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'I guess the ending is the price you pay'. Working at relational depth in a seven-session model: The impact of regular planned endings on counsellors

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Abstract

Background: Evidence suggests that the quality of the therapeutic relationship impacts the outcome of therapy, with the ending phase having the potential to elicit painful and difficult emotions. There is limited research on this phase of the therapeutic relationship.

Aims: The study aimed to explore the lived experiences of counsellors when ending with clients in short-term planned settings those relationships in which they have worked at relational depth.

Method: Interpretative phenomenological analysis was used to evaluate the counsellors' lived experiences of ending therapeutic relationships. Online semi-structured interviews took place with six trainee and qualified counsellors who volunteered as counsellors for a local charity.

Findings: Three main themes were identified during the study—*impact of ending*, *impact of short-term work* and *professional issues*. Findings indicated that working at relational depth in short-term counselling could elicit unprocessed powerful emotions within the ending phase of therapy.

Limitations: A small sample size limits the wider application of these findings.

Implications: Further guidance and support are needed for trainee and qualified practitioners in the management and experience of ending counselling relationships within short-term work, including the exploration of counsellors' self-disclosure. Implications for practice include the need for supervisors and counsellors to be proactive in managing reflective practice within supervision, supervisors recognising and challenging supervisees' non-disclosure and counsellors looking at further ways for self-reflection on endings in counselling relationships.

Conclusion: The ending phase for counsellors working at relational depth within a seven-session model can elicit powerful emotions, positive experiences and challenges.

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KEYWORDS

counselling, ending, psychotherapy, relational depth, short-term, supervision, termination

1 | INTRODUCTION

Counselling relationships are seen to be different from everyday relationships. From the beginning, an ending is part of the contract, creating an understanding that, at some stage, it must inevitably end (Burch, 2010; Schlage, 2016; Wittenberg, 1999). However, it appears for counsellors that there is little written in the theoretical literature or research about this phase in therapy. Wittenberg (1999) suggested that this process, regardless of the outcome of therapy, may be overlooked due to the subject eliciting painful and difficult emotions for counsellors.

Some theoretical literature highlights that, in psychotherapy, it is the quality of the relationship that is central, noting the potential healing capacity of a deep, close relationship and how the therapeutic relationship is possibly the most important predictor of therapeutic outcomes (Cooper, 2015; Mearns, 1996; Rogers, 1959; Watson et al., 2010).

Mearns and Cooper (2005) describe this deep, close relationship in counselling as 'relational depth'. For the purposes of this study, the definition of Mearns and Cooper (2005, p. xii) has been adopted: 'A state of profound contact and engagement between two people, in which each person is fully real with the Other, and able to understand and value the Other's experiences at a high level'.

1.1 | Terminology

Terminology varies within the literature. The term 'ending' in this study is synonymous to the term 'termination'. The terms 'therapist' and 'counsellor' are used interchangeably based on the literature being discussed. Short-term counselling refers to those working in a setting that has a fixed number of no more than 12 sessions.

1.2 | Literature review

Within the literature, several attempts to understand counsellors' lived experiences when ending with clients have been made (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020; Turtle, 2019), but none specifically explore counsellors working at relational depth. Two studies emerged that did make some tenuous connection to relational depth (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012). Fragkiadaki and Strauss (2012) examined the process of ending therapy with psychodynamic and psychoanalytic therapists and found that the development of the relationship determined the experience of ending. They considered the 'bonding relationship' (p. 342) within long-term therapeutic relationships and comparable with relational

Implications for practice and policy

- Further guidance and support for managing and experiencing endings in short-term work within counsellor training and CPD programmes would be beneficial, with additional exploration around counsellor self-disclosure.
- Supervisors and counsellors might benefit from being more proactive in managing reflective practice, focusing on the impact of ending therapeutic relationships and exploration of personal histories and attachments.
- Supervisors should recognise and challenge supervisees' non-disclosure of endings in supervision.
- Counsellors could look at further ways of self-reflection on endings in counselling relationships. This could include peer group supervision, reflective journals and personal therapy.

depth, participants spoke of connection and feelings of closeness with their clients. This type of relationship resulted in a 'proper termination' (p. 342), bringing an intensity and range of emotions not only for their clients but for themselves too. Additionally, Bamford and Akhurst (2014), who looked at counsellors' feelings on ending therapy when working with children in schools, suggested levels of relational depth when they found that counsellors' empathic identification through the 'depth of the relationship' (p. 464) led to feelings of joy and sorrow.

Some studies have found 'loss' to be a predominant feeling for counsellors when ending their therapeutic relationships, regardless of the type of ending. In severed relationships and unplanned endings, counsellors felt a sense of not knowing, wondering how the clients are and remembering them vividly, which continued to have an effect long after the therapeutic relationship ended (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012). A study by Turtle (2019), whose aim was to understand trainee counsellors' early experiences of therapeutic endings, found that those counsellors who spoke of sadness and loss when ending with their clients felt it was the consequence of building a therapeutic relationship.

Furthermore, therapists' own history of loss has been found to have an important influence on endings in therapy (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019), with counsellors being cautious of the ending process and developing an awareness of repeating patterns from endings in their personal lives.

Studies suggest that, regardless of the length of therapy, counsellors are working towards endings from the onset (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020). Turtle (2019) indicates that planning for endings is an important process for good practice

when ending therapeutic relationships. Furthermore, in a study by Perren et al. (2009), which looked at the long-term effects of counselling, they found that the number of sessions seemed less important than how the ending was carried out.

Unplanned endings have often been found to have a negative impact, with counsellors feeling a mixture of emotions including lacking closure due to unanswered questions, feeling powerless, a sense of defeat and doubt about their competence, and feeling grief-stricken (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019). Lanyado (1999, p. 375) proposed that those endings not deemed 'good-enough' could leave the counsellor with feelings of inadequacy, guilt or even shame.

Conversely, a positive impact for counsellors was encountered during mutually agreed endings. Although they felt sadness and loss, they also experienced intense pleasure, a sense of achievement, and feelings of joy, excitement, warmth and content, seeing these positive endings as something special (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019). In addition to this, some studies have revealed that difficult or erratic relationships that had provoked distress and anxiety in the participants provided them with a sense of relief when ending (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019).

Many of the studies around endings have focussed on the impact for counsellors when ending long-term relationships. They suggest that a long-term relationship facilitates the therapeutic relationship to become more intense and that counsellors who have worked with clients short term are less likely to experience intense emotional responses when ending (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Goodyear, 1981, cited in Boyer & Hoffman, 1993; Graybar & Leonard, 2008). However, Ling and Stathopoulou (2020) found that fixed, short-term therapy led to counsellors experiencing endings as challenging, with insufficient time and an overall sense of helplessness, feeling that clients left therapy with unresolved issues.

Supervision came up in many of the studies on endings and was seen as a useful space to reflect on the feelings that surfaced from the endings of their therapeutic relationships (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020; Turtle, 2019). Turtle (2019) found supervision and personal therapy to be important in helping counsellors understand and explore the negative impact of therapeutic endings, reinforcing the therapeutic value for themselves and for their professional practice. However, it has also been found that, due to the turnover of clients in short-term work, there was not always enough time to make use of self-reflection. In other studies, supervision was considered to be required to process experiences and feelings due to erratic, difficult and challenging endings, some of which included anger and sadness (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020).

To conclude, the review highlights little research focus on the experiences of endings for counsellors in planned short-term therapy.

The literature review for this study focussed on endings or terminations specific to counselling and psychotherapy. Searches included the literature published within the last 30 years and used key

databases, including PsycINFO, CINAHL, British Education Index, MEDLINE, OpenDissertations and GoogleScholar. In addition, grey literature from professional journals and reputable websites was included.

1.3 | Ethics

This study was approved by York St John University Research Ethics Committee. The British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP, 2019) Ethical Guidelines for Research in the Counselling Professions were closely followed to ensure the safety, rights and dignity of the participants, as well as safeguarding against harm to anyone affected by this study. General Data Protection Regulation for counsellors (BACP, 2021) was strictly adhered to when obtaining written informed consent from the participants. They were clearly notified regarding the process of rectification or erasure of data, anonymity, security and confidentiality of data. They were made aware that excerpts of verbatim text may be used in the final written paper and that they could withdraw from the research up until 1 week following the interview. Contact was made through the university email system to ensure confidentiality. Regular consulting with the research supervisor (co-author) took place to monitor and reflect on the process throughout to ensure that the research was completed rigorously and ethically (Smith et al., 2009).

1.4 | Aims

The aim of this study was to explore the lived experiences of counsellors when ending with clients, with a particular focus on short-term planned endings within those relationships in which they had experienced relational depth. It aimed to understand, create awareness of and acknowledge the impact this type of relationship has on counsellors, with the view to help trainees and experienced counsellors find perspective and acceptance of their own experiences and emotions for personal self-care and care of self as a practitioner (BACP, 2018), in addition to prompting a wider dialogue on a topic that is of relevance to counsellors, supervisors and trainers.

The rationale for this research was based on the lack of research on the experiences of endings for counsellors in planned short-term therapy and the particular interest and personal experience of the main author. The main author, who conducted the research, was a volunteer counsellor working within a seven-session model at the time of the research. The co-author is a qualitative researcher whose previous publications have included interpretative phenomenological analysis (IPA) studies.

2 | METHOD

A qualitative approach was appropriate for this study as it considered the quality and texture of therapists' lived experiences

(Willig, 2013). Following a review of a range of qualitative methodologies, IPA was selected to allow gathering data in a way that would explore, describe, interpret and situate how participants make sense of their experiences (Smith et al., 2009).

The primary concern of IPA is with a detailed account of individual experience, meaning that quality of data is seen to be more important than quantity. Smith et al. (2009) suggest focussing on a sample size of between three and six participants.

2.1 | Participants

A purposive sampling method was used to recruit volunteer counsellor participants through a local charity (Willig, 2013). Trainees and experienced counsellors who met the inclusion criteria (being a humanistic counsellor who has worked in a short-term setting of a seven-session model and who has experienced relational depth with clients when working face-to-face) were recruited to elicit whether counselling experience has an additional impact on the lived experience of ending. Information about the study and the inclusion criteria was forwarded to the counsellors via email. Six participants, all female, shown in Table 1, came forward to take part in the study.

2.2 | Data collection

Data were gathered through a semistructured interview format (Roulston, 2014), which enabled some focus and flexibility through facilitating the participant to speak freely about their lived experience (Smith et al., 2009). Interviews lasted 52–65 min, were conducted online and recorded on Microsoft Teams and securely stored on OneDrive to ensure safety, security and confidentiality.

Interview questions were used as a guide, for example, 'Can you describe a time in your short-term work when you experienced relational depth with a client and describe it in as much detail as possible?', 'How did it feel when you ended with them?' and 'How does it feel now as you talk about it?' A successful pilot study meant that these data were included in this analysis.

The researcher acknowledged the challenges implicit in conducting research with colleagues throughout, having an awareness of any influence this might have on the participants' responses. A reflexive journal was used to note feelings and thoughts, to support

the process of immersion in the participant's phenomenological experiencing (McLeod, 2015).

2.3 | Data analysis

Following the IPA method set out by Smith et al. (2009), the main author used a manual process to code and organise the themes. Establishing a phenomenological connection between the interview texts and the main author was felt to be in keeping with both relational depth and the nature of IPA. Transcripts were generated for each recording, then read and re-read whilst simultaneously listening to the audio, checking verbatimly on a line-by-line basis and highlighting words and phrases, whilst ensuring that the participants' phenomenological experiences of endings were the focus of the analysis. Initial wide-ranging and unfocussed notes reflecting thoughts and observations were made, which had a clear phenomenological focus, staying close to the participants' explicit meanings (Willig, 2013). For each participant, emergent themes were identified and labelled to portray each section of text, which were grouped into meaningful clusters for overarching themes to bring structure into the analysis. A summary table was produced to include relevant extracts of verbatim text from the transcripts, which only included those that captured the quality of the participants' experience of the phenomenon under investigation. Finally, the themes from all participants were investigated to find occurrence across cases, identifying those that occurred in at least half of the cases, and were then regrouped to identify the final superordinate and subordinate themes shown in Table 2. The results of the analysis were discussed with the co-author before the main author collated the findings.

3 | FINDINGS

Following the analysis of data using IPA methods, three superordinate themes and 11 subordinate themes were generated, as shown in Table 2.

3.1 | Theme 1—Impact of ending

During the interviews, participants spoke in depth about those relationships in which they had worked at relational depth. This theme developed due to the significance of the quality of the relationship that was created and explores how ending relationships has both an immediate impact on the counsellor and one that can continue some time after the relationship has ended.

3.1.1 | Responsibility of ending

All participants shared a sense of responsibility of the ending with those relationships that they experienced as deep and connected.

TABLE 1 Participants' information.

| Participant | Trainee/qualified | Client hours to date |
|-------------|-------------------|----------------------|
| 1 | Trainee | 125h |
| 2 | Qualified | 350+ h |
| 3 | Qualified | 800+ h |
| 4 | Trainee | 65h |
| 5 | Qualified | 450+ h |
| 6 | Trainee | 90h |

TABLE 2 Superordinate themes and associated subordinate themes.

| Superordinate themes | Subordinate themes |
|---------------------------|--------------------------|
| Impact of ending | Responsibility of ending |
| | Loss |
| | Positive ending |
| | Later on |
| Impact of short-term work | Managing an ending |
| | Sense of frustration |
| | Sense of urgency |
| Professional issues | Counsellor experience |
| | Reflective practice |
| | Expectation of role |
| | Moving on |

Most participants felt a need for the client to feel 'ok' when it ended, with P1 recognising this during the interview process: '...I think there's something to do with them...being OK with the ending, I feel OK with the ending, but that's...since doing this interview, I've only just realised that'.

P2 spoke of her responsibility to ensure that the client had support when it ended, which, in turn, enabled her to let go of her responsibility towards the client: 'I had to work really hard to build that sort of, the client support system, not just for the client, but for me too – that enables me to let them go'.

P5 felt there were questions surrounding her responsibility towards the client when it ended: '...what have I done for you? Have I done, have I been good enough for you? ... should have I done differently? What could I have done better, you know, so there's a lot of questions'.

P6 expressed a need to get the ending right: 'I really need to tell him this. I really need to, you know, give him something to leave with. It felt really, really strong that I needed that, you know, my need, I'm very aware of my need here...I really wanted to get it right for him...I was trying to futureproof when he left'.

3.1.2 | Loss

All participants mentioned a sense of loss when talking about ending with those clients they had deep connections with, with particular focus on loss of fluency, connection and purpose: 'I missed the fluency of the connection, I missed the fluency of the sessions' (P1); 'I can't help her anymore...I suppose it's that need to be needed...So with the ending, it's like, well you're not needed anymore' (P6).

P2 and P5, when engaging with a sense of loss, spoke of privilege and enrichment from the relationship: 'It's such a privilege, but it is so hard just to let them go'; 'It's kind of, it's lack of...I can feel there's been an enrichment for my life...I've learned something from you'.

P3 spoke of loss as being the price we pay for having deep, close-felt relationships: 'Didn't somebody once say about love and, well, about grief actually, "grief is the price we pay for love." And in a way, I think actually, when you're with clients, I guess the ending is the price you pay'.

3.1.3 | Positive ending

Five participants spoke about how relational depth gave a sense of satisfaction, achievement and gratitude when ending: '...you go out with a smile on your face...' (P2); 'I felt proud of her, and I suppose proud of the work I'd done with her...' (P1); '...gratitude for having had that experience. Uhm, so yeah, so they're accepting tears' (P6).

P3 spoke of joy when the client did not need them anymore: 'I remember thinking she won't need me anymore...it was a joyous feeling to know...it's like letting the birds go or something'.

3.1.4 | Later on

Five participants, when recalling their deep, close-felt relationships, spoke of wondering how their clients are: 'You just care about them and you want to know what, what their life's like now. Are they doing OK...I just want to message her and say, "are you OK?"' (P5).

P3 and P6 spoke of how, although the story fades, the client leaves an imprinted feeling in them: '...I often wonder how he got on...I think they feel part of you because you've been there, you've listened to their story...when I think about them I can remember the emotion'; '...it feels like that every client's got their own sort of signature of, you know, like embodied signature of who they are, and they have a feel about them...'.

3.2 | Theme 2—Impact of short-term work

All participants interviewed in this study worked in a short-term, seven-session model. This theme developed due to this experience, prominent in the dialogue of all participants, with a particular focus on their sense of responsibility for a good ending.

3.2.1 | Managing an ending

Five participants noted the importance of planning for an ending alongside managing boundaries and expectations within a short-term setting.

Three of the participants felt that having clear boundaries and expectations helped reduce a sense of responsibility for the client when ending: 'I think the beauty of it is, we're not responsible for them. I think, that's the, that's the relief...I've done my contracted work and I've given my, as much of me as I can, but we agreed it would be for this long, and now I can let go' (P4).

P2 spoke of a 'support system': '...clocking it right from the beginning...picking up on sort of where the client is and what the client support is in preparation for the endings'.

P1 felt anger at having to stick to short-term boundaries, finding it difficult to prepare themselves and the client for an ending: 'I get swept away in the moment with them...if I'm preparing for an ending, I feel like I'm pushing them to close it off somehow'.

3.2.2 | Sense of frustration

All participants, when recalling their deep, close-felt relationships, expressed a sense of frustration of short-term boundaries, conveying a sense of sadness, guilt, anger and injustice through wanting to do more: 'I just felt like there was so much more work to do' (P2); 'I suppose it's the system, you know, being in an unfair system...guilty because it's not enough' (P3).

P1 struggled with the lack of control: 'I felt quite angry towards the fact there's a deadline...it's out of my control...I really wanted to help this person, I didn't want her to be on her own'.

P2 and P5 expressed a sense of injustice of short-term therapy: 'I'm alarmed at how quickly relationships develop in short-term therapy and I think that's partly why I'm frustrated that it doesn't carry on'; 'We give so much to our clients. We are, you know, we are on a special journey with them and then just this sort of thing...Oh yeah, it's ended. It kind of doesn't give it justice to the depth of the relationship'.

3.2.3 | Sense of urgency

All participants shared a sense that seven sessions feels fast-paced, with the ending coming too quick: 'I start to get to know people...thinking, crikey, yeah, the end is coming pretty sharpish' (P2); 'It feels very fast paced...like a conveyor belt. It's like one's out, next one's in...' (P1).

P6 felt an urgency to 'fix' the client due to the tension of short-term therapy: 'it's not going to be dealt with in that period of time'.

P3 felt a sense of injustice of the system: 'I want to sort of charge in with a banner and sort of say, look, you should have this, you should have that...this particular girl, she needed more'.

3.3 | Theme 3—Professional issues

This theme explores how the counsellors' professional role and experiences of working in short-term settings had an impact on the ending phase of their therapeutic relationships.

3.3.1 | Counsellor experience

All participants commented on their level of experience of working in short-term settings. Those who had more experience expressed

that although their confidence and competence had grown, endings had not become any easier: 'It gets more and more difficult, instead of getting easier and easier when you have those connections...the depth of the relationship gets deeper...the goodbye, the farewell is harder I think' (P5).

P3 spoke about how deep, close relationships can wear you down: 'It does take its toll...particularly the ones that have been harrowing and really difficult, emotionally'.

P2 felt that experience led to greater self-control and competence when ending: 'I feel more in control of myself, I just know that the end is coming, I've done it quite a few times now'.

However, P6 had anxieties over short-term endings, expressing a need to know more: 'I was reading about time limited counselling quite a lot before I started this placement'.

3.3.2 | Reflective practice

Most participants expressed that, due to the quick turnover of clients in short-term work, endings were less of a focus in supervision, with more emphasis on the responsibility for current or new clients: 'I'm more likely to take a new client to supervision than the loss of the old one' (P1).

P3 shared that endings would not normally be discussed in supervision due to the expectation that they are part of the job: '...it's something about taking it on the chin, you know, it's part of the work I do'.

During the interview process, several participants realised how useful a space to reflect could be: 'It's probably good this for me, 'cause I've never really reflected out loud about endings...I feel calmer, more settled, more grounded' (P5); 'It feels a bit, quite integrating to actually say that out loud to you as well...I've found the experience of sharing this really quite touching as well' (P6).

3.3.3 | Expectation of role

All participants recognised that endings were part of their role as a counsellor: 'I know that it has to end...it's out of my control' (P1) and acknowledging that ending deep-connected relationships was inevitable: 'some are very troublesome, when you've really connected on a really deep emotional level...you go through all the emotion and the turmoil, but the ending is almost, you know, it's inevitable, it's there, ...you know that that's going to happen. So it's uhm, I guess it's about taking it on the chin' (P3).

There was also a shared sense of acceptance of loss and frustration in their role: 'the loss and the frustration that I feel...it's become a norm. Yeah, it's happened quite a few times now...I'm prepared for it' (P2).

One participant reflected that, due to the nature of short-term therapy, endings are part of a rhythm in counselling: '...it's temporary over those periods of weeks or months...And then that will end and it's OK because I suppose mentally, you know that's happening...it's the rhythm of counselling' (P4).

3.3.4 | Moving on

All the participants shared a sense of responsibility over adjusting to the loss of a client and moving on to the next in short-term counselling: 'It's always like a conveyor belt, we've got to get over that and start tuning into the other one' (P1).

P2 spoke of a sense of transition from one client to the next: 'Got to start all over again...short-term therapy is really not easy...I want to carry on but, yes, screen comes down, start all over again...screen has to come right back up again...back into introduction role'.

P3 and P4 felt the need to bracket the pain of ending to move on: '...avoiding the emotion so its uhm, but that's what I have to do to carry on doing my job properly'; 'I couldn't handle it quite, so I distracted myself by spraying the chairs and emptying the bin...I didn't cry, but I felt a bit overwhelmed'.

P6 focussed on letting go of responsibility for the client to move on: 'trying to let go of things which I can't be responsible for...trying to be humble about how much I can really do... whilst not underestimating my client, how they may be able to progress as well'.

4 | DISCUSSION

The findings of this study highlighted some similarities with previous studies around experiences for counsellors when ending therapy (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020; Turtle, 2019). However, with the focus of the present study being on short-term therapy and those relationships in which the counsellors had experienced relational depth, the research elicited several unique factors. This discussion will draw attention to these similarities and differences.

4.1 | Relational depth

Participants described how relational depth looked and felt in their therapeutic relationships, expressing a shared sense that the quality and strength of this type of relationship brought moments of togetherness and connection. These encounters were described as 'being in their world', 'like a glass box' and 'in a sort of cocoon'. This aligns with a study by Cooper (2005), who explored therapists' experiences of relational depth; participants spoke of being 'free from distractions' like being 'immersed in a powerful protective sphere' (p. 91). It was evident from this current study that through building this type of therapeutic relationship, within the constraints of a seven-session model, it elicited a range of powerful emotions when ending, some of which included sadness, guilt, anger, hope and injustice.

4.1.1 | Impact of ending

When participants disclosed detailed accounts of their deeply felt relationships, it emerged that a sense of responsibility in relation to

clients was central in their way of working. Participants spoke about their anxieties for their clients' future welfare, expressing a need 'to get it right' and 'be good enough' within the specific time frame, so they felt able to 'let them go' when it ended. Conversely, there was some tension in this dynamic, particularly when disclosing a sense of loss of purpose when ending. There appeared to be a paradox of wanting to let go of their responsibility in relation to clients by finding a way to facilitate the client and enable client responsibility, but a concurrent feeling of sadness at not being needed anymore.

There was also evidence of loss of connection when the deep-felt relationships had ended, understood by participants to be due to the quality and depth of the relationships that were created. The participants missed the fluency and ease of the connection that had been created, finding it frustrating when striving to rebuild comparable connections with new clients. They expressed how they 'learned' so much from the clients, experiencing a sense of privilege to have reached the level of connection and to be in their clients' life for the duration of the therapeutic relationship. This supports a study by Cooper (2005, p. 91), who looked at therapists' experiences of relational depth, finding that therapists felt 'affected', 'touched' or 'influenced' by their clients at times of relational depth. In the current study, one participant related their endings to grief, with a sense of acceptance of this loss, implying that endings are the price we pay for those profound connections.

Many other studies have also identified loss as an impact of endings (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Lanyado, 1999; Turtle, 2019; Wittenberg, 1999). Turtle (2019) suggested that when counsellors feel sadness and loss from ending, it could be due to their attachments with clients. Within the present study, three participants spoke of a bond or having a sense of mothering in their relationships due to the care and attunement they felt within the encounter. This sense of mothering would support a study by Fragkiadaki and Strauss (2012, p. 342), who discovered that therapists experienced a parental role when talking of a 'bonding relationship', finding that endings brought feelings of sadness and pleasure.

Similar to previous research, the current study found that the therapeutic ending continued to have an impact long after the relationship had ended, bringing feelings of sadness, worry and hope (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019). Participants spoke of needing to 'hold onto the unknown'; wondering how their former clients are managing, but equally not underestimating the therapeutic relationship and holding hope that they have continued to flourish without them. In line with Turtle (2019), participants felt that their clients had been absorbed into their sense of being, still remembering the emotions in the therapeutic encounter some time after, with one participant describing it as an 'embodied signature'.

4.1.2 | Impact of short-term work

A further significant finding of this study was in relation to working in a seven-session model, with all participants identifying a frustration

over their responsibility to work within the boundaries of this modality. The study discovered that, regardless of the participants' hours of experience, they all shared a sense that seven sessions did not always feel like enough time, as they were frequently left with feelings of sadness, guilt, anger and injustice when ending. It was noticeable that this frustration led to feelings of urgency and pressure in the therapeutic encounter, with participants wanting to give their clients what they needed so that they were able to let them go when it ended. Notably, the more experienced participants had begun to find their own way to deal with this; two participants had worked on setting clear expectations or goals at the first session, in preparation for the ending, to promote the clients' self-responsibility when ending and to ensure they had fulfilled their counsellor role within the time frame. One participant spoke in depth about the clients' 'support system' for when therapy ended, which evidently appeared to have become the primary focus of their work with their clients, with implications that relational depth might not always have space to develop. These findings support a study by Ling and Stathopoulou (2020), who suggested that counsellors working within a short, fixed therapy setting would set goals and coping strategies rather than engaging in the deeper counselling process, due to feeling frustration at the level of support they could provide within the time frame. Reflecting the findings of Ling and Stathopoulou (2020), there was a sense of frustration and unease over the control of the ending point within the seven-session model. Participants spoke of sessions needing to be much more controlled and focussed, with endings leaving them feeling that there was still more work left to be done, giving a sense of 'unfinished business'. One trainee participant, who spoke about a need to read about time-limited counselling before starting her placement, expressed that she had to stop herself going down a 'diagnostic rabbit-hole' due to the tensions of trying to fulfil the needs of longer term concerns and offering the client 'enough' within the given time frame.

Echoing the findings of existing research (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020), there was also evidence that participants viewed endings as part of their role as a counsellor, with most expressing a need to plan and prepare for the ending from the onset. They conveyed a belief that this management towards an ending contributed to 'positive experiences' and 'good outcomes', aiding them to let go of a sense of responsibility for the client and, in turn, promote client self-reliance and self-responsibility.

In support of this proactive approach, a study by Turtle (2019) found that planning for an ending, with counsellors disclosing their own feelings around ending, helped towards a positive ending. Self-disclosure when ending was found in a study by Fragkiadaki and Strauss (2012, p. 343) to be used with an aim to enhance the reality of the relationship and aid a 'good ending'. In this current study, it emerged that participants were mindful of when to use immediacy and self-disclosure when ending, with one participant disclosing how they would not want the client to feel guilty or feel they owed them anything when it ends, often having an awareness of the emotional impact immediately after the client had left. It could be argued that this aligned with their sense of professional obligation highlighted in these findings, to bracket the pain and move on. There was a shared awareness of urgency to adjust

emotionally, ready for the transition to new clients and needing to get ready to 'tune in' to the next client. This repetitive sense of detachment and separation, which Skovholt (2005) terms 'The Cycle of Caring', was described by one participant as a 'rhythm of counselling' and by another participant, 'like a conveyor belt...one's out, next one's in'.

4.1.3 | Professional issues

Several features in relation to counsellor experience emerged within this study. One trainee participant conveyed anxiety over their competence for short-term counselling, needing to know more about this modality before starting their placement. Although there was an implication that building experience could lead to more control and competence in the ending phase, the findings suggest that focussing on a support system for the client when it ended had aided this. Furthermore, the study highlights that, regardless of experience, endings do not get easier for many counsellors, with the most experienced participant expressing how ending deep, close-felt relationships 'takes its toll'. There was also evidence that the impact of endings on the counsellors was overlooked when using supervision, with only one participant out of six alluding to the benefit of supervision to disclose the joys and loss impacted upon them through ending deep, close-felt relationships. Most participants reflected that, due to the pressure to move on in their short-term setting, beginnings rather than endings of their therapeutic relationships were central to their focus in supervision, often finding the timing of supervision did not align with these endings. Participants also shared a sense that endings were part of their role as a counsellor, accepting loss and frustration as part of this. One participant expressed endings to be 'inevitable' and described 'taking it on the chin'.

Participants in the current study appeared less likely than those in published studies to use supervision to reflect on and process endings. In several earlier studies, participants described supervision as helpful to understand and explore the negative impacts of endings and to process the experience and difficult feelings of anger and sadness due to erratic, difficult and challenging endings (Bamford & Akhurst, 2014; Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Ling & Stathopoulou, 2020; Turtle, 2019).

It could be argued that this is at odds with BACP's (2018) ethical guidelines that call attention to supervision as an essential aspect of professional standards, with it being somewhere for practitioners to reflect in depth about all aspects of their practice. The question arises as to where the responsibility lies, within the supervisory relationship, to raise the dialogue of the impact of endings. Page and Wosket (2015, p. 86) describe supervision as a collaborative process where, through a 'supervision model', one of the stages of supervision is seen as creating a 'space'. Furthermore, there could be an implication that, within the present study, as illustrated in previous research (Ladany et al., 1996; Webb, 2000), participants were unwilling to disclose in supervision their feelings about ending, for fear it reflected badly on their competence.

4.2 | Limitations

This study was an in-depth, small-scale IPA study based on a sample of six humanistic counsellors who volunteered for a local charity. It is recognised that whilst non-generalisability could be perceived as a limitation, this was not perceived as such by the authors because the richness and quality of the data produced within IPA felt more important than the quantity. It is also recognised that the insider-outsider perspective of the main author, as both a volunteer for the charity and a researcher at the time of interviewing, was both a strength and a limitation. At some level, this will have inevitably influenced the interview process, the data analysis and write-up of the study.

4.3 | Implications for practice

This study provides evidence that relationships in which counsellors have experienced relational depth within short-term work can leave them vulnerable to unprocessed powerful emotions when ending. Participants tended to dismiss processing these personal feelings in supervision due to the challenges of working within a short-term setting. Supervision is an ethical requirement (BACP, 2018) to ensure counsellors sustain good practice throughout their working life. Reflective practice is also needed for counsellors to care for themselves, ensuring that their work with clients does not come at the expense of their own mental health and well-being (BACP, 2021). Therefore, supervisors and counsellors might benefit from being more proactive in managing reflective practice, focusing on the impact of ending therapeutic relationships and exploration of personal histories and attachments. Supervisors should recognise and challenge supervisees' non-disclosure of endings in supervision. Counsellors might benefit from using peer group supervision, self-reflection and personal therapy to focus on endings.

4.4 | Implications for policy

Whilst there is some research and literature around endings in therapy, this study highlights that more research and training are needed. Existing studies imply that planning for an ending and counsellor self-disclosure could aid a positive ending (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019). Therefore, more guidance and support for managing and experiencing endings in short-term work within counsellor training and CPD programmes would be beneficial, with additional exploration around counsellor self-disclosure, indicating the need for further research.

4.5 | Future research

This study focussed on planned endings of counselling relationships in which counsellors worked at relational depth within a short-term modality. Further research could be undertaken to explore the experiences of counsellors when working at relational depth to include alternative types of endings of counselling relationships and long-term models of counselling.

Most of the participants in this study were reluctant to use supervision to make sense of their experiences when ending these relationships. Further research is recommended to enquire how supervisors approach discussing endings with their supervisees. It might also be useful for research to consider counsellors' use of reflective practice to ensure good practice and for practitioner self-care.

The impact of counsellor training programmes on endings for trainee counsellors could be relevant for future studies. This could determine how counsellor training adequately equips counsellors to manage endings in their therapeutic relationships and whether training providers cover endings in enough depth and detail to support counsellors for future practice.

5 | CONCLUSION

This study has highlighted the impact and difficulties experienced when managing a seven-session model and the ending phase of therapy when working at relational depth. It provides evidence that although working at relational depth has some positive elements, such as sense of achievement, gratitude and privilege, the reality is that this type of relationship can take its toll and lead counsellors to experience powerful emotions of sadness, guilt, anger and injustice, when ending with their clients.

It has revealed that counsellors struggle with the boundaries of the seven-session model, with a sense of responsibility for the client and the outcome of therapy. Although there is a view that short-term therapy feels inadequate for a 'successful outcome', there is some indication that, with experience, counsellors can find ways to manage this modality to ease the impact of the ending phase.

Previous studies imply that counsellor self-disclosure could contribute to a positive ending (Fragkiadaki & Strauss, 2012; Turtle, 2019). However, in this study, there appeared to be confusion over the appropriateness of counsellor self-disclosure at the ending phase in the therapeutic relationship, with counsellors' sense of responsibility within their role overshadowing this.

Despite participants experiencing difficult emotions, it seems that processing them is overlooked in supervision, which is somewhat inconsistent with the previous literature. This study found that participants experienced a sense of urgency and pressure to move on within the short-term modality. Consequently, participants felt a greater need to take their concerns of new clients to supervision rather than disclosing the impact of endings with previous clients.

Finally, what is evident is that although there are several studies exploring the impact of therapeutic endings on counsellors, there is still a need to address this further, to offer more guidance, support and training, to ensure that counsellors sustain good practice throughout their working life and care of self as a practitioner (BACP, 2018).

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