What is a door handle comment?
The term ‘door handle comment’ refers to when a client says something of significance on their way out of a therapy session (Green, 2010).

Background
Transference and countertransference are at their height at the end of the session, as such a client’s parting comments may be considered to be the most important communication in the whole therapy hour (Gabbard, 1982).

Such comments may propose challenges to the therapeutic frame resulting in further emotional conflict in the therapist (Symons & Wheeler, 2005).

Furthermore, Gutheil & Simon (1995) call for extra caution to be taken when a client arrives or departs from sessions due to the increased risk of potential boundary violations to occur in this ‘transition zone’.

Aims
To answer the following research questions:
- How do psychodynamic counsellors experience door handle comments?
- How do they make sense of door handle comments?
- What are the implications for the therapeutic work following a door handle comment.

Methodology and design
A qualitative research design was used.
Psychodynamic counsellors were recruited via email through the BACP/UKCP website and displaying posters in counselling centres.

Seven psychodynamic counsellors took part (six female and one male) and were involved in face to face audio recorded semi-structured interviews exploring:
- their description of the door-handle comment
- how they felt and experienced it
- how they responded at that moment
- how they felt after the session
- what support they sought
- their understanding of the comment in context to the therapeutic process/relationship
- if/how the comment was addressed with the client and the subsequent impact on the work.

The data was transcribed and subsequently analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The analysis is currently in progress.

Preliminary findings
Please note the following findings are preliminary only and incomplete.

The findings so far suggest:

Door handle comments resulted in negative countertransference responses amongst the counsellors.

“I felt crushed actually. That kind of I can’t believe he’s just done that and I don’t know why and I felt angry, you know, angry, confused”.

Counsellors reported negative emotional responses in response to the client, including feeling confused, manipulated, dumped, angry and disappointed.

Counsellors also reported negative feelings towards themselves including self doubt, self blame, and feeling incompetent.

Counsellors were more likely to act on their countertransference at the end of the session than in earlier parts of the session.

“I think it’s something to do with her material and I can sometimes just … yeah, lose my kind of therapist hat before I should”.

Counsellors were more likely to breach boundaries (e.g., handshakes and accept a clients hug), or end the session in a different way to usual with clients who disclosed door handle comments.

Door handle comments were considered to be fruitful material for the therapeutic work that facilitated the therapeutic process when mutually understood.

Limitations
- Small sample size consisting of psychodynamic counsellors based in the UK means the findings cannot be generalised to counsellors of other theoretical orientations, or psychodynamic counsellors in other countries.
- It is possible that data saturation may not have been reached due to the small sample size.
- All participants interviewed to date have been white British which may indicate cultural bias.

References