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An exploration of how trainee counselors, who have a Christian faith, experience the impact of person-centered counselor training on their faith

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ABSTRACT

This study explores how trainee counselors, who have a Christian faith, experience the impact of person-centered counselor training on their faith. The research question was: 'How do trainee counsellors who have a Christian faith experience the impact of person-centred counsellor training on their faith?' The aims were: to explore the possible impact of person-centered counselor training on Christian faith; to explore trainees' level of comfort at exploring issues of faith on the course; and to understand how counselor trainees who have a Christian faith perceive their faith 'fits' with person-centered theory. The data were collected using semi-structured interviews and analyzed using Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA). Findings point to the centrality of God within the process of becoming a person-centered counselor, from the decision to train, to interpretation of theory. All participants reported no, or limited, input from tutors on religious and spiritual issues. Differing levels of comfort were felt in the disclosure and exploration of their religious faith whilst training, citing supervisors of Christian faith or church members as the main sources of support with religious or spiritual issues. All participants experienced changes to their religious beliefs and practices, which occurred during and after the course of study.

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Training; counselor; impact; Christian; faith

Exploration de la façon dont les conseillers en formation qui adhèrent à la foi chrétienne ressentent l'impact de la formation de conseiller centré sur la personne sur leur foi

Cette étude explore comment les conseillers en formation qui adhèrent à la foi chrétienne ressentent l'impact de la formation de conseiller centré sur la personne sur leur foi. La question de recherche était la suivante: « Comment les conseillers en formation qui adhèrent à la foi chrétienne ressentent-ils l'impact de la formation centrée sur la personne sur leur foi ? Les objectifs étaient les suivants: explorer l'impact possible de la formation de conseiller centré sur la personne sur la foi chrétienne; explorer le niveau de confort des étudiants quant à explorer les questions de

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foi dans le cursus de formation; et comprendre comment les counselors en formation qui adhèrent à la foi chrétienne perçoivent leur foi comme étant « conforme » à la théorie centrée sur la personne. Les données ont été recueillies au moyen d'interviews semi-structurés et analysées au moyen de l'analyse interprétative phénoménologique (IPA). Les résultats indiquent la centralité de Dieu dans le processus de devenir counselor centré sur la personne tant dans la décision de se former et jusqu'à l'interprétation de la théorie. Tous les participants ont indiqué que l'influence des tuteurs sur les questions religieuses et spirituelles était nulle ou limitée. Différents niveaux de confort ont été ressentis dans la divulgation et l'exploration de leur foi religieuse tout au long de la formation, en citant les superviseurs de la foi chrétienne ou les membres de l'église comme les principales sources de soutien aux questions religieuses ou spirituelles. Tous les participants ont connu des changements dans leurs croyances et pratiques religieuses, qui se sont produits pendant et après le cours de l'étude.

Wie Beratungspersonen in Ausbildung, die den christlichen Glauben angehören, die Auswirkungen des personzentrierten Beratungstrainings auf ihren Glauben erleben

Diese Studie untersucht, wie Beratungspersonen in Ausbildung, die dem christlichen Glauben angehören, die Auswirkungen Personenzentrierter Beratungsausbildung auf ihren Glauben erleben. Die Frage der Untersuchung lautete: 'Wie erleben Beratungspersonen in Ausbildung, die dem christlichen Glauben angehören, die Auswirkungen des Personenzentrierten Beratungstrainings auf ihren Glauben?' Die Ziele waren: die mögliche Auswirkung des Personenzentrierten Beratungstrainings auf den christlichen Glauben zu untersuchen; den Grad des Wohlbefindens der Auszubildenden zu untersuchen, wenn sie während des Kurses Glaubensthemen untersuchten sowie zu verstehen, wie Beratungsauszubildende christlichen Glaubens es wahrnehmen, ob ihr Glaube mit der Personenzentrierten Theorie 'zusammenpasst'. Die Daten wurden mit halb strukturierten Interviews erhoben und mit der Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) analysiert. Die Befunde deuten auf die Zentralität Gottes innerhalb des Prozesses, eine Personenzentrierte Beratungsperson zu werden und zwar von Beginn der Weiterbildung an bis hin zur Interpretation der Theorie. Alle Teilnehmenden berichteten keinen oder nur begrenzten Input von Tutoren zu religiösen und spirituellen Themen. Unterschiedliche Grade an Wohlbefinden liessen sich bei der Preisgabe und der Untersuchung des religiösen Glaubens während des Trainings beobachten. Dabei wurden Supervisor*innen christlichen Glaubens oder Mitglieder der Kirche als die Hauptquelle für Unterstützung bei religiösen oder spirituellen Themen genannt. Alle Teilnehmenden erlebten während und nach der Weiterbildung Veränderungen bezüglich ihres religiösen Glaubens und ihrer Praxis.

Una exploración de como las personas que se están entrenando para ser counselors, que tienen una fe Cristiana, experimentan el impacto de la formación como counselors centrados en la persona en su vida

Este estudio explora cómo los counselors en formación, que tienen una fe cristiana, experimentan el impacto de la formación de consejeros centrados en la persona, en su fe. La pregunta de investigación fue: '¿Cómo experimentan los counselors en formación que tienen una fe cristiana en su fe el impacto de la formación de counselors centrados en la persona?' Los objetivos eran: explorar el posible impacto de la formación de counselors centrados en la persona en la fe cristiana; explorar el nivel de comodidad de los alumnos al explorar cuestiones de fe en el curso; y comprender cómo los counselors en formación que tienen una fe cristiana perciben que su fe 'encaja' con la teoría centrada en la persona. Los datos se recopilaron mediante entrevistas semiestructuradas y se analizaron mediante el análisis fenomenológico interpretativo (IPA). Los hallazgos apuntan a la centralidad de Dios dentro del proceso de convertirse en un counselor centrado en la persona, desde la decisión de capacitarse hasta la interpretación de la teoría. Todos los participantes informaron que los tutores no aportaron, o fueron limitados, sobre cuestiones religiosas y espirituales. Se sintieron diferentes niveles de comodidad en la divulgación y exploración de su fe religiosa durante la capacitación, citando a los supervisores de la fe cristiana o miembros de la iglesia como las principales fuentes de apoyo con cuestiones religiosas o espirituales. Todos los participantes experimentaron cambios en sus creencias y prácticas religiosas, que ocurrieron durante y después del curso de estudio.

Uma exploração de como counsellors em formação com uma fé Cristã vivem o impacto da formação de Counselling Centrado na Pessoa na sua fé

Este estudo explora como os counselors em formação que têm uma fé Cristã vivem o impacto da formação de counselors centrados na pessoa na sua fé. A pergunta de investigação era: 'Como é que os counsellors em formação que têm uma fé Cristã vivem o impacto da formação de counsellors centrados na pessoa na sua fé?' Os objetivos eram: explorar o possível impacto da formação de conselheiros centrados na pessoa na fé cristã; explorar o nível de conforto dos formandos em explorar questões de fé no curso e entender como os counselors em formação que têm uma fé cristã sentem que a sua fé 'se encaixa' com a teoria centrada na pessoa. Os dados foram recolhidos através de entrevistas semiestructuradas e analisados com recurso a uma Análise Fenomenológica Interpretativa (AFI). Os dados apontam para a centralidade de Deus no processo de se tornar um counselor centrado na pessoa, desde a decisão de fazer a formação até à interpretação da teoria. Todos os participantes relataram uma contribuição nula ou limitada dos tutores sobre questões religiosas e espirituais. Diferentes níveis de conforto foram sentidos na divulgação e exploração de sua fé religiosa durante o treinamento, citando supervisores da fé cristã ou membros da igreja como as principais fontes de apoio com questões religiosas ou espirituais. Todos os participantes experimentaram mudanças nas suas crenças e práticas religiosas, durante e após a investigação.

Introduction

There has been much written about the impact that person-centered counselor training has on trainees with regards to personal development (Johns, 2012). As perspectives change, relationships are reassessed, starting with the one that trainees have with themselves, which may lead to gains and losses within close relationships (Collins, 2008) and friendships (Hackland, 2015). Yet, the potential spiritual impact of training is underexplored. The person-centered approach requires the counselor to bring all of themselves to the therapeutic relationship, and training demands a great deal from students. Therefore, trainees whose faith and relationship with God are fundamental to their being, will be impacted in their faith in some way.

Historically, the counseling world has taken a predominantly negative view of religion (Gubi, 2001). Some therapists believe that religious practices are restrictive to growth (Pargament et al., 2005), and much psychological research has ignored input from a spiritual dimension (Scott, 2013). Training courses are predominantly secular, and, even today, there is little mention of spirituality (Hunt, 2019). It seems that this attitude of minimizing spirituality in person-centered counselor training courses still persists, in spite of Rogers' (1980) later acknowledgment of spirituality, and on how the flow of experiencing may connect with deeper awareness/opening. In the specific context of the Christian faith, Thorne's work (Thorne, 2012, 2008, 2002) has demonstrated a valuable link between the person-centered approach and Christian spirituality, which has been celebrated by Leonardi (2010, 2006) and Steele (2014), whilst Moore and Purton (2006) have sought to highlight the wider importance of the spiritual dimension in person-centered counseling.

The research question was: 'How do trainee counsellors who have a Christian faith experience the impact of person-centred counsellor training on their faith?' The aims were: to explore the possible impact of person-centered counselor training on Christian faith; to explore trainees' level of comfort at exploring issues of faith on the course; and to understand how counselor trainees who have a Christian faith perceive their faith 'fits' with person-centered theory.

Methodological choices

Purposive sampling was chosen to recruit participants who were trainees or recently qualified person-centered counselors of Christian faith. The research advertisement was placed on the BACP Research noticeboard, and requests were sent for adverts to be placed in selected Christian counseling services. Six participants (see, Table 1.) responded from Christian counseling services. Interviews were conducted via Zoom.

Table 1. Participant details.

Pseudonym	Age	Gender	Qualification Status
Arkle	67	Male	Qualified person-centered practitioner
Claire	41	Female	Qualified person-centered practitioner
Jessica	26	Female	Student in final year of person-centered practitioner qualifying course
Freddie	47	Male	Qualified person-centered practitioner
Lyndsey	41	Female	Student in final year of person-centered practitioner qualifying course
Andrew	34	Male	Student in final year of person-centered practitioner qualifying course

Table 2. Emergent themes.

Superordinate theme:	1. God is central	2. Do I belong?	3. What do I believe?
Subordinate themes:	1.1 Becoming a counselor 1.2 Need for integration	2.1 A place for religion? 2.2 Disclosure and Exploration	3.1 New perspectives 3.2 Questioning of religious practice 3.3 Relationship with God

Interviews were semi-structured. Participants were sent the questions prior to interview. These consisted of:

- How would you describe your Christian faith?
- Do you feel your faith had a role in your decision to train to be counselor? If so, in what ways.
- How do your Christian beliefs fit with person-centered theory?
- How has the personal development aspect of counselor training impacted on your beliefs?
- Did you feel comfortable to talk about your faith during training? In which scenario did you feel most open to self-disclosure, e.g. with peers, tutors, supervisors etc.
- How do you feel about the level of training on spiritual/religious issues on your course?
- What would you change about your training with regards to spirituality/ religious education?

Interviews were digitally recorded and ranged from 40–60 minutes. Transcripts were member-checked. Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) was chosen to analyze the data. Its aim is to carefully explore participants' experience and personal perception of the topic under investigation, placing value on the verbal statement to attribute meaning and understanding of an event or experience (Smith et al., 2009). The research was approved by the University of Chester's Ethics Committee.

Findings

Three superordinate themes were identified as being common to all six participants, which capture the impact of training from beginning to end and beyond; the sub-themes that emerged represent the uniqueness of individual stories (See, Table 2).

Superordinate theme 1: God is central

Each participant spoke of the centrality of God and their Christian beliefs in relation to their training to become a person-centered counselor; of an awareness of God's influence and presence, or of a search for Him within each element of the process.

Subordinate-theme 1.1: becoming a counselor

Common to each participant was the role their Christianity played in their decision to train. Arkle explained:

I felt God saying to me that I can do anything I like as long as it wasn't on my own and that ... now was the time to be growing in the relational areas of my life.

He spoke of a sense that God's support would continue throughout the process:

I felt very sure that God was going to hold my hand through the whole process ... I had that assurance that God would be with me on the journey.

Claire disclosed:

... I've always been someone who's wanted to do something I feel has purpose ... and that comes from my heart as a Christian and counselling fitted very well with that ... I felt like God just really opened the doors in ways I couldn't have opened the doors myself, erm, so in that sense I wouldn't have been doing it if it wasn't for God because I felt He made a way for it.

Jessica was certain:

100% ... it went hand in hand with my beliefs ... what I believe and how I am as a Christian.

For Freddie, it formed part of his role as a Christian:

... I've done decades of youth work and prison work and charity work ... I've been doing all this ... in the name of the church, in the name of being a Christian, helping people.

Lyndsey believed: ... yeah ... I've always wanted to be a counselor, I feel as though it's part of how I'm called to serve others.

Andrew believes his faith led him into counseling:

... the last few years ... it's opened up a ... different perspective on life ... one that's fulfilling and meaningful ... it's probably led me to choosing this profession as well ... in fact, it has.

He feels his role as counselor fulfills God's intention for him.

... fundamentally I think that's what God wants me to do, is to be of service and connected with others.

Lyndsey's strong relationship with God has provided strength through difficult periods during her training:

... I find it hard to look at myself in such depth ... self-awareness only ever leads to despair ... and so my Christian faith is the remedy to that despair.

Andrew also speaks of the support and meaning he found in his relationship with God, which helped him through the training process:

... in terms of how does that relate to my faith, if anything it's been a real support for me ... it's been a real kind of soul searching experience ... there's been so much pain involved ... I've needed a faith to see like what is on the other side of this ... I'm a person who can be a better expression of God's love ... I have to be able to connect to some kind of higher purpose, because otherwise it's just meaningless.

Arkle felt the presence of God through the difficult times he experienced during training:

... God was holding my hand or I was holding his hand ... and that provided strength for what proved to me quite a struggle.

Subordinate-theme 1.2: need for integration

Freddie recalled his initial reaction to person-centered theory:

I was quite challenged about that ... I was really wrestling with it, you know I remember saying in the class, "I struggle with this as a Christian" ... it was a big, big difference and I did struggle with that actually.

For Arkle, the struggle for integration was profound, resolution necessary to be able to move forward:

... I was trying to capture my thoughts on how I could integrate my Christian beliefs with Carl Rogers' theory, I kind of switched it around quite a bit ... it was a significant battle, a stepping out of the Christian culture that I'm in to actually become a counsellor ... it was very counter-cultural ... so I worked hard to reconcile Christian theology if you like with person-centred counselling.

He goes on to explain the impact of his struggle for integration:

It was a wrestling with my identity, who I see myself to be ... and it felt like I was having to die to who I saw myself to be in order to be a pure person-centred counsellor ... I used to have vivid dreams about being buried alive or fighting overwhelming battles ... because it really felt that it was attacking who I was more than just what I believed, so it was a really fundamental struggle to get through the course ... it wasn't what I believed, but because in counselling who you are is what you bring into the counselling room, that's where the tussle became, erm, and, I found that incredibly painful through the three years.

Superordinate theme 2: do I belong?

All participants spoke of the impact of the inclusivity of their counselor training course with regards to religion and spirituality.

Subordinate-theme 2.1: a place for religion?

When participants were asked about the inclusion in training of issues relating to religion and spirituality, all suggested a lack of, or in some cases, no reference at all made to the topic throughout their studies:

Certainly, the spiritual dimension wasn't emphasised on the course (Arkle)

... I would say not much at all, erm, if anything ... (Jessica)

... hardly at all ... (Claire)

... nothing at all, spirituality wise, nothing, nothing at all (Freddie).

Freddie goes on to explain the reception he got when he tried to discuss religious or spiritual matters:

... my tutor was very anti-Christian ... we didn't see eye to eye on a lot of spiritual stuff .

Andrew felt bewildered by the exclusion of the topic, and began to explore possible reasons for this:

... spirituality wasn't mentioned on my course ... so for me that does indicate that spirituality ... is there something wrong with it? Is there a reason we can't talk about it? ... it could be an important part of them understanding who they are, erm, yet that wasn't talked about on the course, it wasn't discussed.

He is given the impression that religion and spirituality is not important to his training:

I saw the books in the library ... but it felt like, it's something you can go off and research if you want to but it's not something we're going to teach you about.

For Arkle, Lyndsey and Claire, religion and spirituality are a diversity like any other, and there was a sense of acceptance from them that all diversities cannot be covered during training. Arkle took personal responsibility to explore these issues:

I don't expect the course to cover everything, I don't think it can in the time that it has and you have to be prepared to go on learning and finding your way through with the help of supervision.

He accepts that matters of a religious matter will only be explored in detail outside of the course:

... I probably wouldn't work out my theological difficulties with other students ... I have support in my own setting, I run a men's group every week ... when I started the course I set it up ... whatever issues were raised we explored so, I would explore with them the issues of you know, are we basically good or are we basically born sinful, you know, so we would have the discussion in that sort of context, so I did my personal development with a group of Christian men rather than with the students on the course.

Lyndsey recognized the limitations of her secular course:

It's not a Christian course at all ... it's included in the difference and diversity, but it isn't singled out in any way.

Claire accepted the lack of input from tutors, but would have appreciated more discussion:

... there were lots of areas of diversity that weren't covered ... so spirituality was definitely one of those ... one of the other Christians was quite vocal in the group so she did often bring things and that might have started discussion in the group ... but it would have been nice to have a bit more.

Subordinate-theme 2.2: disclosure and exploration

Participants had varied experience of disclosure and exploration of their religious faith in a training context. Arkle was the most confident with disclosure, feeling unable to be anything less than transparent about his faith, as this would deny the person he is:

... because it's so integral to who I am and how I see things, I'd found that it emerged more or less every, well I wouldn't say every week, but almost every week kind of thing, that it would come into the conversation because erm, yeah, my faith is part of who I am.

He was surprised by his exploration of his faith with non-Christians and was aware of the personal benefit of that:

... I took the courage I suppose to be vulnerable in my struggles to adopt and adapt to person-centred counselling, and they often saw me upset, in tears whatever, and the support and encouragement and acceptance that I received, from people I didn't expect to offer me that I guess, was very healing.

For Freddie, the acceptance of his fellow students, many of whom shared similar values to him, enabled him to share and explore his religious views:

... there were a lot of spiritual people on the course ... the conversations were quite open and everyone was very accepting of everyone else's beliefs so it was really nice, there was no judgment or anything ... so I spoke out, I wouldn't say it was in front of the whole group ... but I was confident to talk about my beliefs in small groups definitely.

Claire remembered her hesitations of disclosure on starting her course:

... at the beginning and throughout I thought "How can I possibly bring this? Non-Christians wouldn't understand and people who weren't in my church wouldn't understand" and I felt protective of it because I loved it but the same time there were difficult things and I didn't know how I could possibly bring that to the group.

On reflection, she attributed the exploration of her faith to the understanding and acceptance of the group:

... I remember saying that "I thought there were things I could never bring to this group and you've really helped me work through so many things" ... I wrestled with some of those things in my assignments ... so I felt the course really did help me work through that stuff.

For Lyndsey, there was an awareness of her audience and the perceptions of others. Therefore, she was careful how much she said in relation to her faith:

... I do bring it, most people know that I'm a Christian, I have talked about my faith, and I've talked quite honestly about some aspects of my faith ... but I suppose there is a limit to where I would go, because I feel, there comes a point where I feel that I might be judged.

She observes that exploration of faith has taken place within the privacy of her assignments:

... in terms of my real core beliefs, I might write about them, in my reflective work, but I might not be brave enough to actually sit and really talk about them in a bigger group.

She would only feel able to explore her Christianity openly amongst other Christians:

I suppose if I was on a Christian course, then we'd all be able to acknowledge openly how we feel about our faith in Jesus and our identity in Christ.

Andrew spoke passionately about his faith and what it meant to him. Here, there was a sense of disappointment in his voice, as disclosure had not taken place as he had hoped:

... I was really keen to have lots of conversations with people on the college course, and, with others about faith, but, it's interesting, I haven't had as many conversations as I thought I would have.

Early in the course, he was aware that disclosure may not be appropriate:

... I remember going into group supervision sessions and ... just getting some reception which made me think that it wasn't really a good idea to kind of talk about faith.

He felt uncomfortable to discuss personal development issues in relation to his faith and found other ways to explain his experience:

... I felt like I had to take the faith element out ... maybe I just have to talk about it in a secular way.

His sense of having to conceal part of himself contradicts his understanding of person-centredness:

given that these courses are immersive ... I mean person-centred theory is all about understanding your own valuing process ... we should at least be asking ourselves, how do we all individually relate to this and have a discussion about it ... I probably would have preferred ... the space maybe to just talk about that, how theory influences us, rather than it just being taught.

Jessica, the youngest of the participants, revealed a very different experience to the others, citing fear of consequence as one reason she would withhold disclosure of religious belief:

... when I first sort of started uni, my partner said to me "don't tell anybody that you're a Christian", and I was like "why?" and he was just saying, you know, the institutions are a little bit different now, you might get marked down or something ... put that fear into me that I shouldn't be doing certain things are saying certain things.

She recalls a time when she offered her opinion from her perspective as a Christian:

... we were sort of talking about, like, transgender communities, and I said something along the lines of, I don't agree with it being taught in schools ... and I think it sort of offended a few people but it wasn't in the way it was sounding, erm, but, yeah, think that sort of correlates with what I believe in, but it wasn't meant to be discriminatory at all, but I don't think people sort of like, ooh, and I sort of took a step back, erm, and it's almost given me, put me in check, that I should really think about what I say before I say something.

She recalled her reaction to this:

... I shouldn't say a certain thing or be a certain way.

Jessica described feeling that she could not bring her religious belief into the training process, despite the similarities she saw between Christianity and person-centered theory:

It sometimes feels that as a person with an identity, with a religion, you're kind of, kind of like pushed down a little bit, it almost feels like your sense of self is diminished and you need to be this other person ... it's almost as though, we're doing our counselling here, you don't bring that into the counselling room, even though it all kind of felt so similar.

New awareness of self during the interview process left her with a sense of dismay, which is heard in her voice as she recollected:

... we did a lot of reflective assignments. My religion didn't come out in any of those.

Superordinate theme 3: what do I believe?

This theme captured how changes experienced by each participant, during and after the training process, had impacted on participants' Christian beliefs and religious practices.

Subordinate-theme 3.1: new perspectives

Arkle reflected on the contrast in his thought process from the beginning of the course, to where he was now:

... I still see people as God's creation ... I have no problem with unconditional positive regard ... I don't think of them in terms of sinners or lost ... but it was one of the areas you know, I wrestled with during the course ... I would say that has very little effect these days.

He recognized how he is listening to himself and trusting his own judgment with regards to his religious view:

... a key difference I've found between person-centred counselling and traditional Christian discipleship was there's very little emphasis on guilt or sin ... and you know unconditional positive regard kind of almost starts with believing that the person is inherently good, and so I kind of shifted fully during the course ... I would say I have moved back ... I've probably become a lot more fluid in my theology ... I'm a bit more in the middle ... there is some tension between person-centred philosophy and Christian philosophy and but I don't find it affects the way I work at all.

Claire was aware of a new approach she is adopting in times of difficulty:

... things that I might have found difficult in the past, I might have kept doing those things and take hold of the scripture about taking up your cross and following Jesus rather than taking responsibility that I wasn't really happy with that thing and I need to take some adult responsibility about that and do something about it and change it.

Lyndsey reflected on the new respect she had found for counseling and healing which can be found outside of a religious context.

I used to think ... why do we need counselling we have Jesus ... true healing might come from Jesus ... I now have realised that there is an incredible amount of work you can do with a person ... outside of the Christian faith ... its impacted how much worth I believe it has and value.

She goes on to explain:

... I've seen a lot of value outside the Christian faith, it doesn't need to be me bringing in any spiritual aspect, because everyone's truth is their truth, and I think I've come to realise that more.

Andrew noticed how the study of counseling changed his perspective of his personal worth:

starting to do an introduction to counselling course ... rather than being self-interested ... what can I get out of this, that might enhance my ego or, erm ... what approval can I get from other people ... it's been very much like a journey that's been led by ... 'I'd like to do more of this' ... something about what happens when I engage with this ... yeah led by God in this, rather than leading myself ... there is no outcome ... religion is the goal.

Subordinate-theme 3.2: questioning of religious practice

Claire questioned her previous use of religious practices in times of difficulty:

... when I look back at that situation I felt I was really doing the right thing and I was really doing what God wanted and I had a really good heart in that ... and actually I think that was a lot of incongruence in myself and ... common ideas in our faith like, 'Take up your cross and follow me' and denying yourself while doing God's will, erm, suddenly I felt, erm, is that just incongruence in yourself or lack of responsibility or owning things and, erm, is it really being who you are? ... I came out feeling quite confused I think.

She went on to explore how this was affecting her church life:

I think it affected how I like church life and how I viewed some of that ... I think it shook me a bit in terms of "Can I trust myself, can I trust other people?" because as I learned about incongruence and conditions of worth and introjected values, it made me sort of question like.

Her example clarified her meaning:

... I went to a different church one Sunday and there was some really, it was really good teaching, but it was sort of high core, all the sort of message, and I thought in the past I would have loved this and I would have really joined in with what they were saying but I was just sitting there questioning it, are you putting, you know, people are going to feel obliged to do what you're saying, wanting to fit in or wanting, you know, to be seen to be amazing or, I don't know, so suddenly what I would have loved in the past I was sort of questioning ... it's like a lack of trust in myself and other people.

At the end of her training, she is unsure of what she believed:

... I've been quite on a journey, so now I would say I'm still a very committed Christian, but I'm feeling quite discouraged and disappointed and a bit confused, but it's still the biggest part of my life and very important to me ... but I feel in a very different place to when I started ... I think also by the time I realised what I was feeling in terms of being so confused, maybe it was a bit too late, you know, it was almost since I've finished that I've realised how confused I get.

Arkle saw that church practices were not the complete fix he once believed them to be:

... we still bring a load of life issues, conditions of worth or whatever we've inherited from our upbringing or our experience through life ... into our Christian experience and they don't automatically disappear by prayer ministry or listening to sermons, and I can see how I've developed and become a much more peaceful person through understanding these things and through the course.

Freddie questioned what it meant to be a Christian:

... I think I got quite self-centred actually, if I'm honest, really affected my marriage, in a way that, it was almost like I didn't want anyone telling me what to do anymore, I'd found this new freedom ... I guess I was pushing against my upbringing, it did shake me,

not necessarily my Christian faith, the view of myself I think, in respect to others, relationships ... I started to struggle with being accountable, and maybe that links in the self-actualisation thing, you're accountable to yourself, and I think that's what I mean, I turned it back on myself, I didn't want anyone to be accountable anymore, you know, it's the whole essence of being a Christian isn't it, being accountable to others, and relationships, you know being in submission to one another, all of a sudden I didn't want to be accountable to anyone.

Subordinate-theme 3.3: relationship with God

Jessica was hesitant to suggest a loss of religious faith:

... over the past I would say couple of years, it has kind of, I wouldn't say it's decreased but it's more, it's become a little bit more, erm, I would say it's weakened slightly, erm, but I'm still sort of figuring those things out for myself.

She was aware, however, that her communication with God had stopped:

I would say that it's not got any better almost, this sort of weakening in my relationship with God, but I still have that faith, erm, it's still there and still strong and solid, but it's the relationship that's sort of not there at the moment.

There was a sense that through person-centered theory, she had found something which validated her Christian beliefs, without her having a relationship with God:

... it might be really hard to pick up a bible or something, but when it comes to certain beliefs, like the person-centred theory ... it's easier to look at those and think, oh I want to be like that, rather than think of religion and think, you know, I don't want to be like that, because there's lots of stigma sometimes around it.

She was saddened by the breakdown in her relationship with God:

And it actually makes me feel quite sad thinking about it because ... the relationship ... it's not there ... I was very, very strong in my relationship with God but now it's very different.

In contrast, Arkle described how awareness of self had improved his relationship with God:

... it usefully has exposed deep seated feelings of inadequacy and not being good enough and needing to be perfect ... I'm in such a better place now in terms of self-acceptance, self-awareness and you know that has benefitted my Christian faith because rather than feeling I need to earn God's approval, just like I needed to earn my parents' approval, I'm much better able to accept that I'm enough ... so I am settled and resting in that rather than having to earn any more love, any more approval, anymore reward as it were.

For Andrew, person-centered theory provided explanation and confirmation of his ability connect to God, which gives strength to his Christian faith:

when I was reading the person-centred literature, and it's, it was as if like someone's describing what I'm experiencing with my relationship with God, a higher power, these spiritual, it's almost like by tuning into myself there's a connection to something greater.

For Lyndsey, study of the theory had brought a clearer understanding of her relationship with God:

Carl Rogers has his ideal self and his real self and self-concept, I would say I have another, almost another self, like my true self would be my identity in Christ as a Christian.

She explained how her beliefs had been challenged by the theory, and how she fought to protect them:

I kind of have to keep myself from neglecting what I feel is at the heart of why I'm doing this and what is my core belief really, erm, and actually that has been, it has been something I have considered a lot, but it's been something I've had to guard.

Discussion

Each participant's account of their experience of counselor training positions God as central to the process; the presence of God encompassed all the themes which emerged from the data. All six participants believed their Christian faith influenced their decision to become a counselor; indeed, Lyndsey and Andrew described a sense of 'calling' to the profession. In addition, Lyndsey, Andrew and Arkle spoke of how their religious faith was a means of continued personal support through the demands of person-centered counselor training (Mearns et al., 2013). Religious faith, and a supportive relationship with God as a means of support, is significant. Bilgrave and Deluty (2002) suggest that trainees' religious beliefs influence their choice of therapeutic orientation, and four participants described an initial connection with the person-centered approach, believing its theory to work in harmony with their Christian beliefs. Interestingly, however, and contrary to previous research (e.g. Blair, 2015; Hunt, 2019), most participants did experience some tension between aspects of the theory and their religious beliefs. The findings here echo Lynch (1997), who examines differing opinions of the compatibility between person-centered theory and Christianity. Questions were raised by trainees during the study of Rogers, and his view of human nature and the actualizing tendency (Rogers, 1951), which, in accordance with work by Tan (2011), suggests an omission of the need for guidance by God. Freddie's perspective of the therapeutic relationship reflects that of Oden (1966), who credits its success to the presence of God reflected through the core conditions, without whom *we have no chance* (Freddie). Several participants' accounts also concur with Tan's (2011) suggestion that a theory which rejects the notion that human nature is innately sinful, conflicts with fundamental Christian beliefs. Each participant approached integration in a different way, echoing the uniqueness of their interpretations of Christianity. Some found it an easy process, believing the theory to be compatible with their beliefs and choosing to overlook aspects which caused great incongruence for some (e.g. Jessica, Claire, Andrew). Others were compelled to interpret the theory, so they were able to see God within it (e.g. Arkle, Freddie). One participant's solution to incongruence was to reject parts of the theory which were *incompatible* (Lyndsey) with who she sees herself to be as a Christian.

Findings of this study concur with Hunt (2019), Jafari (2016), and Swinton (2016), in that all participants reported little or no training in religion and spirituality during the course of their studies, and the participants seem not to have been aware of the resources that exist that could have helped them in their wrestling with their Christian values and those of the person-centered approach. In addition, Freddie's description of his tutor as *anti-Christian*,

gives weight to Gubi's (2001) observation that counselor training courses are anti-religious – albeit Gubi expressed this observation twenty years ago. Andrew was confused by the lack of consideration given to the religious and spiritual beliefs of counselor and client, believing this to be an important part of training. The interviews with the other five participants, however, conveyed a sense of resignation and acceptance of the level of input they would receive on religious and spiritual diversity, many stating time constraints as a legitimate reason for its non-inclusion. All participants in this study were supported by their supervisor. However, each trainee sought out a Christian supervisor and confided only with members of their church on specific issues relating to Christian beliefs, and person-centered counseling theory and practice. Arkle's observation that for him, personal development took place in the company of Christian men, highlights a perceived separation between religion and the counseling world. Arkle's setting up of a Christian discussion group outside of the course corroborates Shreus (2002) claim that discussion of religion is preferred within a 'trusted circle'; interestingly, all participants were keen to establish my religious status before starting the interview. Arkle and Freddie's confidence of disclosure showed none of the difficulty in articulation of religious beliefs. None of the participants expressed feelings of self-consciousness, fear of ridicule or appearing stupid as previous studies have found (e.g. Blair, 2015; Swinton, 2016). Dominant among participants, was an expectation that non-Christians would not understand the difficulties a Christian may be experiencing (e.g. Arkle, Claire, Lyndsey and Andrew), along with a fear of causing offense or being judged (e.g. Lyndsey, Jessica), feelings which concur with the experiences of trainee counselors in Souza's (2002) study. Fear of judgment caused Lyndsey to 'limit' her disclosure of faith, feeling comfortable to reflect on her 'real core beliefs' through her privacy of her written assignments. For Jessica, her fear of disclosure of her Christianity goes beyond judgment, to a fear of reprisal, believing she may 'get marked down' if her beliefs are made public. She recalls how a comment she made was deemed as offensive to some and put her 'in check' and influenced her to 'be a certain way' on the course. It has been suggested, however, that potential for conflict should not deter discussion of religious or spiritual issues (Prest et al., 1999); such issues are relevant to the counseling profession, as are the opinions of those with religious faith (Hunt, 2019). Souza (2002) suggests a safe space should be provided for students to bring issues around religion, particularly as the person-centered approach is 'all about understanding your own valuing process' (Andrew). Briggs & Rayle (2005) advise trainees to consider how their religious and spiritual view may influence their role as counselor, and potentially pose ethical dilemmas. The data gives evidence that some participants found that their training course did not assist them in their difficult task to integrate their religious beliefs and therapeutic work. Jessica's thoughts on transgender issues may, as Hoffman (2008) suggests, lead to conflict between her religious values and her role as a counselor. Surprisingly, only Andrew appeared to be confused as to why religion and spirituality are not explored during training; he regards inclusion to be necessary regardless of whether trainees have religious faith or not, because *as humans we're all spiritual beings whether we like it or not, whether we deny it or not*. It is a fundamental factor of being human (West, 2011), yet . . . *it wasn't discussed* (Andrew).

In accordance with Poll and Smith (2003), the exploration of the spiritual self during counselor training was prevalent among participants of this study. New perspective was gained on previously held Christian beliefs and views of humanity (Arkle); on previously unchallenged religious practices (Claire); on the potential for healing outside of

Christianity (Lyndsey, Arkle) and on what it means to be a Christian (Freddie, Andrew). There was evidence of changes regarding the participants' relationship with God. An increase in self-awareness brought authenticity to the relationship (Arkle), study of person-centered theory brought clearer understanding regarding means of communication (Andrew) and identity in Christ (Lyndsey), thus a strengthening of faith. Jessica's experience, however, is very different. She admits a breakdown in her relationship with God as a result of the perceived *stigma* of Christianity. Participants of this study believe their training to be *the catalyst* (Andrew) for change, that there is a sense of continuation of being *on a journey* (Claire), of *still figuring things out* (Jessica) and of a *need to explore a bit more* (Freddie).

Conclusion

Limitations

The chosen IPA research method for this study determined a small-scale project involving only six participants, and the analysis of data limited to the interpretation of the researchers (Smith et al., 2009). It would be interesting to compare the findings of this study with those which use a different method of qualitative research and a much larger group of participants.

Implications for training and practice

This research raises issues for person-centered counseling course leaders to reflect upon. If trainees of Christian faith, who are studying the person-centered approach, which demands the counselor's use of self for effective therapy, feel unable to fully explore this fundamental part of who they are, conflicts in belief may not be recognized and resolved, potentially resulting in unethical counseling practice. Furthermore, if spirituality is a common aspect of human experience, it is important for all trainee counselors to consider their own spiritual perspective, regardless of their religious status, to better understand its influence on therapeutic practice. At the very least, trainees should be made aware of the resources that exist, via inclusion on a booklist, which can help them in their wrestling with their Christian values and those of the person-centered approach.

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No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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