

## **Existential therapy trainees' perspectives on the challenges of their initial training.**

### **Author information**

#### **Author names**

Dr Vicki Smith

[v.smith@hud.ac.uk](mailto:v.smith@hud.ac.uk)

Dr Vicki Smith is a Senior Lecturer in Psychology and Counselling at the University of Huddersfield, UK, and is co-author of *Key Concepts in Counselling and Psychotherapy* (2012). She is a qualified integrative counsellor, and her main area of interest is the relationship between the theory and practice of counselling and psychotherapy, in particular existential therapy.

Professor Viv Burr

[v.burr@hud.ac.uk](mailto:v.burr@hud.ac.uk)

Professor Viv Burr is Professor of Critical Psychology at the University of Huddersfield, and is author of *Social Constructionism* (2015, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition). She has a special interest in the use of innovative qualitative methods and is currently researching the personal meanings of outdoor spaces during lockdown (with Nigel King).

Dr Dawn Leeming

[d.leeming@hud.ac.uk](mailto:d.leeming@hud.ac.uk)

Dr Dawn Leeming is Director of Graduate Education in the School of Human and Health Sciences at the University of Huddersfield. She is a psychologist whose areas of research include self-conscious emotion, recovery from mental health difficulties, and wellbeing in early motherhood.

#### **Author contributions**

The study conception and design were developed by Vicki Smith and the data collection and analysis were undertaken by Vicki Smith in consultation with the other authors. The draft manuscript was written by Vicki Smith and all authors commented on a number of versions of it. All authors read and approved the final manuscript.

### **Compliance with ethical standards**

The study has been approved by the University of Huddersfield Research Ethics Committee and has therefore been performed in accordance with the ethical standards laid down in the 1964 Declaration of Helsinki and its later amendments.

### **Consent to participate and publish**

All participants provided informed consent prior to participation including consent to publish.

### **Disclosure statement**

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

### **ORCID**

Vicki Smith 0000-0002-3398-5956

Viv Burr 0000-0002-3784-1271

Dawn Leeming 0000-0001-6096-2904

## **Abstract**

There is limited research on existential therapy training from the student perspective. Six current or recent existential therapy trainees were interviewed about their experiences of training. Thematic analysis highlighted the personal challenge and dramatic personal transformation often involved. The findings underscore the importance of appropriate support for trainees confronting the challenges of therapy training and the importance of rigorous recruitment and selection processes.

**Key words:** existential, training, therapy, challenging, resilience

## **Introduction**

Existential therapy training is offered at only a few institutions in the UK. However, Correia, Cooper and Bendondini (2015) identified 136 existential therapy institutions in 43 countries across all continents with 54.4% of those being in Europe, 28.7% in Latin America and 11% in North America. Although not as commonly practised as approaches such as cognitive-behavioural or psychodynamic therapy, existential therapy is often integrated with other approaches (Harris, 2013; Lewis, 2014;) where its value as a way of making sense of client issues from a philosophical perspective is highlighted.

This paper will provide an insight into the individual perspectives and lived experiences of trainees during existential therapy training. The data was collected as part of a larger study on the relationship between theory and practice in existential therapy where issues around the challenges of training emerged as important. We discuss only the data relevant to training

here, as this is an under-researched area in the existential therapy field as well as in psychotherapy in general.

### **The nature of existential therapy training**

Just as there is no single approach to existential therapy (Cooper, 2016), there is no single model of existential training or supervision (du Plock, 2007). However, as Langdridge (2013, p.1) notes, all approaches are concerned with “the application of ideas from existential and hermeneutic philosophy to counselling and psychotherapy within a phenomenological methodological framework.” An aim of training is therefore that trainees are able to explore how existential themes such as mortality, freedom and choice, meaning making and isolation (Yalom, 1980) impact on clients’ perceptions of themselves, others and the world, and how clients might be supported in developing more helpful ways of narrating their life stories. Courses facilitate this via in-depth engagement with ideas from existential philosophy aimed at challenging trainees’ assumptions and beliefs and developing an existential world view. However, while the courses offer the traditional psychotherapy training mixture of theoretical input, supervised client work and personal development, the importance of developing an existential way-of-being, and trainees being able to recognise and challenge their own assumptions about the world, means that there tends to be a central focus on the personal development of trainees. The strong focus on the trainees developing an existential attitude or world view (Spinelli, 2015) enables them to embody an existential way of working. As embodiment assumes that our bodies are who we are rather than being separate from our minds and our consciousness (Adams, 2013), a therapist who embodies their approach reduces the need for ongoing decision-making as to how to respond to their clients, as much of the work is relational and intuitive.

Very little has been written about existential therapy training and much of that literature focuses on existential supervision as a central part of the training process. Perhaps unsurprisingly, bearing in mind how existential therapists embody an existential way-of-being, what has been written tends to focus on the relational processes and values which best facilitate effective training and supervisory processes rather than focusing directly on how trainees can be supported in drawing on existential philosophy in their practice. In this way there is consistency between the core philosophical assumptions of the therapy and the training practices. However, in line with existential authors acknowledging that individuals interpret theory differently (Spinelli, 2007), what has been written on existential supervision tends to present the author's idiosyncratic perspective on it (du Plock, 2007; du Plock, 2009; van Deurzen & Young, 2009; Krug & Schneider, 2016), so that they have a different emphasis depending on the individual's existential priorities and particular perspective on what constitutes valuable training and supervision. There is little prior research to guide the development of a comprehensive training model although it is possible to identify some common themes which draw on existential ideas. These include: the concentration on the relationship as a source of learning; on learning through experience and the importance of un-knowing exploration (Cooper, 2016). This focus on personal development and learning through relationship with others and from a place of un-knowing mitigates against having training courses which are theory-focused or skills-based.

Although there is very little empirical research on existential training, or the supervision within it, du Plock (2009), in a qualitative study, identified four main themes which were: "attending to the 'Being' of the supervisee;" "support and maintenance of a philosophical attitude;" "promotion of a relational perspective" and the "supervisor as a colleague or

mentor” (du Plock, 2009, p. 299). Du Plock (2009) seems to be emphasising tentative use of theory in the training with an emphasis on exploration rather than employing theory to provide answers in the way that, arguably, some other forms of therapy might. The supervisees valued a focus on ways of being and relational elements of the supervision including the egalitarian nature of the supervisory relationship.

So, the focus in existential therapy training and supervision appears to be on the personal development of the trainees in terms of developing an existential attitude and a relational way of working. There seems, understandably, to be less emphasis on learning how to use philosophy in practice in a more cognitive sense as the aim is to support trainees in learning to embody the philosophy in their practice.

### **Trainees’ perspectives on psychotherapy training**

According to Pascual-Leone, Wolfe & O’Connor (2012) there is limited literature relating to how psychotherapy trainees from any perspective experience and respond to their training. Indeed, much of the research which has been undertaken focuses on training efficacy rather than trainees’ subjective experiences of their training courses (Paine, Bell, Sandage, Rupert, , Bronstein, , O’Rourke, , Stavros,, Moon,, & Kehoe, , 2019; Tanner, Gray,, & Haaga, 2012). Yet therapy training places significant demands on trainees particularly because the training focuses on much more than the use of theory and techniques. Most training courses regard personal development as a central element of trainees’ professional development (Geller, Norcross and Orlinsky, 2005) so as to produce therapists who can form effective therapeutic relationships as well as pay heed to their own impact on that relationship with a view to minimising negative effects. Arguably, the need for personal development, indeed personal transformation, is particularly foregrounded in approaches such as existential therapy where

the focus is on developing a particular way of being or world view (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). Therefore, it would seem important to know how the training impacts the trainees who are required to undergo such a personally challenging process since this has implications for training effectiveness.

Despite little research to date on trainees' experiences of existential therapy training, there has been some research on other forms of therapy training which indicates that training can be challenging emotionally, giving rise to feelings of shame, abandonment and exposure (Smith & Burr, 2021) and the need for a safe, supportive space (Dryden, 2002; Smith, 2011). While all therapy training is likely to have a profound effect on trainees, existential therapy training places significant emphasis on self-transformation through experiential engagement with the philosophical literature. Training can include reflecting on and challenging one's personal world view, biases and cultural / historical context (Krug and Schneider, 2016) on the basis that a lack of awareness of these aspects of the self are likely to have a negative impact on client work. Such intense focus on the self is likely to be a challenging process. It therefore seems important to explore existential therapy trainees' perspectives on their training to provide insight into not only how the training impacts them but also how trainees may be best supported.

## **Method**

### ***Sampling and recruitment***

The inclusion criteria for participants were that they were either on a training course or had completed their training less than two years ago. The lead author arranged to visit relevant training institutions where permission was granted to speak to any interested course

members. In addition, details of the research project were posted onto the Facebook sites of existential therapy organisations.

### ***Participants***

Six existential therapy trainees / recently qualified therapists were interviewed about their experiences of training. All had attended courses which train existential therapists allied to the British School of Existential Analysis. The study was approved by the School of Human and Health Sciences Research Ethics Panel of the University of Huddersfield. All participants were given pseudonyms. As the target population was very small and the data collected after six interviews was judged to be appropriate and very rich, a decision was made, in line with Nelson's (2017) recommendations, that six participants was sufficient to provide a sufficiently in-depth understanding of the themes.

### ***Participant details***

Four trainees and two recently qualified therapists agreed to participate. One trainee was Asian, the remainder were White British / European. Four were female and two were male. Despite attempts to recruit a diverse sample, these demographics are in keeping with the preponderance of white women amongst existential therapists (Brown, 2017; UKCP, 2017). Their professional training was at either Advanced Diploma, Masters or Doctoral level. Prior to starting on an existential training course, all had undertaken training in other approaches, chiefly psychodynamic, humanistic and integrative orientations, with some also having some exposure to cognitive-behavioural therapy. All were undertaking, or had recently undertaken, a significant period of training in existential therapy.

### ***Data collection***



This study used a qualitative approach to explore the subjective perspectives and experiences of the participants. This methodology was chosen as the aim was to elucidate individual meaning-making (Braun and Clarke, 2013). Semi-structured interviews were chosen to facilitate a flexible exploration of participants' thoughts and ideas while retaining sufficient focus on the subject being explored. They are likely to lead to a "more textured set of accounts" than a more structured approach (Berg and Lune, 2012, p.114).

The interviews were undertaken online via video or audio conferencing and were audio recorded with the participants' permission. Questions focused on experiences and content of training, the challenges of working existentially and perceptions of what differentiates existential therapy from other approaches. No specific questions around the challenges of their training course were posed, although participants were free to focus on this if they chose to.

### ***Data analysis***

Braun and Clarke's (2006) method of thematic data analysis was chosen because it is an approach which is both flexible and accessible but also rigorous and it is regarded as a foundational method for qualitative analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The interviews were transcribed and coded by the first author, then arranged into themes and sub-themes in discussion with the second and third authors. What is presented here is the trainee perspective on one of the sub-themes -*Relishing the challenge* - from the broader study. Sub-themes include: *the extremity of the challenge; the value of the struggle; and the need for resilience.*

### **Findings**

It is important to note that all findings relate specifically to participants from the British School of Existential Analysis, so may not apply to those from other Schools.

### ***Relishing the challenge***

Despite the expectation that some trainees would find training challenging, the extent to which training was experienced as an extremely demanding and sometimes anxiety-provoking process was apparent throughout all the interviews and was a recurrent theme across the trainees' accounts. This challenge was, however, welcomed, indeed relished, by most participants. Some of the reasons given for the extent of the challenge included the fact that existential therapy training places great emphasis on experiential methods of learning and that it challenges one's underlying perspectives on the self, others, social / cultural norms and the dominant therapeutic ideology. Although the process is extremely demanding, the participants emphasised the positive outcomes of these challenges in terms of personal growth and insight both for themselves and for clients. Trainees highlighted the fact that the training demands that one has the courage and resilience to face reality head on as it encourages them to engage in deep and challenging philosophical enquiry. There were also some references to intense struggles leading to strong negative affect. The extremity and impact of the challenge was a particularly notable feature, as was the fact that the challenges were usually, although not always, seen to be extremely valuable. The three sub-themes of '*Relishing the challenge*' are presented below.

#### *(1) The extremity of the challenge*

The extremity of the challenge was regarded as both intellectual and emotional in nature. It was seen to involve in-depth questioning of one's assumptions and beliefs as well as placing significant responsibility on the trainees to find their own ways of dealing with the challenges

and uncertainties inherent in the courses. As a result, the training was, at times, intense and emotionally draining. One trainee, Will, termed the approach ‘provocative:’

*...the kind of provocations of you know, why do you think that, .....where does this come from? ... right, make a list.... of the sort of clients you wouldn't feel comfortable working with. So, everybody kind of quite happy, oh, you know, paedophiles, wife beaters, blah, blah, blah, very easy things came trotting out and then we were basically asked well why? You know, what is it about that, that makes you not want to do that? And when we sat then and kind of talked about why we'd written these things down and started to question them a bit more, that was then well that's Existentialism, ...it was in kind of that, the kind of challenge of it, that I kind of grew into it first, I think.*

Here Will alludes to the types of interventions from trainers which challenged his way of thinking about the world. He began to realise that the task set was going to require far more in-depth consideration than he first thought. The use of the word ‘provocations’ implies that he experienced an emotional as well as a cognitive response and the degree of questioning seems to be intense and ongoing almost like a barrage of questions which force him to face up to and challenge his entire world view. During the exercise, he seemed to arrive at a realisation that this degree of questioning and challenging of one’s initial responses is what existentialism is all about. It was also what ‘drew him in.’

Another trainee stated that no one tells you the right way to do things so “*it's up to you, have, you have to be responsible for finding your way through this course*” (Harry). He indicated that some trainees complained that the course was not looking after them, or as he put it “not

parenting them.” So, the perceived lack of guidance was experienced differently by different trainees, with Harry coping well with it from the outset but others, at least according to this participant, struggling and feeling angry and unsupported. A lack of parenting also implies a perceived lack of a safe, supportive environment.

Some trainees found the process emotionally draining:

*Yeah, well the training was really, really hard, erm, and exhausting, emotionally... you'd get to the end of term, and you'd think like, you know, why do I feel so drained, like what is it? ... it's like oh, I don't actually know what it is we've done in the term that should make me feel almost like I'm having some sort of like, you know, I'm close to collapse at the end of each term, like how come, what is it we've done that's so intense? (Emma).*

Some of the language used by Emma emphasises the extremity of the challenge experienced – ‘exhausting,’ ‘drained,’ ‘close to collapse’ and ‘intense.’

Trainees frequently alluded to the way that the challenging nature of the training had a profound emotional impact on them. Some of the feelings experienced were ‘positive’ ones- for example one trainee described the early stages of her training as “amazing”- but all experienced anxiety and uncertainty at times and attributed this partly to the experiential nature of existential training. When discussing her experience of the training one trainee stated:

*It was like a stirring up, that's the, it was quite challenging, it was a constant stirring up, erm, .....there was a difference in style from my previous trainings or any other trainings I'd had (Sally).*

Her reference to being ‘stirred up’ suggests a powerful emotional impact. It is notable that she experienced existential training as ‘different’ to other previous training courses, with the implication being it stirred her up to a greater degree. She goes on to describe how the tutors placed the responsibility for managing the process of discussions onto the trainees which she saw as encouraging personal insight even though she felt extremely anxious at times.

Emma described an experiential exercise designed to develop the ability to sit with silence which she really struggled with and which she felt contributed to her feeling so emotionally exhausted. She also indicated that because of her personal struggles with some of the experiential work she almost left the course finding it “really, really, really hard, awful.” She stated:

*I remember thinking I’m going to have to leave the course because I can’t do that [the exercise] it’s too hard, I can’t keep going back to do that (Emma).*

Although she was the only student to express this degree of struggle with aspects of the course, the majority referred to the emotional strain they encountered.

## *(2) The value of the struggle*

Most of the participants regarded their perception that existential therapy was more challenging than other therapeutic approaches as being part of its appeal and value. One trainee highlighted the greater focus of existential than other training courses on ongoing self-challenge and honesty:

*I think at the heart of it [the existential approach] is a constant questioning of what am I doing and why am I doing it. So, all the way along, we're being asked to open up those questions and to really look at that and I don't think any other approach kind of does it, I think, with that much honesty that's required (Gillie).*

Here a clear distinction is drawn between the existential approach and other orientations which she had encountered previously. This extract emphasises the extremely close examination of one's motives and actions that existential therapy training demands, suggesting that the approach expects the kind of valuable in-depth exploration of self that no other approach does to the same extent. There is perhaps also a suggestion that this approach is, for her, not only different but better. Such a notion was more strongly implied on various other occasions despite some trainees emphasising that they saw value in all approaches. The expression of “*unconditional regard and being with people through their pain*” as demonstrated by the person-centred approach was contrasted with “*stepping up a gear or two*” when engaging in existential therapy: “*Erm, so it's not just accepting, it's being challenging, it's being real.*” (Harry). This participant indicates his valuing of the heightened challenge in existential therapy which enables clients to get to heart of their issues.

One of the trainees compared the rigor of her existential training to other training experiences:

*Yeah, yeah, they're so rigorous! They are so rigorous. I think everyone I've ever spoken to who has done the training would say exactly the same, you know, there ain't no hiding place! Not at all and I have to say, a criticism of my former training*

*[is that], even though I actually hold it in quite high respect, so yeah, I think in theory, you could have come out having learnt the moves a lot and gone away, and I think you can get through BACP accreditation learning the moves and say the right things and having the right language (Sally).*

This idea of rigor and the lack of a place to hide are highlighted by this trainee as positive features. She emphasizes how the extreme challenge results in there being fewer opportunities to ‘get away with things’ in this approach than another training route.

It is notable that participants were not asked to compare the existential approach with other approaches although the majority did so. The comparison invariably favoured the former approach and often implied a critique of other approaches as being in some way more superficial or less rigorous. There was an implied undercurrent from most trainees that they saw existential therapy training as being more effective than other types of training.

Most trainees saw the challenges of the training in a positive light, as a route to personal and professional growth and development resulting in greater confidence. Emma stated:

*the idea that oh yeah, it [the training] trains you to be more confident in who you are, so you can then be a therapist, .... It's like I don't feel, in a way, like I have to hold really hard and fast to things, in a way, because I know that, you know....I embody those ways of being and you know, nobody can take them away from me.*

Here it is not the accumulation of skills or techniques that are of value but a process of challenging self-development, to the point of feeling she embodies the qualities of an effective and confident therapist.

*(3) The need for resilience.*

A central tenet of existential therapy is the need for practitioners and clients to be willing and able, at least to some extent, to develop courage and resilience in the face of life's difficulties (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011). There is an assumption that life's challenges need to be faced up to and addressed if trainees are to move forward in their personal development. One of the trainees discussed what she saw as this existential mindset and preference for confronting reality:

*If a meteorite was going to fall erm, next week, would you want to know? And everybody on the course said yes, we'd want to know, ... and I thought that's it, that's it, it's about do you want the reality or fantasy? (Sally).*

Most participants alluded to the need to be robust as a trainee to successfully manage the training process as well as working effectively with clients:

*I think that's one of the most valuable things, how better to learn about how you are inter-subjectively, which is, I think, ethically what you've got to do because you are with your client. Then to explore that with your colleagues and you know, there's a certain amount of robustness needed there (Gillie).*



Again, the value and challenge of the training input seem to go hand in hand, but, in addition, emotional resilience is seen as a necessary quality to ‘survive’ the training. The main aspects of the training which seemed to require resilience were dealing with the uncertainty of the process of learning about the approach and coping with the depth of the self-scrutiny. The overall message appeared to be that trainees need to be emotionally robust to withstand the immense challenges involved in existential training and to get through the course.

Most participants seemed to feel they had sufficient courage and resilience to cope with the inherent demands of the approach, but for a few the strain proved overwhelming at times. One trainee referred to some of his peers who found the initial stages of the training extremely difficult as they felt unsupported and lost:

*So other people on the course are complaining often that ..[the institution] isn't looking after them..... We're doing a psychodynamic module at the moment, so there's a lot of talk about [the institution] as a bad object and us putting our negative experiences on them for not parenting us, (Harry).*

As mentioned earlier one of the participants almost left the course as a result of some of the experiential work she was required to undergo and at times trainees did not feel sufficiently resilient and as a result experienced periods of anxiety and disorientation. Gillie mentioned a fellow trainee with whom she did not feel able to be sufficiently honest in a supervision group:

*I know my intentions weren't to attack her and ...we were holding back from saying things because she was incredibly fragile, which impacted on the rest of the group's*

*kind of, we were all in a very different place where we were wanting to be kind of quite rigorous and open and honest and yet not doing that with her because she wasn't really there and that was what actually what we were saying, you know, so I feel like I'm really holding back because I'm worried about you.*

So, it appears there were some trainees who were regarded by others as too fragile to cope with the demands of the training. Certainly, this participant took some responsibility upon herself to protect her fellow trainee from potential harm when it could be argued that this was not her responsibility. It is notable that participants rarely mention feeling safe (there is only one mention of this in relation to a supervisor) and there is a sense that those without sufficient resilience could flounder on a course of this type.

## **Discussion**

The findings highlighted trainees' accounts of the extremity of the challenge of the training both positive and negative; the value of the challenges faced in terms of personal development and transformation and therapeutic effectiveness; the need for courage and resilience in the face of these challenges and the perception of problems for those lacking in the necessary resilience.

Trainees made frequent reference to the powerful and wide-ranging emotions evoked during their training. The training was regarded as intense and there was a great deal of emphasis placed on challenging and developing the self, including in relation to the existential 'givens' of existence. Positive emotions such as amazement were experienced but so were a range of negative feelings. Certainly, therapy training is generally regarded as a challenging

experience. For example, Grover (2014) describes the psychotherapy element embedded in a postgraduate clinical psychology degree in India as a training journey involving ‘struggle’ together with an early fear of failure which gradually gives way to feeling more comfortable with this, as well as struggling with clients’ difficult emotions to feeling more confident in handling them.

However, this research indicates a much more intense and personal challenge than that indicated in much of the literature. Most participants regarded their existential training course as particularly demanding with some drawing a clear distinction between the present degree of challenge and that of other training they had undertaken. Arguably, it may be that the nature of existential therapy training places greater demands on trainees than some other training orientations such that greater attention may need to be given to creating a sufficiently safe environment in which trainees can optimally flourish. Certainly, existential therapy is seen by many authors as well as practitioners as being an extremely challenging approach (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011) which is sometimes attributed to its roots in philosophical enquiry. Participants alluded to the focus on experiential work to help them get more in touch with their authentic selves and to challenge any deep-seated assumptions of which they may be unaware or as Eik (2014, p314) puts it: “to overcome my existential fears in living.” The notion of confronting one’s greatest fears around issues such as mortality, the limitations of existence and essential aloneness (Yalom, 1980) are central to the existential view of existence and as such are likely to be experienced as extremely difficult and uncomfortable at times.

However, authors of some other approaches also regard their therapeutic perspectives as being particularly challenging, which may indicate a tendency to foreground the challenges

of one's own chosen orientation. For example, person-centred practitioners emphasise the demands of their training with Mearns and Thorne (1997, p. x) referring to the "greater intensity of training" than most other counselling approaches because of the need to meet such "daunting personal development objectives" and "the depth of self-awareness required of the person-centred practitioner and the far-reaching challenges offered by the approach." Psychoanalytic therapists often regard their approach as having challenging aims and as addressing complex issues using "intricate and sometimes elusive conceptualisations" (Leiper and Maltby, 2008, p.14). However, as this study focuses only on existential therapy training it is not within its scope to compare the levels of intensity involved in different training routes. The important point here is that participants, all of whom had experienced other forms of therapy training, regarded their existential therapy training as particularly demanding for the reasons outlined above.

Although the challenges faced in the training were at times regarded as extreme, all participants saw these as being of great value in promoting their development as therapists. They seemed to equate professional development with personal development and to accept the idea that therapists cannot effectively help others without first facing difficult issues themselves. This relates to existential ideas about the importance of the therapist having engaged in work around facing their own struggles in living (van Deurzen & Adams, 2011).

In addition, there was a clear implication from some participants that the degree of challenge faced and overcome meant that existential training offered a superior form of training experience which resulted in greater personal transformation than they had previously encountered in other forms of training. Although trainees were at times eager to stress that they were not indicating that existential therapy was 'better' than other approaches, some of

their comments did hint at a belief in its elevated status due to focusing on the essential and hence most challenging elements of human existence and, because of this, resulting in a particularly profound personal transformation. This is, though, a contentious finding, which may also indicate a tendency to elevate one's chosen orientation above others which one has decided not to pursue.

Participants frequently referred to the need for courage and resilience in the face of extreme challenge. The nature of the training process, which involved a great deal of experiential work, forced them to question and confront their deepest existential fears and could at times be almost overwhelming. While most participants reported having sufficient resilience to cope with the extreme challenge, some found the experience almost unbearable at times and also referred to peers they thought had found the training too difficult or had felt angry at the lack of support and direction. Of course, there may be different perspectives on whether the nature and level of support and direction is appropriate, and the views of these peers are unknown. However, it is worth noting that Smith and Burr's (2021) study of personal development groups in gestalt therapy training demonstrated that experiencing sufficient support and guidance from the facilitator could be a crucial factor in participants being able to tolerate challenging feelings. Moreover, Orlinsky and Ronnestad (2005) indicate that if trainees see themselves as 'failing' early in the training they can start to question their professional competence and Szymanska (2002) highlights the fact that, although it is very common to experience some self-doubt during the training process, too much of it can affect a trainee's progress. To maximise the effectiveness of existential therapy training and minimise the risks of any damaging impact there seems to be a need to ensure that it is effectively facilitated so that trainees feel sufficiently safe to take risks which are an essential part of personal and professional development.

## **Conclusions and implications**

This research has provided an insight into an under-researched area by highlighting how existential therapy trainees from the British School value the extreme challenges offered by their training courses. In addition, it has foregrounded issues which have implications for this type of therapy training and perhaps for other training orientations both within and outside the UK. It underscores the importance of providing appropriate support for trainees, particularly at the most challenging points in the course, while ensuring training is sufficiently rigorous and challenging. Some trainers in existential therapy may argue that there is no escaping the fact that truly facing up to oneself and the existential ‘givens’ of existence is extremely difficult and has to be ‘gone through.’ There is of course a balance to be struck between providing a sufficiently supportive environment and over-protecting trainees from the essential existential struggle which leads to the personal insight and growth required to become an effective existential practitioner.

Another implication which may be pertinent for training courses to reflect upon is the degree to which the particular personal challenges inherent in (existential) therapy training are emphasised at the point of recruitment and selection, for example on training course websites as well as at the interview stage. The importance of identifying qualities such as resilience and courage in prospective trainees at this early stage is paramount, as is forewarning of the likely personal challenges. In addition, input to help trainees strengthen their resilience may be of value.

Future research could focus on exploring trainees' and trainers' perspectives on how to most effectively enable trainees to engage in the extreme challenges of existential therapy training while ensuring that any potentially damaging negative emotions are minimised and effectively managed.

## References

Adams, M. (2013). *A Concise Introduction to Existential Counselling*. London: Sage.

Berg, B.L. and Lune, H. (2012). *Qualitative Research Methods for the Social Sciences*. (8<sup>th</sup> ed.). Boston: Pearson.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3 (2). pp.77-101.

Braun, V. and Clarke, V. (2013). *Successful qualitative research: A practical guide for beginners*. London: SAGE.

Brown, S. (2017). Is counselling women's work? *Therapy Today*, 28(2), 6–9.

Cooper, M. (2016). *Existential therapies* (Second ed.). London: Sage.

Correia, E. A., Cooper, M., & Berdondini, L. (2015). Existential psychotherapy: An international survey of the key authors and texts influencing practice. *Journal of Contemporary Psychotherapy*, 45(1), 3-10. doi:10.1007/s10879-014-9275-y Accessed on 27/1/20)

Dryden (2002). *Handbook of individual therapy* (4th ed.). London: SAGE.

du Plock, S. (2007). A relational approach to supervision: some reflections on supervision from an existential-phenomenological perspective. *Existential Analysis*, 18(1), 31-38.

du Plock, S. (2009). An existential-phenomenological enquiry into the meaning of clinical supervision: what do we mean when we talk about existential-phenomenological supervision? *Existential Analysis*, 20 (2), 299-318.

Eik, C. (2014) Beginning the journey of informal counselling from a theistic existential approach: A personal perspective from a Catholic Christian. *Existential Analysis* 25.2, pp. 313-320.

Geller, J.D., Norcross, J.C. and Orlinsky, D.E. (2005). *The psychotherapist's own psychotherapy: patient and clinician perspectives*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Grover, N. (2014). An experiential account of the journey of psychotherapy training in India. *Psychol Stud* 60 (1), pp.114-118.

Harris, W. (2013). Mindfulness-Based Existential Therapy: Connecting Mindfulness and Existential Therapy. *Journal of Creativity in Mental Health*, 8 (4), 349-362.

Krug, O.T. and Schneider, K. J. (2016). *Supervision Essentials for Existential-Humanistic Therapy*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Langdrige, D. (2013). *Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy*. London: Sage.

Leiper, R. and Maltby, M. (2008). *SAGE therapeutic change series: The psychodynamic approach to therapeutic change* London: SAGE Publications.



Lewis, A. M. (2014). Terror management theory applied clinically: Implications for existential-integrative psychotherapy. *Death Studies*, 38(6), 412-417.

doi:10.1080/07481187.2012.753557. (Accessed on 20/1/20)

Mearns, D. and Thorne, B. (1997). *Person-centred counselling training*. London: SAGE.

Nelson, J. (2017) Using conceptual depth criteria: addressing the challenge of reaching saturation in qualitative research. *Qualitative Review*, 17(5), 554-570.

doi:10.1177/1468794116679873 (Accessed on 15/10/19)

O'Reilly, M., and Parker, N. (2012). Unsatisfactory Saturation': A critical exploration of the notion of saturated sample sizes in qualitative research. *Qualitative Research*.

doi:10.1177/1468794112446106. Accessed on 11/11/19)

Orlinsky, D.E. and Ronnestad, M.H. (2005). *How psychotherapists develop: A study of therapeutic work and professional growth*. Washington DC; American Psychological Association.

Paine, D. R., Bell, C. A., Sandage, S. J., Rupert, D., Bronstein, M., O'Rourke, C. G., Stavros, G. S., Moon, S. H., & Kehoe, L. E. (2019). Trainee psychotherapy effectiveness at a psychodynamic training clinic: A practice-based study. *Psychoanalytic Psychotherapy*, 33(1), 20-33. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02668734.2019.1582084>. (Accessed on 16/9/19)

Pascual-Leone, A., Wolfe, B. J. and O'Connor, D. (2012). The reported impact of psychotherapy training: Undergraduate disclosures after a course in experiential psychotherapy. *Person-Centered and Experiential Psychotherapies*. 11, (2), pp. 152-168.

Smith, V. (2011). 'It's the relationship that matters': a qualitative analysis of the role of the student/tutor relationship in counselling training' *Counselling Psychology Quarterly*, 24 (3), pp. 233-246.

Smith, C. and Burr, V. (2021). Retrospective accounts of emotional experiences during personal development groups in qualified counsellors and psychotherapists. *Counselling and Psychotherapy Research*, 2022 (22) pp. 238–249. <https://doi.org/10.1002/capr.12419>.  
(Accessed on 18/1/21)

Spinelli, E. (2007). *Practising existential psychotherapy: The relational world*. London: Sage publications.

Spinelli, E. (2015). On Existential Supervision. *Existential Analysis*, 26 (1), 168-178.

Spinelli, E. & Marshall, S. (2001). *Embodied theories*. Continuum. Stets, J. E. & Burke, P.J. (2000). Identity theory and social identity theory. *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 63(3), 224-237. doi:10.2307/2695870 (Accessed on 2/12/19)

Szymanska, K. (2002). Expectations and the reality of training. In R. Bor and S. Palmer (eds.). *A beginner's guide to training in counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage.

UK Council for Psychotherapy. (2017). UKCP Standards of Education and Training. <https://www.psychotherapy.org.uk/newsets2017>.

Van-Deurzen, E. (2002). *Existential Counselling and Psychotherapy in Practice*. London: Sage.

Van-Deurzen, E. and Adams, M. (2011) *Skills in existential counselling and psychotherapy*. London: Sage publications.

Van Deurzen, E. and Young, S. (2009) *Existential Perspectives on Supervision: Widening the Horizon of Psychotherapy and Counselling*. Basingstoke: Palgrave McMillan.

Yalom, I. D. (1980). *Existential psychotherapy*. New York: Basic Books.