

# “I have empathy and good skills..but..I can try too hard and become over-involved”

## Self-acknowledged strengths and limitations of counsellors and CBT therapists

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### 01 Introduction

Personal and professional self -awareness is important to most counsellors and therapists and constitutes a keystone of reflective practice. Competency frameworks seek to specify practitioners’ desirable assets while ethical codes and practice guidelines aim to guard against potential deficits in practice, but personal appraisals of plusses and minuses are rarely discussed.

### 02 Objective

This mixed-methods study aimed to give voice to practitioners’ self -evaluations of their professional strengths and limitations, while highlighting differences due to theoretical backgrounds and professional contexts.

challenge clients.

### 03 Data

Qualitative data were provided by 337 UK respondents to the International Study of the Professional Development of Psychotherapists (ISPDP), conducted in collaboration with BACP and BABCP, in response to the free-format questions:

What do you feel is your greatest strength / most problematic limitation as a therapist?

### 04 Methods

Initial ‘Strengths’ and ‘Limitations’ coding frames were derived from previous studies with Indian and South Korean samples and iteratively refined. Working definitions of each category were collated in two coding manuals. We transcribed responses and independently coded them in small batches. We compared our codes, discussed any differences in understandings, refined the coding manuals and added verbatim examples to the category definitions.

### Methods (continued)

If new concepts emerged, we developed new categories and re-coded all previous responses against these. To estimate inter-rater reliability, we independently coded a final batch (n=60) using the re-worked coding manuals. We further calculated disagreement percentages, using these to make two further revisions to the coding manuals.

### 05 Research Outputs

1. Coding frames for self-reported strengths and limitations (see Figures 1 and 2).
2. Two coding manuals containing definitions and examples (see illustrations below):

‘Strengths’ coding manual:

5.1: Empathy/understanding/engagement in therapy  
*The strength is due to the therapist’s abilities in empathising, understanding, connecting, or being present, either generally or in response to particular client/patient presentations.*

Example: My ability to make a warm and trusting relationship with clients and be empathic.

‘Limitations’ coding manual:

2.2: ‘Managing therapeutic relationship or boundaries’  
*The limitation is due to the therapist’s relative inability to structure or focus sessions, or to manage therapy process, or to establish or maintain appropriate boundaries.*

Example: Possibly my reluctance to challenge clients.

### 06 Other Results

Estimated inter -rater reliability: Unweighted kappa = .73, (‘substantial agreement’) demonstrating the utility of the coding manuals for future research. These are now being used in the SPR International Study of Therapists’ Training and Development’. Statistical analysis of responses, comparing and contrasting subgroups, is ongoing.

Personal	1. Intrinsic Qualities	1.1 Personal attitudes, beliefs, values
		1.2 Self-related attitudes / beliefs
		1.3 Personal attributes
	2. Acquired Capabilities	2.1 Evolved capacities
		2.2 Attained resilience
	3. Past experiences	
Professional	4. Technical Resources	4.1 Knowledge base.
		4.2 Operational proficiencies.
	5. Therapeutic Relationship Abilities	5.1 Empathy/understanding/engagement in therapy
		5.2 Managing therapeutic relationship or boundaries
		5.3 Managing internal reactions arising from therapeutic relationship
	6. Experience	
	7. Training & Supervision	7.1 Past and current training / CPD / CE
		7.2 Supervision
	8. Professional Values	8.1 Professional attitudes and ethics.
		8.2 Professional loyalties.
	9. Professional Context	9.1 Material working conditions
		9.2 Collegiate and managerial support

Figure 1: Coding frame for Strengths

Internal	1. Personal factors	1.1 General attitudes, beliefs, values
		1.2 Self-related attitudes / beliefs
		1.3 Personal attributes
		1.4 Past experiences
		1.5 Lack of resilience, burnout
	2. Relational obstacles	2.1 Lack of empathy/understanding/engagement in therapy
		2.2 Managing therapeutic relationship or boundaries
		2.3 Managing internal reactions arising from therapeutic relationship
	3. Gaps in competencies or experience	3.1 Gaps in skills, knowledge, or capacities
		3.2 Insufficient experience
3.3 Lack of meta-competencies		
External	4. Cultural context	
	5. Working conditions	
	6. Stressors	6.1 Workload.
		6.2 Colleagues or managers
	7. Lack of resources	7.1 Deficits in supervision/training/therapy
		7.2 Material resources or time
	8. Client/patient factors	

Figure 2: Coding frame for Limitations

### 07 Conclusion

We have analysed the self-acknowledged strengths and limitations of a large sample of counsellors and CBT therapists, resulting in detailed frames for understanding their perceptions. For **researchers**, the outputs from this study provide tools for further research. For **practitioners**, the coding manuals can serve as a point of personal reflection on potential strengths and limitations that may so far be outside their awareness. For **trainers**, future results on limitations should provide pointers to profession- or theory-specific learning needs to be addressed.