What are the challenges and rewards for counsellors in work with clients from a younger generation? GORDON SMITH and MARK PEARSON gathered in-depth qualitative data on this question from experienced and qualified counsellors and identified major themes through the use of interpretative phenomenological analysis. While concurring with the literature on many of the challenges in working with youth, the emerging themes also suggest significant personal rewards for counsellors that have been less appreciated. Themes of rewards such as enhanced vitality and energy, feeling younger, and a sense of wonder and emerged. In contrast to the prevailing view that reports work with adolescents as discouraging and difficult, participants also reported client openness as a rewarding feature of counselling younger clients. The positive nature of these themes may hold valuable contributions for counsellor training, supervision and employment.

In a world where accelerating change has become the norm, generational differences begin to become a significant cultural issue. Little attention has been given to the impact on a counsellor who is working with significant generational differences.

This study was designed to explore the possible rewards and challenges experienced by qualified counsellors who work with clients from a younger generation than themselves. The study seeks to gain a greater understanding of the experiences of these counsellors. These understandings may hold valuable implications for counsellor motivation, employment choices, counsellor education and supervision.

The central research question asked was: What are the challenges and rewards for counsellors in work with clients from a younger generation? This qualitative study used interpretative phenomenological analysis as its central method. Data was analysed from semi-structured interviews with six experienced and qualified counsellors in current practice.

While a proportion of the existing literature has emerged from the field of psychotherapy, often within a psychoanalytic framework, it appeared to be relevant to the field of short-term counselling. Much of the literature describes clinical experience, rather than reporting on empirical research.

Challenges in counselling clients from a younger generation

A common issue reported in counselling clients of younger generations is ‘the need to speak their language’ (Bromfield, 2005). Many counsellors find adolescents difficult and discouraging to work with, and sessions with adolescents can produce poor results (Geldard & Geldard, 2004). There is a tendency for the adolescent to be resistant or defensive, as well as hostile and deliberately boring (Blake, 2008). Challenging experiences, and apparent lack of results, can make counsellors reluctant to work with adolescents.

The onerous task of building a therapeutic alliance with adolescents is highlighted: ‘only the most courageous, or perhaps the most foolish, therapists are willing to treat adolescents, for they are the most difficult group of children with whom to work’ (Spiegel, 1989, in Blake, 2008, p. 130).

The credibility of the counsellor is often assumed by older clients through evidence of training or an established reputation of the therapist. When dealing with younger clients, it is rare that credibility is established on the basis of the counsellor’s qualifications, but has to be earned through the process of therapeutic engagement (McClure & Teyber, 2003).

Everall and Paulson (2002) interviewed adolescents to identify factors they felt were important in relationship formation and maintenance with counsellors. The study identified three major themes; the therapeutic environment, the uniqueness of the therapeutic relationship, and therapist characteristics. Young clients identified that, in order for a strong alliance to be possible, they need a counsellor who is accepting, supportive and trustworthy. A supportive relationship was seen as

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necessary to ensure the willingness of young clients to collaborate in therapeutic interventions. Finally, confidentiality was seen as essential for an effective therapeutic environment.

The critical nature of confidentiality in the therapeutic environment is stressed in the literature (Gonzalez, Alegria & Prihada, 2005; Hewitt, 2000; Rana, 2000), and perhaps more so with young clients, who are less familiar with having confidentiality granted (Prever, 2010). In particular, the issue of confidentiality can be challenging and complex where the young client has been brought to counselling by parents (Geldard & Geldard, 2004; Perl, 2008; Rana, 2000), and often requires a nuanced approach (Bromfield, 2005).

The young clients interviewed by Everall and Paulson (2002) viewed the uniqueness of the therapeutic relationship in terms of egalitarianism, trust and respect, and the counsellor being a ‘special friend’. Geldard and Geldard (2004) describe this idea of egalitarianism as having an element of balance, and suggest that the counselling relationship is similar to the mentor-student relationship. Many writers on counselling younger clients highlight the need for trust and the creation of a safe environment (Prever, 2010; Watt, 2000). The complexity and challenge involved in obtaining this balance without ignoring the power difference should be acknowledged (Blake, 2008; Prever, 2010). Most adolescent-adult relationships are based on authority (Adams, 2000), and a transition to the adolescent-counsellor mode is required.

The creation of a safe, private and trusting environment faces genuine difficulties when young clients are coerced or mandated into counselling by their parents (Amiel, 2001; Blake, 2008; Prever, 2010). Bromfield (2005) summarises the ensuing resistance, scepticism and, at times, hostility, in attendance, in some cases to protect themselves from getting too close or through a fear of not being in control; a view supported by others (Briggs, 2002).

The requirement of being familiar with, sensitive to and adjusting for, the developmental stage of younger clients has been well-documented (Ambrose, 2001; Cooper, 1996; Geldard & Geldard, 2004). Blake (2008, p. 129) describes adolescence as ‘work in progress’, and reinforces the task for counsellors to have a strong understanding of their clients’ developmental contexts. The complex, and at times problematic, stages of individuation, separation, transition to education and employment, and development of relationships are among the issues that can be both demanding and rewarding for the counsellor working with younger clients (Cooper, 1996). The need for the counsellor to be more flexible with younger clients and less adherent to structure can be challenging (Amiel, 2001; Blake, 2008; Geldard & Geldard, 2004).

Many counsellors place an emphasis on a person-centred approach in work with younger clients with the Rogerian qualities of congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathic understanding (Rogers, 1967; Cornelius-White & Behr, 2008; Geldard & Geldard, 2004; Prever, 2010). McClure and Teyber (2003) reinforce the importance of developing credibility through consistent entry to the world of the client with accuracy, empathy and affirmation.

Transference and countertransference

Among the more common transference reactions expected from younger clients is the concept of the counsellor as the ‘angry father’ or ‘anxious mother’, resulting in a predetermined expectation of the counsellor’s response (Hewitt, 2000; Rana, 2000). Some transference reactions have been described by Rose (2001) as “You can’t help me”, “I dread what you think of me” and “I can’t be helped because I’m useless”, and these can create diversions for the counsellor.

Another challenge for the counsellor is to avoid assuming the role of the parent, which can reinforce existing

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**Rewards from counselling clients from a younger generation**

The rewards of working with clients from a younger generation are often implied rather than described explicitly in the literature. Most counsellors who write about work with adolescents describe the experience as satisfying and rewarding (Everall & Paulson, 2002; Geldard & Geldard, 2004), and Prever (2010) states that there is little that is more rewarding. Other writers hint at some of these rewards, including helping younger clients face and overcome problems, and the gaining of mutual understanding (Dartington, 1995).

Most of the literature that gives advice on how to work best with younger clients has an emphasis on the need to overcome the challenges before experiencing the rewards (for example Bromfield, 2005; Prever, 2010). Much attention is given to the importance of gaining the cooperation and trust of the younger client (Geldard & Geldard, 2004).

**Summary of the literature**

Many of the challenges described in the literature revolve around the establishment and maintenance of a functional alliance with younger clients through the creation of a safe and trusting environment. It appears this is best achieved through counsellor attributes that include authenticity, flexibility and open-mindedness.

Transference issues when working with younger clients often involve projection onto the counsellor of issues with authority figures.

The rewards experienced by counsellors from working with younger clients are described in the literature in little detail, and often in vague terms such as ‘satisfaction’. Many writers describe their experience of work with younger clients as rewarding, however this is more often implied, rather than detailed.

**Methods**

In this qualitative study, interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) was used to extract themes from semi-structured interviews. IPA is concerned with the depth and richness of individual experiences and a small sample size is preferable to avoid data overload. A sample of six participants is considered to be optimum (Morse, 1994; Smith, 2003; Smith, Flowers & Larkin, 2009).

Although a small sample size, findings can guide a future, larger study that could determine whether the identified themes can be generalised to the wider field.

Participants were recruited through an email sent to all full professional members of the Psychotherapists and Counsellors Association of Western Australia. Six counsellors, working in both private practice and agencies, volunteered to participate (four females and two males aged 39 to 79 years).

Semi-structured interviews, using open-ended questions were employed. Participants were able to clarify and qualify responses and were accorded time to describe complexity. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed.

**IPA data analysis**

An audio recording of the interview with each participant was reviewed while the transcript was read. As recommended by Smith, Flowers and Larkin (2009), transcripts were re-read several times to gain immersion in the text and to ensure the participant experience became the focus of analysis. In addition, different coloured pens were used to note each of three separate foci; descriptive, linguistic, and conceptual.

Formal coding of the lived experience of each participant into identifiable themes was then completed. This involved judicious introduction of interpretations by the researcher without alteration to the intent of the data. In addition, this stage involved ‘bracketing out’ of pre-existing notions. Identified themes were clustered into related issues, and those with close overlap were merged into one theme. This stage then required a forensic re-reading and refining of the participants’ experience and interpretation (King & Horrocks, 2010). Emerging themes of a similar nature were grouped together into super-ordinate themes.

**Major themes**

The major themes identified were:

- **vitality and energy**;
- **a sense of wonder**;
- **feeling younger**;
- **poignancy and responsibility**;
- **issues relating to the therapeutic process**.

**Vitality and energy**

Participants reported a number of rewarding experiences that centred on vitality and intrigue in their work with younger clients. There was a sense of reverence around the counselling of clients who are at an earlier stage of development than the counsellor.

**Sense of wonder**

Participants described some of the rewarding experiences using a variety of words such as ‘joy’, ‘amazement’, ‘exciting’, ‘passion’, ‘energising’ and ‘nourishing’. The obvious pleasure in being a witness to the growth and innocent beauty of younger clients alludes to a ‘sense of wonder’.

“I guess for me now it is…seeing their idealism, their passion and some of that invincibility and fearlessness…is really quite breathtaking and can be quite energising.” (I-6)

Several participants used the word ‘play’ in their remarks about the rewards of work with younger clients, who evoked a sense of connection with the counsellor’s own capacity for play and fun.

“So I think it’s rewarding in that sense of age is not so much of an issue. I think there’s a lesson in that. And the other thing is that sense of play being important. Play being the way that you communicate whether life is good or not.” (I-6)

**Feeling younger**

For some participants, the experience of counselling clients from a younger generation evoked feelings of ‘being younger’. They reported a sense of freedom from the concerns associated with ageing. The
experience of ‘freshness’, ‘vitality’ and ‘timelessness’ was felt by some participants and the enjoyment garnered from that was widely reported.

“But I enjoy also being with young people because it makes me feel young.” (I-1)

“I think particularly working with children there isn’t that sense of I’m going to grow old. It’s almost like a sort of field, where ageing isn’t relevant; it’s not an issue yet. I think that’s lovely.” (I-6)

A danger of counsellors feeling more youthful when working with younger clients was reported in the possibility that the counsellor could draw too much enjoyment from the relationship with the client. This could lead to the enjoyment of the counsellor over-riding the client’s needs.

“I probably struggle with what pertains to my sense of self when I’m working with young people, that I have to be aware that I feel aligned to them because I want to stay young and be young, be young again [LAUGHS].” (I-4)

Poignancy and responsibility

A feeling of poignancy, or weight of responsibility, rested heavier on a majority of the participants in their work with younger clients. Most participants described the work as more emotionally and professionally challenging. Counsellors felt that the younger client, who had their life ahead of them, had ‘more to lose’ if therapy was not effective.

“I want them to have a positive experience so that when our work is done, or when I can’t help them anymore or when they connect with someone else a few years down the track, that they’ll remember having a positive experience with a counsellor.” (I-6)

Issues relating to the therapeutic process

A number of challenges were encountered that may impact on the alliance and the effectiveness of the treatment—issues of communication styles, individuation, authenticity, trust, flexibility, divergence in values between participants and their clients, responsibility, and transference and countertransference. Participants also reported rewards, particularly in relation to the communication style of younger clients.

Communication

Several participants commented that the open and more direct communication style of younger clients made the counselling process less challenging. This was experienced as rewarding for participants. They found that the therapeutic process was enhanced due to younger clients having less taboos and more direct communication than older clients. It was reported that this allowed issues to be addressed in a more immediate and open way.

“...and they are so open and so receptive to understanding more about themselves and connecting language perhaps that was not given in their family of origin but that discovering for themselves; they have a thirst to discover themselves.” (I-5)

Several participants made specific comment on this more open approach in regards to the topic of sex, in comparison to older clients. One participant emphasised that this open approach of younger clients made it less challenging to work with issues involving sex.

“...and they are so open and so receptive to understanding more about themselves and connecting language perhaps that was not given in their family of origin but that discovering for themselves; they have a thirst to discover themselves.” (I-5)

Individuation challenges

Half of the participants spoke of the individuation challenges when counselling younger clients, in particular, adolescents. The stage of individuation, where the client is reaching for autonomy but still looking to the counsellor as an authority figure, was described as a challenging balance by some participants.

“They want to be told what to do, whilst they’re also differentiating and they resent that, they still want that, so there’s that tension there.” (I-4)

The need for authenticity

Several participants described the disregard younger people can have for experience and qualifications. As a consequence, it was considered critical not to assume the expert position, but rather seek to be authentic. The importance of being fully present and ‘real’ was emphasised by some participants. They reported that it was more likely that any lack of genuine interest would be exposed by younger clients.

“I’ve been working for twenty years and I’ve got the experience. A younger person I don’t think they ask about that. I think for them it’s kind of like ‘do you get me’. They aren’t really as concerned about the letters behind my name.” (I-6)
The need to establish trust

Trust was mentioned as an issue of particular importance when counselling younger clients. The lack of value placed on credentials by younger clients resulted in more emphasis on gaining and retaining their trust.

The findings on trust were mixed, with participants reporting that the rewarding nature of an open style of communication often made the establishment of trust easier with younger clients. One participant indicated that younger clients may trust too quickly.

“They will divulge and disclose very quickly, and I feel—with younger people—I’m putting the brakes on all the time, saying ‘you really shouldn’t be trusting this much, it may not be good for you to’.” (I-6)

Being flexible

A number of the participants commented on the need to adopt a more flexible approach with younger clients to ensure meeting their needs. Examples included the use of a table as a barrier to make some feel safer, being more energetic and adaptable within the room or, in some cases, to move beyond the room. The need for a flexible approach can be in conflict with the way some counsellors are trained. It may also be difficult in agencies where there are prohibitions on working outside set protocols.

“If it means I have to be a bit more energetic with the younger person in the room or I might have to adapt my style and maybe, in some certain context, the role of the counsellor might allow oneself to move beyond just the therapy room”. (I-6)

Values

Most participants reported being confronted by the values of clients younger than themselves, in particular with adolescents. This included such areas as their sexual practices, parenting attitudes, relationship attitudes and how they valued the counselling sessions.

Differing values created some concern for several of the participants in that they would be perceived as ‘old’ by their younger clients. This provoked anxiety over how they would be perceived and of their ability to connect with the younger client.

Transference and countertransference

The most common transference reaction from younger clients reported by participants is that of the counsellor being identified with a parent. Other situations include being perceived as an authority figure, such as a teacher or, in one case, a grandparent.

The transference experience was described by all female counsellors, with a combination of rewards and challenges. The rewarding aspects were that they were filling a void and giving the younger client an experience of a trustworthy parent.

“I think what’s happening to clients who have seen me as a bit of a mother figure, I think that’s okay. Particularly for these younger people who have missed out on mothering.” (I-1)

The most challenging aspect of the transference experience was the pressure on the alliance when the younger client is demanding and expects that the counsellor will provide them with what they have not received. Most participants reported the need to find a balance between supporting the younger client without falling into the trap of ‘giving in’ to demands.

“The younger people might want me more as a parent that they never had, or something like that. That threatens the therapeutic alliance when there’s tension there that I’m not providing what they want from me.” (I-4)

The most challenging countertransference experience with younger clients was encountered by counsellors with clients the same age as their own children. The experience of having young clients show respect, value and engagement, while the counsellor’s own teenage children do not show the same regard, was described as emotionally challenging by several participants.

Summary

In counselling younger clients, the superordinate themes that emerged from the experiences of participants were; vitality and energy, poignancy and responsibility, and issues pertaining to the therapeutic process. Counsellor experiences of a ‘sense of wonder’ and of ‘feeling younger’ were the significant subordinate themes. Challenges fell into a number of sub-themes, including the issues of communication styles, individuation, authenticity, trust, flexibility, divergence in values, responsibility, and transference/countertransference issues.

Discussion

Vitality and energy

All participants reported satisfaction and rewards from counselling younger clients, as reported in the literature (Geldard & Geldard, 2004; Prever, 2010). The findings expand the details of those rewards, revealing a rich sense of vitality and energy that may be gained from counselling younger clients. Among the rewards were gaining a sense of amazement and nourishment, and a sense of wonder at the beauty and capacity of youth.

Most participants experienced freshness and a renewed sense of their own youthfulness, or sense of play and fun. Some of these rewards, while important to the participants, have an abstract or ethereal quality which may account for their absence in past literature.

Poignancy and responsibility

The current literature frames the emotional challenges of working with younger clients predominantly around communication style and attitudes of younger clients (Blake, 2008; Briggs, 2002; Prever, 2010). This study revealed that the most emotionally challenging aspects of working with younger clients were not communication issues, but the weight of responsibility felt by counsellors. This burden, or poignancy, carried by counsellors has not been evident in the literature, and may be an area of future attention in supervision.

Therapeutic process

The findings support the themes in the literature that younger clients often have a disregard for credentials, and that for them authority is not given, but merited (McClure & Teyber, 2003). The literature suggests younger clients are more likely to trust counsellors who show authenticity and egalitarianism (Everall & Paulsen, 2002; Geldard & Geldard, 2004), and the current themes confirm authenticity is critical to an effective therapeutic process with younger clients.
...the most emotionally challenging aspects of working with younger clients were not communication issues, but the weight of responsibility felt by counsellors.

Participants indicated that their younger clients tended to trust very easily in comparison to older clients. Participants experienced their younger clients as open and willing participants with little resistance. This contradicts much of the literature that warns of the challenges of younger people’s resistance, defensiveness and, at times, hostility (Blake, 2008; Bromfield, 2005).

Client openness was reported as one of the rewarding features of counselling younger clients, and this is in contrast to the prevailing view that counsellors find adolescents discouraging and difficult (Geldard & Geldard, 2004). There are several possible explanations for this divergence. One is that the literature may be focused on mandated adolescents rather than younger clients as a general group. The other is the emergence of a younger generation that is more comfortable with a culture of self-disclosure that has yet to be described by the main body of literature.

The emerging themes provided support for the recommendation in most of the literature of the need to be flexible (Bromfield, 2005; Everall & Paulson, 2002; Geldard & Geldard, 2004; Prever, 2010) and the challenge of understanding individuation and developmental stages of young clients (Blake, 2008; Briggs, 2002; Geldard & Geldard, 2004).

The challenge for counsellors to be value-free when working with younger clients, was highlighted, as also reported by Prever (2010). While this is also essential in work with older clients, the emotion and strength of language in the participants’ reports suggested that it was more challenging to be value-free with younger clients. One possible explanation for this may be that with a rapidly changing world, most counsellors’ values are closer to those of their parents than of their own children. An alternative explanation may be that the values of the younger generation will become dominant, and therefore are more threatening to counsellors than those of the older generation, whose values have reduced in influence. This could be an area of interest for further investigation.

A lesser theme was the impact of new technology, such as Facebook and Twitter, on communications. The impact of new technology has led to some counsellors feeling less equipped to speak the language of younger people, an identified theme in literature (Bromfield, 2005). With the expanding use of virtual communication, there may be value in incorporating training in these methods into inservice programs for older counsellors.

Clients relating to the counsellor as if they were the parent were the most common transference reactions reported. This resulted in some counsellors experiencing the challenges of transference, such as feeling pressure to respond in a parental manner. This is consistent with previous literature on transference with younger clients (Hewitt, 2000; Rana, 2000).

The emotional challenges of counselling younger clients who are the same age as the counsellors’ own children was highlighted by several participants. This situation evoked feelings around the counsellors’ capacity as parents, particularly when younger clients valued the counsellor and showed respect not apparent in the counsellor’s relationship with their own children. Most literature on counselling younger clients gives superficial attention to, or ignores, countertransference experiences and the current perceptions suggest that a higher priority may be appropriate.

Limitations

In the future, a larger qualitative study may determine the extent to which these themes are representative of the experiences of those who work therapeutically with children and adolescents in the broader workforce.

Conclusion

Counselling clients who are from a younger generation than the counsellor can be a rewarding experience. The rewards included the generation of feelings of vitality and energy and the experience of the more open communication style of many younger clients. Literature reports of the need to be authentic and flexible, the disregard younger clients have for credentials, and the challenges of individuation, were supported. The importance identified in the literature, of establishing trust with younger clients, was partially confirmed. The reporting of a more open communication style with younger clients, and their readiness to trust and divulge information, was inconsistent with the themes of most previous writers.

The responsibility felt by counsellors in their work with younger clients and the challenges for the profession from new communication technologies were highlighted. The emotional challenge of countertransference with younger clients was also emphasized by some participants, suggesting that further exploration be given to this issue.

With respect to counselling clients from a younger generation a number of distinctions emerged between the findings of this study and the existing literature. Perhaps the most significant of these was the enhanced vitality and energy experienced by counsellors. This was significant in both its emotional impact on counsellors and lack of identification in the literature. Another area under-reported in the literature is the emotional and professional challenges associated with a sense of responsibility or poignancy experienced
by counsellors working with younger clients.

When considering work with clients from a younger generation, the most important finding was the significant rewards reported by participants. In particular, participants reported an enrichment of their personal and professional development. This, in turn, led to an enhanced perception of the counsellors’ confidence in their ability to assist clients and contribute to the profession in general. Wider awareness of these rewards within the counselling profession, and among counselling educators, may contribute to future generations of counsellors being more willing to engage with younger clients.

The divergences between themes in previous literature and themes identified from the participants, suggest that further larger-scale studies may be valuable to support generalisability of findings to the wider workforce.

References


AUTHOR NOTES

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