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Assessment component 2: Reflective Essay

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Critcally reflect on your own values and beliefs and consider the influences that may have shaped these throughout your life.

This essay explores my ethical stance and sense of value and belief, how these are shaped and influenced, how these relate to my current training and potential professional role as a person-centred counsellor and how my ethical stance might align with or negotiate the ethical framework set out by the BACP (2018). The process problematises the use of reflective models for teaching reflective practice in counsellor education programs and challenges underlying, limiting assumptions in academic literature around the subject.

Kickstarted by the seminal work of Schon (1991) first published in 1983, reflective practice in counselling and psychotherapy education and practice is evolving, inline with cultural and academic changes concerning ethical practice. Reflective models of single and double-loop learning include those developed by Kolb (1984), Gibbs (1988) and Argyris and Schon, summarised by Anderson (1994). Moving on from these, a looser process, and one which does not separate emotional from cognitive process, evolved in the form of a three-part, experiential model: What, So What, Now What? (Rolfe et al., 2001). These are all useful for understanding the concept and initiating the process of self-reflective and reflexive practice, but once the individual has grasped this, adherence to these models can become limiting and may only be applicable in certain circumstances. For

example, this assignment asks what values and beliefs I hold, but the process of seeking out something within myself and understanding it, does not align with the reflection on action-in and action-on which are central to these models. Wong-Wylie (2007) proposed a further dimension for reflection: reflection on self in/on action which may be applicable to part of my process of reflection in that it might allow me to examine personal experiences that may contribute to habits of mind that, in turn, may shape me as a professional. To compliment this, the concept of reflection-for action (Thompson, 2016) might allow me to hypothetically project how my ethical stance may play out in my future role as a counsellor. However, none of these pointedly or comprehensively facilitate the drawing-out or discovering from within.

Such limitations are recognised within the counselling field and academia, and more creative, individual approaches are now being explored and proposed. Thompson (2016) offers a toolbox of techniques to explore and decide which are appropriate for ourselves in specific circumstances. For reflection for action, these include: question-based techniques (why, what, who, how, etc); emancipatory techniques, such as visioning, or imagining a future scenario; problem-solving techniques, such as RED (Recognise, Evaluate, Dealing with) for potential conflict situations; Cost/ benefit analysis to encourage reflection on the potential consequences through a variety of lenses; rehearsing, in which one imagines, anticipates and rehearses a set of responses. Some of these techniques are again useful for my own future projections in the context of this essay, but again cannot be relied upon for a comprehensive analysis of my values and beliefs. For reflection in action, they describe question based approaches and refer to Head, Heart, Habit, or Think, Feel, Do as simple, memorable models to prompt ourselves. For the purpose of investigating my own values and beliefs I am drawn more to the idea of noticing and challenging, which Thompson applies to reflection in action, but which also resonate with some of the tenets of person centred counselling.

Phenomenological noticing and tentative challenging are key counselling techniques used within the established counselling relationship. (Midwinter, 2015)

Thompson (2016) acknowledges that reflective learning (or reflexivity) is creative, variable and complex and that we need to cultivate the motivation to develop our own tools. While I am inspired by this creative opening, and I am able to select some of these tools and perhaps modify them for my own inquiry, I still still have an uneasy sense of restriction, a sense of imposition coming from unconscious bias in the academic literature. It is an internal response, from my position as a trainee counsellor, to the tacit assumption in all these models that there is some kind of resistance to awareness, a lack of motivation to investigate, or that individuation or the integration of one's own unconscious is somehow difficult, obstructed by internal processes, obscured or coloured by cultural and social lenses, or that full maturity - which includes wisdom or a transpersonal dimension - is rare or unattainable in this lifetime. Jessica Rosin (2015) suggests that counsellor individuation needs to be promoted in order to develop the art of critical reflection and in order to avoid ethnocentrism and culturocentrism. She quotes Hollis (2005): "the individuation process is considered a lifelong journey with the final goal rarely, if ever, accomplished." Hollis' statement is a bold generalisation and I ask, "What population or individual considers it to be a rare manifestation, or a life-long quest?" and "What qualifies them to make this assumption?"

Also implicit in these ideas is the assumption of lack of sensitivity to cultural or gender differences, a lack of awareness of self and other in social context - a lack of metacognition. In response to this perceived lack, and with reference to counsellor training, Collins et al. (2010) proposed methods to enhance reflection in multicultural counselling through cultural auditing. However, it is arguable

from many spiritual and cultural perspectives presented today, that the impact of this perceived lack is becoming increasingly negligible, and that popular culture is leading the way, ahead of - or in spite of - academia and other cultural institutions. For example, multiculturalism and gender inclusivity is becoming a structural feature of our global community. Otherness is being increasingly challenged at a grassroots level; the demonstrations started by Black Lives Matter, lead to the publication of the Sewel Report in 2021. Although the report drew criticism for gaslighting concerning the prevalence of structural and institutional racism, there was nevertheless a resultant decision to drop the use of the term BAME in our social literature and a proposal for a new historical model to be taught in schools. (Stewart, 2022). Similarly, as a result of grass-roots movements in popular culture, our language is changing to embrace non-binary perspectives - pronouns "they/their" are being used in place of "him/her/his/hers" and "Mx" in place of "Mr/Mrs/ Ms/Miss/Master". The effect is to fundamentally undermine gender difference and stereotyping, paving the way for equality in real terms. My own observation is that by disrupting language, this creates dissonance in cultural and individual terms and the opportunity for paradigm shift in both dimensions.

In the same way that multiculturalism and gender fluidity is becoming normalised, the boundaries between different spiritualities and religions are increasingly blurred and a kind of spiritual supermarket has evolved. Over the last twenty years I have noticed the emergence of the idea across different traditions, that humanity is approaching a critical mass of enlightened human beings and that we are tipping into a new, inclusive and expansive, collective consciousness which is transcendent of culture and difference. Concepts of metacognition or overarching consciousness are not new in popular culture, nor are they confined to spiritual paths or religions. These ideas have relevance here in terms of the individual's assumed limited level of capacity for self-reflection

and metacognition or awareness in current counsellor training programs and academic literature. I make these observations as a result of informal learning - an exposure to information on social media and other platforms - and experiential learning, which is spontaneous and arises out of everyday life. Thompson (2016) recognises this kind of informal learning as a key component of critical, reflective practice.

An opportunity to consider my values and beliefs, then evaluate and hypothesise my future professional role as a counsellor, seems to present in the various values-based models for reflection which are emerging, such as Waring's Me, My, More, Must model (2017). Waring's model invites reflection on the impact of one's values on any given situation in the context of the health care professions. However, this is also problematic and limiting as my sense of self is fluid and my beliefs and values are not fixed or rigid. Rather, my perspectives are open and map-like, full of nuance, ever-reshaping, adapting, expanding and contracting; I negotiate and engage with ethical issues as they arise in unique contexts and with the fullness of my being. My perspectives lend themselves more to the ideas put forward by Proctor et al. (2021) who espouses an unknowing, intersubjective, relational stance to counsellor training and self-reflective practice, which requires "commitment to ongoing self-awareness, openness, transparency and non-defensiveness". The emphasis of self-reflective practice moves away from understanding theory and techniques, to prioritising self and intersubjective consciousness. Theories are not seen as truths, but as an array of perspectives which one can select or engage with according to context or curiosity.

In the context of person-centred counselling, which is my current focus of study, Proctor et al. (2021) note that the unknowing stance is implicit within the fundamental principles of person

centred counselling. These are non-directive and place trust in the actualising tendency of the client. The additional core conditions of unconditional positive regard and empathy (Rogers, 1959) align perfectly with an unknowing stance in which all parts of the shared human experience between the client and the therapist are accepted equally. Schmid (2001/2012) describes this as an encounter in which there is distance and an openness to wonder and respect. Proctor et al. (2021) suggest that in the unknowing stance there is an acceptance of mutual humanity and vulnerability and in the absence of this, an imbalance of power arises. The concepts of transference and countertransference are accordingly replaced by co-transference and the space created by unknowing and wonderment can give rise to transformation affecting both at any moment. Schmidt (2001) asserts that the unknowing stance should be an ethical commitment toward both client and counsellor. Knowing that my aim is to embody these ideas as a person-centred counsellor, it seems reasonable to apply this to myself, to practice it now since I already am that, and make a choice to self-reflect within this essay on the same terms - as an ethical commitment to myself.

So, at the interface of the values inherent in person centred counselling, the notion of unknowing as an ethical commitment, and the concept of critical self-reflection, there presents the opportunity to take a creative, individual approach to reflection, rooted in the qualitative space that this creates. This is the approach I will take to reflect on my values and beliefs for the remainder of this essay. I will explore in terms of the values inherent in the person-centred counselling relationship, spontaneously and simultaneously creating and navigating my own, individual model, in response to what arises, informed by research and both formal and informal learning. This process mimics the counselling relationship (me as both counsellor and client, or me observing and being curious about myself), and will allow me to explore my beliefs and values and their roots in the space provided by unknowing, vulnerability, acceptance, and a sense of wonder. I am qualified on the

basis that I have nothing to fear, and I am uninhibited as I am comfortable with and deeply accepting of myself, and I have the attitude that whatever I find will be good - even if it appears to be negative, it is still ultimately positive. My approach represents a challenge to the assumptions of limited self-awareness, metacognition and unattainable individuation, met in the academic concepts described at the start of this essay. In claiming my innate wisdom to navigate myself holistically, I assert that whatever I might find, in the conscious or unconscious realm of my being, it will be easy to find! In the absence of fear or resistance, exploration becomes play and discovery becomes joy. I will relate this to an amalgamation, of techniques from both counselling and reflective practice, such as phenomenological noticing, questioning, elegant challenging, embedded why's, staying with emotion, dyadic reflection, reflection for action, and more.

The internal dialogue that arises as a result of engaging with these ideas has already brought to light some values and beliefs which I may hold. For example, the belief that individuation is achievable, that the unconscious is easily accessible, the belief that one need not be limited by external ideas and perceptions and that I value inclusivity, mutuality and humility. It could be said I have used the techniques of elegantly challenging myself through formal learning and research, and by engaging with material in this way, I have brought out and identified some of my inherent beliefs and values. Using reflection-for action, these values could potentially translate into not limiting my future clients, being inclusive and adopting a shared vulnerability and unknowing stance. My resonance with the ideas of Procter et al. (2021) around shared humanity and intersubjectivity, suggests that I also share those values.

However, if I ask myself directly what are my values and beliefs, (open questioning) I am unable to pin them down. Asking myself why or how this is difficult (embedded why's/socratic questioning),

it emerges that it comes from a sense of openness, a sense of nuance concerning ethical matters and perceptions of right and wrong, a deep sense of internal and external acceptance and fluidity, and a relative lack of fear that is a consequence of that. This is my immediate response (immediacy). In terms of my future practice (visioning and evaluation of cost/benefit), this aligns well with both accepting the client and being comfortable with myself and open. It provides a space for anything to happen and the client can bring anything to the table. It is a creative space, full of potential. This is a good foundation for the therapeutic alliance. There is a confidence in that, which is also a secure foundation for professional practice. This professional and personal foundation based on shared humanity has the potential to create a space which transcends difference in culture, religion, race and gender. It is inherently inclusive.

However, I am conscious that, from this state of being, there is the potential to override or dismiss issues of difference and avoid taking responsibility for ethical decisions. On the basis of shared vulnerability (Proctor et al, 2021), this could be damaging for the client and therapist on a personal and professional level. (Formal learning). This potential for damage is mitigated by the immediacy and holistic presence cultivated by the unknowing stance, which includes my own sensitivity to and experience of such issues. (Informal learning) I come from a diverse and multicultural family. My daughter is half Iranian and I wore a hijab, by choice, while married to her father. I have experienced poverty and homelessness and wealth and privilege, I have experienced unconscious and overt prejudice and bias (systemic and personal) in relation to my gender, my standing in life, my perceived nationality, and so on. I have encountered mental health issues, drug and alcohol issues, issues of abuse, gender issues, physical disability and neurodiversity. I have embraced faith and been an apostate. I have lived within and intersected with cultures where I am a minority. I

have experienced discrimination. My lenses are many. My experiences are multifarious, and evolving. I embrace and include them all.

Inclusivity is one of the tenets of the BACP good practice guidelines (2018, point 23) appears to align well with my ethical commitment to unknowing and holistic embracing of self and others. While the BACP offers an ethical framework as a reference and guide for professional counsellors and clients, and has evolved to create a working relationship with the law, Clarkson (2000) urges us to question and problematise our relationship to ethics, our profession, the law and morality. This appears to be a subtly confrontational approach, seeking to agitate in order to expose and influence. My preferred approach would be to look at what arises at the interface when meeting with these institutions and the concepts that underpin them, with each situation or instance being unique, and to bring to that meeting a sense of individual professionalism, independent of any authority, and rooted in the confidence of being able to navigate the unknown. In my experience, this leads to a more co-creative space in which one has a greater degree of influence and power to shape future action and policies.

In the context of this essay, my "meeting" is with the BACP ethical framework (2018). I brought the skill of phenomenological noticing - which Roger's (1959) places at the heart of person-centred counselling - to the task of reading through the BACP (2018) online literature. Observing myself in this way, I noticed it felt relatively comfortable to acknowledge my alignment with their principles of being trustworthy, autonomy, beneficience, non-meleficence, justice and self-respect. (BACP, 2018, point 5). I also noticed visceral and emotional reactions to their use of certain terms, such as *vulnerable adults* (BACP, 2018, point 28) and felt some discomfort around issues of

safeguarding, confidentiality and contracting. Intuitively, I stayed with these feelings and invited my unconscious to throw up whatever it might in connection with them. Pascal (1992) and Plotkin, (2008) recognise that the ability to explore non-rational, unconscious and intuitive realms significantly contributes to self-reflective practice. This is a process I enjoy and the response from my unconscious was easily and quickly forthcoming. A host of memories readily emerged, and behind them, an image of myself as a young child, silent. In that silence was a communication, a knowing, a recognition: that child that I was then, was suffering abuse. She had repeatedly asked for help but had not been listened to by her extended family, nor any health and social care practitioner. So, my unconscious clarified the core belief "I will not be listened to". This core belief rooted in childhood experience accounts for an element of lack of trust in the system to listen and effectively safeguard those who are vulnerable. If I am not conscious of it, this core belief established in childhood has the potential to negatively influence how I relate to the health and social care system, other professionals, the BACP framework and my ethical decision making in professional practice.

However, being conscious of that child part of myself allows me to understand and integrate it. My interpretations here are based on the transpersonal, psychotherapeutic concepts of Roberto Assagioli, and the idea of integrating sub-personalities (Ferrucci, 2009). By consciously including this child part of myself (sub-personality), I enjoy her wisdom and intuition, clarity, heightened awareness and sensitivity. Her tenderness, ability to live in the moment, spontaneity, playfulness, affectionate nature also become part of me and a source of joy. Her vulnerability and and openness nourishes my sense of humility and I can enhance that quality in the shared humanity and shared vulnerability within the therapeutic alliance. If the state of unknowing is an ethical commitment, the integration of this child within my adult self strengthens that commitment. By the same process

of integration, my adult self possesses the communication skills and acuity with which to negotiate any situation or to represent and protect that vulnerability appropriately and gives that child part an effective voice. The child within alerts and inspires me concerning issues of self-care and to take full responsibility for the depth of that, both personally and professionally.

There is a further dimension to my visceral response to the BACP's use of the term *vulnerable adults* (BACP, 2018, point 28). It makes me uncomfortable in a similar way that the common use of the term BAME does - the homogenous othering of a broad and diverse spectrum of individual people. There is opportunity here to influence and create change through my future relationship with the BACP. Feeding into this, my experience of mental health and social care (and the individual professionals working within the associated institutions) in relation to my mother's care, has been mixed. As my mother's carer and power of attorney, I learned to navigate a complex system full of power differentials and conflicting agendas through her stroke, psychotic episode, sectioning and discharge, subsequent diagnosis of vascular dementia. Difficult, ethical decisions were made at every turn and my assumption of responsibility and participation and advocacy for my mother in the process was central. I researched the law and guidance and the medical understanding of my mother's conditions as well as the responsibilities of the professionals and institutions involved (self-directed research). I spoke with friends and sought discussion with other professionals (dyadic reflection/informal learning) I learned that there are significant problems in the health and social care system around an individual's capacity, particularly where capacity fluctuates. Levels of capacity and vulnerability go hand-in-hand and the potential for institutional abuse is very high. I learned that clear, precise communication and representation, which minimises the potential for inference, is essential for establishing and maintaining appropriate care and ensuring respect for basic human rights.

This level of professional communication is something that I will feel an acute sense of responsibility for when facing ethical decisions in counselling practice. In particular, around disclosure and sharing of information, and the limits of confidentiality in respect of harm to self or others. There is also a personal balance to be navigated in each unique counselling relationship when communicating contracts. For example, it feels that stating the limits to confidentiality at the outset inhibits the counselling alliance by effectively bringing the social worker into the room! I anticipate tension here, between the sanctity and preservation of the counselling relationship, the ethical practices of one's work context, the law, and the principles and guidelines of the BACP (2018). For example, the BACP (2018, point 3) declares a commitment to "alleviating symptoms of personal distress and suffering". This, along with the principle of beneficence (BACP, 2018, point 5) implies an agency in the counsellor and a subtle imbalance of power, which may be at odds with the ethical stance of the unknown, which is non-directive and based on equality. Questions arise, such as: Who defines the client's wellbeing? Who defines what suffering means? There may be purpose in the suffering and a need to stay with this. Negotiating these issues in the counselling alliance committed to the ethical stance of unknowing, necessarily impacts on the wellbeing of both counsellor and client and issues of professional self-care abut this. At the same time, the state of unknowing mitigates inference and thereby facilitates a more encompassing and open summation of any elements of risk or benefit that might arise and allows meaning to be co-created. This is a complex area which requires me to engage with legal and ethical frameworks at appropriate stages in my training and career and in the context of each, unique situation. This will facilitate a working and evolving relationship over time. What is important is remaining accountable and having confidence in one's sense of self in relation to others and one's sense of responsibility and integrity.

The scope of this essay is limited and has only briefly looked at my nuanced ethical stance and values and beliefs in relation to reflective practice, the BACP and my potential professional role as a person-centred counsellor. My values and beliefs are not fixed and, as a result, engaging with ethical decisions is a nuanced, fluid and open process which I approach from a sense of equality, shared humanity and vulnerability. The process of this essay has problematised the use of reflective models and it is notable that the reflection within this essay took place instinctively and without adherence to a particular model. Being asked to funnel myself through academic concepts and the processes of various reflective models that I had already anticipated or arrived at through experiential and self-directed learning, resulted in frustrating the reflective practice rather than facilitating further depth to it. For the purpose of this assignment, I resorted to finding theories to support my own level of awareness, rather than feeling genuinely challenged or having my perceptions expanded. This raises questions around the methods for teaching and evaluating self-reflective practice and how it accommodates the student's degree of consciousness, cognitive function, state-of-being and existing, integrated capacity for reflection and reflective distance. This would seem to give weight to the problem of assessment of intersubjective process in counsellor training programs identified by Proctor et al. (2021) and is an area for further, collaborative reflection and research.

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