

UK counselling psychology training placements: *Where are we now?*

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Abstract

Quality training placements are crucial to delivering quality learning and teaching and to producing professional practitioner psychologists. However, accessing high-quality placements remains a struggle for trainee counselling psychologists, and there is a lack of information regarding where trainees typically work on placement and the level of support provided to students. This pilot project attempted to gather data on programme placement support and placement / training mapping. A confidential, anonymous online survey was created, and each BPS accredited counselling psychology programme was invited to complete one questionnaire. 9 of the 14 programmes took part. Results were used to generate ideas as to how training programmes and professional bodies could better support trainee counselling psychologists.

Research Questions

Following Martin's call (2010) for additional research in the area, this study sought to parallel Neimeyer and Keilin's (2007) analysis of results of annual placement surveys of US counselling psychology programmes. This initial investigation aimed to explore what our training placements indicate about the current state of the profession and its identity, by addressing three questions:

- *How well do we support our trainees with placement issues?*

In response to the workshop on placement issues at last year's DCoP conference, the survey included some foundational questions around the number of placement contacts held by each programme, the number of students on each programme, and the level of staffing resource allocated to placement support.

- *How well do our placements map onto our training?*

Where do our trainees work on placement, typically? And do these settings permit them to practice the therapeutic approaches taught on their programmes?

- *What are the primary challenges faced by training programmes around placements?*

The survey also requested some written qualitative data regarding the barriers experienced while supporting trainees to find suitable placements and how these have changed over time.

Method

To enable the prompt collation of this information from the UK accredited programmes, an online questionnaire was devised (Sue and Ritter, 2007). Each BPS accredited counselling psychology training course was invited to take part in this study. One completed survey was requested from each course, collecting self-report data from either the programme leader or placement coordinator. 9 of the 14 accredited UK programmes took part. Data was collected confidentially via Qualtrics and reported and analysed anonymously. Respondents were not asked to identify their training institution. Descriptive, summary statistics were run on the quantitative data. Qualitative, open-ended questions were also included in the questionnaire, but replies to these short-answer questions were consistently brief, precluding any in-depth thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). However, Braun and Clarke's model was still used to organise the data into themes, at a descriptive level, from a critical realist perspective (Wetherell & Still, 2001).

Results

- Academic resource allocated to placement coordination on UK counselling psychology professional doctorates ranged from 0.2 to 1 FTE, averaging at 0.5 FTE across the 9 participating programmes.
- There was no correspondence between the number of placement contacts per programme and the number of students enrolled on the programme.
- CBT was the most predominant approach taught on these programmes.
- For six of the surveyed programmes, there was a strong correspondence between the approaches taught and the number of placement contacts held where students could practice those approaches.
- NHS placements are now prevalent, but variety in placement settings remains.
- The qualitative data gathered in this study could be summarised by four headings: 'Placements as problematic', 'Counselling psychology versus clinical psychology', 'An improving profile', and 'The role of the professional body.'

Chart 1: Therapeutic approaches taught on UK counselling psychology programmes

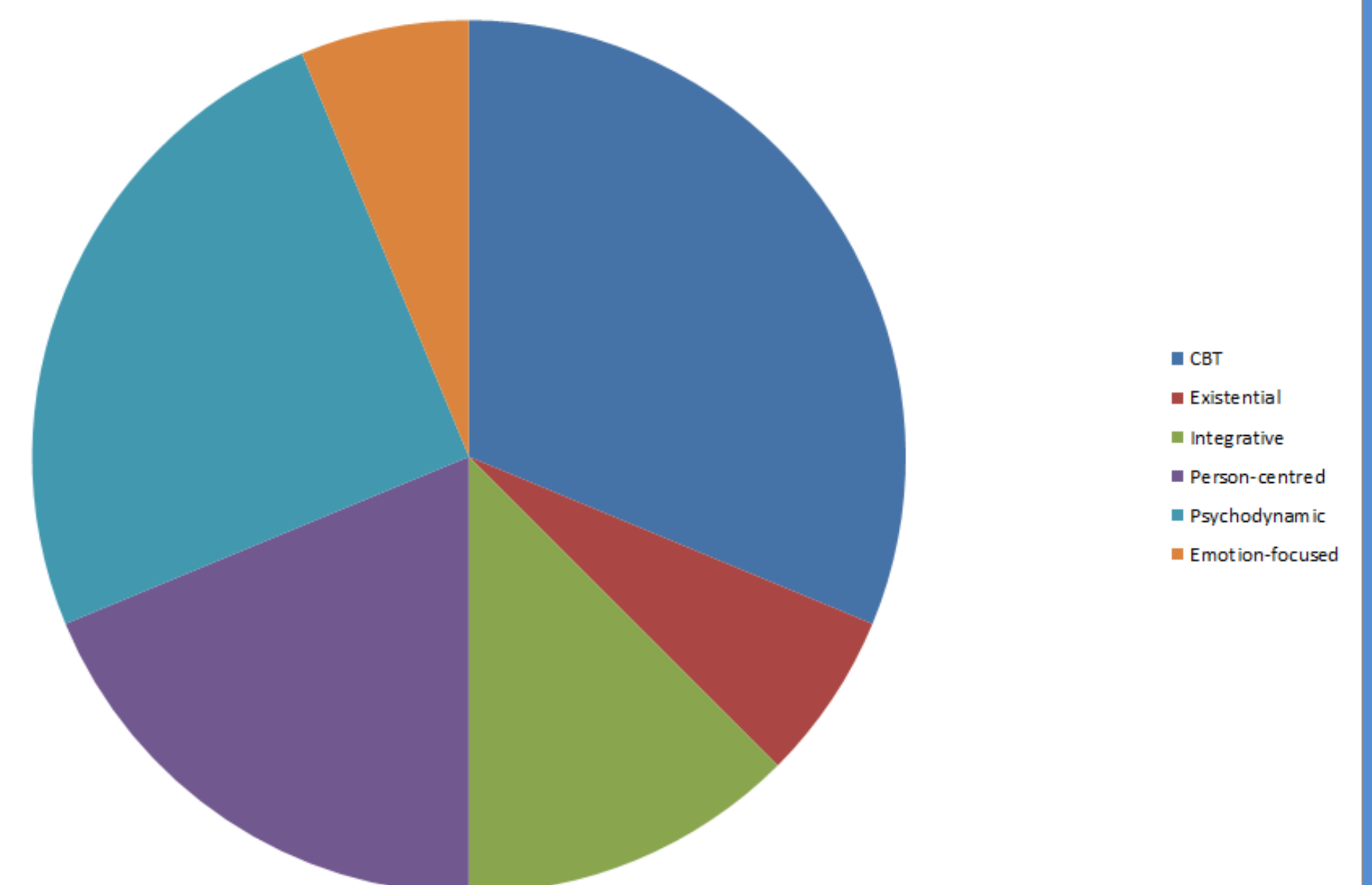


Chart 2: Placement contacts by approach

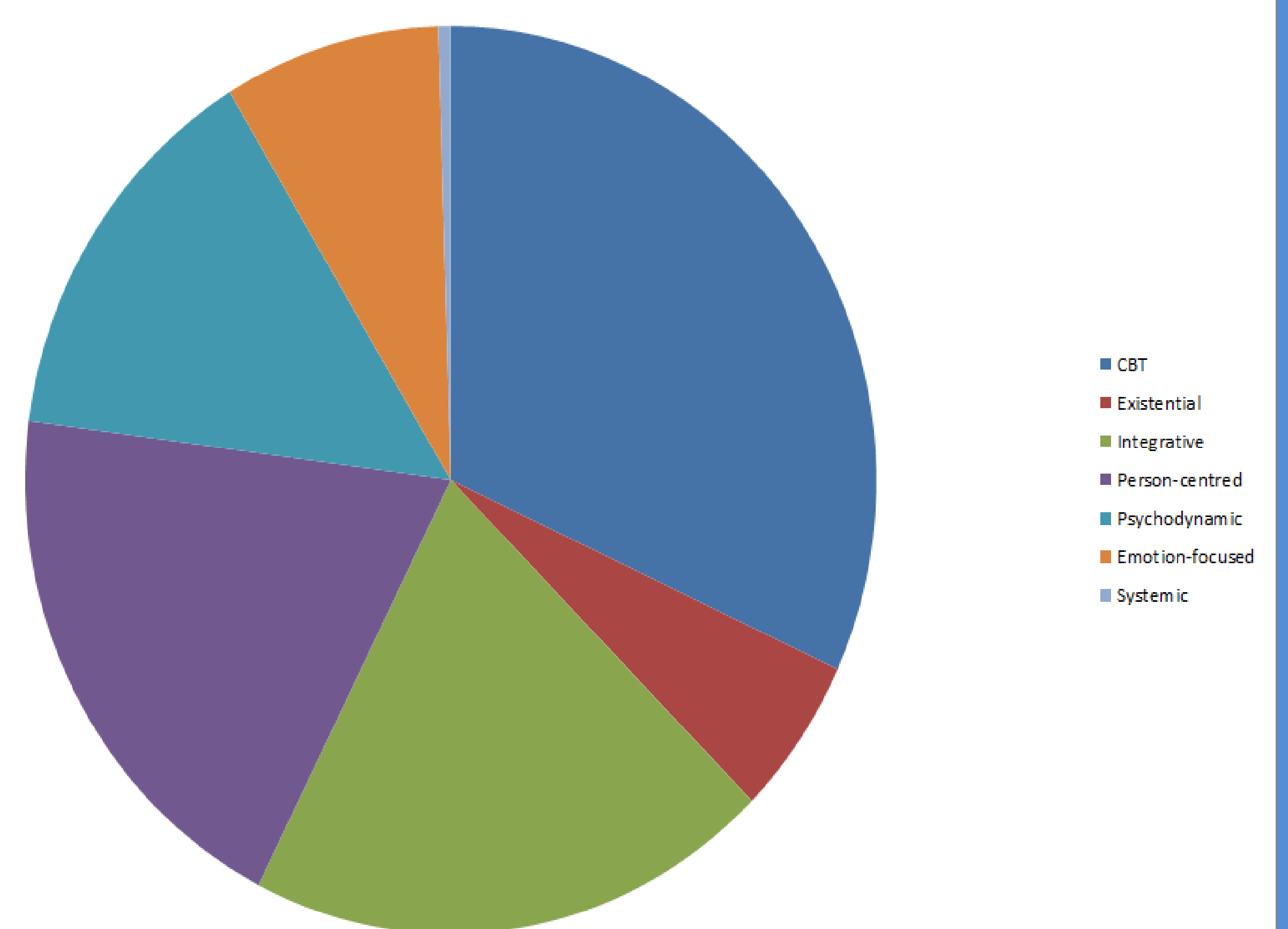
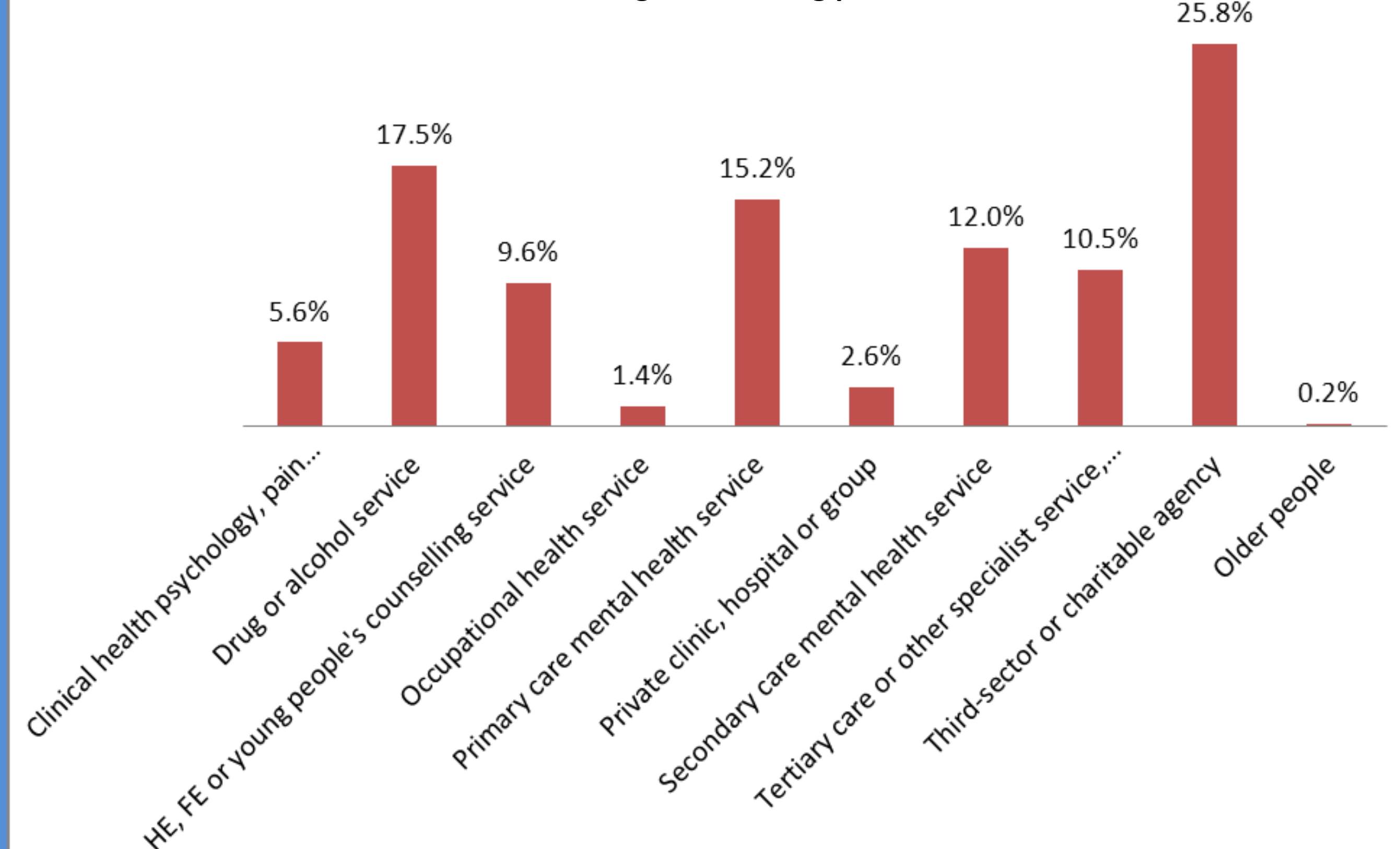


Chart 3: Settings for training placements



Suggestions for policy and practice

- Commence an annual survey of UK counselling psychology training programmes, as in the US
- Promote a clear professional identity to commissioning groups and placement providers
- Promote the supervision of trainees in organisations and privately
- Create a national placement database
- Recommend a BPS training standards benchmark staffing level for placement coordination for professional doctorate programmes of 0.5 FTE as a minimum