

STUDENT PAGES



A survey on age

Karen Bateson and Clare Whitworth

In the spirit of ‘developing a student writing presence in the journal’ (House, Kalisch, & Proctor, 2016, p. 309), we have taken on the job of editing this section. We are interested in hearing experiences of training from students on other courses.

The topic for this issue is ageing, so to get us started we have undertaken a one-question survey of our colleagues who study alongside us at Leeds. Our question, ‘What is it like to train as a therapist at your age?’, aimed to get a snapshot of the experience we are having here. Of a cohort of 16 (twelve women, four men), 12 (eleven women, one man) responded and agreed that their responses could be shared with you here. Our course is integrative, focusing on the intersubjective dynamics between people and the co-creation of meaning that evokes therapeutic change. As there are two of us, there are differences in the way we see these data. However, themes emerged for us both around timing, experience and career.

A sense of a life course, or expected ‘pattern’ is something that permeates the medical world, seen for example in specialities such as obstetrics, paediatrics or geriatrics (see Rosenfeld & Gallagher, 2002; Thell & Jacobsson, 2016 for further exploration of this medical model). However, the way age is viewed is also a cultural construction, “‘adolescents”, “adults”, ... “growing-up” and so on are cultural events that members *make happen* on each and every actual occasion of categorization’ (Atkinson, 1980, p. 35; emphasis in the original). In our particular culture, childhood and older age are often seen as hierarchically lower than being a productive adult, with dependency a feature of both (Rosenfeld & Gallagher, 2002; Thell & Jacobsson, 2016). Concerns about being seen by clients as too young, or not having the experience of someone older, were a common thread for our younger group members, whereas a sense of coming to training at the ‘right’ time pervaded later.

The profession of counselling and psychotherapy is one dominated by women, and this is reflected in our cohort. A recent article discussing this reported the British Association of Counselling and Psychotherapy membership to be 84% female, 16% male, with other professional bodies reporting similar splits, and the typical member’s age being 53 (Brown, 2017). Brown argues that this is a reflection of a cultural view of women, both as taking on ‘caring’ work, but also as more willing to embark on a profession that may not lead to work paying well enough to be the family breadwinner. While this is a notion that certainly requires further discussion, it is something that is reflected in the comments gathered as younger respondents in particular think about the financial impact of the choices they make. Illustrations of responses are reproduced below under extracted themes. We hope you enjoy reading them.

Timing

It feels like it is the right time in my life to do this and has actually helped me to make sense of my life and the world a little bit more.

At first it was difficult as I felt people (clients) wouldn't take me seriously because they might think I'm too young.

This was the right time for me to do this – it has taken this long to reach this point.

I often feel that I have started to study counselling/psychotherapy too late, about 15 years too late. However, I am also aware that, for me, this is actually the 'right' time.

It is helpful to know about the attachment stuff before I start a family. Interesting to discover triggers before making big life choices (having a long-term relationship etc.).

Experience

Enlightening. Challenging. Rewarding.

At first, I was really self-conscious about being perceived as 'too young' to do this course, something to do with life experience + questioning the relevance of mine + whether this even matters.

This issue came up with my first client, she thought/said I was too inexperienced or didn't have enough life experience to be able to help her. This led to her wanting another therapist.

Hard work academically but lots of life experience to bring to the room.

I felt like I would have less knowledge/life experience than others + that others would perceive me in this way.

I feel a bit weird sometimes because I am afraid that other people will make an assumption that I am inexperienced, but this is my fear and I know that.

I also feel like I have enough 'life' experience, I wouldn't have been able to engage in so much in-depth personal development a few years ago.

Enlightening. Difficult. Sincere. Overwhelming. Challenging. Protective. Fun. Warm.

Career

Sometimes I have wondered if it is appropriate to have seen this as a future career given the difficulties getting into the profession as a livelihood.

One difficulty of being a young and enthusiastic therapist is my dream of making this into a career, something sustainable and reliable. Unfortunately, I cannot escape from the opinions that tell me there is not enough work available to counsellors, that paid work is a struggle.

I haven't had to massively upheave my life to change my career and haven't got too many commitments.

Notes on contributors



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The next issue will focus on both the humanistic psychologist Alan Watts (1915–1973) who 'helped pioneer humanistic-transpersonal psychology' (Gordon, 2015, p. 311), publishing 20 major works during his career (Columbus, 2015, p. 354), and on the 'Dialectics of Liberation Congress, revisited'. The original Dialectics of Liberation Congress took place in London in July 1967. Send your submissions for the student pages (which don't have to be relevant to the special issue subjects) by email to Karen Bateson: hc15keb@leeds.ac.uk or Clare Whitworth: eng5c2w@leeds.ac.uk.
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