



**Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) Professional Training
Programme - 2015**

**Young People's Experiences of School-Based Counselling: A Constructivist
Grounded Theory Study**

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Part I: Introduction and Literature Review

Part II: Research Paper

Part III: Reflective Account

Abstract

School-based counselling (SBC) is one of the most common therapeutic interventions received by secondary school aged pupils within the UK (Cooper, 2013). Despite this, little is known about the processes by which SBC leads to positive outcomes for many young people. This qualitative study aimed to generate a substantive theory of the processes contributing to positive outcomes, using a constructivist grounded theory (GT) methodology. Nine participants were interviewed using a broad open-ended interview schedule, and interviews were analysed using the constructivist GT analysis process outlined by Charmaz (2006). Key processes underpinning young peoples' experiences of SBC were constructed including: developing a safe space, engaging in a collaborative relationship and receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience. Key processes are considered in relation to relevant research and psychological theory and implications for school counsellors, school staff and EPs are discussed.

Summary

This thesis is comprised of three main sections including a literature review, research paper and reflective account of the research process. Part one, the introduction and literature review, explores and critically evaluates existing research in the field of school-based counselling (SBC). Through highlighting a number of gaps within this body of research, a clear rationale for the current study is provided.

Part two, the research paper, provides an account of the constructivist grounded theory carried out in order to develop an increased understanding of key processes which contribute to positive outcomes in SBC. Alongside a discussion of the methodology used, findings are presented and considered in relation to relevant research and psychological theory.

Part three, the reflective account, is comprised of two sections. The first section discusses the positioning of the current study within the existing SBC research literature, and goes on to consider the contribution to knowledge made in the fields of SBC, education and educational psychology. The second section contains a critical account of the research process within the context of the epistemological stance taken by the researcher.

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Abbreviations

BACP	British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy
CAMHS	Child and adolescent mental health services
DENI	Department for Education Northern Ireland
DfCSF	Department for Children, Schools & Families
DfE	Department for Education
DH	Department of Health
EP	Educational psychologist
GT	Grounded theory
NHS	National Health Service
RCT	Randomised control trial
SBC	School-based counselling
SEN	Special educational needs
TaMHS	Targeted Mental Health in Schools
UK	United Kingdom
USA	United States of America
WAG	Welsh Assembly Government



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Part I: Introduction and Literature Review

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1. Introduction

Amongst secondary school aged pupils attending mainstream schools in England, the most prevalent special educational need is reported to be behavioural, social and emotional difficulties (DfE, 2014). Given this statistic, it seems important that effective, evidence-based provision is made available to support the needs of these young people. Within the last decade, school-based counselling (SBC) has become one of the most commonly received therapeutic interventions by secondary school pupils in the UK experiencing these types of difficulties (Cooper, 2013). Although SBC has consistently been found to lead to positive changes, such as improved confidence and better relationships with family and friends (Lynass, Pykhtina & Cooper, 2012), little is known about the specific processes by which it contributes to these outcomes. Obtaining a more detailed understanding of how SBC leads to positive outcomes has important implications for supporting the emotional wellbeing of young people, for example, through developing more effective types of provision, which are tailored to the needs of those that they are designed to support.

A key role for EPs involves supporting young people with behavioural, emotional and social difficulties on a range of levels, including direct work, taking a multi-agency role and through strategic work and capacity building (Farrell, et al., 2006). EPs are therefore well positioned to support schools in establishing and implementing robust, evidence-based systems that will promote the emotional wellbeing of their pupils (WAG, 2001). In addition, as EPs are increasingly working with young people in a therapeutic capacity (Atkinson, Squires, Bragg, Wasilewski & Muscutt, 2013), it is important that they have an understanding of processes which lead to positive change, particularly processes which young people themselves report to be important.

1.1 Overview of literature review

This literature review begins with an exploration of the current rates of child and adolescent mental health difficulties within the United Kingdom (UK) and the negative impact these difficulties can have on life outcomes. The positioning of schools as an appropriate context in which to support positive emotional wellbeing is discussed and SBC is identified as an approach that appears to be compatible with both national guidance regarding the type of support which should be available in schools, and also the type of support that young people report finding helpful. Research providing support for the efficacy of SBC, and a description of particular aspects of SBC that service users and relevant stakeholders perceive to be helpful, is critically discussed. Due to the largely descriptive nature of much of the qualitative SBC research, studies that have endeavoured to further explore the processes involved in SBC are also presented. Few studies of this nature have been conducted,

therefore theoretical approaches to counselling are also examined, focusing on how these approaches hypothesise that positive change occurs. Finally, in light of the research findings and limitations to this body of research, the aim of the current study is presented.

1.2 Key sources

Key databases including PsycINFO, PsycArticles and ERIC were searched for literature reporting on young people's experiences of school-based counselling. Search criteria included combinations of key terms such as "school-based counselling" or "school counselling" with "outcomes", "processes" and "experiences". Government and professional body websites were also searched in order to access relevant policy documents and commissioned research. Additional searches of the same key databases were made for theoretical and research literature relating to person-centred, cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic approaches. Search criteria included combinations of key terms such as, "person-centred approach", "cognitive-behavioural approach" and "psychodynamic approach" with "counselling" and "psychotherapy". Other key sources included textbooks regarding theoretical approaches to counselling and psychotherapy. The search was completed in April 2015.

Research studies investigating SBC, which have been carried out in countries other than the UK, have been excluded from this review as SBC, particularly in the United States of America (USA), seems to take more of a guidance role in supporting pupils with academic and vocational development, rather than solely focusing on therapeutic support (American School Counsellor Association, 1999). Where any exceptions to these exclusion criteria have been made, the rationale for inclusion is clearly justified.

2. Mental health

2.1 Current national context of child and adolescent mental health

In 2004, a national survey examining the mental health of young people in the UK, aged between 5 and 16, was carried out by the Office for National Statistics (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford & Goodman, 2005). It was reported that one in ten young people were experiencing a diagnosable mental health condition, causing them distress and functional impairment, for example, difficulties with family and peer relationships or learning. This rate is equivalent to around three children in every school class. A prospective longitudinal study has also reported that more than half of adults accessing mental health services at the age of 26 had met the criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition between the ages of 11 and 15, and more than three quarters had received a first diagnosis by the age of 18 (Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). This finding highlights that for many young people emotional difficulties have an early onset in adolescence and demonstrate a marked increase throughout adolescence.

It is important to consider that the figures reported may not offer a complete reflection of the number of school aged children experiencing mental health difficulties since, as with much mental health research, only young people meeting a clinical threshold for diagnosis have been included. It is likely that there are a large number of children experiencing mental health difficulties which would fall below this threshold but which may develop into more serious difficulties if they do not have access to appropriate support. However, even when solely considering symptoms of emotional distress, such as worry, irritability and feeling stressed, the number of young people reporting these feelings has doubled between 1986 and 2006 (Collishaw, Maughan, Natarajan & Pickles, 2010).

Many young people who experience mental health difficulties in adolescence will continue to experience difficulties and require specialist support into adulthood (Kim-Cohen et al., 2003; Reef, Diamantopoulou, van Meurs, Verhulst & van der Ende, 2010). Longitudinal research has also indicated that young people who experience mental health difficulties are more likely to experience poorer life outcomes, such as being excluded from education, leaving school with no qualifications and a lack of peer networks (DfCSF & DH, 2008; Parry-Langdon 2008).

Despite the apparent high levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties faced by school-aged children, The Princes Trust Youth Index (2013) reported that more than one in five 16-25 year olds, not in employment, education or training, felt that they had no one to talk to about their difficulties whilst they were growing up. This finding, together with research highlighting the longer-term negative impact of mental health difficulties, indicates the importance of ensuring that appropriate, accessible and effective support is made widely available to young people.

2.2 Supporting positive mental health and the role of schools

A recent mental health task-force report (O'Brien et al., 2015) highlighted a number of barriers which are preventing young people from accessing child and adolescent mental health services (CAMHS) including waiting times, specific thresholds which young people who experience lower, non-clinical levels of emotional difficulty may not meet and young people feeling reluctant to attend clinic settings. In addition, between 2009 and 2013 the National Health Service (NHS) decreased the amount of money spent on CAMHS by almost £60 million (DH, 2015) further contributing to difficulties in providing specialist services. Schools are increasingly becoming recognised as an appropriate setting in which to provide mental health support for young people, as they offer a more accessible and less stigmatising service than attending an external specialist mental health provision (DfE, 2011).

Accordingly, government policies have become increasingly concerned with the need for schools to put in place systems for the effective promotion and support of young people's emotional wellbeing. Such initiatives have been prioritised by past successive governments and include programmes such as the National Healthy Schools Programme (DfCSF & DH, 1999), the Social and Emotional Aspects of Learning Programme (DfCSF, 2005) and the Targeted Mental Health in Schools (TaMHS) Programme (DfCSF, 2008). Similarly, the recently revised Special Educational Needs (SEN) Code of Practice (DfE & DH, 2014) introduces a new category of SEN, social, mental and emotional health, and outlines the importance of schools having a clear process to support the needs of these young people.

One of the more recent national initiatives, previously cited, was the TaMHS programme. This programme aimed at ensuring that schools develop and improve mental health and emotional wellbeing through providing access to both preventative and intervention support (DfCSF, 2008). The TaMHS model (see Figure 1) features three waves of support; wave one, which comprises whole-school preventative approaches, wave two, which offers more targeted skill-based interventions for vulnerable young people and their families, and wave three, where therapeutic interventions are offered, often by external specialist services commissioned by the school or local authority.

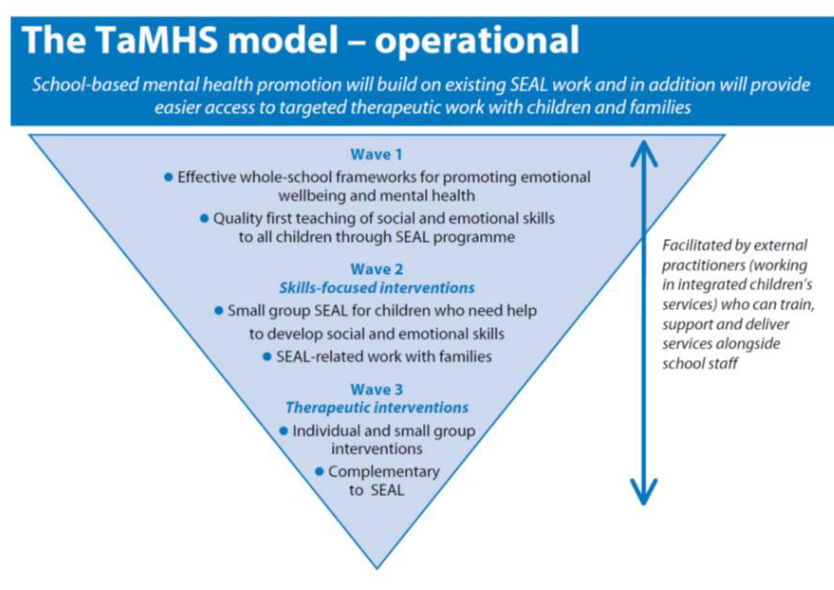


Figure 1: The wave model of prevention and intervention for TaMHS delivery (from DfCSF, 2010)

The targeted therapeutic support that schools provide at wave three of the TaMHS model can take many different forms including individual or group therapy for pupils, as well as working with families in addition to pupils (DfE, 2011). One such intervention, which appears to have been

frequently commissioned by schools and LAs, is the development of a school-based counselling service (DfCSF, 2010).

3. School-based counselling

3.1 Rationale for the use of counselling in a school context

A number of meta-analyses have been conducted to identify what young people want from helping professionals (Freake, Barley & Kent, 2007; Robinson, 2010). These reviews have concluded that some of the key qualities which young people seek are:

- familiarity, ease of access and availability,
- someone who will listen to their concerns,
- and assurance of privacy and confidentiality.

It is important to highlight that these reviews encompass the experiences of young people who have accessed support in external, medical settings, such as hospitals and mental health clinics, in addition to those who have been supported within school. It must be considered that young people may want different things from school support and the support they receive from, for example, their doctor. However, research has also been carried out solely within a school context to investigate the types of emotional support that pupils report as helpful in school (Kidger, Donovan, Biddle, Campbell & Gunnell, 2009). Similar to the previously reported meta-analyses, the main themes which arose were the importance of confidentiality and sources of support being easily accessible and empathetic. In addition, pupils expressed concerns regarding the stigma of accessing additional support and consequently being able to access help without the knowledge of others was key.

From the descriptions of counselling given by the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy (BACP), it can be considered that a SBC approach appears to be congruent with what young people report to find helpful. The BACP (2010) describe counselling as a talking therapy in which a person is encouraged to discuss their feelings, emotions and behaviours, within the context of a trusting therapeutic relationship. Confidentiality is seen as a key element of this relationship and consequently for many secondary school aged pupils, they can access counselling without the knowledge of others. Counsellors are also able to work in a number of different contexts, which offers the advantage of placing them within the school environment, affording them more familiarity to pupils than an external professional would have. Whilst it could be argued that school staff, such as those in a pastoral care role, may offer further familiarity, factors such as limited time, lack of specific training and unclear boundaries are likely to prevent them from being appropriate (WAG, 2008). The

provision of a school counsellor, therefore, seems to be a suitable means of providing young people with therapeutic support in a manner that they themselves identify as appropriate.

3.2 Current context and provision

Since 2007 in Northern Ireland, and 2008 in Wales, all secondary schools have provided their pupils with a counselling service. This is following statutory guidance in both countries which states that all secondary schools must provide a counselling service which affords young people the opportunity to discuss any difficulties which are impacting on their emotional wellbeing in a supportive, familiar and comfortable environment (DENI, 2006; WAG, 2008). It has also been estimated in 2012 that between 61-85% of secondary schools in England, and 64-80% in Scotland, were providing a service (Hanley, Jenkins, Barlow, Humphrey & Wigelsworth, 2012). Although at present there is no statutory responsibility for secondary schools in England or Scotland to provide a SBC service, calls are being made from government officials (O'Brien et al., 2015) and the counselling profession (BACP, 2013) for this to be made a legal requirement for all schools in the UK.

With regards to the demographics of young people who access SBC services, Cooper (2009) conducted a meta-analysis which encompassed close to 11,000 SBC service users in the UK and found that there was almost an equal proportion of male (44%) and female (56%) pupils accessing the service. Studies have also highlighted that the majority of young people engaging with the service are aged between 12 and 16 and that the two most commonly reported referral pathways are by school staff and self-referral (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011).

With regards to the counsellors that deliver SBC services, Hill et al. (2011) reported that the 106 school counsellors in Wales that responded to the national survey held a variety of counselling qualifications, ranging from undergraduate to doctoral level, with most counsellors possessing a postgraduate qualification or above (74%). In addition, 86% of counsellors reported to be a member of a professional counselling body, predominantly the BACP (77%). Studies highlight a significant level of flexibility and diversity in the way in which counsellors' practice varies, for example, the maximum number of sessions that they are able to deliver or the therapeutic approaches they draw upon (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011).

It has been reported that school counselling services see a comparable number of young people each year to CAMHS (Cooper, 2013). However, in contrast with CAMHS, there are no specific criteria or thresholds which need to be met in order to access SBC and average waiting times have been reported to be around one week (Hill et al., 2011). This indicates that SBC is a viable means of offering immediate support to a large number of young people who may otherwise not gain access to specialist mental health services due to, for example, not meeting specific clinical cut-off points.

4. Existing school-based counselling research

It is important that strategies put in place to support young people's emotional wellbeing are monitored and evaluated in order to review their impact and efficacy, as well as to contribute towards their ongoing development. More specifically, one of the key recommendations made by a research study commissioned by the Welsh Assembly Government (Pattinson, 2007) was that school counselling services should be subject to monitoring and evaluation processes in order to ascertain effectiveness and satisfaction of service users.

4.1 Outcomes

A large proportion of the existing research on SBC focuses on outcomes and evaluating implementation, predominantly using quantitative methods. A systematic review of sixteen research studies carried out in Scotland, Northern Ireland and England identified a significant decrease in the levels of psychological distress experienced by young people who had accessed, on average, eight sessions of SBC (Cooper, 2009). Hill et al. (2011) reported a similar significant reduction from data collected from young people engaging with SBC throughout the whole of Wales over a three year period. Cooper (2013) has highlighted that these reported levels of improvement after accessing SBC, both in Wales and the rest of the UK, are comparable to the reductions in psychological distress reported by young people who have received support from external specialist mental health services such as CAMHS.

Without the presence of a control group in the studies carried out by Cooper (2009) and Hill et al. (2011), reductions in distress after engaging with SBC, as indicated by pre- and post- questionnaire measures, do not offer conclusive support for the efficacy of SBC as external factors which may also contribute to change, for example more general maturation effects (Daniunaite, Ahmad & Cooper, 2012) or changes in circumstances, cannot be ruled out. In order to address this limitation, a small number of randomised control trials (RCTs) have been carried out in the past five years in which young people receiving counselling have been compared to a waiting list control group (Cooper et al., 2010; McArthur, Cooper & Berdondini, 2013; Murdoch et al., 2012; Pybis et al., 2014). McArthur et al. (2013) reported that, over a period of twelve weeks, young people accessing weekly SBC sessions reported a significant reduction in psychological distress compared to those in a waiting list condition. Similarly, a recent meta-analysis of four RCT pilot studies (Cooper, Fugard, Pybis, McArthur & Pearce, 2015) found that SBC was associated with a significant decrease in the levels of emotional and behavioural difficulties than would be anticipated without access to the service. It is, however, important to highlight that not all RCTs have replicated these findings. A RCT carried out by Cooper et al. (2010) reported no significant differences on measures of emotional difficulties between a

control group and young people who had received 4 to 6 sessions of counselling. However, there are a number of key limitations in the design of this study which may have contributed to this finding. Young people were recruited through a screening procedure carried out by the researchers rather than through more naturalistic processes such as self-referral or referral by teaching staff or parents. This, together with the fact that the school where the research was carried out had an existing SBC service, indicates that these young people may not be representative of individuals who would independently seek out, or be referred to, counselling. In addition, a quarter of the young people who accessed counselling in this study reported that they felt they had not had enough sessions which again may contribute to a less 'real-world' representation of SBC where counsellors tend to deliver as many sessions as is felt to be necessary (Cooper, 2013; Hill et al., 2011). This highlights the importance of all SBC research ensuring that if it is not feasible for a study to be carried out in naturalistic settings, i.e. with young people who have accessed their SBC service independently of the research, then the ecological validity of the study must be carefully considered. It is also important to note that at present the most long-term follow up of outcomes is three months (Fox & Butler, 2009; Pybis et al., 2014) and although both of these studies indicate that positive effects remain at this time point, it is likely that further longitudinal research is needed to demonstrate whether the positive effects of SBC are longer lasting.

It is important to highlight that the positive changes reported above were all identified using pre- and post- counselling closed questionnaire measures, such as the Young Persons Clinical Outcomes in Routine Evaluation and Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire. Whilst measures such as these are useful for quantifying and demonstrating change, and allow comparisons to be made between the efficacy of different therapeutic interventions, they are largely objective and positivist approaches to evaluation. Daniel and McLeod (2006) question whether such methods are truly able to "reflect the complex and multidimensional nature of what comes out of the process of engaging as a client in therapy" (p.244). The use of data collection measures and methods which gather richer, more subjective information about young peoples' experiences of SBC are therefore important in order to gain a better understanding of how and why SBC is leading to positive outcomes.

Utilising a more subjective measure of change, questionnaire data from 325 young people indicated that over half viewed themselves as 'much better' since finishing their SBC sessions and over a third as a 'bit better' (Cooper, 2009). The use of qualitative measures, such as interviews, has created the opportunity to explore a wider range of changes from the perspective of young people who have engaged with SBC. Lynass, Pykhtina & Cooper (2012) interviewed 11 young people regarding any changes which they had noticed in themselves since the start of their counselling sessions. The key changes which young people reported fell into three broad themes; emotional changes such as increased confidence and feeling happier, behavioural changes such as improved performance in

school, and inter-personal changes such as being able to talk about their feelings more easily and better relationships with friends and family. It has also been reported that, following SBC, young people view themselves as more able to concentrate in lessons, more engaged with schoolwork and more motivated to attend school, which they attribute to engaging in the process of counselling (Cooper, 2006; Rupani, Haughey & Cooper, 2012). However, it is important to highlight that these are solely the perceptions of participants and, whilst their subjective experiences of change are of key importance, their views have not been triangulated with information from school staff or attendance records in order to further evidence these positive changes.

4.2 Helpful and unhelpful factors

In addition to research regarding outcomes, a smaller number of studies have sought to gather information about service users' experiences of SBC through large-scale questionnaire surveys, and to a lesser extent, interviews. As young people who have accessed SBC have consistently reported it to have been a 'helpful' experience (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011) a key focus in the research literature has been on describing which aspects of the counselling process service users and other stakeholders, such as school staff and school counsellors themselves, view as helpful and unhelpful. A number of common factors have emerged from the research literature, which will be critically discussed below.

4.2.1 Being able to talk and feel listened to

A positive aspect of counselling which has frequently been reported in the research literature, in response to both open ended questionnaire and interview measures, is being able to talk to somebody who listens and understands (Cooper, 2004, 2009; Dunne, Thompson & Leitch, 2000; Hill et al., 2011, Lynass et al., 2012). In a meta-analysis of thirteen studies, it was the most commonly reported helpful factor, being mentioned three times more often than any other aspect of counselling (Cooper, 2009). Service users interviewed in a Welsh Evaluation study (Hill et al., 2011) added that it was not just the opportunity to talk but also the opportunity to be honest about how they were feeling and to get things off their chest. Whilst many studies have not explored why this is so important to many young people, Rupani et al. (2012) described a specific mechanism whereby the opportunity to talk about their problems allowed a young person to focus less on these problems, which led to increased concentration in school. However, it may be that for others the act of talking and expressing their feelings itself is significant.

4.2.2 Confidentiality and privacy

Another frequently reported helpful aspect of counselling is that it offers confidentiality and privacy with service users feeling able to talk to their counsellor without concerns that information will be passed on to teachers, family members or friends (Cooper, 2004, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Lynass et al., 2012). In a number of studies the experiences that young people report seem to indicate that

confidentiality is particularly important as it allows them to feel comfortable and trust their counsellor which in turn means that they feel able to share more and open up about their feelings (Cooper, 2004; Hill et al., 2011). It may be that a direct link can be drawn between confidentiality and the most commonly reported helpful aspect of counselling, feeling able to talk. However, this link is not made by the researchers in their findings and is a speculative connection derived from the descriptions given by participants in their interviews and detailed in the study. This hypothesis would need to be explored directly with service users to examine whether this link between confidentiality and feeling more able to talk openly does indeed exist.

In a study carried out by Westergaard (2013) in which school counsellors were interviewed to identify what they felt helped young people attending counselling, aspects such as confidentiality and having a private space were highlighted and incorporated into an overarching theme of safety. Counsellors seem to perceive that confidentiality contributes to a young person developing a sense of safety, which they feel, is a precursor to establishing a therapeutic relationship. It therefore appears that both the young people who access counselling, and counsellors themselves, view confidentiality as a key part of the process, although they may have differing perspectives on why it is so helpful.

4.2.3 Counsellor's personal qualities

Young people who have accessed SBC report that a number of the counsellor's personal qualities have been important including being non-judgemental (Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012; McKenzie, Murray, Prior & Stark, 2011), friendly (Bondi, Forbat, Gallagher, Plows & Prior, 2006; Cooper, 2004) and supportive (McKenzie et al., 2011). Cooper (2004) reported that over half of the service users interviewed stated that it was important that their counsellor had been nice and friendly, although there was no elaboration of why these specific qualities had been such a key part of counselling.

Regarding the importance of the counsellor being non-judgemental, it appears that school counsellors themselves view acceptance as fundamental to a young person feeling able to be honest and open about their feelings (Westergaard, 2013). This seems to be reflected in a number of comments made by young people which indicate that they have been concerned about talking to friends or family about specific issues because of how they might view them, however, they felt able to confide in their counsellor (Cooper, 2004). What is currently less clear from the research is how service users decide that a counsellor is non-judgemental, and how a counsellor is able to demonstrate this to a young person.

4.2.4 Direct advice and therapeutic strategies

Over half of the young people who were interviewed in a Scottish evaluation study (Cooper, 2004) reported that suggestions and advice from the counsellor were a helpful aspect of their experience.

Similarly, when asked about unhelpful aspects, a number of young people felt that they would have preferred their counsellor to provide them with more guidance during their sessions (Lynass et al., 2012). In Westergaard's (2013) research with counsellors, they reported that they drew on techniques and strategies from a range of therapeutic approaches depending on the needs of the young person they were working with and what they felt to be appropriate.

There seems to be some contradictory evidence regarding the level of guidance that young people find helpful, as service users have also frequently reported finding the non-directive nature of counselling important, such as, letting them lead the conversation and accepting what they are saying without having to try and resolve certain issues (Cooper, 2004.) It seems likely that, as the counsellors in the Westergaard study allude to, the level of direction from the counsellor will depend a great deal on the needs and preferences of individual service users. Unlike many of the other helpful aspects reported, this seems to be a factor which is not necessarily universally helpful, but which can contribute significantly to SBC being viewed as a positive experience if it is gauged at the right level.

4.2.5 Accessibility

Young people who have engaged with SBC have highlighted that being able to see the counsellor when they needed to was important, which for some users included in between sessions and over the telephone (Bondi et al., 2006; Hill et al., 2011). School staff have also reported that the straightforward referral process and short waiting times contribute to the positive impact of SBC with their schools (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). The finding that a lack of availability and accessibility has been highlighted as an unhelpful factor seems to reinforce its importance as a key contributor to the success of SBC. Across seven studies, young people reported that it would be useful if their school counsellor was present in school more often and had more availability to see pupils (Cooper, 2009). It seems appropriate to conclude that multiple stakeholders involved in SBC view accessibility as a key factor, although the reasons why are largely unexplored.

It is important to consider that a key limitation of much of the research describing helpful and unhelpful factors involved in SBC is the use of questionnaire measures and highly structured interviews (such as Cooper, 2004, 2006; Lynass et al., 2012). In using these types of data collection techniques young people are only questioned about factors that the researcher views as important and consequently, the researcher's constructions of what is important may be imposed onto participants. Additionally, these measures provide limited flexibility to explore any emerging ideas, particularly when using questionnaires. The use of more open and unstructured interviews is likely to be valuable in eliciting more novel ideas from users of SBC.

4.3 Process research in SBC

From the research discussed it can be seen that, whilst a number of studies have begun to provide an insight into young people's lived experiences of SBC, the focus has largely been on describing experiences, with an emphasis on helpful and unhelpful aspects. As Cooper (2013) highlights, there is a need for further exploratory research which moves towards an understanding of the process of how SBC is helping young people. In the existing literature, themes have been drawn from the data provided by young people, but there has been little attempt to use these themes to form a more conceptual model of the process of SBC.

Within the adult psychotherapy literature, process research has been valuable in “identifying, describing, explaining, and predicting the effects of the processes that bring about therapeutic change over the entire course of therapy” (Greenberg, 1986, p.4.) However, far fewer studies have been carried out investigating these processes within child and adolescent therapeutic interventions, more specifically SBC.

Due to this lack of process research, Dunne et al. (2000) sought to investigate the experiences of eleven male students who had accessed SBC, in order to begin to gather a picture of the processes involved in counselling. Four data collection measures were used, two closed and one open-ended questionnaire and a relatively structured interview that was informed by the young person's responses on the open-ended questionnaire. From the qualitative information gathered in the interviews, Dunne et al. identified a number of helpful processes which they categorised into affective and cognitive factors. Affective processes, which participants placed more weight on than cognitive processes, encompassed the importance of talking and sharing emotions, as well as feeling understood. This seems comparable to the most commonly reported helpful factor described in earlier research. Important cognitive processes involved insight events, where, through the counsellor offering an explanation or different perspective, the young person developed a clearer understanding of an event or issue that was troubling them.

The study by Dunne et al. (2000) does begin to provide a more comprehensive understanding of the processes involved in SBC, such as insight events and both the counsellor and service user's role in this process. However, in other areas it continues to provide a descriptive account of helpful factors with no clear attempt to make causal links between these factors, for example, the process of talking and sharing emotions and the processes by which a young person feels comfortable to do so. There are also a number of methodological factors that limit the extent to which an understanding of processes can be drawn from this study. The counsellor, also in the role of researcher, carried out all data collection measures, including the interviews. Whilst this may have the benefit of ensuring that the counsellor understands which specific events a young person is referring to, it may also suggest

that the counsellor's own constructions are reflected in their interpretation of helpful processes. It also raises questions about the extent to which participants felt that they could be open and honest about their experiences. In addition, interviews were completed at the end of each counselling session and it could be argued that completing interviews in this way, rather than at the end of the process, does not provide an overview of the processes involved in SBC rather a snapshot of what has been helpful in each session.

Gibson and Cartwright (2014) carried out a process research study utilising a narrative approach in order to investigate 22 young people's experiences of SBC, with a particular focus on how their experiences are shaped by their perceptions of the purpose of, and what they seek to get out of counselling. Data was collected using an unstructured, conversational approach that was intended to encourage young people to talk about their experiences using their own words rather than responding to questions generated by the researchers. Through analysis, four narrative accounts of the process of SBC were identified which Gibson and Cartwright labelled as transformative, supportive, pragmatic and disappointed experiences. Each of these processes will be described and discussed in brief:

- *Transformative* – prior to attending counselling the young person possessed a highly negative view of themselves and their situation. Counselling led to significant positive changes for these young people as it supported them to develop a more positive sense of themselves.
- *Supportive* – before engaging with counselling these young people seemed to have low expectations that it could help them. They did not articulate significant changes to themselves over their sessions; instead, the counsellor seemed to act as an ongoing support system for the young person to help them to cope with ongoing emotional challenges.
- *Pragmatic* – these young people attended counselling due to a specific concern or issue, which they felt they needed support to resolve. Rather than significant changes to themselves or ongoing support, the positive outcome for these young people was finding a solution to their specific concern.
- *Disappointed* – a minority of young people reported no positive outcomes from engaging with counselling. A small number of these participants also entered counselling with negative expectations.

These narrative accounts are useful in providing a more holistic overview of the process of counselling, along with a general understanding of how the process leads to different outcomes for different young people. It seems clear that young people approach counselling with a range of expectations and priorities, and that these impact on how they engage with the process and what they find useful. The different narratives highlight that it may be useful to move away from the notion that

all young people will find the same things useful and follow the same processes towards positive outcomes, therefore, a universal approach to SBC may not necessarily be appropriate.

It must be stated that this study was conducted in New Zealand, however, it was felt that it was important to include the research, as it is one of very few studies exploring SBC processes and utilising open-ended methods of data collection. In addition, the researchers did highlight that the counselling service which participants had accessed had received training in a range of therapeutic approaches which they employed flexibly, rather than ascribing to one specific approach. However, it is obviously important to be mindful of the limitations, previously discussed, involved in generalising research findings from one country to another.

The final piece of research, which attempts to investigate effective processes within SBC, looks at a specific process, that of help seeking (Prior, 2012). Eight young people were interviewed regarding their experiences of counselling with a particular focus on how they overcame their initial concerns in order to access counselling. Similar to Gibson and Cartwright (2014) a narrative approach to analysis was taken in order to explore the process of change within participants' accounts. Through comparing these narratives, Prior conceptualised a staged process of engagement, from the young person's initial self-acceptance of needing support through to feeling able to open up to the counsellor. The process identified six stages:

1. The young person accepting themselves that there is a concern, often which they feel unable to talk to family or friends about due to worries regarding judgment, breaches of confidentiality or causing those close to them to worry.
2. A member of school staff acts as a facilitator to accessing counselling, through offering information and clarification about the service, and by emphasising the young person's choice over whether to engage.
3. The young person considers attending counselling in light of the information from school staff, weighing up the benefits of accessing help versus the risks of stigmatisation.
4. The young person decides to attend a counselling session, feeling uncertain but hopeful.
5. During initial sessions, the young person embarks on a process of establishing whether they can trust the counsellor and their ability to ensure confidentiality. Acceptance and not being judged or patronised seemed to be key features in participants developing feelings of trust.
6. Once the young person feels they can trust the counsellor they feel able to open up about the concerns that led them to embark on this process of help seeking.

The process which Prior conceptualises provides an important and novel insight into a specific aspect of the counselling process. It demonstrates that positive outcomes within the sessions, such as a young

person feeling able to disclose their concerns, arise from a complex interplay of inter- and intra-personal factors involving both the counsellor and the service user. It also highlights that constructs, such as confidentiality and being able to talk which have been identified as the most helpful aspects of counselling, are not single events or actions, and it is important to consider the processes behind them. A methodological limitation of Prior's study, which must be considered, is that the interviews relied on significant retrospective recall of experiences and therefore it cannot be discounted that constructions, or reconstructions, may have changed over time. In addition, the study does not extend beyond the service user feeling able to talk about their concerns to, for example, resolution of these concerns. However, from the complex nature of the one aspect which Prior chose to investigate, it could be argued that limiting the research in this way may have allowed for a more detailed understanding of this process to emerge.

4.3.1 Overview of process research in SBC

It is clear that the research base regarding processes involved in SBC is limited. However, the small number of studies that have been conducted provide a useful insight into some of the key processes leading to engagement, feeling able to disclose concerns to the counsellor, and how service users develop different ways of thinking about their problems. The research has also demonstrated how different processes may be at play depending on a young person's expectations and goals for counselling. Given this finding, it seems important that further research is carried out in order to investigate additional processes, as well as looking at those already identified, that may be leading to positive outcomes for young people who engage with SBC.

There are also a number of methodological limitations which future research may seek to address including, the distinction between researcher and counsellor, and the use of more open, unstructured data collection methods, as presently these appear to have elicited the most novel understanding of processes. In addition, the timing of the interviews seems important in that carrying out interviews after SBC sessions have ceased allows participants to reflect on the process as a whole. However, the time lapse should not be too great in order to maximise the likelihood that experiential accounts are reflecting the lived-experiences of service users, rather than their reconstructions of this experience.

5. Theoretical approaches to counselling

Due to the shortage of research investigating processes that contribute to positive outcomes within SBC, it seems appropriate to consider how the theoretical literature regarding approaches to counselling might explain these positive outcomes. Counsellors draw on a range of theoretical approaches in their work with clients including behavioural, cognitive-behavioural, psychodynamic and humanistic approaches. As it is not within the scope of this review paper to discuss in detail how

each of these approaches would theorise that positive change occurs, it seems appropriate to consider the theoretical orientations that school counsellors predominantly report to draw upon. A meta-analysis of thirty studies reported that a third of the counselling services in the study drew upon a person-centred approach to counselling (Cooper, 2009). Similarly, Hill et al. (2011) found that over a quarter of the counsellors in a large-scale survey of school counsellors in Wales described their theoretical orientation as primarily humanistic and person-centred. However, whilst maintaining a person-centred core to their work, many counsellors report that they use an integrative approach to counselling, drawing upon techniques and strategies from a range of theoretical approaches as appropriate (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Westergaard, 2013). The two approaches that appear to be most widely drawn upon are elements of cognitive-behavioural (Fox & Butler, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Westergaard, 2013) and psychodynamic (Bondi et al., 2006; Cooper, 2009) practice. The second part of this review will therefore discuss how a person-centred approach to counselling would explain positive outcomes, as this approach appears to be central to the practice of many school-based counsellors. This will be followed by a broader overview of how cognitive-behavioural and psychodynamic approaches would also explain these outcomes, focusing particularly on the techniques these approaches recommend, as these also appear to inform school counsellors' work.

5.1 Person-centred approach

A fundamental assumption of the person-centred approach is that all individuals possess a propensity for psychological growth and change, and the internal resources to do so if “a definable climate of facilitative psychological attitudes can be provided” (Rogers, 1979, p. 1). A second key principle of this approach is the positioning of the client rather than the counsellor as the ‘expert’ on his or her own difficulties and, consequently, the client themselves is best placed to identify appropriate personalised solutions to these difficulties (McLeod, 2009). The aim of person-centred counselling is therefore not for the counsellor to provide the client with solutions to their problems, but to facilitate an interpersonal environment which allows the client to identify their own personal resources for change.

Rogers (1957) theorised that for many individuals who engage with counselling the difficulties that they are experiencing are caused by a discrepancy between how they view themselves, their self-concept, and how they would like to view themselves, their ideal-self. Rogers posits that this incongruence stems from two key sources; a person's locus of evaluation, that is, the extent to which they view themselves through the eyes of others, relying on external evaluations rather than their own values, and a person's perceived conditions of worth, where self-worth is conditional on behaving in a manner which will lead others to view them in a positive light. Rogers hypothesised that this discrepancy between self-concept and the ideal-self, caused by behaving in a way which is acceptable to others rather than oneself, prevents the individual from moving towards the self that they truly want

to be. Based on his clinical experience, Rogers (1957) theorised that in order to facilitate psychological change, an individual needs to experience a relationship in which they feel able to express their ‘true’ internal self and have this met with acceptance and positive regard. More specifically, Rogers outlined three core conditions which he determined to be necessary for change to occur, namely congruence, empathy and unconditional positive regard, which will be explored in more detail below. Rogers states that no other therapeutic techniques or strategies are required for positive change to occur, the presence of a relationship characterised by these three conditions is sufficient.

- *Congruence* involves the counsellor being genuine and authentic in their interactions with a client. Rogers (1979) emphasises the importance of the counsellor being aware of his or her own thoughts and feelings, and representing these accurately in his or her interactions with the client. It is hypothesised that acting in a congruent manner not only facilitates the development of trust within the relationship, but also communicates to the client that it is acceptable to be oneself (McLeod, 2009).
- *Unconditional positive regard* describes a warm and accepting approach, in which a client’s behaviour, beliefs and feelings are accepted by the counsellor in a non-judgemental manner. The counsellor does not place any conditions of worth on the client and values him or her no matter what they may be feeling or expressing. Mearns (2003) highlights that the concept of unconditional positive regard should not be perceived merely as liking a client. Liking tends to refer to valuing those components of a person which are viewed as similar or complementary to one’s own values, however, unconditional positive regard represents valuing a person for all that they are. Mearns, Thorne and McLeod (2013) theorise that being in a non-judgemental environment leads the client to feel safe enough to be honest and explore previously concealed parts of the self.
- *Empathy* is the ability to accurately understand what a client is feeling (Rogers, 1957). As the person-centred approach places the client as the ‘expert’ regarding his or her difficulties, the counsellor seeks to develop an understanding of how the client constructs their world rather than relying on their own constructions of reality (Mearns et al., 2013). In addition to developing an understanding of what it is to be the client, it is important that this understanding is reflected back to him or her in order for the client to feel truly listened to and understood. It is thought that through experiencing empathic understanding the client feels valued and begins to view themselves in a more positive light (Vanaerschot, 1993).

Since the development of the person-centred approach, many research studies have been carried out exploring the impact of the relationship between a counsellor or therapist and a client on positive outcomes, although a minority of these studies have been carried out with young people. A meta-analysis of over forty studies examining the therapeutic relationship between young people and their counsellor or therapist, reported that counsellor interpersonal skills such as warmth, empathy and genuineness were a significant predictor of positive outcomes (Karver, Handelsman, Fields & Bickman, 2006). It is important to highlight that many of the measures utilised in these studies were questionnaires, indicating that young people were reporting on pre-defined characteristics of the relationship. However, studies which have employed methods encouraging participants to share their experiences in their own words, such as the use of interviews, have also reported that young people highlight qualities akin to congruence, including authenticity (Thompson, Bender, Lantry & Flynn, 2007) and the counsellor being comfortable in their role (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Henden Sagen & Holgersen, 2011) as important. Similarly, qualities which characterise unconditional positive regard, such as acceptance and a non-judgmental approach, and empathy, such as warmth and understanding, have also been articulated as important (Binder et al., 2011; Everall & Paulson, 2002; Thompson et al., 2007).

A number of factors which have been reported as helpful by young people who have accessed SBC appear to be similar to the core conditions outlined by Rogers (1957). The most frequently cited helpful aspect of counselling, being able to talk to someone who listens and understands (Cooper, 2004, 2009; Dunne et al., 2000; Hill et al., 2011, Lynass et al., 2012), appears to reflect elements of empathy. Likewise, experiencing the counsellor as non-judgemental (Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012; McKenzie et al., 2011) seems akin to the accepting nature of unconditional positive regard. There are also comparisons which can be drawn with the limited process research that exists within the field of SBC. Prior (2013) identified a process similar to that theorised by Mearns et al. (2013) whereby service users developed feelings of trust in their counsellor, based on the counsellor's accepting and non-judgemental nature, which led the service user to feel able to open up about issues which were concerning them. Within the SBC research discussed in this review there was no explicit mention of young people valuing congruence, or genuineness, in their counsellor. It could be argued that it can be difficult for clients to detect congruence, as Rogers' defines the term, as it requires insight into the match between a counsellor's internal state and what they are expressing. However, perceptions of the counsellor as honest or authentic may be markers for congruence, as found in the psychotherapy literature (Thompson et al., 2007). It seems, therefore, that some of the key components of the person-centred approach are present in SBC however, with the exception of Prior (2013), the descriptive nature of much of the research means that there is little understanding of whether the processes suggested by this approach are present.

It is important to highlight a number of limitations to person-centred explanations of positive counselling outcomes. Lazarus (1993) challenges the assumption that the core conditions will be sufficient for all individuals and advocates a more tailored approach dependent on the characteristics of the client and how they respond to the counsellor. Some clients, for example, may seek more structure and direction than the person-centred approach advocates. From the SBC research previously reviewed it can be seen that the level of advice and guidance which young people report as helpful varies greatly (Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012). Another critic of the assumption that the core conditions are all that is required for positive change was Bordin (1979) who asserted that in addition to the emotional bond between a client and counsellor, collaboration and agreement on goals and tasks judged by the client to be meaningful and valuable is also of importance. Within the child and adolescent psychotherapy literature, it has been reported that collaborative engagement alone is significantly associated with positive outcomes (Karver et al., 2006) as well as being reported by clients to be an important factor (Binder et al., 2011; Everall & Paulson, 2002). Karver, Handelsman, Fields & Bickman (2005) postulate that collaboration and willingness to engage is likely to be dependent on the development of a strong emotional connection between the counsellor and client. This therefore may suggest that whilst the core conditions are necessary in developing a therapeutic relationship, without additional factors such as client collaboration and a tailored approach they may not be sufficient for positive change occur.

5.2 Cognitive-behavioural approach

Cognitive-behavioural approaches to counselling are grounded in the belief that the way in which an individual perceives and interprets the world has an impact on the emotions they experience and how they behave (Grazebrook & Garland, 2005). Beck (1976) theorised that psychological distress stems from negative evaluations of events, rather than the events themselves, which leads to negative emotional states such as anxiety or low mood. Positive outcomes in counselling are therefore attributed to clients acquiring skills that allow them to identify negative thoughts or attributions and develop alternative ways of thinking which, in turn, reduces the experience of negative or distressing emotions and behaviours.

Cognitive-behavioural approaches draw on a range of specific techniques and strategies to support the client in developing psychological and practical skills which they can put into practise to make positive changes. Westbrook, Kennerley & Kirk (2007) outline a number of commonly used strategies which include cognitive methods such as guided discovery, where, rather than the counsellor telling a client what to do or providing them with an answer, questions are posed to the client in order to encourage them to reflect on their current thinking styles and begin to consider different perspectives themselves. Westbrook et al. (2007) also highlight behavioural methods such as the use of homework and behavioural experiments, where clients are asked to put into practise skills that they have

developed in their sessions, for example, looking for evidence that supports or contradicts negatively held assumptions.

Meta-analyses have reported a significant decrease in levels of psychological distress following cognitive-behavioural therapy for young people experiencing clinical levels of mental health difficulties, such as anxiety (James, Soler & Weatherall, 2005) and depression (Klein, Jacobs & Reinecke, 2007). It is important to highlight that studies of this kind commonly focus on pre- and post-therapy symptoms rather than subjective reports of what the young people have found helpful. This means that it is difficult to disentangle whether it is techniques specific to the cognitive-behavioural approach or non-specific factors such as counsellor interpersonal skills which have contributed to positive outcomes.

Within the SBC research literature, half of the participants in Cooper's (2004) evaluation study identified that the types of questions that the counsellor asked, as well as the opportunity to reflect on their feelings, thoughts and behaviour, were helpful aspects of counselling. Whilst it could be argued that these are not factors which are necessarily specific to a cognitive-behavioural approach, the focus on reflective questioning and the relationship between feelings, thoughts and behaviours does fit with the principles of the approach. As there does not appear to be any reference to elements of the cognitive-behavioural approach in the existing SBC process literature, it is currently unclear to what extent techniques or strategies that counsellors may be drawing upon are contributing to positive outcomes.

5.3 Psychodynamic approach

The psychodynamic approach theorises that an individual's unconscious mind influences their thoughts and behaviour (McLeod, 2009). Freud (1922) theorised that the unconscious mind retains difficult memories and feelings which are too painful for the conscious mind to process, and that these difficulties often stem from childhood experiences. This approach perceives that a client's difficulties stem from these unresolved past experiences which influence their current behaviour through the unconscious. The psychodynamic approach to counselling would therefore reason that positive outcomes occur when the unconscious mind is brought into the client's consciousness in order to begin to resolve these difficulties (British Psychoanalytic Council, 2014).

Specific techniques which the psychodynamic approach theorises will support the client to develop an insight into, and understanding of, their unconscious mind include interpretation, where the counsellor directly provides the client with possible ways of making sense of issues they are experiencing, often by linking them to past experiences (Jacobs, 2004). When working with young people, the

psychodynamic approach also encourage the use of creative expression, such as diaries or art, to help the client to externalise their difficulties.

In comparison to person-centred and cognitive-behavioural approaches to counselling, the research evidence for psychodynamic approaches is much more limited. Midgley and Kennedy (2011) carried out a meta-analysis of thirty-four studies reporting on the outcomes of psychodynamic therapy with young people and found evidence to indicate that the approach is associated with positive treatment outcomes such as a reduction in behavioural or emotional difficulties. It is, however, important to highlight that many of the studies included in this review were not compared against a control group. This limits the extent to which positive change can be attributed to psychodynamic counselling alone. In addition, as with the evidence for cognitive-behavioural therapy, the research did not directly elicit the views of young people and subsequently it is not clear what aspects of counselling they felt contributed to positive change.

Despite school counsellors reporting that they draw upon psychodynamic approaches in their practice, there is limited evidence from the accounts of young people who have accessed SBC to reflect this. Bondi et al. (2005) highlighted that a number of young people specifically mentioned that they had found creative activities, such as drawing and painting, helpful and that these activities “helped some young people connect with a younger self” (p. 49). Aside from this finding, there does not appear to be further reflection of the psychodynamic approach in young people’s experiences of SBC. This may be due to factors such as the limited amount of in-depth qualitative research regarding young people’s experiences of SBC. However, Fonagy (2010) states that psychodynamic approaches may be more appropriate for a specific subset of clients; those who wish to address more than their presenting difficulties and explore the underlying causes. As Gibson and Cartwright’s (2014) research highlighted, young people who engage with SBC have a range of different expectations which impact on their experiences and what they find helpful. It may therefore mean that, although counsellors report using this approach, many young people seek support for their presenting difficulties, rather than an exploration of underlying causes, and in these cases counsellors would judge psychodynamic approaches to be inappropriate to draw upon.

5.4 Overview of theoretical approaches to counselling

The three theoretical approaches discussed contribute different hypotheses regarding the processes that underpin positive change as a result of engaging in counselling. It is important to highlight that although the approaches have been discussed separately, this is not to suggest that they are mutually exclusive and that, for example, the core conditions cannot be used alongside therapeutic strategies from another approach. In fact, it is this integrative approach that many counsellors report to draw upon in their practice (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). Whilst components of all three approaches can

be seen within the aspects of SBC that service users report to be helpful, it is currently unclear to what extent the processes espoused by these theories are effecting positive change.

6. Rationale for the current study (based on existing research)

An increasing number of young people in the UK are accessing SBC as a means to support, and develop, their emotional wellbeing. It seems appropriate to conclude that the consensus amongst existing research regarding outcomes of SBC provides evidence for the approach as an effective tool for supporting the positive mental health of young people in schools (e.g. Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). Although studies of this nature are useful for demonstrating the efficacy of SBC, they provide little insight into how these positive changes arise. A smaller body of research (e.g. Bondi et al., 2006; Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012) has sought to obtain more qualitative information about young people's experiences of SBC. However, these studies have been largely descriptive in nature, focusing on helpful and unhelpful aspects of counselling, and therefore have not moved towards an understanding of how SBC is leading to positive outcomes. In addition, a large proportion of these studies have utilised relatively closed measures of data collection, such as questionnaires and structured interviews. Such measures may not capture a true picture of young people's experiences, but actually reflect factors which the researchers have deemed to be important. The importance of eliciting the voice of young people, particularly as service users accessing specific school provisions, has been highlighted both in government policy (DfE & DoH, 2014) and by researchers in the field of SBC (Cooper, 2013). Therefore it is important that appropriate research measures and methods are selected that will allow young people the freedom to articulate their lived experiences of the process of SBC.

A limited number of studies have sought to delve further into young people's subjective experiences of SBC using more exploratory qualitative methods in order to provide further understanding about the processes involved in SBC. These studies have provided an insight into some of the key processes that may be at play for service users accessing SBC, for example, how they come to engage, feel able to be open with the counsellor and develop different ways of thinking about their problems (Dunne et al., 2000; Prior, 2013). The paucity of research in this area, together with the finding that young people often have different experiences of the process based on their own priorities (Gibson & Cartwright, 2014), highlights the need for further research regarding the experiences of service users. Two out of the three studies in this area (Dunne et al., 2000; Prior, 2013) also raised methodological questions regarding the most appropriate timing of interviews. It seems important to ensure that young people are able to reflect on their overall experiences soon after they finish attending SBC, in order to gather an authentic reflection of their lived experiences.

It is possible that the theoretical approaches which counsellors draw upon are able to contribute an understanding of how SBC leads to positive outcomes. The emotional connection between a counsellor and client, as well as key therapeutic strategies, appear to contribute towards positive outcomes within the psychotherapy literature. It also seems that elements of all three approaches are reflected, to different extents, within the factors that SBC service users report as helpful. However, additional research is needed in order to further explore whether processes espoused by the theoretical approaches that counsellors draw upon may contribute towards the range of positive outcomes reported in the SBC literature.

7. Research aims and questions

Whilst there have been a small number of research studies exploring the processes involved in SBC, to date, the utilisation of data from the lived experiences of young people who have engaged with SBC to construct a ‘theory’ of the processes by which it is leading to positive outcomes is a largely unexplored area. A more detailed understanding of the processes involved has important implications for developing more effective practice and ensuring that SBC provision is tailored to the needs of the young people who access the service. The current research study will therefore seek to gather rich data about young people’s lived experiences of SBC, and apply a constructivist grounded theory methodology (Charmaz, 2006) in order to construct a theoretical understanding of the processes which play a part in SBC. To the knowledge of the researcher, the use of this methodology has not yet been utilised to explore processes with this area.

The current research study therefore aims to explore the experiences and views of secondary school aged children who have engaged in SBC, with a view to constructing a substantive theory of the processes by which SBC leads to positive outcomes for many young people. In keeping with the grounded theory research methodology which this study will utilise, the research aim has been kept broad at the outset in order to provide ‘flexibility and freedom to explore the phenomenon in depth’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.37). During data collection and analysis, the research aims will become more focused as theoretical categories, and the interactions between these categories, emerge.

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**Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) Professional Training
Programme - 2015**

**Young People's Experiences of School-Based Counselling: A Constructivist
Grounded Theory Study**

Part II: Research Paper

Part II: Research Paper

8. Abstract

School-based counselling (SBC) is one of the most common therapeutic interventions received by secondary school aged pupils within the UK (Cooper, 2013). Despite this, little is known about the processes by which SBC leads to positive outcomes for many young people. This qualitative study aimed to generate a substantive theory of the processes contributing to positive outcomes, using a constructivist grounded theory (GT) methodology. Nine participants were interviewed using a broad open-ended interview schedule, and interviews were analysed using the constructivist GT analysis process outlined by Charmaz (2006). Key processes underpinning young peoples' experiences of SBC were constructed including: developing a safe space, engaging in a collaborative relationship and receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience. Key processes are considered in relation to relevant research and psychological theory and implications for school counsellors, school staff and EPs are discussed.

9. Introduction

One in ten school aged children in the United Kingdom (UK) have been found to be experiencing levels of emotional or behavioural difficulties which would meet criteria for a diagnosable mental health condition (Green, McGinnity, Meltzer, Ford & Goodman, 2005). This finding provides an impetus for ensuring that appropriate, accessible and effective mental health support is available to all young people. One such type of support is school based counselling (SBC) which, over the past decade, has become one of the most frequently accessed therapeutic interventions for secondary school aged pupils (Cooper, 2013).

9.1 School based counselling research

A number of large studies, including a meta-analysis of sixteen research studies, have reported a significant decrease in the levels of psychological distress young people report before and after engaging with SBC (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). Whilst this seems to be a robust finding in the literature, without comparing these positive changes to a control group, it cannot be discounted that the change is not attributable to SBC alone. A small number of randomised control trials (RCTs) have been carried out in order to explore this hypothesis, and a meta-analysis of the data from four of these studies has shown that young people who engaged with SBC reported significantly decreased rates of emotional difficulties, in comparison to those in a waiting list condition (Cooper, Fugard, Pybis, McArthur & Pearce, 2015). It is, however, important to highlight that this is a cumulative effect

across all four studies and that not all of these studies independently identified these significant findings. In addition, a key methodological limitation of some of the more experimental research, such as RCTs, is that it has not utilised a truly ecologically valid research design, for example, through providing participants with a set number of counselling sessions when often they feel that they have not had the opportunity to explore all of their concerns or difficulties. In order to generalise research findings to SBC service users, it is important that naturalistic research designs are utilised.

Although studies of this nature are important in establishing the effectiveness and impact of SBC, the quantitative measures that they employ provide little insight into how SBC leads to positive change. A smaller number of research studies that employ more open, qualitative measures in order to explore young people's experiences of SBC have been conducted. As service users consistently report to have found SBC 'helpful' (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011) much of this research has chosen to focus on the specific elements of the process which service users identify as helpful. Some of the key factors that have emerged from the research literature are summarised in Table 1.

Table 1: An overview of commonly reported helpful aspects of SBC

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Being able to talk to somebody who listens and understands (Cooper, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Dunne, Thompson & Leitch, 2000; Hill et al., 2011, Lynass, Pykhtina & Cooper, 2012). • Confidentiality and privacy (Cooper, 2004; Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Lynass et al., 2012). • Personal qualities of the counsellor (Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012; McKenzie, Murray, Prior & Stark, 2011). • Direct advice and therapeutic strategies (Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012).
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Whilst these studies have begun to provide more qualitative information about positive aspects of the SBC experience, they are still largely descriptive and do not elucidate any causal links between helpful factors which may provide an insight into the process. It is also important to highlight that much of the research regarding helpful factors has utilised questionnaires or structured interviews. Closed measures such as these do not allow for an exploration of the lived experiences of participants and often reflect the aspects of counselling which researchers' judge to be important, rather than the service users. It is therefore key that SBC research draws upon the use of more open, narrative approaches to data collection in order to elicit a more authentic picture of service user's experiences.

9.2 Process research in school-based counselling

Within the SBC research literature there are a small number of studies that have attempted to move beyond a description of helpful factors, towards an understanding of the processes that lead to positive outcomes. Gibson and Cartwright (2014) examined the narrative accounts of 22 young people who had engaged with SBC and identified four different counselling processes, which seemed to vary depending on the service user's expectations and goals for counselling. The findings from this study demonstrate that it is likely that not all young people will find the same aspects of counselling useful or follow the same processes towards positive outcomes.

Prior (2012) analysed the experiences of eight young people who had engaged with SBC and conceptualised a staged process of engagement, from the young person's initial recognition of needing support through to feeling able to open up to the counsellor. A key component of this process was participants' establishing whether they could trust the counsellor. Participants seemed to base this judgment on the counsellors' ability to ensure confidentiality, demonstrate acceptance and not be patronising or judgemental. Once the young person established trust in the counsellor, they then felt able to be more open about their problems. This finding provides an original insight into a key process of SBC. It also serves to highlight that constructs such as confidentiality and being able to talk, which are frequently reported as the most helpful aspects of counselling, are not single events or actions, and is important to consider the processes behind them. Even with the paucity of research in this area, it can be seen that processes which lead to positive outcomes are emerging, and it seems important that further research is carried out in order to investigate additional processes.

9.3 Theoretical approaches to counselling

Due to the small number of studies looking explicitly at processes involved in SBC, it seems appropriate to examine how theoretical approaches to counselling would posit that positive change occurs. An approach that many school-based counsellors draw upon in their practice is the person-centred approach (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). A person-centred approach theorises that there are three core conditions, namely congruence, unconditional positive regard and empathy, which, if communicated to a client, are sufficient for positive change to occur (Rogers, 1957). This approach does not perceive that any other therapeutic techniques or strategies are required, only the presence of an accepting and genuine relationship between a client and a counsellor. It is important to highlight that the person-centred approach has received criticisms for overlooking the importance of collaboration within the therapeutic relationship (Bordin, 1979) and also for offering a panacea that does not take account of individual preferences (Lazarus, 1993).

In addition to drawing upon a person-centred approach, a number of counsellors also report using specific techniques from alternative theoretical approaches, such as the cognitive-behavioural

approach (Fox & Butler, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). A cognitive-behavioural approach theorises that positive change occurs when clients become skilled in identifying negative thoughts or attributions, and are able to develop alternate ways of thinking (Beck, 1976). Consequently, this approach draws upon specific strategies such as guided discovery, in which a counsellor utilises questions to encourage reflection and the consideration of different perspectives (Westbrook, Kennerly & Kirk, 2007).

It is clear, therefore, that the theoretical approaches that counsellors draw upon hold different hypotheses regarding how counselling leads to positive therapeutic change. Whilst similarities can be drawn between elements of these approaches and some of the most commonly reported ‘helpful’ aspects of SBC, for example, feeling listened to and not being judged (Cooper, 2004; Lynass et al., 2012), additional research is required to further explore whether the processes espoused by these approaches are underpinning positive outcomes in SBC.

10. Research aim

From the research discussed, it is apparent that there is a limited understanding of the processes contributing to positive outcomes in SBC. The current research study therefore aims to explore the experiences and views of secondary school aged children who have engaged in SBC, with a view to constructing a substantive theory of the processes by which SBC leads to positive outcomes for many young people. Obtaining a more detailed understanding of the processes involved in SBC has important implications for shaping and developing services to ensure that they are tailored to the needs of the young people they are designed to support. In keeping with the GT research methodology that this study has adopted, the research aim has been kept broad at the outset in order to provide ‘flexibility and freedom to explore the phenomenon in depth’ (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p.37).

11. Methodology

11.1 Sample and recruitment

Participants were recruited from five schools within one local authority in which the SBC service had given consent to assist with recruitment. Nine female service users, aged between 13 and 18 took part in the study. As the research aim was to investigate the processes by which SBC leads to positive outcomes, a purposive sample was selected through counsellors only inviting young people who they considered to have had a positive experience of SBC to take part in the study. All participants had attended a minimum of five sessions of counselling, were either still receiving SBC or had finished at most one school term before, and were seeing one of five counsellors who worked for the service. All

five counsellors held a counselling qualification, ranging from professional diploma to postgraduate degree, and were members of a professional counselling body.

11.2 Measure

In order to gather qualitative information regarding young people's experiences, intensive interviewing was used. Charmaz (2006) states that interviews can be seen as a directed conversation, whereas an intensive interview allows a detailed exploration of an individual's experiences. The guidelines outlined by Charmaz (2006) were employed in order to construct a broad, open-ended interview schedule (Appendix I), characteristic of an intensive interview, to ensure that unanticipated stories could emerge from the participant. Due to the open and flexible nature of the interview, with specific questions only being used if participants required further prompting to discuss their experiences, it was not deemed appropriate to pilot the interview schedule. However, in keeping with a GT methodology questions were adapted throughout the research process based on the responses of previous participants.

11.3 Procedure

After ethical approval was obtained, school-based counsellors working within one local authority were provided with information about the study (Appendix II) and asked to provide consent if they were willing to assist with recruitment (Appendix III). Each counsellor provided a gatekeeper letter to the head teachers of schools where they were based (Appendix IV). It is important to highlight that gatekeepers had no knowledge of which pupils were identified by the counsellors or those who chose to participate. Counsellors were asked to provide young people who met the inclusion/exclusion criteria (see Appendix II) with a brief summary of the research study, outlining what their involvement would entail (Appendix V). If a young person was interested in participating, and was aged under 18, the counsellor provided them with a parental information sheet and consent form (Appendix VI & VII), which was returned to the counsellor in school. A convenient date and time was then arranged for the researcher to carry out the interview. All communication between the researcher and the young person occurred through the counsellor to maintain confidentiality of the young person's involvement with the counselling service. Only the participant and researcher were present during the interview, eight of which were carried out on school premises and one in a local youth centre. All interviews were audiotaped and ranged from 12 and 50 minutes in length (see Appendix VIII for details of how confidentiality and anonymity of data were ensured). Before the interview took place, the researcher obtained informed consent from the participant (Appendix IX) and ethical considerations such as confidentiality and the right to withdraw were made explicit (see Appendix I for full details of the ethical considerations discussed with participants). Participants were made aware that they would not be asked directly about the issues that had led them to seek counselling. Post

interview, participants were verbally debriefed, in addition to being provided with a written debrief form (Appendix X) and were offered the opportunity to see the school counsellor.

11.4 Ethical considerations

Ethical approval for this study was obtained from Cardiff University, School of Psychology Ethics Board. For a comprehensive overview of all ethical considerations raised by this study, and how they were addressed, see Appendix VIII.

12. Data analysis

12.1 Epistemology

The current research study adopted a social constructionist epistemology, which proposes that knowledge and understanding are constructed through peoples' experiences, and consequently, there is no single 'true' description of reality specific to a phenomenon being examined (Burr, 2003). A constructionist approach also recognises the active role that the researcher plays in constructing meaning from the data through their interaction with participants and their perspectives (Pidgeon & Henwood, 1997). It was, therefore, essential that the researcher upheld a reflexive approach to data analysis, conscious of the effect their own constructions of reality may have on the process (see 16.1 for the researcher's reflexive statement).

Consistent with a social constructionist epistemology, a qualitative research design was felt to be most appropriate as it offers the opportunity to discuss the experiences of individuals, exploring 'how' and 'why' questions, in this instance, about the process of SBC. Social constructionism lends itself to a range of different qualitative methodologies including thematic (Braun & Clarke, 2006) and narrative (Riessman, 2008) analyses. These approaches were not considered appropriate for the current research study due to the more descriptive level of analysis they offer with no specific emphasis on processes or theory development. A constructivist GT approach was felt to be more appropriate as it allows the researcher to construct a theory that is "inductively derived from the phenomenon it represents" (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 23). As the current research aim is to develop an explanatory model of how SBC helps young people, using their lived-experiences, a GT approach was deemed the most appropriate methodology.

12.2 Grounded theory analysis

In keeping with the GT approach, data collection and analysis occurred simultaneously. All interviews were transcribed shortly after completing the interview, and the process of transcribing and subsequently reading the transcripts allowed the researcher to become immersed in the data from an early stage of the process. Analysis took the form of a staged process, as outlined by Charmaz (2006),

involving initial, focused and theoretical coding, a constant comparative method and theoretical sampling. A more detailed overview of each step is provided in Table 2.

Table 2: Constructivist grounded theory analysis process, as outlined by Charmaz (2006)

Level of analysis	Description
Coding	Initial coding of each transcript took the form of categorising sections of data, such as sentences or extracts from sentences, with a label summarising the content.
	Following initial coding, focused coding was applied. At this level of analysis the most frequently occurring, or significant, codes or subcategories from the data were used to synthesise and describe larger sections of data to form categories.
	Theoretical coding was then utilised to begin to conceptualise relationships between the categories that were constructed during focused coding. Theoretical codes can include relationships such as causes, contexts or consequences, and at this stage of analysis, the researcher begins to construct the emerging theory.
Constant comparative method	A constant comparative method was employed across the three levels of coding outlined above. This involved the constant comparison of data with data (within and between interviews), data with categories, categories with categories and categories with concepts (Charmaz, 2006). As categories were constructed, the researcher was able to carry out subsequent interviews with new participants using more specific questions, in order to make further comparisons and develop the emerging theory.
Memoing (see Appendix XI for an example memo)	Writing memos are a key element of conducting a constructivist GT, particularly due to its epistemological stance that meaning is constructed (Charmaz, 2006). In writing memos, the researcher steps away from the data in order to construct and hypothesise relationships between codes and categories, which can then be used to inform subsequent interviews.
Theoretical sampling	Data collection ceased when interview data no longer offered new features of core categories or novel insights into the constructed theory, in keeping with the principle of theoretical saturation (Strauss & Corbin, 1990).

13. Results

The following section presents a GT constructed from the analysis of nine interviews. The aim of this research was to elicit a more detailed understanding of the positive experiences of young people

engaging with SBC and to construct a GT of this process. A visual representation of this process is depicted in Figure 2, followed by a detailed exploration of the theory with quotes¹ to illustrate key components. A narrative summary of the process has also been provided in Appendix XII.

13.1 Experiencing uncertainty

Prior to engaging with counselling, participants described how they experienced uncertainty regarding four key areas. Uncertainty *regarding themselves* and their current *context*, which led them to seek emotional support, and once they had decided to access SBC, uncertainty regarding *the process of SBC* and *others' constructions of SBC*.

Uncertainty regarding themselves was characterised by participants experiencing a range of negative emotions including feeling “nervous about everything”, “quite alone” and “not confident about myself”. Often these feelings were accompanied by *contextual uncertainty*, feeling that they had no one to discuss their difficulties with. For some this was a result of wanting to protect their friends or family from their difficulties:

“...sometimes you don’t want to tell your parents ‘cos you don’t want to upset them and you don’t want them to worry.”

For others it seemed to stem from a concern that others would not keep shared information confidential:

“I felt like I couldn’t talk to anyone else, ‘cos I thought they were gonna say something to someone else.”

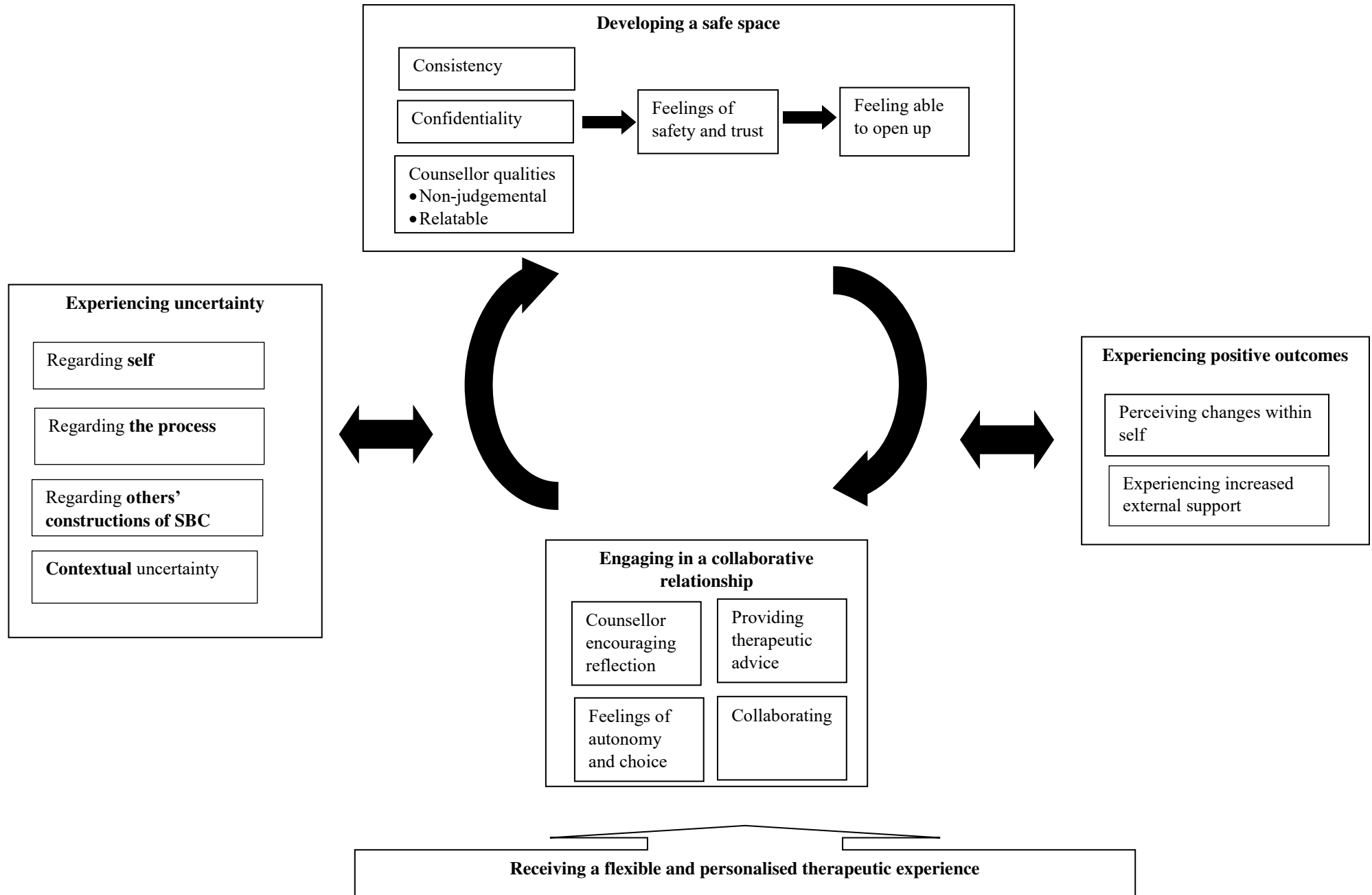
Participants also described a fear of judgement which prevented them from sharing their feelings with parents or friends:

“I felt I just couldn’t talk to them completely ‘cos I was too scared of what they’d think of me.”

Many of the participants explained that “bottling things up” often had additional negative consequences such as not attending school, self-harming or aggressive outbursts. Often it was not until others, often a member of school staff, noticed these externalised difficulties that school counselling was suggested.

¹ Words which have been added to provide the context for a quote are indicated by square brackets. Ellipsis have been used to indicate pauses in participants’ speech.

Figure 2: Constructivist grounded theory of young peoples' positive experiences of SBC



Once participants had made the decision to engage with SBC, two additional sources of uncertainty emerged. *Uncertainty regarding the process of SBC* was characterised by feelings such as scepticism: “I thought this ain’t gonna work”, anxiety: “I just didn’t know what to expect and that, kind of, made me a bit nervous”, as well as a fear of judgement: “what if I don’t get on with her, what if she hates me.”

In addition to battling with their own uncertainties, participants described how *others’ constructions of SBC* contributed to their ambivalence. This included a fear of stigma, with one participant describing how she felt other people her age might view her;

“She’s in counselling so there’s obviously something really wrong with her.”

13.2 Developing a safe space

Once participants had started to engage with SBC they described a number of aspects of counselling, namely *consistency*, *confidentiality* and specific *counsellor qualities* which seemed to be fundamental in creating *feelings of safety and trust*. This in turn led young people to describe *feeling able to open up* about previously undisclosed negative feelings and emotions.

Consistency seemed to be characterised by participants as protected time every week or two weeks to discuss their difficulties and “think things through”. Participants particularly valued the dependability of their counsellor, with one participant commenting: “never once did she cancel on me.” This seemed to have a positive impact on the development of a safe space:

“The trust that got built up was the fact that she never once let me down.”

All participants highlighted *confidentiality* as something which they were initially concerned about, however, they were reassured by the counsellor’s guarantee of privacy and being made aware of the limits to this:

“At first I was a bit wary, like, but what if she says something? But then she told me she wouldn’t and she hasn’t which... made me feel better”

“If they tell someone, they tell you who they’ll tell... you know who knows.”

Participants also valued that the counsellor was able to offer confidentiality where others could not:

“...she doesn’t have to go round and tell everyone else. I think teachers, I don’t think they mean to, but I think they gossip a bit.”

Confidentiality appeared to have a direct impact on the development of a safe space, with one participant commenting that she “felt safe seeing her and knowing everything was just kept safe.”

There were a number of *counsellor qualities* that participants mentioned in their experiences of SBC. Two, which were particularly key in developing a safe space, were the counsellor being *relatable* and *non-judgemental*. Being *relatable* seemed to be conveyed through the counsellor giving the young person an insight into their life, allowing the participant to see them as “not as much of a robot really”. With regards to being *non-judgemental*, one participant commented that:

“...if you say something, she doesn’t go ‘strange’, you know, ‘that’s weird’, she kind of goes ‘yeah’... so you don’t feel like you’re getting judged.”

Within participants’ descriptions, there seemed to be a link between these two qualities, with participants viewing their counsellor as less judgemental because they communicated to the young person that their “life wasn’t perfect”.

It can be seen from the descriptions previously given that *feelings of safety and trust* developed through not being let down, knowing that the counsellor would not disclose information about them and viewing the counsellor as accepting and authentic. Participants described how these feelings meant that they felt able to begin *opening up* about difficult emotions and feelings:

“When you get to trust you feel like you can tell them a bit more.”

“If I didn’t trust her I don’t think I’d tell her half the things that I do.”

From participants’ descriptions, developing a safe space seemed to act as a precursor to feeling able to open up about previously undisclosed difficulties. Opening up appears to be a core element of the change process, as it represents a significant contrast to the initial uncertainties participants’ held regarding talking to others about their difficulties. Participants commented that “it was the first time I’d ever let everything out” and that there was “stuff that I told her that not many people know about me.” Opening up seemed to permit a release of emotions which previously had been hidden:

“All the anger and the upset and the feelings I had, I didn’t have to hold in.”

13.3 Engaging in a collaborative relationship

Once participants felt safe with their counsellor and that they could open up to them, they began to engage in a collaborative relationship which impacted positively on the change process. Participants spoke about the *counsellor encouraging reflection* and *providing therapeutic advice*, however, they

felt that this was always done through *collaboration* and that they were able to make their own decisions about whether to act on suggestions developed in the sessions, conceptualised as feelings of *autonomy and choice*.

Participants described a number of ways in which their *counsellor encouraged reflection*. The use of questions was highlighted as a way in which counsellors supported participants to reflect on their thoughts and behaviours without directly telling them how to make positive changes:

“So like, she doesn’t tell me what to do but I kind of find a way for myself, but she just helps me... to lead it there, and like, she just goes... like, she does ask me questions.”

“...so, I’ll say something and she’ll be like, ‘how did you feel?’ and be like... she kind of makes me think about it myself, of how I should have handled it, but at the same time she is guiding me to that answer, so she knows what I need to say, but she’s trying to make me think for myself.”

Participants also valued their counsellor providing them with a different way of looking at their difficulties, both through providing their own objective view and offering how others, such as family, might view a situation;

“I found it helpful that it was said how it is and how it was seen from different people’s point of view.”

Lastly, participants described how their counsellor positively reframed situations in order to help the young person to reflect on “the good things in my life... instead of all the negative.”

A number of participants also described how their counsellor provided more direct *therapeutic advice* on how to manage their difficulties. Specific strategies that participants could utilise outside of their counselling sessions were described, such as breathing exercises and creative avenues for channelling anger, including drawing and diaries.

Whilst participants valued these more counsellor-led aspects of SBC, they also felt that they were successful because they were carried out with a sense of equality in the relationship. The following quote encompasses the feelings of being listened to and valued which contributed to participants’ experiencing a *collaborative* relationship:

“She’ll listen but then she’ll talk to me as well, but it’s not in a way that she’s telling me what to do. She is hearing what I’m saying and understanding it at the same time... she never talks at me, she talks with me, so she wants me to give an input.”

This collaboration meant that participants retained a sense of *autonomy and choice* in all that happened during their sessions. This included deciding whether to take up suggestions that the counsellor had made, as well as retaining control over what they shared during their sessions:

“You don’t have to say things you don’t want to, so you know, you’re leading it.”

Participants also highlighted the importance of being in control of, and having a choice over, what information was shared outside of the sessions, with one participant commenting that “she asks me... she doesn’t go ‘I will go talk to your teachers right now’ if you don’t want her to”.

13.4 Receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience

Throughout their descriptions of SBC, participants reported the importance of receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience. Flexibility was characterised by features such as being able to see the counsellor when they needed to, and arranging sessions around their timetable:

“It’s knowing that if something goes really bad I can just call her and like, she’ll get back to me as soon as she can and we can just talk about it.”

“She would tell me what lessons she had free and then I’d decide when was easiest for me.”

Participants perceived that counsellors were adapting their approach based on the needs of the young person they were working with. They described how counsellors had, from the outset, let them lead discussions in order to find out “what I would find useful” and “the way that suited me”. The following quote encapsulates the view that participants held regarding unhelpful approaches to counselling, where the counsellor attempts to follow a prescriptive way of working which is not tailored to the needs of the young person they are working with:

“[the counsellor is] a robot really, that’s been told what to say and learnt it all from textbooks and everything, because there is going to be questions from a child or there is going to be things which are said that isn’t in that textbook... and if a counsellor follows that textbook it’s not going to work out and you’re not gonna help any child.”

13.5 Experiencing positive outcomes

As a result of engaging with SBC, participants described a range of positive outcomes both within themselves and externally. The former encompassed changes such as increased self-acceptance: “it’s not all bad to have feelings and not all bad to cry, um, and be angry”, feeling able to be more open with others: “it’s ok for people to know if you’re upset”, a more positive mind-set: “I feel a lot more positive about things whereas before I wouldn’t have looked at things in such a different way”, and increased self-control: “that part of the brain’s working now, going ‘that’s it just stay calm’”.

Participants also described how, as a result of SBC, they were receiving increased support from teachers and parents outside of their sessions. This appeared to be facilitated by the counsellor and young person working collaboratively to make others more aware of how the participant was feeling:

“Never did they [teachers] see that vulnerable side of me ever, until she spoke to them and then it got better.”

“she tried to help talk to my Dad, telling him how I feel, ‘cos I was struggling to tell him, it was easier for me to tell her and then pass it on in a way... bit more adult for my Dad to understand as well. It’s just helping to communicate with my Dad a bit more.”

A key feature which enabled counsellors to facilitate increased support for participants from school staff was the positioning of the counsellor within the school, and therefore being able to access, and develop links with, key members of staff.

14. Discussion

The aim of this study was to construct a substantive theory of the processes by which SBC leads to positive outcomes. Participants’ descriptions of their experiences highlighted the importance of three key processes, **developing a safe space**, **engaging in a collaborative relationship** and **receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience**, which collectively contributed to positive outcomes. Within the following section, these key processes will be discussed in relation to relevant research and psychological theory. Implications and practical applications for a range of professionals including counsellors, school staff and EPs are discussed in-depth in sections 15.1 and 15.2.

14.1 Developing a safe space

For participants in the current study, feeling safe was fundamental in creating an environment in which they could open up about uncomfortable, previously undisclosed, emotional difficulties. The importance of safety and trust in deciding to make disclosures has also been highlighted in the process research carried out by Prior (2012). Contrary to the findings of some SBC research, feeling able to open up was a key product of the change process, rather than just a vehicle for subsequent positive change, for example, increasing concentration (Rupani et al., 2012). It appears that for the participants in this study, opening up was particularly poignant as the inability to do so was one of the key reasons for initially seeking emotional support.

The process identified in developing a safe space, together with the findings of Prior (2012), provides evidence for a link between two of the most commonly reported helpful aspects of SBC,

confidentiality and feeling able to open up (Cooper, 2004, 2009; Hill et al., 2011; Lynass et al., 2012). Due to the descriptive nature of much of the SBC research, this relationship has been largely unexplored. It appears that experiencing confidentiality acts as a precursor to feeling able to open up; however, this is mediated through feelings of safety and trust within the counselling relationship. Interestingly, counsellors themselves highlight safety as a key aspect that they endeavour to foster within the therapeutic relationship by providing clear boundaries, including confidentiality and limits to this (Westergaard, 2013). This indicates that there seems to be agreement between what counsellors are trying to communicate to their clients, and what clients are, in turn, experiencing.

Two of the conditions which participants highlighted as key in developing feelings of safety, appear to be similar to two of the ‘core conditions’ proposed by the person-centred approach (Rogers, 1957). It could be argued that participants’ descriptions of the counsellor as relatable and non-judgemental could be interpreted as markers for congruence and unconditional positive regard. In addition, participants who felt that they had developed a safe space went on to describe the importance of feeling listened to and understood when engaging collaboratively with their counsellor. It appears, therefore, that in the current study the triad of therapeutic conditions deemed by Rogers (1979) to be necessary and sufficient for change to occur were, in fact, judged by participants to be necessary. However, these conditions alone were not sufficient, as other processes such as collaboration were key.

14.2 Engaging in a collaborative relationship

The importance of engaging in a collaborative relationship, as identified by participants in the present study, contributes a novel insight into the processes underlying positive outcomes in SBC. Participants described the importance of counsellor-led activities being carried out within a context of collaboration, as this allowed the young person to retain a sense of autonomy. Although this process has not been previously reported within the SBC research literature, it does have parallels within the psychotherapy literature, where young people have been found to respond more positively to therapists who are perceived as allies rather than authority figures (Binder, Moltu, Hummelsund, Sagen & Holgersen, 2011; Everall & Paulson, 2002). Church (1994) highlights that when a therapist is overly directive in their advice and guidance this can be perceived by a service user as a threat to their autonomy, and subsequently decreases the likelihood of that young person accepting what the therapist is saying.

The importance of collaboration for positive outcomes seems to resonate with Bordin’s (1979) conceptualisation of the therapeutic alliance. Bordin argues that, not only is an emotional connection between a counsellor and client important, which it could be argued the development of a safe space offers, but also the presence of collaboration and agreement. When considering why collaboration and

autonomy are fundamental to the change process, self-determination theory (Ryan & Deci, 2008) suggests that when a client engages autonomously, their intrinsic motivation for change is higher. Accordingly, the descriptions of participants in the current study seem to suggest that when they were encouraged to reflect on issues themselves, rather than being told what to do, they were more likely to make changes to their thoughts or behaviour.

From the descriptive SBC literature, it is currently unclear to what extent young people find therapeutic advice and strategies useful (Cooper, 2004). In the present study, it seems that participants did find this useful when delivered within the context of collaborative relationship, and not in a prescriptive manner. Specific strategies, such as encouraging reflection, seem comparable to guided discovery techniques used in a cognitive-behavioural approach (Westbrook et al., 2007). Interestingly, participants reported that the use of these techniques helped them to consider different perspectives and reflect on their own thought processes, as espoused by the cognitive-behavioural approach.

14.3 Receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience

The final process that participants described as important in the change process was receiving a flexible and personalised therapeutic experience. This finding resonates with the process research carried out by Gibson and Cartwright (2014) in which they highlighted that young people accessing SBC have different experiences based on their own needs, preferences and expectations. It also provides evidence for the concerns of Lazarus (1993) who challenged the assumptions of the person-centred approach that the core conditions alone would be necessary and sufficient for positive change to occur for all individuals. Participants in this study were very aware of when their counsellor was tailoring their approach based on the needs of the young person, and when they were merely “following a textbook”. This finding has implications for a range of professionals, including EPs, who may draw upon manualised therapeutic interventions in their practice. Based on the experiences of the participants in the current study, young people are likely to find them unhelpful if they are delivered in a prescriptive manner, which does not account for the preferences and needs of the individual.

14.4 Overview of processes

When comparing the processes underpinning positive change in the current study with how the theoretical approaches that counsellors draw upon would explain these changes, a number of similarities emerge. As previously discussed, the ‘core conditions’ outlined by the person-centred approach (Rogers, 1957) are present throughout the process, as are specific techniques which stem from cognitive-behavioural approaches to counselling. In addition, two of the key positive outcomes which participants report, seem to reflect the goals of person-centred and cognitive-behavioural approaches to counselling, namely self-acceptance and possessing a more positive thinking style. It is important to highlight that neither of these theoretical approaches alone were sufficient for positive

change to occur. As reflected in participants' reports, flexibility and personalisation were key in ensuring that they engaged in a positive therapeutic experience.

14.5 Strengths and limitations

The current study addresses a number of limitations highlighted in the existing SBC research literature. A key strength was the use of a constructivist GT methodology, not previously utilised within SBC research, which provided a level of analysis that has helped move from a descriptive to a process based understanding of SBC. Additionally, the use of an open-ended interview schedule afforded young people the opportunity to provide rich, detailed accounts of their experiences of SBC, without being constrained by questions that may reflect the researcher's preconceptions of SBC. The current study also ensured that participants were not required to draw upon significant retrospective recall by only interviewing participants who had finished attending SBC in the past school term.

A limitation of the current study was that all participants were female, therefore, the current sample does not accurately reflect the parent population it stems from, as research has indicated that around half to a third of service users of SBC are male (Cooper, 2009; Hill et al., 2011). It may be that male service users experience different processes within SBC, and this would be an interesting direction for future research. Similarly, all participants were accessing the SBC service in one local authority, which may have led them to have more similar experiences than if participants had been recruited from a number of different services. However, with regard to both limitations, it is important to highlight that a constructivist GT seeks to develop an understanding of a phenomenon within a given context (Charmaz, 2006), which in this study was an understanding of how SBC led to positive outcomes for these nine participants. Therefore, the researcher is not seeking to generalise this theory to the experiences of all young people who engage with SBC.

14.6 Future research

Due to the limited process research regarding SBC, the present study has been largely exploratory and additional process research of this kind would contribute to a more holistic understanding of the experiences of SBC users. It would also be useful to conduct a similar study with young people who have had negative experiences, or felt that nothing changed for them, as a result of engaging with SBC. This would be particularly enlightening when compared with research on those who have experienced positive outcomes, such as the current study, in order to investigate whether an absence of key elements, for example a safe space or collaborative relationship, is a contributing factor.

Additionally, as SBC is increasingly being utilised to support children experiencing emotional difficulties in primary schools, it would be valuable to investigate whether they value similar processes.

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**Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) Professional Training
Programme - 2015**

**Young People's Experiences of School-Based Counselling: A Constructivist
Grounded Theory Study**

Part III: Reflective Summary

Part III: Reflective Summary

The following section will provide the researcher's reflective account of the research process undertaken, as well as the contribution to knowledge that this research has made. The first part of this account will discuss the positioning of the current study within the existing SBC research literature and will go on to consider the contribution to knowledge made in the fields of SBC, education and educational psychology. The second section will contain a critical account of the research process within the context of the epistemological stance that was taken by the researcher.

15. Contribution to knowledge

15.1 Contribution to knowledge within school-based counselling practice and research

In 2013, Cooper conducted a review and critical evaluation regarding the state of SBC in UK secondary schools drawing upon existing research literature. Within his review paper, Cooper highlighted a number of areas in which further research was needed, two of which have been addressed by the current study. The first area which Cooper (2013) identified was a need for further research exploring *how* SBC is leading to positive outcomes for many young people. As highlighted in the literature review of the current study, much of the existing research within this field is descriptive, and therefore does not attempt to explain the processes through which counselling is having a positive effect. The second area that Cooper identifies a need for further research is involving young people in evaluating and developing the SBC services which they access. Cooper states that it is important that service users' views are elicited, as this will play a key role in shaping and developing services to ensure that they are meeting the needs of the young people that they serve. The researcher will now address, in turn, the contribution to knowledge the current study has made in these two areas. It is, however, important to highlight that the study was small-scale in nature and that the findings are not considered to represent the experiences of all young people who have engaged with SBC.

15.1.1 How school-based counselling leads to positive outcomes

Within the psychotherapy research literature, process research has been widely used in order to develop a better understanding of the processes that contribute to therapeutic change (Greenberg, 1986). However, within the SBC literature few studies of this kind exist. The current small-scale study contributes a novel insight into the processes underpinning positive change for a sample of young people who have engaged with SBC. Being aware of these processes has important implications, such as offering the opportunity to develop more effective practice (Dunne, Thomas & Leitch, 2000). The findings from this study demonstrate that, for the young people who took part, establishing a safe and trusting relationship is a precursor to feeling able to work collaboratively with

their counsellor. Whilst it could be argued that counsellors inherently strive to build this type of relationship with their clients, this study elucidates some of the conditions which participants deemed to be necessary in order to feel safe, from the perspective of the young person. More effective practice could, perhaps, be developed if counsellors are able to ensure that they offer their clients confidentiality and consistency, whilst communicating a non-judgemental and relatable attitude. Another key process highlighted in the current study was the importance of collaboration and, as such, it may be useful for counsellors to be aware that not all young people receive direct approaches, such as specific advice or guidance, positively as they can be perceived as a threat to their autonomy.

In 2014, Hill, Roth and Cooper, on behalf of the BACP, published a competency-based framework for professionals working in a counselling capacity with young people. Whilst evidence based frameworks such as this are important for disseminating what works well for young people, it is important to consider that the participants in the current study placed a high value on receiving a flexible and tailored experience. Accordingly, it may be useful for counsellors not to rigidly adhere to a certain framework, as participants in this study highlighted that they are aware of when a counsellor appears to be “reading from a textbook” and view this as detrimental to the therapeutic relationship.

15.1.2 Involving service users in research

As highlighted by Cooper (2013), eliciting the views of young people regarding services which are provided specifically for them is crucial in ensuring that these services are fit for purpose. Within the findings of this study, there are a number of aspects of SBC which service users report to find helpful and contribute to positive outcomes. As discussed above, it may be useful for counsellors to consider these processes in their practice if they are to deliver a service which is tailored to the needs and preferences of their service users. In addition to the positive processes identified by participants, there were also areas for change that were apparent in their descriptions. One such factor was that participants felt teachers should be more aware, and have more understanding, of SBC so that they are able to offer it as a source of support to young people who are experiencing emotional difficulties. This finding has implications for counsellors and school staff, and could suggest that information sessions for staff which outline the nature of counselling and who it may be appropriate for, may have wider positive ramifications for young people.

15.2 Contribution to knowledge for educational professionals

The findings of this study not only contribute to knowledge within the field of SBC, but also have wider implications for educational professionals such as school staff and EPs. In this study, participants reported feelings of improved emotional wellbeing through being part of a personalised therapeutic relationship characterised by safety and collaboration. In order to promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing for these young people on a more systemic level, characteristics of

this relationship could be adopted into the whole school environment and ethos. EPs are well placed to support school staffs' ability to facilitate a therapeutic environment such as this, through training and consultation. In addition, it could be valuable for EPs to take a role in training pastoral support workers in the key therapeutic processes identified in the current study, in order to continue the positive outcomes that participants achieved as a result of counselling. This could also be particularly useful in situations where long-term counselling is not feasible or appropriate.

As parallels have been drawn between the processes identified by participants in the current study and those identified within the psychotherapy literature, it could be argued that these processes may not necessarily be specific to the therapeutic context of SBC. As EPs are becoming increasingly involved in delivering therapeutic interventions (Atkinson, Squires, Bragg, Wasilewski & Muscutt, 2013) it is important that they are aware of the processes which some young people deem to be important. The importance of spending time developing a safe and trusting relationship as basis for subsequent positive change has implications for EPs who often work in a more time-limited manner. However, the findings from this study indicate that, for these young people, if time is not invested into fostering conditions which they value, such as seeing the EP as non-judgemental, relatable and offering confidentiality, then therapeutic change may be unlikely to occur. In addition, as maintaining a sense of autonomy was important for the young people in this study, this may have implications for EPs working with young people who have not chosen themselves to engage with the EP but have been referred by school. In the current study, although it was often a member of school staff who suggested the young person considered SBC, young people ultimately decided for themselves whether they wanted to attend, and it was this sense of autonomy throughout the process that led them to take on board and implement suggestions and reflections from their sessions. For EPs, ensuring that a young person is able to make decisions regarding the nature of their involvement with the EP, and that they feel they are valued as an equal partner, may be crucial for achieving positive outcomes.

Lastly, a key positive outcome which participants described was experiencing increased levels of support from their school, as a result of engaging with counselling. Participants articulated that this stemmed from teachers having a better understanding of their circumstances and needs, and therefore increased empathy, as well as having a designated teacher to go and speak to about their difficulties, who was not a class teacher. Participants felt that these changes came about through the counsellor speaking directly with teaching staff. For these young people, school staff and EPs could take a more collaborative role in setting up robust pastoral care systems, involving pastoral support workers who do not occupy dual roles, and the appropriate sharing of key personal information, with the permission of pupils. It is also likely to be important that these systems are communicated clearly to young people so that they are aware of all avenues of emotional support available to them.

15.3 Dissemination of knowledge

The researcher was keen to disseminate the findings of this study to professionals who are well positioned to utilise the findings in their everyday practice with young people. Currently, the researcher has arranged to present the findings to the counselling service in which the research was undertaken. In addition, she is in contact with key academics and practitioners with the field of SBC and hopes to disseminate the findings of this study to a wider audience.

15.4 Contribution to personal knowledge

The findings from this study have also had a direct influence on the researcher's knowledge, both as an applied psychologist and as a researcher. The researcher feels that she has an increased understanding and awareness of the processes which promoted and supported emotional wellbeing for the young people in the current study, and within her applied work, is mindful of these core therapeutic conditions, such as being relatable and non-judgmental, whenever she is working with young people, not just in a therapeutic capacity. In addition, through carrying out this research, the researcher feels more confident in her ability to advise schools on appropriate therapeutic interventions and ways to foster positive mental health on a whole school level. Carrying out research in the field of emotional wellbeing and mental health has strengthened the researcher's interest in this area and intensified her intent to develop a specialist role within this field in the future.

From a research perspective, the researcher feels that she has developed her skills in carrying out qualitative research. Grounded theory was a methodology that the researcher was unfamiliar with prior to embarking on this project and she was faced with a steep learning curve over a relatively short amount of time. Consequently, the researcher feels that she has contributed to her own learning particularly her ability to interact with, and analyse large amounts of interview data. Another key skill which the researcher feels she has further developed during this process is her active listening skills. As in-depth interviews were carried out using broad open-ended questions, it was important that active listening techniques such as using prompts, paraphrasing and clarifying understanding were utilised, in order to elicit a rich, description from participants (Robertson, 2005). The researcher feels that developing her ability to actively listen has had, and will continue to have, important implications for her work as an applied psychologist consulting with schools, families and young people, as well as her skills as a researcher.

16. Critical account of research practitioner

16.1 Epistemological positioning of the research

It is important that this critical account commences with a discussion of the epistemological stance taken by the researcher as this underpins the entire research process from the methodological decisions made, to how the research was evaluated and the conclusions which were drawn.

Much of the existing SBC counselling research stems from a positivist approach to research. The epistemological stance of the positivist paradigm is that knowledge takes the form of an objective reality that can be observed and measured (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000) and therefore lends itself to research methods such as questionnaires. It could be argued that the large number of studies utilising questionnaire measures within the SBC research literature has contributed to the paucity of information regarding service users' lived experiences of SBC. The aim of the current research study was to explore young people's experiences of SBC in order to begin to develop an understanding of underlying processes contributing to positive outcomes. As the researcher sought to obtain rich, detailed experiential information, rather than measure 'fact', she adopted a social constructionist epistemology. In contrast to the epistemological view taken by a positivist stance, a social constructionist approach views that knowledge is constructed through peoples' experiences of the world, and consequently, there are many different 'realities' in relation to a specific phenomenon (Burr, 2003). The researcher felt that this epistemological stance was more in keeping with her research aims as she wanted to elicit the subjective accounts of a number of individuals.

A social constructionist approach also positions the researcher as having a key, active role in co-constructing meaning from data through her interactions with participants and the accounts that they provide (Mackenzie & Knipe, 2006). Charmaz (2006) states that it is, therefore, important that the researcher adopts a reflexive approach and is aware of the effect that her own constructions may have on the process. Ahern (1999) suggests making the researcher's own position clear, so that the reader is able to judge how the researcher's beliefs and experiences may have influenced the research process. A reflexive statement is therefore provided below, highlighting key interests and experiences relevant to the research area:

"The researcher is a female trainee educational psychologist who, prior to embarking on an educational psychology training course, spent four years working with young people with social, emotional and behavioural difficulties, largely in an assessment and research capacity. As part of her current and previous placements, the researcher has worked therapeutically with young people within a school context. This direct experience of

working therapeutically means that the researcher has personal and professional beliefs regarding factors that contribute to improved emotional wellbeing. In addition, the researcher has personal experience of engaging with counselling and therefore has her own opinions regarding the processes which were helpful and unhelpful for her personally.”

16.2 Methodological choice

The epistemological stance taken subsequently informs a researcher’s choice of methodology (Crotty, 1998). In the current study, the researcher felt that a qualitative methodology would be most appropriate as it allows for an exploration of ‘how’ and ‘why’ questions (Willig, 2008), necessary for eliciting the lived experiences of SBC service users. There are a number of qualitative methodologies that may have been appropriate for this task, however, the research aim was to move from a descriptive level of analysis towards an understanding of processes that may underpin positive SBC experiences. Given this aim, a grounded theory approach was deemed to be appropriate as this methodology is “oriented toward action and process” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, p. 38). Willig (2008) also highlights that a grounded theory approach is often appropriate when carrying out research in an area with a small evidence and theory base, as it can generate initial theories grounded within the data. As very few process research studies currently exist within the field of SBC, this provided an additional rationale for the use of grounded theory in the current study.

A number of modifications to the original grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) currently exist, each with differing perspectives on how grounded theory should be carried out and the conclusions which can be drawn from the analysis. In the current study, it was not felt to be appropriate to draw upon the approaches of Glaser (1992) or Strauss and Corbin (1990) as these methods do not fit with epistemological stance taken by the researcher. Both approaches take the view that a grounded theory will emerge from the data, inferring that there is a ‘truth’ to be discovered by the researcher (Charmaz, 2006). However, Charmaz (2006) has developed a grounded theory approach informed by social constructionism, in which the researcher constructs the grounded theory through interacting with participants and the data. This grounded theory approach was felt to be more appropriate due to its complimentary epistemological stance.

Whilst a constructivist grounded theory holds many opportunities for a researcher, such as providing insights into a research area where little is currently known, it is also important to highlight some of the limitations inherent in utilising this approach. The level of analysis required to carry out a grounded theory is lengthy and labour intensive, involving a contemporaneous process of coding, comparing and memoing, in addition to collecting data from new participants to inform and refine the grounded theory. For those new to grounded theory, such as the researcher in the current study, this

can be an overwhelming task and Annells (1996) recommends seeking a grounded theory mentor. Accordingly, the researcher in the current study sought advice from a researcher familiar with constructivist grounded theory approaches, however on reflection, it may have been useful to do this earlier in the process in order to prepare the researcher for the journey that lay ahead. A second limitation relating to the timing of the literature review is discussed in section 16.5.

16.3 Research design

16.3.1 Ethics

In the researcher's initial ethics proposal, she sought to involve participants both with and without parental consent. In the current study, participants were recruited by virtue of accessing a service which their parents may not know about, as SBC can be received without parental consent. It was judged that, for young people who had chosen not to inform their parents they were receiving SBC but were interested in participating, notifying parents of their involvement would involve breaching that young person's right to confidentiality as a user of the SBC service. The British Psychological Society (BPS) Code of Human Research Ethics (2011) states that, in regard to not obtaining parental consent, there are "...special circumstances such as where it may be important that views of such participants or findings about them should not be suppressed..." (p. 16). The researcher therefore felt it was important that the voice of this group of children was not excluded, as they may have different experiences of SBC, some of which may relate to the fact that they have not shared with their parents that they were attending SBC. Unfortunately, and perhaps understandably, the Ethics Board did not approve the initial ethics request as there were concerns regarding safeguarding and therefore the research study was amended to only include young people who gave permission for parents to be contacted. On reflection, although delays in obtaining ethical approval were costly to the researcher, she feels that it was important that this rationale was put forward to the Ethics Board as eliciting the voice of the young person was always a key aim of this study.

16.3.2 Recruitment

From the outset, the researcher was aware that recruiting participants was likely to be challenging due to the multiple gatekeepers involved in accessing this specific group of young people. The researcher approached a large number of counselling services over a period of six months before receiving a positive response from a manager of a SBC service. It is possible that the requirement of counsellors to, not only, support with recruitment but also with obtaining parental consent and practical arrangements, may have deterred them from volunteering to participate in the research study.

The researcher and counsellors worked collaboratively to select a purposive sample of young people to take part in the study. Purposive sampling describes a process by which, "the researcher actively

selects the most productive sample to answer the research question” (Marshall, 1996, p. 523). As the aim of this research study was to develop an increased understanding of processes leading to positive outcomes, it was important that only young people who had positive experiences of SBC were included. In addition, from an ethical standpoint, it was important that young people who the counsellors felt may be negatively impacted by carrying out the interview were not included within the sample. Although purposive sampling has received criticisms for being open to researcher bias (Marshall, 1996) it was felt that in the current study it was necessary in order to allow an exploration of the research question and also to protect potentially vulnerable young people.

16.3.3 Research interviews

The researcher chose to use interviews in order to elicit the experiences of young people, as this was felt to be a method that was congruent with the researcher’s belief that knowledge is constructed through an individual’s interactions with the world. An intensive interview approach was drawn upon as this allows for an in-depth exploration of an individual’s thoughts and experiences, in contrast to an interview, which is “often used to provide context to other data” (Boyce & Neale, 2006, p.3). It was also deemed important that any questions used were compatible with the epistemological stance taken. Therefore, instead of using a semi-structured interview, a broad open-ended interview schedule was constructed. This afforded participants the opportunity to express their views regarding their experiences of SBC, whilst minimising the potential bias of any researcher preconceptions.

In keeping with a grounded theory approach, the schedule was adapted following each interview to incorporate themes and theories that the researcher had constructed from the analysis of that interview (Charmaz, 2006). During the first few interviews, after coding had taken place, the researcher was unsure how to introduce new ideas into subsequent interviews, particularly as she had sought to keep her questions very open and non-directive from the outset. However, after accessing supervision and consulting appropriate literature (Charmaz, 2006), the researcher felt reassured that all interviews should begin in a broad, open manner, however, in later interviews more specific probe questions should be asked, particularly if a participant made a comment which appeared to either agree or disagree with a theme constructed from previous interviews.

In a small number of interviews, the participants were more reserved and provided short, less detailed answers. In these cases, it was useful for the researcher to have the interview schedule to refer to, as she was still able to elicit an understanding of their experience, although the picture may have been less rich than participants who spoke more freely. Overall, the researcher felt that participants were able to maturely and insightfully talk about their experiences of SBC with a great deal of self-reflection, and she felt privileged to have shared in their experiences.

The researcher was mindful of the power imbalance which can occur during an interview between an adult (the researcher) and young person (the participant). Kvale (2008) highlights that the presence of a power imbalance can impact on what a young person chooses to disclose and may lead them to provide an account which they perceive is congruent with what the researcher is seeking. In an attempt to minimise any possible imbalances of power, the researcher utilised the following guidelines set out by the National Children's Bureau (2011) for conducting research with young people:

- Create an informal environment – all interviews were carried out in the room which participants used for their SBC sessions. This meant that participants were familiar with the setting, and that the rooms were set up for one-to-one discussion, for example, two comfortable chairs rather than being seated either side of a desk. The researcher also endeavoured to create a relaxed atmosphere prior to commencing the interviewing by chatting informally about subjects that arose naturally.
- Communicate to participants that all answers are valid – prior to starting the interview, the researcher explicitly highlighted to participants that there were no 'right' or 'wrong' answers. In addition, using questions that followed on from the comments made by participants further highlighted that the researcher was particularly interested in their personal experiences.
- Clearly communicate the aims of research – before beginning the interview the researcher discussed with participants that she was seeking a more detailed understanding of SBC processes in order to help develop existing services. The researcher made it clear that the accounts which participants provided would be valuable in helping to improve services for other young people.

Whilst this is clearly not an exhaustive list of all the steps which could be taken to reduce any possible power imbalance, the researcher felt that overall, participants seemed able to provide personal accounts of their experiences which did not appear to be influenced by any specific expectations of what the researcher wanted to hear.

16.4 Data analysis

As previously highlighted, the constructivist grounded theory analysis process is both complex and extensive and as the researcher was a novice within this area it was approached with trepidation. As reflecting on each part of the analysis process would fall beyond the scope of this account, the researcher has selected a number of key reflections and decision points to discuss.

A core component of grounded theory is that data collection and analysis are carried out simultaneously, as the analysis of each interview informs the questions posed in subsequent interviews. The researcher was unfamiliar with this approach, as previous research experience had been carried out in the more traditional style of data collection preceding analysis. Following the grounded theory approach meant that time management was crucial, as the researcher was only able to complete one interview at a time and also required enough time before the next interview to carry out transcription and coding. On reflection, the researcher perceives that this may have been a useful way to work, as the methodology imposed certain timeframes and deadlines on the researcher, which ensured that hours of data which required transcription and coding did not accumulate.

A decision that the researcher made early on in the data analysis process was not to use any computer software to support with coding. Whilst the researcher had previous experience of using such software, and found it helpful in organising large amounts of data, it was felt that by reducing participants' transcripts down to a series of coded quotes, the context, and therefore the richness, of their experiences would be lost. Instead, the researcher coded by hand and utilised index cards to represent categories and themes. This meant that the researcher was able to visually represent relationships between categories and themes by physically rearranging the cards. The researcher found this process to be invaluable in helping her to move from a descriptive level of analysis towards being able to perceive the relationships between categories and themes.

Another fundamental aspect of grounded theory analysis is the process of theoretical sampling and saturation. This entails the researcher carrying out interviews with new participants, informed by the analysis of previous interviews, until the data "no longer sparks new theoretical insights, nor reveals new properties of these core theoretical categories" (Charmaz, 2006, p.113). Accordingly, after the ninth interview, the researcher judged that saturation of themes had begun to occur. In order for her to feel more confident that the theory reflected the experiences of participants, she also discussed some of the key processes from the theory with participants in the final few interviews to see if they resonated with their experiences. On reflection, the researcher did feel that eliciting the views of young people who judged their experiences of SBC to be negative, or felt that nothing had changed for them, would be useful in order to strengthen the theory, for example, was it a lack of feeling safe or autonomous in the relationship. However, the researcher would have had to seek amended ethical approval to implement these changes to the research design and time constraints would not have permitted her to do so.

16.5 Writing-up the grounded theory

Within the field of grounded theory research, the most appropriate timing for the literature review is widely debated. Glaser and Strauss (1967) state that the literature must be reviewed after the analysis

has taken place to ensure that the researcher's analysis has not been influenced by existing research findings. For the researcher in the current study, this was not possible as she needed to familiarise herself with the existing research literature in order to identify a gap in the research and to provide a clear rationale for her study. Charmaz (2006) acknowledges that the literature review is likely to be an initial part of the research process, however, warns that a review carried out before the research may turn out to be irrelevant once the analysis has been carried out, as there is no way of knowing which direction the analysis may take. It was for this reason that the researcher carried out an initial literature review prior to the analysis, which focused solely on descriptive level SBC research. Once the analysis was mostly completed, the researcher carried out a second review looking more specifically at process research in SBC and theoretical approaches to counselling. By taking this approach, the researcher felt that she was able to complete the analysis with minimal influence from existing literature regarding possible processes leading to positive outcomes in SBC. On reflection, following this format did contribute to a very 'bottom-heavy' research process which the researcher had not foreseen when embarking on this piece of research.

16.6 Evaluating the research

There has been much debate over the most appropriate way in which to evaluate qualitative research and as such, a range of criteria exist (e.g. Elliot, Fischer & Rennie, 1999; Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Mays & Pope, 2000). It was felt that it was important to consider the epistemological underpinnings of any criteria that may be used, as evaluation criteria such as generalisability and objectivity, which stem from a more positivist epistemology, would not be appropriate for the current study, given its social constructionist stance. Charmaz (2006) has proposed the use of four key criteria specifically for assessing the value and quality of a constructivist grounded theory. Each criteria will be outlined below, and the extent to which the current research study meets each criteria will be discussed:

- Credibility refers to how strong the links are between the data, and the theory constructed from that data. It also questions whether the reader has provided an adequate level of evidence in their research report to allow a reader make this judgement for themselves. Within the current study, the researcher feels that credibility is evidenced in a number of ways. Utilising a constant comparative method meant that all the data was not only compared with the rest of the data, but also compared directly with the final theory to judge whether it reflected the account given by the participant. The researcher also feels that the links which have been made between the grounded theory and existing research helps to strengthen the credibility of the findings. Finally, the researcher has presented a range of quotes within the research report to allow the reader to independently judge the strength of the link between the data and the researcher's interpretations of that data.

- Originality refers to the extent to which a grounded theory contributes to, or challenges, existing knowledge in a given area of research. Charmaz (2006) poses questions such as, do the categories provide a novel insight, and does the analysis offer a different understanding of the phenomenon under study. The current study contributes to the limited amount of process research within the field of SBC and provides a novel conceptual framework that proposes a theory of the processes by which service users' progress from feelings of uncertainty to improved emotional wellbeing.
- Resonance refers to the extent to which a grounded theory captures "the fullness of the studied experience" (Charmaz, 2006, p. 182). That is, does the analysis reflect the lived experiences of the participants in the study, and in addition, would they make sense to the participants themselves. In the current study, during the final interviews the researcher discussed some of the tentative processes within the theory with participants in order to gauge to what extent they resonated with their experiences. In addition, during all the interviews the researcher recapped on key themes or processes which participants had mentioned in order to clarify her understanding of the participants experiences.
- Usefulness refers to whether the grounded theory offers any practical applications that can be drawn upon in peoples' everyday lives. The findings of the current study identified a number of key processes that are important in supporting emotional wellbeing. The researcher perceives that all professionals working with young people can draw upon these processes in order to promote positive mental health and emotional wellbeing (for further discussion of practical applications see sections 15.1 and 15.2).

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**Doctorate in Educational Psychology (DEdPsy) Professional Training
Programme - 2015**

**Young People's Experiences of School-Based Counselling: A Constructivist
Grounded Theory Study**

Appendices

Appendix I – Interview schedule

(Influenced by Charmaz (2006) guidelines for constructing open, exploratory questions, and the interviews of Cooper (2004) with young people who had experienced SBC.)

Introduction and informed consent

- Introduce who I am and why I am doing this research
- Discuss the aims of the interview:
 - to get a more detailed understanding of how you experienced counselling
 - help me to understand how counselling helps young people like you
- Discuss practicalities of the interview:
 - last for around half an hour but will depend on how much you want to say about your counselling experience
 - not about the issues that led you to see the counsellor, but about your experience of counselling itself
 - you will be asked some questions and it is important to remember there are no right or wrong answers. It is more important that you tell me what you really think
 - do not have to answer any questions that you do not want to – just say ‘pass’ and I will not ask why
 - can leave at any time and do not need to say why
- Audiotaping:
 - as mentioned in your information sheet, the interview will be audiotaped but only I will listen to it to type up our conversation. After I have typed it up I will delete the recording
 - you can ask me to stop recording, or to destroy the tape, and don’t need to give a reason for doing so
 - if you decide you do not want your interview used, you can tell me and I won’t use it. You need to tell your counsellor before 1st January 2015 because after that all the information you and other young people have given me will be grouped together
 - the typed up copy of your interview will be kept indefinitely but it will be completely anonymous as it will not have any of your details on it
- Confidentiality and anonymity
 - some of what you say may be used in a research report but I will never use your name
 - everything that you say in interview will be treated as completely confidential:
 - won’t be told to teachers, parents or the counsellor
 - only time I might have to tell anyone is if you talked about a threat to your safety or the safety of someone else
 - if this happened we would talk about who I would have to pass this information on to
- If at any point during interview, you feel upset or uncomfortable, let me know, and we can talk about that.
- If after the interview you feel like you would like to talk to someone you can make a time to go and see counsellor.
- The fact that you have turned up now doesn’t mean you have to take part, you can still decide not to take part and leave, without giving any reason.
- Are you ok to continue?

Interview questions

NB. Use flexibly, if the participant is able to openly discuss their experiences without the use of initial questions and prompts, then use questions which follow on naturally from what they say.

- Can you tell me about your experience of counselling?
- What were the sessions like?
- What was the counsellor like?
- Was anything helpful/ unhelpful?
- How did you feel about going to counselling?
- What changes have you noticed since going to counselling?
- What did you hope to get out of counselling? And what did you get out of counselling?
- When, and how, did you know that you did not want/need anymore sessions?
- Thinking about your experience of counselling now, does anything stand out?
- Is there anything you think I should know about counselling?

Other prompts

Could you say a bit more..?

Why do you say that..?

Is that right?

Are you saying that.....?

How is that?

Why do you think that was?

When?

How?

What?

Why?

Rephrase

Summarise

Silence

Ending

Prompt – If the young person mentioned any unresolved issues from counsellor, check with the participant if they want this to be passed on to the counsellor so another appointment can be made.

How did you find the interview?

Do you have any questions?

Remind them that they can visit the counsellor if they feel that they need to.

Provide and explain the debrief form

Thank them for their participation

Appendix II - Information sheet for counsellors

Young people's experiences of school counselling

My name is Rebecca Davis and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist currently completing my doctoral training at Cardiff University. I am hoping to carry out a piece of research for my thesis investigating secondary school aged pupil's experiences of school-based counselling, in order to better understand how school counselling helps young people.

You have received this information sheet as I am hoping to find secondary school based counsellors who would be willing to assist me with my research.

Who would it involve?

Recruitment – Counsellors would be asked to mention the study and talk through an information sheet with young people fulfilling the following criteria:

Inclusion criteria

- Male or female
- Aged between 13 and 18
- Considered to have had a positive counselling experience (judged by counsellor and pre/post outcome measures)
- Completed at least two counselling sessions

Exclusion criteria

- Where the counsellor feels the young person may be negatively impacted by carrying out the interview
- Where the child has significant special educational needs, for example, a statement or EHCP

It is important that counsellors use the following 'script' when initially mentioning the project to avoid young people feeling obliged to take part due to their existing relationship with the counsellor:

"A researcher from Cardiff University is doing a piece of research about young people's experiences of school counselling. She is looking for young people to help her by carrying out a 30 to 45 minute interview in school about their experience. Would you like me to tell you a bit more about it? Remember, it's fine if you don't want to –if it

doesn't sound like something that you would be comfortable doing then that's nothing to worry about. It is also important that you are aware that at this point the researcher does not know you by name, and will not, if you are not interested."

If a young person expresses an interest in participating (after the counsellor has explained the information sheet), if they are aged under 18, the counsellor will ask whether they consent to their parent being contacted in order to obtain parental consent. If a young person consents, the counsellor will provide the young person with a parental information sheet and consent form. If the young person does not consent, they will not be eligible to take part in the study.

School liaison – Counsellors would be asked to notify the researcher when a young person has expressed an interest and when the parental consent form is received back into school. Counsellors will also be asked to support the researcher in finding an appropriate time and place to meet with the young person to carry out the interview. It is important that this is done through the counsellor to maintain confidentiality regarding the young person's involvement with the counselling service.

Feedback – If a young person raises any issues which they feel were not resolved during their counselling sessions they will be asked whether they would like this information to be passed back to their counsellor.

Debrief – Counsellors will be asked to be available for young people to come and speak with them if they have any concerns or worries arising from the interview.

Findings – Counsellors will be provided with a summary of the findings which they can share with participants if they request to see a copy.

Further information

This project has been checked and approved by Cardiff University School of Psychology Ethics Board.

If you have any further questions regarding this research study you can contact the researcher, Rebecca Davis, Trainee Educational Psychologist on 02920 875393 or her supervisor, Dr Nicola Canale on 02920 875474

Appendix III – Consent form for counsellors

Please read the following statements and circle your answer

I have read the information sheet regarding this study	Yes	No
I understand what this study is about	Yes	No
I agree to assist with the recruitment for this study through identifying young people who meet the inclusion/exclusion criteria and providing them with information about the study	Yes	No
I agree to contact the researcher when a young person has expressed an interest in finding out more about the study and when a parental consent form has been returned.	Yes	No
I agree to liaise with the researcher to identify suitable times and rooms for the interviews to take place	Yes	No
I am happy to receive feedback from the researcher if any participants wish information to be passed on regarding unresolved issues relating to their counselling sessions	Yes	No
I am happy to arrange a time to meet with a young person if they wish to speak with me after the interview has been carried out	Yes	No
I agree to provide information regarding the findings of the research to participants if they contact me	Yes	No
I have asked all the questions I want	Yes	No
I am happy to take part	Yes	No

I, _____ (NAME) consent to participate in this study conducted by Rebecca Davis, Trainee Educational Psychologist, School of Psychology, Cardiff University with the supervision of Dr Nicola Canale.

Signed:

Date:

Contact details:

Rebecca Davis
Trainee Educational Psychologist
Email: DavisRS6@cardiff.ac.uk
Tel: 07843672974

Dr Nicola Canale
Professional Tutor – Doctorate in Educational Psychology
Email: CanaleN@cardiff.ac.uk
Tel: 02920 875474

Appendix IV - Gatekeeper letter for head teachers

Address

Date

Dear Head Teacher of X School

My name is Rebecca Davis and I am a Trainee Educational Psychologist currently completing my doctoral training at Cardiff University. I am hoping to carry out a piece of research for my thesis investigating secondary school aged pupil's experiences of school-based counselling, in order to better understand how school counselling helps young people. I am writing to you as your school counsellor XXX has expressed an interest in assisting with the recruitment of suitable young people, and I would like to obtain your consent to carry out this research within your school.

The research project will require the participation of pupils aged between 13 and 18, who have recently attended the school counselling service. Suitable young people will be identified, and provided with information about the study, by the school counsellor during a counselling session.

As young people are able to access the counselling service without informing their parents, all participants (aged under 18) will be asked whether they consent to their parents being contacted in order to obtain parental consent. If the young person gives their consent, a parent information sheet and consent form will be sent out to parents. If a young person does not wish to inform their parents, they will not be eligible to take part in the study. It is important to note that young people will not be asked to discuss the issues which led them to seek counselling, just their experiences of the process, and as such the likelihood of the young person finding the interview distressing is minimal.

The research itself would involve pupils participating in a thirty to forty-five minute audiotaped interview at the school, at a convenient time arranged through the school counsellor. The information gathered would be held confidentially and anonymised once the audiotapes had been transcribed and destroyed (April 2015). A report summarising the key findings of the research will be provided to the local authority, however no data will be traceable back to any individual participants.

My research supervisor at Cardiff University is Dr Nicola Canale, Professional Tutor on the Doctorate of Educational Psychology, and her contact details can be found below.

I would be grateful if you could contact your school counsellor or myself, to let one of us know if you are willing for me to carry out this research within your school.

Many thanks in advance for your consideration of this project.

.

Regards,

Rebecca Davis
Trainee Educational Psychologist
School of Psychology
Cardiff University
Tel: 02920 875393
Email: DavisRS6@cardiff.ac.uk

Dr. Nicola Canale
Professional Tutor and Supervisor
School of Psychology
Cardiff University
Tel: 02920 875474
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Appendix V – Information sheet for young people

You are being asked if you would like to take part in a research project to look at:

Young people's experiences of school counselling

Before you decide if you want to take part, it's important to understand why this research is being carried out and what it will involve for you. So please think about this information sheet carefully.

Why is this research being carried out?

Research has shown that school counselling helps a lot of young people – it can make them feel more confident and less angry.

But less is known about how school counselling leads to these positive changes. The researchers aim is to carry out a study which contributes towards a more detailed understanding of young people's experiences of counselling and how it helps them.

Why have I been invited to take part?

You are being invited to take part because you are aged between 13 and 18, and have recently completed a number of sessions with the school counselling service.

Do I have to take part?

No. It is entirely up to you. If you would like to take part, tell your counsellor and they will arrange a time for you to meet with the researcher to carry out the interview. If you do decide to take part you are still free to stop taking part at any time without giving a reason. Even after you have taken part you can ask for your information to be deleted (up until the end of March 2015).

Will my parents be told?

If you are under the age of 18 the researcher will also need to ask your parents whether they are happy for you to take part in this study. If you do not wish for your parents to be made aware then unfortunately you will not be able to take part in this study. Also, it is important that you understand that if your parent is not happy for you to take part then you will not be able to participate.

What will happen to me if I take part?

You will be invited to meet with the researcher at a suitable time during your school day. The researcher won't ask you about any of the things you spoke to the

counsellor about, just your experience of counselling. The discussion will last for around 30 to 45 minutes, depending on how much you have to say about your experience. So that the researcher can type up the conversation, the discussion will be audiotaped.

What will happen to the information I give?

The information that you and other young people provide will be used to write a report about young people's experiences of counselling for the researcher's University course. Your name will not be written anywhere in the research report, and there will be no way that anyone can trace the information back to you. The local authority will receive a copy of this information and if you would like to see a copy of the findings you can ask your counsellor.

Is there anything to be worried about if I take part?

There should not be anything for you to worry about if you take part. The interviews will be kept confidential, which means that what you say during the interview will not be told to your teachers, parents, the counsellor or anyone else*. In the unlikely chance that you find the interview upsetting you will be able to speak to your school counsellor.

*Limits of anonymity/confidentiality

It is important that you are aware that the only time details of the discussion would need to be told to someone else would be if you talked about:

- a) An actual or possible threat to your safety
- b) An actual or possible threat to the safety of someone else

If this happened, the researcher would talk to you about who the information would be passed on to.

Benefits of taking part

The information that you provide may help us to understand more about how school based counselling helps young people and what they find particularly helpful.

Thank you for reading. Please let your counsellor know if you have any further questions or are interested in taking part.

Appendix VI – Information sheet for parents

Your child has expressed an interest in taking part in a research project looking at:

Young people's experiences of school counselling

Before you decide whether you are happy for your child to take part, it is important for you to understand why this research is being carried out and what it will involve for your child.

Why is this research being carried out?

Research has shown that school counselling helps a lot of young people – it can make them feel more confident and less angry.

But less is known about how school counselling leads to these positive changes. The researchers aim is to carry out a study which contributes towards a more detailed understanding of young people's experiences of counselling and how it helps them.

Why has my child been invited to take part?

Your child is being invited to take part because he/she is aged between 13 and 17, and has recently completed a number of sessions with the school counselling service.

Does my child have to take part?

No. It is entirely up to you and your child. If you are both happy for them to take part, please return the attached consent form to the school in the enclosed envelope. The school counsellor will then arrange a time for your child to meet with the researcher to find out more about the study and carry out the interview. If your child does take part they are free to stop taking part at any time without giving a reason. Even after they have taken part you or your child can ask for their information to be deleted (up until March 2015).

What will happen if my child takes part?

Your child will be invited to meet with the researcher at a suitable time during your school day. The researcher won't ask your child about any of the things they spoke to the counsellor about, just their experience of counselling. The discussion will last for around 30 to 45 minutes, depending on how much your child has to

say about their experience. So that the researcher can type up the conversation, the discussion will be audiotaped.

What will happen to the information my child gives?

The information that your child and other young people provide will be used to write a report about young people's experiences of counselling for the researcher's University course. Your child's name will not be written anywhere in the research report, and there will be no way that anyone can trace the information back to your child. The local authority will receive a copy of this information and if you would like to see a copy of the findings your child can ask their school counsellor.

Is there anything to be worried about if my child takes part?

There should not be anything for you or your child to worry about if they take part. The interviews will be kept confidential, which means that what your child says during the interview will not be told to you (their parents), teachers, the counsellor or anyone else*. In the unlikely chance that your child finds the interview upsetting they will be able to speak to the school counsellor.

*Limits of anonymity/confidentiality

It is important that you and your child are aware that the only time details of the discussion would need to be told to someone else would be if your child talked about:

- a) An actual or possible threat to their safety
- b) An actual or possible threat to the safety of someone else

If this happened, the researcher would talk to your child about who the information would be passed on to.

Benefits of taking part

The information that your child provides may help us to understand more about how school based counselling helps young people and what they find particularly helpful.

Thank you for reading. If you are happy for your child to take part please return the attached consent form to the school in the enclosed envelope.

Appendix VII – Consent form for parents

Please read the following statements and circle your answer

I have read the information sheet regarding this study	Yes	No
I understand what this study is about	Yes	No
I understand that my child's participation in this study will involve a thirty to forty-five minute interview about their experiences of school counselling	Yes	No
I understand that the interview will be audiotaped	Yes	No
I understand that anything my child says will be treated confidentially, unless the researcher is concerned about harm to my child or another person (in which case my child will be told who the information is being passed on to)	Yes	No
I understand that my child's participation is voluntary and that they are able to stop taking part at any time without giving a reason	Yes	No
I understand that the information my child provides will be kept confidentially, and only the researcher can trace it back to them	Yes	No
I understand that by the 31 st March 2015 my child's information will be made completely anonymous so that no one can trace it back to them	Yes	No
I understand that my child can ask for their information to be deleted up until the 31 st March 2015	Yes	No
I understand the anonymous information will be kept for up to 4 years before being deleted	Yes	No
I understand that a summary of the findings of this research will be provided to the local authority, however, no information can be traced back to my child.	Yes	No
I am happy for my child to take part in this research study	Yes	No

I have read and understood the above statements and am happy for my child to take part in this study

Parent/Carer Name: _____

Parent/Carer Signature: _____

Child's name: _____

Relationship to child: _____

Date: _____

Contact details

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Appendix VIII - Ethical considerations

Informed consent and debrief

Informed consent was gathered from all young people prior to beginning the interview where they were reminded of the aims of the study, confidentiality (including limits to) and their right to withdraw, up until their data has been anonymised. Informed consent was also obtained from all parents where participants were aged under 18.

Debrief information was provided to the young people after the interview, and also explained verbally. Young people were informed that the results of the study will be used as part of the researcher's University thesis, and also disseminated to the local authority in the form of a summary report which will not be traceable back to any individual participants. The young people were informed that they could request a copy of a leaflet summarising the main findings through their school counsellor in May 2015.

Confidentiality during interviews

Participants were made aware from the outset that the information discussed during the interviews would be kept confidential, unless the participant disclosed any information that causes the researcher to feel that the young person was in danger or was acting in a manner that could cause danger to others.

Confidentiality and anonymity of data

The researcher ensured that all participants understood that the information provided would be held confidentially, such that only the researcher could trace this information back to the individuals. They were also made aware that all data would be anonymised by 31st March 2015 and after this point no-one could trace the information back to individuals. Participants were made aware that they could withdraw their information up until the point it was anonymised (at the end of March). The information was required to be held confidentially, as the small sample size could allow recognition of individuals from the audiotapes. All transcripts were stored securely and only the researcher had access to them.

Impact of participation

In order to minimise the possible detrimental impact of participation on young people, it was made clear that the interview would not focus on the specific issues that had led them to seek counselling, rather their general experiences of the process. Young people were also made aware that they could seek additional support from the counsellor should they become distressed as a result of participation. All counsellors consented to be available should a participant wish to speak with them.

Appendix IX – Consent form for young people

Please read the statements and circle your answer

I have read the information sheet regarding this study	Yes	No
Someone has explained this study to me	Yes	No
I understand what this study is about	Yes	No
I understand that my participation in this study will involve a thirty to forty-five minute interview about my experiences of school counselling	Yes	No
I understand that the interview will be audiotaped	Yes	No
I understand that anything I say will be treated confidentially, unless the researcher is concerned about harm to myself or another person (in which case I will be told who the information is being passed on to)	Yes	No
I understand that my participation is voluntary and it is OK to stop taking part at any time without giving a reason	Yes	No
I understand that the information I give will be kept confidentially, and only the researcher can trace it back to me	Yes	No
I understand that by the end of March 2015 my information will be made completely anonymous so that no one can trace it back to me	Yes	No
I understand that I can ask for my information to be deleted up until the end of March 2015	Yes	No
I understand the anonymous information will be kept for up to 4 years before being deleted	Yes	No
I understand that a summary of the findings of this research will be provided to the local authority, however, no information can be traced back to me. I understand that if I want to see a copy of the findings I can ask my school counsellor.	Yes	No
I have asked all the questions I want	Yes	No
I am happy to take part	Yes	No

I have read and understood the above statements and am happy to take part in this study

Name: _____

Signature: _____

Date: _____

Appendix X – Debrief form for young people

Young people’s experiences of school counselling

Thank you for taking part in this research study.

The aims of this research were to find out about secondary school aged pupil’s experiences of school counselling, in order to investigate **how** counselling helps young people. Interviews were used as they are a good way of finding out about experiences because they allow you to talk about your thoughts and feelings in your own way. This gives the researcher a really good insight into your experience of counselling. Your interview, along with the interviews of other young people who have had school counselling, will be compared to look for similarities between what you said. These similarities will help the researcher to build up a ‘theory’ of how counselling helps young people.

All the information you provided during the interview will be held confidentially, which means that only the researcher can trace this information back to you. The information will be anonymised by the 31st March 2015 and after this point no one will be able to trace the information back to you (not even the researcher). If you decide that you want to withdraw your information from the study then this can be arranged by asking your counsellor to let me know before 31st March 2015.

Later this year, a summary of the key findings of this study will be provided to the local authority, however no information that you gave will be traceable back to you. If you would like a summary of the findings, you can ask your counsellor for a copy.

If you think of any questions that you would like answered after I have gone or if you are worried about anything after the interview, you can speak to your school counsellor.

Thank you again.

Rebecca Davis

Researcher

Appendix XI - Example memo

Themes and ideas generated from this interview

- Participant put a great deal of emphasis on the importance of confidentiality and privacy (specifically others knowing that she attends counselling and the physical aspects of the room which support privacy) – confidentiality continues to stand out as a key aspect of the process.
- She frequently referred to being able to think more positively/make more positive evaluations of events outside of her counselling sessions – resonates with a cognitive-behavioural approach. The researcher is interested in the extent to which counsellors might draw on these approaches.
- Seems to be themes of equality and collaboration running through her descriptions – she commented that she would not have taken on-board suggestions if the counsellor had been direct. Sense of equality is important.
- She used the word control frequently – it seemed to refer to have a choice over what to disclose, whether to attend and who to tell (akin to autonomy which has been described in previous interviews)
- Again, links between confidentiality and trust are appearing (participant commented that she would not come to counselling if she did not trust her counsellor – obviously a key component for engagement)
- Valuing outside perspective
- Wider implications – she felt that teachers should be more aware and counselling should be offered more universally.
- Uncertainty early on seemed to be driven by a fear of being judged by the counsellor (non-judgemental approach continuing to be highlighted by participants).

Key categories

- Control
- Confidentiality
- Equality
- Increased ability to think in a positive manner (impacted by counsellor offering positive reframes)
- Trust

Ideas to think about in future interviews

- Autonomy/ control/ empowerment
- Influence of specific therapeutic approaches? Are other participants reporting changes to their thinking style?
- Further links between confidentiality and trust
- Sense of equality in the relationship and how this is fostered

Appendix XII – Narrative summary of the grounded theory

Participants described how **‘experiencing uncertainty’** regarding themselves and their current context led them to seek out emotional support, whilst also experiencing uncertainty about the process of SBC and others’ constructions of SBC once this decision had been made. Once participants started to engage with SBC they described the importance of **‘developing a safe space’** in which they moved from feelings of uncertainty, towards feeling able to be open and honest with their counsellor. A key process which participants articulated was the counsellor establishing conditions which fostered feelings of safety and trust and subsequently allowed the young person to feel comfortable to share, often previously undisclosed, feelings and emotions. The development of this secure, trusting relationship appeared to be a facilitator for **‘engaging in a collaborative relationship’**, where participants felt that their counsellor encouraged reflection and offered suggestions whilst they maintained a sense of autonomy. Participants described this sense of autonomy and collaboration as important in ensuring that they took ownership of making changes, for example, in how they think or behave. Throughout the whole process, **‘receiving flexible and personalised therapeutic experience’** was of key importance to the participants and highlighted the significance of tailoring the process to suit the needs and preferences of the individual. Finally, participants described **‘experiencing positive outcomes’** as a result of engaging with SBC, including perceived changes in themselves and increased feelings of support from teachers and family, facilitated by the counsellor. It is important to highlight that this theory is not composed of discrete processes and that participants moved between feeling uncertain and feeling safe, particularly early on in the process. Likewise, throughout their experiences, participants reported the impact of being part of a safe therapeutic relationship on being able to engage collaboratively and vice versa.