knowing the detail of clearly what's going on, but but just to normalise the fact that, that, there will be umm an impact on your closest relationship. (T/CA-13).*
- *It was just about, I'm lost, I'm trying to figure out what to do and I think I made such a rash decision by leaving a relationship, what was positive at the time, that I probably could of worked through it with more support. (T/D-5).*

### **The relevance of personal therapy to personal development in counsellor training and how this was used as support.**

Participants viewed personal therapy as an integral part of their personal development process.

Participants linked various elements of the course including theory, PDG, skills, supervision, and counselling practice within placement, as contributing to their overall growth and personal development. This was particularly apparent for personal therapy. Personal therapy was linked to personal development, regardless of whether it had been mandatory on the participant's individual course or not. For three participants personal therapy was mandatory and for three it was not, however, it appeared to have been recommended in all cases (whether strongly or loosely). This was evident in the interviews even before participants were specifically asked about it towards the end of the interviews.

- *My personal development ...umm I think it wasn't just about the PD group, it was backed up by the therapy (yeah), it was backed up in my supervision um... (T/S-6).*
- *I think it helped me to understand myself more and what I was going through and trying to sort out and become more in touch with and and my personal development by being in therapy I think that helped I'm still seeing the same therapist now (yes) so umm I think I've been with her for four years now... (T/S-6).*
- *Yeah I would umm I think to be honest umm I was really I mean I'm talking about my personal therapy as well helping personal development umm... (T/CC-8).*
- *I see personal development as the whole course really in the sense of doing the course and the theories and therapy so it's hard to kind of separate it. (T/D-11).*

Participants viewed their own personal therapy as a beneficial component of their counselling training.

- *Being in therapy was would help umm all the way through really umm for your own personal relationships try and acknowledge what you're trying to push onto that partner take a step back and see what you really want.*



(T/D-14).

- *I think I think there was there was some of that umm and I suppose just thinking umm how I was in that group listening how other peoples relationships impacted ...it triggered me to think about my relationships definitely yeah and then and then in therapy that was that I mean that continued really you know. (T/S-6).*
- *I had things that cropped up, you know, now and again burning issues maybe if there was something that you really needed to talk about, therapy was helpful then. (T/CB-14/15).*

Participant's experience of the personal development group was not always positive.

- *I didn't talk directly in the group much at all it wasn't always very safe... (T/S-5).*
- *Gosh (C starts laughing) the personal development was the worst nightmare in the course I really... and I was just I felt myself almost like just disappearing into the wall you know. (T/CC-3).*

Participants' views on whether personal therapy during training should/should not be mandatory.

Participants all agreed that personal therapy was important during training, stressing words like: "essential" (CC and S), "absolutely essential" (G), "Highly valuable" (CA) "beneficial" (D). However, whether it should be mandatory was a different matter. Issues of "power", "qualitative versus quantitative", "cost", "elitism" etc. were raised.

- *I think it is highly valuable and I'm sure it would have been helpful to me during my training, but as a person centred counsellor I'm going to say no, I do not think it should be mandatory... it feels like a power issue to me for a college or a course to demand something happens. (T/CA-12).*
- *I think that BACP were right when they said it should be qualitative rather than quantitative, you know, have as much as you need but to have a number put on it, you know, by somebody who doesn't know you, hasn't met you but I think also that worries me. (T/CB-14).*

I concluded that, although therapy was believed positive, other issues over-rode the desire to insist trainees should attend.

### **Participants' hindsight.**

#### Knowing what I know now I would still chose to go through counsellor training.

A last word from the participants: Regardless of everything that has been discussed above, of all the stresses and strains felt by the participants whilst they were undergoing the personal development element of the counsellor training, five out of the six participants said they would do it again.:

- *Oh most definitely absolutely yes yeah, yeah.* (T/CA-8).
- *I'm glad I done it and I know I'm developing as a person umm...* (T/D-10).
- *Definitely, but I think I've been quite lucky too. Yeah. Lucky in the sense that my relationship with her survived, and got better yeah (yeah). It could have survived and got worse (yeah), or it could not have survived.* (T/G-7).
- *Yeah I would umm I think to be honest umm I was really I mean I'm talking to my personal therapy as well PD umm I wasn't totally aware but yeah I'd do it again.* (T/CC-8).
- *Yes yeah yeah I I feel much more of a wholer person than I was (yeah) there was a large part of me cut off (yeah) and un thought about and not looked after and umm now I feel much more content.* (T/S-9).

The sixth participant concluded that:

- *The only way I can answer you is to say that I might have not do it again but I'm so glad I did.* (T/CB-13).

### **Summary of outcomes.**

The outcomes suggest that there are both positive and negative aspects of the personal development element of counsellor training, both for the trainees and their significant relationships. The participants interviewed seemed happy or content with the changes within themselves, and the people they had become as a result of the training, despite the tensions they had gone through whilst these changes were happening. These tensions could be minimised, however, through the interpersonal process and communication between partners. Where this was utilised, it seemed to protect their relationship; however, this needed to come from both parties.

## **Discussion.**

The outcomes of the research study suggested that the personal development element of counsellor training did impact on student counsellors' significant relationships. This was found true for all participants interviewed. Two separate themes emerged identifying different aspects of this impact as discussed by the participants. These are:

- Changes within the participants as a result of personal development in counsellor training and how this impacted on the participants' significant relationships.
- The impact of tensions within the participants' personal relationships as a result of Personal Development during counsellor training.

A third theme emerged discussing:

- The relevance of personal therapy to personal development in counsellor training and how this was used as support.

In order to structure the following discussion, the above will be discussed in relation to the main outcomes of the research study under the subheading as they were laid out in the previous chapter.

**Changes within the participants as a result of personal development in counsellor training and how this impacted on the participants' significant relationships.**

One of the most prominent outcomes of this study was that the participants reported personal change as a result of the personal development element of counselling training. This is consistent with earlier studies, (Wright, 2004; Flynn-Piercy, 2002; Battye, 1991). All report student changes during training and Johns (1997, 1996), Wilkins (1997) and Wheeler (1996) state change is in fact the work of personal development. This was evident in all of the participants who took part in the study and manifested itself in what could be referred to as a form of “emotional maturity”. The study highlighted changes in participants in two areas:

- Inter-personal skills: communicating more effectively, learning to really listen, be a part of a group, patience and not jump in, allow others space.
- Intra-personal changes: in their perception of people and situations, and in growing self-worth and how they valued themselves.

These changes are similar to those found by Wright (2004) and Flynn-Piercy (2002). The changes contributed to a growing awareness of self, of others, and a willingness to take responsibility for whom and how they were. This included changes in behaviour i.e. “gentler ways of being”, being “less boundaried”, “easier to be with”, which allowed participants to become more “accepting”, “open” and “understanding”. This process is reminiscent of the counsellor’s use of Rogers’ (1957) core conditions, “empathy” “congruence” and “unconditional positive regard”, supporting the belief that counselling is “a way of being” (Merry 2002) and not just a role that counsellors put on when entering a counselling room.

When asked directly, how the personal development element of training had impacted on their relationships, the participants cited the changes described above as being responsible. They expressed the view that these changes whilst affecting them as individuals had also impacted on their intimate relationships. The changes not only appear to have influenced how the participants themselves behaved; but how they perceived their partners as being different to themselves, and how their partners changed within the relationships, in response to the changes in the participants.

The outcomes suggested that participants were happy with the changes in themselves and therefore they saw personal development as ultimately having had a positive effect on themselves. This was also a finding of Wright (2004) and Flynn-Piercy (2002). Participants also concluded that the personal development element of counsellor training had helped their relationships. This was the outcome, regardless of whether the participants’ significant relationship had survived or ended, as a result of the training.

Where the participants' relationships survived counsellor training, the participants described a process where ultimately the changes they experienced in themselves had changed and enhanced the dynamics between themselves and others, particularly in regards to their partners (Wright, 2004).

Where participants reported their relationships to have ended as a result of the personal development they went through, this outcome was ultimately experienced as positive for themselves, though not necessarily for their relationship. These participants reported a growing self-awareness and knowledge of themselves, along with interpersonal skills, which they had not previously experienced. They believed the changes within them, brought about by the personal development, gave them new choices and a realisation that they did not have to settle for unsatisfactory relationships, or end up in abusive relationships, as a result of old behaviour/patterns. This supports Mearns' (1997) view that students go through a speeded up form of personal development during training, which may cause problems within the student's personal relationships.

A less explored outcome of the study was that the impact of personal development and student change was not confined to the participants' partners. There was evidence suggesting the participants' personal development also had an impact on other close relationships, for example children, as found by Wright (2004) and Batty (1991). One participant expressed the view that it changed all his relationships. However, the degree of the impact or whether this was experienced as positive or negative by the participants, was not established.

## **The impact of tensions within the participants' personal relationships as a result of personal development during training.**

Whilst recognising explicitly that personal development ultimately had a positive impact on the participants' relationships, all participants identified a number of tensions that arose for their relationships, as a result of personal development whilst in counsellor training. These tensions were present regardless of whether the participants' relationship had survived or not. Contributing factors to these tensions were changes in themselves, unwitting use of new skills, deliberate attempts to change/analyse their partners. The outcomes also highlighted to some extent that partners could feel left out of or threatened by counsellor training. This de-stabilisation of relationships, particularly partners, was highlighted by Johns (1996) and was found in the outcomes of Flynn-Piercy (2002) for all co-researchers. In this study, although it was present for two participants it was not explicitly discussed by the remaining participants.

Although participants had initially appeared to be over zealous in the early stages of counsellor training, wanting to share new discoveries and realities with their partners, this seemed to lessen as time went on. This was similarly described by Battye (1991), who found she learnt to put things in perspective over time. However, it did initially seem to create tensions within all of the relationships and instigated resistance from the participants' partners. In the cases where the students' relationships endured, new lines of communication were not just opened by the participant, but accepted by the partner. Where the relationships ended, although participants described new interpersonal skills and an openness to communicate with their partners, this does not appear to have been reciprocated by their partners. This seems to have made the difference whether



relationships endured or not. Mearns (1997) warns that students' partners may not be in the same place as students as they go through their personal development and this seems to have been the case for two of the participants interviewed. One participant stated that both parties needed to engage in change or it doesn't work, and in this study this seems to have been true (Learner 1990, 1989).

Further outcomes of the study revolved around participants not being aware, at the beginning of training, how the personal development they would be expected to undergo may impact on them or their relationships. Wright (2004, p43) argues that it is "crucial", that trainees are prepared for these changes and the effects they may have on their relationships. The participants in this study also expressed this view. Whilst expressing the view that this information would have been beneficial at the outset, participants also acknowledged that they probably did receive a "health warning". This finding, therefore, suggests that the "health warning" did not promote understanding of the implications counsellor training may have, either for themselves or on their relationships. This supports the findings of Wright (2004), Flynn-Piercy (2002) and Mearns (1997).

A possible reason for this, identified in the outcomes, was that although there was often a "health warning" given at the beginning of training, it was generally given in an "offhand" manner. This was found by Wright (2004) and Flynn-Piercy (2002). This is surprising since according to Thorne and Dryden (1991) it is a "notoriously" known, if little researched phenomena, that "relationships with spouses and other family members are liable to undergo considerable upheaval or even founder altogether", as a result of training (p4.). However, it is hard to see how this can be implemented in a more constructive way. Like the participants in the study, I did not believe the warning I was

given at the beginning of my own training. I know categorically that my colleagues and I do give a “health warning”. However, like Mearns (1997), I have also received “knowing smiles” and “glazed looks” by students, only to be challenged later “why weren’t we made aware this could affect our partnerships”. Dexter (cited in Wright, 2004) suggests that preparing students for change, and ensuring the implications for their relationships are understood, should be the responsibility, not just of the trainer, but also the student. Two issues are raised from these arguments:

- In order to take responsibility for changes students need to know they are going to happen.
- In order for the “health warning” to work, the students not only need to hear the warning but understand it. However, for Battye (1991), and as suggested in the outcomes of this study, real listening is a skill often learnt in counsellor training, not before.

### **The relevance of personal therapy to personal development in counsellor training and how this was used as support.**

I was at times confused as to the relevance of personal therapy in this research study. Having now experienced the process of analysing the data and writing the outcomes, this confusion has now cleared to some degree. The findings suggested that personal development and personal therapy were perceived by the participants to be interlinked, a view supported by Rothery (1992). This was found regardless of whether personal therapy was mandatory on their courses or not. In retrospect, I feel the participants

were confused as to where the boundaries of personal development and personal therapy extended. I had, in essence, taken on this confusion as my own.

Flynn-Piercy (2002) found that her co-researchers did not feel supported during Relate counsellor training when issues relating to their own relationships were raised for them. The co-researchers described having to go outside of the organisation to find support. This finding appears to be replicated in this study, where participants used therapy for support when things arose in counsellor training. Grimmer and Tribe (2001) suggest a positive outcome of therapy for students is, “emotional support during times of crisis” (p.296). This was particularly relevant when participants found personal development groups unsatisfactory.

The question of personal development becoming mandatory on training courses was less clear. Although on the one hand participants had assessed it as necessary and even “crucial”, several issues were raised for the participants. They saw cost as prohibitive and as keeping counselling exclusive to those who could pay. This conflicts with Rothery’s (1992) view that students would be prepared to pay for therapy. It was suggested that some way of including it as a part of the course should be found, a suggestion proposed by Murphy (2005). This cost however would most likely just be passed on to students with higher fees, so may not be a benefit.

Issues related to ethics and theoretical orientation were also raised. One participant, for example, suggested that forcing someone to attend personal therapy raised ethical issues for her. These issues centred around her person-centred base and the issue of power imbalance. Whilst she believed therapy in training was essential, she also felt the issue of mandatory therapy in training could be considered a power issue, and was therefore ethically unsound, particularly for a person-centred counsellor.

## **Recommendations.**

### **Making explicit the process of personal development in counsellor training.**

For the majority of research participants, some type of warning, however superficial, was given. For five out of the six participants this was the extent of the information received on how training may impact on themselves and subsequently their relationships. Relationships are discussed in training as a matter of course, however, this is often focused indirectly on theories rather than explicitly on what may be happening to the students within their own relationships. “Health warnings” may not work, however, a deeper understanding based on empirical research early on in the course structure may.

Such a move may serve to lessen the impact of student over zealousness in trying to change partners, or attempting to reproduce the same intimacy found on the course at home with unsuspecting partners. A theoretical understanding may help students become “consciously competent” (Clarkson and Gilbert, 1988) in the first instance, which may prevent them adding extra stresses to their relationships. This could also provide understanding necessary for Cawkill’s (2002) recommendation that students help their partners understand the process they are going through, and Dexter’s (cited in Wright, 2004) recommendation that students take responsibility for their own changes. It may also lay the ground work for later understanding of the therapeutic relationship, between counsellor and client, as well as an understanding of the impact counselling

might have on their clients' relationships. This could be invaluable for counsellor understanding both personally and professionally.

### **Areas for future research.**

I think it would be interesting to assess how the partners of counselling students experience the process of their partner's training and the impact it has on them. Wright (2004) attempted this in her quantitative study; however, a qualitative investigation may shed more light on the process. At the time of writing, as far as I am aware, counsellor training providers do not give any consideration to offering support for partners or families to cope with or understand what is going on in counsellor training. It may be that something as simple as a lecture for partners, one evening at the beginning of the students' training, or a partners' support group, could alleviate a lot of tensions that fester within their relationships. It could be argued that this study has highlighted both moral and ethical implications for how we train counselling students and the impact this has, not only on them, but also on the others we "never meet" (Clarkson and Gilbert, 1991, p.143). I find this morally and ethically challenging, and given the growing litigious society we are now a part of I also find this surprising (Bond, 2000).

## **Conclusion.**

The focus of this qualitative research study was to explore the impact of the personal development element of counsellor training on the student counsellor's significant relationships. The study highlighted the fact that there was very little research undertaken on how personal development impacts on counselling students, and even less on how it impacts on the significant relationships. Particular areas of interest identified in the earlier stages of the study focused around an exploration of the following topics:

- Change in students as a result of personal development.
- The impact of the personal development element of counsellor training on the student counsellors' significant relationships.

- Students understanding of the possible impact on relationships, prior to or in the initial stages of training. Possible support available for this.
- Support for the student's family if the training had a detrimental effect on them.
- How far counsellor trainer responsibility extends.

The findings of this study were paradoxical in nature. The outcomes of the research found that the personal development element of counsellor training did have an impact on the student counsellors' significant relationships for all participants interviewed. This impact was ultimately regarded as positive, regardless of whether the participant's significant relationship survived the training or not. This is congruent with research already undertaken. However, it was also established that whilst going through the personal development element of training, the participants' relationships had been put under quite significant stresses. This resulted in two relationships ending and others being subjected to tensions which, although they did survive, were threatened to a degree where reparative measures had to be taken. The research title asks "should counsellor training come with a stronger health warning or more support?" The study suggests it should come with more support, however, questions whether a health warning would ever really work. The participants wanted a deeper understanding of the process they were undergoing during counsellor training. This may be all that is needed to support them and their relationships.

However, despite everything:

- All participants said personal development helped their relationship.
- All said they were glad they did it in the first place.
- Almost all said they would do it again.

This seems to be a general consensus; once the can of worms is opened, counsellors don't seem to want to put the lid back on. Wright (2004) states that if she had to do it again, knowing what she knows now, she would "hesitate, tremble, hide and then take myself off to the nearest training establishment" (p.43). I would probably do the same. For those who may read this and wonder, my relationship survived. I leave the last word on personal development to one of the studies participants:

*It's not like all the other groups that you teach on the course is it? Personal development is an individual and private thing, and it's like lighting the blue touch paper and not quite knowing whether it's going to take off or fly down the road and hit someone in the eye.*  
*(T/G-8).*



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**Appendix A.**

**Research Subjects Wanted for MA in Counselling Studies  
Dissertation.**

I am reading for the MA in Counselling studies at the University of Chester. I am looking for qualified counsellors to take part in a research study exploring the impact of the personal development element of counsellor training on their significant relationships.

The participants need to have been qualified for a minimum of 12 months and hold a diploma in counselling. They need to have been in a relationship for part/or all of the time they were completing their diploma. The diploma needs to have contained a personal development element (i.e. with participation in personal development groups and/or requirement to attend personal therapy during the course).

The study will consist of a one off interview with myself lasting approximately one and a half hours.

If you fulfil these criteria, are interested in taking part in this study and would like further information please contact me either: by email at .....

Thank you for reading this flyer,

Karen Collins.

## **Appendix B.**

### **Initial Questionnaire.**

**Name:**

**Address:**

These questions are designed to elicit information to assess whether participants are suitable for this research project. This is not a judgement on any individual rather a matter of practicality; there are therefore no right or wrong answers.

**Participant:**

Do you have a Diploma in Counselling?

If yes please give brief details.

Were you in a significant relationship with a Spouse/Life partner whilst you were completing your Diploma in Counselling?

Did your Diploma contain a personal development element?

(Personal development is used to mean participation in personal development groups and/or requirement to attend personal therapy during the course).

Do you feel your counselling diploma had an impact on your significant relationship?

Have you been a qualified counsellor for more than twelve months?

If yes please state time qualified.

Are you practicing as a counsellor at the present time?

If yes are you in counselling supervision?

And are you a member of the BACP?

Do you have access to personal therapy at the present time?

If yes, would you be prepared to use it if you participate in this study should the need arise?

Thank you for answering these questions.

Karen Collins.



## **Appendix C.**

### **Information for potential research participants.**

As part of my MA in Counselling Studies Dissertation at the University of Chester, I am undertaking a research study exploring the impact of personal development in counselling training on the student counsellor's significant relationship. In this instance the relationship will be that of life partner/spouse.

The participants will be asked to answer one short questionnaire to determine if they meet the relevant criteria for the purposes of this study. The participants will then be asked to participate in an interview, with myself, exploring the impact the personal development element of their counsellor training had on their significant relationship. The interview will last for approximately half to one hour and will be audio taped. This audiotape will be transcribed.

Participants may withdraw from the study at any time up to and including one month after they are presented with the copy of their audiotape. I will at all times be the only person to know the identity of the research participants. I will however share the contents of the tapes with my research supervisor and words or phrases from the tapes may be used in the dissertation itself. However no identifying information will be entered into the dissertation or published at any time without formal written permission by the research participant. The completed dissertation will be available for public scrutiny via the University of Chester Library.

All tapes, transcriptions and written notes will be stored in such a manner that no research participant can be identified.

About myself: I am at present reading for the MA in Counselling Studies at Chester University. I am a qualified counsellor. (BSc. in Psychology, Certificate in Counselling (Birmingham University), Graduate Diploma in Counselling Theory (Keele University). I am a member of the BACP and adhere to the Ethical Framework for good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy (2002). I lecture in counselling at Walsall College. I will be guided by the Ethical Guidelines for Researching Counselling and Psychotherapy, as set out by the BACP, during this study.

Thank you for taking the time to consider taking part in this research study.

Karen Collins.

**Appendix D.**

**M. A. in counselling studies research consent form.**

I .....hereby give my consent for the details of a written transcript based on an audio recorded interview with myself and Karen Ann Collins to be used in preparation and as part of my research dissertation for the M. A. in Counselling Studies at the University of Chester. I understand that my identity will remain anonymous and that all personally identifiable information will remain confidential and separate from the research data. I further understand that the transcript may be seen by Counselling Tutors and the External Examiner for the purpose of assessment and moderation. I also understand that all the people are bound by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy Ethical Framework for Good Practice in Counselling and Psychotherapy.

I understand that I will be provided with a copy of the taped interview. I will also have access to the transcribed material should I so wish. I am aware that I can stop the interview at any point, or ultimately withdraw the interview within one month of my being provided with a copy of my audiotape. Upon completion of the research study the audiotape will be offered to me, or, by prior agreement with me, destroyed.

Excerpts from the transcript will be included in the dissertation. Copies of the dissertation will be held in the University of Chester Library and the Department of Social and Communication Studies Resource Room.

Without my further consent some or all of the material may be used for publication and or presentation at conferences and seminars. Every effort will be made to ensure complete anonymity.

I have been provided with information about the nature of the research, including any possible risks, and have had a chance to check out any questions or concerns with the researcher, to give my informed consent to participate.

Signed (Participant).....

Date.....

Signed (Researcher).....

Date.....

## **Appendix E.**

### **Research interview questions.**

#### **Introductions.**

Thank you and are there any questions about the study or consent forms?

Have you participated in this type of research before?

Could you tell me a little about your Diploma in Counselling?

Could you tell me a little about the relationship you were engaged in whilst you were doing your counselling diploma?

#### **Begin interview proper**

Can you tell me how you feel the personal development element of your training had an impact on your relationship?

#### **Avoid positive/negative.**

Do you feel you gained any interpersonal skills from PD or your own therapy? OR Do you feel the PD you did as a trainee made you a better partner?

Do you feel your partner used you as a therapist?

Did you try to become a therapist with your partner and sort out or analyse their behaviours?

Do you feel you pressured your partner to change because of the PD you were going through?

Did your partner understand or struggle with what you were going through during training?

Knowing what you know now would you still have chosen to train as a counsellor?

In retrospect having discussed it today do you feel PD helped or hindered your relationship?

What was useful during your training?

Is therapy in training necessary?

What do you think might, in relation to your significant relationship, help other trainees in the future?

Is there anything else you would like to tell me before we end?

## **Appendix F.**

### **Initial categories identified.**

- 1) Comments on personal therapy.
- 2) Comments on personal development.
- 3) How personal development impacted relationships.
- 4) Comments on personal relationships.
- 5) Partners understood.
- 6) Partners struggled.
- 7) Partner support.
- 8) Pressure on partner to change.
- 9) Analyse partner.
- 10) Inter-personal skills gained.
- 11) Intra-personal skills.
- 12) Partner therapist.
- 13) If you knew what you know now....
- 14) In retrospect- helped relationship.
- 15) In retrospect-hindered.
- 16) What was useful.
- 17) Therapy in training.
- 18) What might help.
- 19) Better Partners.
- 20) Other relationships.
- 21) What they learned.

22) Whole course PD.

23) New Learning.

24) Possible impact.

### **Propositional statements.**

- 1) Participants changed as a result of personal development, and this impacted on the participants' significant relationship.
- 2) Participants' perceptions of their partners changed as a result of counsellor training.
- 3) Participants observed changes within their partners, as a result of changes within themselves, which impacted on their relationships.
- 4) The participants' experience of personal development in counsellor training was perceived to have helped the participants' relationship.
- 5) The participants' personal development was perceived by themselves as contributing to making them better partners/people.
- 6) Change within the participants also impacted on other relationships.
- 7) Personal development was perceived by the participants, to have caused tensions whilst in counsellor training.
- 8) Participants' attempts to instigate change within their partners, caused tensions within the relationship.
- 9) Tensions arising, as a result of the participants partners feeling threatened, by the personal development the participant encountered.
- 10) Health warnings at the beginning of training did not promote understanding for the participants on the impact counsellor training may have on their relationships.

- 11) Participants viewed personal therapy as an integral part of their personal development process.
- 12) Participants viewed their own personal therapy as a beneficial component of their counselling training.
- 13) Participant's experience of the personal development group was not always positive.
- 14) Participants' views on whether personal therapy during training should/should not be mandatory.
- 15) Knowing what I know now I would still chose to go through counsellor training.

### **Main focus groups.**

- 1) Changes within participants as a result of personal development in counsellor training and how this impacted on the participants' significant relationships.
- 2) Tensions within the participants' personal relationship as a result of Personal Development during training.
- 3) The relevance of personal therapy to personal development in counsellor training and how this was used as support.

### **Main focus groups and assigned propositional statements.**

Changes within participants as a result of personal development in counsellor training and how this impacted on the participants' significant relationships.

- 1) Participants changed as a result of personal development, and this impacted on the participants' significant relationship.

- 2) Participants' perceptions of their partners changed as a result of counsellor training.
- 3) Participants observed changes within their partners, as a result of changes within themselves, which impacted on their relationships.
- 4) The participants' experience of personal development in counsellor training was perceived to have helped the participants' relationship.
- 5) The participants' personal development was perceived by themselves as contributing to making them better partners/people.
- 6) Change within the participants also impacted on other relationships.

Tensions within the participants' personal relationship as a result of personal development during training.

- 7) Personal development was perceived by the participants, to have caused tensions whilst in counsellor training.
- 8) Participants' attempts to instigate change within their partners, caused tensions within the relationship.
- 9) Tensions arising, as a result of the participants partners feeling threatened, by the personal development the participant encountered.
- 10) Health warnings at the beginning of training did not promote understanding for the participants on the impact counsellor training may have on their relationships.

The relevance of personal therapy to personal development in counsellor training and how this was used as support.

- 11) Participants viewed personal therapy as an integral part of their personal development process.

- 12) Participants viewed their own personal therapy as a beneficial component of their counselling training.
- 13) Participant's experience of the personal development group was not always positive.
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- 15) Knowing what I know now I would still chose to go through counsellor training.