

Extract of quotations from research into Triad Work conducted by Smith (2016)

Reference: Smith, K. 2016. Learning from triads. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*. June 2016. 16(2). 123–131. Lutterworth: British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy [BACP].

THEME: Functioning of the cohort

This theme was indicated by an awareness in the participants that there were both shared and individual rules on how to manage what was divulged during triads:

A275: 'It's just clear that you wouldn't take that outside (the group), like maybe you could look at someone and say "alright?" but I wouldn't think of bringing it up'.

H121: 'Some of us just got it, like in that early discussion group, it all clicked and we were like permission to share, it kind of made it easy that the rules were talked about'.

E332: 'I still monitor what I can say, like I have to prepare for triads to get a problem that's the right size, sometimes I don't want to talk and that's okay, it's not a problem'.

Reports indicate that the group functioned on a very personal level from early on. This was felt to be an unusual experience for students, and unlike that of other groups. A strong sense of positive group identity pervaded many of the reports.

D254: 'You look at other students and I mean, they are not like us, we're really unusual because we have like grown up really fast together'.

An awareness of the impact of intimacy, which came out of disclosure, was viewed positively and negatively by participants.

K176: 'Trust is a big deal for me, I know I can trust everyone, I feel really close to the class, I've told them stuff I wouldn't say to my mum'.

This related to discussions around the ideas of sharing with friends and sharing with peers on the course, with some students distinguishing between them.

C344: 'I walk in here and I don't think about it, but I definitely have my friends, like X, and then there are people I will work with, but then I wouldn't see them

from one week to the next except in class but they are easier to work with, you know?’

Some of the students reported negative feelings around the formation of subgroups within the teaching cohort, impacting on the way triads worked.

G401: ‘I think we have now got our little groups, cliques, and if we don’t get made to work with other people we don’t, and if I’m with X (student) then we tend to just not do our work’.

THEME: Personal impact

This theme cluster concerns the ways in which being on the course has impacted on the students personally, in particular, the impact of what is said, when too much might be shared, and the consequences of breaches of trust. Students sometimes felt that they were managing a tension between their social presentations of themselves and the ways that they were expected to be open and honest on the counselling course.

B316: ‘I’m not sure I want to be like, “I know all about you, and you know all about me”, it doesn’t make me feel good sometimes that someone knows your underneath’.

This was highlighted by important aspects of the emotional experience and how these were managed by others on the course.

C167: ‘My eyes were red from crying, and everyone knew why, but it was fine, I mean they knew but no-one made a fuss when I saw them later’.

The students were very aware of the real or potential impact of sharing too much with peers. Sometimes sharing left the students with a sense of reduced safety.

B105: ‘At first when I got the whole story out I felt okay but then the worries set in about what people thought and where they would take it, I mean like I’d hate to think that they were down the pub telling everyone, “Oh yeh there’s this girl on my course with an alki for a mum”’.

There was awareness of the need to limit what is said in triads.

I56: ‘God, I have to be careful because if I am on a rant it all comes out, I don’t hold back and I had to learn to just think of how it would sound, and what I can talk about in like 15 minutes....sometimes the sessions would just be one person going on, and that means you get in to a lot of s***’.

There was also a need to ensure that the listener was not overloaded, or too concerned.

D320: 'To be honest I don't think he'd cope with it all, I didn't want to tell him all about it and then he'd not know what to say and that would be just awkward'.

E178: 'There's a limit, not just time, but like a limit on how much you put on people, they are going to be thinking about it all day'.

Sometimes what was shared in the triads left a mark, and this impact left long-term feelings of discomfort and concern:

K365: 'I just felt for her, really, really bad, like so sorry that this had happened, and I didn't know what to say, and when I saw her later I wanted to say "are you okay?" but wasn't allowed and so I've never even said anything to her'.

Putting trust in others, and being placed in a situation where trust is required, presented problems especially at the start of the training. Several participants mused about when and where breaches were being risked, that someone might take the information out of the group, but also that under some circumstances breaches should occur for the benefit of other students.

G214: 'My feeling was that you couldn't talk about it outside, like you would never talk about it outside but this time we all left together and were in the hall before I thought ooh no shut up'.

B115: 'Do I say something, like when is it appropriate to like say to X (tutor) that there is an issue?'

This perceived risk was matched in many reports by a sense of trust:

C12: 'We've all been like so trusting over the last year or so that no-one would break that now, it's like a pact between us'.

The role of the tutors was again important in terms of emotional support, and for formal and informal advice. They were seen as a resource.

E54: 'So I spoke to X (tutor) about it, and she was great, she suggested that I went to student services, which I did and I've been going there for four weeks now'.

THEME: Impact on learning

This theme reflects the various ways that the triads impacted on learning in the group. The triads were approached with various levels of trepidation, but recognised as an important aspect of training.

G62: 'I can still remember oh my gosh when X (tutor) said we were going to be counselling each other, I was so nervous'.

H300: 'You have to be careful with feedback, you want them to be honest but you don't want to say anything negative to them'.

E51: 'You can't learn without it'.

Some of the students reported going through a stage of withdrawing from the group, not wanting to take part in the triads or reverting to role-play as a client.

B201: 'There was definitely a stage where I went right back and thought, these aren't people who need to talk to me right now, I don't want to engage you know?'

For some, the major challenge was to understand the need for skills practice, and why taking the role of the client is so important to personal development.

I329: 'I kept looking for the learning, you know like what is it that I have got from this, and I still can't put my finger on it'.

Ultimately, many of the students summarised their experiences as being hard going but worth it, with the positive aspects and learning far outweighing the negative.

A197: '..at that point I really got it, it clicked and I thought I had really learnt something significant, not just about counselling, but about me and them, it changed me'.