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## The trainee experience

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### INTRODUCTION

Training within the psychological therapies calls for not only rigorous academic commitment but also a holistic immersion of oneself that can be all-consuming. What is it like to embark on such a journey? What are the commonalities, the rewards, the pitfalls? In this chapter, I will endeavour to relay my observations of what it is like to be a trainee in our field, as well as drawing from the thoughts and guidance of some eminent practitioners in the psychological therapies.

The trainee experience was recently brought home to me when I visited Colorado for the first time since my doctoral training there, in Counselling Psychology, twenty-seven years earlier. Although I had looked forward very much to my visits, they affected me even more than I had anticipated. In reflecting upon this, I realise that my five intensive years as a trainee have had a profound impact upon the person I have become, both professionally and personally. I think this is the nature of work in our field, in which the professional and personal are inextricably linked, and thus the continued examination of multiple aspects of ourselves is arguably not only compelling but crucial.

I have found my role for the past ten years as an academic integrally involved in trainees' development immensely gratifying. The prospect of writing this chapter thus resonated with me deeply. I am very aware, however, that, although I once was a trainee, there are many aspects of my own trainees' experiences that I cannot know. I can, however, try to reflect here the myriad observations, encounters, discussions and written reflections that have all shaped my understanding of the trainee experience today, and inspired me to attempt to express that understanding.

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### THE BEGINNING

When a new cohort of trainees begins, the excitement is palpable. The starting of a course in our field is often the culmination of a significant period, sometimes years, of anticipation. It is not a decision taken lightly, and it may involve much sacrifice.

The first day of term is typically packed with an almost visceral energy that inhabits the room, and I am struck by the happiness, openness and receptivity in many of the faces that I observe. In addition to one's personal journey, there is also the potential to meet like-minded individuals who share similar hopes and dreams. Close bonds form quickly, some of which remain throughout the course, some for a lifetime.

Alongside the joy so evident at the start, there can also be considerable anxiety. So much has gone into reaching this stage, and equally so much is unknown as to what lies ahead. It is striking to me the number of times trainees have told me of that part of themselves that they battle against that fears being discovered as a *fraud*, an *imposter*, and thus the not uncommon refrain, '*Am I good enough?*' There are also often the comparisons: '*She is so much smarter*', '*He has so much more experience*', and '*How did they pick me? It must have been a mistake*'. These words are often uttered by bright, talented, insightful people who have in fact been carefully selected.

I still recall clearly when one of my professors in our first year of our doctorate suggested to us, when we were studying Erik Erikson, that we would all experience the reworking of the Eriksonian stages (Erikson, 1950) in the course of our development as trainees. I recall feeling sceptical, and apprehensive, initially as to what this might mean. Training in our field is, of necessity, a time of self-examination, exploration and discovery that can lead to a substantial reworking of our perception and understanding of ourselves. A recent trainee, reflecting upon her own training, describes how 'one's sense of self is constantly being deconstructed and previously held assumptions about the self and the world are being challenged, only to be rebuilt in the process'. She goes on to say, 'perhaps that's where real learning occurs'.

## WHO ARE OUR TRAINEES?

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Imagine a poet, an archaeologist, a dancer, a midwife, a horticulturist, a journalist, a broadcaster, a university lecturer and a nurse, all assembled with a common purpose. Together with them are several others from a traditional psychological therapy background. Many have advanced degrees, occasionally PhDs in unrelated fields. Many are mothers and fathers, simultaneously raising their children. These are our trainees. I find it daunting, and humbling, to remind myself of the diversity and wealth of experience that our trainees bring. Exhilarating, admirable, and yet what must it be like, in some way, to feel reduced to square one, where all are on a level playing field, and their impressive backgrounds recede, and are sometimes not even known, in this new arena? In reality, the life experience that our trainees bring is by no means incidental to their training. Rather it offers a unique lens that adds to one's capacity to reflect upon and make sense of oneself and others, a lens that enriches not only one's own experience but that of other trainees, and trainers, on a course.

## THE THREE RS – REFLECTION, REFLEXIVITY AND RELATIONSHIP

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Reflection, reflexivity and relationship are arguably the three cornerstones of our field. Drawing upon Schön's (1983, 1987) work on reflective practice, Dallos and Stedmon

(2009) define *personal reflection* as ‘the spontaneous and immediate act of reflecting in the moment’, and *personal reflexivity* as ‘the act of looking back over, or reflecting on, action’ (p. 4). They argue that ‘reflexivity can be a creative, artistic and playful activity that utilises a person’s selfhood and agency beyond the narrower confines of their acquired academic knowledge’ (p. 5). There is thus an important experiential component within our training in the psychological therapies, as we strive to apply not merely academic learning, but our broader personal experience in making sense of both our practice and research. In keeping with this emphasis upon personal experience, Carl Rogers (1961), in his seminal work, *On Becoming a Person*, declares, ‘*Experience is, for me, the highest authority. The touchstone of validity is my own experience*’ (p. 23).

Rogers (1961) offers his ‘overall hypothesis’ on the facilitation of personal growth, stating, ‘If I can provide a certain type of relationship, the other person will discover within himself the capacity to use that relationship for growth, and change and personal development will occur’ (p. 33). Resonating with Rogers, Yalom (2002) asserts that our ‘paramount task is to build a relationship together that will itself become the agent of change’ (p. 34). What this means for anyone embarking on a course in our field is that our relationship with ourselves and with others, and our capacity to reflect upon these relationships, is vital to our development as practitioners. This extends as well to our research, whereby we must be able to identify our place in, and our influence upon, the research that we undertake (Smith, 2008; Willig, 2013). The process of coming to know ourselves, in the context of our relationships with ourselves, our clients, our colleagues, and our research, thus becomes integral to our work. Rogers (1961) advises, ‘If I am to facilitate the personal growth of others in relation to me, then I must grow, and while this is often painful it is also enriching’ (p. 51). The centrality of reflection, reflexivity and relationship to our profession will be explored further in the following sections.

## BECOMING A THERAPIST

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The therapeutic relationship will inevitably trigger many emotions within us, not simply because of our client’s presentation, but also because of our own histories. Although this may be something we understand intellectually, the way it plays out can take a trainee by surprise. On one level, there is the anxiety of initially assuming the therapist role, and there is also the unique relationship that is formed in each therapeutic encounter, which can unexpectedly evoke reactions in us, some of which we may find difficult to manage. Constant reflection therefore becomes a critical tool. Stedmon and Dallos (2009) describe how the “natural empathy” and reflectivity that we bring with us to training is then shaped and honed through the reflective practices into which we are inducted as we grow into our “therapist” selves’ (p. 195). Clinical supervision thus becomes not just a means of adding to our repertoire of theoretical understanding, application and techniques, but an opportunity to work reflexively, as we attempt to make sense of the dynamics that may be playing out within the therapeutic space. Similarly, personal therapy becomes an important avenue whereby we may explore such responses.

I have heard trainees countless times speak of the challenge they feel in beginning their placements, apprehensive about clients’ reactions to their inexperience, fearful

of not being taken seriously. This self-doubt, though commonly a part of the initial training experience, can potentially be harmful to the therapeutic work if not processed. Most clients will in fact be accepting of their trainee therapist, but the manner in which trainees manage their own reactions to these new situations can make all the difference in successful therapeutic engagement. There will, on the other hand, be clients who do play on the inexperience of the trainee. This can be grist for the mill in exploring clients' own unresolved issues, but nonetheless it is incumbent on trainee therapists to be alert and responsive to the uncomfortable feelings that may be engendered within themselves. Carl Rogers seems to strike the balance right in proclaiming, 'I think that one should let the beginning therapist do whatever he wants in therapy, provided that he records the sessions and listens to them afterward, so that he can see the effects on the process' (Baldwin, 2013, p. 35).

Compassion towards ourselves becomes a key ingredient in our therapeutic practice. Wosket (1999) offers a reframing of potential therapeutic mistakes, noting that it is often 'the therapist's mistake or misunderstanding that reveals the client's need', and suggesting that 'the wrong footing is not so much a mistake as what might be termed "creative slippage" prompted by the client' (p. 110). She speaks of how we can thus turn possible misunderstandings into opportunities to further explore and understand our clients' concerns. Wosket goes further in explaining, 'The essential paradox here is that if I do not fail the client in some way then I *am* failing them by denying them the recognition that I am fallible' (p. 111). Such an interpretation may be helpful in allowing ourselves to risk being more *real* in the therapeutic encounter.

## **'HOW REAL TO BE'**

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A common dilemma that trainees express is, '*How much of myself do I share?*' This arises in multiple situations – with clients, in clinical supervision, in personal therapy, in personal and professional development groups, in clinical reports and in their own research. Jordan (2008) addresses the difficulty we face in deciding 'how to be real and how real to be' (p. 220). One could say that this concept of *being real* is so central as to be our *mantra*, and yet how does one navigate through its meaning and implications?

Jordan (2008), reflecting upon 'relational authenticity', says, 'I can't imagine a therapist being responsive in a growth-fostering way to the client's vulnerability without opening up our own vulnerability'. She says that we must allow clients to 'see their real impact on us' (p. 221). As a trainee therapist, and also as a peer and colleague, one must decide, however, what boundaries feel comfortable in any given situation, and *how real to be*. Rogers (1961) advocates that the more we can be *real* with our clients, the more the therapeutic relationship can thrive. For all of the above scenarios, however, the meaning of *being real* must be interpreted. Rogers speaks of striving for a transparency within ourselves, but what we then comfortably share with others, 'if appropriate' (p. 61), is nonetheless something that requires continual self-reflection. Wosket (1999) cautions: 'The undisciplined use of self may occur when counsellors have not sufficiently chewed over and digested their own personal material to prevent its being regurgitated on to their clients' (p. 117). We are thus equally reminded of the necessity for adequate

boundaries. How, then, do we negotiate the space between *realness* and boundaries? When the reality of evaluation is added to the mix, this struggle can become complicated.

Trainees are exquisitely aware of the fact that ultimately they are being evaluated, in their academic work and in placement. In an international study of 72 trainee therapists, psychologists and counsellors, 60 per cent reported initial difficulty reaching out for advice in their training and placements, especially when they perceived an element of judgement by supervisors or tutors (Tribe, 2015). I recently met a trainee at a conference who spoke of his reluctance to speak to anyone on his training programme regarding a problem he had experienced within his placement supervision, fearing repercussions. Echoing what he described as the general apprehension of his cohort in expressing such concerns, he explained emphatically, '*We want to pass*'. Hadjiosif (2015) reminds us of the 'potentially turbulent transition' (p. 310) that trainees may face in this regard. Drawing conclusions from his own research on this topic, he indicates that, although trainees are 'ethically bound to be reflexive and forthcoming in supervision if they have the best interests of their clients in mind' (p. 314), a tension exists given their awareness of their supervisor's role in formally assessing their work. This bind that can be felt by trainees no doubt extends to the more immediate setting of their training programme itself. Trainees are encouraged to be open, to be congruent, to give feedback, to share their feelings, to *be authentic*, and yet negotiating the boundaries of these invitations can be extremely challenging. The challenge arises for trainees not only when sharing their own personal stories, but also in authentically conveying their thoughts and feelings about aspects of their training.

Even personal therapy, required by many training programmes, is an area about which many trainees express similar apprehension, although safeguarded by clear ethical boundaries which have been dictated by professional bodies. Given the context of this therapy as a part of their training programme, trainees may struggle to feel safe to genuinely explore their deepest concerns, regardless of how much they rationally understand the confidentiality of the therapy setting. Another place where such feelings may surface is in personal and professional development groups, established so that trainees might add to their self-awareness through intrapersonal and interpersonal exploration. Such groups provide a confidential space, and one in which facilitators hold no evaluative role. How does one decide, however, what and how much to reveal, with peers whom they will be training alongside for the coming years? Hadjiosif (2015) suggests that, although formal ethical and professional guidance regarding peer relations is uncommon, this is a landscape that very much requires reflection as tensions may inevitably arise given the 'emotionally demanding and exposing nature of any training' (p. 318).

The feedback I hear from most trainees is that their experiences of clinical supervision, personal therapy and personal and professional development groups is invaluable. Some trainees also readily admit that they get out what they put in, acknowledging that their own apprehension at the start meant their having limited the benefits that they received. The vulnerability that a trainee can feel in these realms is important to recognise, and open communication in relationships of trust is essential, in order for the trainee to safely engage in meaningful self-exploration. The solution is not to avoid revealing aspects of oneself, but rather to ensure the building of relationships in which such vulnerability can be safely contained.

## CREATING SPACE

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By the time trainees begin their studies, they have had countless life experiences, including in some cases first careers and raising families. Although all have proven themselves to be very capable of academic success, it is not uncommon to reach the stage of postgraduate training carrying a complexity of responsibilities. Trainees are often advised to only engage minimally, if at all, in employment while training, given the demands of training, but there are times when it may be hard to adhere to such advice. Nor can children, or in some cases ageing parents, be put aside. Even a trainee with excellent time management skills may thus find it difficult to fulfil course requirements, given assessment deadlines, placement hours, personal therapy, and in many cases substantial research expectations, not to mention financial obligations. There is a certain *head space* required for this work which it may not be possible to create in a life packed with too many other responsibilities. It is thus crucial that prospective trainees seriously consider whether they can make adequate space before beginning on such a path.

## LIFE CHANGES

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I have had several experiences, even just a year into a cohort's training, in which I have almost failed to recognise some trainees, not because I don't remember them, but rather because their appearance really has changed so substantially. Be it hair colour, hairstyle, the way they dress, or, more substantially, the way in which they carry and present themselves, notable changes occur. These changes are no doubt at least in part representative of deeper changes occurring within them as a result of self-reflection through their training. I have also been struck by the number of engagement rings, *bumps* and babies that have appeared! Life does go on, and major, very joyful life events occur. Sadly, at the same time, significant illnesses and bereavements are not uncommon in these years. Moreover, relationships form, but break-ups also occur, as trainees come to know and examine themselves more completely. Thus, in addition to the many predictable challenges, life can present unanticipated changes, both joyful and sad, that can greatly affect a trainee over the course of their training, and no doubt shape the person they are becoming.

## NORMALISING THE MELTDOWN!

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I have come to think that the occasional *meltdown* is a normal part of the trainee experience, and I feel that predicting and anticipating it can therefore be facilitative. I have had several highly capable students whom I have seen witness this phenomenon.

I can recall one student who, very late in the game, doctoral thesis virtually complete, came to me with grave concern, stating with utter conviction, '*My research makes no sense*', clearly ready to begin a substantial reworking of her analysis and conclusions.

This same student, after talking through her doubts and agreeing to *risk* presenting her work as it is, successfully defended her work in her viva a short time later, and emerged having received the exceptional outcome of ‘*Pass, With No Amendments*’. The experience of developing substantial self-doubt, sometimes accompanied by an arresting panic, whether or not such a reaction is at all grounded in reality, is something that is not unusual for trainees to encounter at some point. For some, this may be symbolic of deeper unresolved issues, while for others it may simply be an inevitable part of a very demanding journey. This reaction can be explained in part by the fact that all along there are going to be challenging *firsts*, whereby a trainee is attempting a particular milestone for the first time. These challenges can sometimes tip the balance in a way that can feel temporarily debilitating for the trainee.

Another way that such a *meltdown* may occur is as a result of a failed assessment. I have often said to my students that I wish we had another term, another category, and that we could simply say that a piece of work was not yet ready. I have had students over the years who have failed an assessment, taken feedback on board, and turned their work around significantly, producing a high-level piece of work, thus reinforcing their capability in meeting the demands of the course. Occasionally, however, this unfortunately does not happen. It is possible that, for a variety of reasons, the course requirements are not something that a trainee can manage, whether it is the academic work or its practical application. Consultation with a tutor who can counsel and support a trainee may be advisable in such a circumstance in order to arrive at a most suitable resolution.

## WHY DO IT?

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So you have changed your educational status, in some cases having left your first career, you have no doubt made financial sacrifices, you have created space, albeit at a cost, you have even anticipated potential meltdown moments, and you may simultaneously be planning for your wedding, or beginning or continuing the enormous responsibilities of parenthood. So why do it?

Speaking for myself, not once have I regretted having chosen this career. The stimulation I experienced during my training has proven to be long-lasting, and I have felt as though I am on a continuing journey of learning over the course of my career. The diversity of career path opportunities is also something that I have appreciated. Having steadfastly identified as a practitioner for many years, I have gravitated to the academic world. Having found the building of the therapeutic relationship extremely satisfying, I have found my role as a trainer to be equally rewarding. Yalom (2002) describes our role as ‘explorers immersed in the grandest and most complex of pursuits – the development and maintenance of the human mind’ (p. 258). Ours is indeed a field in which the room for discovery and growth is potentially life-enhancing far beyond the parameters of our career.

The satisfaction and confidence I have seen grow in our trainees has been a pleasure to witness, as they come to know themselves better, in addition to acquiring a vast amount of new knowledge and skill. It has been a privilege to be a part of that process, and I must say that I have learned immeasurably from my trainees. It is also a joy to

hear of our trainees' successes. One recent graduate, telling me excitedly about her new post, said with much animation, and seemingly a bit of disbelief, 'They're asking *me* my opinion!' Although the inevitable anxiety of *once again* starting anew was evident, even more evident was a clear exuberance and pride. Another recent graduate coincidentally made contact while I was completing this chapter, closing with the words, 'all I can say is it was one of the best experiences I have had'. I would recommend our field highly and hope that the thoughts I have shared may be useful in helping trainees to navigate what can be a wonderfully rewarding, challenging and life-changing path.

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