

Narrative case study research: On endings and six session reviews

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Abstract

Background: An in-depth, small scale narrative inquiry into ex-clients' experiences of counselling was undertaken, using a local community counselling agency which highlighted several important themes, including reviews and endings. **Aim:** To show clients' lived experience of reviews and endings. **Methods:** Narrative case study methods were used, alongside researcher reflexivity. The meanings were co-constructed between the ex-clients, their counsellors and the researchers. **Results:** Clients stories show the inter-relationship between reviews and endings, and that even when experienced negatively, clients can see the value of reviews. This paper also notes the therapeutic importance of mutuality and negotiation in decision making about endings. **Conclusions:** The process of undertaking collaborative, narrative inquiry can be empowering for all involved. Clients, counsellors and managers can question funders about their assumptions about the number of sessions offered when they inform themselves with research.

Keywords: endings; reviews; narrative case study; counselling; psychotherapy; agency counselling

Introduction

The ending of counselling and psychotherapy represents a highly significant stage in the therapy process. One of the strategies that some counsellors and psychotherapists employ in order to ensure that the ending of therapy occurs at a time that is meaningful for the client, and that the decision to end is agreed collaboratively with the client, is to initiate regular reviews. Typically, in a review the client and counsellor might discuss their views around progress of therapy to that point, re-visit their agreement or shared understanding around the goals of therapy, and decide how best to proceed in future sessions. However, few research papers have been published about clients' experiences of reviews and endings, most published literature being based upon clinical reports. One paper on endings, (more commonly referred to as 'termination' in the psychotherapy literature) written back in 1993 by Quintana, in response to the move towards short-term psychotherapy at that time, focuses on 'revising, expanding and modernizing' theories about endings, and recommends that the 'termination-as-loss' metaphor be updated to 'termination-as-transformation'. A paper by

Cummings (2001) raises the notion of endings being viewed as 'interruption' rather than 'termination', and the work being 'suspended until such time as the therapist may be needed again' (p. 4). Although most of the literature addresses endings or termination only from the perspective of the therapist, Hunsley et al. (1999), who examined the reasons for clients ending therapy from the perspective of both therapist *and* client, found that the reasons for ending given by both parties were rarely in concordance. Client and therapist viewpoints are also considered in studies by Stiles et al. (1998, 2008) which propose the *responsive regulation* model where both parties 'act together as rational decision makers' about the timing of the termination of therapy (2008, p. 299). In more recent times studies have addressed the premature termination of psychotherapy (Murdock et al., 2010; Ogrodniczuk et al., 2005) and the clinical, practical and ethical issues related to endings (Davis & Younggren, 2009). Books addressing endings are mainly written from a psychoanalytical perspective (Murdin, 2000; Schlesinger, 2005) some of which focuses on brief therapy models (Mander, 2000; Mann, 1973). Person-centred

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writers Mearns and Thorne have, since 1998, also raised the issue of leaving open possibilities for the client to arrange further reviews or restarts, and warn against the counsellor imposing their own judgements as to what may be a premature ending. Rennie (1998), writing from an experiential person-centred perspective, focuses on issues of dependence as a necessary and expected part of the process.

The aim of the present study was to explore clients' experiences of reviews and endings by presenting an analysis of relevant aspects of client narratives that were collected as part of a broader inquiry into six clients' experiences within a community counselling agency for people who have experienced abuse. The counsellors working in the agency were all trained in humanistic integrative models underpinned by person-centred values.

Method

The study used a narrative case study approach to collect and analyse rich narrative accounts of clients' experiences. Like Simons (2009), our approach to case study research acknowledges researcher reflexivity as a main instrument for gathering, interpreting and re-presenting the 'data' (i.e. stories of lived experience), and views knowledge and knower as interdependent and embedded within history, context, culture, language, experience, and understandings (Etherington, 2004). A narrative researcher begins from a 'curious, not knowing' position (Anderson & Gehart, 2007) and focuses on questions that help the storyteller address cultural context; their embodied engagement in the events, their senses, feelings; thoughts, attitudes and ideas; the significance of other people; the choices and actions of the teller: based on values, beliefs and aims; historical continuity; and metaphors, symbols, and creative, intuitive ways of knowing which create pictures that capture vivid representations of experiences. Narrative research seeks out how people make meanings of their experiences, and recognises that meanings are multiple and context dependent.

Collaboration with the agency

The involvement of the first author (KE) with this agency has taken several forms over many years, sometimes as consultant, supervisor, trainer, and latterly, as a researcher. During that period she had an unusual position in that, as well as offering all of

the above in a freelance capacity she was also a part-time senior academic. The second author (NB) also holds a dual role as academic and practitioner but has no professional link with this agency. The approach of both authors to all aspects of their work is based on feminist principles of equality and collaboration, values shared by the counselling agency at every level.

At an early meeting with the agency counsellors, to prepare for designing and writing a funding bid to evaluate clients' experiences of counselling, we discussed what it might mean to the agency and their clients for us to explore their work, and the ethical and pragmatic issues involved in making public something which is usually so private (Etherington, 2007a). At this meeting the counsellors described their hopes and fears for the research, indicating that, whilst feeling some anxiety, they were reassured by the collaborative nature of our discussions and their knowledge of KE's previous research with the agency. Following that meeting we made several unsuccessful attempts to seek funding, which meant that there was some delay before we could continue with the work unfunded. When we did, KE took the lead in setting up the research, negotiating with the agency and participants, and conducting the interviews. She takes up the account of that process here.

Recruitment of participants

As it is ethically questionable to contact people once they have ended counselling I worked with the agency to create a letter to be offered to *new* clients, asking if they would be willing to receive an invitation to participate in research at least two months after their counselling had ended. Those who agreed were sent a further invitation at that time, with an information letter and a request to contact me directly if they wanted to participate. All offers were accepted.

Interviews

The material presented in this paper is drawn from audio-recorded interviews/conversations I conducted with three of the six ex-clients who offered to participate in the research. We met at venues most convenient for the participants: one chose to meet me at my room in the university, one in her home and one at my home, from where I conduct my counselling and supervision practice. The conversations lasted approximately one and a half hours. As a narrative researcher I positioned myself in a

‘not-knowing and curious’ position asking: ‘what was your experience of counselling?’ I was open to following wherever the participants chose to lead me. My aim was to use this opening question as a way of initiating a research conversation that reflected dynamic and organic, dialogical processes. When new questions emerged from what was being said, I attempted to maintain coherence with the participants’ descriptions of their experiences, and to clarify and check if I was understanding what they wanted to convey. In this dialogical process I was able to include my own questions as they arose and/or additional clarifications were made later by email, phone contact or further meetings. In my representation of parts of those conversations below I show some of my part in the co-construction of knowledge and some of the questions I asked.

Although I had written in the research information that the agency would *not* be told who had participated in this research I discovered during the interviews that participants *wanted* their counsellors to see their feedback. They also indicated that they were happy for me to have access to their records and their counsellors’ views. At various times when something was difficult to remember participants might say, ‘have a look at the notes’ or ‘my counsellor would know about that if you asked her’, indicating their willingness for me to discuss their counselling within the agency. Their trust in the agency, their counsellors and themselves – and me, it seemed – created an openness that was extremely helpful. This raises questions about what seems like taken-for-granted assumptions about the need for total anonymity (Helgeland, 2005) and the counsellor’s right to know what was being said/interpreted from what their ex-clients said about a relationship/experience of which they were a part. Pseudonyms were chosen by the counsellors referred to in this paper and by some (but not all) of the ex-clients.

Iterative processes of meaning making

The agency provided a small sum of money to allow the audio-recordings to be transcribed professionally. In narrative inquiry analysis (or meaning-making) occurs throughout the research process rather than being a separate activity carried out after data collection (Gehart et al., 2007). ‘Data gathering’ and ‘analysis’ therefore becomes a single harmonious and organic process.

As the research was unfunded it was conducted slowly over a period of approximately one year.

Initially I worked with each person’s narrative on its own terms (Harvey & Chavis, 2006), treating them as knowledge in their own right (Polkinghorne, 1995), seeking out the stories, thinking *with* the stories (Frank, 1995) as much as *about* them, noticing *how* the stories were told, the metaphors used, and emotional responses, thoughts and ideas: making meaning of them as I checked and amended the transcript against the audio-recording. As the emphasis in narrative inquiry is on co-construction of meaning between the researchers and participants I returned the amended transcripts to the participants asking them to highlight the most important stories from *their* point of view. The second author, NB, also worked with the transcribed narratives; both of us comparing what was being said against our own understandings, trying not to fill in any gaps with ‘grand narratives’, but rather inquiring about how pieces of the stories made sense together.

Following our independent work on the transcripts we met to jointly consider what seemed most significant, both of us drawing on our theoretical and practice knowledge, personal experience, resonances, and the meanings participants constructed as they told their stories, as evidenced in the transcripts: thus adding another layer of shared meaning making. When all of the interviews/conversations were completed we took up a position from where we could look *across* the stories, exploring similarities, contradictions, ambiguities and differences – between the participants and between our ideas and theirs.

Once we had received the highlighted transcripts from the participants KE checked again that they wanted their counsellor to have sight of them and, as each person agreed to that idea she invited the counsellors to read them. All counsellors welcomed that. Following their reading of the transcripts each counsellor talked about *their* responses to the transcript thereby adding a further rich seam of knowledge to the whole (for a detailed example of this iterative process see Etherington, 2007b).

We then met for a further research conversation highlighting the multiple meanings and layers of knowledge that were constructed through this iterative and co-constructed process. One of the major concepts raised was about endings and reviews: there were also many other concepts raised which will be dealt with in future papers, such as the impact of the counselling on: their cognition and behaviours; their development of empathy towards others, thereby improving relationships; the growth of their trust in

self; and the construction and reconstruction of their sense of self and identity. Participants also articulated their view of: what makes a relationship therapeutic; the impact of the agency on the process of counselling; and the day-to-day differences counselling has made in their lives.

This paper focuses on only one aspect of their experience, namely: endings and reviews. Although all of the participants referred to these concepts, some placed more emphasis on this aspect of counselling than others. We have therefore chosen to present these particular participants because they spoke about endings and reviews in greater detail and with more energy than others, and because a paper limits the amount of stories that can be represented here.

Focussing on what ex-clients said about their process of ending led us to recognise two major issues:

- (1) the impact of six-weekly reviews on those endings, and
- (2) how the management of endings contributed to and affirmed the clients overall trust in themselves.

As therapists who are influenced by humanistic and narrative ideas and practices, and working in private practice, we were surprised to find that 'reviews and endings' were what first rose to the surface. Our own use of reviews is informal and an organic part of conversations with our clients and our approach to endings is influenced by our humanistic training as well as experiences of being a client in therapy over the years. Some of those endings were not of our choosing and some of them were: however, all of them were significant in different ways. In recent years our approach to endings has been influenced by narrative ideas and practices, in tune with the notion that 'Therapy ends when the person decides that her self-story is rich enough to sustain her future' (Payne, 2006, p. 17).

The writing of the stories is taken up here by KE who conducted the conversations and co-constructed the representations which she sent to each of the participants before offering the paper for publication:

Sarah's story:

Sarah [pseudonym] was 42 when I met her, nine months after her counselling at the agency ended. She was married with one child. Sarah had met her

counsellor Nina [pseudonym] when she attended a different agency two years earlier. At that time they had worked on issues related to Sarah's serious illness and the anticipation of her first child's birth:

I was in such a bad physical state, mental state, that I was just a puddle by the time I got there because I was so stressed ... And she just listened ... at the same time I found out that I was pregnant, within like a week before I was going to go for my first counselling, my first meeting with her. And so it turned from 'I desperately want to get back out into the world', to, 'oh my lord, how am I going to cope with this?'

That counselling had been brought to a close after six months by the imminent birth of Sarah's baby and ended without her having talked about her childhood sexual abuse. Two years later events in Sarah's life triggered her memories of abuse and she sought out Nina for counselling at the agency where she now worked. She told me that it was like 'meeting an old friend' and that:

It was as if now we were starting the conversation that we originally had intended ... because those were the things that I couldn't get back in the box ...

Having previously established a trusting relationship with Nina, Sarah was able to focus on getting what she needed from this new phase of counselling. Sarah had mentioned that being clear about the time of ending was important to her because as that time drew closer she realised that there were certain things she had not yet done. She was about to visit her parents who were living back in the area where she was abused and she wanted to talk to them about that abuse:

... it was getting towards the end of our allotted year and we'd gone up to see them and I just knew that if I didn't [talk to them] the chance may never again be so open

She also wanted to speak to the police in that area:

I'd been thinking ... I should contact the police in the area, they should have records, and ... the question had come up and gone away so many times that I got bored of asking it and I just knew, if this all falls apart and people start screaming at

me I can always still run back to Nina and know that I was safe Well, I knew we had this deadline looming, and I knew that if I was going to do that I had to do it before ... [we ended]

Oh I see, whilst she was still around for you to run to?

Yes, and I know, that was like a gentle persuasion, but *she* didn't put that on me, and I didn't even put it on myself ... I just knew that if I was going to make contact with a lawyer then I'd like her to be beside me, so I had to get that done.

So having an end point was important to you?

Well it was important to me because I was losing a really ... big part of my support network and I suppose ... I wanted to squeeze the best out of it I could and make the most of it; don't let this opportunity slip through your hands because when am I going to ... click with somebody so easily – not so easily – but ... so smoothly ...

... I think, yes, knowing that there was an end was important, not because I wanted the end but because I think you have to move on and ... every time she did a review she would say, would you like to carry on with the counselling?

So you made a choice each time?

... and I would always say, yes. And towards the end I thought, why am I saying, yes? I don't know if I *need* this anymore. You know, I'm in distress, I'm falling apart! But ... it felt okay to say, yes, I want to carry on talking about this.

It's still useful?

And I'd think: well now somebody else has that chance to appreciate, to learn something more of themselves to be able to cope better themselves. So in that way I'm happy to let go. When I hear certain songs on the radio, think of certain things and I need somebody, she's [Nina] who I think of.

So you've still got her with you?

Yes, there are certain songs that just bring a tear to my eye because ... [in a choked voice] I know she's still there. I do, I do miss her but I now have to be grown up and adult about this! [laughter] Because she did really help and I really appreciate that ...

Yes, but then there comes that issue of ending, of the finishing, of actually following through, which turns your circle, you have to break that circle to actually finish something ... put everything back

in the box, but now I know that when the box comes open again I know that I've got the tools to steer me back to shore.

Yes. I don't need her physically; I've got her voice up here [points to head] and when a certain situation or thing happens I know what she'll say ... it's like, not how would *she* deal with it, but [she'd] give it back to yourself to deal with.

Jane's story:

Jane met me at the door of her house with her six-month-old baby under her arm. Eleven months had passed since she had ended counselling at the agency and now, aged 35, she was happy with a new partner. Jane had been seriously neglected as a child and placed in care with her younger siblings when she was six years old. She was fostered by a family who, she believed, only really wanted her younger brother and sister. Jane said she had been depressed for as long as she could remember. She had had counselling at her GP surgery prior to attending the agency, so she was able to compare two very different experiences.

She said she was 'desperate' when she attended counselling at her GP surgery:

... every time I said things her eyebrows would raise, and ... I wasn't comfortable with this lady, and it just didn't work for me. I did the six sessions, and then she said I could pay to go somewhere else, which I couldn't afford. I was unemployed, really badly depressed, and just felt that she didn't help.

Her sense of desperation was even greater when she attended the agency for her first session. But here she found that her counsellor, Morag [pseudonym], made her feel at ease: '... if I wanted to ramble I could ramble, if I wanted to go in there and ... cry I didn't necessarily have to explain why I was crying'.

Jane explained the importance of being allowed to stay with her own pace and agenda:

... one of the reasons I didn't feel at ease [with GP counsellor] was it didn't feel like it was about me, ... whereas with Morag ... it was much more relaxed ... it was a long process, and we pulled things into it when it was the right time

Morag ... made me see what a special person I am, and I am so grateful for what she's done for me, I've got tears in my eyes, you know, and I think that the agency should realise how much they touch people's lives, she really had given me hope, she really changed my life ...

However, a frequent theme in Jane's story of counselling was the impact of six-session review. She described her first introduction to that idea:

... Morag said it would be initially six weeks, and I remember at the time going, "... only six weeks, what am I going to do after six weeks," ... and she was going, "Don't panic, it'll be fine," you know, "You have a chat after six weeks ... we see if you're benefiting from it, if you're getting what you need from it, and if it's working,"

Jane decided that if she told Morag 'absolutely everything' it would become clear how badly she needed counselling and that it would not stop 'until I needed it to stop'.

... But at that time I thought I would never be able to cope without it, I mean, at that time I thought ... even a year's not going to be enough ... I'd be panicking [every six weeks], up until quite close to the end of my counselling when I decided that I didn't need it ... the last couple [of reviews] I wasn't *as* anxious.

At this point Jane made what was to us a surprising statement, by saying that one of the reasons she was able to end counselling was that her brother killed himself: thus challenging our taken-for-granted assumptions that this would mean she needed to *continue* with counselling rather than end. She explained:

... my brother killed himself, and it changed my whole life because it made me think, I mean, I don't know what you believe in, but I believe in spirits and things like that, and ... I feel that he's in a better place, and him doing that made me think, you know, I've got through this, and I am actually alright, and ... I've achieved a lot in my life ...

So seeing that you'd both gone through similar experiences and he'd ended up ... the way he had and you hadn't ... that made you realise.

... I am a strong person and I *can* achieve. That was my turning point for my counselling, and that's when I started to think actually I don't need this now. Whereas most people were saying, "Your brother's killed himself, you *need* this counselling," and I was like, "No I don't," you know, it made me see things so differently.

So how did you know when you were ready to finish?

The desperation had gone: she did say to me at the last review, 'Do you feel that you need this anymore?' And I said, 'Yeah I do.' I had that brief thought, like, 'You're asking me to stop,' and I was like, ooh [makes scared noise], and I did say to her, 'No, no, no I can't stop.' But when I went home that day I thought, actually what am I getting out of it now? Do I need it? And it did make me start to think that actually, I'm quite happy with my life, ... and when I went back for my next session we made a date, and I said, 'Right I'm going to stop the counselling,' and it was very soon after he'd killed himself, which I was quite shocked at, 'cause I didn't think I would be strong enough ...

From what Jane had said to me I had the impression that the six-weekly reviews were unhelpful but when I checked out this assumption Jane's response indicated her ambivalence:

Yeah, no, no I don't, looking back on it, at the time you do feel a bit like a ticking bomb, like they're going to take it away, but that was because when I'd had the counselling with the doctors, and they'd said I'd have to pay for it, ... when you're living off fifty pound a week ... you've got no chance. ... and the time period is very scary, you know, when they say, 'We'll give you six weeks sessions, and then see whether you need it,' that is where my desperation was.

It sounds as though it [the review] was a bit unhelpful and yet you also seem to be saying no not really?

No, I don't, the initial yes, but no I don't, I think it's good to have that [review], every so many weeks, because you re-focus, so yeah I do think it's good in the long run because it gives you a time to look back on what you've achieved and how you feel you've moved on and, but that *initial* period no, that's the scary ...

Catherine's story:

Catherine, aged 31, met with me in my room at the university seven months after ending her counselling. She had seen 'a psychotherapist' privately before attending the agency, but she hadn't found that helpful and chose to end after two sessions.

Catherine had needed time to build enough trust in the relationship for her to address the difficult events of her life. Initially the agency offered her a year of counselling but as that time drew closer she realised she wasn't ready to end.

... and it had to come to an end, and actually they changed the policies and extended it so that I actually could stay longer ...

How soon was it before you realised you could extend?

Well ... they changed the system right at that point where I was going to have to end. I was thinking I don't know what to do, and it changed, and so I stayed.

So had you been working towards an ending, had you been talking about endings, and maybe worrying about endings?

Well yeah ... It felt, you know, almost like a miracle It would have been nice if I didn't have to have that scare in the middle with it having to end, but then it didn't, that was a bit stressful, but that's resolved now, it won't happen, so, ...

So when they changed that did they then put a new limit on it or ...?

We sort of extended it ... to be reviewed at a certain point, and, you know, it was indefinite, but we agreed an ending point so it wasn't indefinite but it could be if I needed it to be. But I didn't need it to be, so yeah I think it seems to take me quite a long time to form a relationship where I feel comfortable enough to actually say what's going on in my head or how it feels ...

So you wanted to have that time to build up the trust ...

Yeah ... I can't, nobody can rush that, so ... had it been ... six weeks and that was it, well it wouldn't have worked ... would be a bit of a waste of time.

Catherine went on to describe her experience of her six-weekly reviews:

Paperwork was a pain the backside, it really was There was like just these little questionnaires ... and tick boxes, and stuff like that, you know. ... Because they get European Union funding, they have to do it, which is okay, but it ... it was bureaucracy really, because as far as my relationship with Nina was concerned we both knew what was happening, and the paperwork wasn't necessary for either of us, but it was for the funding. So I don't know whether they might have changed that now, because they didn't like it very much either.

So was it in any way helpful?

I think it's a great thing if maybe somebody's not having a good experience ... then they would definitely have an opportunity to say so ... I wasn't in that position, it was going really well, and I felt able to say if I wasn't comfortable about that or this ... so for other people it might be useful, for me it was just, kind of, paperwork.

I can hear that you wanted to satisfy the needs of the agency, but apart from that how did you feel about spending time doing that?

I would have been more irritated had I had a finite amount of time, because it felt like a waste of time ...

Yes, so this happened in the session, in your session time?

Yeah, I think once I might have ... just filled it out at home, I think that works better for me. 'Cause I just wrote it down and brought it back and ... then you get into the whole, 'who's in charge' thing – once somebody's got a clipboard and piece of paper (laughs).

Who's in charge me or the Counsellor?

Yeah, the balance changes ... as soon as somebody gets that clipboard it's just ... it wasn't a major problem, probably would have been had I ... although if I'd really needed to talk about something ... I don't think I would have been expected to have waited until the paperwork was done. It wasn't like 'you have to do this', it's just like, 'really sorry, got to get ...' (laughs) which it's fine, yeah, so it was managed well.

So what was it like when you finally ended?

Yeah, it felt right, it was agreed ... the time we'd agreed to review was coming up, as opposed to when I thought it was going to *have* to end and

that felt really wrong, whereas this just felt right, and it's like you trust in yourself again isn't? So it felt like there wasn't anything major left undone, just ... time to ... try and live, you know.

To live yeah, to put some of that learning into practice and ...?

Yeah, it was scary and, but I did have that reassurance that, if you need to, you can re-refer, you know? If I wanted to write to my counsellor at the organisation, just say what was going on, that was okay, that was nice ... not actually a closed door. I think if it had been too, like black and white I would have panicked, whereas ... it's almost like, kind of, stabilisers do you know?

Yeah, so it ... [the ending] was definitely the right time.

I sent a Christmas card and just a little bit of contact, you know, it's like everything, it settles down. Having said that I wouldn't mind knowing if she leaves ... just so I know.

The significance of reviews

From KE's discussions with the counsellors we learned that at assessment clients were offered six sessions with the possibility of continuing for up to a year if needed. Every six weeks a formal review was held to explore the client's view of counselling and their willingness to continue. Initially, the agency used a qualitative review form; later, the form changed to meet the funder's agenda, collecting both qualitative *and* quantitative data. The clients whose stories are told above all used the old forms – with Catherine only once using the form requiring quantitative data.

It is noticeable that each of the participants in this study (including those not referred to in this paper) referred to the six-session review spontaneously, indicating their impact had been significant. KE's initial question, 'Please tell me your stories of counselling at the agency', left the agenda wide open, ensuring that they spoke about the topics that were of importance to *them*. Two participants (whose stories are not directly included in this paper) also focussed heavily on the negative aspects of reviews: one of those who mainly used the newer form stated that the reviews were 'really annoying':

... because I used to have to fill in the ruddy thing in my time (laughs) and I'd think, 'I'd rather be doing work now, I don't want to be filling this', but

I know it was useful for her [the counsellor] so I would do it.

In spite of participants' dislike of the reviews, most stated that it was useful to check regularly how things were going and state their willingness to continue: it also gave them a chance to focus or re-focus on their aims. Whereas they were willing to do this for the agency's/counsellor's sake, they felt there was less value to themselves, especially if it took up their time in sessions when they would have preferred to meet their own agenda. As they were receiving free counselling it might have been difficult for them to say this directly to their counsellors; the research however gave them the opportunity they may not otherwise have had.

Having a regular review allowed Sarah to make choices. Throughout our conversation she spoke of how the counselling overall had taught her to trust herself by recognising her as someone who could judge what she needed and for how long. The review process and ending, in particular, helped her recognise and develop trust in her ability to make choices and decisions.

It is interesting to note how much Jane's experience of counselling was impacted by the six-session reviews, something she returned to over and over again in our conversation. This was difficult for her counsellor, Morag, to read as she had been unaware of the degree of distress this had caused Jane at the time. From what Jane says, she heard Morag's question: 'Do you want to continue?' as 'I want you to end' – sometimes raising her anxiety to almost unbearable levels. Although Jane's story shows that some of her anxieties were caused by her first experience of brief counselling, her misinterpretations might also have been influenced by her early experiences of parental abandonment and rejection, but rather than viewing this as something which needs, in psychoanalytical terms, to be '... consistently interpreted in the transference, which becomes essential for the therapeutic results of the work ...' (Mander, 2000, p. 36) Morag helped create an environment in which Jane came to realise that she could trust herself to know when she no longer needed counselling.

Catherine's story shows how the review process raised questions for her about 'who's in charge' and the impact of 'a clipboard and piece of paper' on her sense of power and agency, whilst also acknowledging that for her the process was managed well. However, the decision to offer her an extension

seems to have been made rather late in the day, so late that it felt like 'a miracle' when it came. In discussion with Nina and Morag, we wondered if this was influenced by uncertainty about funding at that time. This agency, like many others that rely on charitable support, has come close to extinction from time to time, something that impacts on the counsellors' anxieties about what to tell their clients about continuation.

Endings

Sarah finished at the agency after the allocated year, having had six months counselling with Nina previously at another agency. Both Jane and Catherine re-negotiated their ending at 18 and 22 months respectively. From discussions with the counsellors we learned that although clients are offered 12 months of counselling at the start of therapy each counsellor can carry a limited number of longer term clients. So, if clients do not feel ready to end after one year they may be offered an extended period of counselling after careful discussion in supervision to ensure that it benefits the client rather than being a counter-transference response in the counsellor. Once an extension has been agreed in supervision the counsellor offers it to the client and discusses the pros and cons. This approach is based on beliefs about the value of mutual agenda setting and a fundamental trust in the client's ability to know what is best for them (Anderson & Gehart, 2007, p. 406) rather than psychoanalytical beliefs about endings needing to deal with '... regressive demands for continuation, aggressive sabotaging or bland denying of loss and grief' (Mander, 2000, p. 2). Although the counsellors employed by the agency use integrative models underpinned by person-centred values, their beliefs about endings seem to include a basic feminist position, with awareness of power issues that inform their practices in terms of equality, consultancy and collaboration.

Sarah's story shows how a clear end point spurred her on to do the difficult things she wanted to achieve whilst still being supported by her counsellor. The deadline itself created 'a gentle persuasion' to act before it was too late. It also shows her ambivalence about ending, something that is clear in other cases too. Rather than 'eliminating' her ambiguity about ending, as seems to be the preferred goal for some psychodynamic therapists (Mann, 1973), she seems to have been helped to work with her

ambivalence in useful ways that strengthened her ability to trust her own judgements.

Jane's story shows us how her premature ending of counselling at the surgery impacted on her level of anxiety and 'desperation' at the start of her second experience of counselling at the agency. Having not had her needs met in the surgery Jane worried that the same thing would happen again and it may have been this anxiety that was raised each time the review period came around. Her story shows us the importance of frequently checking how the client understands the contract. It also raises issues of clinical, practical, and ethical factors, especially for clients who have early experiences of abandonment (Davis & Younggren, 2009).

Jane's brother committed suicide in January 2004; she ended her counselling in October the same year, having had a four-week break in March due to Morag's bereavement. It is clear from Jane's story that her brother's death had a considerable impact on her sense of self and identity: she realised that she was indeed a strong person who had survived the same kind of life that had led him to commit suicide, and much of her counselling had focussed on recognising and acknowledging her strengths and achievements. However, her counsellor's unplanned absence may also have helped her realise she could manage her life without counselling. Jane's story does however show us how important it is to allow clients to explore the meaning they create from their experiences, rather than imposing meaning based upon taken-for-granted assumptions when major crises arise towards the end of counselling.

Catherine, like many clients, needed enough time to build up a trusting relationship before she could feel safe enough to speak of her abuse. For people whose trust has been betrayed and who have experienced powerlessness in their early lives, a major focus of counselling may be to explore the place of collaboration in the client's development of self-trust and self-agency, i.e. a sense of competency or ability to participate in the creation of choices (Anderson & Gehart, 2007; Cummings, 2001). Catherine knew that she was not ready to end after a year of counselling and she was able to extend her period of counselling to better suit her needs. She acknowledged that the ending felt 'really right when it was agreed'; when *she* was included in the decision. This was further enhanced by knowing that her connection with the agency did not have to be completely severed but rather that she could experience a continuing bond with the people and place

that had been so central in her journey towards health and well-being. Her image of being able to use 'stabilisers' for a while until she was secure enough to ride alone was powerful, and her touching statement she 'wouldn't mind knowing' if her counsellor should ever leave the agency reminded us of Jane's sadness (not shown in this paper) on finding that her counsellor had indeed left the agency when she rang to tell her about the birth of her child.

Discussion

The findings of this study suggest that reviews can be a useful tool for both counsellors and clients; and that their usefulness might depend upon their design and the manner in which they are implemented. The usefulness of the review process seems to be in: focusing the client on their aims and encouraging them to complete the tasks they need to achieve before counselling ends; enabling them to develop their ability to ask for what they want, i.e. to continue or to finish; and to monitor the relationship with their counsellor and their progress. This depends upon a belief that therapists and clients are able to make appropriately responsive decisions about the length of therapy, as shown by Stiles et al. (2008) and Barkham et al. (2006) and in line with Perrin et al. (2009) who found that 'the precise number of sessions seemed less important than how the ending was conducted' (p. 245).

This study supports the model proposed by Cummings (2001) who suggests 'interruption' as a metaphor for endings rather than 'termination' – a notion that seems to match Catherine's valuing of the message given by her counsellor 'if you need to, you can re-refer'. Cummings provides tabulated evidence from his own clinical practice that shows when clients know they can return if and when the need arises, there are only small numbers who avail themselves of this. He writes: 'To successfully substitute interruption for termination the strength of the transference must be diminished while the intensity of the therapy is raised' (p. 4) and suggests that this requires the establishment of a 'true partnership' between client and therapist – which seems to fit with the model of collaborative relationship experienced by participants in this study. Cummings suggests that this kind of therapeutic partnership enables endings to be implemented 'unrelentingly' but with compassion,

empathy, understanding and patience and sees the cornerstones to this process as the therapeutic contract, homework, and fostering resiliency (p. 4).

The findings of this study have a number of potentially significant implications for practice. The agency's offer of a year's free counselling, along with their willingness to work with clients to re-negotiate when necessary, provides clients with a history of abuse an opportunity to develop and experience a sense of trust in their own competency in decision-making and a chance to say what they need: major therapeutic (and possibly transforming) work in its own right for this client group – perhaps reflecting Quintana's idea of 'termination-as-transformation' rather than only as loss (Quintana, 1993).

Learning from this paper has been discussed with agency staff and led to changes in practice, mainly related to the design and implementation of the review forms. But now, once again, the agency is fighting for its existence and its practices have been influenced by that, notably their ability to offer the long-term counselling that is described above. Their willingness to engage with research has produced several different types of evidence related to the impact of their work with clients and this has recently been rewarded by receipt of their first ever service level agreement – for a limited period. Ironically, this funding, whilst creating a slightly more secure base has also meant that clients are now allocated a maximum of 18 sessions offered in six-weekly blocks. This has ensured that in spite of our discussions about changes referred to above, the funder's requirements are based on six-weekly reviews.

Practitioners in the field rarely have access to a range of research journals but through our involvement as researchers we have been able to make known to agency workers several papers which we believe they will find useful, notably Cummings (2001) and Stiles et al. (2008) who argue that clients and counsellors are able to make rational decisions about the duration of counselling. With the backing of that research it may be that counsellors and their managers could question the funders' imposed agendas and explore the perhaps unexamined assumptions that underpin the 'dose-effect model' based on the belief that there is an optimum 'dosage' of counselling to provide a 'cure' for clients (Stiles et al., 2008). Why, for example, do they impose a maximum of 18 sessions?

Finally, the process of this study illustrates how narrative inquiry can be empowering for those who take part in it. Feedback from ex-clients about their involvement emphasised their pleasure in having their views taken seriously, and being treated as 'experts' on their own experiences. The counsellors involved were visibly moved as we discussed their reading of the transcripts, never before having received the depth, quality and extent of feedback about their work and their relationships with clients. The overwhelming gratitude of participants rang out loudly from their transcripts: a gift indeed to their erstwhile counsellors. However, this is a small in-depth sample of three clients from one agency who all felt very satisfied with the outcome of their time spent in counselling. We had hoped to offer the story of a client who was less satisfied by the time he ended but after reading his transcript he withdrew from the study. Therefore, sadly, we cannot offer his stories. The other two clients involved in the study were also very satisfied with the outcome of their therapy and their stories will be told elsewhere. This satisfaction will almost surely have shaped the stories they told. Lack of funding limited the amount of time that could be given to the research and therefore the numbers involved.

Using a narrative approach to case studies we have gained rich layers of information and understanding about the particularities of counselling from the clients' point of view. This knowledge, while not claiming generality in a positivistic sense, does offer the reader a chance to discern what of these stories they can apply to their own context, and what they cannot. By studying the uniqueness of each case in-depth, alongside others, we may yet come to understand universality, if that is our aim. For ourselves, like Simons (2009), we prefer to hold 'the tension between the universal and the particular, and the ambiguity or conflict it presents' (p. 167) in the hope that, in doing so, we may find the balance therein.

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