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The perceived impact of counselling training on students' personal relationships

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Abstract

Background: Despite the urban myth of "the divorce course," there is little research to support this perception of counselling training programmes. Studies exploring the lived experiences of counsellors in training have referred to relationship changes, but none have made these their primary focus. Research is needed to enhance our understanding of this formative stage for counsellors.

Aims: The purpose of this ideographic study is to gain new perspectives on the perceived impact of counselling training on trainees' personal relationships by exploring the lived experiences of five counsellors who completed their training in the last 18 months.

Method: Through a process of volunteer and snowball sampling, qualified counsellors were invited to participate in individual semistructured interviews, which were recorded and transcribed. Due to the small sample size and the emphasis on how each participant made meaning of their own experience, interpretative phenomenological analysis was chosen to interpret the findings.

Findings: Detailed analysis and interpretation of the data filtered into two superordinate themes:

1. permission to change; and
2. the challenge of integration.

Conclusion: The data revealed that training had a significant multifaceted impact on the personal relationships of all participants. Participants' experience of their training group and of personal therapy was found to be an important factor in this change, as were themes of agency and identity. The majority of ruptures in extant relationships took place early in training. Further research is needed, perhaps into the experiences of loved ones in relationships with student counsellors.

KEYWORDS
change, counselling training, divorce course, identity, relationships

1 | INTRODUCTION

This study was designed to find out more about the perceived impact of counselling training on students' personal relationships. The ability of counselling students to begin, sustain and nurture a therapeutic relationship is key to the well-being of clients and the effectiveness of therapy (Duncan et al., 2010; Garfield, 1957; Hoch, 1955; Lambert & Barley, 2001; Rozenzweig, 1936; Watson, 1940). However, personal relationships of a student are different to a therapeutic relationship. The therapeutic relationship is developed for the benefit of the client (Bayne & Jinks, 2010), but the student's social relationships may reside anywhere on a spectrum of reciprocity. Each therapeutic relationship is built within the safety of professional boundaries, usually set out in contracts at the beginning of counselling (Hough, 2014). However, the student's personal relationships are likely to be built on the organic growth of trust over time and the boundaries may be less clear. As students learn about the contracting of a therapeutic relationship, they may begin to consider re-contracting other relationships in their lives and setting new boundaries (Kennedy & Black, 2010; Rath, 2008). Students may go about a conscious, deliberate process of change, but they may also react unconsciously to the training.

2 | LITERATURE REVIEW

Since calls for further research into therapy training in the early 2000s (Fauth et al., 2007; Rønnestad & Ladany, 2006), many studies have explored the lived experience of counsellors in training (Barton, 2019; Chae & Choi, 2015; Pascual-Leone et al., 2013; Råbu et al., 2016; Ray et al., 2021). This research has revealed much about the emotional demands of training (Folkes-Skinner et al., 2010) and the hidden challenges of embarking upon the transition into being a professional counsellor (Rønnestad & Skovholt, 2003). Further studies have shown that trainees undergo changes in their interpersonal skills (Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Pearson & Weinberg, 2017) and in their relationships (Pierce, 2016; Rath, 2008; Truell, 2001). A detailed exploration of students' experiences and interpretations of the reasons for relationship change is lacking in the existing literature. It is therefore an area worth exploring, with the potential to influence student engagement, premature departure from courses, counsellors' well-being and even client outcomes.

2.1 | Relationships and well-being

It is argued that humans "are evolutionarily hard-wired to heal and be healed by human connection and social interaction" (Elkins, 2016, p. 51). This is supported by social pain theory (MacDonald & Leary, 2005), which indicates that the pain we feel from social exclusion makes evolutionary sense as a survival mechanism. Furthermore, studies have shown that pain from physical injury and pain of social rejection are processed in the same neural regions of

Implications for Practice and Policy

- Participants repeatedly stated that their personal relationships were affected by their experiences of being a client in a counselling relationship whilst training. For some participants, personal therapy enabled them to disentangle their thoughts before addressing them with loved ones. For others, it gave them a safe space to work through relational challenges provoked by the training. The findings of this study reinforce the idea that personal therapy whilst training is important for the self-development of counselling students.

- The findings suggest that difficult group training experiences may present opportunities for students to learn about how they relate to others, particularly where other sources of support (such as personal therapy) are available. Equally, the findings enhance previous research, which found that a supportive training environment may improve students' self-esteem. Furthermore, this study indicates that an open, accepting training environment can be beneficial for students' personal relationships by improving interpersonal skills, building self-acceptance and enabling greater openness with others.

- Significantly, this study was only able to explore the trainee counsellors' experiences but not those of their relatives, friends or partners. To improve our understanding of the perceived impact of training, further research could explore the experiences of those who are in relationships with trainee counsellors.

- The current study could be utilised to enhance the information presented to prospective counselling students. Offering applicants insight into the perceived impact of training on the participants' personal relationships could help prospective students make an informed choice about whether they wish to pursue counselling training at this point in their lives.

the brain (Eisenberger & Lieberman, 2005; Zhang et al., 2020). This research points strongly to the centrality of relationships to our physical and mental well-being.

The definition of "relationship" (collinsdictionary.com [2021]) includes how we "behave" and how we "feel" about another person. Throughout counselling training, our behaviour and feelings are under the microscope. How a student experiences this may affect their relationships, their well-being and their work.

The connection between personal well-being and our relationships is supported by numerous studies (Castro & Zautra, 2016; Mental Health Foundation, 2016; Umberson & Montez, 2010). One 2020 study found that vicarious trauma for practitioners can affect their interpersonal relationships (Black & Weinreich, 2000). Furthermore, studies indicate that counsellor wellness is an

indicator of client outcome (Witmer & Young, 1996) and that investment in the wellness of students is needed to reduce the likelihood of counsellor impairment (Roach & Young, 2007). Recently, numerous studies have emphasised the importance of teaching self-care in counselling programmes (Aydin & Odaci, 2020; Barton, 2019; Butts & Gutierrez, 2018; Christopher & Maris, 2010; Colman et al., 2016; Guler & Ceyhan, 2020). There is a cyclical nature to this point: each counsellor's well-being may affect their personal relationships and vice versa, which may also have an impact on client work, which may affect a counsellor's well-being and relationships.

2.2 | Boundaries and self-care

It is part of our responsibility to clients to take care of our own well-being (Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions, 2018, p. 27), and setting appropriate boundaries in relationships is part of this self-care. Counselling students may consider setting boundaries with their time and emotional resources in order to cope with the demands of training. Participants of one study reported positive gains in terms of "selective investment of personal energy into relationships" and "better boundaries" (Kennedy & Black, 2010, pp. 429–430). However, a more recent study showed that some participants left their course "feeling unable to put in adequate boundaries that would enable them to enjoy 'normal' family life" (Barton, 2019, p. 521). Whilst the idea of "normal family life" is inherently problematic given the variation within families, Barton's finding has concerning implications for the well-being of counsellors and their loved ones.

Furthermore, there is evidence to suggest that the influx of new theories can be disruptive to students' relationships (Truell, 2001, p. 77). This raises questions about how students apply theory to their personal lives and how this is received by their loved ones. Students are navigating a complex balancing act of integrating the personal change demanded of them, whilst maintaining boundaries between their learning and their personal lives. This may require patience, hope and flexibility from those that love them, just as it requires those things of the student themselves.

2.3 | Communication

Despite the many differences between the therapeutic relationship and the personal relationships of counsellors, there are common threads of interpersonal and intrapersonal skills required to form and maintain relationships. Several studies have shown that these skills, when combined with the personality of the counsellor, have the greatest influence on the therapeutic experience of the client (De Stefano et al., 2010; Rieck & Callahan, 2013). By learning these skills and observing how they affect the therapeutic relationship, counselling students may be inspired to make positive changes to how they relate to others in their personal lives.

In one study, researchers used grounded theory to analyse the written descriptions of 24 undergraduate students' experiences of existential psychotherapy training. Almost every participant noted developments in "interacting and relating to others, both in a counseling context as well as in a personal context" (Pascual-Leone et al., 2012, p. 12). This analysis was carried out by the participants' tutor, which perhaps presents some questions about subjective interpretation, but credibility checks were carried out to address this. A further and larger study carried out the following year by Pascual-Leone et al. (2013) found that most graduate participants noticed benefits in their communication with others. Both undergraduate and postgraduate students reported benefits to their romantic relationships. The study is not generalisable as it was limited to the students of one specific training programme, but it provides us with a strong sense of the possible impact of training on students' relationships.

2.4 | Emotional intelligence

Skills practice gives students the opportunity to notice their own feelings and practise responding, rather than reacting to the client: a reflexive process which some argue is a form of emotional intelligence (Salovey & Mayer, 1990, p. 189). One small-scale study found emotional intelligence to be an important factor for counsellors in "achieving better therapist-rated outcome results and lower drop-out rates" (Kaplowitz et al., 2011, p. 1). In 2017, Weinberg and Pearson studied the impact of counselling training on the emotional intelligence of counselling students. The authors found that training had advanced the "intra- and interpersonal aspects of emotional functioning" in the participants (Pearson & Weinberg, 2017). The small sample size of the study and the lack of any control group are noted as limitations, but, nevertheless, this research gives us insight into how training enhances students' emotional intelligence.

Significantly, one review of the research into emotional intelligence in 2011 concluded that participants with higher levels of emotional intelligence had better quality relationships (Brackett et al., 2011), although the authors note that "how emotional intelligence contributes to relationship quality and satisfaction is still unknown" (Brackett et al., 2011). This suggests that there is more to discover about the way that emotional intelligence developed during training affects the personal relationships of counselling students.

2.5 | Safety and experimentation

It is argued that interactions between students in group work "could be a catalyst to students'" interpersonal growth (Goodrich, 2008, p. 227). One interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) showed that a participant's experience of acceptance and support in their training group had lasting consequences in terms of self-worth and emotional security (Duncan & Reid, 2019). Whilst the authors note that the findings are not generalisable, the ideographic approach they used provides a nuanced interpretation of the participants' lived experiences.

Furthermore, a recent study reviewing the literature about "self-esteem and the quality of romantic relationships" found evidence that high self-esteem "benefits relationships" (Erol & Orth, 2016). Whilst the authors acknowledge that further research is required, this finding suggests that a positive experience of a training group may boost self-esteem, which can also improve relationship quality.

By contrast, difficult interactions with peers and tutors may have a disruptive impact on students' personal relationships. One participant in Truell's study described how a particular exercise with a tutor was an "awful experience" that "did not help" her difficult relationship with her mother (Truell, 2001, p. 79). Another qualitative study asked 11 student counsellors from two training programmes to keep a journal about their personal development groups. The article concluded that a feeling of safety is required in order for counselling students to "take the risk of learning about themselves or others" (Robson & Robson, 2008, p. 380). The importance of being heard and accepted by others was also highlighted as important to feeling safe. This suggests that when counselling students experience a training environment in which they feel safe and accepted, they are more likely to experiment with changes in how they relate to others and themselves.

2.6 | Rationale for study

This study is intended to respond to the call by Pascual-Leone et al. (2013, p. 579) for research into the "personal, interpersonal, and reflexive changes that trainees undergo as a critical, albeit largely undeclared, product of psychotherapist training." An exploration of the way that training affects trainees' relationships could tell us a great deal about these hidden changes.

Some authors suggest that the counsellor's "use of self" makes a difference to therapy (Rowan & Jacobs, 2003; Sleater & Scheiner, 2019). Furthermore, it is argued that a student's sense of self may alter significantly due to "the 'shock' of exposure to and immersion in therapeutic practices" (Råbu et al., 2016). New perspectives about students' relationships during training could deepen our understanding of how the therapist's "use of self" is developed.

Although several studies have indicated that students' relationships may change during training, this researcher was unable to find any research specifically focussed on students' perceptions of the impact of training on their relationships. The proposed study aims to gain insight into this topic in the context of wider research concerned with supporting students through the transition of becoming a counsellor. It is hoped that the findings will be of interest to training institutions, prospective students, student counsellors and the wider counselling profession.

2.7 | Rationale for approach

A qualitative phenomenological method was chosen for this study, since the lived experience of the participants lies at its heart.

Thematic analysis was considered, but it was felt that analysis using themes from the literature would divert the study from its hermeneutic roots. Grounded theory would have been suitable epistemologically, but it was felt to be impractical in the time available for this research. Consequently, IPA was chosen because this approach generates themes from the transcripts themselves, maintaining an intimate connection to the participant's own meaning-making. In order "to capture particular experiences as experienced for particular people" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 16), a small sample size of five participants was chosen, enabling the author to maintain the detailed ideographic focus required by IPA. This process supported the original intention to stay as close as possible to the participants' experiences and meaning-making.

3 | METHOD

3.1 | Participants

I recruited participants through a process of volunteer and snowball sampling, which utilised my professional connections. Three participants had attended the same training programme as I did but on a different day and in a different group. Two participants were trained on different training programmes, but all had received training in integrative counselling and qualified within the last 18 months.

3.2 | Ethical considerations

The University of East London's Ethics Committee approved the ethics approval application for this study. This addressed considerations such as confidentiality, data protection, risk assessment and participant consent. All necessary steps were taken throughout the research to reduce any risk of harm to the participants. Potential participants were sent an information letter to ensure that they understood the research and the interview process. They were also sent a consent form so that they could choose whether they wished to give their individual consent to the process before each interview took place. In the interest of participants' safety and confidentiality, this study was carried out in accordance with UEL guidance on data protection and the UK government's guide to data protection regulations. No payment was made to participants for their participation.

3.3 | Interviews

Each participant was invited to an individual semistructured interview lasting approximately 1 hr to enable participants to explore their experiences in depth. I asked minimal open questions, attempting to maintain a facilitative and curious voice as researcher. All of the participants were asked the following questions as prompts:

1. What was the impact on your personal relationships of undertaking counselling training?
2. How did learning specific counselling or psychotherapy theories affect your personal relationships?
3. In what ways did interacting with counselling tutors and peers change your personal relationships outside the course?
4. How did regular counselling skills practice affect communication in your personal relationships?
5. What changes did you notice in your relationship with yourself whilst undergoing counselling training?

In addition to these questions, I sometimes asked for specific examples where these were not offered. I also checked I had heard and understood the interviewee where there was any ambiguity. This was an important factor in maintaining a conscious focus on the participant's individual experience, rather than allowing my own interpretation to fill gaps or obscured words during transcription.

Due to the coronavirus pandemic, interviews took place online via Microsoft Teams, on which data are encrypted to protect participants' confidentiality. Transcription of the recordings took place in a private location, and data were kept on a password-protected device with up-to-date virus protection. This device was kept in a locked filing cabinet when not in use. All names were changed to pseudonyms, and identifying features were removed to maintain participants' confidentiality. Participants' details were not shared with anyone, and consent forms were stored separately. Only each individual participant, my supervisor Dr Suzannah Hill and I have access to their original recordings and transcripts. The data will be retained for a maximum of 10 years after the study.

3.4 | Reflexive statement

My axiological position is as an "insider" researcher (Kanuha, 2000): I am a qualified counsellor who recently completed training and someone whose training had a transformative impact on my relationships. I therefore may have benefitted from some of the "insider" advantages suggested by researchers, such as gaining greater depth in the interviews (Talbot, 1998–1999) and having "preunderstandings" about the area of study (Brannick & Coghlan, 2007, pp. 68–9). However, this complete membership role (Adler & Adler, 1987) presents the challenge of how to prevent my familiarity with the participants' experiences from unduly influencing my interpretation of the transcripts (Chavez, 2008).

To mitigate this, I interviewed participants with whom I had not trained prior to qualification as this provided me with some distance from their stories. Because developing awareness of positionality is a central component of carrying out ethical research (Sultana, 2007), I also wrote notes throughout the process as recommended (Holmes, 2020, p. 2) in order to explore and bracket my own preconceptions. This helped me to maintain focus on the participants' own individual experiences and engage in a process of "radical looking, making the familiar strange" (Clough & Nutbrown, 2012, p. 47). This reflexive attitude is, of course, required of all researchers, since "personhood cannot be left behind, cannot be left out of the research process" (Stanley & Wise, 1993, p. 161) and the researcher's interpretation is part of the hermeneutic circle of analysis (Smith et al., 2009). The reflexive notes limited the influence of the unconscious template of my own experience and provided me with a reflexive space to consciously evaluate the process.

3.5 | Analytical approach

Using a circular process of listening, reading, notating and writing reflectively, patterns of linguistic, descriptive and conceptual ideas became apparent. Through this iterative process, various "emergent themes" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96) formed, which told me something about what mattered to each participant and their interpretation of their experience. I then moved towards "abstraction" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96), in which I searched for patterns across the themes I found before. I used various creative methods, including cutting up lists of themes and moving them around to find "families" of similar concepts. These themes fell into two "super-ordinate themes" (Smith et al., 2009, p. 96) within which emergent themes were grouped. Finally, I attempted to interpret and make meaning from each participant's interpretation (or meaning-making) of their experiences, creating the double hermeneutic (Smith et al., 2009, p. 35) at the heart of IPA research.

4 | RESULTS

The two superordinate themes are explored below, followed in turn by the interrelated subordinate themes which grouped around them. These are discussed with extracts from the transcripts. The participants are referred to by their pseudonyms: Lucy, George, Freya, Ruby and Chris.

Superordinate Themes	Subordinate Themes	Participants
Permission to change	New perspectives and early ruptures	New perspectives: all participants Specific examples of early ruptures from Freya, Lucy and Ruby
	Experimenting with new ways of relating	All participants Specific examples from George, Lucy and Chris
The challenge of integration	Congruence and the unconscious current	Examples from all participants
	Shifts in self-concept	Examples from all participants

4.1 | Superordinate theme 1: permission to change

All participants explained that the training gave them the insight and courage to adapt their personal relationships. For several participants, training expedited ruptures in existing relationships. Present in all interviews was a sense of relief and liberation through learning new ways of relating to others.

4.1.1 | New perspectives and early ruptures

All participants said that training provided them with new perspectives on existing personal relationships. Three participants experienced ruptures in significant relationships early in training. Freya separated from her partner of four years: "literally as soon as [she] got accepted onto the course." The emphasis on immediacy here suggests that this was a powerful catalyst, providing Freya with the impetus to change. The second rupture was with her mother just before training:

> Deciding to do the course made me realise that I couldn't have contact with her.

The approaching start of the course appears to have given Freya insight into her needs, motivating her to impose boundaries and take care of her well-being.

Lucy describes how her romantic relationship finished at the start of the course. Whilst she says she did not understand it then, she later understood it as a "serious [...] mis-match of attachment styles." This suggests that there may be a significant unconscious impact at the start of training as a counsellor, which is perhaps unveiled or reinterpreted as the training progresses.

Ruby explains that, within the first few months of the course, she had a significant rupture with her father with whom she had "never had a particularly great relationship." Despite this, she explains, "there was always something that kept [her] there." She says:

> ...becoming a counsellor and personal therapy has kind of given me the courage to be brave, to speak out about: Actually this isn't acceptable. This isn't what I want.

The combination of training and personal therapy gave Ruby space to explore what it was that "kept her" in her relationship with her father and reminded her of her autonomy. Ruby's repeated references to personal therapy throughout her interview illustrate that it was an important factor in the impact of training on her personal relationships.

Ruby and Freya both developed new perspectives on existing friendships, which led to ruptures in the first year of training. Ruby says:

> I can look back on relationships and kind of go... yeah, something about my self-worth that I allowed certain things, 'cause there was a [...] fear.

Training appears to have given Ruby the confidence to overcome fear and demand more from her relationships. This suggests that her self-worth has increased and the power imbalance in her relationships is changing.

Freya describes having "a very different response" to an argument with a friend due to the "cathartic process" of journal-writing in her first year. Whilst she says she would have blamed herself before training, now she is reassured that she has behaved in accordance with her own values.

> I feel quite confident in what I've done. She's not very happy about it but I own it and I'm responsible for it.

Freya's expression of confidence illustrates a shift from seeking external validation to being able to offer herself internal validation. It is notable that the rupture with Freya's friend followed "tension" about Freya's decision to train as a counsellor, a difficulty she also experienced with her mother, who she says: "didn't want [her] to explore any further." This suggests that students' loved ones may struggle with their choice to study counselling and this may be a source of disruption for these relationships.

4.1.2 | : Experimenting with new ways of relating

All participants explained that training gave them a sense of agency to try new ways of being within their personal relationships. George describes finding he has "wiggle room," "freedom" and "room to manoeuvre." He repeats this last phrase several times in his interview, highlighting his feeling of liberation from old roles in relationships. He goes on to describe several instances in which he noticed an old pattern of relating and tried something new. In one example, he recounts how his mother's behaviour irritated him:

> I'd been pulled in and then I was acting like I was when I was fourteen [...] and then I actually sat down and thought and I said: 'Well no, I'm not going to do that. I'm going to carry on doing what an adult would do and I'm going to talk it through in a mature manner and be polite and see where it goes from there' and then the...the thing resolved itself.

The insight he has gained about his "perception of the family system" through training has given George the opportunity to try new ways of relating. George explains that, for him, "one of the biggest impacts is [...] re-establishing relationships." The word "re-establishing" suggests something affirming in which a relationship is being rebuilt: reformed on new terms. This is echoed by Lucy, who explains that learning transactional analysis has helped her to "understand the dynamics, the power dynamics and, yeah, to not get stuck in either one [role]." To some extent, this counters the stigmatising stereotype of the divorce course through an example in which participants are inspired to "re-contract" or recreate, rather than dissolve their relationships.

Lucy describes how her experience of "honesty and vulnerability and support" on the course highlighted things that might be missing from some of her personal relationships. She recounts trying to "encourage it a little bit… to say it's ok to feel shit and to share when I do and kind of, you know, lead by example." It is clear that, for some participants, enriching experiences in their training group made it possible for them to experiment with changes in their personal relationships.

In talking about his past role in relationships, Chris describes how he had always been "so much happier being the listener." However, his experience of trying to be as "open and honest as possible" on the course has helped him to "share a bit more" in his personal relationships. Chris' experience of being accepted in a "supportive kind of group dynamic" has enabled him to take risks and express himself in his personal relationships outside the course. For Chris, this is an "uncomfortable thing to do," as suggested by how he stumbles a little over the phrase "a bit… a bit more vocal," demonstrating the continuing struggle to voice his perspective. Nevertheless, Chris says "there's value in doing it." Similarly, Lucy explains that she does not "like to be vulnerable" but that attending her "own counselling" and "being a client" had the biggest impact on her personal relationships. This underlines the importance of personal therapy and skills practice in helping students reflect on how they relate to others and, consequently, try new ways of being in relationships.

For Chris, however, having personal therapy whilst training became a source of tension in his romantic relationship. When he explained that he wanted to keep elements of his counselling sessions private, his partner found this "more difficult" than other aspects of training. Chris talked about this several times with his partner, listening carefully and then reframing what he was saying. After this, his partner "saw the value in that process" and "was a lot more comfortable." Chris' experience highlights the way that personal therapy whilst training may have a disruptive impact, but also suggests that this can be navigated successfully through thoughtful communication.

4.2 | Superordinate theme 2: the challenge of integration

All participants describe their struggle to find a way to be themselves whilst integrating a counsellor self. This is both an internal search for identity and the cause of external conflict with others. It is influenced by the preconceptions of the counselling trainees and their loved ones. The challenge of integration for the participants involves navigating their relationships and their sense of self through a period of great personal change.

4.2.1 | Congruence and the unconscious current

In several interviews, participants use a liquid motif to illustrate that training affects all aspects of a trainee's life. Lucy explains that the process "permeates everything," and Ruby describes how the learning "spills out into personal life." Freya remembers that "it was the

[…] subtle undercurrent of the course that really changed […] the relationships." She later goes on to say:

> I'm not really doing a job. I am who I am and then that filters through to every interaction that I'm having with people.

This level of congruence suits Freya, who finds it simple and authentic: "It makes it easier for me not to have to remember [makes quotation signs with fingers and uses a deeper voice] who I'm supposed to be." As reflected in her body language here, Freya expresses fatigue with maintaining false selves to suit societal expectations. The training has enabled Freya to be one integrated self in many different contexts.

The water motif suggests a level of helplessness for the trainees: it is impossible and perhaps undesirable to extricate their learning entirely from their personal relationships. Lucy expresses this here:

> If your knowledge of yourself has changed then, inevitably, the way that you interact with others will change.

This creates a complicated challenge for some participants who experience a conflict between a desire for authenticity and a fear of allowing their counsellor self into their personal lives. Chris expresses concern about "clientising" loved ones but at the same time fears "playing a role" when being a counsellor and creating a "sense of inauthenticity." There is a desire to be more himself when he is counselling but bring less counselling into his personal life. George also experiences this "conflict," explaining that:

> You've got the counselling side skills and the listening but then they're your friends as well.

There is an ambivalence between incorporating the new learning and maintaining a former way of being in existing relationships. Lucy expresses this concern when talking about the temptation to analyse her friends and family:

> I think you do have to be quite careful because […] I can see how you could get a bit superior with it about: [she puts on a voice] 'Wow! I can see your problem's this.'

Lucy is searching for a balance: allowing some helpful self-awareness to influence personal relationships whilst not engaging in any self-aggrandising or didactic behaviour as a result of training.

4.2.2 | Shifts in self-concept

All participants recount times when they have doubted themselves or felt self-conscious whilst training. For George, being in the training group influenced his relationship with himself:

> How am I…? It's a bit like… and I sort of… tried to ad-
> just. How do I fit in this group? And then I was like:
> 'Hang on! Just… you've just got to be yourself!' And
> that's what I did.

In the broken, unfinished phrases at the start, there is a sense of awkward confusion about identity and belonging. Perhaps the split-ting of self is reflected in the splitting of the phrases. However, this awkward speech settles into fluid prose towards the end, reflecting George's growing self-acceptance and congruence.

Freya recalls her first impressions at the start of the course:

> They were social workers, they all work in the men-
> tal health field, and I was a self-employed hairdresser,
> who'd just spent the summer cleaning toilets.

This comparison indicates a self-consciousness about these differences in professional background. She goes on to say: "There was a slight feeling of: I shouldn't really be here, should I?" It ap-pears Freya felt like an outsider or fraud, and this is highlighted when describing her family background: "By rights, I shouldn't be a psychotherapist." This suggests that she had a preconception of psychotherapists which she felt she did not fit. However, to-wards the end of the interview, Freya explains that she has "just become more at ease with who [she is]" and has developed a way of being a counsellor that fits her sense of self. There is developing self-acceptance combined with a tangible sense of achievement in overcoming the difficulties she has faced whilst training. This feeds into her personal relationships in which she is now confident to "state her needs," owning who she is and what she wants from life.

For other participants, the difficulty of integrating a counsellor self is exacerbated by their relationships. Lucy describes how a com-bination of other people's "derogatory" comments and her own "pro-jection and insecurity" left her preoccupied with their judgements of her. In a "highly emotional situation" she describes, Lucy remembers asking herself:

> Am I being a therapy person here?

This raises the question of what it means to be "a therapy person." In a sense, Lucy answers her own question, saying: "There's that blur-ring." This metaphor illustrates her sense that it is impossible to draw clear lines between the counsellor self and the rest of the self. It high-lights the complex nature of professional training that requires per-sonal development and suggests that shifts in self-concept may muddy the waters of existing relationships.

Chris also worries about the judgements of his friends and family and imagines them thinking: "I hate to think what he's like as a coun-sellor!" However, as the course progresses, he describes "coming to much more of a place of acceptance" and "being much more self-compassionate in terms of that journey." There is a sense that Chris has internalised the core conditions (Rogers, 1957) and is learning to

apply them to himself. The training is changing his relationship with himself.

Both Ruby and Chris remember puzzling over what drew them to training. Chris expresses concern that he might be trying to solve "some internal kind of conflict," and Ruby fears being "a damaged person, this wounded healer" early in her training. However, the self-acceptance Chris later develops is mirrored by Ruby's realisation that therapists' wounds "give us a much deeper understanding and knowledge of ourselves." She says:

> It's still a work in progress of: I'm ok as I am.

Her relationship with herself is becoming more forgiving and ac-cepting. All participants describe periods of self-doubt and discovery, which are influenced by their relationships. They also express a sense of growing confidence, self-compassion and congruence towards the end of training.

5 | DISCUSSION

The findings of this study support those of previous studies that training has a significant disruptive impact on trainees' personal relationships (Hazler & Kottler, 2005; Pierce, 2016; Rath, 2008; Truell, 2001). The early ruptures in personal relationships do, in some ways, reflect the stereotype of the "divorce course" and previ-ous findings (Rath, 2008) suggesting that training may contribute to the breakdown of relationships. They were experienced in a range of different personal relationships: two with parents; two with roman-tic partners; and two with friends. Participants expressed feelings of sadness and loss about these ruptures, but also a sense of personal achievement for overcoming unhelpful patterns and setting bound-aries to manage unhealthy relationships. This process reflects the findings of Kennedy and Black (2010, p. 429), in which "participants reported that due to their training and/or practice, they have better boundaries in their relationships."

This re-contracting of relationships can also be seen in the par-ticipants' experiments with changing old patterns of relating and stepping out of roles they have played for years. In George's interac-tion with his mother, he observed his emotional state, which enabled him to respond in a new way and work towards a different outcome. This illustrates that he is engaging in the reflexive process described by Salovey and Mayer (1990) as integral to emotional intelligence. Similarly, all five participants gave examples in which they noticed a familiar urge to rescue others from their distress but were able to contain their feelings and respond differently.

Chris described how he uses his "bodily cues" to enable him to listen to his feelings and choose his response. This reflects the "ideal" scenario put forth by Fauth et al. (2007) that "training cultivates […] the ability to internally manage one's own difficulties during an in-terpersonal encounter." Furthermore, the participants found it ben-eficial to their relationships, with George, for example, noticing that his new ability to "wait" and "just listen", rather than react, led to

"deeper" communication with his friends. This supports Pearson and Weinberg's (2017) findings in the sense that training appears to have heightened the intrapersonal and interpersonal skills of the participants.

The many developments the participants noted in their communication provide further evidence to support the findings of previous studies (Pascual-Leone et al., 2012, 2013). George found that he listened more in his relationships with women after working with a majority female training group. He felt this had improved his communication and his understanding of the women in his life. Chris said that his experience of training had led him to offer more positive feedback to others in his relationships, which reflects a previous finding that training may make students less critical of others (Pascual-Leone et al., 2013).

Interestingly, all five participants enthused about being more honest, direct and clear in their communication with others. This is reflected in the participants' personal relationships, with participants stating that they are empowered to state their needs, express their feelings and accept responsibility for their own behaviour. The BACP's ethical framework includes "candour," "integrity" and "sincerity" in its list of "key personal qualities to which members and registrants are strongly encouraged to aspire" (Ethical Framework for the Counselling Professions, 2018, p. 10). The repetition of words such as honesty, directness and congruence across all interviews suggests that training has inspired changes in communication that reflect the BACP's guidelines.

Unlike Barton's (2019) findings, the participants of this study were empowered by their learning to set boundaries with work and friends to improve their family lives. The ruptures described illustrate a shift towards prioritising relationships that are reciprocal and setting boundaries in those that negatively affect well-being. Furthermore, Lucy set out a range of changes she has made to working hours, phone use and social commitments to manage her energy levels. Claire reflected that her "treadmill" of work, study and charity commitments was unhelpful for her well-being and explained that she is now doing much less. Chris clarified with family members that, whilst he could offer a distressed family member empathy and signposting, he could not be her counsellor for ethical reasons. All five participants described a move away from rescuing others in relationships and instead appear to work towards relationships in which both parties are empowered and autonomous.

All five participants spoke about the ways in which their experiences of training groups had affected their relationships, which supports previous research by Kristopher Goodrich (2008, p. 227). Three of the participants recalled experiences of acceptance and support in their training group, which left them with increased self-esteem, as found by Duncan and Reid (2019). Furthermore, these experiences inspired participants to aim for greater openness and vulnerability in their personal relationships. It could be argued that participants' experimentation with new ways of relating, including willingness to be vulnerable in their personal relationships, signifies an increasing capacity "to engage in meaningful and relationally deep therapeutic encounters" (Mearns & Cooper, 2018). In some of the participants' relationships, this led to deeper connections with loved ones, and in others, it was met with inflexibility. Whilst participants expressed feelings of frustration and sadness in these situations, they also said that this was mitigated by a new-found acceptance of other people's choices. This supports the findings of Kennedy and Black (2010) that counselling students become more accepting of others through training.

For two participants, their experiences of peers and tutors were more mixed. One participant felt isolated in her training group and said that she was more willing to be honest than her peers. However, she found that personal therapy and supervision offered her support to get through the course. Her decision to be authentic throughout left her with a sense of congruence and a clear idea of the open communication she wanted in a partner. Another participant experienced being unheard in her training group, which left her feeling upset and angry. However, taking this to personal therapy helped her explore how she relates to others, which inspired her to voice her needs and make herself heard. This indicates that difficult experiences of a training group can provide a trainee with useful learning for their personal relationships. It challenges the argument that "safety needs to be experienced by group members before they can take the risk of learning about themselves or others" (Robson & Robson, 2008, p. 380). Whilst it may be preferable for students to experience a supportive training group, these findings suggest that unhappy experiences can also motivate students to learn about how they relate to others. The participants' experiences indicate that it is particularly important that students have an alternative safe space, such as personal therapy, to process these difficulties.

The participants' struggles with identity support previous findings about trainees' lived experiences (Råbu et al., 2016). The participants described the ways in which their loved ones contributed to these struggles and explained how shifts in identity affected their relationships. Experiences of hostility from some friends and family members about the students' choice to train are perhaps indicative of a fear of losing the person they love. This may suggest that research is needed to explore the lived experiences of students' loved ones during training and perhaps further education is needed to challenge the existing societal stigma about counselling. For the students themselves, experiences of hostility may exacerbate fears that others are judging them and contribute to the challenge of integrating a therapist self whilst being authentic. Some self-doubt is potentially helpful, but in the extreme, it may affect counsellor well-being and client work, so personal therapy and the support of peers and tutors may be important during this time.

6 | LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The choice of an ideographic method with a small sample size means that no generalisation is possible from the findings. The self-selecting nature of volunteer and snowball sampling processes is a further limitation. Furthermore, all participants studied integrative courses, so it would be interesting for future research to explore

the experiences of student counsellors from other modalities. The influence of social context issues, such as gender, sexuality, religious faith, race or age, was not explored explicitly as a potential variable here. These may be areas for further study. This research was carried out in the context of a global pandemic, and the participants were studying at different stages of their courses when lockdown restrictions were put in place. This may have acted as a further variable in terms of the impact of training on the students' personal relationships.

7 | CONCLUSION

A detailed analysis of five interviews has revealed a fresh perspective on the perceived impact of training on students' personal relationships. The decision to train appears to represent an unconscious act of self-care: a promise of self-discovery and permission to change how they relate to themselves and others. This is demonstrated by the ruptures in the early stages of training in which participants exercised growing autonomy and confidence. Furthermore, the combination of personal therapy, journal-writing and group work gave participants the opportunity to review their relationships and experiment with new ways of relating.

Participants experienced changes to their identity and internal conflict about how to be in old relationships with new skills. This conflict perhaps reflects the participants' awareness of the danger of "clientising" loved ones but also the urge to utilise their learning to improve their relationships. Participants felt that their communication had improved significantly and that they were now empowered to set boundaries for the sake of their well-being and that of their families.

Perhaps many of us take it for granted that training affects students' personal relationships and yet rigorous research into this specific topic has been lacking until now. This study has begun a process of bringing the impact of training on students' relationships into sharper focus through the analysis of empirical evidence.

STATEMENTS REGARDING CPR'S ETHICS AND INTEGRITY POLICIES

1. Strictly anonymised data were only shared with my supervisor and examiners until this submission for publication. Any data will be stored securely for 10 years after the interviews are completed.

2. No funding was required for this study, and no payment was made to participants.

3. I declare that there was no conflict of interest involved in this research.

4. Ethics approval for this study has been granted by the University of East London's Ethics Committee.

5. All participants were sent an information letter and consent form before agreeing to participate in this research. All participants gave their consent freely.

6. Material from other sources has been clearly referenced throughout.

7. There was no need for clinical trial registration for this study.

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