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Citation for published version:

Georgiadou, L, Willis, A & Canavan, S 2015, 'An outfield at a cricket game': Integrating support provisions in counsellor education', *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, vol. 15, no. 4, pp. 289-297.
<https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12039>

Digital Object Identifier (DOI):

[10.1002/capr.12039](https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12039)

Link:

[Link to publication record in Edinburgh Research Explorer](#)

Document Version:

Peer reviewed version

Published In:

Counselling and Psychotherapy Research

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‘An outfield at a cricket game’: integrating support provisions in counsellor education.

Lorena Georgiadou, Alette Willis and Siobhan Canavan

Background: The demanding nature of counsellor education necessitates support provisions for trainees, which promote learning and development. While clinical and academic supervision, as well as personal therapy, can be important sources of support and learning, they are targeted at specific aspects of the trainee experience.

Aim: In this paper we examine the need for additional provisions that are integrative, phronetic and, though related to core training, separate from it, allowing trainees to bring together theory, personal experience and practice in a safe space. We present a study investigating student and staff experiences of using a system of ‘Personal Tutorials’ designed to provide phronetic and integrative support, which is in operation at our institution. Our study sought to explore the ways in which students made use of this system and what helped or hindered them in using it integratively.

Methodology: Focus groups were conducted with students, core staff and Personal Tutors involved in this provision. Data were analysed following a reflective team-based approach (Siltanen, Willis, & Scobie, 2008). **Findings:** Overall, trainees appreciated having a dedicated space to explore their learning with a non-assessing tutor and used this provision in a number of ways that advanced their personal and professional development. **Implications:** An external Personal Tutor seems to be providing trainees with an additional phronetic source of support that balances individual and group learning and advances the overall training experience.

Keywords:

Counselling training, trainee support, integration, pedagogy, mentoring

Introduction

Historically in Britain, counselling developed as a 'lay practice' (Bondi & Fewell, 2003), 'as something that people did, with little or no training, as part of another profession' (Dryden, Mearns, & Thorne, 2000, p. 471). Things have changed significantly in the past three decades. Nowadays, counsellor training is offered in universities, colleges of further education and by private training providers (Bondi, 2003); and professional bodies monitor training standards and accreditation to ensure quality service provision (Nolan, Macaskie, & Meekums, 2014). At the heart of the process of becoming a counsellor lies the Aristotelian concept of phronesis (Dunne, 1993, 2011), the idea that becoming a counsellor requires the development not just of technical skills but of embodied personal practical knowledge and wisdom. Phronesis entails the ability to act reflexively and ethically and can only be developed experientially, ideally with the support of someone who has already achieved mastery of that particular area of life (Flyvbjerg, 2001).

Despite the advances in the training field, there is little research on trainee counsellor experience (Grafanaki, 2010). One thing that is commonly reported, though, is that counsellor training is a strenuous process (Skovholt & Rønnestad, 2003; Truell, 2001). The demanding nature of training, alongside the ongoing need for highly developed reflexivity (Scaife, 2010; Wosket, 2010), calls for personal and professional support. This support advances learning by promoting personal and professional development, and monitors trainee fitness to practice, ultimately safeguarding clients (Barden, 2001; Turner, Gibson, Bennetts, & Hunt, 2008). To ensure ethical practice, programmes incorporate 'external' support provisions, in addition to the support available within the core training environment (e.g. personal development groups, academic tutorials).

External support can take various forms, one of which is clinical supervision. Regular supervision is a central requirement for membership in UK professional bodies and an inextricable component of any clinical work during training (BACP, 2010; COSCA, 2012). Supervision may take place in an agency or independently, in a group and/or individually with a qualified counsellor paid for by the trainee, with or without financial support from the agency in which the student is in practice (Henderson, 2009). Support can also be found in personal therapy, which can reduce trainee stress and provide a space to explore personal issues that emerge during training (Murphy, 2005; Rizq & Target, 2008). Influenced by the psychoanalytic belief that individuals who had not had been analysed themselves would not understand the power of the unconscious (Lasky, 2005), personal therapy was a mandatory element of accredited training until recently. In 2005, after considerable debate around its appropriateness for trainees (e.g. Murphy, 2005), the BACP dropped the criterion of 40 hours of personal therapy from their accreditation scheme, asking for evidence of trainee engagement with activities that increase self-awareness broadly (Malikiosi-Loizos, 2013).

It is important to note that the relationships developed in those environments (just like any relationship within core training) can be anxiety-provoking. Research shows that mandatory therapy, while an important ‘professional *rite de passage*’ (McLeod, 2009, p. 625), can generate anxiety for trainees who do not feel the need to be in therapy, cannot manage the emotional distress that might emerge, or who struggle with financial constraints (Macaskill & Macaskill, 1992; Malikiosi-Loizos, 2013). Similarly, trainees often perceive supervisors as gatekeepers who assess their practice and determine their progress and may be reluctant to share ‘bad’ practice (Barden, 2001; Dryden, 1994b; Mehr, Ladany, & Caskie, 2010).

Challenges in interpersonal relationships with peers, tutors, supervisors and personal therapists are to be expected and even welcomed in counsellor training. In order for such challenges to contribute to trainee development and lead to ‘transformational learning’, that is, learning based on critical self-reflection that leads to new understanding and action, they must be processed effectively (McQuaid, 2014). One of the questions this study seeks to answer is whether providing support to students that is separate from assessment and the core training relationships, and designed to follow individual pace and needs, facilitates such processing.

Moreover, support provisions in counsellor education tend to be ‘fragmented’: clinical supervision addresses practice-related matters, while therapy focuses on personal issues. Boundaries between counselling, supervision and training are important and require careful consideration, primarily to safeguard clients (Dryden, 1994a). Nonetheless, what is often missing, is a place outside the core training environment where trainees can bring together the different aspects of training and explore their overall experience of ‘developing as a counsellor both professionally and personally’ (Truell, 2001, p. 88).

The idea of integrating the different elements of counsellor education was initially put forward by Connor (1994, p. 26), who highlighted the importance of providing a ‘coherent and developmental framework’ that merges the various components of the learning experience. This integration usually takes place within the core training (e.g. in personal development/process groups) and individually (e.g. learning log). Our programme elaborates this pedagogy and provides trainees with an additional space to integrate their experience in the presence of one other person, a non-assessing practitioner-tutor. This study seeks to explore whether this provision is indeed facilitative and integrative.

Endorsing Grafanaki's (2010, p. 81) advocacy to 'captur[e] more accurately the reality of counselling training programmes today' and advance knowledge in the field, we explored the integrative, phronetic support provision that is in operation at our Institution, namely, the Personal Tutoring system. In what follows, we present our investigation of student and staff experiences of using this system, the benefits that accrued from its use and what helped or hindered trainees in using it to integrate their training experiences.

Methods

The Personal Tutoring system

The trainee support system examined here has been offered in our own professional programmes over the last 25 years. Trainees on our Diploma programmes are provided with an external Personal Tutor (PT)¹, who offers a setting for students to explore and integrate their experiences of the programme and of their placement. PTs are qualified, experienced practitioners who have in-depth knowledge of our programmes and experience of academic study. These tutorials are kept separate from the programme and have no assessment function. The agenda is open and students are invited to discuss any aspect of their training and learning they wish to bring. The Personal Tutorials are compulsory and the programme covers their cost. They have a distinct function from clinical supervision, which is also mandatory but not provided by the training programme, as well as from personal therapy, which while not mandatory, is recommended to our trainees.

¹ The title of this role changed to Professional Mentor in 2014 to differentiate it from the completely different University-wide system established in 2013 that also used the term 'Personal Tutor'.

Pedagogically, this system has its roots in the community education movement of the 1970s and 1980s and in the system used at the Scottish Institute of Human Relations, where the two original tutors on the programme trained². The aim of this system is to provide a space in which students can integrate learning and personal experiences away from the intensive group context in which they are immersed for most of their training. This respects students' needs for both social (interpersonal) and individual (intrapersonal) learning (Connor, 1994). By pairing students with experienced counsellors, it also provides a context for learning to occur through modelling, respecting the phronetic nature of the knowledge needed to practice as a counsellor (Dunne, 2011).

The frequency of student-PT meetings and the PTs' proximity to core training vary depending on the programme. For example, part-time students are offered fourteen sessions over two years of training. PTs support up to three students and meet as a group with core tutors twice a year to discuss general themes, but not individual students. On our full-time programme, by contrast, two PTs support the entire cohort, meet with each student monthly and with core tutors three times per year. In these core tutor meetings, individual students and their progress are discussed. Although these variations are minor, they helped us to discern what worked well and what worked less well³.

The research project

² Our understanding of the context for this system, its background, original conceptualisation and historical development, comes primarily from individual interviews with the two people who initiated it, both now retired from teaching, [names removed for peer review].

³ The first year that the full-time programme operated, the PTs were also the students' Practice and Process Groups tutors (educational groups where trainees present and explore their work with clients) and were therefore involved in assessment. This dual role was dropped the following year.

Qualitative research methods in the form of focus groups were employed in this study in keeping with its exploratory nature and our focus on experiences and processes. In terms of our positionality, one author was a core tutor on a professional programme employing PTs, the other two authors were research staff with no professional counselling training and wholly uninvolved in professional training. Ethics approval for this project was granted by the [name of institution removed] Research Ethics Committee and conformed with University and BACP ethical policies.

We held two focus groups of five students each and two groups of six and five Personal Tutors. Participants were recruited through an email sent to all students and Personal Tutors who had been and/or who were still involved in our professional training programmes during the past three years, explaining the aim and nature of this study and asking them to contact the research team should they wish to participate. Focus groups were organised based on participants' availability. We recruited from various full- and part-time programmes. While students could only discuss their experience as trainees, PTs were invited to discuss both their trainer and trainee experiences (where available). A final focus group was held with three core staff members who had experienced Personal Tutorials as trainees and who are currently in decision-making roles with relation to professional programmes. Focus groups took approximately one hour and were facilitated by authors 1 and 2 who had no role conflicts with any of the participants. Groups explored participants' experiences of using the groups, particularly as to what functions well and not so well in the model(s) they have used and their thoughts on what could be improved.

To generate data in a way congruent with the individual and group components of counsellor training, we employed a combination of individual reflection using sticky notes, which we collected; and group discussion, which we

recorded and transcribed verbatim. The group discussions enabled us to observe communication and meaning construction through social interaction (Barbour, 2008), as well as participants' consensus over the subject under investigation (Wilkinson, 1998). They were also anticipated to facilitate participants' cognitive processing, as listening to others' stories can promote further reflection and exploration of own experience (Morgan, 1997). All data was held confidentially and was anonymised. Data were analysed using a reflective team based approach (Siltanen, et al., 2008), in congruence with an ontology that values group and individual learning. This reflexive approach conceives of researchers, their perspectives and experiences as resources for interpreting data, and dialogue as a key process for collaboratively and reflexively building theoretical insights (Willis & Siltanen, 2009). The team collated the sticky notes inductively and then used the generated conceptual themes to guide the analysis of the focus group discussions. Subsequently, each member of the research team individual coded all transcripts. The team met regularly and discussed their respective coding, understanding and meaning-making process. Through these analytical discussions the team gradually reached higher conceptualisations of the existing data.

The summative findings arrived at through this collaborative, reflexive analysis are presented in the next section. The voices of students and Personal Tutors are blended, in line with the integrative methodological framework of the study. Quotations from the transcripts are included to provide illustrations of the points we outline.

Findings and Discussion

The uses students made of the Personal Tutorials

Overall, we found that PTs are experienced as a significant **source of support and learning** for students. Students use these tutorials to discuss a mixture of ‘**group stuff**’, concerns associated with peers and core tutors, and ‘**personal stuff**’, i.e. realisations about themselves. Students also reported discussing **client work** and counselling **theory and academic work**. So for the most part, students reported using PT sessions to discuss a range of topics, as illustrated below:

‘it does feel like a safe environment to say things and we can just talk about everything. I don’t feel like she has agenda for me to say certain things. I can talk about academic side of things and about my personal life and I just feel the kind of support I get from her has grown me better’

‘I found my tutor very useful as a sounding board to discuss ideas and the coursework and I found her really invaluable when we were working through the group work experience in the second semester cos I found that very tough going. And just discussing my own feelings about the group and what was happening with the group, what I was perceiving was happening with the group, was really, really useful’

This flexible use has the potential to bring elements of personal therapy, academic supervision and clinical supervision together within one context and one relationship, thereby enabling students to integrate these facets of their training experience, as these three students discuss:

‘P2: it was somewhere to pull all the strands together because you have supervision, which is quite an intense relationship as well but this was a place you could sort of stand above everything and talk - think about your supervision experiences, your client work, bits of the course, interpersonal stuff on the course, how you felt about the tutors, anything. It’s a place you could sort of –

P3: Pull it all together.

P2: Pull it all together and I'm not sure where else I would have done that.

P4: I agree. They help you locate yourself.'

Participants conceptualised PTs as a **dual bridge**: On the one hand, these tutorials bridged the different elements of training, integrating theory, experience and practice. At the same time, PTs provided a link between the intense, often inward-facing microcosm of the training experience and the macrocosm of the profession 'out there'. This PT, looking back at her own experience as a student who used Personal Tutorials, highlights this aspect:

'So it felt really important, this engagement with the profession (...) having conversations with other people in the profession, felt really important to me, if you think about layers, we were a small cohort within a thing and that's a kind of interface between these people who are the peripheral people and then the outside world of the counsellor'

In light of this, PTs were often seen as expert **mentors** offering insight and modelling what it may be like to practise as a counsellor.

In summary, many students used PTs as a place to integrate experiences from the various training opportunities and supports, as a place to process learning in a one-on-one context away from the intensity of group learning, and as a bridge between training and the wider world of counselling. However, a minority of students reported using PTs more narrowly, purely as a substitute for personal therapy or as a place to discuss academic work.

In the next two sections we look first at what helped students to make use of the PTs in integrative ways and at what might have got in the way.

What supports students in working integratively?

The previous section has already alluded to facilitative elements of the PT system.

The tutorials' **open agenda and flexibility** was appreciated by students and enabled them to integrate experiences. In order to provide such a flexible relationship, PTs themselves had to be **adaptable and capable** of meeting students in a variety of roles, as this student articulates:

'at times she's felt like a counsellor, at times like a supervisor, at times more academic element, you know, tutor and it's sort of just flowed between those things. Like you [another student] say, perhaps at different times related to my need as my need has changed'

Integration happens across time as well as across relationships and training elements. Thus, having a continuous relationship with a PT over the duration of training, while relationships with tutors, placement managers or peers came and went, was valued by students. As this student, nearing the end of her programme, explains, this **longitudinal relationship** helped her to develop her sense of identity as an emerging counsellor:

'I think there is something about it developing over the two years that's really valuable because they do - like you were saying about identity as that emerges and changes. They're with you and they see that, so it's quite valuable that it's a constant thread throughout the two years whereas actually placements changed, supervisors can change'

PTs conceptualised this process in terms of supporting the integration of identities and roles for the student. The following description from a PT highlights how the integration of identity over time develops personal professional wisdom:

'in the beginning it's more about being a student and then it becomes about being a trainee counsellor and then at some point it becomes about being a counsellor'

In order for students to use Personal Tutorials to integrate their learning and develop personal professional wisdom they need to feel able to *'be themselves'* and to discuss openly any difficulties they faced. In other areas of their training, the spectre of assessment could impede students' self-development, as this student states:

'inevitably everybody else that you meet on the course in one way or another is evaluating us for our suitability for becoming a counsellor and, as so much of this is personal development, there's a sense of scrutiny, even if it's done very nicely and whatever. I didn't have a feeling like that with the personal tutor'

PTs also highlighted the importance of **not being involved in the students' assessment**. Having a 'third position' allowed them to offer the distant space and support that students may need during an often *'very claustrophobic'* training.

That said, working with PTs was also experienced as **challenging** at times, just like any peer, tutor and supervisory relationship. Interestingly, this was perceived as a valuable element of the system that promoted learning and overall development. For example, the PTs' open agenda required trainees to take responsibility over their learning, an element appreciated by students. In one case, an international student found the relationship very difficult as she felt that cultural differences prevented her PT from *'getting her'*. Nonetheless by persevering, she eventually found a way of making good use of that space for personal and professional development.

We end this section with a quotation from a PT about what it feels like towards the end of a relationship with a student, when the process works:

'it feels like a natural process of moving on (...) I do feel like if it was a game of cricket, I'd be an outfield. Sometimes it's about getting the ball thrown back in and towards the end, the ball is in play. They don't need me to help them with that, they're doing it'

The above excerpt, which gave birth to the title of this paper, accurately describes the PTs' role: they are at some distance from the programme but still part of it, helping to contain the ball and develop the play that the central players (students) must ultimately carry out to 'win' the game.

What could get in the way?

Like any provision, the Personal Tutoring system has some limitations. To a certain extent, what got in the way of effective PT relationships were things that prevented all the facilitative elements discussed above from being present. PT relationships were impeded if students did not feel they could be themselves. The following quotation from a PT presents her experience of a situation when she occupied two roles, one of which involved **assessment**:

'this was a major issue, I think probably both for the students and for the staff. The students certainly fed back to me that they found it very difficult that we would meet them as Personal Tutors on the Monday say and then on the Tuesday we were doing Practice and Process Groups with them and we then had to make that switch, that this person who was their Personal Tutor is then somebody who's actually doing PPG work with them and has an assessment role.'

Likewise, students strongly preferred that none of what they said to their PT was shared with core tutors. Complexities surrounding **confidentiality** also arose when only two PTs were responsible for all students on one programme and heard incidents from different tutees. This was often challenging for PTs to manage. Similarly, one student mentioned that she felt unable to openly discuss group-work material, because

of a constant awareness that her peers shared the same PT. Her fears were not ungrounded, as this discussion between PTs illustrates:

'P4: I suppose it stirs up my imagination as well when a student is talking about another student and I find myself thinking, oh who is that? So when we're seeing six students out of twelve, we're each seeing half the course and it's a lot.

P3: It's hard not to know who they're talking about'

As discussed above, the **longitudinal relationship** worked in most cases.

Nonetheless, if a student took a long time to finish her practice hours, took a leave of absence, or used up too many meetings early on it could be difficult to maintain the relationship constructively over the entire period. This Personal Tutor discloses the impact that this may have:

'I'm already negotiating with somebody who's going to take an extra year to finish their hours (...) how we're gonna spread the tutorials out over that time. I think once the course ends, there's a real serious question about where the holding takes place (...) you're talking about spreading what's usually done in seven over two years, spreading them out, the gap's big. That's not real holding.'

Bringing academic learning to PTs was impeded for some students who felt that their PT **did not understand the requirements** of the academic programme or who did not have **sufficient background** in a particular theoretical orientation. While the **flexibility** of the PT system was found to be amongst its strongest assets, it could also cause confusion amongst students struggling to understand expectations around their use of the system and the role of PTs. Many students reported that they were not provided with any clarity on how to use the Personal Tutorials; as a consequence, some felt that they were just another 'box to tick' in a context of multiple demands on their limited time and therefore resented their mandatory nature:

'I could have used some more guidance at the very beginning because- it's mostly an issue of time, because, I'm working practically full time so for me to take one hour off for something, I need to jiggle and juggle (...) So I wanted to know very clearly, OK, you think it's necessary, tell me why'

Thoughts Towards Integrative Support in Practice

Our findings demonstrate that students generally experience PTs as supportive. In providing longitudinal, integrated support, PTs assist trainees in processing their learning experiences into personal practical wisdom. It is important to highlight that PTs are not experienced or used as a comforting 'ally' against the challenging tutor- and peer-relationships. Just as any other training relationship (McQuaid, 2014), Personal Tutors offer a demanding, thought-provoking space that requires trainee commitment and agency.

Pedagogically, this system aims to provide an overarching source of support, a place in which students can integrate their learning, and a bridge to the wider world of professional counselling. Having an ongoing relationship with a mentor, who can model good practice and support students across the span of their training, provides students with a consistent relational structure within which to develop as professionals. In that sense, Personal Tutors can be seen as similar to clinical supervisors and personal therapists who may function as a model to the professional role (McLeod, 2009). The difference, however, and hence the value of the Personal Tutorials, is their flexible nature and open agenda. While supervisors focus on clinical practice and therapists on personal issues, PTs allow trainees to explore the totality of their training experience and integrate the various parts. To an extent, Personal Tutorials can also be paralleled to personal development/process groups which have

no agenda but aim to facilitate an exploration of trainees' experiences of the course and of relating to each other (Rose, 2008). Again, the uniqueness of the PT system lies in that they allow further explorations of a similar nature in a one-on-one environment.

Phronesis, or personal practical wisdom, needs to be developed experientially in a relational context that facilitates exchanges between experienced counsellors and trainees. With increasing time and commitment pressures on core teaching staff in HEIs, who have less and less time to keep up with their own practice as counsellors and to meet with trainees on a one-to-one basis, external PTs can be an invaluable resource. As one core tutor reflects:

'[Personal Tutors] are on the whole much more plugged into practice than most of us. They're working over a number of agencies, they're working as agency managers, they're plugged into professional bodies and all kinds of things and I thought, what a fantastic resource that we have this army of assistants (...) our students are really lucky that they have this. They don't just have this small group in the academy (...) they actually have access to these incredibly experienced people who are out in the field.'

Finally, our study showed us that the role of PTs needs to be flexible and adaptable over the course of the training, and that clear boundaries separating PTs from any assessment role is key. This is in line with existing literature on personal development groups (McQuaid, 2014; Rose, 2008) and supervisory relationships (Mehr, et al., 2010). At the same time, PTs also need to know enough about the programme to be useful resources for its students. This aligns with, and elaborates Truell's (2001, p. 87) suggestion of incorporating a 'non-assessing staff member' in the training curriculum who, by being familiar with 'the stresses and difficulties of counselling training', can normalise the trainee experience and decrease anxiety. As explained

earlier, the role of the PTs is not to minimise the intensity of the training experience, but to offer a safe space where this can be processed and integrated ultimately enhancing practice.

In conclusion, our work suggests that an external Personal Tutor can provide an additional source of support during training and functions as a unique learning facilitator on the journey of becoming a counsellor.

Implications for Training

There are wider implications of our research for counselling training: First, the ongoing debate regarding trainees being in therapy during training or programmes offering a robust system of non-assessing tutors in place merits further examination. This is at the level of individual programmes and with validating agencies. The cost of engaging in therapy can be prohibitive for many students; a personal tutoring system which is embedded in the training programme enables a separate space for students to explore the personal impact of the training on their lives as it relates to their practice and academic development. Second, a personal tutor system as we have described, separates academic assessment from personal development whilst holding both processes within the training institution. Counselling training is a complex and demanding process. Models of personal tutoring described in our research offer one possibility for an enhancement of student experience which can, ultimately, improve counselling practice by having more self-aware, reflexive practitioners.

To conclude, by sharing our practices we are by no means advocating that Personal Tutorials are the only way to facilitate integrative, assessment-free individualised support for counsellors in training. We do hope, however, that our

experience will feed a dialogue within the counsellor training community on the subject of phronetic trainee support and development.

Acknowledgments

Will be added after the peer review process

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