

Study Information Sheet

From Empathy to Enmeshment: Psychodynamic therapists' experiences of fusion with clients — an interpretative phenomenological study.

My name is Anne Brassier and I am doing a research study for my Masters Dissertation in Human Relations and Counselling, at Human Development Scotland (HDS) / Robert Gordon University (RGU). Part of the requirement for the MSc is that I conduct a qualitative research study.

ABOUT THE STUDY

The aim of this study is to enquire: *How psychodynamic therapists experience and make sense of fusion with clients.*

Fusion describes a state where therapist and client have become emotionally or relationally tangled. It is often referred to as *merging*, *enmeshment* or *over-involvement*, and intersects with psychodynamic concepts including individuation and countertransference. Like gravity, fusion is not a directly observable phenomenon; it becomes apparent through its effects, and affects, on the therapist and their client. This study hopes to gain a deeper understanding of how therapists experience and make sense of fusion, and how these experiences influence therapeutic practice, professional boundaries, and reflective self-understanding.

To do this, the study will focus on the following:

- How fusion is understood
- How the experience is described
- How the experience is made sense of
- How the experience impacts therapists

ABOUT PARTICIPATION

The invitation to participate is open to anyone who:

- Is psychodynamic in therapeutic approach
- Is in active clinical practice with at least one regular client
- Has at least 2 years post-qualification experience (post-graduate level studies in counselling or psychotherapy)
- Has experienced fusion with a client in their own clinical work.

Participation involves a one-to-one interview with the researcher, lasting approximately 60–90 minutes. Interviews will take place either face-to-face or via video call depending on your location, and will be audio-recorded with prior consent. The interview will cover topics such as your therapeutic context, your experience of fusion, how you made sense of it and what was the impact on yourself, and your work. You do not need to prepare anything in advance — this information is to help you feel informed and have a sense of what to expect. Following the interview, the recording will be transcribed verbatim and analysed for the final dissertation write-up.

Participation is voluntary and there are no negative consequences if you choose not to participate. Please note that there are no rewards, financial or otherwise, for participation. Participants may withdraw from the study up until data analysis has started (the exact date will be confirmed to participants).

Equally, there are no negative consequences anticipated by taking part in the study, however anyone who experiences distress during an interview can choose not to answer a question, pause the interview for a break, or stop the interview entirely — all without needing to provide a reason. Additionally, after the interview has finished, a debrief is offered as a space to reflect on the experience of participation and for emotional regulation. A debrief handout will be given to all participants, which provides resources for further support.

CONFIDENTIALITY AND PRIVACY

All information shared during participation in this study will be treated as confidential and handled in accordance with Robert Gordon University's [Data Protection Policy](#). Interview data will be audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and anonymised at the point of

transcription. Any other identifying information will be removed, changed or anonymised to ensure confidentiality in the recordings, transcripts and research findings. All data will be stored securely and password-protected, accessible only by the researcher and their supervisors, both clinical and academic.

However, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed if information is disclosed that indicates a risk of serious harm to yourself or others, including clients, or where disclosure would be required by law or the researcher's professional and ethical obligations (the British Association for Counselling and Psychotherapy's [Ethical Framework](#)).

The data — audio recordings and transcripts — will be securely stored on Robert Gordon University's OneDrive. All other working documents will be kept on the researcher's laptop, which is securely stored at their home office with locked access. Only the researcher and their supervisor will have access to the data. The data will be destroyed up to ten years after completion of the study (expected to be June 2026). All participants' personal data will be processed in accordance with RGU's Information Governance Policy in terms of the GDPR 2018 which can be found at: [RGU Data Protection](#).

On agreeing to participate, participants will be asked to sign a consent form to confirm that they have understood the scope of the study and of participation. A digital version of the consent form will be available for participants interviewed online.

THE FINDINGS

The findings from the study will be presented in the form of a Dissertation, which will be examined at the University and may be placed in virtual learning environments, such as RGU's Virtual Learning Environment or Google Scholar, for other Counselling and Psychotherapy students and researchers. Those wishing to be informed of the research study outcomes can request a summary of the findings, which will be sent to them in due course.

CONTACT DETAILS

Please contact me for further information: a.brassier@rgu.ac.uk. Or my research supervisor, Jennifer Malik: jennifer@hds.scot.

Thank you for your interest in taking part,