

From trainee to trainer

Jasmine Childs-Fegredo, a counselling psychologist, on her journey. Who would she become?



I embarked on my professional counselling doctorate bright eyed and bushy tailed, with a passionate ambition to learn and develop. I set up my placements, engaged in the weekly lectures, attended supervision, found a personal therapist and began to write my research proposal and other assignments, whilst continuing work in my office role three days a week. Then around four months into the course I, along with a lot of my peers, seemed to take a nose dive into the more anxious side of the human psyche.

This manifested in various forms for each student; from the fear of failure to feelings of anger or disappointment. Questions began to surface – what does training to become a psychologist really mean? Will I ever ‘arrive’? Arrive where, exactly? I questioned the emotional process of my training. What was really happening, and who would I become?

The transference-countertransference dynamic

The counselling psychology doctorate requires trainees to be in their own personal therapy, which means that past material – in the forms of memories, projections, and emotions to name a few – is surfacing all the time. This ‘unconscious’ material can lead to ‘transference’, projections towards the university and the course or the tutors, who could become ‘bad parents’. In line with Winnicott, the purpose of the training could be seen to move trainees from viewing external others as ‘good’ or ‘bad’, to ‘good enough’.

Whilst some of the tensions that were experienced on the course are part of the emotional process of the trainee, others can stem from what could be due to difficulties in achieving parity across professional doctorate training programmes. Doctorates are required to meet standards and policies outlined by

the Graduate Schools’ Code of Practice for Research Degrees at each university, which were originally set up to support MPhils and PhDs. Our training adds layers of complexity, through the addition of lectures, assignments and clinical practice in order to comply with British Psychological Society competencies. This leaves programme leaders on psychology doctoral training courses with an onerous task, and this tension can filter through to trainees. Messages can feel mixed, deadlines don’t necessarily ‘make sense’. I would hope that more can be done to iron out these tensions, so that trainees are supported within a system which is inherently feasible in terms of completion rates.

Working with severe mental health issues

Research reveals that stress and burnout are commonplace within the counselling and psychotherapy profession. Literature which demonstrates emotions as ‘contagious’ could be one way to make sense of this. As a friend once put it, ‘you are never around people who feel better than you, always worse!’

I had a placement in a complex trauma service in the NHS in my final year, which was a fantastic opportunity to train at the more severe end of the psychiatric spectrum. The notion of secondary traumatic stress came to mind as I was there; thankfully I learnt to put in good boundaries and hold the projections of complex clients. The training experience and expertise offered in clinical supervision was faultless, but I still wondered about the emotional process of working with severe and enduring mental health.

I began to see that I was not the only one considering the emotional ramifications of such work.

As the years rolled on, trainees dropped out. Of the 19 that started the course, only eight of us made it straight through to the final year and only one completed on time. By the time I handed in my thesis and completed my viva, I felt like I had been through a trainwreck.

What to do next? I needed to consider all the possible avenues. I realised that the training had enabled me to become positively engaged in research as well as practice.

Onto the academic ladder

Following training, many Counselling Psychologists go on to apply for Band 7 Counselling/Clinical Psychologist roles in the NHS, be that on a full-time or part-time basis. Others set up private practice or go back into roles they previously had in other sectors, whilst some decide to take a welcome break and travel or put more time into family life. Many trainees are less aware that the research component of the doctorate provides them with credentials to apply for post-doctoral roles in other universities.

Research-based roles exist in psychology departments across the country and internationally, on a part-time and full-time basis. I was fortunate to find an opportunity at the University of Cambridge, working in a full-time research role as a qualitative researcher in child and adolescent mental health. This happened to match previous experience I had of working in schools prior to the doctorate, whilst bringing in my qualitative research expertise and psychological mindset. I moved to Cambridge and immersed myself in the project and university life, gaining experience of delivering research within a world-class institution.

The world of research is not the dull, tweed covered place that it is stereotypically thought to be. There is energy and vibrancy, with working days in the lab, office, or out in the field. Post-docs present their research at conferences and engage in other academic interests. In Cambridge, the 'Post-Doc Society' proved to be an invaluable resource – for post-docs and run by post-docs. Here I met early and mid-career researchers from all over the world and a variety of disciplines, from cancer research and Artificial Intelligence to zoology and philosophy.

I was part of an experimental lab group in the Department of Psychiatry, where I was one of the few qualitative researchers. I presented my thesis – an Interpretative Phenomenological analysis of Dialectical Behaviour Therapy – and the head of the group commented, 'I think we are going from hard end quantitative to hard end qualitative!' Indeed it was. Whilst hugely out of my comfort zone, I was able to give quantitative neuroscientists, statisticians, and psychiatry researchers a glimpse into the world of applying qualitative research to mental health, whilst

gaining insight into their fields.

The post-doctoral phase is a tricky one, though, fraught with insecurities in the world of fixed-term research contracts. Whilst many go on to other post-doc roles, the next step is thought to be gaining a lectureship in one's area of expertise, and working the way up the academic ladder. For psychologists, this can involve clinical work balanced with research. I am delighted to have been offered a new role as a lecturer in Counselling Psychology at the University of Roehampton, which I have experienced as 'coming home' to a profession I value and know well.

In my experience of being a lone Counselling Psychologist in an institution like Cambridge, and one of a few qualitative researchers in my experimental group, I realised that I had become passionate about collaborations in research across psychological and psychiatric disciplines. The humanistic and philosophical approach to mental health could make a good contribution to experimental psychology, if only we were all open to interdisciplinary discussions and working together to enhance research outputs.

Reflecting back

I wrote an email to a former lecturer of mine recently, asking for some reading and letting him know of the news of my shift into academia. 'Don't laugh', I said. I was reflecting back on my journey from what I was – a student full of disdain for the shortcomings of academia – to the fully-fledged academic I had become.

I now recognise that the trainees I support are going through the same complex process of training. I seek to find the place where I can be close enough to them to

understand their position, whilst also working as a professional within the boundaries of an academic programme. I see that more can be done to enhance the feasibility and depth of training, but that part of the journey is simply to go through it, warts and all. This is a process that hopefully serves to produce robust qualified psychologists.

My passion for research has become clear. The vision for me is that in the next 20 years, high quality and impactful research is published by Counselling Psychologists working in collaboration with others in all areas of psychology and other disciplines, perhaps most notably with neuroscience. Our profession has so much to offer, especially in an ever-changing and complex society, where we offer a deep and rich understanding of the experiences of all individuals, and their associated distress. Taking it upon ourselves to talk to others outside the field and coming together to promote similar moral purposes from different paradigms could serve to enhance not only the research field, but wellbeing in society as a whole.

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