**BSc (Hons) Psychology and Counselling, Staffordshire University**

**Psychology Project Report**

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Exploration of Barriers and Facilitators of Reflection from Undergraduate Counselling Students Perspective: A Thematic Analysis.

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Abstract

Reflection is an important aspect in the counselling profession, enabling counsellors to develop their skills, empathy, resilience, wellbeing and provide adequate support to their clients (Mösler et al, 2023). Reflection is a core component of the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy ethical framework which promotes safe and ethical practice (British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2018). However, it has been found that student and professional counsellors experience barriers preventing them from practicing reflectively (Haarhoff et al, 2015; Wong-Wiley, 2007). Additionally, it has been suggested that the importance of reflection in counselling is not spoken about enough in the literature (Colins, 2013). This qualitative research consists of seven level 5 and 6 undergraduate psychology and counselling students of differing ages and gender. The decision to study undergraduate students was made due to past research being conducted primarily with postgraduate counselling students. Participants undertook qualitative interviews exploring their experiences of barriers and facilitators of reflection. Data was analysed using Braun and Clarkes (2006) 6 step thematic analysis and 4 themes were found: personal and emotional barriers and facilitators, academic barriers and support, diversity and individual differences, and benefits of reflection in personal and professional development. However, the theme benefits of reflection in personal and professional development will not be discussed in this report due to the limited wordcount of this project and the lack of relevance to the research question. Suggestions for future research are also explored in this report.

Introduction

Reflection is a process involving an in-depth evaluation of situations, behaviours, reactions, emotions, personal values, unconscious biases, and belief systems (Orak et al, 2020). However, there are many definitions of reflection described in the literature (Nguyen et al, 2014), reflective practice was formally introduced in the 1930’s, the author described reflection has a form of critically thinking, involving giving serious consideration to the subject at hand (Dewy, 1933). Later, Schön (1987) described reflection has a process of actively examining personal experiences and gaining understanding of how past experiences may be shaping current behaviours. Nevertheless, Bennett-Levy & Finlay-Jones (2018) stated that no single definition is required for reflection to be beneficial in personal and professional growth. Reflection enables individuals to become more self-aware, not only of themselves but their relationships with others, it facilitates problem solving, setting meaningful goals, correcting mistakes, improved decision making, application of knowledge to real-life situations, and improved outcomes in the future (Wilhelm, 2013).

Reflection of an event can be performed at different time points, the most commonly recognised type of reflection occurs after an event has happened, known as reflection on action; however, it can also be implemented whilst an event is taking place, known as reflection in action; or in preparation for future events, known as reflection for action (Olteanu, 2017). There are many ways to engage in reflection, previous literature suggests that it is important for individuals to find a method of reflection which they relate to and is efficient for them, a common method is reflective journalling (Van Rensburg et al, 2018), another method of reflection is storytelling, these methods of reflection enables individuals to bring context to their life experiences (Phillips et al, 2017). Though, it is common for people to engage in reflection subconsciously, however it is said that these types of reflections may be less critical, lack accountability, and ineffective (Marshall et al, 2022). Therefore, when engaging in reflection it is recommended to make use of a reflective cycle, to further enable the learning process (Dressler et al, 2018), likewise the reflective cycle used should be one that the individual feels works best for them (Jasper, 2013), examples of reflective cycles include the Rolf et al (2001) model, Gibbs’ (1988) 6 step model, or Kolb’s (1984) Experimental Learning Cycle. The literature suggests that when paired with experience and knowledge, reflection enables higher levels of learning and offers deeper understanding of complex ideas (McLeod et al, 2015) consequently, it is proposed that reflection is an essential component of life-long personal and professional development (Lane & Roberts, 2022).

Reflection is a major part of many professions such as, education and nursing (Akella et al, 2021; Miambo et al, 2021), in these professions reflection is promoted and encouraged as an important factor of professional growth (Taylor, 2020). Reflection is a requirement of every nurse’s practice and is embedded within the Nursing and Midwifery Councils code of conduct, qualified nurses must apply for revalidation every 3 years to continue practising in the UK, a component of this is to complete 5 written reflective accounts and engage in a reflective discussion based on clinical experiences (Nursing and Midwifery Council, 2018). This process has been developed to ensure that nurses are able to adapt the skills gained from clinical knowledge and experiences, in order to provide safe and ethical care (Barchard, 2022). Another area of the medical field where reflection is crucial is clinical psychology, however due to the positivist approach in the nature of behavioural science, clinical psychology is said to have been slower on the uptake of reflective practice, although recently it has become common for clinical psychologists to engage in reflective groups and writing (Fisher et al, 2015). Similarly, in the counselling and psychotherapy profession all BACP (British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists) accredited counselling courses have a requirement that, alongside training and placement hours, counselling students must engage in reflective practice (British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists, 2018). To meet this requirement students on BACP accredited courses must engage in personal therapy and both students and qualified counsellors must participate in a minimum of 1.5 hours of supervision per month, on a ratio of 1 hour of supervision per 8 client hours to facilitate safe practice (British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists, 2024).

It is often said that counselling is a mix of science and art (Ivey et al, 2018) and that counselling professionals need to be equipped with a range of diverse and flexible tools to support themselves and their clients (Taylor, 2020). Counsellors may face many challenges in practice concerning their own mental wellbeing, such as secondary trauma, which can lead to a decline in physical and mental health and result in burnout, compassion fatigue, and impacts on therapeutic relationships (Hazen et al, 2020). Therefore, reflective practice is an essential component of counselling, enabling counsellors to enhance their empathy, wellbeing, resilience, and develop core counselling skills (Mösler et al, 2023), allowing counsellors to practice in a self-critical and ethical manner (Stedmon & Dallos, 2009). Reflection in the counselling profession involves practitioners observing, describing, and highlighting their emotions, thoughts, and practice behaviours (Bennett-Levy, 2006) in attempts to understand why particular situations occurred, why they practice the way they do, to evaluate the implications of their actions, and explore how to improve their practice in the future (Thompson & Thompson, 2023). A recent example of a situation that required counsellors to reflect was the Covid-19 pandemic, in response to national lockdown counsellors had to use reflective skills to decide how best to adapt their way of working in order to continue to deliver adequate care to their clients, whilst keeping themselves and their clients safe, these reflections led to practices such as remote assessments and treatments, and continuous revision of the impact that lockdown was having on the mental health of their clients (Jurcik et al, 2021).

Consequently, it is crucial to encourage reflection in trainee counsellors, this not only aids students in becoming reflective practitioners but also supports them to produce insight to their own learning (Dixon & Chiang, 2019), to develop their counselling skills, and highlight areas of learning which they find challenging to seek ways of overcoming them (Slovák et al, 2015). Studying at university is a process that consists of self-directed independent learning, the student is responsible for their own learning, time management, and work-load, therefore reflection and self-evaluation are crucial skills when studying for a higher education degree (Țîru, 2021). Recent studies investigating the experiences of trainee counsellors found that reflection is just as beneficial then engagement in personal therapy (Chigwedere et al, 2021). An example of this can be found in the work of Meakin (2021) and the use of “Patchworks of practise” for personal and professional development, an activity that encourages individuals to explore the influences of experiences and how these experiences impact their practice. Participants consisted of postgraduate counselling students, who engaged in this activity has part of the reflective element for their postgraduate degree. Participants reported that this activity highlighted the importance of personal development before professional development and found this activity beneficial in exploring their emotions, behavioural patterns, and struggles; enabling them to gain the understanding that the more a counsellor knows about themselves the more they are able to be present with their client.

Nevertheless, students have expressed experiencing barriers when attempting to engage in reflection. Wong-Wylie (2007) undertook a qualitative study interviewing doctoral counselling students investigating their experiences of reflective practice, this study uncovered common themes towards barriers to reflective practice which included, receiving unsupportive feedback, unsupportive staff, experiencing mistrust in peer relationships, and systemic barriers. However, participants indicated that they found building trusting peer relationships, supportive staff, and having a good sense of self-trust facilitated their engagement in reflective tasks. Likewise, research has found that post-graduate counselling students faced other challenges engaging in reflective practice, these barriers included fears of being seen as incompetent and the pressures of reflective activities being a mandatory part of the course. It was also found that some students used maladaptive coping strategies to provide temporary relief and self-protection, the outcome of this was usually detrimental. Again, it was indicated that building strong connections between peers and staff had a positive influence on students reflective practice (Collins, 2013). Equally, evidence suggests that qualified counsellors continue to face similar barriers when it comes to practicing reflectively, a study consisting of 44 National Health Service (NHS) counsellors found that although the majority of participants valued the importance of reflection, they cited lack of time as being a significant barrier to engagement (Haarhoff et al, 2015). This theme seems to be common in the experiences of reflection across the board, a study investigating reflective practice in higher education staff, also found that participants faced barriers towards reflective practice, factors included being over worked, feeling demotivated, and lack of recognition and appreciation (Grace et al, 2006).

Subsequently, Collins (2013) suggests that reflective practise is not spoken about enough in the counselling profession, stating that very little literature around reflective practice has come from counselling psychology, especially regarding trainees, despite the emphasis on the importance of it within counselling and psychotherapy. Evidentially, studies have highlighted that counsellors who engage in high levels of reflection have witnessed significantly better outcomes for their clients (Cologon et al, 2017). Furthermore, it has been suggested that continued development and research into reflective practice is essential in the counselling profession, has it has been claimed that in no other profession does the personality and behaviour of a practitioner make such a difference to the client, hence the importance of continued growth and development of self-awareness (Bennett-Levy, 2019). However, due to the previously mentioned barriers it has been found that counselling students have expressed a reluctance when it comes to engaging in reflective tasks (Wong-Wylie, 2007). As a result, it is important that research is conducted in this area, investigating the lived experiences of trainee counsellors, the barriers they experience in reflective practice and how these can be overcome. Undergraduate psychology and counselling students have been chosen for this study, due to previous research being largely conducted with postgraduate counselling students. Yet, many undergraduate counselling student go on to study at postgraduate level, therefore this study intends to explore this gap in the research. The aim of this research is to increase awareness surrounding the importance of reflection in the counselling profession and investigate ways of facilitating reflection for undergraduate counselling students to better prepare them for postgraduate level study. This study comprises of a thematic analysis exploring the research question “what are the barriers to reflection from the perspectives of undergraduate counselling students and what can be done to facilitate engagement in reflective tasks?”.

Methods

**Participants**

It was proposed that 6-10 participants would be recruited for this study in accordance with guidance from Braun and Clark (2013), which suggests that this number of participants is adequate for small qualitative projects, such as the current study. However, it has also been suggested that due to the level of study and time restraints involved at undergraduate level, 4-6 participants are sufficient for this type of project (Vasileiou et al, 2018). Consequently, after an initial poster campaign seven Staffordshire University Undergraduate Psychology and Counselling students were recruited and interviewed for this project. In order to meet the aims and objectives of this project, participants were required to meet the following inclusion criteria: (1) be aged 18 years or older; (2) be current level 5 or level 6 Undergraduate Psychology and Counselling students. In accordance with ethical guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2021; British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2019) Consent was obtained from every participant and was provided both verbally and written via a consent form (see *Appendix* C), participants were given a pseudonym to protect their identities. Further participant information is provided in table 1.

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| **Table 1.**  Participant Information |  |  |
| Pseudonyms | Participant 1  Participant 2  Participant 3  Participant 4  Participant 5  Participant 6  Participant 7 | Caitlin  Max  Paul  Richard  Natalie  Oscar  Louise |
| Gender | Female | 3 |
|  | Male | 4 |
| Age in years | Range  Mean  SD | 26 - 46  39.57  8.36 |
| Level of Study | Level 5 | 4 |
|  | Level 6 | 3 |

**Materials**

An advertising poster was used for recruitment (*Appendix A*) which was emailed to counselling staff, to be advertised during lectures. The poster was also advertised via the Staffordshire University Psychology Society. The poster encouraged students interested in participating to email the researcher. Students also had the option to sign-up via the Staffordshire University SONA credit system which enabled participants to choose a timeslot for their interview. Upon receiving confirmation of participant sign-up, the researcher sent the participant a copy of the information sheet (*Appendix B*) and the consent form (*Appendix C*). Following completion of the interview a copy of the debrief was emailed to all participants, which included details of support services if required and information of how to withdraw their data from the study if they wished to do so (*Appendix D*).

All interviews were conducted and recorded using Microsoft Teams, the information sheet, consent form, and debrief forms were created using Microsoft Word, and the advertising poster was created using Microsoft PowerPoint.

**Procedure**

This study consisted of a qualitative analysis of undergraduate Psychology and Counselling students lived experiences of reflection. A qualitative method was chosen for this study has qualitative data enabled the researcher to capture a rich, in-depth, and contextualised understanding of the participants experiences, in a way that quantitative data would be unable to provide (Povee & Roberts, 2014). As previously mentioned, the process began withparticipant recruitment from an advertising campaign involving an advertising poster (see *Appendix A*) and Staffordshire Universities SONA software. Participants who were interested in being a part of this research were invited to email the researcher to arrange an interview slot or to choose a timeslot available on SONA, whichever they preferred. When completing the recruitment process via SONA an incentive of 4 SONA credits was available, participants were then able to use their SONA credits to recruit participants in the future to complete their own level 6 research projects. There were no further incentives offered for participation in this project.

Participants who had expressed interest in taking part in the project were provided with a copy of the information sheet (*Appendix B*) and consent form (*Appendix C*) via email, participants were asked to only complete and return the consent form after reviewing the information sheet and felt comfortable to continue. Participants were also informed that they were under no obligation to participate and of their rights of withdrawal. Once consent forms were returned a mutually agreed time and date for the interview was arranged with participants who had reached out via email or the time and date of the interview confirmed with participants who had signed up via SONA.

Interviews were conducted via Microsoft Teams and lasted approximately 1 hour, when the meeting begun the researcher briefly discussed the information sheet with the participant and obtained verbal consent for the interview to begin. The participant was informed that they were under no obligation to answer every question, they may stop or pause the interview at any time and were reminded again of their rights of withdrawal. Following this brief discussion and ensuring receipt of verbal and written consent, the researcher began the recording. Once the recording had begun the semi-structured interview consisted of 10 core questions (*Appendix* E), however relevant additional questions were asked dependent upon the participants responses.

Once the interview had ended participants were given the opportunity to add anything else that may not have been covered in the interview and thanked for taking the time to participate. The recording was terminated and the participant was asked if they had any further questions. After the meeting finished participants were provided with the debrief form (*Appendix D*) which contained the information of relevant support services if required.

**Ethical Considerations**

This research project was approved by the Staffordshire University Ethics Board before data collection began. In accordance with the British Psychological Society and the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy ethical guidelines (British Psychological Society, 2021; British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy, 2019), the wellbeing and safeguarding of participants was considered throughout the application of this study and data collection process, to ensure participants were at no risk of psychological or physical harm has a result of engaging in this study. Participants engaged with this research of their own freewill and were provided with all the necessary information regarding the aims of the research and the process of participation to enable them to make an informed decision when considering taking part in this study (*Appendix* B). Verbal and written consent (*Appendix* C) was gained and assured from all participants throughout the entirety of this project and participants were frequently reminded of their rights of withdrawal. On completion of the study all participants were debriefed and provided with information of relevant support services and reminded of their rights to have their data removed, if they wished, without any consequence (*Appendix D*).

**Method of Data Analysis**

Each interview was analysed separately following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) 6 step thematic analysis, during which reflexivity was ensured throughout. Thematic analysis was chosen to analyse this data has it offers theoretical flexibility and is said to be centred around the exploration of subjective experiences (Braun and Clarke, 2021), thus aligning with the aims of this project. Following completion of interviews, the first step involved transcribing the interviews verbatim, this included familiarisation of the data, in which the data was read over at least 3 times (*Appendix G*). Transcripts were then extracted into a table in a separate Word Document where initial codes were generated (*Appendix* F), codes were then checked to rule out potential for bias. Following this codes were analysed and used to generate key themes (*Appendix* G), themes were generated based on the number of occurrences and relevance to the research question, which on occasion required the researchers judgement. Potential themes were then reviewed, defined, and finalised. Finally, each theme was written up demonstrating quotes extracted from the transcripts. The analysis section will now follow which will include a detailed discussion of the themes and subthemes found within the data.

Analysis

Four themes were identified from the data, however the theme “benefits of reflection to personal and emotional development” (*Appendix E*) will not be discussed in this report. The decision to not include this theme was made due to the restricted word count of this project and has the aim of this research was to explore barriers and facilitators to reflection this theme lacked relevance to the research question. The following themes will be discussed in more depth: Personal and Emotional Barriers and Facilitators, Academic Barriers and Support, and Individual Differences and Diversity.

**Theme 1 *Personal and Emotional Barriers and Facilitators: Explores personal and emotional factors to reflection*.**

Figure 1. Theme 1 thematic map (*Appendix E*)

This theme is constructed of 4 subthemes (shown in figure 1) and depicts the barriers and facilitators linked to the personal and emotional challenges that students have experienced when engaging in reflection.

Subtheme 1: Past Traumas and Experiences Impact Reflection

This subtheme is defined by codes describing how participants past traumas and experiences created difficulties in engagement in reflection. Similarly, it describes how participants found old habits and thought processes hindered their reflections. Louise mentioned experiencing difficulties with reflection from having to revisit painful events from her past:

*“I would say it was very… deep and very painful… because I have to go down and activate more traumas”* (*Appendix* G,vii,L22)

Caitlin expressed they found it hard to address emotional triggers which were brought up by reflection due to repressed childhood memories:

*“I think… it’s just more my own… resurfacing emotions, I guess from the reflective practice because I’ve got a lot of memories that I repress. I can’t remember a lot of my childhood, so obviously these feelings are coming up and I’m not sure where they’re coming from or what’s going on”* (*Appendix* G,i,L50)

Whereas Max described he enjoys addressing events from his past:

*“I quite enjoy reflecting if I’m honest because, I suppose back in active alcoholism I’ve done a lot of [redacted]. So, I’ve had a lot to reflect on that”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L26)

Despite this, he went on to express experiencing barriers to reflection due to a recent bereavement, suggesting that how much time has passed since the traumatic event may be a factor for some.

Other issues that participants described as impacting their ability to reflect are related to their past experiences of reflection. Max described how he was taught to reflect during his recovery from alcoholism and how this differed from the way he is now expected to reflect at university:

*“I’ve had to really unlearn that behaviour, which was really difficult”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L20)

Louise expressed that her previous reflections consisted of over analysing herself, which was counterproductive to her mental well-being and a barrier to efficient reflection. However, she went on to express she was able to manage this:

*“Before, I used to just be everyday like what’s happening? Why is that? Why do I feel that? Now I’m a bit more relaxed and I need to live my life a little bit, instead of just analysing myself over and over again”* (*Appendix* G,vii,L22)

This suggests that although reflection is an important aspect of personal development (Taylor, 2020), it is important to find a balance, not allowing analysis of yourself to consume you.

Subtheme 2: Other Commitments and Life Circumstances Impact Ability to Reflect

This subtheme illustrates how responsibilities outside of university and difficult life events have affected the participants ability to be reflective. Richard described how his life circumstances changed when he became a single working parent and his commitments outside of university created barriers for him:

*“So, you have all the school stuff, appointments, uni, work, and everything else that is going on. So, I think life can get in the way sometimes”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L60)

Therefore, lacking time to reflect seems to be a barrier for students who have commitments and responsibilities outside of studying, this also links in with the subtheme of time management and workload within theme 2. Other barriers were found within the data relating to life circumstances impacting participants ability to reflect. Natalie described it is hard to reflect when you have difficult situations occurring because she struggles to focus on anything other than what is occurring in the moment:

*“Because when you’re very much living in the moment and stuff is going on, you’re just surviving”* (*Appendix* G,v,L26)

Similarly, this was repeated by other participants, who described often feeling they are in fight or flight mode during difficult life situations and are unable to engage effectively in reflection. Though, Richard stated during Covid lockdown he had lost his business and his identity. However, instead of allowing this event to hinder him he reevaluated his circumstances and made positive changes:

*“In the end, I had to let my business go and then I got quite down after that… I kind of lost all my identities… but coming out of that, I thought well what am I going to do now and that was looking… to the future and making things better”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L54)

This suggests that although difficult life circumstances can hinder reflection, they can also be used as an opportunity to use reflection and potentially change the outcome of these situations.

Subtheme 2: Emotional Experiences Whilst Engaging in Reflection

This subtheme was observed throughout many of the interviews, it depicts the emotional impacts that participants experienced whilst engaging in reflection, either causing difficulties or motivating them to continue. Caitlin mentioned that she finds it difficult when a topic she is reflecting on brings up difficult emotions:

*“Things come up that shock you… You have to deal with all the feelings that come up with that as well, don’t you?”* (*Appendix* G,i,L8)

This research also highlighted that some students struggle to engage in reflection due to feelings of anxiety, guilt, and vulnerability, an example can be seen here:

*“I used to feel a lot of guilt and a lot of shame… that would push me into not being able to perform well”* (*Appendix* G,vi,L24)

Paul confirmed that he was anxious of judgement, knowing that some journal entries would need to be submitted:

*“Also, like fear of judgement”* (*Appendix* G,iii,L30)

However, participants expressed positive emotions occurring due to reflection, motivating them to engage further. Richard expressed his excitement upon reflecting about what is to come in the future:

*“It is exciting to think well where are you going to be in… 18 months, three years where we going to be… what are we going to be doing”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L54)

And Caitlin said that once she has engaged in a reflective activity, she feels proud of her achievement:

*“I get like a really good sense of achievement… I’m really proud of myself and it feels really good”* (*Appendix* G,i,L10)

So, it would seem that once the participants overcame the negative emotions and fears they experienced from reflection, they experienced benefits which were likely to boost their self-esteem and improve their reflective experiences.

Subtheme 3: Overcoming Personal and Emotional Barriers

This subtheme discusses ways that participants managed to overcome the personal and emotional barriers they encountered with reflection. Max proposed that continuing to reflect despite the barriers you may experience eventually makes reflecting easier and more natural:

*“The more reflection I do in terms of writing… it allows me to breakthrough these barriers… my own personal barriers”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L22)

Whereas Oliver found that having supportive people around him facilitated his reflection, allowing him to feel able to express himself:

*“You want a good support network… you want to be around people who are caring and you are able to express yourself”* (*Appendix G,vi,*L36)

Another way participants suggested over coming barriers to reflection was by engaging in personal therapy, this code appeared across multiple participants and can be confirmed as a way to facilitate reflection with it being a requirement for BACP accredited training courses (British Association for Counsellors and Psychotherapists, 2021), Louise states:

*“At the beginning I learned to do that [reflecting] by going for counselling… that was one of the first things my counsellor taught me to do”* (*Appendix* G,vii*,*L4)

Finally, participants spoke about the importance of being kind and compassionate to yourself when engaging in reflection to alleviate difficult emotions:

*“It’s about having compassion. It’s about showing yourself some kindness when you are… reflecting back”* (*Appendix* G,vi,L34)

Natalie goes on to describe reflection as a form of self-care:

*“You got all this stuff going on and you’re trying… then you go away, you reflect, you have this quite time for an hour”* (*Appendix* G,v,L26)

Therefore, indicating that reflection can be an important factor in your mental and physical wellbeing.

**Theme 2 *Academic Barriers and Support: Explores academic expectations and support.***

Figure 2. Theme 2 thematic map (*Appendix E*)

This theme is made up of 5 subthemes (shown in figure 2) and captures students experiences with academic support surrounding reflective tasks.

Subtheme 1: Experiences of Low Confidence with Reflective Journalling

A recurring theme which appeared in the data was participants expressing that they experienced lack of confidence and uncertainty when writing reflectively due to not feeling they knew how to do it:

*“I was anxious because I didn’t know how to do it… it was all about the academic side… I wasn’t reflecting at all. All I was doing was getting bogged down with the technical of how to reflect”* (*Appendix* G,v,L52)

Consequently, this research suggests that lack of confidence and uncertainty was a barrier to reflection. Several participants also mentioned they were unaware of the level of personal reflection required on this degree, so were not prepared for this aspect of the course:

*“I didn’t know I would be reflecting on me as a person and my growth”* (*Appendix* G,v,L48)

However, participants were able to share concepts that helped them overcome these barriers, Natalie suggested free writing assisted her journal writing:

*“How I did that was I started freewriting. I would free write and I would take what I wrote… and I could pick from my freewriting, what to put in each bit [in a reflective cycle]”* (Appendix G,v,L78)

And Paul advocates engaging in reflective journalling as soon as possible and as much as possible, to increase confidence and overcome this barrier:

*“My opinion is you need to start actually. No need to hesitate”* (*Appendix* G,iii*,*L54)

“Good continuous writing… the more we do, the more success we will gain”

(*Appendix* G,iii*,*L38)

This suggests that reflective writing is a skill which requires time and practice in order to gain confidence in your abilities, the more engagement put into the process the more comfortable students will feel when reflecting.

Subtheme 2: Difficulties With Time Management and Workload

This subtheme describes barriers to reflection linked to time management and university workload. Richard suggested that the workload from university assignments and requirements created further barriers to his reflections:

*“I haven’t really had time to think about anything… like with the workload as well because uni there’s a lot… there’s a lot to do”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L62)

Richard also went on to explain that he procrastinates and tends to leave reflection to the last minute, this could potentially link back to how busy he is with other commitments and deadlines:

*“I kind of leave things to last minute I’ve got issues starting stuff and think oh no, not yet”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L70)

Cailin confirmed that she also finds reflection overwhelming which leads to avoidance:

*“I mean, sort of like avoided it a little bit, a lot of procrastination has come up for me… with like reflection. And I also struggle with overwhelm as well”* (*Appendix* G,i,L50)

Lacking the time to reflect is a common occurrence stated as a barrier throughout this research and seems to be a persistent barrier.

Subtheme 3: Barriers and Facilitators Created by Course Content and Expectations

Multiple codes communicating barriers and facilitators related to the content and expectations of the course were found in the data. Caitlin claimed she struggles with reflection knowing that it is a requirement of the course:

*“I feel like if I am forced to do it, like say, if I’m… going to do once a week. I hate it. I don’t want to do it. I don’t enjoy it”* (*Appendix* G,i,L14)

Although, she enjoys reflecting when it is not an expectation of her:

*“Whereas, if I just naturally journal when I feel in the mood… I love it”* (*Appendix* G,i,L14)

Furthermore, other participants felt the importance of reflection was not highlighted enough and felt it was a small part of the teaching on the course:

*“It’s like their saying it’s very important and the reality of how it comes across as its this very small thing”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L98)

This is something that could be addressed by further research and promotion of the importance of reflection could facilitate motivation to reflect in students.

Participants were able to express what they felt helped them with better engagement in reflective tasks. Max recommended actively engaging in seminars as a facilitator for reflection:

*“What’s helped me is… participating in things… when we have the seminars… I’ve always tried to actively participate”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L28)

Similarly, a number of the participants stated that the knowledge and theory taught has part of the course supported their reflections:

*“Whereas at uni I think cause you start learning the theory… you start being introduced to different… theories around… why this could be a thing”* (*Appendix* G,i,L36)

Furthermore, Caitlin suggests that lectures dedicated to journalling and reflective cycles and examples of journals could be provided to give students an idea of how to complete a reflective journal:

*“Maybe explain the reflective cycles more and the different types that can be used, maybe have a lecture dedicated to that”* (*Appendix* G,i,L28)

*“I think maybe they could… provide with more examples of… people’s journals in the past”* (*Appendix* G,I,L20)

And Natalie proposes that the importance of reflection should be articulated to students from the very beginning of the course:

*“Getting that point across to students that reflection is something that’s a big part of this course… and I think getting that across to them right from the start”* (*Appendix* G,v,L98)

As a final message to future students the participants advised having a desire to engage in reflection is crucial and that making mistakes is part of the journey:

*“you’ve got to find the drive and determination”* (*Appendix G,*iv,L54)

*“What you tend to realise is that making mistakes through working with your fellow students and stuff is actually a great learning process”* (*Appendix* G,vi,L44)

Subtheme 4: Experiences of Tutor Support and Feedback

Participants expressed the importance of tutor support and feedback in this subtheme, how they feel they benefitted from the support they received and what they feel could be provided to facilitate reflection. Louise proposed that it is important for tutors to support their students to do their best, in a way that works for each individual student:

*“They [tutors] should have like a conversation to figure out… how should they… push that student to the best… [lecturer name] does that… but obviously, should be done by everyone”* (*Appendix* G,vii,L84)

However, Paul mentioned that he was pleased with the guidance and encouragement that he received form his tutors:

*“[Tutors] Giving guidance and time and encouragement and yes, I’m happy with that”* (*Appendix* G,iii,L42)

And Caitlin expressed that tutor feedback boosts her self-esteem and confidence to continue reflection in the future:

*“Having the good feedback kind of helps because you think, OK, well next time it will be easier”* (*Appendix* G,i,L60)

Hence, Richard feels having more opportunities to submit journal entries and receive feedback would encourage engagement in reflective journalling:

*“I don’t know whether they could probably do… over this year you got to do so many journal entries… I don’t know five or six”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L90)

Natalie also proposes that some students may not fully understand what reflection is and that more consideration could be given for these students:

*“When I walked in at level 4, I didn’t really know a lot, so I think maybe the university could have taken into consideration that a lot of people are in that same boat… maybe they should have gone a bit more in depth”* (*Appendix* G,v,L48)

This statement suggests that although students are overall satisfied with the support received from tutors, more guidance could be provided to support students who are new to reflection.

Subtheme 5: The Importance of Peer Support in Facilitating Reflection

This final subtheme discusses how participants found peer support facilitated their reflections. Oscar mentioned that when he first started reflecting a lack of peer support was a barrier he faced and emphasised the importance of it:

*“Not having the right people around me when I was prepared to push myself to positions of vulnerability… not being aware of people you can go to and speak to… because… that’s what’s really important”* (*Appendix* G,vi,L62)

Other participants went on to explain how the support they received from peers benefitted their reflections and minimised their perceptions of being alone in their struggles:

*“Talking to other peers at uni about stuff… sharing experiences, hearing that they… feel similar… it is good… just having people say things like… I’m really proud of you”*

(*Appendix* G,i,L56)

Participants highlighted the importance of personal development groups as a factor in enhancing their reflective process:

*“Doing PD [personal development] groups… that’s really helped me”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L28)

Finally, Max shared an idea he thought would be useful to facilitate peer support across all levels of the degree:

*“Having… more open dialogue with other levels… where we… have these conversations… I look back to my level four like I was scared… It would have been nice if level six students came in at that point and kind of give us some further understanding”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L36)

Ultimately, this research has shown the value that students put on peer support and how it can be used to facilitate engagement in reflection.

**Theme 3 *Individual Differences and Diversity: Explores individual differences and diversity in reflection.***

Figure 3. Theme 3 thematic map (appendix E)

This theme describes factors related to barriers participants faced due individual differences and diversity and how they can be overcome. This theme consists of 2 sub themes (shown in figure 3).

Subtheme 1: The Impact of Neurodivergence and Mental Health

This subtheme discusses the impact reflection had on participants mental health and discusses the experience of reflection by neurodivergent students. Max spoke about how he chose the Rolfe et al (2001) reflective cycle for his journalling has it consists of 3 steps, in order to accommodate his ADHD (Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder):

*“I need that kind of simplicity because of my ADHD… in order to process and understand”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L4)

Max later went on to describe that due to ADHD he sometimes struggles to process information given by tutors:

*“I struggle with certain aspects of learning… ADHD and other things… I just wish things were more simplified”* (*Appendix* G,ii,L38)

Suggesting that ADHD caused barriers for him that he has had to overcome in order to engage in reflection. Though, other participants shared they feel reflection has helped reduce symptoms of mental health conditions. Richard explained that he now feels calmer and less stressed, creating a better mindset for reflection:

*“Always being a bit calmer or not as worried about things and… not as stressed and that’s got to be down to reflecting, I think”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L102)

Additionally, Louise stated that reflection helped her overcome symptoms of anxiety:

*“I’ve solved most of the anxiety and most of the first level of problems”* (*Appendix* G,vii,L22)

Previous literature confirms these claims, Crawford et al (2021) proposes that reflective journalling can be transformative, empowering and unleashes healing properties within individuals.

Subtheme 2: Reflection is a Personal Process, Impacted by Individual Differences

This subtheme discusses how reflection is a personal process which should be adapted to individual needs to enable engagement. Louise described how she combined her spirituality and love of painting to reflect on an area of life she was struggling with:

*“I'm very passionate about the Norse mythology… I was struggling to accept my inner power and then I remember drawing Thors hammer… and painting, it took me about 10 hours… that was such a strong... Connection and a way of expressing what I was internalising at the time”* (*Appendix* G,vii,L10)

Richard shared similar experiences of reflecting in his own way, using creative models to visualise his thoughts:

*“I kind of spend a lot of time drawing out a model… for me to understand things… I like to draw them out or apply them to an abstract… which helps… I think reflection can be very personal… drawings, pictures… poems”* (*Appendix* G,iv,L16-18)

Reflection being a personal process was a theme shown throughout this data, from multiple participants. Caitlin claims that there is no right or wrong way to reflect due to this:

*“It’s a very personal thing. So, there’s no right or wrong way”* (*Appendix* G,i,L24)

Oscar agreed with this sentiment and highlighted that students of different ages or life stages may experience reflection differently:

*“Everybody’s unique… and they are in different parts of life… being a mature student, I would be coming in totally different than somebody in their 20’s”* (*Appendix* G,vi,L28)

This research shows the importance of accommodating individual differences in reflection. Therefore, the participants emphasised the importance of safe and inclusive spaces in facilitating individualism:

*“Just making sure that staff are facilitating a safe space and be open-minded”*

(*Appendix* G,i,L82)

Now that the analysis section has been discussed, the discussion section will follow including an evaluation of the themes discussed and directions for future research.

Discussion

This research entailed an investigation into the experiences of barriers and facilitators to reflection for undergraduate counselling students, interviews were conducted and data was analysed using Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six step thematic analysis. Following analysis four themes were identified, however due to a restricted word count and relevance to the research question “benefits of reflection in personal and professional development” was not discussed in this report. The themes that were discussed include: personal and emotional barriers and facilitators; academic barriers and support; individual differences and diversity.

Theme 1 provided evidence of barriers created by having to revisit painful events from the past and the emotions that this resurfaced. Participants expressed that the process of reflection brought up feelings of anxiety, apprehension, guilt, shame, and they were left feeling vulnerable and wary of sharing these reflections due to fear of judgement. Participants mentioned that these factors caused them to avoid participation in reflection. Previous literature supports these claims has it has been shown that individuals who have been exposed to trauma are likely to show avoidance to reminders of that time in their lives (Sheynin et al, 2017). Other research highlighted concerns of confidentiality as a barrier to reflective writing (Miller, 2020), this supports claims in the current research has the fear of judgement stemmed from the requirement to submit journal articles and reflect with peers.

Other barriers that theme 1 highlighted were commitments outside of university and unexpected life events, such as having children and working alongside studying. Likewise, lack of time has been cited as a barrier to reflection for students in previous literature (Gathu, 2022). Participants spoke about how unexpected life circumstances can impact their ability to reflect, due to having to focus on surviving. An example of this is the Covid-19 pandemic, implementation of national lockdowns and isolation led to people living in survival mode (Shek, 2021). This left people struggling with issues such as anxiety, depression, low self-esteem, and post-traumatic stress disorder, making engagement in personal development and reflection difficult (Akat & Karataş, 2020). However, life circumstances are not always a barrier to reflection, one participant highlighted they used national lockdown to reflect and make positive change, this is referred to as post-traumatic growth, which describes undertaking positive change, despite of traumatic experiences and challenging circumstances (Jayawickreme et al, 2021).

Finally, participants concluded discussing facilitators of reflection, which included being kind to yourself, showing self-compassion, embracing positive support networks, and engaging in personal therapy. Supporting evidence can be found for these statements in the literature, research confirms that personal therapy assists in gaining insight and better management of personal experiences (Edwards, 2018). Evidence in the literature supports the importance of adequate support networks for higher education students, not only for reflective practice but for their whole academic journey (Raaper & Brown, 2020).

The second theme explored academic barriers and support for reflection, lack of confidence was a common occurrence in this theme. Participants mentioned they felt uncertain about how to write reflectively and worried about doing it wrong, mentioning some students start the course with limited knowledge of reflection and the level of reflection required on a counselling course. Previous literature states that students tend to struggle with understanding the purpose of reflection (Lutz et al, 2017) and that reflection is not a natural occurrence, it is important for students to be taught how to reflect efficiently (Oakley, 2014). Dobbs-Oates (2021) proposes one way this can be achieved is by setting aside time each semester to teach about reflection, what it is and how to do it. Furthermore, previous research has shown that students have struggled to recognise the importance of reflection (Mahlanze & Sibiya, 2017), which correlates with the findings of the present research, which recommends that tutors may not be aware of this and further awareness should be raised in this area. However, the majority of participants shared that they found tutor support and feedback useful and sufficient. Participants also shared that free writing and frequent engagement in journalling increased their confidence and comfort levels.

Likewise, additional barriers in this theme were the pressure of reflection being a course requirement, Jindal-Snape & Holmes (2009) similarly found that when reflection is part of course content students struggle to engage, feeling they are being forced to reflect and report finding it intrusive. Moreover, participants found the workload of other university assignments result in overwhelm and becomes a barrier to reflection. Once more these claims can be verified by previous literature with Ahmed (2020) stating a key factor in motivation in reflective activities is the time available to dedicate to reflection, with students describing reflection as a further weight to carry (Chan & Lee, 2021).

Lastly, this theme highlighted the importance of peer support and learning from other students perspectives, participants expressed that positive feedback received from peers increased their self-esteem and confidence and discussing experiences enabled them to feel that they are not alone with their experiences. Peer support is often encouraged in counsellor training through the use of personal development groups, it is suggested that these groups facilitate reflection by developing self-awareness (Smith & Burr, 2021). Although data suggests that personal development groups can be a cause of anxiety, they have been quoted as a highly valued method for personal development and reflection (Moller & Rance, 2013). Data in this research confirms this has it was stated that personal development groups have been useful and participants felt they are an essential part of reflection. Other facilitators to reflection found in this data included actively participating in seminars and using the knowledge taught about different theories to guide reflections. Supporting this, research suggests that when students do not have crucial knowledge of theories of reflection, they can find the process unsettling (Thomson et al, 2019).

Finally, the last theme in this research describes experiences of diversity and individual differences, the data suggests that students with neurodiversity may need to adapt the way they reflect in order to meet their needs and accommodate struggles they may encounter. Neurodivergent participants also expressed they had difficulties processing information delivered in lectures and seminars on occasion. Whilst conducting this research, a lack of research surrounding reflection and neurodiversity was found, however past research suggests that higher education material is often based on neurotypical students and highlights the importance of higher education institutes being aware of how content is delivered to neurodivergent students (Spaeth & Pearson, 2021). Other participants described reflection as a personal process, explaining they prefer to reflect in alternative ways than traditional journalling, incorporating passions into their reflections. In order to facilitate reflection, participants felt it is crucial to feel comfortable in expressing themselves, to accommodate this it was proposed that safe and inclusive spaces are needed. Similarly, previous literature suggests that learning environments that value and support individualism, embrace reflective practice (Wong-Wylie, 2007). Marshall et al (2022) also states that creating supportive environments open to dialogue and enquiry is a facilitating factor for reflection.

Directions for Further Research

This study highlighted several areas for further research, issues were raised concerning neurodivergent students facing barriers to reflection, when attempting to explore previous literature in this area there was limited research available. Therefore, more research is required investigating the experiences of neurodivergent students and what can be done to better facilitate reflection for them.

There was also an emphasis on the importance of reflection in the counselling profession, however evidence throughout this research highlighted that this isn’t promoted as much as in other professions. Whilst conducting this research, it was found that the majority of studies conducted in reflective practice were in the medical and teaching fields. Further research is required to promote the value of reflection in counselling practice, bringing counselling in line with other professions.

Limitations

The main limitation in this research is that all participants were Staffordshire University students. Therefore, this data may not be a reflection of students studying at different universities across the UK or different parts of the world, who may have had different experiences or encountered other barriers to reflection. Some of the participants had a personal connection to the researcher after studying on the same course for the past 3 years. A wider range of recruitment would have been needed to make this research more generalisable.

Another limitation was the removal of the theme “benefits of reflection to professional and personal development”. Although this theme was chosen for removal due to restrictions on the wordcount and lack of relevance to the main research question, it may have provided further evidence for the importance of reflection in the counselling profession.

Conclusion

This study aimed to investigate barriers and facilitators to reflection for undergraduate counselling students, in order to better prepare future undergraduate students for the level of reflection required at postgraduate level. This study found that undergraduate counselling students experienced barriers to reflection which were linked to personal and emotional factors which included struggling due to commitments and responsibilities outside of university. As well as Difficulties with past traumas and the emotions that reflection surfaces, and difficult life circumstances that forced participants to focus on survival rather than personal development. Academic factors, which included feeling pressured into reflecting due to it being a course requirement, deadlines and workload of other university assignments, low confidence with abilities to reflect, and lack of understanding of the level and importance of reflection on the counselling course. Factors relating to diversity and individual differences were also discussed.

Additionally, facilitators to reflection were also explored which included, utilising your support network, peer support, and tutor support, having more information surrounding reflection and the importance of it included in the course content, being provided with examples of journal entries, being given more opportunities to engage in reflection and receive constructive feedback, and creating safe spaces that promote creativity and diversity to allow students to feel comfortable to open up and express themselves.

This research also highlighted that awareness needs to be raised of the importance of reflection in the counselling profession and made suggestions for further research in this area.

Reflexivity

Reflexivity is essential in qualitative studies due to the subjective nature of this methodology (Braun & Clark, 2019). It is therefore vital that researchers identify any potential biases and continually review their interpretation of the data, to acknowledge their subjectivity, and attempt to minimise any impact this may have on the analysis (Olmos-Vega et al, 2023).

Whilst conducting this research I identified several areas where bias may have been potential. As a current student on the Psychology and Counselling course at Staffordshire University, I was aware that it may be a challenge to separate my experience of the course from the experiences of the participants and this could potentially cause bias when discussing elements of the counselling course. Likewise, some of the participants were peers that I have been studying alongside for the past 3 years, I remained aware of boundaries when interviewing these participants and not forcefully bring anything up that they have not willingly discussed themselves. This also had the potential to cause challenges when interpretating the data, I handled this challenge by attempting to ignore what I already knew about the individuals, to prevent assumptions being made out of context of their responses.

Furthermore, I share similarities with a number of the participants, such as being a mature student, a parent, and neurodivergent. Some of the experience discussed were relatable to my own situation. I had to remain mindful this did not interfere with the interview process, keeping my responses as neutral as possible to prevent influence and remained reflexive when analysing the data.

To minimise the impact these factors had on the research, I regularly reflected on my own feelings through the entirety of this project and codes were checked numerous times to ensure they aligned with the data.

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**Appendices**

See separate document