



Counselling Skills Essay

Recording 8

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Counselling Skills Critical Review

Therapy can be provided within a variety of different relationships, as this is referred to helping another individual with healing or dealing with something they may not be able to do on their own (Feltham, 1999). However, depending on the therapy form, a professional therapeutic relationship will contain a trained counsellor and a client. These relationships will hold a professional that has been held up within the standards of ethics and values that an association has enforced, for instance, the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (2018). While training to become a qualified counsellor, depending on the field of counselling that an individual has started to study, could alter the skill taught and what order. Humanistic and person-centred counselling skills are used during this session. These skills are there to encourage clients to focus on their selves and help them find solutions to their issues.

This counselling skills essay will review the skills presented by the student counsellor. The skills presented will be discussed in chronological order of the time they took place within the recording or when the topic is first mentioned. There will be an exploration into each skill used and how they improved the quality of the counselling session. Following that, some skills needed to be used more effectively. Therefore, exploring the skills that were also not used will be reviewed to understand better what improvements can be made. This will demonstrate how this can improve the student counsellors' abilities. As these could help a future client as the counsellor will have more self-awareness. The first skill that will be explored is contracting,

which is commonly used at the beginning of the relationship during the first session. However, it was incorporated into the skills recording to be aware of what was stated within this section.

A beneficial way to manage the therapeutic relationship is to establish the appropriate boundaries between the client and counsellor is 'contracting .' Also known as 'Boundary management' as stated by McLeod & McLeod (2011), it can set an appropriate space, comfortable for the client yet still holds professional boundaries, clarifying the roles of the practitioner and the client. Contracting would take place at the beginning of the counselling session, covering topics including the time being used and if the client is comfortable using the space; following that, the counsellor must explain what they would do if sensitive information would come to light and that they would need to inform their superiors (McLeod & McLeod, 2011). Hermansson (1997) stated that it is 'imperative that functional boundaries operate within the therapeutic relationship. However, the key term in that statement is 'functional', as excessively rigid boundaries could negatively impact the counselling session and restrict the client's growth as a trusting environment may not form. On the other hand, a lack of boundaries or an inability to stay within the set boundaries may cause a loss of identity within the counselling relationship and its roles (Hermansson, 1997).

During the counselling skills recording, as a student counsellor, I practiced establishing boundaries between myself and the student client (SC). From 00:00:00 till 00:01:58, as the student counsellor, I covered a variety of points that were important to both the client and myself. Time management was covered first, as this highlighted how long the contracting could be alongside the central part of the session while allowing time for the summary at the end.

Following that, due to certain Covid-19 aspects of the counselling relationship, has had to adapt to ensure the client would not be uncomfortable with any aspects of the session. Therefore, at 00.00.40 I allowed the SC to be aware that I would wear a mask or alter our environment to make them feel more comfortable. Therefore, providing them a chance to get comfortable.

During the counselling skills recording, there are multiple skills practiced. Specific skills surround the counsellor's body language and the environment's positioning. Therefore, following boundary management, a skill that the student counsellor used in the counselling skills recording, is SOLER. One of the skills hidden within this acronym is 'sitting squarely.' This refers to the counsellor sitting at an angle to the client that would allow the counsellor to look directly at the client and listen intently. Sitting squarely was demonstrated during the skills recording as the student counsellor clarified with the SC that they were comfortable with the distance between them during the contracting stage of the session. Maintaining this sitting position is imperative to a one-on-one counselling session, as this restricts the number of distractions that a counsellor can see; alongside this, their client will be within their line of sight. Therefore, a lack of focus on the client would be problematic.

Following the squared sitting positioning, there is the 'Open posture.' This refers to the area in which one is sitting and the counsellor's body language. Open Posture is closely linked to the 'Relaxed body language' part of the acronym. Both refer to the counsellor's relaxed body and not emitting any tension into the room. The student counsellor demonstrated open body language at 00:02:11. This was because I placed my hands in my lap rather than crossing my

arms across my chest, as this could cause a counsellor to appear uninterested (Parvez, 2021). Following this, my body language before this presented relaxed and open behaviour, as I used hand gestures during the contracting section. This is seen as open behaviour as it reduces stiffness in the listener and demonstrates a level of emphasis and interest in a subject (Patel, 2014). Ensuring I was comfortable during the session restricted my need to fidget, allowing me to focus solely on my SC. This is linked to my ability to maintain eye contact with my client. Maintaining eye contact was essential to my counselling skills session, and further training I will have is that eye contact is a crucial step to building trust.

Eye contact within any relationship is vital as it can highly impact communication between individuals. It has also been highly connected to the effectiveness of patient/person-centred approaches within therapeutic and medical settings. Research by Gorawara-Bhat & Cook (2011) demonstrated that eye contact is highly efficient when practicing person-centred care and listening more. Following this, their research presented that a listener, counsellor, or other medical professional does not need to hold eye contact for long periods. As their 'low' tapes consisted of brief eye contact being held also proved to be beneficial to the rate of how much the listener remembered. Although both still had high rates for active listening and attentiveness, consistent eye contact with the speaker was found to be more effective for the professional in that relational dynamic (Gorawara-Bhat & Cook, 2011)

Although eye contact is vital to building rapport between a client and counsellor, it is within the counsellors' responsibilities to be aware when their client shows signs of agitation when feeling eyes on them consistently. Eye contact can be highly beneficial for a client to be made

aware that they have been provided undivided attention from the professional. However, the need to make eye contact can cause some individuals to feel uncomfortable and anxious (Schneier et al., 2011); therefore, they avoid it: this may cause the counsellor to stare unintentionally, causing more agitation and discomfort (Cullen, 2017). As stated by Vehmas (2010), the act of staring is encouraged by our desire to know more. However, the counsellor must ensure they do not cause more discomfort. Therefore, as the student counsellor, I made sure that I was blinking to make the client feel more at ease and made glances at other areas in the room. However, there was consistent eye contact, and I found that I could retain more information provided by the SC when I gave my undivided attention. Alongside this, I became aware that the SC was comfortable making eye contact with me as they turned to look directly at me on numerous occasions in the session.

Once the SC started exploring the topic they wanted to discuss in the session, the student counsellor started to show minimal encouragement and responses. Minimal responses demonstrate to the client that the professional actively listens and understands the information provided (Egbochuku, 2008). These encouragements do not need to be verbal. A non-verbal encouragement that was used consistently during the skills recording was nodding. Following this, at 00:02:29, the term 'right, okay' and later on within the session at 00:19:35, a 'yeah' was used to allow the SC to feel heard and to encourage them to continue. A key aspect of minimal encouragement is that it must not hold any emotional tones other than inquisitorial. This is because the tones being used, even empathetic ones, could cause a client to become defensive or close-up as they may not feel comfortable with specific tones, for example, judgemental, pitiful, or at times enthusiastic (Geldard, Geldard & Foo, 2015). This is supported

by the BACP as their guidelines highlight that a session needs to be judgment free, to allow the client to feel comfortable (2018).

Therefore, it was beneficial to the therapeutic relationship between the SC and me to have had previous sessions, as I understood what gentle tones were more effective within the counsellor's position.

As the student counsellor, I actively listened throughout the counselling skills recording, which benefitted the whole session. This was due to the improvement in retaining information provided; therefore, the questioning and clarifying happening throughout were more accurate. Questioning the SC was there to either start the conversation if they were uncomfortable or help understand and clarify their perspective. Within a counselling session, there are two possible types of questions. There are open and closed. Open questions allow the client to explore certain feelings about a situation or person without being led to a specific answer. After 2 minutes into the counselling skills recording, the student counsellor opened the conversation by saying, 'is there anything you wish to speak about?'. This is an open, non-leading question as it allowed the SC to explore any thought that came to mind (Reeves, 2018). This was beneficial to the session as it allowed the client to start with something that could have been bothering them recently rather than narrowing down their thoughts by using a specific time frame. This would have then been an open leading question as the client may have something pressing on them to discuss first. The benefits of open questions are that they can allow an individual to talk freely about their perspectives, creating in-depth feelings and explanations of a situation (Hood & Hoffman, 2019). Following this, another time within the session that an open non-leading question was used was 00:19:43; this was an afterthought

topic the client wanted to talk about, it was a happy event as her body language, and facial expression demonstrated that she was excited and euphoric about the event.

As highlighted, open questions give the client a certain level of control, allowing it to be person centred as it works around what topic or issue the client wants to discuss. However, when in a counselling session and the skills recording, closed questions could be as informative and clarifying. A closed question can occasionally be restricted for the client and may result in one-word answers (Schuman & Presser, 1979). However, during the counselling skills recording, the student counsellor practiced closed questions to clarify the feelings or actions that impacted them. The student counsellor's clarification was at 00:10:46. This statement started with 'correct me if I am wrong,' as this sentence would have allowed the SC to feel comfortable in stating differently and correcting the student counsellor what they meant. This followed with the descriptive action of 'exploiting' to understand if this was the exact definition of the action causing their agitation. As McLeod & McLeod (2011) highlighted, giving a Name to an experience allows the client to feel understood. This was highly effective within the skills recording as the SC ultimately agreed with that statement and believed it summed up her situation correctly. This supports the statement of 'The power in a name,' which has been linked to identity, but it can also be applied to experiences as the name helps define a situation for some (Davis, 2014). The term I used was 'exploiting,' not only allowed the client to pinpoint the exact actions that were causing her frustrations; it presented me with a precise clarification of the events allowing a greater understanding moving forward.

As demonstrated, open and closed questions can provide clear and beneficial responses to create a transparent therapeutic relationship. However, during the skills recording, it was

demonstrated that some closed questions would be incorrect and could be an assumption based on the counsellors' thoughts surrounding the client's perspective. This was shown at 00:16:49 when I asked the SC if she felt 'silenced' within her place of work. The SC responded to this question more in-depth to explain it more clearly to me. However, it must be clear that some clients would not do this, and they may close up due to the misunderstanding. An open leading question that would have been more effective in this situation could have been (Reeves, 2018), 'while being told this, how did you feel in that moment?'. Allowing the SC to explore her feelings on the situation rather than the situation (Schuman & Presser, 1979).

During the skills recording, paraphrasing was a skill that I used alongside the previously stated. This can be seen at 00:10:46. Paraphrasing highlighted to the SC that I was actively listening to what they were saying and gaining an understanding. As this skill requires a counsellor to understand the information being given by the client and then repeat it back to them differently, clarifying the story. Rogers (1951) highlighted that paraphrasing is a way in which the counsellor can demonstrate a deeper understanding of the speaker's perspective, therefore, practicing cognitive empathy. However, Bodie, Cannava, & Vickery (2016) stated their research suggested that it may not always be effective in a supportive relationship.

Their research stated that the effectiveness of the paraphrasing technique is closely connected to the pre-existing rapport in the relationship. When the client is more comfortable within the environment it can encourage them to disclose background stories that could explain the reasoning behind their emotions on situation. Therefore, by providing more information to gain a greater understanding and empathy for the client, a counsellor could know if there are

other influences (Bodie, Cannava, & Vickery, 2016). Paraphrasing too soon within the session could cause the client to feel they have not been listened to and restrict them from continuing. Therefore, the rapport of trust and understanding would already need to be forming before the paraphrasing should take place (Bodie, Cannava, & Vickery, 2016).

A summary is there to provide closure to the client that a session is coming to an end, as well as clarify critical points of the session (Fernando, 2012). During this stage, empathy is essential as it requires the counsellor to paraphrase the experience with an understanding of the emotions behind it. This was demonstrated within the skills recording at 00:24:18 as a happy memory was brought up during the session, and acknowledging the feeling of euphoria that it provided, brought a happy end to the session. However, during the summary of a session, a counsellor must ensure that they do not show signs of panic when new information is stated. These are known as 'Doorknob' comments; these comments challenge the boundaries presented by the counsellor. This could occur for various reasons; therefore, being aware that these could happen could allow a counsellor or training counsellor to anticipate sudden changes (Frye, 2021) while maintaining the trust and being non-judgmental. During a summary, a topic could be significant enough to carry over into the next session; this could be known as goal setting.

During the session, there were two themes: The first one mentioned was at 00:18:23, which focused on the repeated overwhelming feeling the SC was having. This was mentioned within previous sessions; therefore, I asked the SC if one of the issues causing her stressed emotions had eased off, allowing her to feel better. This was clarified; however, the current and ongoing

family issues were not helping them. Identifying themes are essential to therapeutic relationships alongside research-based work, as these themes can explain individuals' behaviours and responses in situations. Johnson et al. (1989) highlighted that reoccurring themes have the potential to be an extension of past relationships and can alter how individuals handle current ones. The SC did not support this with their overwhelmed feelings, as these were situational. However, the other theme that was identified by myself and the SC was the need for 'control at 00:21:34. In an attempt to understand what started this need for control, I asked, 'Do you remember when this first started?'. The SC stated that it was in childhood; however, little detail was provided. Therefore, this could have been a topic worth carrying to the next session. Therefore, this theme could be an extension of past experiences (Johnson et al., 1989).

With overall themes identified, this provided an area to work on as this would have provided the client a coping mechanism to come to terms with their need for control and where it truly steamed from in childhood. This would have been a form of goal setting, which I did not do. Goal setting is a vital part of the progress of the client and the sessions moving forward; this is essential when there are only a certain number of sessions a counsellor can have with a specific client. For instance, the NHS will only provide clients with 6-12 sessions as there are people on waiting lists (NHSinform, 2020). Therefore, questioning and goal setting allows a clear path on what the sessions aims are. This can benefit the client as they may be able to feel the progress, but this will only sometimes be the result, as each client is different. Goal setting can be giving tasks that help an individual feel and control their emotions when they start to feel overwhelmed (Krishnan, 2015). On the other hand, some may ask clients to try and complete

active tasks that can contribute to their goal, encouraging their client's motivation (Krishnan, 2015).

I know that there were crucial points within the counselling skills recording that different techniques would have been more beneficial. However, witnessing the progress made from the beginning of the training to the skills recording demonstrated that there has been an improvement of skills. Many skill sets were represented, creating a congruent relationship as the I demonstrated active listening and attentively gave minimal responses with supportive tones when the client started to speak quieter, encouraging them to continue. A key aspect of building a trusting environment for the client, allowing them to feel heard and respected. I used an unnecessary closed question at 00:16:49 however, the other questions used proved to be beneficial. Therefore, highlighting the need for more awareness but not my weakest area as a student counsellor. There is much room for improvement, Krishnan (2015) demonstrated the importance of setting goals. There were clear openings to do so, this would have highlighted to the SC that as the counsellor, I was interested in delving deeper into the history behind the need for control, as well as providing the SC the chance to explore this area herself. Therefore, these skills recording review has provided me the chance to become more self-aware of skills I need to practise and understand on how a lack of them can be restricting.

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