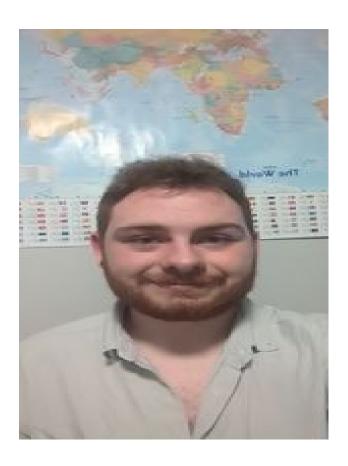# The Personal Experiences of University Counsellors During the Covid-19 Pandemic

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Nicholas is a third-year student at Edge Hill University studying on the BSc (Hons) Critical Approaches to Counselling and Psychotherapy programme. This course has been instrumental in his development and has led to him pursuing a career in a supportive role, for the near future. His dissertation emerged due to his interest in the course for two reasons. The first being that he had found counselling interesting thus making him want to understand counsellors' experiences and get first hand insight into their work. The second reason was that he had experienced what it was like to be a student during the Covid pandemic and how this caused struggles. As a result, he wanted to explore a counsellor's experience of working during the pandemic as he knew students who had struggled due to it. With these two reasons combined it created his dissertation topic of university counsellors personal experiences working through the pandemic.

Abstract

This paper explores how Covid-19 impacted the work of a university counsellors, by looking at their experiences during the pandemic.

The methodology used to create my primary research was a phenomenological case study, that used an interview to generate the data. To generate the interview questions, my literature review focused on key themes and topics and influenced how I would style the questions for a comparative look at my data against the literature.

My research found six key themes, those being the acceptance of the new methods, my participant's adaptability, and resilience, how effective the clients found both alternative methods, my participant's perception of how well the university supported them and their clients, the clients' preferences to working from home, and the pandemic being stressful, with elements of fear. I found connections with the literature from the review- this then strengthens both my data and the literature's data.

The research concludes that Covid-19 created loads of uncertainty and stress for my participant, but, due to the right support they received and their attitude and application to their work, they managed the situation successfully and improved as a counsellor, due to the circumstances forced on them. This also needs to be explored further, to generate more data, and to see if my data is generalisable.

Introduction

This dissertation is being written about the personal experience of university counsellors working through the covid-19 pandemic, as I have an interest in the topic and results. I have an interest because, when I was first considering a topic, I first started by looking at university students' experiences, and I found some good data. So, I continued to dig and noticed the lack of information provided about university counsellors and felt this could be a key area to produce some information. I believe this to be a relevant area needing research because there is a gap in the information that is available. If themes appear, the research could be conducted elsewhere to see if it replicates the results and provides us with a detailed common experience.

My research will be structured by first going over the literature and showcasing how I found the gap within the journals used. Secondly, it will discuss the methods I used for structuring my research, with the approach being based on phenomenology and collecting qualitative data, both impacting my choices for sampling, data analysis, structuring my interviews, and the credibility of my research. Then, I will discuss the ethics of my research through the subcategories of what ethical issues I expected to deal with, how I planned to deal with them, how I safeguarded the participants from the risks, and which ethical issues I encountered.

Next, I will state the themes I found in my research, which will lead me into the discussion where I will critically examine the themes. I will compare it to my literature review and showcase similarities and differences in the theories suggested. Then, I will state my recommendations after completing my research and state the limitations to my research and what impacts this could have had, Finally, I will draw everything together in my conclusion and completing my research.

The Research Question

My dissertation focuses on the personal experience of a university counsellor working through the covid-19 pandemic. I formulated this question by reviewing over 20 pieces of literature, which I then sorted through relevance. I examined the remaining 12 in my literature review. From my literature review, it became evident that a gap in the research was the personal experience of working through covid-19, which led me to choose that as my project and to help design interview questions. I focused my questions, not only on my main theme but also on some themes that were prevalent in my literature review, like the theme of adapting to online counselling.

With all of this in mind, my research question is focused on the personal experience of university counsellors working through covid-19 and looks at a few themes, those being the adjustment from in-person sessions to online sessions, what the experience was like for counsellors and how they feel it was handled, as it was a sudden change.

Literature Review

The search strategy I employed to find the literature was to use electronic databases and online journals. This was for convenience, as stated by Groote and Dorsch (2003) and Kwadzo (2015). Adding on to its strengths, as stated by Akinola et al (2018), are flexibility and speed. These quotes link together, as flexibility and speed connect to create convenience, giving more weight to this description and showcasing why this has been an ever-growing method in recent times (Naqvi 2012).

A method I applied to increase the relevance of articles I found in my search was the use of keywords and synonyms. Meaning, to find literature on my topic, I used keywords and phrases like "covid and university counsellors" to focus on the pieces I found, as shown by the tables in my appendices number 1.

As stated by Winchester and Salji (2016), searching for keywords while doing a literature search should be the first step, as it guides the pieces you find. Adding to this, Grewal, Kataria, and Dhawan (2016) stated that they are a cornerstone of an effective search when used correctly. This shows that using keywords is an important first step and if used correctly can shape the whole literature review. This quote was something I kept in mind while picking keywords to design my literature review, as I wanted to make sure the keywords used would create what I was trying to search for. Grant (2010) supports the idea that keywords enhance the content representation and increase the suitable pieces of literature. This emphasises my reasoning for its inclusion in my literature review, as it showcases the strength it can bring when implemented correctly.

For my literature review, I focused on using a systematic, comprehensive method. A systematic literature review identifies, selects, and critically appraises a subject to formulate and answer the formed question (Dewey & Drahota 2016 and Pericic & Tanveer 2019), with the seven key

principles being transparency, clarity, integration, focus, equality, accessibility, and coverage (Pittway 2008). According to Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar (2013), systematic reviews are considered the best way to generate a definitive answer to the research question. This applies to me, as this is how I plan to create and answer my question, by first looking at the literature and finding gaps where I will base my question to fill said gaps.

According to Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar (2013) and Pericic & Tanveer (2019), systematic literature reviews have the benefits of delivering clear and comprehensive data while filling gaps in information. Under these benefits, presented by Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar (2013) and Pericic & Tanveer (2019), gives weight to my choice, as I wanted to produce a clear and comprehensive literature review which would find gaps for me to fill, which was a benefit to this method and worked out to be the case. However, the method of systematic literature reviews does not come without its flaws. These flaws, as stated by Garg, Hackam, & Tonelli (2008) and Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar (2013), are heterogeneity, loss of information on crucial outcomes, improper subgroup analysis, conflict with fresh experimental data, repetition of publishing, and applying rigour. Though the combination of flaws presented by Garg, Hackam, & Tonelli (2008) and Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar (2013) is a challenge for conducting a literature review, the strengths presented by Gopalakrishnan & Ganeshkumar (2013) and Pericic & Tanveer (2019) are more relevant for completing my piece, as the benefits suited my work, and I could plan around the weaknesses.

As my topic was very current and niche, I found it difficult to find literature on my topic. This ended up with me having 12 pieces of credible literature from all the sources I found. Credible sources, to me, mean they are sources with results and evidence showcasing this and generalisability. I narrowed my pieces down based on the exclusion criteria of relevance and credibility.

One method used for finding relevance was searching using the keywords "Covid-19" and "university counsellors". As shown earlier in my work by Grant (2010), keywords can be used to increase the number of suitable literature and I found this to be the case as, my keywords, made the pieces I was shown more relevant and highlighted those words, so they stood out.

The importance of checking the credibility of the literature is a vital component to a literature review. However, using online sources require more detail when examining credibility (Metzger 2007). The importance of this quote concerning my work comes from the side of using online sources as, because of the current nature of my study, by looking at university counselling during Covid-19, most sources are online due to the isolated nature and the convenience to do it online caused by Covid. This, however, has not impacted the credibility of my chosen pieces, as I used sources that met my credibility checklist, which left me with my 12 pieces.

I used 12 journals to build an overview of the topic and in this overview, I developed my gap in the research. My synthesis starts by looking broadly at students' mental health and the impacts Covid-19 has had on them. The first journal comes from Pincus et al. (2020), who showcased how Covid-19 had a negative impact on student's mental health and academic skills, while also calling for school counsellors to be the main point of support for the students. In their work, they use a reference from Wan (2020) to showcase the growing levels of depression, substance abuse, post-traumatic stress disorder, and suicide in students who would be returning, and this is a cause for concern that highlights their emphasis on using school counsellors. They suggest that school counsellors have a major and majority role to play in lowering the consequences of the pandemic.

This journal article highlights two key themes that will be present throughout my synthesis, those being that students' mental health will have been affected by the pandemic and it

highlights the key role counsellors must play. This links in with the second journal, coming from Atlam et al. (2022) who was looking at the psychological health and the use of online learning during Covid-19 in Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, where they found the results that, if the individual's psychological health was struggling, so would their interest and involvement with their learning. Both above studies link together to showcase the detrimental effects the Covid pandemic has had for students on their mental health and their studies as, by Pincus et al. (2020), it shows that the pandemic is affecting students' mental health, which is then linked with the second study of Atlam et al. (2022). It would also be affecting their studies, which could easily spiral into a cycle of getting upset that the student is struggling with work, which in turn lowers their mental health, resulting in their work continuing to drop and so on.

Further adding to this point is the work of Chen and Lucock (2022), who conducted a study of UK students and their mental health during the pandemic. Similarly, to the other studies, they found that the undergraduate and postgraduate students had increased anxiety and depression with lowered resilience and there was a need for professional support. The strength of these three quotes is they are all from different countries and support the same theories. However, due to the short-term nature of these pieces, the long-term effects are currently unknown and speculated. The importance of these three journals is they prove and support each other in creating two themes, the first being that Covid-19 had detrimental effects on students' mental health and that professional help through a counsellor is recommended. This, in turn, opens into what support they receive or can they receive from counsellors.

However, one negative that has come to light due to the pandemic is the disparity affecting people of colour within the United States within counselling, which leads me to the next journal from Litam and Hipolito-Delgado (2021). They discussed how a person of colour was more likely to experience an exposure to infection, financial stress, and a sense of uncertainty, all due to the pandemic, which, due to how the United States of America has their health system

set up, leads to limited access and the call for counsellors to provide extra support during the pandemic and with the aftereffects caused by it. The relevance this has to my study is the weaknesses as, not being focused on the United Kingdom, which has different health care set up to the United States and it does not have a focus on being in an educational setting like a university, showcase a gap. However, these weaknesses open up the potential for further research on whether this would be the case within the United Kingdom and if it would be the case in an educational setting. The strength of including this quote is how it showcases the inequality that can occur during counselling during Covid-19, but it does lack the focus on the key area of the educational sector.

The earlier pieces covered the impacts Covid-19 had on students and people of colour, with most pieces pointing toward counsellors as a method of support and importance. None of the aforementioned articles mentioned how counsellors could have been affected during the pandemic. This is balanced out by Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021), who state how counsellors home lives and work lives became a lot more intertwined and there was a need for flexibility to balance their work and personal lives, while there is also a need to improve counsellors' ability to use technology applications for delivering sessions. This piece highlights two areas which may be a concern for counsellors and how they are working in the form of balancing home and work life and adapting to new methods of providing the service. The importance of this piece is that it connects with the earlier pieces, as it acknowledges the importance of counsellors, but it states how they may face their challenges, which would impact the support they could provide. The weakness of this research is that I found no other pieces exploring this issue to agree or disagree with it, however, this can be spun into a strength as it can show an area where research is needed, and I can probe during my interview.

A second piece that looks deeper into the change suggested by Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021) regarding adapting to online methods was conducted by Barker and Barker

(2020). This research focused on the experiences of 114 counsellors who worked in many different fields, from university to marriage counselling, in the US, giving a broad view of the different types of services. However, a weakness of this study is that it only looks within the US and may not be generalisable to different cultures. The results of Barker and Barker's (2020) study showcased how 58% had no experience in working online and over the telephone before the pandemic. This links with the work produced by Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021), as, due to the nature of 58% having no prior experience, this could lead to problems adapting to the new methods for some counsellors. Prior research stated in Barker and Barker's piece that online therapy can be as effective as in-person therapy (Berger 2017). However, the results of Barker and Barker (2020) suggested that face-to-face was more effective, making a contrast in research that could be explored.

Also, this is linked with Supriyanto et al. (2020) who state there were many methods used in Indonesia like Zoom, Google Meeting, WhatsApp, and Facebook. This source has a massive weakness, as it only focuses on Indonesia, which will not represent all the techniques in other places, like the UK. Its strength, however, is it highlights the pressure of adapting, as the university counsellors will have had to learn and adapt their services to suit each site.

The next article, by Erekson et al. (2020), examined the context of moving online earlier on in the pandemic. They found that there was a decrease in scheduled appointments, with no change in attendance rate and that the number of people who applied for the online service was not affected. This is important, as it shows session numbers stayed at a similar level, which would play into the previous theme of struggling to adapt as, due to the numbers staying similar, there would not be much room to learn and adapt before starting sessions. However, the weakness of this study is it cannot look at and does not predict the long-term effects of the covid-19 pandemic, which, as stated in earlier sources, if current issues remain unchecked, they will fester and develop.

A cause for concern that has developed during the literature review was counsellor burnout during covid-19 as, with the extra strain and thoughts presented, these will carry extra weight for the counsellor. This idea was explored by Sandhu and Singh (2021), who found the burden on counsellors had amplified due to covid-19, especially amoung less experienced counsellors. The importance of this piece is that it draws attention that, though counsellors are needed and are facing challenges to the new way of working, they also need protection and support to avoid burnout.

Vostanis and Bell (2020) use the challenges presented by Sandhu and Singh (2021) and Erekson et al. (2020) as a sense of warning and pulling together motives in their piece, as they discuss how, like clients, the counsellors will have extra stressors and may struggle, but they discuss how, due to these challenges, it may force beneficial change and improve the training for counsellors, which would potentially have a positive impact on both prior worries.

Linking with Vostanis and Bell (2020) is Gay and Swank (2021), who stated how counsellor training had been disrupted due to the pandemic and, though it created challenges, these challenges have promoted a unique strategy throughout an online environment. These two pieces link through training, as one calls for improved training, and one discusses the experience of training throughout the pandemic, which offered challenges, which suggests Vostanis, and Bells (2020) call for improved training in the current climate will face challenges, like shown in Gay, and Swank's (2021) study. A weakness which arises with Gay and Swanks (2021) study, however, is generalisability, as it is based in the US, which had a different covid experience to the UK.

Hanley (2020) ties the literature together, as he discusses the history of online counselling and discusses how the pandemic was a driving factor for developments in online counselling. He states it needs to carry on being a research focus. This relates to all discussed topics as, for a

section of time, it was the only available service, so it held importance in getting it right for students and counsellors alike. It was not a mainstream used technique before the pandemic, which drew more attention to it, and, with better research, it would be taught better, making it more effective.

As shown throughout this literature review, there are some key themes to the current literature, those being the student's experience, the importance of the sessions, the demanding and adaptive nature of the work, and the need for more training and research into online counselling. It also showed a glaring weakness-that little to no research has been done exploring university counsellors' experiences and feelings about the pandemic.

Methodology

The philosophy I applied to my research was constructivist, which is a non-positive approach to research, with its focus being on cognitive development and a deep understanding (Fosnot and Perry 1996), which is an important technique that can yield important benefits when correctly applied (Adom, Yeboah, and Ankrah 2016). This was due to the use of phenomenology in my work. Phenomenology is a qualitative research theory that focuses on an individual's lived experience (Neubauer, Witkop, and Varpio 2019). I used phenomenology, as my research focused on the personal experiences of university counsellors, and I wanted to draw conclusions based on what was presented, which is phenomenology, as it is used to study what an experience means to a group of people (Grossoehme 2014).

Although I used phenomenology, it does come with weaknesses. Lopez and Willis (2004) suggested that failing to analyse a research method's philosophical foundation may lead to research that is confusing in its goal, structure, and findings. This quote holds significance to my work, as, for my work to be effective, I need to understand the constructivist approach and phenomenology. One way I have gone about understanding them is by examining the strengths and weaknesses of both.

For example, constructivism is seen at a general level as strong in areas, where other approaches are weak (Jung 2019). However, with its strength being in areas like a person's interaction, it creates weaknesses. One such weakness is selection bias (Hopf 1998 and Jung 2019). This weakness was worked around for me by my use of selective sampling and the use of my gatekeeper, as I required only a university counsellor and my gatekeeper got me in touch with one.

For phenomenology, it has a strength that, if not careful, can become a weakness, this being the researcher using personal interest within the study (Maxwell 2013 and Hickman 2015). This is useful for conducting the research and the effort one would put in, but that interest could lead to bias as you may want certain results. Due to that interest (Creswell 2014 and Hickman 2015), these references show the important balance needed to conduct phenomenological research and I feel that I am capable of creating a fair, unbiased piece.

Though seen in some fields to be illegitimate science and being undervalued (Marschan-Piekkari & Welch 2004), I have chosen to use a qualitative method of data collection, as, if used correctly, it can be a valuable piece of research and gather trustworthy and relevant results (Bergman & Coxon 2005 and Bowen 2010). Aspers and Corte (2019) define qualitative research as being able to make significant changes once it discovers new distinctions and I believe my research is capable of that, as, shown in the literature review, there was a gap in university counsellors' opinions of working through Covid 19.

Qualitative data suits my research question, as my question is focused on human experience, in which qualitative research is grounded (Sandelowski 2004). With everything, however, there are strengths and weaknesses. According to Punch (1998), ethical issues can be present with qualitative research, due to the potential to ask personal questions. Neuman (2011) states it is on the researcher to make sure they are ethical in their approach and work. This was something highly present within my research, as I had to get my work approved by the Undergraduate Faculty of Health, Social Care & Medicine Research Ethics subcommittee, which helped to keep my work ethical, as I was not allowed to conduct my research without approval.

For my sampling, I used selective sampling which is considered a good technique to deeply investigate, develop and understand a phenomenon being investigated (Merriam 2002). This relates to my work, as I will be looking at the phenomenon of being a university counsellor

during the pandemic, which, in itself, is a very selective topic, as it requires individuals who worked before, during, and after the pandemic, as a counsellor at a university. My sample size was six, as I had a low target audience, but also valued relevance over representativeness, which, according to Flick (2009), is important.

I, like Flick, value its importance. So, I planned to keep my sample size low, so I could focus more on the detail given within each answer. Though large sample sizes should generate more reliable results (Columb and Atkinson 2016), they also have their problems of being time-consuming (Nayak 2010), which, due to the size of my project, it was not necessary to have a large sample size. With that in mind, it was important to create a sample size that was not too large or too small. As stated by Griffith (2013), the sample size is crucial. Inadequate size of too big or small can undermine research findings, with qualitative research favouring smaller samples.

I believe, from the examples shown, that six was the suitable number to start with, as it conformed with the stereotypes of qualitative research and suited my timeframe and restrictions. Though I intended were to use six participants, as specified, my project had to become a case study, due to a lack of interest and responses. Therefore, my data generated is that of a case study and not multiple interviews, as wanted. However, my methodology stayed the same, I just did not receive the number of participants first desired.

For finding my participants, I used a gatekeeper. The gatekeeper's role was to find participants, as they already worked in that field, so had more contacts. My reasons for using a gatekeeper were to make it easier to get into contact with my target audience, to convince and to keep anonymity for my participants. Andoh-Arthur (2019) describes gatekeepers as a vital component of social research, as the person employed as the gatekeeper has access to the participants you are searching for. This quote underpins my previous statement of reasoning,

as, through my gatekeeper, it was easier to contact my target audience and, since I was not having to search individually, it was more convenient. Also, agreeing with Andoh- Arthur (2019), is Singh and Wassenaar (2016) who states gatekeepers play an essential and undervalued role in research and though results have risks of being influenced or manipulated by institutions, with gatekeepers involved, it should lead to good quality research. This quote, with the prior one, shows that gatekeepers in research are seen as a top method of recruiting participants.

However, it does refer to possible flaws within this method, that being influence and manipulation. Singh and Wassenaar (2016) give the example of the host institution influencing and manipulating the data. In other research projects, such as Lamprianou (2021), focused on the effectiveness of gatekeepers and found it was the most effective method of gathering participants.

As my research is qualitative, I will be using thematic analysis to analyse my data as it is an effective method for examining a large amount of qualitative data (Nowell et al. 2017). Though there can be some confusion about what it is and when and where to use it (Kiger and Varpio 2020), Clarke and Braun (2017) and Nowell et al. (2017) all agree that it is a good first analytic method to use for novices and masters alike. However, though it is agreed to be a good starting method for novices, Kiger and Varpio (2020) state it should be used based on the goals of the research and not the fact it is easy to follow. With that in mind, I chose to do a thematic analysis, as it best suited the type of data I was looking to generate, as I wanted to see if there were any common themes to the feelings or experiences of university counsellors working during the pandemic.

The main aspects I have looked at to create credible research are, validity, reliability, and transferability. Starting with validity, which, as described by Leung (2015), means the

appropriateness of the planning, process, and data within the research, so was it planned properly, was the research conducted right and was the data answering the question. With that being stated, I believe, due to the nature of my question being of personal experience, the methodology and planning was suited for the question, and this led to it generating answers to the question. As my research is phenomenological, this focuses on the individual, which causes a difference in validity compared with a positivist approach (Waterman 2013 and Leung 2015).

For reliability, Leung (2015) defines it as the ability to recreate the research and gather the same results. I believe, as showcased by my methodology, as it was started as multiple interviews and changed to a case study, it could be repeatable in both formats, due to how I have laid out my work. The final point proving credibility comes in generalisability, and as described by Leung (2015), the research done can be generalised to different people. For this, I believe my research showcases this due to the links between the literature I used and the results I generated as, although it is about personal experience, there are joint themes which are displayed, indicating generable feelings and thoughts. With these three aspects in mind, my work aimed to reach a stage where all of these were present to make my research credible. This piece, as stated, showcases this and has because of that become more credible.

Research Ethics

Ethics are a vital part of the research, especially when working with people (Gregory 2003). As this study is a case study, which works with an individual, Gregory (2003) states I will have a lot of ethical considerations to take on board, not only for the participant but also for myself. Due to my research being an undergraduate piece, I have made many considerations and plans before even starting my research, due to having to have my proposal ethically checked by the Undergraduate Faculty of Health, Social Care & Medicine Research Ethics subcommittee.

The main ethical issues I expected to be present during my interview for the participant were unresolved feelings, anonymity, and covid-19. Whereas, for myself, the main ethical concerns were covid-19 and bias. Originally, burnout had been a concern, as I had planned to do six interviews. However, this was no longer a concern as, due to unforeseen circumstances, my research was changed from multiple interviews to a case study. I only conducted the one interview, therefore mitigating the risk of burnout.

Firstly, explaining the ethical issues around the participant in more detail, the risk of unresolved feelings comes from the nature of how covid-19 caused a lot of problems for individuals (Schelhorn et al. 2022). Those problems resurfacing in the interview could potentially cause the individual to feel some difficult emotions, which may develop into a concern. To help lower the risk of this, I included several organisations in the participant information sheet, that could provide professional support if required.

Next was the issue of anonymity for the participant. This meant keeping the identity of my participant and any personal information that may expose them hidden, out of respect for their anonymity. This was important due to the personal nature of my research and the data provided, which is why I took measures to keep the participants anonymous. One such method I employed to keep their identity hidden was not referring to their name or any data which potentially could reveal their identity throughout my piece, as shown in the findings and discussion.

Covid-19 was also an issue for both my participant and me. To prevent the potential risk of covid transmission, I agreed that the interview would be conducted online. This enabled both of us to remain confident in our physical safety.

The final ethical issue that could be present for myself was bias. This would be present in the form of my data collection and my presentation of results, as I could have presented

leading/closed questions to generate the results I wanted, and I could have printed only the results that backed up my argument (Simundic 2013). However, I tried to lower this issue as much as possible by having open questions, which I discussed with my supervisor for guidance. I also tried to not have a set image or thoughts on the situation and based my work on found themes, while remaining open.

One key issue I focused on during the whole process of my research was informed consent. This was a major focus of mine, as it helps to keep the participant informed on the project, which helps to keep the research ethical, as the participant understands what is going on at all times. I have informed consent from them as they understand everything.

I would say, though there was always potential for these ethical dilemmas to occur, I believe that the mitigation plans I put in place were effective at minimising the risk. This was also supported by obtaining ethical approval by the Undergraduate Faculty of Health, Social Care & Medicine Research Ethics subcommittee before I could start my research.

Findings

Themes	Quotes of evidence
The first theme was the acceptance of the new methods.	"So yeah, there are considerable pros and, in my opinion now, very few cons to working via telephone and online ." (participant 2022, lines 134 – 135)
The second theme that appeared was my participant's adaptability and resilience.	"It took me a little bit of time, but eventually, having looked at the pros and cons of telephone counselling, video counselling, and face to face counselling, I came to a realization and an acceptance that they are all equally as effective for me because it's whatever works for the client." (participant 2022, lines 200-203)
The third theme presented was how effective the clients found both alternative methods.	" Positively in the main. I don't know what the percentages are in terms of how many decided that, yeah, video is the way to go for me. I don't know, maybe 50/50, and probably quite a few said no, I'll continue, or I will have telephone counselling, as opposed to video. But, quite a few of them went down a route of video as well." (participant 2022, lines 178-181)

The fourth theme was my participant's perception of how well the university supported him and his client.	" I believe overall that the institution did pretty well in terms of attempting to look after me. They provided me with the appropriate resources, I think the admin staff were absolutely superb and the IT guys just absolutely brilliant. And yeah, so they, in particular, did really well, Management, That's a whole different thing." (participant 2022, lines 355-358)
A fifth theme was the clients' preferences for working from home.	" Well, I think that the major concern for me was, yeah, everybody back to work as normal and therefore I'm face to face. I was more than happy working from home thank you very much. So, coming back on campus for me, did I want to commute into Ormskirk on the days that I work? Not particularly. Did I want this stress of trying to of come in at stupid o'clock because of the car parking situation? Not really. So yeah, it's been a transition for me on a personal basis ." (participant 2022, lines 263-267)
The final theme was that the pandemic was stressful for the participant and brought about elements of fear.	the COVID thing is still it's still there and that kind of for me is underlying still and that I'm well yeah. And whilst my attitude has changed towards my fear of Covid if you're

	like because I'm fully vaccinated and boosted and all of that kind of stuff, that doesn't mean to say that it's not kind of still there. So, the pandemic, the COVID, from the stress, the fear that arises out of that was heightened by and had an effect on, well, everybody back to work." (participant 2022, lines 269-273)

Due to the design of my interview, there were specific areas of interest that the questions focused on, as shown by my questionnaire in the appendices. These questions led to several themes being discovered by the participant.

Discussion

The interview I conducted found a few themes and connections to the literature I provided in my literature review. One such common theme, which appeared in both, was the lack of experience for counsellors providing online and telephone counselling. In my literature review, Barker and Barker (2020) state there could be a struggle for counsellors to adapt to online and telephone counselling, as 58% of the individuals they studied had no prior experience. In my interview, this was found to be the case, as my participant stated in the interview

> " So, my thoughts and feelings on that were, this is never going to work, because we were going to telephone counselling immediately, and I've had very little experience of telephone counselling, it's all face to face. My feelings were, well, this is never going to work. How can I create a therapeutic relationship over the phone?"

> (Participant, 2022, lines 90-93)

For online counselling, they stated, "or had sufficient training in the MS Teams platform" [Participant, 2022, lines 165-166].

Both quotes highlight the results provided by Barker and Barkers (2020), as the participant in my study discussed how he had not had any training in telephone counselling or online counselling before the pandemic. This led them to believe it would not be able to work, due to not having experience in either field.

However, the opposite was proven to be true as stated by my participant, in the end, they believed:

"So yeah, there are considerable pros and, in my opinion now, very few cons to working via telephone and online."

<div align="center">(Participant, 2022, lines 134 - 135)</div>

This showcases how, after experience and training with both methods, the participant's opinion changed on both methods from "this is not going to work" to "the pros outweighed the cons" and this is further enhanced by the participant when he states:

"It took me a little bit of time, but eventually, having looked at the pros and cons of telephone counselling, video counselling, and face to face counselling. I came to a realization and an acceptance that they are all equally as effective for me, because it's whatever works for the client."

<div align="center">(Participant, 2022, lines 200-203)</div>

The importance of this quote is it shows the growth the participant undertook and the change in opinion from "this would not work" to all three methods of telephone, online, and face-to-face being effective methods. This is backed up by Berger (2017) who stated that online counselling was just as effective as face-to-face, which is agreed by the participant. This disproves Barker and Barker's (2020) theory, that face-to-face was more effective. However, this should be taken with caution, as it is one person's thoughts.

Comparing this change in opinion to the literature, adds weight to the ideas of Vostanis and Bell (2020), who stated there was an opportunity to improve training for the counsellors. These link together, as, due to the pandemic, my participant found themselves using these methods, which they hey had no prior training. Due to being forced to work with these new methods, they learned and adapted their work, which is what Vostanis and Bell (2020) stated had the potential to happen.

My participant's data was backed up by the literature of Hanley (2020), as he stated the pandemic was a driving factor for research into online counselling, as my participant had little experience before the pandemic. However, they then tried to research and prepare themselves for online counselling as shown by

> "that meant becoming much more au fait with the BACP telephone and online counselling guidelines and looking at all of that as well."

(Participant, 2022, lines 214-215)

My findings are backed up by Hanley (2020), as he highlighted there will be more research into online counselling and stated this was needed. As highlighted by my participant, once he found out he was moving to online counselling, he researched the guidelines and, in a way, conducted research into finding ways to best support the clients in their sessions, as highlighted in

> "The background to here is the room that I counsel on a face-to-face basis. And, whereas, you know, sometimes, in particular with students, that you talk to, you know they're in the bedrooms and you know all of that kind of stuff and you know people potentially wandering in and all sorts of stuff going on. And, so, all of those things need to be managed and contracted for as well."

(Participant, 2022, lines 237-241)

This highlights, on small scale, that the participant was conducting research on how to best support the clients, this links with Hanley (2020) stating it was important for research on online counselling to be done. Which links back with my participant, as shown by the quote he saw it as important, as it would benefit the client more.

Adding on to the previous discussion comes the theme of the participant's preference for working from home. I believe this is a theme, due to the change in view of the client, from first viewing it as negative to, in the end, it being his preference. This links to the literature of Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021), as they explored the home and work-life mix of counsellors. The literature stated there needed to be flexibility to create a balance between the two. The theme I found of the client preferring working from home adds weight, as they found a balance. A quote where this is highlighted by my participant is when they stated

> " Well, I think that the major concern for me was, yeah, everybody back to work as normal and therefore I'm face to face. I was more than happy working from home thank you very much. So, coming back on campus for me, did I want to commute into Ormskirk on the days that I work? Not particularly. Did I want this stress of trying to of come in at stupid o'clock because of the car parking situation? Not really. So yeah, it's been a transition for me on a personal basis."

> (Participant, 2022, lines 263-267)

This quote showcases how my participant was happy working from home, as he found it suited him better and gave him a better balance, which, when he was working in person, was disturbed with the hassles of travelling and waking up earlier. This links back to Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021) as they stated how this could be the case for counsellors if they had a work-life balance at home, which my client found, therefore making him prefer being home, as the environment suited him better.

One theme that could connect with the last is the fear of returning due to covid-19. My participant stated

"the COVID thing is still it's still there and that kind of for me is underlying still and that I'm well yeah. And whilst my attitude has changed towards my fear of Covid if you're like because I'm fully vaccinated and boosted and all of that kind of stuff, that doesn't mean to say that it's not kind of still there. So, the pandemic, the COVID, from the stress, the fear that arises out of that was heightened by and had an effect on, well, everybody back to work.".

(Participant, 2022, lines 269-273)

This quote highlights how my participant found the pandemic stressful, and they were worried about covid-19, which could link to my previous theme, as, due to this fear, potentially it could have been the reason they wanted to stay at home. If this was the case, it would work against Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021), as it would highlight fear as the biggest contributor over the balance for staying at home. However, as they stated the major concern was more related to balance, so overall, though fear was a contributor, it was not a major one. So, this theme, though it showed potential to challenge the theories of Eckart, Hermann, and Neale-McFall (2021), in the end, it has enhanced them. It has enhanced them, as it showed, even with other factors there for the participant, work-life and home life balance is well managed was still the major factor.

The next theme that was present in both my data and the literature review was how the students had experienced the pandemic. The literature of Pincus et al. (2020) and Chen and Lucock (2022) both discussed how the student's mental health was impacted due to covid-19, and their results showed the students were impacted. However, as my study focused on the counsellor and their experience, to explore the perspective of the student's mental health from the angle of the counsellor. This came more in the sense of how the clients of my participant were treated,

and their thoughts on the changing landscape, rather than their experiences, like the work of Pincus et al. (2020) and Chen and Lucock (2022).

My participant felt initially the clients reacted with "remarkable resilience and flexibility" when they were first informed about going to telephone appointments, with some even stating "yeah, this kind of suits me". This importantly shows how, although the clients, as presented by Pincus et al. (2020) and Chen and Lucock (2022), showed signs students were mentally struggling, these methods, from my participant, still proved helpful in supporting them.

This is further amplified by my participant stating when asked about their clients' reactions to moving online from telephone:

> " Positively in the main. I don't know what the percentages are in terms of how many decided that, yeah, video is the way to go for me. I don't know, maybe 50/50, and probably quite a few said no, I'll continue, or I will have telephone counselling, as opposed to video. But, quite a few of them went down a route of video as well."

(Participant, 2022, lines 178-181)

This showcases resilience for those who found it not working for them, as they kept going and then once it became available switched. Also, this shows just how much telephone was working for some, and how both methods supported students who were struggling, as it was received positively as the option for change. These quotes link to the ideas of Pincus et al. (2020) and Chen and Lucock (2022) because these methods were providing support to clients, as they were both received positively, so the implications due to covid-19 were being supported the best they could.

The final theme was the support for the service provided by the employer. Throughout the interview, the participant states how supportive the university was, as shown by quotes like

> " I believe overall that the institution did pretty well in terms of attempting to look after me. They provided me with the appropriate resources, I think the admin staff were absolutely superb and the IT guys just absolutely brilliant. And yeah, so they in particular did really well, Management, That's a whole different thing."

> (Participant, 2022, lines 355-358)

This quote shows how, by the admin and IT teams at the university, the participant felt well supported. This is important as, with this support, it would make the work for the participant easier, contributing to lower stress levels and a higher focus by the participant on the clients, as they would have fewer outside stressors due to the university supporting them. This relates well with Sandhu and Singh (2021), as they stated how counsellors had amplified burdens to deal with, which risked the development of burnout. Linking this to the participant, with the support being provided, it lowered their risk of burnout, as they were being supported with tasks that could have provided extra stress. The participant then states

> "I think that the university made quite significant, took significant steps in terms of looking after clients"

> (Participant, 2022, lines 352-353)

This is important, as it showcases that the university not only supported the participant but made attempts to support clients. This, linking back to Sandhu and Singh (2021), would also lower the burden on the participant, as the clients received good support, which lowers the demand on the participant, as they are not the only support for the clients, thus lowering the risk of burnout further.

In conclusion, the themes present in my data shared similarities with some of the data collected in my literature review. This adds weight to both my data and the literature found, as there are

connections showing similarities. However, my study is only one person's experience and data, so it is not generalizable to a general opinion, as, though the literature and my data agree on common themes, this is one individual and his opinions, so cannot be taken to be the same as others in the same position.

Recommendations

One recommendation I would make is to further research this topic. As stated in my limitations, this study was originally meant to have 6 participants, with the idea of seeing if there were common themes and experiences shared between the participants. Therefore, I would suggest more research, as my data did connect with the literature, showcasing the possibility of it being generalisable. However, it was one person. Therefore, I would suggest conducting more research to see if similar results could be showcased.

A second recommendation I would suggest is generating more literature around Covid-19's effects on counselling as a whole. This would be a recommendation, as Covid-19, as showcased by my data and my literature review, had a wide impact as a whole and needs to be explored further than it has been.

Limitations

One limitation of my research was the lack of interest and responses, as I had designed my research project to have between 3-6 participants. However, I only got one response, which meant I had to change my study to a case study. This was a limitation because it lowered the generalisability, as I had planned to compare the data generated to see common themes from multiple people to make a more generalisable piece. However, this does highlight a strength of my study, as my methodology stayed mostly the same, besides the change in participants. This showcases a well-structured methodology, as it did not need to be altered much under a change to the structure.

A second limitation to my study was the time frame. As stated from lack of interest, I only got one response. This led to a smaller time frame to write up my work, due to me leaving the study open as I waited for responses. This was a limitation, as it impacted my writing, as if I had given myself more time, I would have had the opportunity to examine my discussion more.

A final limitation was that I was a novice at conducting research. As this was my first-time doing research, I will have made mistakes, as I had no experience. These mistakes were eased by my dissertation supervisor, as they provided a lot of support that helped me produce a stronger and more coherent piece.

Conclusion

In summary, the literature found themes and a gap in research on the personal experience of university counsellors working during the pandemic, that my research aimed to fill and check. It aimed to do this by doing a thematic analysis, using a phenomenological case study, to fill the gap in a university counsellor's experience working during the pandemic. My methodology was well structured, as showcased by my findings, as my findings found key themes and filled the gap. This was then explored in my discussion, which cross-checked my six themes against the literature and found they supported each other, strengthening both my and their research. Overall, I would say the main experience for the counsellor was that Covid-19 created loads of uncertainty and stress with my participant, but, due to the right support they received and their attitude and application to their work, they managed the situation successfully and improved as a counsellor due to the circumstances forced on them. However, though my research answers the question about the personal experience of a university counsellor during covid-19, it is on a small scale considering that it is a case study, meaning this topic should continue to be explored and compared.

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