

Enhancing the students' general therapeutic skills: evaluating students' experience at a practical training course in clinical psychology at MA level to optimize the course and inform further development of a new professional training course at BA level

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Background

Psychology students at the University of Copenhagen attend a mandatory course in clinical psychology-practical training. The course is worth 5 ECTS, is placed in the first semester of the MA education and consist of classroom teaching in groups of a maximum of 25 students. The practical classes involve short lectures that provide an advanced introduction to specific therapeutic perspectives and methods, as well as analyses and discussion of specific client cases managed as far as possible by the students. Students are expected to take part in class discussions and, where it is called for, peer supervision, presentations, etc.

The practical training courses cover different psychotherapeutic approaches, and nine different courses are offered in the fall semester 2023, including courses in cognitive behavioral therapy, dialectic behavioral therapy, metacognitive therapy, existential therapy to name a few. The courses differ in their formats. In many of them two students hold a role of a student therapist and conduct therapy with real life clients, while the remaining students provide peer supervision to student therapists, showcase therapeutic techniques via roleplays, conduct student presentations on selected themes, or write reflective papers based on specific clinical cases, or issues. In one of the current courses, all students are assigned to be therapists, and in another, none of the students conduct therapy, and instead, all students watch videos with recorded therapeutic sessions conducted by experienced psychologists. The course runs as a series of 14 classes of 3 hours duration.

A common theme in student evaluations of the MA practical training course in clinical psychology program, particularly coming from the students not assigned to hold a therapist role (most of the students), is a wish for more group work or more practical exercises that could help them practice their therapeutic skills. In contrast, students often voice feeling anxious and vulnerable while practicing specific therapeutic techniques, role plays or presenting in front of others. One could argue that the underlying problem could lie in insufficient exposure to practical psychological tasks earlier on in their psychology education, as well as deficiencies in knowledge, skills and competencies related to general therapeutic skills.

In the fall 2020 the bachelor education at the Department of Psychology went through a revision process. Identified problems in previous BA clinical program included an overlap between the lectures and exams at BA and MA level, as well as purely theoretical nature of BA education, with insufficient emphasis on issues related to law and ethics in psychological practice, and on training basic practical psychological skills.

The working group responsible for the BA clinical program revision, which I was a member of, suggested an introduction of three new courses in clinical program in BA education. One of the new courses is a trans cluster professional training program, that has been introduced for the first time in the fall semester 2023. The new professional training course requires further development and scaling.

Higher education encompasses many activities that may have the potential to be co-created with students. Co-creation of values and further course development in higher education can be achieved by eliciting student feedback with questionnaires or surveys (Dollinger et al., 2018).

Aim of the current project

The current study used a mixed method survey design with involvement of a convenient sample of 42 MA students currently attending practical training course in clinical psychology. The aim of this study was twofold:

- To assess the student's perception of how well their previous education at BA level prepared them for the MA level practical course in clinical psychology, and to use the students' responses to inform further development of course format and curriculum content of the newly developed professional skills training course on the BA level.
- To assess the students' opinions of how the format of the currently versatile practical training courses in clinical psychology could be optimized to best support the development of students' general therapeutic competencies and skills for all the participating students.

Methods

A survey containing a mix of 41 closed-ended and open-ended questions was developed. The survey consisted of two parts. In the first part containing 32 questions relating the students' previous practical clinical experience, their knowledge, competencies, and skills regarding basic practical clinical (therapeutic) training and their perception of how well their previous BA education prepared them for the practical training course in clinical therapy at MA level. The second part of the survey contained 9 questions relating possible suggestions for changes in the practical training courses in clinical therapy at MA level, to streamline the courses and enhance the learning of therapeutic competencies and skills in all the participating students.

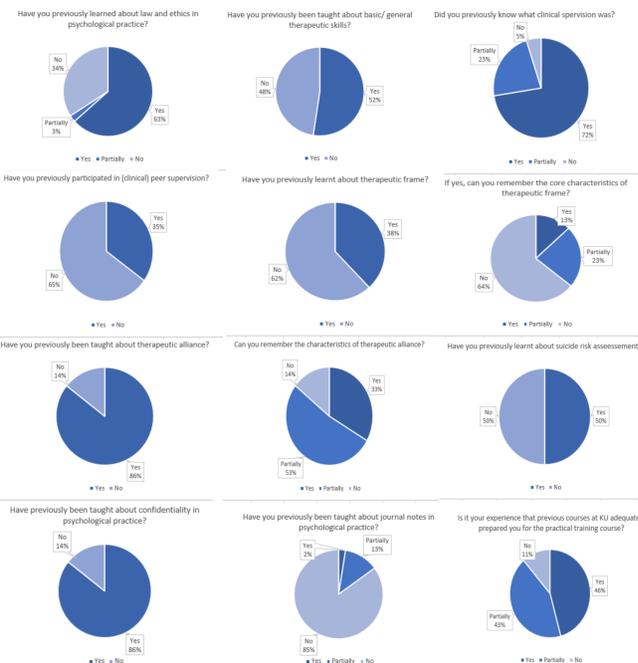
The survey has been distributed in a paper and pen form among the participants of four different types of practical training courses (in one of the courses, all participating students were assigned a role of student therapists, in two of them only two of the students were student therapists, and in one of the courses none of the students acted as therapists). The surveys were distributed in 10th and 11th class (out of 14). A total of 42 MA students currently attending clinical psychology-practical training courses responded to the survey. Among the responders, 7 students hold a role of a student therapist.

Results

Quantitative results

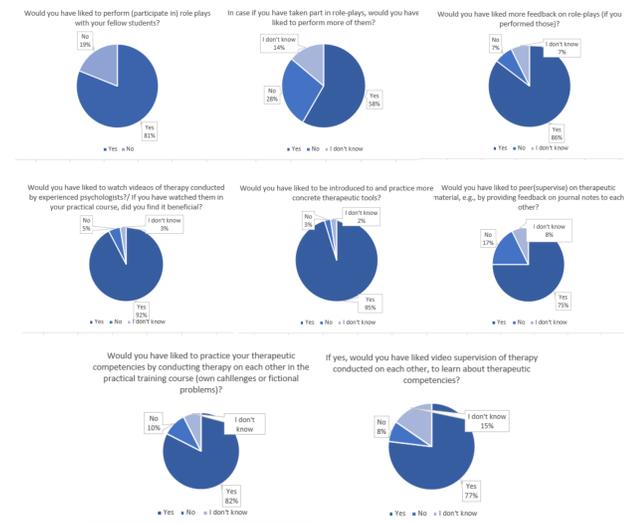
Students' endorsements on the selected (most relevant) closed - ended questions are reported below.

- Previous clinical experience, knowledge, competencies and practical skills learned at BA level, and suggestions for a new course content.



In the qualitative items of this part of the survey, many of the participating students indicated that their previous clinical experience and competencies were acquired during a one week long summer course in communication training at a BA level. Three of the participating students specifically indicated that they have learned about general therapeutic competencies in a seminar course taught by professor in clinical psychology Stig Poulsen.

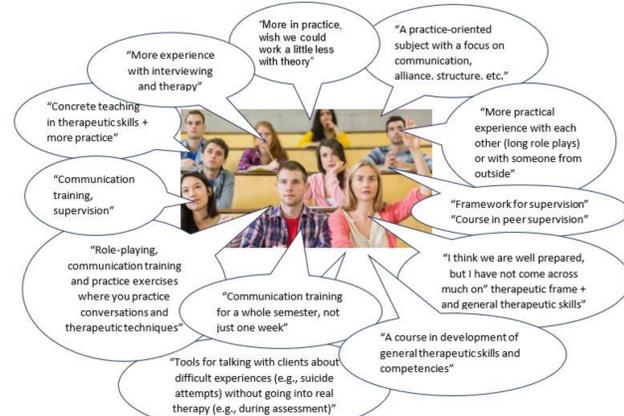
- Suggestions for optimization of the current MA clinical psychology-practical training courses.



Qualitative results - Student testimonials

- Previous clinical experience, knowledge, competencies and practical skills learned at BA level, and suggestions for a new course content.

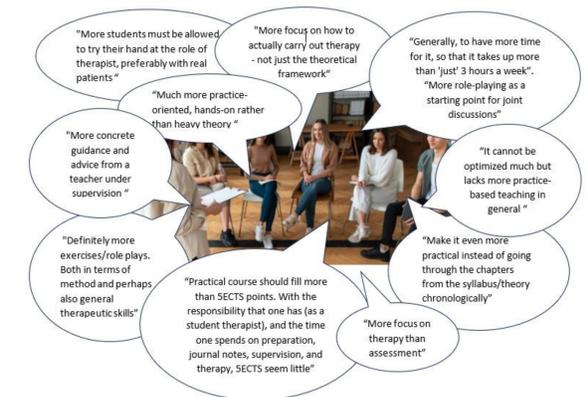
In the first part of the survey assessing the students' perception of how well their previous education at BA level prepared them for the MA level practical training course, the students were also asked to respond to the following question: "If you could go back in time and imagine a course you would attend before the practical training course to give you the right preparation, what would that course include?" The picture below lists the suggestions from the students who responded to the question*.



* The original responses were in Danish language. They were translated into English language for the purpose of this poster.

- Suggestions for optimization of the current clinical psychology-practical training courses at MA level.

In the second part of the survey the students we asked to respond to the following open-ended question: "Do you have any other suggestions on how the practical training course can be optimized with respect to greater learning of practical skills?"



Conclusions

The results of this study indicate that the students often enter their practical courses in clinical psychology at MA level with insecurities related their practical skills. The quantitative part of the study sheds light on the insufficient knowledge regarding therapeutic frame, confidentiality, ethical issues and legal rules, and supervision in psychological practice.

The qualitative testimonials indicate that learning about these general therapeutic competencies and practical skills occurred primarily during a one-week long communication training course at a bachelor level. The students suggest that their learning could be improved, if they could attend a course resembling the one-week communication training course, but throughout a semester during their BA education. The students highlight the need for more courses offering them exposure to hands-on practical experiences, where they could practice their communication skills, basic therapeutic skills and enhance their knowledge and competencies related to therapeutic frame, and supervision in clinical practice.

Involving students in co-creation of the content and format of the courses, can make their learning experience more valuable (Dollinger et al, 2018). The results of this study indicate that the students give value to higher education in psychology that can provide a good balance between theory and practice.

Recommendations

More emphasis should be given in creating opportunities for all psychology students to practice and showcase practical clinical skills at both BA- and MA level. Practice orientated education in psychology can enhance students' confidence, and perceived clinical competence (Sheen et al., 2021). The format of the new BA course in professional training should encompass this need, and incorporate teaching relating general themes such as law and ethics, confidentiality, (peer) supervision, and frame in psychological practice.

References

Dollinger, M., Lodge, J., & Coates, H. (2018). Co-creation in higher education: Towards a conceptual model. *Journal of marketing for higher education*, 28(2), 210-231.

Sheen, J., Sutherland-Smith, W., Thompson, E., Youssef, G. J., Dudley, A., King, R., ... & McGillivray, J. A. (2021). Evaluating the impact of simulation-based education on clinical psychology students' confidence and clinical competence. *Clinical Psychologist*, 25(3), 271-282.