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Searching for Story: A Narrative Inquiry into Hindering Experiences in *Counselling*

by

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

in

Counselling Psychology

Department of Educational Psychology

Edmonton, Alberta

Spring, 2005

> Good therapy should enable, instigate, enliven, provide its clients with useful tools for careful and generous living. A context which is free of judgment, which brings instead discrimination, awareness and an understanding that is fresh and invigorating, can renew and inspire what is best in us. A context which evokes division and denies the connectedness and interdependence that characterise all human relationships can chip away at a sense of authenticity, of one's presence in the world and of the importance of other people (Sands, 2000, p. 200).

Sands, A. (2000). *Falling for therapy: Psychotherapy from a client's point of view.* London: Macmillan Press.

To Greg,

for his unwavering belief in me

Abstract

This study placed clients' stories of hindering experiences in counselling in the public domain. The goal of deeply attending to these stories in an effort to better understand clients' hindering experiences in counselling was met through conducting a narrative inquiry in which stories of experience were solicited, analyzed and represented. Narrative inquiry, a qualitative research method in which attention is paid to the storying activities that shape our understanding of experience, gave voice to six participants' hindering experiences in counselling. Since the research literature reports that client perceptions of and contributions to counselling contribute more strongly to outcome than do counsellor ratings, client viewpoints are critical. Clients are generally reluctant to share negative experiences and a discussion regarding the difficulty in soliciting these experiences is presented. Several implications for counselling practice are addressed. The integral presence of narrative as the shaping force in how people make sense of their lives is seen in the participants' experiences. As people develop coherent narratives to make sense of their lives, personal narrative formation and its influence on the counselling process is considered. Counselling, and hindering experiences in particular, can be understood in the context of the client's narrative of identity. The uniqueness of each person's life story and their position within that story needs to be attended to in the counselling process. Hindering experiences are also explored through a detailed narrative of one participant's experiences in counselling. Working collaboratively, the participant and researcher came to understand her hindering experience as initiating a process of regaining her voice and taking a more active stance in her life. Connections are made to the narrative process of counselling and the process that occurred in this research. The influence of each

participant's stories of expectations, stories of personal agency, and stories at the boundaries of relationship are discussed in regard to hindering experiences. Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of the client perspective in counselling. Clients are engaged in a change process and counsellors need be willing to attend closely to clients' experiences of counselling to best encourage that change process.

Acknowledgements

First I would like to acknowledge my dissertation committee, particularly Barbara Paulson, Jean Clandinin, and Robin Everall. Your support, encouragement, and confidence were instrumental in bringing this project to completion. Working with a consistent and cooperative committee was deeply appreciated throughout this process. I have learned a great deal from each of you.

I would also like to thank the six people who shared their time and their lives with me. Having been a participant in various research studies, I realize that it is not always easy to be open and trusting. I much appreciate the confidence you placed in me, and hope I have done your experiences justice. Karma, I especially wish to acknowledge the role you played in exploring your story with me. Again, the trust and commitment shared is treasured and I have been changed as a result of seeing your willingness to engage so fully in this research.

Greg and Katrina – you two have held me steady and reminded me that there is more to life than dissertations. While always willing to bend to accommodate what I asked for regarding time to work, I knew I was working too hard the day Katrina, clinging tightly to her colouring sheets, cautioned me to be careful and not touch her 'dissertation papers'. Katrina, you were born into this process, and I look forward to many years with you before we need to be cautious about dissertation papers again!

The friends and colleagues who supported me throughout this process – I am very grateful for always finding an empathic shoulder when I needed one. Knowing others who had completed or were immersed in this process was immensely helpful. I especially thank those friends who were consistently interested in talking through ideas with me.

And finally, I would like to acknowledge the role of those who have known me the longest. People say that parents are the greatest cheerleaders, and mine certainly qualify. While they may not have always fully understood what I was doing, they were supportive and proud – and that was all that was necessary. Thanks for firmly believing I was capable of seeing this process through to the end. And to a second Mom, acquired along the way, your constant support and help in finding ways to get the work done has made this process much smoother. Having another cheerleader come along in my life has been most welcome!

Table of Contents

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Stories have been used as a means of identifying the self throughout the history of humankind. They have the power to move us and to teach us. Bateson states "our species thinks in metaphors and learns through stories" (1994, p. 11). In this research, I explore the process of counselling from the perspective of the client through the use of story. While developing stories of counselling, the focus was on those aspects of the counselling process that were experienced as not helpful, those things that interfered with progress. The principal goal of the study was to share the stories that clients hold of hindering experiences in counselling in order to learn more about these experiences. Research shows clients do not often share their negative experiences with their counsellors (Regan & Hill, 1992) and that counsellors are rarely aware of what clients are not saying (Hill, Nutt-Williams, Heaton, Thompson & Rhodes, 1996). Hindering experiences are often untold stories, stories counsellors do not hear. By encouraging clients to tell their stories of hindering experiences, counsellors will be in the privileged position of hearing what clients generally do not say.

Research regarding hindering experiences in counselling can be better understood by contextualizing it within a brief overview of counselling research in general. Research in psychotherapy outcome began in the 1950's and 60's in response to Hans Eysenck's (1952) challenge that research had failed to show that psychotherapy was more effective than the simple passage of time. Many researchers attempted to measure outcome more precisely (Auerbach, 1983; Bergin, 1971; Jacobson, Follette, & Revenstorf, 1984), and began working to find ways to prove the effectiveness of psychotherapy (Bergin, 1966; May, 1971; Truax, 1963). Often entailing randomized clinical trials and comparing various therapies against one another or against other treatments, the goal of outcome

research is to assess the effectiveness of psychotherapy (Watson, Gordon, Stermac, Kalogerakos, & Steckley, 2003; Westen & Morrison, 2001).

The study of negative outcomes in therapy is a relatively recent focus within outcome research (Levy, Glass, Arnkoff, Gershefski & Elkin, 1996; Sandell Sachs, 1983) in which studies typically measure symptomatic deterioration from pre- to post- treatment (Mohr, 1995). This focus seems to stem from an intuitive sense that perhaps certain clients will not benefit from a particular kind of therapy or therapist. Hadley and Strupp (1976) report that among 70 clinicians, there was almost unanimous agreement that negative outcome is a problem. As practitioners and researchers (Powell, 1995; Strupp, 1980a) have suggested, learning can occur from understanding the unsuccessful times in therapy. Naming and exploring hindering experiences can lead to growth and learning. Kottler and Carson assert that "growth and learning, after all, often result from making sense of things that go wrong. This is especially the case when we are reflective and systematic about deconstructing the sequence of events and making sense of the experience" (2003, p. x). A careful look at what hinders therapy can provide information to help reduce negative outcome and increase the value of therapy for the client.

Overall, outcome research has encouraged psychotherapy researchers to become more attentive to effectiveness and has shown that psychotherapy can be very effective (Ogles, Lambert & Fields, 2002; Wampold, 2001). Outcome research has been augmented by process research, which strives to find out *how* it is that psychotherapy is an effective tool for bringing about healing and change. Process research focuses on how therapy is unfolding; on understanding better what it is about psychotherapy that makes it effective. Hill (1982) defines process research as research that analyses the behaviours

and interactions that occur in the counselling session between the counsellor and client. She suggests that process research has three main goals: (a) to discover what happens in the counselling session, (b) to show change in client in-session behaviours and (c) to link process to outcome or to describe how change is brought about. Overall, the goal of process research is to understand more fully how counselling affects the client's change process. Like outcome research, process research has been empirically based and also strives to contribute to the study of efficacy and effectiveness of psychotherapy (Binder & Strupp, 1997; Gelso & Carter, 1994; Heppner, Rosenberg, & Hedgespeth, 1992; Kolden, 1996). Process research tends to generate detailed and specific data (often within session) while outcome research tends to have a broader focus (often across entire treatments) which does not always address in full what it is that people do in counselling. Both areas of research are valuable, and there is often overlap between the two.

As an investigation that solicits clients' reflections on their counselling experiences, this study is situated within the scope of process research. Rather than directly addressing efficacy, attention is paid to the detailed contextual picture of what is happening in the counselling, and how it is that the counselling is working or not working. By better understanding how clients perceive and experience counselling, more effective counselling practices can be developed. In seeking to learn from clients, attending to the unhelpful or hindering aspects of therapy is valuable.

Background Context

Increasingly, value is being placed on including the client perspective in psychotherapy research (Clarke, Rees, & Hardy, 2004; Elliott & James, 1989; Heppner et al., 1992; Paulson, Everall & Stuart, 2001). Research shows that clients' perceptions of

the counselling process often differ from those of the counsellor (Bachelor, 1991; Elliott & James, 1989; Gershefski, Arnkoff, Glass & Elkin, 1996) and that clients' perceptions of, and contributions to, therapy correlate more strongly with outcome than do therapist ratings (Halstead, Brooks Jr., Goldberg & Fish, 1990; Marziali, 1984). In this research project, clients are positioned as privileged knowers, as expert on what is and is not helpful. Their experiences of counselling are given voice.

This research sought to expand knowledge of clients' hindering and unhelpful experiences in counselling. While much research has been done in the area of what is helpful in counselling, hindering aspects have been less researched (Mohr, 1995; Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992). Although not an easy area to research, there are many indications that hindering experiences do happen, and they do have an impact on counselling (Hadley & Strupp, 1976; Paulson et al., 2001). Binder and Strupp (1997), Lietaer (1992) and Mohr (1995) all indicate that negative process is an important obstacle to successful treatment that has been underestimated to date. Previous research shows that hindering experiences are a difficult area to study as clients do not easily talk about them (Levitt, 2001; Paulson et al., 2001; Sells, Smith & Moon, 1996) and tend to hide negative reactions in therapy (Regan & Hill, 1992; Thompson & Hill, 1991). Possibly it is the difficulty in researching this area that has led to a call for more exploratory, qualitative research of client experiences (Clarke et al., 2004; Levy et al., 1996; Rhodes, Hill, Thompson, & Elliott, 1994; Sells et al., 1996; Strupp, 1980b; Thompson & Hill, 1991).

Research conducted in the area of hindering experiences seems to suggest that many of these experiences can be located in three broad areas: counsellor activity, client

process, and the client-counsellor relationship or match (Elliott, 1985; Lietaer, 1992; Llewelyn, Elliott, Shapiro, Hardy & Firth-Cozens, 1988; Paulson et al., 2001). Lietaer (1992) found that clients identified the source of impediments in counselling in two broad areas: counsellor attitudes and interventions, and client process. In Sands (2000), a self-reflective book written by a client of psychotherapy, these areas can also be seen. Paulson et al.'s (2001) investigation of clients' perceptions of hindering experiences in counselling developed a number of themes within the three categories of counsellor behaviours, external and structural barriers, and client variables. Many of these themes appear to relate to the relationship aspects of therapy. This research utilized direct interviews with actual clients which strengthens its findings. Paulson et al. briefly refer to the value of understanding negative experiences for practice and suggest that many of these negative experiences on the part of the client may be rooted in a lack of responsiveness on the part of the therapist. The work by Paulson et al. was part of the impetus for this research project, which sought to deepen understanding of hindering experiences through engaging in a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000).

As a developing practitioner with an interest in research, I have been particularly interested in points of disconnection that exist between research and practice in counselling and psychotherapy (McLeod, 1999; Sexton & Whiston, 1996). McLeod (1999) identifies that often practitioner research stems from personal experience and a "need to know" and is designed in a manner that facilitates the counselling process. The qualitative method mirrors the therapeutic relationship in many ways. In both, the person is the instrument: the counsellor is a therapeutic instrument (Hayes, McCracken, McClanahan, Hill, Harp & Carozzoni, 1998), and the researcher is an instrument through

which the data is composed and analyzed (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997; Schulz, 1997). Using narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000), a method that closely reflects the counselling process, increases the practical relevance of the research. Polkinghorne (1988) describes the result of grappling with the gaps that seem to exist between research and practice as discovering "the importance of having research strategies that can work with the narratives people use to understand the human world" (p. xi) in order to enhance and learn from practitioner knowledge. Narrative inquiry is such a strategy.

Two main questions guided this research: (1) What do people experience as hindering and/or unhelpful in therapy? and (2) How do people situate these experiences within the context of the therapy process? A third question emerged through the research process: (3) How do people situate the hindering counselling experience within the context of their lives? Previous research suggests that hindering research is best done by conducting in-person interviews (Levy et al., 1996; Paulson et al., 2001) with actual clients (Sells et al., 1996), refraining from imposing categories on the participants (Paulson, Truscott & Stuart, 1999), and collecting data both throughout treatment and post-treatment (Hill, Helms, Spiegel & Tichenor, 1988; Rhodes et al, 1994). In the service of these goals I chose narrative inquiry, a qualitative research method, as an appropriate and useful approach. Unstructured, in-person interviews with actual clients were conducted, which allowed participants to tell their stories without imposing an explanatory meta-narrative onto their experiences. As well, participants were encouraged to maintain an ongoing record of their counselling throughout the process.

Method of Narrative Inquiry

The use of qualitative methods to investigate social phenomena, specifically the counselling relationship, is strongly supported in the literature (Heppner et al., 1992; Hill, 1982; McLeod, 2000; Polkinghorne, 1994). There is an acknowledgement that quantitative methods, while useful, often cannot explore experiences in the same way (Neimeyer & Resnikoff, 1982, Polkinghorne, 1988). Many qualitative methods, including narrative inquiry, are rooted in a postmodern view of the world, where knowledge is understood to be perspectival and contextual (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). While important, McLeod (1997) has noted a lack of attention to narrative in research and writing on psychotherapy. Recently there has been an increasing amount of writing in this area, as can be seen by Josselson, Lieblich, & McAdams' (2003) in depth discussion of the necessity of providing guidance in the areas of teaching and learning narrative research. As well, Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson (2004) investigate narrative aspects in the healing process in psychotherapy.

As Clandinin and Connelly (2000) stress, narrative inquiry also takes into consideration the temporal nature of experience, and connects to the relational and interactive nature of experience as discussed by Dewey (1963). In thinking about these aspects, Clandinin and Connelly develop a very useful metaphor of three-dimensional space to consider the influences of time, location and social context in a story of experience. Stories move in and out of time, referring back to the past, being in the present and looking forward to the future. As well, the places in which stories occur and relate to vary, with movement being a common occurrence in a story. Finally, the inward or outward focus of the story shapes its meaning. The stories of hindering experiences as told by the participants here move in and out of these various dimensions. Their personal

stories have broader social implications and this study considers this intersection of intra and inter personal.

Psychologists are constantly engaged in interpretive processes of meaning making. People bring us their stories hoping we can interpret them (Coles, 1989). Historically, the assumption has been made that the psychologist's ability to interpret was based on their skill, training and mastery of technique. More recently, guided by philosophical shifts in ontology and epistemology as well as empirical research, these assumptions have been called into question. Increasingly the interpretive process is being placed in-between the two people engaged in therapy - in the relationship. Working together, meaning is created and the person coming to therapy is an equal contributor to the process. In fact, the client is the main source of knowledge and the "privileged interpreter" (Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999; White & Epston, 1990).

These changes in the psychotherapy climate are reflected in the way counsellors attend to the stories people bring to therapy. As McLeod states, "In mainstream psychodynamic therapy, listening to stories is a means to an end. The story itself is of relatively little intrinsic interest to the therapist" (1997, p. 68). However, support for a "narrative perspective within psychology, based in the work of Bruner (1986, 1990), Polkinghorne (1988), Sarbin (1986) and others, has steadily gained in importance over the last ten years" (Grafankaki & McLeod, 1999, p. 289). The value attached to stories and storying activities is shifting; both in the practice of and in the researching of psychotherapy (Angus & McLeod, 2004). Witherell and Noddings write:

> Stories are powerful research tools. They provide us with a picture of real people in real situations, struggling with real problems. They banish the indifference

> often generated by samples, treatments and faceless subjects. They invite us to speculate on what might be changed and with what effect. And, of course they remind us of our persistent fallibility. Most important, they invite us to remember that we are in the business of teaching, learning, and researching to improve the human condition. Telling and listening to stories can be a powerful sign of regard-of-caring-for one another (1991, p. 280).

If narrative structure can be understood as "the organizing principle not only of experiences and actions but of the self who experiences and acts" (Carr, 1986, p. 73), it makes sense to investigate these selves and actions using a narrative method. Narrative inquiry attends to the storying activities that shape and create our understanding of our experiences; it captures the power of narrative discourse to integrate knowledge and subjectivity (Josselson et al., 2003). The present study used narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to develop stories of experience in order to learn more about hindering experiences in counselling. Participants reflected on what their experiences in counselling meant to them, and how they made meaning of their experience from within the context of their lives. We talked about when, where and how the counselling occurred and a deep understanding of the nuances of experiences within each individual life was sought. As Connelly & Clandinin (1990) state "people by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of them, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (p. 2). In narrative inquiry, metaphors to encourage understanding are shaped, and the pattern or framework of the storied life is developed. Bruner's (2004) discussion of self formation describes how people naturally portray the self through story and discusses how this narrative act must

balance between a "conviction of autonomy, that one has a will of one's own ... [and that the story] must also relate the self to the world of others" (p.10). The story is contextual and mutable; it is the story in this place and for this time. In the future, the life may be storied differently as any reflection on experience is always shaped by the context in which both the experience and the reflection occurred.

As a method, narrative inquiry was of interest to me for a number of reasons: First, it was a good fit with the research questions as its inquiring stance of accepting curiosity is well-suited to investigating a generally silenced or unspoken story like hindering experiences (Regan & Hill, 1992). Second, it was an excellent way of valuing the context of unique experiences. Third, it provided space to be respectful, attentive and authentic in relationships, which is a strongly held personal value. Finally, narrative inquiry allowed my voice to be an integral part of the work rather than presenting a decontextualized piece.

Each method of research generates a particular kind of knowledge. This research does not provide a mirror on "Truth" as objective reality, but rather seeks to develop conversation. Dewey (1963) emphasized the importance of interaction between the experiencing person and his/her environment for learning, with the role of the teacher being that of creating an environment suited to learning for the student. It is hoped that this research has created an environment which encourages an interactive reading. The reader is invited to be an agent who actively shapes his or her own knowing.

Participants and Data Collection

Prior to participant solicitation or data collection, ethics approval was obtained from the University of Alberta Ethics Board. Six adults (five women and one man) who

had recently engaged in counselling participated in this research. Their ages ranged from early twenties to late forties, and there were a variety of gender combinations of therapist and client. The male participant worked with a female counsellor, three of the women worked with female counsellors, and two worked with male counsellors. Four participants worked with counsellors in training, all of whom had already acquired a Masters degree in counselling and were continuing their studies at the doctoral level. Two women worked with licensed psychologists in private practice.

Participants were solicited through their counsellors and through advertisements in a free, local newspaper. The study information (Appendix A) was given to counsellors, who presented the study description with contact information to their clients (Appendix B). The clients then indicated their interest to the counsellor or myself directly. One participant responded to the newspaper advertisement, three were recruited through their counsellors, one was told about the study by another participant and one heard about the study and came to me directly (all were given study descriptions).

Participants were further informed about and gave informed consent to participate in the study at the outset of their counselling (Appendix C). They were clearly informed of their right to withdraw at anytime. Participants were asked to keep a record of their experiences as they moved through counselling (by journal writing or an alternate method of their choice) which they were to share at the time of the interview. When counselling had ended, each person engaged with me in a tape recorded interview lasting 1-2 hours, during which time their experiences in counselling were explored in detail. While the research focused on exploring hindering or unhelpful experiences, clients were encouraged to discuss the full range of their experiences and were not restricted in their

expression. Transcripts of these interviews became the data. Unfortunately, most of the participants did not kept an ongoing record of their counselling experiences. While a few participants had kept private journals, they chose not to bring these to our interview. One participant, Karma, did share her personal writings with me. All participants had one recorded interview, and one participant (Karma) and I also engaged in extended conversations over a period of six months.

Data Analysis

The transcripts were read a number of times to gain further familiarity with each conversation. During the narrative analysis, various types of research texts were created for each transcript in an effort to understand what each person had said. These texts became the basis for the representations of each person's story that are contained within this work. With many of the conversations, I worked with creating found poetry (Richardson, 1997), a method of creating poetry using verbatim text from the participant's interview. This encouraged concise thinking, and helped identify key aspects of the conversations. Metaphoric representations of the counselling experiences were created to capture what was being shared, and clarify my understanding. I also organized the text by theme, grouping together statements reflecting similar thoughts. This helped key elements of each story to come forward, and ensured that minor statements I connected to did not become larger than the participant intended. In many of the conversations participants described both the recent counselling experience and previous counselling. Often using different experiences in a comparative manner helped them clarify what they found helpful or hindering. At times, I used comparative tables to hold two different experiences side by side. Thematizing these tables helped to organize

the information. Finally, writing summary statements helped manage the amount of information, and pull out the most salient parts of the experiences being described. Overall, my goal was to better understand the stories, particularly what each person was trying to tell me about hindering experiences.

As a researcher I also brought stories to the research, and lived stories of relationships with participants. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) acknowledge the relational nature of research: "Of course, the landscapes on which we work are storied. Of course, as researchers on those landscapes, we will be storied by those with whom we work. Stories of us are with us as we move from field to field text to research text" (p.177). One way I acknowledged the stories I brought was through including another counsellor/researcher in the initial stages of the analysis. She read the anonymous transcripts, and we spoke about each participant's story. This was helpful in highlighting my assumptions and the working knowledge on which I was basing my understanding. We were able to challenge each other, and I was encouraged to think more deeply about the stories shared with me. Working in this way made it easier to notice when I was shifting the client's story to match my preferred interpretations or overlaying a particular theoretical lenses, and gave me a relationship within which to explore these occurrences. While it is neither possible nor desirable to engage in research without assumptions, working collaboratively was an effective way to bring these to awareness.

The following section introduces the reader to each participant, presenting something of their stories and my interactions with them, in order to provide a sense of each person. It is valuable for the reader to have a glimpse into each person's experiences in counselling, in order to have a sense of the foundation that shaped this work. The

participants are presented in the order in which I met with them. Pseudonyms are used and identifying information has been omitted or altered to protect anonymity.

Gail – Power of the Self

Gail worked with a male counselling student at a training clinic over a period of eight months, typically once per week. Our interview was energetic, with Gail eager to share her views and also somewhat apologetic that her positive experience may not be useful to me. In Gail's transcript, a picture of a strong, self-sufficient woman emerged. While willing to accept help from others, Gail presented a core of self-reliance and was very aware of her goals for counselling. She reflected a positive attitude, which she stated she consciously cultivates, and clearly presented herself as someone who was not broken, did not need fixing, but rather wished to learn more and understand herself better. Gail's statement that she approaches everything with gusto is reflected in her comments during our time together. She approached counselling wholeheartedly - determined to make it work for her. Consequently, it appears that it did work for her. We discussed her positive experience within the context of previous counselling experiences (both mandated and voluntary) that were less helpful. I did contact Gail and briefly discussed my thoughts and arranged to send her the transcript and my analysis of it, which was primarily in the form of found poetry (Richardson, 1997). Unfortunately, I did not receive a response from her, even after repeated attempts to contact her. Gail's views of herself, counselling, and the fit between the two are discussed more fully in Chapter Three – "Narrative inquiry illuminates counselling: Stories of coherence".

In our interview Gail placed a strong value on minimizing any power difference there might have been between her and the counsellor. Counselling was most helpful for

Gail when she felt the relationship to be equal, rather than the counsellor taking an expert position. Gail gave examples of ways she worked to make the relationship equal, such as times when she gave her counsellor personal advice, and he accepted it. Counselling, for Gail, was a safe place to grow, stretch, take chances. She learned tools and participated in behavioural experiments. She processed past trauma, and oriented herself toward her future. She seemed to have taken something of value from each experiment or suggestion, even if it was the knowledge that a particular way of working was not suited to her. Gail recognized she has the ability and knowledge within herself, but was willing to seek out assistance in tapping into and better understanding that knowledge. In these ways she was a good match for counselling.

Throughout our interview, Gail relayed being aware that her approach to counselling strongly influenced the process. In fact, in response to being asked what was most helpful out of the whole experience, she said: "walking in the front door". Essentially, her view of counselling seems to be that a person's stance in the world affects their view of counselling, and the therapist needs to understand and meet this stance to be effective. Gail's particular stance included a strong valuing of herself as a person who did not need to be fixed, and a high degree of awareness around power imbalances. Many of her comments and examples returned to the idea that the therapist as expert is not helpful, while an approach of equality and reciprocity is more useful.

Lori – An Archaeology Dig

Lori was seen regularly by a female counsellor undergoing doctoral training in a counselling training centre for seven months; typically attending one session per week. In our interview Lori was open and clear regarding her process in counselling and her

thoughts on her sessions. Through working with the themes in Lori's transcript, I began to see her counselling experience metaphorically as an archaeology dig occurring in her backyard (Appendix D). The yard was symbolic of her life, and the dig represented her attempt to better understand herself and gain insight into her issue, a main focus in her counselling sessions. Lori displayed a belief that in order to change her behaviour, which was her goal, she needed to understand it first. The counsellor appeared to have joined her in this belief, and is represented as the dig supervisor. The process of counselling is portrayed through tracing what being on the dig site was like for Lori. The language of the metaphoric representation of Lori's experience sought to capture the flavour of speaking with Lori. Lori read the transcript and my representation of her experience in the metaphoric archaeology dig. She stated that the metaphor captured her experience and was appropriate.

Overall, Lori described her counselling experience as helpful. She did describe a hindering experience in her fourth session where she felt a lack of connection to, and empathy from, the counsellor. She described bringing this into the session, feeling heard by the counsellor and having a sense of resolution that resulted in feeling a closer connection to the counsellor. Interestingly, she stated that she had not experienced a great deal of behavioural change, which had been her stated goal. This was a struggle for me – how to understand that counselling can be experienced as a helpful and positive experience when it does not seem that the goal of behavioural change was met. However, the increased understanding of the issue that Lori came to cannot be minimized.

The crucial part of the experience that appears to have interfered with Lori's process in therapy was the imposed ending of therapy. As Lori was working with a

student, the counselling ended when the student's training period ended. Perhaps a longer term of therapy would have enabled the hoped for behavioural changes to occur. Lori began to experience anxiety about ending well before the termination date, as she felt she was not finished, and this anxiety was minimized by the counsellor rather than validated. Yet, even though the counsellor did not realize the extent of Lori's anxiety, it did not diminish, if anything it grew and began to interfere with her ability to maximally benefit from her sessions. She began disconnecting early and experienced termination as a tremendous negative shock. This experience shows how quickly and easily a client will put away their experience rather than force the counsellor to hear them. The allusion to a puppy dangling on a leash was how Lori described the experience in our interview. I felt her shock strongly enough when we were talking to ask if she would like some referrals.

Megan – A House on Fire

Megan saw a male student counsellor at a training clinic for six months, typically once per week. She also willingly conveyed her experience to me as fully as she could. I began working with Megan's transcript by attempting to pull out meaning through creating poems from her statements (Richardson, 1997). This quickly proved difficult to do as our conversation was filled with descriptive anecdotes that did not lend themselves to the concise nature of poetry. I began to represent her experience though metaphor, and portrayed her counselling experiences as battling to put out the flames in her home. In the metaphoric representation (presented in Chapter Three, "Narrative inquiry illuminates counselling: Stories of coherence"), her counsellors are fire fighters, educating her about fire safety and Megan engages in a process of attempting to make her house (her sense of self) safe and liveable again. Megan responded positively to reading the transcript and the

account as well as my reflections. She noted that engaging in this research helped her further consolidate her counselling experience.

Megan praised her counsellor, Mark, for his ability to ground her, and keep up with her frequent topic changing, or "switching channels" as she called it. Megan tended to place the counsellor slightly above herself in power as a person with skills and knowledge that can be given to her. She did state that once she was given information, she could learn and practice on her own. It seemed that for therapy to be optimal for Megan, she needed to feel confident that the counsellor had knowledge and skills that could be helpful for her. Megan described Mark as fitting this position.

She described experiences with other counsellors where the balance of power was not ideal. In one such experience Megan described how the counsellor took on the expert and advice-giving role too strongly. Megan also described a time when she decided the issues she was confronting would be too hard for the counsellor, and made a decision to end counselling and work on her own.

Prior to Mark, Megan saw a young woman in training, Susan. Megan described this relationship as being somewhat useful, but noted that Susan failed to take on enough of a role in the counselling. She primarily validated and encouraged Megan, without giving her any tools to further her processing and increase her knowledge. Goals were not clearly identified. However, Megan noted that after reflecting on this experience she approached her counselling with Mark differently, which contributed to its effectiveness. She was clearer about her goals and her purpose in counselling. With Susan, Megan said she "didn't know what about myself I wanted to fix".

Megan drew some comparisons between counselling and friendship, noting that

while the two have different boundaries, having a connection with the counsellor is important. Overall, Megan highlighted how important it was to her that the counsellor be able to go in various directions with her rather than clinging to one agenda. As well, she emphasized that she needs to be able to have confidence in the counsellor's expertise and ability to be helpful for counselling to be successful.

Karma – Change through Collaboration

Karma had one counselling session with a female psychologist in private practice in a large urban center and then did not return. Partway through the research process, after our first interview, Karma engaged in counselling for a second time with a different female psychologist in private practice, where she had five sessions over a period of three months. Both of these experiences were reflected on in our research process. Karma and I engaged in a collaborative process where she was deeply involved in thinking about and writing about her experiences. Karma came to this research with background knowledge of counselling, as well as familiarity with qualitative research.

As Karma's story is the central theme of Chapter Four, "Relation/slips: Attending with care to hindering experiences in counselling", here I describe the research process we engaged in. I came to know Karma through my training as a counsellor. Karma phoned me after her first counselling session and described the session as very difficult and upsetting. After our conversation, I noted that her experience fit within the scope of my research project. She readily agreed to participate, and subsequently we met, at which time I reviewed the entire project for her and we engaged in a tape recorded interview.

Of all the transcribed interviews, Karma's single session experience stood out as the most strongly negative. This led me to consider devoting an entire paper to her

experience. When I contacted her to discuss the work I was doing with her transcript, and my thoughts about how to represent her story, we began to talk more about her involvement in the research. Karma was interested in the project and it quickly become apparent that she would like to deepen her involvement in it. We began talking about co-writing a paper and, as a result, began to meet regularly to read, write and talk. These conversations led to a co-written paper (Chapter Four), and also led Karma to consider more deeply the meaning that the hindering counselling experience had for her.

Working with Karma in such a close, collaborative manner was an unexpected bonus in this research project. It enabled a greater engagement with her experience, and allowed Karma, as expert on her experience, to ensure our writing was an accurate reflection of her experience. The process of working collaboratively opened up a new set of questions, thoughts and considerations. One question we grappled with extensively was that of anonymity. In the end, Karma chose to remain anonymous in the dissertation, with the possibility of naming herself on the paper submitted for publication, a decision which resonated with me as appropriately balancing her concerns regarding anonymity with claiming her role in this portrayal of her experience.

"Tony Danza" – My Friend is a Better Counsellor

Tony, a male in his twenties, mentioned a variety of past counselling experiences throughout our interview with the focus predominantly on his most recent counsellor, Val, and his close friend, Mike. Val was a counsellor in training, whom Tony saw at a university student counselling centre about six times, approximately once per month. Tony stated he has known his friend Mike, who is fifty, for four years, and that they connect weekly – in person or by telephone. Tony was interested in the research project

and participated fully, even demonstrating his curiosity about the counselling process by asking me questions during our interview. I sent him the interview transcript, a thematic table comparing his counselling experience to his friendship, and a letter outlining my thoughts. Tony responded with agreement to the themes and added more thoughts.

Comparing and contrasting Val and Mike were my main means of understanding Tony's experiences as Tony depicted Mike as a better counsellor than any counsellor with whom he had worked. Tony repeatedly returned to his relationship with Mike as a point of comparison which was unique in my study. While other participants mentioned feeling their counsellors could have been good friends, all seemed to accept and adhere to a strong distinction between counsellors and friends. Tony challenged these boundaries by claiming his friend was the best counsellor he knew, primarily because of the level of disclosure in which Mike engaged. Tony went beyond identifying self disclosure as a significant difference between his friendship and his counselling, to claim that a high level of self-disclosure is the key element that differentiates among helpful, hindering, or neutral counselling experiences.

Rather than work with these relationships successively, I chose to continuously lay Tony's discussion of Val and Mike side by side, watching themes emerge (Appendix E). I spoke with Tony as I was working with his story, and shared with him a thematic table comparing Val and Mike, as well as my thoughts about his experiences. Tony read his transcript and the other information and indicated his agreement with my analysis. The following is a description of the ideas that arose from my conversation with Tony.

Tony indicated that the professional nature of the counselling relationship gets in the way of it being helpful. He was clear that the lack of professional barriers is part of

what made his friendship so helpful to him. Throughout his description of his counselling with Val it feels as though he is trying to break down these barriers in order to humanize her. He boldly stated she must also have some problems in her life, which pulls her closer to him. He noted various similarities between them – both observable and assumed. He was trying to create a connection, a feeling of reciprocity in order to build a trusting relationship. This makes sense to me as something most people do in their relationships, and led me to wonder about the atypical aspects of counselling. Tony's motivations to connect with Val became clear when hearing his story of his friendship with Mike. He connects the helpfulness of his friendship to Mike being willing to be known by Tony, to share himself and his own concerns with Tony. Because Mike shared himself with Tony, Tony has confidence in Mike's role as a helper. Tony declared Mike is a great person from whom to learn. Self-disclosure and reciprocity built a trusting relationship. In considering our conversation I have to respect Tony for being cautious about counselling, for requiring knowledge of a person before he would fully trust this person's ability to be helpful to him.

Tony's experience with Val was not entirely unhelpful – he noted that a female perspective was helpful. Tony was exploring various ideas and seeing another person's reaction to them was helpful to some degree. Again, however, he pointed out that getting to know his friend well was more impactful. Tony noted his friendship went beyond knowing Mike well enough to trust him and was reciprocal in terms of helping each other with their concerns and struggles. There is a different kind of being understood than was present in Tony's comments about Val. Tony worked with what Val was willing to offer, occasionally pushing her to see if the relationship could be more connected and then

settling for having a female sounding board in a safe setting.

Tony did acknowledge his own role in building the relationship, noting his behaviour influenced how the relationships developed, and was clear that he sought out Mike more than he did Val. It seems he matched what was offered to him by Val while he was eager to hear Mike's thoughts and actively sought Mike out at difficult points in his life.

Tony described Val as fairly inactive in their sessions - both in sharing herself, and in seeking to know him, and noted a desire for her to have been more engaged in his process, more willing to challenge him. With Mike, Tony stated he was not able to hide from himself because Mike knew him so well. Tony described a high degree of reciprocity, stating it was a relationship of co-learning and co-challenging. When I lay Tony's two experiences beside each other, the differences are strong. It is not that Val did not do "correct" therapy, but its very neutrality was hindering to Tony. Tony took what he could from what Val offered, however, her non-directive, non-disclosing style did not fit well with Tony and he did not experience a great deal of change. Tony's experience of his friendship with Mike was very different. Here, Tony experienced a relationship built on caring and openness, and here is where Tony reported the most change and learning. As Tony said regarding his counselling relationship with Val:

No it's not even close to how me and my friend help each other.

Diane – Competence and Confidence

Diane, a woman in her mid-twenties, described two recent counselling experiences with female psychologists in private practice in a large urban center, both focused on the same issue. Diane had two sessions with her first counsellor and about

five with the second. Diane described these experiences in relation to each other, with the first experience being more hindering, and ultimately unsuccessful. Diane remained engaged throughout the research process, and responded openly to all my questions. When she received the transcribed interview and my storying of her experience, she responded with agreement, and provided some further thoughts. My narrative account of Diane's counselling experience is presented in Chapter Three, "Narrative inquiry illuminates counseling: Stories of coherence".

Diane was very clear in her discussion of her experiences and was easily able to identify the hindering aspects of her experience. One place of importance for Diane was feeling confident regarding the counsellor's training and expertise in the specific area on which she was working. Diane made a strong connection between her confidence in the counsellor's skill level and the value of the session for her. Her portrayal of her first counselling experience was one in which she did not fit with the counsellor's approach. The counsellor was too "artsy-fartsy" and Diane wanted and expected a more focused, 'scientific' orientation to her issue. Diane identified not feeling personally valued by the first counsellor and not feeling confident in the counsellor's skill level.

Diane painted strong, contrasting pictures of the two counsellors, and it became clear that each experience illuminated the other. It took the helpful experience to clarify what was unhelpful in the first experience, and vice versa. I identified the following themes regarding hindering experiences in counselling by combining Diane descriptions of both hindering and helpful aspects of her experiences.

- It is important for the client to have confidence in the counsellor's ability to be helpful. This may be confidence in the person's training or specialty or arise in other

ways.

- The counsellor must be caring and compassionate, regardless of the orientation or approach the counsellor takes.
- A personal connection with the counsellor is necessary. This is not a friendship, but appropriate self-disclosure by the counsellor is helpful in developing this connection.
- Having more than one counselling experience is helpful, as one clarifies the other in terms of what works, is effective and helpful. As well, the individual person's preferred style of working is clarified when counsellors who have different styles are experienced.
- The counsellor is not likely to change their approach or style, so a person would be better off seeking a different counsellor who is better than giving the counsellor feedback in hopes of change.

The variety of experiences described to me is revealed in these brief introductions to each participant. There is a sense of the wealth of stories shared with me and the depth of knowing within each person. Each participant shared with me stories of their experiences and, in turn, taught me about the experience of counselling from the perspective of the client. As each participant has been briefly introduced, it also is important that the researcher be introduced at the outset of this project. The following section is intended to situate the researcher within this study of hindering experiences in counselling.

Reflexive Statement of Personal Stance

My interest in hindering experiences was sparked during my first counselling practicum. My curiosity about hindering experiences is reflective of a deeper personal

orientation to life as I began my counselling training with many questions. I was not convinced of the value and usefulness of counselling, and spent considerable energy scrutinizing the profession that I was learning. As part of that critical approach, I was aware of and oriented toward the hindering or difficult aspects of counselling. Over time, and as I gained experience, I came to consider counselling a valuable endeavour, and am now committed to its usefulness in creating change in the lives of people. However, I have retained a questioning stance in which knowledge is always open to challenge. Conducting research regarding hindering experiences was a way to hold counselling up to a "final test", and engage directly with my own questioning nature.

This research process has been accompanied by feeling that a mirror is being held up at every turn. In considering questions around what hinders growth and change in counselling, I was led to consider many of my personal relationships and wonder about what I experienced as hindering. Part of the narrative tradition is writing what you see reflected in the mirror. By sharing my experiences the reader will be better equipped to understand how the lens through which I view hindering experiences has shaped this work. Here I share two reflections on relationships in my life that have had a hindered quality, as well as some reflections on this research process.

Sue

My relationship with Sue has never been severed, and has always been caring, but has been troubled by conflicting values and approaches to life. For me, the crux of the hindering aspects of this relationship was feeling that I had to change, to be something else to be accepted, that my choices were not met with approval. I expected complete support in the process of exploring my identity and did not pause to put myself in her

shoes, to wonder about her life, experiences, and beliefs. This led to many tense moments. Now I find I am more forgiving and able to take the other perspective. I realize that I have not made the relationship easy for her. Letting go of expectations and accepting I will never be fully known by her have been key processes for me in working through the hindering aspects of the relationship. Reflecting on this relationship has been instrumental for me in challenging patterns of avoidance in difficult relationships. I continue to surprise myself in taking chances of honesty – in reflecting my experience to others. While not always comfortable, to me the feeling of authenticity is worth the discomfort.

Interestingly, it was a third person who began to mend this relationship. An unwitting conspirator in healing, she was a middle ground, a place for mediation. I wonder what this might mean for counselling as counsellors are always the "third person". How might counsellors embrace the unknowing position and recognize how influential this place can be? Perhaps our haste to be expert is occasionally misplaced, and an increased trust in the power of not knowing is needed.

Relationships are often considered in isolation and realizing their full complexity and potential is difficult. It is much easier to focus on specific aspects as problematic or to focus externally rather than on the self, especially when the relationship is hindered in some way.

The Lion

I wrote the following poem as a means of understanding my experiences in a relationship during my early twenties. Poetry portrays my desire to be acknowledged, to merit attention.

The Approach

the lion roars,
I tremble
the lion purrs
I cower
the svelte skin, the sultry mane,
I want to touch you, bury my nose in your scent
your eyes welcome
and yet you pace and growl
Should I stay or should I go?
will I be mauled or welcomed
caressed with purrs or claws unsheathed?
When I dare to sneak in, to reach in and softly tug your tail,
touch your cloak
and you whirl and growl,
ready to pounce,
my legs tremble
Your eyes soften with recognition
and I feel shame,
I wonder - why was I so afraid?
When will I be worthy to tap your nose when I come?
When will I feel able to approach boldly, eyes ahead
and demand my right to an audience?
When will I be able to ask the Sphinx a question or two?

As the poem expresses, the hindering aspects of this relationship center on my constant uncertainty about the other person's stance in the relationship. This relationship began as I was exposing myself to new ways of understanding the world. I was drawn to this person - perhaps because he represented a familiar culture and upbringing in a place awash with different, new thought. His appearance of having achieved a balance among seemingly incompatible approaches to life was appealing.

In this relationship I heard conflicting messages. I perceived I was valued only within certain time constraints, with conditions. There were many positive experiences that kept pulling me back, allowing me to endure the difficult approaches, initiations met with no recognition. However, I did experience confusion, rage and helplessness. I never

addressed these feelings in the relationship, many times I chalked up the behaviour to callous arrogance - but I felt anger. In the end ... the relationship has faded away. My initiations slowed and finally ceased. I look back with regret that not addressing my feelings led to a loss of a relationship. I am certain he did not intend what I perceived. I am sure his story would be quite different.

Writing and thinking about this relationship greatly lessened the anger I felt. I have let go of the hurt and recognized my exaggeration of the situation. Realistically, he just never remembered who I was until he saw me. Whenever we did meet, he was unfailingly attentive and helpful. The hindered aspect of this relationship is perhaps mainly due to my expectations and lack of assertion.

Spending time wondering about both of these relationships led me to confront my role in them, to recognize how my avoidance of conflict influenced my experience. I am forced to notice, occasionally with chagrin, that I cannot hold on to anger and blame. Accepting rather than avoiding led to a better understanding of myself and allowed me to notice how much I have changed over time. Today, these relationships would, and do, get played out differently. I am more able to address concerns and find resolution that allow me to maintain who I am in the relationship.

In my research proposal, I wrote about the complexity of the counselling relationship. In the research process, I grappled with this complexity. I have come to believe that acknowledging and working with hindering experiences is central to learning, growing, and developing deeper connections with others.

Dissertation Format

This dissertation follows a paper format in which the study is presented in the

form of three papers, comprising chapters two, three and four of this document. The papers are to be or have been submitted for publication in peer reviewed journals and are discussed separately below. Chapter five, the discussion, reviews the study as a whole, discusses implications for practice and suggests directions for continued research.

Paper One – "The client as expert: Researching hindering experiences in counselling"

This position paper examines literature regarding hindering experiences in counselling, while grappling with questions about researching from the client's perspective. Process literature is reviewed, and my research questions are shown to be developed through the results of previous work. This paper advocates for soliciting and valuing what clients can teach us about the counselling process through sharing their reflections of their experiences. The difficulty clients have in sharing negative experiences is highlighted through previous research and through reflections on the process of conducting this research. Several implications for counselling practice are discussed, with the goal of helping counsellors find ways to encourage clients to share their unspoken experiences.

Paper Two – "Narrative inquiry illuminates counseling: Stories of coherence"

This paper considers how hindering experiences can be understood within a broader view of the whole of a person's life. Through telling the stories of three participants, I explore the idea that people develop coherent narratives to make sense of their lives. As White and Epston (1990) state:

> In striving to make sense of a life, persons face the task of arranging their experiences of events in sequences across time in such a way as to arrive at a coherent account of themselves and the world around them. ... The success of this

> storying of experience provides persons with a sense of continuity and meaning in their lives, and this is relied upon for the ordering of daily lives and for the interpretation of further experiences (p. 10).

The experiences of three women are addressed, and each woman is seen to be retelling and re-understanding the events in her life in some way. They each do this differently, and are at different stages in this journey. This paper augments Lieblich et al.'s (2004) focus on the key role of personal narrative formation in counselling by showing that hindering experiences in particular can be better understood when attention is paid to the context of each participant's narrative of identity. In this way, counselling experiences can be understood as a part of a life; a piece that can be best understood from within the framework of the whole life. Hindering experiences are contextual and are shaped by the client's expectations of the purpose of counselling and how it will fit in their lives.

Paper Three – "Relation/slips: Attending with care to hindering experiences in counselling"

This third paper reflects on the hindering experience of one participant, Karma through photography, poetry and journal entries. The original pieces created by Karma are woven together through a co-written exploration of her experience. A metaphor of water as emotion is developed, and traces her experiences in, and responses to, her various counselling sessions. The paper follows the process of Karma's counselling experience and the research process of seeking to better understand that experience. The similarities of the counselling and research process are discussed and implications for practice are suggested.

Discussion

This chapter reviews the present study with a focus on coming back to the participants as a whole and unpacking the influence that stories of expectations, agency and boundaries have on hindering experiences. Attention is given to the directions yet to be explored. Further work to be done is outlined, and suggestions for further research are identified. As counselling is at heart a practical profession, careful thought is given to the practical implications of this work.

Closing Invitation

This research placed clients' stories of counselling in the public domain. In this way, anyone who reads these stories can gain an understanding that difficult or hindering times are part of the story of counselling, and may be included in one's own story. Stories allow accessibility into the life of an*other* and encourage reflection on one's own life. The blend of life and teaching that can be achieved through story telling (Coles, 1989) allows hindering experiences to be more deeply understood by researchers, counsellors and clients alike. If, as counsellors, we begin to carefully consider clients' stories of what is and is not helpful, current practice and training programs can become more responsive. Counselling is predicated on responsiveness (Stiles, Honos-Webb, & Surko, 1998), which requires a deep openness to the other.

This work presents the results of my research, my time spent in conversation, both with self and others, through reading, talking and reflecting on those conversations. As I portray these varied conversations, my hope is that the process through which the research results emerged is also present. Qualitative research, like counselling, is as much about the process as it is t the product. Narrative inquiry is an inherently personal process that embraces understanding and encourages growth on an individual level. Much

depends on the manner in which the person engages in the research, either as researcher, participant or audience. I have come to see narrative inquiry as a powerful form of research - choice is placed in the hands of each person to be open to the research and allow it to form, shape, and influence thinking, or to dismiss it as "just another story".

Through this work, I learned to doubt any truth presented as final and conclusive. While later I will read this work differently and feel new questions stirring within me, there is much in the stories shared here to provoke thought. As Kerby (1991) states:

> From a hermeneutic perspective there can be no such thing as a final "truth" of the human subject and the human condition, for we investigators are not the disengaged spectators that such a scientific inquiry would require. We are ourselves the subject of the inquiry, and the asking of the question regarding the nature of the human subject is a considerable part of what it means to be such a subject. Thus I cannot claim the venerable status of the "truth" for what is contained in these pages. What is hoped for is that the reader finds this interpretation of the human subject to be both a plausible and a coherent account, and at times perhaps even a provocative one. (p. 14)

My hope is that this work encourages reflection on your own experiences with, and practice of, the art of counselling.

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CHAPTER 2

THE CLIENT AS EXPERT: RESEARCHING HINDERING EXPERIENCES IN COUNSELLING

The Client as Expert: Researching Hindering Experiences in Counselling

Much of the research in the area of hindering experiences in counselling has historically been conducted from the perspective of practitioners. This paper develops the idea of the centrality of client experiences and perceptions when seeking to understand more about how hindering experiences influence the counselling process. The continuing difficulties researchers face in attempting to give voice to the client perspective is addressed. Reflections on this inquiry into hindering experiences in counselling are included to provide concrete instances of this difficulty. The paper concludes with a discussion of the implications that soliciting and valuing clients' hindering experiences have for counselling practice. Through a focus on hindering experiences this paper seeks to encourage improvement in counselling practice. By considering a research process similar to the counselling process as a way to stimulate reflection on counselling practice, it is hoped that the gap between research and practice is lessened.

Hindering experiences in counselling are factors that clients describe as interfering with the process of counselling and preventing them from achieving their goals. Paulson, Everall, and Stuart (2001) note that clients described aspects of counselling which, while not necessarily precipitating termination, do impede progress. Researchers report that hindering experiences have a significant impact on counselling (Binder & Strupp, 1997; Hadley & Strupp, 1976; Mohr, 1995). In spite of this, there has been little research (Mohr, 1995; Toukmanian & Rennie, 1992) and a lack of emphasis on the client's perspective (Paulson, Truscott & Stuart, 1999; Thompson & Hill, 1991). Hindering experiences are a less intuitive and more difficult area of study. Overall research evidence has established that negative process is a major obstacle in successful

treatment and that its impact has been underestimated to date (Binder & Strupp, 1997; Lietaer, 1992; Mohr, 1995).

While hindering experiences do occur, the effectiveness of counselling overall has been well established in the research literature (Greenberg & Pinsof, 1986; Hubble, Duncan & Miller, 1999; Lambert, 2004; Luborsky, Singer, & Luborsky, 1975). As Lambert and Ogles (2004) state "... psychotherapy is beneficial. This consistent finding across thousands of studies and hundreds of meta-analyses is seemingly undebatable" (p. 148). Research findings also indicate that all orientations to counselling are effective (Elkin et al., 1989; Norcross, 2002; Wampold, 2001), in that each approach studied is effective with some clients some of the time. "Decades of research have not produced support for one superior treatment or set of techniques for specific disorders" (Lambert & Ogles, 2004, p. 167). One explanation for this finding is that there are common elements to counselling, regardless of theoretical orientation, that are largely responsible for the effectiveness of counselling and thus are considered significant predictors of therapeutic outcome (Hubble et al., 1999). Wampold (2001) states that

> the components common to all therapies include (a) an emotionally charged confiding relationship with a helping person; (b) a healing setting that involves the client's expectations that the professional helper will assist him or her; (c) a rationale, conceptual scheme, or myth that provides a plausible, although not necessarily true, explanation of the client's symptoms and how the client can overcome his or her demoralization; and (d) a ritual or procedure that requires the active participation of both the client and counselor and is based on the rationale underlying the psychotherapy (p. 206).

Various researchers agree that client or extratherapeutic factors and relationship factors are two key elements influencing outcome in counselling (Clarkin & Levy, 2004; Norcross, 2002).

In this narrative inquiry, hindering experiences in counselling were explored from the perspective of the client through the use of open-ended interviews. Stories of each person's experience were constructed in a narrative manner (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) with the goal of learning more about hindering experiences in counselling from the client's perspective.

Differing Perceptions of Client and Counsellor

Significant differences exist between clients' and counsellors' interpretations of the clients' experience in counselling (Bachelor, 1991; Elliott & James, 1989; Gershefski, Arnkoff, Glass, & Elkin, 1996). The client's perceptions of and contributions to counselling correlate more strongly with outcome than do counsellor perceptions (Halstead, Brooks Jr., Goldberg, & Fish, 1990; Marziali, 1984; Hubble et al., 1999; Lambert & Ogles, 2004). A study by Hill, Helms, Spiegel, and Tichenor (1988) identified that "counselor intentions do not often match client reactions, even when the therapists are experienced" (p. 32), possibly because counsellors often do not perceive client reactions accurately. A stronger link between counsellor intention and client reaction exists in successful cases than unsuccessful cases, indicating that there is a better mutual understanding in positive experiences (Hill et al., 1988). As well, Grafanaki and McLeod (1995) note that there are greater levels of congruence in counsellors and clients during helpful events than during hindering events. Thompson and Hill's (1991) investigation into counsellor perceptions of client reactions concluded that knowledge is lacking in the

area of how clients experience negative counsellor reactions.

In 1986, Lietaer and Neirinck used questionnaires completed by both counsellor and client individually after every other session to examine if differences exist in their points of view. Results indicated that both the counsellors' and the clients' experiences can be grouped into 3 main categories: (1) the relationship climate (attitudes of the counsellor and mutual contact), (2) specific counsellor interventions, and (3) process aspects concerning the client. Interestingly, clients more often than counsellors perceived the relational climate as helpful. This fits with research suggesting that clients attach more importance to the relationship or connection that is built in counselling than counsellors do (Halstead et al., 1990; Marziali, 1984; Nelson & Neufeldt, 1996). Llewelyn (1988) also indicates that while counsellors and clients match in identifying key components of counselling, they value these components differently. Counsellors focus on gaining cognitive and affective insight, while clients stress reassurance/relief and problem solution. Both recognize the importance to the client of personal contact.

Lietaer (1992) investigated what clients experience as impeding counselling and found that the unhelpful experiences reported by clients were of two broad types: (1) counsellor attitudes and interventions, and (2) client process. In this study participants often connected hindering experiences to their own process, regularly taking ownership in some way for the difficulty, or attempting to place the source of the difficulty in a more neutral external location. This study, along with previous research (Paulson et al., 2001; Sells, Smith & Moon, 1996), emphasizes the value for counsellors of consciously engaging in the client's world, constantly checking for understanding, rather than trusting assumptions that are quite likely to be inaccurate.

One striking difference from the exploration of helpful experiences noted by Lietaer (1992) was in the area of counsellor attitudes and interventions. Within the context of hindering experiences it became very difficult to distinguish between the relational climate and the techniques used by the counsellor (Lietaer, 1992). Here the relationship, which includes aspects such as the counsellor's ability to provide a feeling of being understood, could not be extricated from technique. Lietaer and Neirinck (1986) note that it was easier to tease out the influence of individual factors when counselling is experienced as helpful than when it was hindering. Hindering experiences often comprised a mix of relationship and technique factors.

A strong focus on hearing and valuing the client perspective was present in this study. Even with a determined commitment to this perspective, I occasionally found myself questioning the participants' stories rather than fully accepting their understanding of their experiences without question. I found it easier to join in agreement when participants were describing positive experiences and had more difficulty when the counsellor was portrayed in a negative light. I would shift from first agreeing with the participant, thinking the counsellor had been particularly inept or harmful to leaning more sympathetically to the counsellor, thinking the participant was misinterpreting the counsellor's intentions or was unwilling to fully engage in a change process. This process has implications for both research and counselling. Researchers and counsellors do not know what clients perceive and their own process can easily get in the way of seeking to understand the client's experience. These findings highlight the interactional nature of counselling which increases the complexity of researching in this area. Clarkin and Levy (2004) note, "as soon as therapy begins, the client variables are in a dynamic and ever

changing context of therapist variables and behavior" (p.215). The same can be applied to research.

Overall, the research literature shows that counsellors and clients make different judgments about what is of value in counselling and what is actually happening in counselling. Counsellors are not "mind readers" and clients are unappreciative of attempts in this regard (Reagan & Hill, 1992). Perhaps clients value those things that feel immediately helpful to them, such as feeling accepted and being problem-oriented. Counsellors on the other hand, may attend to specific kinds of changes, like searching for insight or fostering a particular kind of awareness. These disparities in perception shed light on how hindering experiences may occur.

Valuing the Client Perspective

Given that the client accounts for the majority of the variance in outcome (Lambert, 2004; Wampold, 2001) and that counsellors and clients do not match in their assessments of how counselling is progressing, it seems useful to give precedence to the client's perspective when attempting to better understand poor outcome and hindering experiences. As Duncan and Miller (2000) state "it is the *clients,* not the therapists, who make treatment work. As a result, treatment should be organized around their resources, perceptions, experiences, and ideas" (p. 11). Horvath (2000) also supports this view in the following comments: "there has been a consistent observation that the client's subjective evaluation of the relationship, rather than the counselor's actual behavior, has the most impact on psychotherapy outcome" (p. 166) and "therapists ... appear to be less astute judges of the level of alliance between themselves and their clients" (p. 168). Clients are aware of their own process, and are the best judges of their own experience.

Increasingly, value is being placed on including the client perspective in research (Clarke, Rees, & Hardy, 2004; Duncan & Miller, 2000; Elliott & James, 1989; Heppner, Rosenberg, & Hedgespeth, 1992). Paulson et al.'s (2001) investigation of client's perceptions of hindering experiences in counselling has encouraged a client focus. Thematic clusters that emerged by allowing the participants to guide the thematic conceptualizations included concerns about vulnerability, barriers to feeling understood, lack of connection, lack of responsiveness and negative counsellor behaviours. Many of these themes highlight the relational aspects of psychotherapy; which matches research cited earlier regarding the value clients place on the relationship. While it has often been therapists rather than clients who describe and explain the counselling experience, these findings show that much can be learned from clients' assessments of counselling.

In this narrative inquiry research questions were addressed by acknowledging clients as privileged knowers, and giving voice to their stories of counselling through non-structured, in-person interviews. Participants reflected on their experiences without the imposition of an explanatory meta-narrative. Engaging in this research process, I was initially confident in my commitment to valuing the participants and their stories. As a result, questioning the validity and accuracy of their assessments of what was helpful was an unexpected and disconcerting struggle. There were times when participants described their counsellor as very helpful, yet it seemed the counsellor had been less than optimally helpful. I wondered how much progress had been made and began to question the decision to solely privilege the participant's voice. A pull to overlay the client's story with my preferred interpretation, informed by training and experience, was present.

This desire to privilege expert knowledge, while tempting, does not fit with

research findings indicating that the client's assessment of counselling is a much more useful and accurate measure of how counselling is progressing. In effect, "the client's view of the relationship is the 'trump card' in psychotherapy outcome, second only to the winning hand of the client's strengths" (Duncan & Miller, 2000, p. 72). The client accounts for the majority of the variance in outcome (Lambert & Barley, 2002) and therefore it is valuable for counselling researchers to respect what the client has to say regarding their counselling. By encouraging clients to tell their stories of hindering experiences, counsellors will be in the position of hearing what clients are not saying. What they are not saying is crucial to the outcome of therapy.

Difficulties with Soliciting the Client Perspective

While a case has been made for the importance of giving the client's perceptions and experience preeminence in researching hindering experiences, this is not without pitfalls. One key aspect that practitioners need to be cognizant of is client reluctance to discuss negative aspects of counselling. Clients do not easily talk about hindering experiences (Paulson et al., 2001; Levitt, 2002; Sells et al., 1996) and tend to hide negative reactions in counselling (Audet & Everall, 2003; Farber, 2003; Regan & Hill, 1992; Rennie, 1992; Thompson & Hill, 1991). Studies that seek to augment the solicitation of helpful aspects of therapy with unhelpful typically receive greater amounts of information regarding what is helpful (Bowman & Fine, 2000; Levy, Glass, Arnkoff, Gershefski, & Elkin, 1996). Overall, negative experience in counselling is underreported (Levy et al., 1996). Lietaer (1992) notes that in general, both counsellors and clients demonstrated a lower response rate to the question about unhelpful aspects of counselling, with clients' response rates even lower than counsellors.

The reluctance of clients to articulate hindering experiences in counselling is reflected in Levitt's (2002) grounded theory study investigating silence in psychotherapy. One type of silence identified was obstructive silence, described as "moments in which clients detached from the process of therapeutic inquiry" (p. 221). Two subtypes were identified - disengaged and interactional silences. Disengaged silences are largely internal responses to difficult points in therapy and interactional pauses are responses to relational difficulties. In either case it is relevant to realize that one client response to a difficult aspect of the therapy experience is silence. Reagan and Hill's (1992) investigation of unspoken thoughts in counselling shows that clients do not often share their negative experiences with their counsellors and that what clients leave unsaid is largely negative in nature. Audet and Everall (2003) describe an example of the unspoken nature of negative experience in the case of Stan. Over time, Stan became dissatisfied with his counsellor and sought a new counsellor (Audet, personal communication, May 2003). While this may be a common occurrence, not only did Stan refrain from letting the first counsellor know of his dissatisfaction, he maintained this relationship while addressing his own needs with the second counsellor, apparently solely to avoid giving the first counsellor negative feedback. In actively seeking this kind of feedback I also found participants had difficulty talking about hindering experiences at length. Perhaps clients attempt to preserve the integrity of a relationship that they had hoped and may well have experienced as helpful overall. Participants are often more comfortable talking about what is helpful, and allowing inferences regarding what is hindering to come from the researcher (Levy et al., 1996; Paulson et al., 2001).

The contextual nature of memory may also be part of the reason that hindering

experiences are difficult to research (Martin & Stelmaczonek, 1988). If the client experiences the overall outcome of counselling as positive, their memories may naturally shift to cast a positive glow on all aspects of the counselling. It may become difficult to recall any part as hindering, especially if the particular experience was only mildly unhelpful or was resolved. One study (Llewelyn, 1988) that differentiated between perceptions during and after completion of counselling noted that what clients valued most about counselling tended to shift throughout versus after sessions completed. Llewelyn also found that more differences were present between counsellors and clients when the outcome of counselling was poor.

In addition, counsellors are rarely aware of what clients are not saying (Hill, Nutt-Williams, Heaton, Thompson & Rhodes, 1996). In a study by Reagan and Hill (1992) therapists were only able to accurately guess 17% of what was unsaid. They found that clients perceived the sessions in which the counsellor accurately guessed what was unsaid as less satisfying. Researchers have engaged in comparison between client and counsellor overt and covert processes (Hill et al., 1988) and call for research that is responsive to contextual considerations. Analyzing the transcripts raised my awareness of times that I subtly encouraged participants to veer back to discussing positive aspects of their experiences rather than exploring their difficult experiences thoroughly. It is not only clients that may have difficulty expressing negative experiences, but counsellors and researchers as well (Lietaer, 1992; Rhodes, Hill, Thompson & Elliott, 1994). Reagan and Hill (1992) suggest that perhaps counsellors are ill-equipped to deal with the negative experiences clients have in counselling.

Counselling research indicates that counsellors are predominantly incorrect when

speculating about the client's experience. Therefore it is necessary to actively solicit the client's perspective and understanding of their counselling experiences. However, this is not easily done. Careful thought needs to be given to how to explore clients' hindering experiences in counselling. The foregoing discussion of the research context can provide guidance in this area.

Implications for Practice

One purpose of researching hindering experiences is to become more effective practitioners. There are a variety of ways that counsellors can begin to actively encourage their clients to share their experiences of counselling. Suggestions for practice include: attending to the quality of the relationship as a way of acknowledging hindering experiences, actively working on becoming more flexible and responsive as a counsellor, and incorporating measures in session to encourage clients to more openly reflect on their process.

Counsellors guide the counselling process and this includes noticing and repairing hindering experiences (Horvath, 2000; Safran & Muran, 2000). Rhodes et al.'s (1994) focus on client's recollections of resolved and unresolved major misunderstanding events concludes that the successful resolution of the misunderstanding event depends largely on three factors: (a) the quality of the relationship, (b) the client's assertion of negative feelings to the counsellor, and (c) the counsellor's acceptance of and willingness to work through the client's negative feelings. This study suggests that it is the counsellor's failure to work adequately on misunderstandings that leads to client dissatisfaction.

Attention to building and maintaining strong relationships may be a way for counsellors to become more attentive to hindering experiences. "To the extent that issues

in the therapeutic relationship interact or overlap with other client problems, their resolution can be an active ingredient in the change process" (Horvath, 2000, p.237). Safran and Muran (2000) provide an excellent discussion of ways counsellors can engage in working through and resolving strains in the relationship. They identify that different interventions are necessary for targeting relationship strains as compared to difficulties in the task and goal components of counselling and point to the value of engaging in a metacommunication process with clients that focuses on exploring the client-counsellor current interactions as a way of addressing hindering experiences.

One important aspect of building a relationship is a consideration of how well the client and counsellor match. Strupp's (1980) comparative case study allowed an in-depth look at the role of individual factors in counselling. He compared one counsellor across two clients fairly evenly matched upon intake - one resulted in a successful outcome and one did not. Results show that the mix of the counsellor's style with the client's expectations, and the counsellor's ability to form a strong interpersonal relationship with the client are two key elements in successful outcome. Strupp comments that the "therapeutic outcome was a function of the patient's ability ... to work productively within the framework proffered by the counsellor" (p. 947). These results suggest that counsellors engage in counselling in a particular way, and if the client can match this, the outcome is more likely to be positive. The importance of this match has also been noted by Elkin et al. (1999) and Powell (1995). McCullough et al.'s (1991) study brings forward the complementary notion that the client's response to the counsellor intervention is linked to outcome, not the intervention in isolation. As Lambert and Barley (2002) state "psychotherapy is, at a fundamental level, an interpersonal process

characterized by the therapist's and the client's ability to engage in a therapeutic relationship" (p. 26).

It is incumbent on the counsellor to continually strive for flexibility to match as many clients as possible (Duncan & Miller, 2000; Norcross, 2002; Stiles, Honos-Webb, & Surko, 1998). When considering how to encourage flexibility or "fit", the idea of responsiveness as discussed by Stiles and colleagues (1998) is useful. The term responsiveness is used to "describe behavior that is affected by emerging context, including emerging perceptions of others' characteristics and behavior" (p. 439). The concept of responsiveness highlights the contextual nature of psychotherapy and implies that counsellors need to understand the unique aspects of each person in the context of their lives. Paulson et al. (2001) refer to the value of understanding negative experiences for practice and suggest that many of these negative experiences may be rooted in a lack of responsiveness on the part of the counsellor. An investigation of counsellors' experiences of disliking a client (Henkelman, 1999) also indicated that counsellors had difficulty in being appropriately responsive to their clients. One way to encourage responsiveness and flexibility as a counsellor is to seek out experiences through training and supervision that will challenge assumptions and beliefs. Sells et al. (1996) reported on what they termed a surprising finding that the counsellors engaged in their ethnographic study of client and counsellor perceptions of effectiveness described a positive change in their views about their current practice and philosophy of counselling as a result of being involved in the study. Clarkin and Levy (2004) point to the value of adapting and responding to client variables beyond the "dominant research theme today of matching the client on only the diagnosis variable" (p. 214) as a refreshing idea that

deserves further attention.

Aside from learning to be a more responsive counsellor, the issue of how to encourage clients to share their negative or hindering experiences with their counsellor remains salient. This is of crucial importance, as part of valuing the client and being responsive is finding ways to encourage the client to share their unspoken experiences. There are various ways to encourage clients to feel comfortable and safe enough to begin to reveal the concealed parts of their experience. The ability of counsellors to manage negative expressions and feedback is of course critical. One way to encourage feedback is to incorporate some practical tools into the counselling process. Pencil and paper in-session feedback is being increasingly used as a means of gathering some initial information in a way less threatening to the client (Duncan & Miller 2000; Johnson & Shaha, 1996; Lambert et al., 2001). The Outcome Questionnaire 45.2 (Lambert & Burlingame, 1996) is an assessment tool that can be used in session with clients. This tool has been widely researched and has strong reliability and validity. However, some clinicians find it to be somewhat lengthy, and briefer measures have been developed (Duncan & Miller, 2000). A recent guide (Ogles, Lambert, & Fields, 2002) provides an overview of outcome assessment, as well as detailed information on how to pursue the use of these kinds of assessments in everyday practice.

Seeking information through a pencil and paper format does appear to be an effective way of encouraging clients to express their concerns. These measures take into account a positive response tendency and generally suggest that any score other than a very high one is cause for discussion, as it may imply something is amiss. The information gathered in this way can be used to review concerns with individual clients

and open discussion can clarify the meaning of the scores for that client. Of obvious importance is that counsellors use the information in a respectful way to make changes in the counselling process. Currently treatment evaluation methods in which feedback solicited from clients is relayed to counsellors as a means of enhancing outcome are being developed and evaluated for efficacy with promising results (Asay, Lambert, Gregersen, & Goates, 2002; Lambert et al., 2001; Whipple et al., 2003). Generally, the information gathered is used as a starting place for conversation with the client. The main point to keep in mind is that regardless of how information is gathered, the information provider is the client. These methods are a few examples of ways to encourage feedback given the reluctance of clients to express it directly.

Conclusion

The goal of this paper has been to use research to identify the crucial importance of valuing clients' perspectives when seeking to learn more about the counselling process. The focus on hindering experiences was deliberate, as these kinds of experiences are complex and more difficult to research than helpful experiences (Lietaer, 1992). They serve to show clearly the need to attend to the client. Clients and counsellors differ in their perceptions of the counselling experience, and counsellors are not effective at realizing what clients are experiencing. Therefore it is important to find ways to encourage clients to share their experiences with their counsellors.

Critical factors identified as contributing to improvement in counselling are client resources and the counsellor's ability to develop a strong relationship with the client. A shift in the understanding of counselling has occurred as researchers and practitioners have begun to recognize the value of the relationship and client variables to successful

counselling (Lambert, 2004; Norcross, 2002). Researchers are clearly stating that counselling is best understood within a theory that emphasizes the importance of the client experience. Understanding more about hindering experiences in counselling offers a rich environment for counsellors to improve their own practice. Hindering experiences can be understood by seeking to understand clients in the context of their lives and finding ways to hear their unspoken stories.

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CHAPTER 3

NARRATIVE INQUIRY ILLUMINATES COUNSELLING: STORIES OF COHERENCE

Narrative Inquiry Illuminates Counselling: Stories of Coherence

> In order to make sense of our lives and to express ourselves, experience must be "storied" and it is this storying that determines the meaning ascribed to experience (White & Epston, 1990, p. 9-10).

In an effort to seek client's stories, a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) into hindering experiences in counselling was conducted. Hindering experiences, those aspects of counselling that are experienced negatively and hamper clients in achieving their goals, can encompass a broad range of situations and experiences, including the actions and personality of the counsellor, environmental factors, and the client's personality variables (Paulson, Everall & Stuart, 2001). Hindering experiences are difficult to study and their impact has been underestimated (Binder & Strupp, 1997; Lietaer, 1992; Mohr, 1995; Paulson et al., 2001).

In this study, ethics approval was obtained from a university ethics board, as well as informed consent from participants, and open-ended interviews were conducted with people who had completed personal counselling. Participants were encouraged to discuss all aspects of their counselling experienced as negative, problematic or difficult in any way. The interviews were transcribed and analyzed narratively (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method in which attention is paid to the storying activities that shape and create our understanding of our experiences. "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of them, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, and write narratives of experience" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 2). Narrative inquiry seeks to give voice to stories of individuals in ways that respect the dignity of the individual and is well-suited to investigating a

generally silenced or unspoken story like hindering experiences. In preparing narrative accounts for each participant, a dialogue between researcher and text ensured that developing ideas were continually returned to the text for clarification and accuracy. In this paper, a thread of my process is woven throughout to increase transparency and trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is also enhanced by the cyclical nature of the research. Each participant had the opportunity of re-engaging with their retold story and was encouraged to comment on its accuracy in capturing their experiences. Two of the three women portrayed here engaged fully in this process, one engaged partially as we briefly discussed my retelling, and I sent her the transcript and story, but she did not respond to it.

In the midst of the analytic process, I began to stretch the boundaries that I had allowed to be imposed on the three-dimensional space described by Clandinin and Connelly (2000) by my understanding of my research question. In particular, I needed to move more deeply into the personal aspects of each experience and wonder in a more holistic manner about each person's understanding of their life and their self. My focus on experiences within the counselling relationship needed to be extended. As a result, narrative theories which explore how people use story to place their experiences in a coherent pattern as a way of understanding their lives became the basis in which the thread of hindering experiences in counselling was sought.

This paper begins to describe a broader process of intrapersonal meaning making - each individual's development of a coherent narrative of experience. Understanding counselling in the context of how people work to develop coherent narratives of their lives in order to make sense of their experiences provides a foundation to understand

hindering experiences. I discuss the meaning of a "coherent narrative of experience", based primarily on Carr's work, *Time, Narrative and History* (1986). Narrative coherence is explored through narrative accounts of three participants that reveal people seeking coherence of their experiences within the context of counselling. The idea of narrative coherence as a basis for self identity is a central theme revealed in these stories.

Developing a Coherent Narrative of Identity

Carr (1986) examines ideas around time, history and narrative and proposes a basic thesis that "narrative structure pervades our very experience of time and social existence" (p. 9). Drawing on Dilthey and Heidegger, Carr pulls narrative into our understanding of how we order and make sense of our lives. He suggests that narrative features can be uncovered in everyday life and states:

> So it is with the events and actions of our lives; either they are already embedded in the stories provided by our plans and expectations or, if they are not, we look for and anticipate the stories to which they do, will, or may belong. Narrative coherence is what we find or effect in much of our experience and action, and to the extent that we do not, we aim for it, try to produce it, and try to restore it when it goes missing for whatever reason. It is in this broad sense that we insist that everyday reality is permeated with narrative. (p. 90).

Carr rejects the notion that a narrative approach is merely a commonly used means of understanding our lives, but rather insists that narrative *is* our lives. Our lives are lived in, through, and by narrative means. "[Narrative] is our primary way of organizing and giving coherence to our experience ... narrative form is not a dress which covers something else but the structure inherent in human experience and action" (Carr, p. 65). It

is language that connects experience to understanding (Bateson, 2001; Coles, 1989). "[Stories] are told in being lived and lived in being told" (Carr, p.61). Crites (1971) argues that "the formal quality of experience through time is inherently narrative" (p. 291). Kerby (1991) also offers "a model of the human subject that takes acts of *self-narration* not only as descriptive of the self but, more importantly, as *fundamental to the emergence and reality of that subject"* (p. 4). Given the centrality of narrative to our experience attending to narrative features in counselling is a congruent approach to people's lives.

People develop a life narrative and make sense of what is happening by, to and around them by referring back to this narrative. These life narratives are created through weaving together an individual's storied experience over time. Crites (1971) states that

> Our sense of personal identity depends upon the continuity of experience through time, a continuity bridging even the cleft between remembered past and projected future. Even when it is largely implicit, not vividly self-conscious, our sense of ourselves is at every moment to some extent integrated into a single story (p. 302).

Carr (1986) agrees that our experience is situated temporally and that self identity is developed through attending to experience in time. He comments that "the self is the unity of a series of overlapping projections made from different temporal points of view. It is a "story-in-the-making" (p. 161). Carr's main argument is that narrative structure – a temporal storying of experience with attention to beginning, middle and end, as well as plot development and character – is the fundamental sense-making people do in the world at their most basic level of understanding.

Throughout this process of meaning-making, people work to maintain a coherent story. However, at times their experiences do not fit the story or they begin to disagree with the story, and thus, may be forced to restory. Restorying (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) is the process of seeking a new story to live by, one that better fits experience and can involve a reinterpretation of past events, altered perspectives and beliefs, and/or a shifted orientation to the future. Restorying occurs when the "story-in-the-making ... fall[s] apart for lack of coherence" (Carr, 1986, p. 161). A life story can be pulled into question when individuals have experiences that cannot be adequately understood from within a current narrative. Individuals may feel chaotic as personal identity is called into question. Restorying - a search for a new way of understanding experience that can restore a sense of coherence - occurs. As a result, "events that were lived in terms of one story are now seen as part of another" (Carr, p. 76).

This interpretive process is limited by the past. While past events cannot be erased, they can be, and often are, understood in multiple ways. Old events may be recalled and understood in light of the new. "Self-narration is - and this needs stressing - an interpretive activity and not a simple mirroring of the past ... the meaning of the past is not something fixed and final but is something continually refigured and updated in the present" (Kerby, 1991, p. 7).

The Three Stories

Three study participants' narratives are described to explore the implications that these ideas regarding the development of coherent life narratives have for better understanding hindering experiences in counselling. Counselling is often a place of reflection where the reshaping of a life can be explored. Megan, Gail, and Diane were

each engaged in various processes of restorying their lives and this influences what they experienced as hindering their progress in counselling. The search for narrative coherence provides a framework for understanding their experiences in counselling. Each woman's narrative is placed in italics to differentiate it from the surrounding discussions.

Megan

Megan, a single mother in her thirties, came to our interview with a variety of counselling experiences. Her story, as she told it to me, has strong themes of encouraging empowerment and self confidence. Through conversations with Megan and developing the following story, I understand her counselling experiences as part of a greater life process. Megan is engaged in a struggle to understand painful childhood experiences differently and to build a story to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that includes herself as an active, positive agent in her life. Her thoughts around the usefulness and value of her counselling experiences are strongly tied to the counsellor's ability to engage in this process with her. Megan's life narrative has become incoherent and she is in the process of building coherence or "restorying" herself through counselling. What follows is a metaphoric representation of her counselling experience as a story of disorientation and uncertainty moving toward clarity and understanding.

This story was developed by reading and rereading Megan's transcript, trying to order the conversation into themes, and making notes about my thoughts and responses. In relationship with a colleague I explored my experience of, and reactions to, Megan. I developed a metaphoric representation of Megan's experience in which the incoherence of Megan's identity is seen as a house on fire. The following story is an exploration of this metaphor in which Megan seeks help to put out the fire and rebuild a coherent self.

While written in the first person to maintain the intensity of the story, I, as researcher, am author of the metaphor. In the story, the house represents Megan's self, her narrative of identity. The fire is symbolic of the past trauma in her life. She seeks out the help of various counsellors (firefighters), some of whom are in training programs in counselling.

Megan's story

Fire Fighting

Smoke everywhere. I am coughing, choking. This feels familiar and yet I am stumbling, unsure, disoriented. It is hot. You know, when I think about it, it seems like my whole life has been smoky and unclear.

I really don't know when the fires first began. I do know that there was a time when I became aware that my home was not a safe place to be. I was thrashing about and noticed I was coughing. I began looking around, and was somewhat boggled by what I saw. It took me awhile to figure out if I was seeing reality - dingy ugliness and pain. I wanted to see the truth, see things as they really were, and yet it took time. I knew this was something I had to do on my own. I needed to figure out fantasy from reality. I was surrounded by smoke, a fog. Hiding me and shielding me, yes. But causing me damage as well. And the fires were so hot they were burning me. I had been dancing around in pain, running to and fro to escape without even seeing the fire.

As I began to see, it became obvious. My house was burning down! I had to do something. I wondered where to turn and was pointed in the direction of a local fire hall [community counselling centre]. There I found a firefighter, Ivy [counsellor #1] who said she could help. She came by my place, took one quick look, and had the problem figured out. She said I was suffering from heat exposure. I wasn't sure if this made sense or not,

but I decided to go with what she said and see if it helped. I was eager to get help with the huge blaze in the living room [PTSD flashbacks]. Ivy showed me how to contain the blaze so it wouldn't spread further and we worked together to put the fire out. It turned out that I needed a particular chemical, so I was thankful she knew what to do. That blaze had been burning for so long and felt so entrenched I hadn't been confident anything could put it out.

Whew. I took a minute to catch my breath, and take stock. There were still other fires burning, and there was extensive damage in my living room, but at least I could stand there without fear. It felt good to have some space. I began to consider reconnecting with other people I care for. But right away Ivy began tugging on my elbow. Taking over. Telling me that was not a good idea. Telling me she knew what I needed now.

Just because she knew something about fires, she had no right to direct my life. She wouldn't let go, like a dog with a bone. She worried and worried me. Finally I had enough. I told her that while I appreciated her help with that big blaze, I did not feel she needed to run my life. I left her at the fire hall. I was really upset.

Well, I shrugged it off. At least I had got rid of that big blaze. I prepared to do battle with the rest of the fires on my own. But I soon found out that I still didn't really know how to fight these fires. Where to start, what to do? Someone told me about another fire hall [counselling centre/training facility] that might be helpful. I wasn't sure, but I was at my wit's end. I decided to give it another try.

So I met Susan [counsellor #2], who was just new to the fire-fighting business. In fact, she was still in training. I decided to show her some of the fires and see what she

did. She seemed really nice, but I don't think she really knew what to do. I was running around showing her all these fires, breathing smoke, telling her I wasn't sure what to do, where to start, or even if I was capable of handling all this stuff, and she just ... well, she just ... well I don't know. I'm not sure if she did anything. I don't know if she could even keep up to me. After awhile I started throwing some water around, and she sort of stood by watching, telling me I was doing a good job. I didn't really agree - by this time I was getting better at seeing the fires and the ravaging effects they were having on my home. So it didn't feel like I was having much of an impact. I know Susan wanted to be helpful and I think I overwhelmed her. Maybe this was the biggest, longest burning fire she had seen yet in her training. I don't know. She didn't say anything and I didn't know what to say - she was supposed to be the expert, but I didn't have much confidence in her. She was encouraging though, and after awhile I began to think that maybe I could fight this fire. Finally she had to stop helping me because she was ending her training. I wondered if she was relieved to get out of there.

I was discouraged. I was all alone, my daughter was running around underfoot, and I was really worried that the smoky hot house wasn't very good for her. I thought I would make one last try to get some help. Desperate, I went back to the same fire hall. I figured that at least Susan hadn't done any damage; maybe I could learn a little bit more, anything that would make this job more manageable.

This time, something seemed different immediately. I met Mark [counsellor #3-student], and noticed he was wearing a fire hat. Right away he asked about the house - how it was, where the fires were and what I had already done to fix things. With a snap of his suspenders, he seemed confident and comfortable. I took him over to the house, eager

to show him. He was interested in everything, including the places I had already diminished the fire's effects. I ran all over, flitting from place to place, every time I stopped another fire would flare up somewhere else and demand my attention. I was really hoping to focus on one fire at a time and proceed methodically through my home, dousing the fires, dealing with the smoke and systematically making things better. But it seemed impossible; there was always another flare up somewhere else. The great thing was that in the midst of all this chaos, smoke and heat, Mark was able to follow me. He was amazing in his ability to keep up with me as I leapt from fire to fire. He gave me lots of helpful information - and he never blamed me for the fires or made me feel stupid for not handling them better.

Now I have a lot more confidence. I know a great deal about fire fighting and have been practicing. Things are different in my home. There is still smoke damage, and some smouldering piles, but I have put all the active fires out. What a relief. And the great thing is that if another fire were to pop up, I can use the tools Mark gave me and could probably figure out something to try. The sad part was that I began to get very concerned about my daughter, and had to engage some specialized firefighters [play therapy] to help her. Since there were limited resources, this meant that I could no longer get Mark's help. I was learning so much. However, I suppose I can always go back to the fire hall sometime later if I need help again. Now that I finally met an effective fire fighter, my faith in their ability to help has been renewed.

I recall reading Megan's transcript over and over, wondering what was happening. A strong sense of turmoil spilled off the pages. The conversation jumped around and was filled with detailed descriptions of incidents in Megan's life. My linear

approach to this conversation was not helpful. It was only when I dreamt one night of a house on fire that I found a way of understanding Megan's experience. I suddenly understood much better the degree of confusion Megan was experiencing - confusion that seeped out in our interview. It became easier to engage with the transcript in a meaningful way, and I understood the many anecdotes as Megan's way of sharing her experiences.

Megan was excited about her story as she felt it captured her experiences, and found reading it refreshing. She stated that the story had consolidated her learning and given her more insight into her current experience. She stated that working with Mark, and our exploration of that, had given her more courage in confronting and changing unhelpful relationships.

The disarray of Megan's experience suggests that her life story had fallen into incoherence. Her decision to begin counselling was an attempt to regain coherence, to reinterpret her life story – to restory. As Carr (1986) states: "Coherence seems to be a need imposed on us whether we seek it or not. Things need to make sense. We feel the lack of sense when it goes missing" (p. 97). Megan felt this lack of sense and, recognizing that her independent attempts to rectify this were not working, turned to counselling as a possible place to create a new understanding, a coherent story. Megan was not seeking someone to provide her with this new story, as the first counsellor tried to do. However, she was looking for more than validation. Megan was struggling to restore coherence and in seeking counselling she was looking for another person to engage with her as she tried to build a new self identity. She was requesting some guidance through this process, not answers (as Ivy offered) or generalized, and thus

ineffectual, support (as Susan offered). Susan did not demonstrate confidence in her ability to be helpful and thus Megan's confidence in counselling as a way to restore coherence was not facilitated. The counsellor needed to respect Megan's knowledge of the world, and yet still offer something new, something she could incorporate in her restorying. "The narrative coherence of a life-story is a struggle nonetheless, and a responsibility which no one else can finally lift entirely from the shoulders of the one who lives that life" (Carr, p. 96). Mark, the third fire fighter/counsellor, encouraged autonomy and helped Megan develop confidence in her own ability. He supplied Megan with various tools which she could use throughout the (re)interpretive process she was engaged in. He coupled this educational process with confidence - in Megan's ability to build a coherent narrative of identity and in counselling to provide useful assistance to her.

Megan's experience in counselling can be understood as a "radical revision" (Carr, 1986, p. 76) in which the whole of her past is being re-examined. She is fully engaged in seeking new ways of being in relation to her past. Megan is not disavowing these experiences as though they never happened, but she does wish to, as Crites (1971) says, radically reinterpret them and thus alter the impact they have on her present life. By reshaping her narrative of identity, Megan is creating new space for herself. The hindering experiences Megan encountered were largely rooted in the counsellors' failures to be responsive to her goals and her beliefs about how to approach them.

Gail

While Megan shares a story of re-examining her entire life, in the initial stages of developing new ways of being, relating and understanding, Gail portrays a life narrative

that has already been restoried in many ways. She shows a strong determination to hold onto the coherent narrative of identity she is consolidating. Meeting Gail was like encountering a gale force wind. She is an independent woman not afraid to speak. I present her story through found poetry, a style of poetry built from the participant's own words (Richardson, 1997) to preserve the clarity and power of her words. Gail outlines very clearly who she believes herself to be and her use of counselling to strengthen her life narrative.

Gail expressed a strong preference for a positive outlook on her life and the strength of Gail's determination to retain a positive view in her life was contrary to a discussion of hindering experiences. Although I reassured Gail that I valued her thoughts, I was somewhat concerned later that our conversation had not focused enough on hindering experiences to be useful. A challenge for me was honouring her perspective and realizing that Gail also had much to tell about hindering experiences in counselling.

The found poetry is presented in three interlocking narratives as a way of organizing Gail's story: Gail's narratives of identity, of counselling, of change. These three areas emerged when sorting the transcript thematically. Gail made a point of highlighting her role in shaping the counselling process. As a result, it felt appropriate to separate her narrative of identity from her narrative of counselling. The narrative of change shows the interaction of the self and the counselling process, as well as Gail's beliefs about change.

Gail's narrative of identity

I'm the key

hold on, I am not broken here,

I don't need to be fixed - I just need to find some answers.

understanding more - who I am, why I am

expand my own knowledge

you [counsellors] can't fix me because I'm not broken.

you can't solve my problems,

you can help me understand

you can help me solve them

I know without a shadow of a doubt

I have a very strong mind, a very good mind

I don't have mental problems

Do I feel ashamed of coming here?

No, I'm really proud of it.

I'm proud of myself because I've got the guts to face up to it

I've got the guts to say

"I'm not comfortable with this and want to change it"

instead of hiding.

Gail reveals an already formed coherent narrative of identity in which she claims power and strength. The following found poem reveals how Gail developed her narrative of identity – she is consciously shaping how she interprets her experiences.

negative can be a positive if we choose it to be

I'm not a negative person by nature -

there were some sad issues but

I didn't come in with a negative thought that I was dealing with

I am a very positive thinker

hold on, there's gotta be a positive side to this

I very rarely let negative thoughts bother me

if I do I try and nip them right in the bud

We choose negative or positive

I've tried really hard not to see things in a negative light - I don't like depression.

(Laughter)

And when you are in too much negative

let's face it - we get depressed pretty easy

If it isn't going to the positive for me then why would I bother wasting my time

Gail recognizes that she has a great deal of control in how she interprets the events in her life. In actively storying her life, she is so determined to maintain her story to live by (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) that she cannot include questions around hindering experiences. White and Epston (1990) discuss the selective nature of storying experience as an editing process in which "we prune, from our experience, those events that do not fit with the dominant evolving stories that we and others have about us" (p. 11-12). White and Epston describe counselling as a place to challenge that pruning process and to look for new ways of storying. Gail uses counselling as a place to encourage pruning – with a different focus. Gail is struggling to incorporate and integrate a consciously chosen dominant story, and thus must prune exceedingly carefully - she does not want to open her newly formed identity stories to incoherence. Counselling allowed Gail to strengthen the coherence of her narrative of identity. Asking Gail to look at negative aspects challenged her narrative of identity and introduced the possibility of

jeopardizing her integration process. Friendly and helpful as Gail was, she was not willing to disrupt this process of building coherence.

Gail's narrative of counselling

Counselling is helping Gail's spoken narrative take hold in her life. Her counsellor, Max (a doctoral student), found a way to connect with her that also challenged her to grow within her chosen plotline. The following poems explore the influence of counselling on Gail's integration of her narrative of identity.

A counsellor is not the local mechanic

I like that coming here - they're not trying to fix you

a counsellor

can't make me better

can't turn the screw the right way and have it running smoothly.

can give me the tools to understand where I'm at

can help you learn how to utilize the tools available within yourself

can help link it all together

you have to fix yourself

comes back to that feeling

very very comfortable

because they're not sitting there trying to fix you

I notice how closely Gail's story of the role of counsellors ties with how she places herself as an active agent shaping her world. Gail did briefly portray experiences with previous counsellors which were less helpful, primarily because strong power distinctions were made. Gail experienced as hindering those things that went against the

coherent narrative of identity she is building.

The following poem expresses Gail's experience of the change process in counselling. It becomes clear that counselling helped her further integrate the life story she was building as her actions are brought into harmony with her preferred narrative of identity.

Gail's narrative of change

It's been a growth and a learning

Through this I've learned

I had to do something with my anger, my temper, find a better solution

when I don't understand things now I don't have to be afraid of them

a lot more tools personally

I let pain and stress and life, ups and downs become too serious and too important –

I've learned that I don't have to

I'm even fascinated with how far I've come from [the onset of counselling]

in how I view things, the comfortability I have with emotions

Gail is easily able to identify a number of changes experienced in counselling which show the counsellor joined Gail's identity story that she was a strong, competent woman. In the following statement Gail speaks to her view of change. As she moves away from defending her coherent narrative of identity I glimpse where uncertainty can enter her story.

I think anybody coming through counselling, you know, if they are coming in here and thinking that they are going to walk out anywhere from a month to six months, whole, healed, functioning - they're only going to be a hurting puppy,

because they are deluding themselves. There is so many times that we get messed up with society and people's judgments. We lose the fact of truth and how that truth affects us, and where we fit in that truth.

Gail is talking directly about coherence here, and how we fit into the complexity of society while developing or maintaining our individual narratives. There are dominant stories established on a societal level expressed in every culture (White & Epston, 1990) and Gail seems aware that while society is awash in these dominant narratives, they are not always helpful to the individual. Gail shared with me her developing coherent narrative of identity. In both words and actions she revealed a strong commitment to solidifying this narrative in her life. She chose counselling as one way to do this. In this process she needs to actively defend her narrative from incoherence and this includes disallowing herself to focus on hindering aspects of counselling, the very path she chose to deepen the roots of her narrative of identity.

Diane

Gail's story reveals a woman who chose counselling to strengthen her developing narrative of identity. The final story explored here, Diane's story, portrays a more specific restorying. While Megan is reinterpreting her entire life story, and Gail is consolidating hers, Diane is working on changing a very specific aspect of her experience. She discussed her experiences with two counsellors. The following two depictions were developed by rereading the transcript while attending to themes relevant to hindering experiences. Again, working with a colleague in the analysis process allowed me to challenge my responses and attend more closely to what Diane was saying. The first piece of writing is in third person, a narrator relaying a story of another, in

which I simply trace Diane's experience. This piece is not a verbatim reflection, but it does reflect Diane's style of speech. The second piece attends more closely to her hindering experience and is written in a similar manner. As many of the words and phrases are direct quotes from the transcript, with my writing serving a connective function, this piece shifts to first person.

Diane's story

Control

Diane was scared stiff. Petrified. And she would be dammed if anyone saw it. Usually she was a confident, assertive woman who went after what she wanted with verve and tenacity. But this one thing ... it always threw her. She couldn't control herself - she tried to force her body to let her do what she wanted – in vain. She knew her fear made no sense; she knew it was unreasonable, irrational. And she was not an unreasonable, irrational person. She was a clear thinking scientist, accustomed to reason and logic. Diane routinely denied mystery and the unknown in favour of concrete fact resting in empirical research. The unshakeable foundation of known fact and objective truth. But she could not shake the fear. While she preferred to ignore its existence, she could not shake the fear.

Eventually, the fear got in the way of her goals. She couldn't do what she wanted. It was then that she finally sought help from someone she trusted. She received the name of a counsellor, someone who should know how to help her regain the reins, slow the galloping fear to a more restrained trot. Although she hadn't given it a great deal of thought, it was clear to her that this was a very specific concern, one which required a focused logical approach to combat. It didn't seem necessary to open her inner most self

to the process.

So, she was expecting a direct, problem-solving approach. And she ran straight into the 'heart side' of psychology – unclear and nebulous. The why questions, the vague explorations seemed so remote from this tangible, interfering fear. Also there was pressure to commit to something that she didn't trust in. All this was too much. She couldn't keep going. She went twice, although she knew in her heart after the first visit that it wasn't going to work. So, there she was, still full of fear and without a solution.

And then, one day, unexpectedly she ran across another counsellor advertising that she worked exclusively with specific fears like Diane's. Diane decided to give it a try, and had a completely different experience. This woman knew what she was doing, she was organized, scientific and up to date in her field. Right away, Diane felt confident in this helper, and began to notice improvements quickly. She felt like the helper was truly concerned and went out of her way to help alleviate the fear. And indeed, over time, Diane did conquer her fear. It was like she grew wings, she felt free. Although she knew it would never be easy, she eventually came to a place where the fear was no longer in control. This was success.

Talking with Diane, I was struck by the strong contrasting pictures she painted of the two counsellors. It was clear that each experience illuminated and clarified the other. The following is a further exploration of Diane's unhelpful experience using primarily direct statements from our interview.

Mismatch

I didn't click with her, I felt like a number. I really wasn't convinced that she cared for me or felt compassion for me. Rather I was her income, she wanted to see me

because it was how she made a living. I really felt like she was just in it for the money.

So when she called me up regarding my cancelling my second appointment, I really felt pressure. Pressure to come in, and really I think counselling is a personal choice and I will go when I am ready, not when someone else tells me I should. I think the amount of pressure I was getting to come in was overstepping the bounds of what is appropriate. It only further confirmed for me that she wasn't getting me.

Also there was this discrepancy. I noticed that she seemed to want me to show my emotions, but she wasn't doing anything like that herself. She was pushing me to open up and be vulnerable. And yet, she wasn't showing me anything of herself, she wasn't being open or communicating with me on a personal level. She didn't seem to get that I'm not like that. I don't wear my heart on my sleeve, and I'm not about to get all emotional, especially when the situation doesn't warrant it and the other person is unemotional. I mean I was there to deal with this fear, and I didn't see that getting all emotional was going to be helpful at all.

And I didn't get the feeling that she was really skilled in the issue. Like she said we would do some cognitive desensitization stuff, but it didn't seem like we were getting there very quickly. It seemed very loose and unscientific. Just asking me how I feel. I mean really – how is that going to be effective? So I guess I just wasn't trusting that where she was leading me was going to be effective in dealing with the fear. I mean, I can see the value of this way of working if the problem you were having was more, more, ... well Freudian, I guess. I mean if a person was having problems from childhood, like with parents or whatever, but my problem was nothing like that, and so I really just didn't see that what she was trying to do was all that useful for me personally.

Oh, maybe part of my not really trusting that she could be all that helpful is that she didn't seem to understand the irrational thoughts I was having. She just didn't connect with me. And she went from topic to topic: I was mostly answering questions. She was in charge and I just felt from the way the conversation was going that she didn't really understand where I was at.

Oh, three words to describe her? Well, ... artsy-fartsy, unemotional, pushy. I guess I just didn't groove with her style, and honestly I didn't say anything about that to her, I just stopped going, because I think that's the way she is, and she wouldn't be able to change that. If you don't fit with the counsellor's style, you just better find another counsellor who you do fit with, because otherwise it will just be a battle, and you won't really be able to engage in the process and most importantly, you won't trust the process, and ... you won't get better!

Diane felt that these two pieces represented her experience. While Diane was very approachable, forthcoming and helpful, our conversation was fairly brief and I recall struggling to lengthen it, thinking quickly to develop further questions. Diane is a concise, pointed speaker and our conversation did not veer off course. I was somewhat concerned about this brevity and it was collaboration with a colleague that helped me recognize the degree of Diane's disclosure of herself and her hindering experiences.

Diane went to counselling with the goal of changing one particular piece of her life. She has a coherent narrative of identity and had no desire to alter it. The first counsellor's attempt to broaden this small piece to include other aspects of her life was not helpful, and challenged her life story. Diane is satisfied with the coherence of her narrative of identity and does not wish to be pulled toward incoherence. Seeking to

involve greater pieces of her life in addressing her fear could possibly begin to do this. The second counsellor respected Diane's wishes and kept the focus in counselling on the identified problem. This counsellor respected the coherence of Diane's narrative of identity, which includes respecting the kind of process Diane wished to engage in to resolve her concern.

"Artsy-fartsy, unemotional and pushy" – these terms are quite a description of a counsellor. Diane's experience reminds me of Coles' (1989) comment:

> if our job was to help our patients understand what they had experienced by getting them to tell their stories, our job was also to realize that as active listeners we give shape to what we hear, make over their stories into something of our own (p. 19).

The first counsellor seems to have shaped Diane's story without realizing her own role in that story. The counsellor made decisions about how to approach Diane's concern based on her presumption that Diane's concern necessitated a broad look at her life. This did not fit for Diane. Interestingly, Diane stressed to me her view that if counselling is not working, the client should simply seek a new counsellor. She expressed a belief that the counsellor would not change. This explains why she did not provide the counsellor with feedback about her experience or attempt to work further with the first counsellor. In Diane's view, the client needs to seek a counsellor that fits. In current counselling research, a complementary notion is increasingly being advocated as counsellors are being encouraged to become more flexible and responsive (Stiles, Honos-Webb & Surko, 1998; Duncan & Miller, 2000).

Diane's experiences show the importance of the match between the client's

expectations about how counselling can be helpful and the actual experience of counselling. Diane came to counselling with a stable, coherent narrative of identity. The issue she brought to counselling was to be dealt with from within the security of her narrative of identity, it was not meant to challenge it. Diane experienced the first counsellor's attempts to broaden her issue as a threat to her narrative of identity. She strongly resisted the counsellor's attempts to make her concern more global – to the point of ending counselling. Diane wished to address her concern from within her narrative of identity, not by challenging or changing this narrative.

Resonances across Stories

> The people who come to see us bring us their stories. They hope they tell them well enough so that we understand the truth of their lives. They hope we know how to interpret their stories correctly. We have to remember that what we hear is *their story* (Coles, 1989, p. 7).

Megan's, Gail's, and Diane's stories of counselling are examples of how the search for, or maintenance of, a coherent narrative of identity influences clients' engagement in counselling. Hindering experiences can be better understood in this context as what is experienced as helpful for one person can have a different impact for another. Megan was seeking to rework her entire narrative of identity into a coherent whole, and therefore desired assistance in looking at her whole life. Gail was integrating her narrative of identity and was open to looking at many areas of her life, as long as they were explored from within her chosen narrative and did not threaten it. Diane had a narrative of identity and was seeking to change only a small piece of her story. She actively resisted attempts to look at her life broadly, which she perceived as a threat of

possible incoherence. Each woman came to counselling with a story of themselves, and a story of how the counsellor fit into that broader story. Their stories show that hindering experiences in counselling are strongly influenced by the match between the client's beliefs about counselling and the actual experience. The counsellor's task is to understand each person's narrative and work within that narrative to affect the change the client seeks.

Coming to counselling can be understood as recognition that something extra is required to maintain coherence - there is a tenuous grasp on the life story.

> At higher levels of complexity something special is required, in the way of a reflexive temporal grasp, to hold together the phases of these larger-scale phenomena and to preserve their coherence. This is, in turn to admit that they have a tendency, or at least a capacity, to fly apart or to fragment, thus losing their narrative coherence (Carr, 1986, p. 88).

Coherent narratives of identity are developed and maintained in many different ways. Counselling is one way to actively reflect on the shaping of experience. When conducted respectfully, attending to the client's position in, and understanding of, their own lives, counselling can be very useful in restoring/restorying coherent narratives of identity.

To the degree that counselling is an influential and interpretive process, it is also a power-laden process (White & Epston, 1990). The client does open their life to another person, and the counsellor does become involved in shaping that life. While coherence can be regained through this relationship, the possibility also exists that it can be threatened through reflection or the actions of another person. While the loss of coherence for a time may be part of a change process, the danger of being drawn into

incoherence also exists. If the counsellor fails to work within a person's coherent narrative of identity, the client is at risk of being pulled into incoherence. Megan, Gail, and Diane's narratives of experience teach that clients are very aware of the power held by the counsellor. In various ways, they all worked to maintain their own influence in the counselling process and actively (if not directly) rejected those suggestions and behaviours that did not fit into their stories. They were guarding against the inherent threat that counselling possesses – the possibility of being pulled to greater incoherence.

Through the process of this narrative inquiry into hindering experiences in counselling I have been privileged to hear that clients understand themselves to have a central role in the therapy process. Megan desired some guidance and information from her counsellor, but was clearly not giving up her own responsibility as author of her life. Gail was very articulate about owning the counselling process. Diane recalled coming to counselling knowing precisely what she wanted to achieve and was convinced that re-evaluating her life narrative was not necessary. Each person was clear that attempts by counsellors to take over their story, however well-intentioned, were not helpful.

Conclusion

Understanding how people make meaning in their lives encourages counsellors to attend to individual experience, and to how that experience is storied in a life (McLeod, 1997). Storytelling, and more specifically the development of life narrative, is a process integral to counselling (Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004). Through acknowledging the narrative structure of experience and our common search for coherence, attending to hindering experiences in counselling can become a less confusing and more manageable task. People come to counselling as a way to address incoherence or the threat of

incoherence. At times a "radical revision" is required and counselling is one way to do this in relationship. However, it has also been seen that at times counselling can pull people toward incoherence. This can occur when the counsellor does not adequately attend to the client's narrative of identity and is perceived by the client to be disregarding his/her narrative. The challenge for counsellors is to seek out and understand each person's narrative of identity and work within that framework to manifest change.

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CHAPTER 4

RELATION/SLIPS: ATTENDING WITH CARE TO HINDERING EXPERIENCES IN COUNSELLING

Relation/slips: Attending with Care to Hindering Experiences in Counselling

I don't think even now I'm sure exactly what it was that was missing. I just know that I was excited, looking forward to the session and I walked away feeling much worse. ... It is very hard for me to get past the idea that she's an expert ... I walked away feeling like I had done something wrong ... I felt a lot of guilt. ... Even now I would be really uncomfortable saying anything to her. ... It was very difficult for me to phone her and say, "I don't feel comfortable seeing you again." ... [telephoning] felt very good after ... I trusted that I know myself better than she does ... so it was very empowering to give that back to myself. (Karma, April 21, 2002)

This brief excerpt from our first interview reveals the intensity of Karma's (participant and co-author) first counselling session and shows Karma's struggle with asserting her voice in that session. Our interview about this session resonated with themes of silence and inadequacy, as well as regaining a sense of empowerment through telephoning to cancel further appointments. In this paper a detailed exploration of Karma's hindering experience is used as the basis for reflecting more broadly on how counsellors can attend to the counselling process.

This paper grew out of a larger research project seeking to understand more about hindering experiences in counselling from the perspective of the client. Hindering experiences arise when something occurs in the counselling process that interferes with clients' abilities to achieve their goals (Paulson, Everall, & Stuart, 2001). These experiences are not easily studied, as they are rarely articulated by clients (Audet & Everall, 2003; Levy, Glass, Arnkoff, Gershefski & Elkin, 1996, Regan & Hill, 1992).

However, hindering experiences do impact counselling outcome (Lietaer, 1992; Mohr, 1995). This research used narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) as a way of making these experiences more accessible to counsellors and counselling researchers.

Narrative inquiry is a qualitative research method in which attention is paid to the storying activities that shape and create our understanding of our experiences. "People by nature lead storied lives and tell stories of them, whereas narrative researchers describe such lives, collect and tell stories of them, write narratives of experience (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.2). Narrative inquiry seeks to give voice to stories of individuals in ways that respect the dignity of the individual and is well-suited to investigating a generally silenced or unspoken story like hindering experiences. In investigating these experiences the choice to solicit client experience rather than counsellor experience was deliberate. Clients and counsellors interpret client experiences in counselling differently (Bachelor, 1991; Elliott & James, 1989), and it is the clients' perceptions of counselling that contribute most strongly to outcome (Duncan & Miller, 2000; Lambert & Ogles, 2004).

Situating the Research Process

A brief discussion of our collaborative research process is useful in providing a context for this work. This narrative inquiry has been a reflexive inquiry into self-knowing (Byrne-Armstrong, 2001; McLeod, 2001), emerging over time through conversation. As we acknowledge that representing narrative is an ongoing, ever-changing process deeply influenced by the relationships we engage in, so we have engaged in a relationship with one another as a process of developing Karma's story of counselling within the narrative of her life. Karma often commented that a great deal of

learning and change occurred for her as a result of this research project. Her identity has been re/constructed through metaphor and conversation.

Karma was in training as a mental health practitioner, and it quickly became clear she was interested in the research process. When invited, she readily agreed to extend her involvement in the research beyond the first audio-recorded interview. Karma also had background knowledge of qualitative research, and this research process became an intersection of our roles as researchers, counsellors, and friends. An extended conversation began and various documents including the interview transcript, journal writing and photography became field texts (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The transcript of the original interview became a starting point and anchor for our later conversations.

In the midst of our research process, Karma went on a trip with the purpose of reconnecting with her self where she took photographs of images that spoke to her. In later reflecting on her trip, we noticed almost all the photos contained water. These photographs became field text, and the water metaphor became a focal point in our conversations. Having a variety of field texts arise over time created crystallization and a prism effect, in which different ideas and thoughts were refracted back to us, depending on our angle of repose (Richardson, 1997). Using images to explore experience revealed the changes occurring within Karma. Narrative inquiry can "draw upon the use of still photography to evoke memory in our lives, a memory around which we construct and reconstruct life stories" (Bach, 1998, p. 34). The photos extended Karma's previous journal writing that also employed water as a metaphor for her changing self. Karma's story became one of melting and rushing where the return to self occurred in relationship, through conversation. Karma's journey of change, which included counselling, was a

process of examining her life and retelling her narrative of identity (Carr, 1986).

Central to narrative inquiry is thoughtful attention to how research is conducted and research claims are developed (Bach, 1998; Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Schulz, 1997). In a narrative inquiry the research exploration occurs within "a relationship in which both [participants] and researchers feel cared for and have a voice with which to tell their stories" (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 4). As Tom and Herbert (2002) note, "doing good qualitative research these days requires an engagement with both the ethical and the epistemological challenges of deliberately entering into relationships with other people to learn about them" (p. 591). Our collaboration became a way of further attending to the "nature and quality of the relationships *between* researchers and research participants" (Tom & Herbert, 2002, p. 591). Karma's choice to position herself as a researcher gave her more authority in shaping her narrative and allowed her to claim her voice as her own. This is particularly valuable, given that her voice, like many clients, (Farber, 2003) was not expressed in her initial counselling. This research has been a collaborative investigation and a relationship of equality and respect has been established between the authors.

Method of Data Re/presentation: Creating Meaning through Form

Increasingly, qualitative researchers are recognizing the limitations of traditional forms of data representation in regards to the study of and portrayal of human experience (Eisner, 1997a, Butler-Kisber, 2002). Alternative forms of data representation are being experimented with in the search to find more authentic ways of portraying the other (Lincoln & Denzin, 2000) and as a more effective means of evoking an empathic experience in the reader (Eisner, 1997b). Part of what shapes the meaning ascribed to an

experience is the way in which it is represented. As Butler-Kisber (2002) notes, "the rationale for including arts-based representation in qualitative research is that form mediates understanding" (p. 230). By portraying Karma's story in a variety of ways we acknowledge the multi-layered nature of experience and the plurality of possible meanings (Ely, Vinz, Downing & Anzul, 1997; Richardson, 1997). Eisner (2003) states: "all forms of inquiry, like all forms of representation, have their own constraints and provide their own affordances" (p.21). Telling Karma's story through a combination of forms, similar to the turning prism, allows it to be reflected on from a variety of angles.

Employing alternative forms of data representation draws the reader into the participant's experience (McLeod, 2001). Rather than imposing a particular meaning on Karma's story, opening up the text to multiple readings allows the reader to form an empathic connection. As Schulz (1997) states:

> A lived story calls for space to come to that story with an attitude of care. Creating a space within the reading framework to incorporate an attitude of caring and connecting to the other within the text establishes a different perspective from which to read the research story. Within a dialogic model of reading, the purpose is not to analyze a text as object in order to gain mastery over it, but rather to connect with the existence behind the text (p. 138).

Through artfully weaving field texts together, we represented Karma's story in ways that create space, and thus encourage the reader to come to this narrative with the attitude of care discussed by Schulz.

Karma's story was not created in a linear manner; rather it is a result of multiple crossings back and forth between composition and representation. In the messiness of

extended conversation over time, the line between data collection and representation becomes blurred. Karma did not travel with an instruction to take photos that would capture her hindering experience. However, our ongoing research was very salient to Karma, and we did speak about the meaning of the trip for her prior to her leaving. The photographs became unplanned field texts, and some later moved into our representation of her experience. As Schulz (1997) notes, "The point of the narrative is an understanding of the persons being studied from the perspective of their own situation, rather than judgmentally from afar. The purpose is reconstruction of meaning" (p. 88). This paper represents Karma's story centered on the development of the metaphor of water as emotion. The reader will encounter photographs and poetry created by Karma, thus allowing the reader to join in her perspective. Her journal writings are italicized to distinguish them from co-authored text.

From Silence to Voice: Reconnecting to Self

Figure 1: Before Counselling

Prior to seeking counselling, Karma felt precarious, vulnerable, and exposed. Like the tree in the photo (Figure 1) she was tenaciously hanging-on, barely surviving. The environment provides many challenges for a growing tree – erosion, unpredictable storms, and drought. Karma also had weathered her share. Her roots were strong, and she had skills that served her in the past but here she was, with the very soil underneath eroded away, leaving her roots hanging, nothing to grab on to. The dryness of this image is shocking. There is no water

to work with. It seems so far out of reach ...

I lost my voice
it screamed in an agony of silence and restraint
burning for release
paralyzing
Searching, trying to find my way,
through the darkness and despair.
Where is the flame that used to burn,
within?
I am searching .....
for my way in the world
for my health
for my center, my peace of mind,
for answers
for compassion

I no longer feel the ground beneath my feet,
nor the pull within, an energy, a quickening
to propel me forward, toward the goal

Karma, March 2003

Karma was lonely, overwhelmed, and depressed; disconnected from her self and caught in a place of silence. She was in a difficult marriage in which she did not feel heard or encouraged. In many areas of her life, both personal and professional, she was feeling unable to voice her emotions. She recalled struggling academically for many years to find and express her voice. Choosing silence was familiar to her – silence had been with her for many years in different ways. For a time, she had found a voice through art, but that too had faded away. Karma writes: *In the past I've often received feedback that others find my presence calm – soothing. And this has always been my way of coping – to suppress the turmoil swimming beneath the surface. In turning inward I try to protect those around me but I harm myself. It is from this place that I first sought out a counsellor – to begin expressing the pain and helplessness I was feeling* (March, 2004). Karma recognized that she was stuck and sought counselling as a way of moving

forward. A sense of healing and empowerment was felt and Karma was enjoying the shift felt by having taken the first step of booking an appointment. Along with these feelings of strength came the reintroduction of water in her photographs.

Figure 2: First Session

Partway through the first session, Karma was caught off guard as the counsellor behaved in unexpected ways. Karma was suddenly free falling down a massive, unseen, unheard waterfall. The roar was deafening, stifling her voice; and the fall heart stopping. All of her attention was focused on survival, on finding a safe landing. How could such a "safe" place suddenly become so dangerous, so threatening?

Karma entered this first counselling session eager to move forward. However, her feelings of confidence and safety were quickly replaced with shock, confusion and betrayal. Almost immediately, the counsellor reneged on their prior agreement regarding a reduced fee, and unexpectedly increased the agreed upon cost of counselling. The counsellor seemed to be guiding the session toward goals that Karma was not proposing. Karma felt that her prior knowledge, particularly about counselling, was ignored and devalued rather than respected. As well, the counsellor indicated that her issues were going to require much more work than Karma was anticipating. Karma described expecting to attend counselling bi-weekly or monthly for a little while, and the counsellor indicated she had years of work ahead of her. In fact, the counsellor booked six sessions ahead with Karma. The counsellor also asked Karma's permission to speak to the referral source about their meeting (essentially requesting to break confidentiality) without giving

a reason for needing to do so. All of this left Karma feeling bereft, desolate and weak. She was not given time to assimilate all the changes, nor was she given space to voice her concerns, reactions and feelings of betrayal to her counsellor. She lost her sense of safety. Combined, these reactions released a burst of powerful emotion in her.

Figure 3: After the Hindering Session

The rough waters of emotion released in the waterfall surround Karma. This new, wet terrain is unfamiliar and frightening. The tree still struggles to hang on, its beleaguered trunk now soaked by spray. The situation is precarious. The tree is still very exposed, and a heavy feeling of aloneness hangs in the air.

Karma was tearful and emotionally distraught upon leaving the session. Her hope in her ability to regain a sense of identity had been stripped away by the counsellor's problem-oriented, labelling approach. Karma's initial reaction to the counsellor's broadening the scope of her issues was one of acquiescence. She assumed the "expert" was correct and left broken. The shock of this experience unleashed a flood of emotion in Karma, as is seen in the powerful reintroduction of water in her photographs (Figure 2 and 3).

The intensity of this experience pushed Karma to confront the disparity between the counsellor's approach and her own intuition. Her expectations were shattered. Her standard silent response could not be maintained. Karma connected with family and friends with whom she felt safe. In conversation she began to challenge the expert role

she had allowed the counsellor to retain. Karma telephoned the counsellor and cancelled further appointments which led to a feeling of empowerment. It was the very strength of the hindering experience that pushed the emotions to burst out. A less difficult experience could easily have led to ongoing agreement, with the emotions remaining unexpressed.

Time goes by ... and Karma regained enough trust to reach out for connection again. She initiated a second counselling process with a different counsellor. Here Karma felt respected and understood. She had space to speak and becomes aware of how frozen her feelings were. Karma developed a metaphor of an iceberg and began to recognize her pain – both physical and emotional, as something that had immobilized her, had halted her words. In the far reaches of the Artic Ocean an iceberg sits, alone, frozen and immobile.

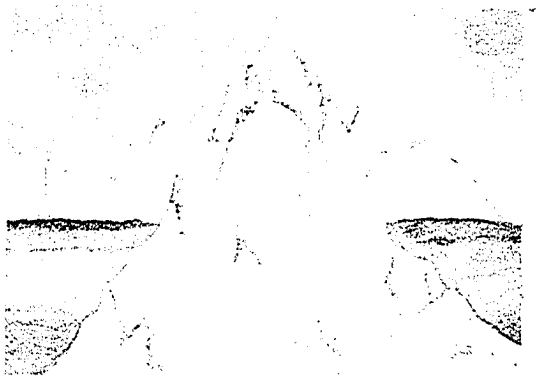

Figure 4: The Iceberg

My pain's remains,
a frozen block of ice
locked away, so no-one sees
Hidden, under the surface, the real danger lies
jagged spikes, deceptive waves
lurking, cavernous mouth, open wide
depths unknown, truths untold
Here (hear) the skeletons cry,
rattle of bones, and echo-off stones
Clouds unfurl, season's break
Cracks appear as the sunlight glows
Warming sun's burning fire
Melts the gloom, seals its doom

The water rises and the ice recedes
Feelings burn, fire ignited
Spring renewed
Healing water bringing growth and new life.
I slumbered – dormant
Hibernating in a frozen landscape.

Now buds form, flowers yet to bloom
The darkness gone, the light remains
For the cycle to renew, we all must sleep awhile

BUT THIS IS MY DAY NOW!

The pain's remains
Numbness gone, feelings reign
It hovers, near, but its power with fear is gone

Sacred fires burn along
Prickles awake, tingling awareness grows

A healing time
Growing strong

Karma, April, 2003

Through this second counselling experience, Karma begins to thaw her emotional pain. She finds tools to rebuild her narrative of identity, reconnects with her intuition and builds a firmer belief in her own skills. Suggestions, support and stability are provided. There is an absence of the betrayal and mistrust that occurred with the first counsellor, and an emphasis on strength and resources rather than brokenness. Karma's growing comfort with the ebbs and flows of emotion in her life allows her to continue on her own with a clear path ahead; regaining confidence, establishing balance, and consolidating her learning. Karma leaves counselling and is required to have faith in her own abilities to sustain herself.

Balance- rhythmic footsteps, striking on water, splashing

Beating heart a living drum
Guides my voice and calls my song
Notes entwine and a spirit sings along
A journey begins, a soul awakens

Karma, March, 2004

We leave Karma at a deep, misty lake; a place of serenity. Solid mountains, steady and strong in the background have replaced the iceberg. The smooth, peaceful

rhythm of small waves has replaced the turbulent rapids. In reconnecting with her self, Karma rests in a place of renewed knowledge, ready to face future challenges. The cold colors of the rushing water and frozen ice have been replaced by the warm hues of a lake reposing in the twilight sun.

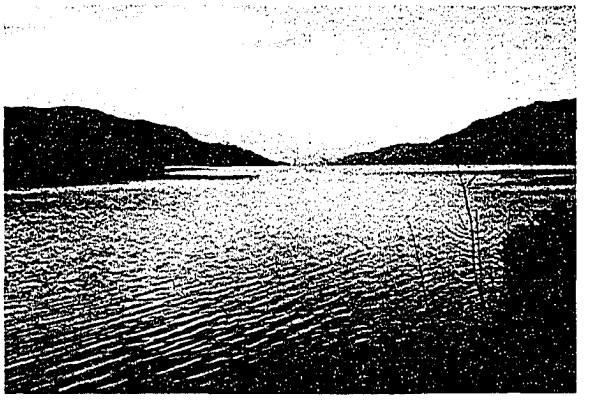

Figure 5: A Contemplative Pause

I remember.
the answer, within
darkness shows the light,
the flame
the beauty,
the joy, of the moment
the process
how to play
how to for-give
the way
the path lies ahead,
behind, the foundation of who I am

I have navigated the treacherous waters of the iceberg
The danger beneath the surface is no more
obstacles, challenges await
but, for now I rest,
I am healed and whole.

Karma, April, 2003

Through these counselling experiences Karma began to realize how frozen and distant her emotions were. Her experiences had been kept internal, she had given up her voice, and this was keeping her from moving forward in her life. The photos portray the shifts Karma experienced – before counselling her experience was barren, devoid of water. Karma was keeping her emotion tightly contained. Her first counselling experience reintroduced the expression of emotion, but in a shocking and powerful manner that did not feel safe or controlled. Karma's actual experience of her first counselling experience stood in sharp contrast to her expectation, creating an intensity

that forced her to make a choice - she could no longer deny the degree of silence that enveloped her. However, through continuing to work, Karma recognized herself as an iceberg and engaged in the task of beginning to soften and melt some deeply rooted, emotionally laden experiences. Her story here culminates in a scene where water, calm and soothing, is fully present.

Discussion

Further thoughts on Karma's story

Karma's story can be understood as a process of moving from silence to voice, both physically and emotionally. She entered her first counselling session feeling "hung out to dry" with no sustenance, support or voice. Making a counselling appointment was an important step - it signified a new prioritizing of her self. It makes sense that this first counselling session was so difficult. Here was a woman struggling to find permission to speak, to value herself, and her first tentative step to do so is met with perceived disrespect and betrayal. Karma's expectations of counselling were at odds with her experience. The actions of the counsellor – changing the fee structure, dismissing Karma's pre-existing knowledge of both the counselling process and herself, and overlaying a language of expertise and pathology – were questionable. In combination with Karma's reluctance to challenge the counsellor and her resistance to being pathologized, this session resulted in an unresolved misunderstanding event (Rhodes, Hill, Thompson & Elliott, 1994). The counsellor did not assess how Karma was feeling, nor did Karma give voice to those feelings in session, perhaps was not given any space to do so. The session was a discordant event that did not fit with Karma's expectations.

Rhodes et al. (1994) describe misunderstanding events as times when the therapist

"did or did not do something that was a breach of what the client wanted or needed" (p.479). Typically, when these occurrences remained unresolved, the client refrained from asserting their negative experience, often due to the perception that the counsellor was not open to this type of feedback. Silence of this type is common among clients, as has been noted by Farber (2003), Granfanaki and McLeod (1995), Paulson et al. (2001), Regan and Hill, (1992), and Rennie (1992). Levitt's (2001) discussion of silence in psychotherapy notes that obstructive silences include times when the client is uncomfortable with something in the session and responds by emotionally shutting down and disengaging. Karma retreated into silence in her session, and was not helped to speak by her counsellor – the silence was co-created in relationship. Through this reflective, ongoing research process Karma has come to view this experience as reflective of her silenced position in life.

Parallels between Counselling and Research

Based on an investigation of processes that influence clients' understandings of events in experiential psychotherapy as helpful or hindering, Grafanki & McLeod (1999) suggest that the process of counselling can be understood narratively. They discuss three broad influences on the therapy process: the therapist as audience, the negotiation of a new story-line and the co-construction of a story of therapy. All three of these aspects are paralleled in the research process of this narrative inquiry. Karma was negotiating a new storyline, and Julie was the audience with whom the story was being co-constructed. As well, a story of research was co-constructed.

Through this research process, Karma was reflecting closely on her experience and was making meaning of previous experiences – both hindering and helpful. In fact,

her hindering counselling experience was restoried in such a way that it became an integral beginning to a healing journey. Just as in counselling she, like other clients, was engaged in re-understanding aspects of her life, this research process was also a re-understanding of experience. Part of this process was finding ways to make her story heard and understood by Julie through ongoing negotiation. This also reflects counselling, as central to counselling is the conversation that occurs between counsellor and client in a constantly negotiated space. If counsellors take over rather than negotiate the conversational space, hindering experiences may arise.

Grafanaki and McLeod (1999) reflect on the importance of the relationship between client and therapist in the narrative renegotiation that the client engages in when reconstructing the life narrative. They discuss how the presence of the therapist as an audience shapes the story that unfolds. It is easy to focus on the teller of the story, and forget that a story is always shaped for its audience. In this research process, Julie was a primary audience, and her involvement did shape the developing story. Julie's role was not removed and dispassionate, but rather often mimicked that of an engaged, interested counsellor. Her different personality as well as her separation from the experience, allowed her to provide alternative viewpoints to Karma. At times Julie was a sounding board to reflect Karma's voice – saying things that were difficult for Karma to voice. Her agreed upon role was to encourage Karma to explore her story, and to this end, she often summarized, wondered, challenged, and clarified Karma's emerging thoughts. Empowering the client is necessary, but it is important not to lose sight of the counsellor's impact in session. Attending closely to how the hearers of the story also shape its telling is a direction that can be explored further in counselling and research.

While our focus was on Karma's story of her hindering counselling experience, we lived a particular story of research. Just as clients and counsellors co-construct a story of counselling, and clients story the experience of counselling within the broader narrative of their lives, we attended to the research process. Over time, we would talk about what it was like to be working together and how the research was unfolding. For both Karma and Julie this has been a personal process and we have spoken about how this research has shaped our narratives of identity. For Karma, the research process was an extension of her healing journey, and became storied within the themes of self-discovery and growth. For Julie, this process was storied within the framework of a developing identity as a researcher.

Returning to Practice

Having a single counselling session makes Karma a typical client while giving voice in such depth to a hindering experience makes her a rare client. Many clients come to one session and then do not return. While some may experience symptom relief or other positive results, others, like Karma, discover counselling to be something other than they were expecting, and do not return. Karma, having training in counselling, perhaps had an even more clearly defined set of expectations than most clients coming to their first session. It is clear that the counsellor violated many of Karma's expectations. While Karma's response of not returning was a naturally protective one, this means the counsellor does not receive feedback as to what was problematic for the client. Thus, it is difficult to modify future behaviour.

Research that solicits stories of hindering experiences gives voice to the dissatisfactions and hurts that clients feel and do not share with their counsellors. It is not

easy for most people to provide negative feedback to others, and clients in particular are often coming to counselling because they are not feeling confident, and thus will be even less likely to be able to provide this kind of feedback, especially to a designated helper. Through being involved in research, clients can begin to voice these experiences in a safe reflective setting and counsellors can begin to get a sense of how clients experience counselling.

In considering Karma's experience further, the intent is not to pass judgement on the counsellor, but rather to explore the nature of the hindering experience. It is important to note that the counsellor was not interviewed and so does not have a voice in this paper. Based on our reflections, it seems the counsellor failed to establish a connected working relationship with Karma. It appears that she did not pace Karma well – at times moving too quickly by reflecting to Karma that her issues were very deep and long term and at other times moving too slowly by not acknowledging Karma's knowledge of the counselling process. As well, it is unclear why she chose to change the already agreed upon reduced fee. Karma did not experience an environment of empathy, respect and understanding. Rather she received a message of brokenness and felt devalued by the counsellor changing a contractual agreement. Speculation could be made about Karma's role in the hindering experience. Consideration of Karma's readiness to change, or her acknowledgement of her issues could occur. In our conversations Karma did recognize her contribution to this experience; however, she was the client. It was the counsellor's job to begin to find a way to understand Karma's experience of her life and work with her to create change, rather than impose change from an authoritative position. In counselling, the onus is on the counsellor to create safe spaces for clients to express

themselves. Karma's experience clearly shows that hindering experiences can occur even with a skilled, experienced, and well-intentioned counsellor. In investigating hindering experiences it is important to avoid the trap of blaming, and to acknowledge that it is challenging to be appropriately responsive to every client on a first meeting.

In re-examining Paulson et al.'s (2001) study that begins to develop thematic structures of hindering experiences, a distinct fit can be seen with Karma's experiences. Central to their concept map, as well as central to Karma's experience, is the theme of "lack of connection". While Karma's experience is not inclusive of all of the themes described by Paulson et al., most notably "lack of commitment and motivation", the themes of "barriers to feeling understood", "negative counsellor behaviours", and "lack of responsiveness" are all present.

Karma's experience points to the importance of the counsellor to be attentive to process issues. Counsellors need to seek feedback immediately and throughout counselling in ways that clients can comfortably engage in. It is important for counsellors to be able to notice and discuss times when a mistake or misjudgement has occurred. Hiding behind a shield of expertise may save the ego of the counsellor, but does little to extend the counselling relationship or alleviate client concerns. Karma's experience also highlights the comfort that counsellors develop with the counselling endeavour. With repetition comes familiarity, and it is easy to disregard the strength required of a client to attend the first appointment, let alone provide negative feedback to a counsellor.

This paper reveals the power of the narrative process to effect change in lives. While both counselling and research may be small portions of a life, their reflective capacity can have a large impact on the construction of a life narrative. In collaborating

for this project, the power of conversation in shaping life narrative was revealed. As narrative components of counselling have also been identified (Grafanki & McLeod, 1999), it may be useful for counsellors to consider pulling narrative aspects of therapy into direct discussion. Shaping sessions around these themes, much as our research conversations were shaped, may be very useful in both resolving issues and finding ways for clients to engage in counselling process discussions with the counsellor. Collaborating in sessions, both counsellor and client can become immersed in understanding the ways that the process of counselling is shaping and refining the client's ongoing narrative construction.

Conclusion

Using varied means of expression is intended to allow the reader to connect with the power of Karma's story. The value of narrative inquiry as a research method is seen in the close connection that stories bring between the text and the reader. Conveying the emotional intensity of the story helps the reader build an empathic connection with a recognizable person. Exploring the hindering themes through ongoing collection and representation of arts-based data was very empowering for Karma and being a part of this research has continued to encourage her to speak her ideas, thoughts, and emotions rather than remain silent.

It was in and through our research relationship that Karma's narrative of identity was given space to take shape. As Witherell (1991) states:

> The self develops and finds meaning in the context of relationship – between self and other selves, subject and object, individual and culture, and between aspects of the self, both across and within the time dimension. Further, each [previous

> references] emphasizes the central importance of story and dialogue with the process of human development, especially as they pertain to the development of one's sense of self (p. 90-91).

Using narrative inquiry allowed us time to reflect and interact, which was invaluable in allowing a halting, reluctantly told story to fully emerge. A constant challenge for Karma has been to voice her deeply felt responses to and thoughts about her counselling experiences. As previous research acknowledges (Paulson et al., 2001; Rennie, 1992), clients are generally reluctant to attend to and discuss negative or hindering experiences in counselling with their counsellors. Well versed in the school of silence, it took time and trust to allow Karma to more deeply expose and explore her own stories. Throughout our conversations, Karma repeatedly noted how difficult it was to reflect on this experience. Like counselling, this process could not be rushed, but needed to be given room to emerge. We experienced what Grafanaki and McLeod (1999) describe as "flow" in helpful counselling relationships, when it is "as if each [person] shared in a common, mutual experience and it was from this mutual engagement that both were able to contribute to the telling of the story" (p. 300). In conversation we were able to effectively investigate a reluctantly shared experience.

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CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

This study placed clients' stories of hindering experiences in counselling in the public domain. The goal of attending to these stories more deeply in an effort to better understand clients' hindering experiences in counselling was met through conducting a narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) in which stories of experience were solicited, analyzed and represented. The six people (five women and one man) who participated in the study had all engaged in individual counselling for personal issues, and were interviewed upon completion of their counselling. Each interview was audio-taped and transcribed. A narrative analysis was conducted in which metaphoric representations of their hindering counselling experiences were developed that sought to convey each participant's conceptualizations of their experiences. Transcripts and analysis were returned to all participants for input and responses were received from five of the six participants. The participants conveyed that the research accurately described their experiences. Minor comments, mostly extending the work or providing clarification, were provided by some participants.

To date, this study has resulted in three papers. The first paper (Chapter Two), "The clients as expert: Researching hindering experiences in counselling", focuses on a critical exploration of counselling literature, while building a case for the importance of attending to the client perspective in conducting research. Aspects of this research study are described to highlight the difficulty in doing so. Suggestions for soliciting client feedback in counselling are given based on both previous research and this study.

The second paper (Chapter Three), "Narrative inquiry illuminates counselling: Stories of coherence", discusses the integral presence of narrative as the shaping force in

how people make sense of their lives. The narratives of three participants are presented and the role that counselling can play in this storying process is discussed within the context of these participants seeking coherent narratives of identity. Hindering experiences arise within the process of seeking narrative coherence – particularly when the counsellor does not recognize where the client is in that process.

The third paper (Chapter Four), "Relation/slips: Attending with care to hindering experiences in counselling", is an in-depth exploration of one participant's hindering experience in counselling. Written collaboratively with the participant, attention is paid to both the experience itself and how the participant came to view this experience within the context of her healing process. Connections are made to the narrative process of counselling and the parallel process that occurred in conducting this research. All three papers include a focus on what these experiences can teach practitioners.

Viewed as a whole, these papers can be seen as a gradual focusing of a lens. The first paper presents a wide angle view of research in the area, the second paper focuses more closely on three women's stories, and the third paper attends in detail to one story of a hindering experience. Overall, this study demonstrates the importance of the client perspective in counselling. Clients are engaged in a process of change and counsellors need be willing to attend closely to clients' experiences of counselling in order to best join and encourage that change process.

Narrative Threads Across Participants

Throughout this narrative inquiry into hindering experiences in counselling the following questions were posed: (1) What do people experience as hindering and/or unhelpful in therapy? (2) How do people situate these experiences within the context of

the counselling process? and (3) How do people situate the hindering counselling experience within the context of their lives? In seeking to learn more about these questions, stories rooted in personal experience have been told. These portraits are situated within a time, place and social context. "The past ... should be viewed as part of our lives, and because life is unfinished so is the meaning of the past" (Kerby, 1991, p. 31). The narratives shared with me may change over time and with further experience. However, the situational nature of the narratives does not diminish their power, rather the ever changing nature of human experience can be embraced and perhaps what can be learned from these pages can serve to continue that process of change. While there is much variation across the six participants, there are also shared threads running through their stories. These narrative threads (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) are explored here as resonances across experience rooted in particular context that also have broader implications for counselling.

The phrase "narrative threads" lends itself to a weaving metaphor. While the participants are weaving their experiences together with similar coloured threads, there are many factors influencing the overall appearance of each completed cloth or narrative. In this section, some of the more informative threads seen across hindering experiences are examined. Often research focuses on themes developed from composite descriptions across participants. However, these types of descriptions lose the particular, and as a result can be difficult to apply to other people. Rather than develop composite thematic descriptions, I reflect on three main narrative threads seen across the six participants' narratives that speak strongly to hindering experiences. Stories of expectations, stories of personal agency, and stories at the boundaries of relationship will be described through

the use of direct quotes from the six participants. These threads are not exclusive of one another, but often influence one another such that it becomes difficult to discuss each as distinctly separate from the others.

Stories of Expectations

All of the participants came to counselling with expectations. Four participants had experienced prior counselling that shaped what they expected of the current counselling. While Karma had not previously engaged in counselling, she was in training to be a counsellor which influenced her expectations. Diane described her first counselling experience, as well as her second which followed shortly after. In telling the story of these expectations, I will discuss four types of expectation that influence hindering experiences in counselling – expectations of the self, of the counsellor and of the process as well as uncertainty or not knowing what to expect.

Expectations of the self

Each participant came to counselling with a view of how they would fit into the process. Participants described an awareness of how their view of counselling, their motivation, and their goals all impacted their experience. Lori makes reference to the changing status of counselling in society – "mental health is getting a much better social reputation or whatever, it's no longer the crazies that go and talk to somebody. You know, it's pretty much, now we have problems, we talk them out, and we need an outside person to … show you the whole picture". Gail also notes "the positive advertising coming out about counselling and psychologists" and goes on to say "Do I feel ashamed of coming here? No, I'm really proud of it". This shift in perception of counselling has a strong impact on the person's expectation of the purpose of counselling and has

implications for the person's view of him/her self. Reflected in these comments is increasing permission to access counselling without needing to view the self as broken in some way.

A number of participants talked about their motivation and readiness to change as key in the process. As Lori stated "I am ready. I am ready for what I want to be a normal life." Tony highlights the role of motivation by contrasting his friend and his counsellor. He described himself as always "really eager to learn what he [his friend, Mike] has to say about me", while in reference to his counsellor, he comments that "what a person gets out of something is what they put into it ... I'm sure if I talked to Val [counsellor] every week, ... my experience would have been even better". Participants talked about how they had chosen to engage in counselling once more, even though previous sessions had not been useful, as a kind of "last hope". Lori described becoming aware that "I can't do it on my own. Because I came to that point where I tried everything, nothing works. This is my only hope". Megan also described counselling as a "last resort", which appears to have increased her motivation to make it work.

Expectations of the self are seen in the participants' varied approaches to goal setting. Karma clearly talks about her approach to her first session. "I was looking for some reassurance and guidance in terms of how things had been going and what I should be doing to improve things ... I was looking forward to it". Megan portrays the importance of having clear goals in comparing two different counsellors. Her counselling with Susan was of limited value, and she mentions "by the same token I didn't know what I was looking for." In later (more successful) counselling she stated that she was "setting goals for what I want to try and fix with us in the tenure I have". Reflecting on

her dissatisfaction with previous counselling led Megan to assert herself by formulating her goals more clearly in her next counselling relationship.

Expectations of the counsellor

Expectations regarding what the counsellor would be like played a role in the hindering experiences that some participants described. Lori described having felt "betrayed" by a previous counsellor, as well as her concern regarding her counsellor's age - "Can this person really help me? They are awful young" - which led to her hesitation to reengage in counselling. Tony, in talking about trying to connect to his counsellor, describes his presuppositions about counselling: "I just kind of figured, well, you know, she's in psychology so she's probably got some problems of her own. So really we're not that different". Karma said that she "had expectations as to what she [the counsellor] should be doing and so I was very aware of when she didn't follow that or she did". Diane described a mismatch between her approach and the approach of the counsellor as a hindering experience. She states

> I'm coming from a very scientific background and she kind of approached it more from like why you feel this way ... it works better for me from a cognitive point of view and she was approaching it more from the heart side of psychology.

How the counsellor fits into each person's expectations of them is clearly related to hindering experiences.

Expectations of the counselling process

While closely linked to the person of the counsellor, expectations of the process of how counselling would unfold also influenced hindering experiences. Gail, who had experienced a process that matched her expectation, had a positive experience. She was

expecting that her counsellor would "help me learn tools and how to utilize the tools that are available within myself", which fits her description of her counselling. Megan described expecting a smooth, steady process in which "this will be a nice normal thing. We'll deal with this issue". This is very different from her experience of "changing channels lots" as many and varied issues came up in counselling. Megan's main accolade to her counsellor was his ability to keep up with the varied nature of the counselling content. So while her expectation did not match her experience, her counsellor's ability to keep up with the variation still allowed the experience to be helpful. Karma describes the negative impact of her expectations being at odds with her experience. "I felt like things slowed down more than they needed to be. Like I was ... ready to get things rolling. I felt like she was trying to start from square one and I was already on square ten".

Uncertainty and not knowing

Although each person had some expectations coming to counselling, some participants also relayed an element of not knowing what to expect, regardless of previous counselling experience. While counsellors are comfortable with various aspects of the counselling process, clients may not be. Lori commented that "I was a little bit unsure because I'm not only starting a brand new journey, but I'm not knowing exactly what I'm going to expect of the whole process". For most people counselling is an unfamiliar experience – certainly different from encounters in everyday. This uncertainty is at times partly due to a lack of knowledge. In commenting on her first counsellor, Diane stated: "I wasn't aware of what I needed in a counsellor either ... I wasn't aware that I would have fit better with a different one". This uncertainty or lack of knowledge about the counselling process can lead to hindering experiences in counselling. Karma,

even with her knowledge of the counselling process, acknowledges this uncertainty in describing her awareness that being a client was new - "I didn't know how I reacted as a client ... [there was] kind of an openness to see what was going to happen ... how I was going to react to things".

Summary of stories of expectations

Hindering experiences arise when there is a clash between a positive expectation of counselling and the actual experience. This clash can clearly arise when the experience is negative, but interestingly, hindering experiences can also occur when the positive expectation is somewhat unrealistic. The expectation of counselling needs to be realistic, which can be difficult if counselling is a new experience. Hindering experiences also seem to occur when negative expectations about counselling are confirmed. Counselling sessions described as most helpful were portrayed by participants who began counselling with some mistrust of the process or negative expectations about counselling and were surprised by the experience. For some participants, not knowing what else to do encouraged a reengagement in a process that previously had only been moderately successful. This combination of a "last resort" with low expectation of success led to perhaps an assumption that the experience would not be completely free of hindering experiences. Others, Karma in particular, approached counselling full of hope with an expectation that counselling would be a unique, positive, affirming experience. This approach led to a much greater degree of shock when the reality of an imperfect session was experienced. Finally, reflected in some participants' stories was an approach that was less intense and more realistic. The "last resort" feeling regarding engaging in counselling was not present and counselling was sought for its possibilities of learning

more, reflecting on the self, or working within a circumscribed problem. Here the imperfect session seems to be more accepted and the hindering experiences described arise less from a clash of expectations than from other factors.

Stories of Agency and Power

Many participants' discussions of their counselling experiences included aspects of personal agency. White (2004) describes personal agency as viewing "people as active mediators, negotiators, and as representatives of their own lives, doing so separately and in unison with others" (p. 20). This ability to have an active role in directing one's life is an important part of many of the hindering experiences described. As well, the ways participants experienced the agency or power exerted by the counsellor is important. Many stories of both hindering and helpful experiences portray the negotiation of power in the counselling relationship. Reflections on personal agency are separated for discussion into three areas – participants' sense of personal agency, agency or power of the counsellor, and expression of participant personal agency within the counselling process.

Personal agency of the participants

There is a strong connection to personal agency in Gail's narratives. She recalled telling her previous counsellor, Sheena, "you can't fix me because I'm not broken. You can't solve my problems, you can help me understand and you can help me solve them. But, I'm the key". Here, Gail was clearly conveying how she would like the counsellor to respect her own sense of agency. Her comments show how the person's sense of personal agency influences how the problem is storied. Lori noted that the counsellor's flexibility in allowing her to choose homework topics and guide the session was very helpful. She

noted "[the counselling] was always open ... I guess if you want to call it that I always had the control over it ... so that was very helpful". Lori appreciated being able to be an active agent in her counselling.

This sense of personal agency interacts with the participant's view of the counsellor, as is seen in Karma's experience. Karma described her sense of personal agency in the following manner: "I had somewhat of an idea what I needed to work on. I've done a lot of work on myself in the past .... I don't think I'm exactly someone who's totally in the dark about what's going on." Karma also had a strong sense of the counsellor as expert, and described her difficulty in rejecting the counsellor's inaccurate assessments.

> It is still very hard for me to get past the idea that she's an expert and she knows something that I don't and so if she's saying this it must be true. And so I walked away feeling like I had done something wrong and that there must be a problem with me if I was feeling this way.

Karma noted that she continued blaming herself for a time. "I felt a lot of guilt ... I tried to explain it away for a little while. I tried to tell myself that I was being resistant to the counselling, I wasn't prepared to do the work". Karma's words clearly show how much credibility she gave to the counsellor as an expert and how this impacted her own sense of agency. Megan, who at times went along with various counsellors' opinions even though she disagreed, also described times when her agency was disallowed as hindering. She talked about coming to counselling and having the counsellor pick up on an issue she was not concerned about.

> I finished up my session. I said, 'you know something. Three sessions I've come

now. Three sessions you've talked about this [an issue Megan felt was not important]. I've explained to you what is going on in that dynamic. I am comfortable with it ... That's not why I'm coming to you ... I am finished. I won't be back.

Megan's decision to end that counselling relationship was a way of reclaiming her agency. Feeling respected and acknowledged as people contributed to a sense of personal agency in counselling, while feeling disrespected reduced the participants' feeling of power and became construed as hindering. Times when the participant felt genuinely respected were treasured. Counselling that facilitated the ability of the participant to either gain or maintain a sense of agency over the problem was seen as helpful while experiences that led to a decreased sense of agency were experienced as hindering or unhelpful.

Counsellor power

Power held by the counsellor was a distinct thread in the narratives as something each participant was aware of. Diane described the counsellor exerting her power as "a lot of pressure to come in for that session" and goes on to say "I don't think that's reasonable ... to me that's kind of overstepping the bounds a bit". Gail described her response to an earlier counselling experience in which she felt her knowledge was not respected as "you haven't been here – you haven't walked the walk, so don't start". In reflecting on hindering experiences, she linked them to counsellors being superior or expert. "I've never gotten that with ... Max (counsellor), that they were superior because they were ... in the profession ... I have on the outside like working with psychologists". Gail connected this superiority to feeling judged. For Lori, hindering experiences

centered around times she felt guided or pushed. "I just figured that she [counsellor] had full control and she was steering me ... at that time, I felt it wasn't relevant, or that I didn't need to be going there". The counsellor taking "full control" interfered with Lori's ability to fully engage in the session.

In Karma's description of her first counselling session, she stated that the counsellor took her words and "made global predictions about who I am and the way I interact with people based on one or two words that I used. And ... the feedback she was giving me wasn't accurate and it wasn't helpful". This description of a counsellor using her "expert knowledge" to make generalizations left Karma feeling a reduced sense of agency. Her words were taken from her and used in ways that did not fit for her. No participant expressed appreciation of times when they perceived the counsellor's use of power to force a point. Often hindering experiences were times when the participant felt that the counsellor was using their expert status to push their own agenda forward.

Personal agency within the process of counselling

Participants described becoming active agents within the counselling process. At times, this was a response to a felt need to push against the counsellor's power. Other times, being an active agent was the approach to counselling or a signal of readiness to engage in a healing process. Often, effort was put in by participants to minimize the felt power difference and exerting personal agency was a positive step that mended a relationship rupture. Hindering experiences were times when the power difference was felt in a negative manner or the participant was unable to mitigate this felt difference. At these times the relationship deteriorated, often seemingly outside of the counsellor's awareness. While participants described their reactions to these experiences to me, they

did not often describe telling the counsellor about their reactions.

> Megan, who acknowledged a desire to be taught in counselling, notes that whereas what I felt with Mark [counsellor] ... he was still a little higher than me. This is his job, this is his profession. He's more educated than I am. But I felt that I made a good student on fairly good ground together. Not too much difference.

Here, immediately after allowing Mark the power of knowledge, Megan worked to close this gap by positioning herself as a "good student". Gail described giving personal advice to her counsellor and defined counselling as a "give and take situation". She said "he's [the counsellor] leaving our counselling with as much value and knowledge as I am leaving counselling. With all the tools and values and knowledge which he has given me. I have been able to give back to him". In describing his relationship to his friend, Tony stated: "a lot of times he's like "I have just learned so much from you. ... sometimes like I'm able to call him when he's not being honest with himself." Both Tony and Gail emphasized that giving advice to the other person deepened their experience and enabled them to receive more freely.

Lori described a hindering experience where her sense of agency was reduced – the counsellor checking her watch to ensure the session did not continue longer than intended.

> I felt [being in charge of managing the time] was really good because I noticed, ... very subtly or whatever, she [counsellor] would just kind of look at her watch. And I found that very unnerving. I just felt that she wasn't actually listening to me ... I just felt pressured. ... so I found her [later] lack of a watch, and me being in charge of saying 'OK, let's wrap up' was helpful.

Lori found a way to balance her concern about the counsellor having "full control" when she took charge of managing the time in session. Lori felt more comfortable as her agency in the situation was restored and described feeling a positive sense of power.

Diane pushed against giving power to the first counsellor who was trying to pull aspects of her life into counselling that she felt was not related or necessary. Diane said "for me like counselling is obviously a very personal choice and it should be when you're ready to go kind of thing. Not when the psychologist necessarily wants you to come. ... I just stopped seeing her." Part of her refusal to give up her power was the choice to seek a new counsellor. Karma, later on, began to realize the power she allowed the counsellor to have when she accepted the counsellor's opinions about the depth of her issues and the length of time that would be needed for resolution. She stated that cancelling further sessions "felt very good after. It was very empowering ... [because] I trusted myself and trusted that I know myself better than she does". Even so, Karma later stated that the expert status she gave the counsellor would still interfere with her ability to discuss her concerns about the counselling process with the counsellor. She said "I would really, really be uncomfortable saying anything to her now about that".

Counsellor-initiated premature termination was present in a number of places as particularly hindering. While this is partly an artefact of the study, in that three participants were being seen by students who stopped counselling at the end of their training period, these kinds of impositions also happen in the broader context, particularly with third party payment arrangements. Not being in control of when counselling ends removes a sense of personal agency. The story Lori shared about her counselling experience clearly showed the impact this can have.

> I started feeling apprehension back in January about the whole thing. Knowing that it was April coming up, and I really started to focus on the end already. ... I asked her just after the New Year, when exactly, you know, is this done. And she just kind of swerved me around that we didn't focus on it right then ... [the last sessions were less helpful] because I was clouded by the apprehension and the anxiety of the end. ... I felt like I was running down on, I'm a puppy, I'm projecting, running along, riding along and all of a sudden my last session it was like oook (jerks hand) and I was left dangling. (pause) I don't know where to go. I don't know who to talk to. Who would be good. Who wouldn't.

While the counsellor may not be concerned about endings, this story clearly shows how aware clients may be of ending well in advance. Various aspects of the counselling process can strongly influence hindering experiences.

Summary of stories of agency and power

While each participant responded differently to the power held by the counsellor, they all responded at some point in their counselling process in ways that resisted the counsellor's power. Clearly times when participants experienced the counsellor as pushing their own power forward were predominantly experienced as hindering, even when the participant understood that the counsellor may have been motivated by concern. The counsellor gaining power through taking on the role of an expert was also experienced as hindering for the participants. In tandem with this, times when the participants felt that their role was respected and they were permitted to express power or agency in the counselling setting was appreciated as valuable.

The process of counselling also includes what might be considered structural

elements. At times, the very environment and structure can contribute to hindering experiences. Cost and accessibility, as well as arbitrary forced endings, can interfere with feelings of agency. These stories show that finding ways to empower clients is strongly connected to clients' understanding of their counselling as valuable or hindering.

Stories of Relationship – Challenges at the Boundaries

Many stories that valued relationship were shared with me, with hindering experiences often being described when a lack of connection was felt. Research already shows how deeply clients value the importance of the relationship in counselling, and this study is no exception. As part of these stories of relationship, I call attention to stories on the margins of traditional views of the counselling relationship. Clandinin and Connelly (2000) speak of how researchers are often "living on an edge, trying to maintain one's balance" (p. 147) as part of the struggle of expressing the researcher's voice while maintaining the integrity of participants' stories. In a similar way, at times participants struggled with expressing their voice when it differed with dominant, culturally accepted views regarding counselling relationships. These stories would have been easy to pass by, but they are important to explore as they push counsellors to carefully consider common assumptions about counselling relationships.

Valuing the relationship

Consistent across all participants was a desire to interact with a real person, not a removed or distant technician. Tony described one counsellor in the following way:

> there's this guy who helped me a lot [previous counsellor] ... and he'd share a lot of his own life experiences and that pretty much broke down the border of patient-authority. It was really relaxing.

The willingness of the counsellor to be open relates back to the influences of power and agency. Valuing a personal connection to the counsellor is one way to reduce the power differences and to acknowledge that the content of counselling is highly intimate and private. Diane maintained that a "real" counsellor, one who "seemed to care more about, I don't think I was just a number of a client to her kind of thing" was crucial to the process. Lori described a previous mandated counselling experience in which she was "very closed". She stated:

> there is this guy sitting in front of me who I have no idea who the hell he is ... you expect me to know you well enough or like you or anything to be open with you? ... there is something wrong with this picture.

These comments sharply contrast her experience with Chantal [counsellor] in which Lori described an "instant rapport, which was really nice ... we clicked instantaneously ... I moved through a lot of things". Lori suggested that in the first counselling experience a relationship was never formed, while she connected the positive relationship developed in the second counselling with making progress in counselling.

As Lori's negative experience indicates, building a strong relationship is based on trust. A clear description of how trust is connected to relationship and progress in counselling is seen in Tony's comment that

> if you're in counselling and then you're going to tell the person things that you don't feel comfortable talking about and feel stuff that you need to share, but it's hard to share so it's like you don't want to tell it to somebody you can't trust and part of trusting somebody's knowing ... something about them.

Tony noted that the most hindering aspect of his counselling relationship was that the

counsellor "didn't let me get to know her even a little bit. And that made me hesitant to go back". He added that if she had been more willing to be known by him, he would have made a greater effort to attend sessions. Megan stated that "if you've got a standoffish feeling because somebody's not comfortable, you're not going to get the benefit ... if the connection isn't there the trust isn't there". Gail showed agreement with Tony and Megan in her comment:

> how can you counsel me in human feelings if you can't even feel your own. If you can't share your own, then how can I come back to you – because I think that's where you build that bond of relationship or trust.

Gail described feeling comfortable and safe, "a rhythm where ... [in] this room you're free to say exactly how you feel or what you're thinking" a rhythm based in trust. Hindering experiences described show a lack of this rhythm and sense of safety. They are times when the connection of relationship is lacking.

Pushing the boundaries of relationship

When exploring stories of the counselling relationship, many participants made reference to a desire for a more egalitarian relationship. They prized counsellor self-disclosure and made comparisons to friendship. In these areas participants often seemed to struggle to clearly express their thoughts. The result is a feeling that while counselling relationships that are closer to friendships might be valued, there is also some reluctance or discomfort around this idea. Commonly considered part of professionalism, counsellors are schooled in the importance of holding themselves separate from their clients. Excessive self-disclosure is viewed with suspicion and questions around whose needs are being served are raised. This discrepancy between tradition and client

preference is important to consider.

Tony focused most strongly on the value of self-disclosure for increasing trust and thus the effectiveness of counselling. Many times in our conversation Tony described a close friend as being a better counsellor than his counsellor. In relaying details about his friend's life, Tony states

> what helps me out a lot is ... our lives have been so similar in what we've had to go through ... he's an equal to me because I see he still knows how to have fun. ... so I put those two together and then it becomes, well this is a great person to learn from.

Tony was seeking to learn from the person of the counsellor, not from techniques, and needed to know a great deal about his friend to be able to make these comparisons. As described earlier, counsellor self-disclosure was critical in his ability to open up to the counsellor and share his innermost thoughts. Tony described working in session to learn about his counsellor. He said "I did ask her on a few occasions [questions about herself]. She told me exactly what I wanted to know but then didn't expand on it or anything. I was kind of hoping she'd kind of expand on it". Gail discussed the importance of being able to give advice to her counsellor, and in order to do so, she must know something of the counsellor and his/her personal life. Reflected in the interviews as a whole is an appreciation of appropriate self-disclosure, with Tony in particular describing actively striving to know his counsellor in a personal way.

This curiosity around challenging social conventions is present in the subtle comparisons of counselling and friendship that emerged. In describing counselling Lori struggled to express herself:

> I think I understand about that type of relationship – it's not a friendship. ... I found it very difficult because we did mesh so well, if I met ... somewhere else ..., I could see us totally being friends. ... there's a reason why that distance is there and I understand it and I respect it. But, the one or two little tidbits that I did get, you know, so ... [pause].

In a voice tinged with regret, Lori recognized that her counsellor could have been a great friend, if they had met in different circumstances.

> It was very sad ending for me because that's how I felt the last day, not only for myself and for what happened in the room, but my genuine liking for her. And it wasn't just like, 'oh my God, I need my therapist'. There was a loss there for me. Of a very good potential friend.

This regret contributed to her difficulty with termination. Gail mentioned she knew a counsellor could not be a friend and then moved on to suggest the counsellor did need to have some friend-like qualities. "I really enjoy the feeling of safety, the feeling of, um, I wouldn't say friendship but you're just accepted ... as part of the human race". Diane expressed a need for the counsellor to have connecting qualities like those needed in friendships:

> [the counsellor] would put in her own personal stories ... [the counselling is] like talking to friends, right like because you guys are trading stories right. Like it's, just, it makes more of that connection kind of thing. And I think you do have to have a bit of, I don't want to say bond because I mean it's not a friendship right but you do have to have some kind of connection with the psychologist I think for it to work.

Megan explained that "there's different boundaries in [counselling]. Your friends, you go for coffee but there's an even boundary. Coming to the counselling this person's boundaries are a little higher and they're doing a job so to speak. But if you connect with them there's more to it than that". Megan took a more hierarchical position towards her counselling than the other participants, and acknowledged her experiences of the differences between the two kinds of relationships. Karma was the only participant that did not make reference to desiring a closer connection or a more friend-like relationship. She was also the only participant with formal mental health training.

Summary of stories of challenging boundaries in relationship

The key element among the participants in using the word "friend" seems to be reciprocity – giving back to the other person and also hearing about the other person's experiences. Some participants desire this more strongly than others, but most appear to appreciate it when it occurs. Tony clearly described working for equality and building trust by attempting to get to know the counsellor as a person. He also recognized that he needed to have a sense of the counsellor as a reliable and exemplary source of advice before he wished to take that advice. His commitment to counselling increased as the counsellors' level of personal engagement in the process increased. Overall, times when the counsellor clearly demarks a boundary and maintains a stance of distance are seen as most hindering.

Reflections on the Stories of Hindering Experiences

Throughout our interview process participants were reflecting on their experiences in new ways and were often in unfamiliar territory in their search for coherent narratives of counselling. By conveying the narratives of Gail, Megan, Lori,

Tony, Karma, and Diane it is clear that hindering experiences involve many contextual factors. Knowledge of background information was crucial to understanding these types of experiences as what made an experience hindering for one person did not necessarily make it so for another.

Each participant acknowledged his or her own role in the relationship that developed, as many clients do (Lietaer, 1992, Paulson, Everall, & Stuart, 2001) and noted that their contributions were part of both the success experienced in counselling and the ways that made counselling more difficult. In fact, it was easier for most participants to recognize ways they felt they had interfered with the counselling process than to talk about ways the counsellor contributed to hindrances. During the interviews, I needed to ease the anxiety of some participants about sounding overly "negative" regarding their counselling experiences. It was striking how reluctant participants were to clearly describe hindering experiences, and made very clear to me how difficult it would be for clients to address these experiences in the moment with the counsellor involved. As Farber (2003) notes, clients "tend to hide immediately experienced negative reactions from their therapists" (p. 599). Finding ways to encourage clients to speak about their concerns is important. However, perhaps more important is that counsellors find ways to attend to, acknowledge and bring into conversation concerns that the client has not verbally expressed.

Participants unanimously acknowledged that the work of change in counselling is the job of the client. Many engaged in some activity on their own after sessions to further process their experience and promote the change process. The participants in this study portray clients who are motivated, responsive, self-aware, and responsible. This matches

research which emphasizes the client's role in therapeutic change (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999; Rennie, 2001; Wampold, 2001).

Expectations play an important role in counselling as they are a large part of the perspective that is present when counselling begins. Paulson et al.'s (2001) concept map of hindering experiences notes a theme of "uncertain expectations" as hindering counselling. This study showed that not only can not knowing what to expect be hindering, but particular expectations about counselling can also get in the way. Expectations, often strongly shaped by previous experiences, are part of what the client brings to counselling, and as such are important for counsellors to attend to as much as possible. Arnkoff, Glass, & Shapiro (2002) review empirical research conducted in the area of client expectation and preference. They conclude that at present it is difficult to draw conclusions in these areas due to "methodological weaknesses or lack of studies" (p. 351) but link these areas to discussions of the importance of hope in counselling. The participants of this study also made connections to hope in approaching counselling as a "last resort" and having a strong motivation and commitment to the change process.

It is interesting to note in this study that having positive expectations did, at times, interfere with a positive experience of counselling. When the expectation of counselling is not in proportion with what counselling can realistically achieve, a hindering experience seems more likely to occur. Our expectations and attitudes toward an anticipated event strongly shape our experience of that event, and counselling is no exception. The fact that expectations were a prominent component of these participants' hindering experiences lends support to Norcross' (2002) identification of expectations as a "promising element" of the counselling relationship that may contribute to outcome.

Themes of personal agency and attention to the agency of the counsellor resonated throughout the participants' interviews. The participants strongly valued their ability to be active agents in sessions. These ideas match well with the argument developed in Chapter Two that encourages counsellors to help clients actively participate in the therapeutic process by giving the counsellor feedback regarding their experience in counselling. This theme of the client's personal agency is not seen as clearly in Paulson et al.'s (2001) concept map of hindering experiences, and while it can often be implied, appears to be rarely named in research regarding hindering experiences. Rennie's (2001) discussion of clients as self-aware agents is an exception, in which he describes how clients will work to manage the session so they can focus where they feel they need to and avoid places that are difficult for them. He also affirms the value of respecting and acknowledging the agency of clients in the counselling process, and involving them as developers of the process, not just evaluators of it.

One other paper which clearly notes the power relation aspects of hindering experiences is a summary of four papers in which consumers evaluate their mental health treatment (Glass & Arnkoff, 2000). Actual consumers of mental health services describe four broad hindering areas: context of treatment, therapy relationship, issues addressed/interventions and views of mental illness and treatment. In these four areas, descriptions of hindering experiences include times of being powerless, being confronted by arrogant, superior therapists, having little control over issues addressed or ignored, being forced into particular treatment regimes and being stigmatized. All of these kinds of experiences clearly have power imbalances at their root. These consumers strongly confirm what the participants of this study described – times when they were not included

as full members of their treatment are hindering.

The importance of a strong counselling relationship is confirmed in the research literature (Norcross, 2002). The theme of "lack of connection" is at the centre of the concept map of hindering experiences (Paulson et al., 2001). This matches with both the value of the relationship portrayed by the participants, as well as the way in which some relayed striving for a closer connection. While distance from the client is a common approach in counselling, the participants in this study challenged it as a useful one. These ideas raise some interesting questions for counselling, particularly if the counsellor is striving to be responsive (Stiles, Honos-Webb, & Surko, 1998). Part of being responsive is striving to match what the client wishes to experience in the relationship. In this research there is a strong focus on participants' own agency in the counselling process, and finding ways to build connection with the counsellor and ensure the process is helpful for them.

A feminist approach to counselling seems to closely approximate what some participants appeared to be striving for, with a focus on the counsellor and client taking equal and active roles. The feminist counsellor consciously uses techniques like self-disclosure to reduce power imbalances (Jordan, Kaplan, Miller, Stiver, & Surrey, 1991; Corey, 2001). A valuable direction for further research would be to inform these ideas about equality with a practically- based orientation seeking experiences to augment the theoretical frame. Some participants challenged the reserve that is often present in counsellors. This suggests that a reconsideration of the roots of many counsellors' hesitation to engage in self-disclosure would be helpful. Audet and Everall's (2003) discussion of self-disclosure highlights the useful nature of disclosure in many

counselling situations. The participants clearly linked knowing their counsellor with increasing feelings of trust, which makes intuitive sense. Being encouraged to trust a person who is unwilling to engage in a personal dialogue seems an incongruent and possibly dangerous thing to do. While perhaps fitting with an "expert model", that asks the client to self-disclose wholly with blind faith in science, that is not how many clients, particularly those with a strong sense of personal agency, feel. I would argue that this is not a position that clients in counselling should be in. Perhaps the interest of these participants in knowing their counsellor, and experiencing a 'give and take' relationship is a call to rethink the business of therapy.

These narratives of counselling experiences have led me to wonder more deeply about the boundaries we erect in counselling and the reasons behind them. I suspect that there are times when the boundaries that counsellors erect to maintain distance from clients do more to provide comfort and security for the counsellor than serve the best interests of the client. This is not to diminish the difficult and draining nature of counselling work, but to acknowledge that a common approach to managing this – namely maintaining distance – may not serve the best interests of the client. Erecting boundaries and remaining silent and unknown to the client also serves to preserve power differences between the counsellor and client. While I am not advocating wholesale self disclosure to clients, I am suggesting that as counsellors, our reasons for refraining from disclosure need to be as carefully considered as our reasons for engaging in self-disclosure have historically been.

Limitations

This dissertation has emphasized the unique, individual and contextual nature of

knowledge development and acquisition. Each participant had a different experience in counselling, and different ways of understanding their experience. We all have preconceived notions about what to attend to when telling a story (Coles, 1989; Angus & McLeod, 2004). What is left out varies depending on the teller's perceptions of the current goals and audience. It is valuable to recognize how strongly the question asked and the path of inquiry chosen shape a study.

The Research Question

In much research dichotomous distinctions are made between two factors. Research in helpful and hindering experiences is no exception as many studies ask clients to differentiate between the two (Bowman & Fine, 2000; Levy, Glass, Arnkoff, Gershefski, & Elkin, 1996). Often the focus is on the helpful aspects, with brief self-report regarding hindering experiences included (Lietaer & Neinrick; Levy et al., 1996) or suggested (Clarke, Rees & Hardy, 2004). Making categorical distinctions of this nature is familiar in western thought and my research also began in this foundation. Questions like "what was helpful?" and "tell me about the least helpful time?" were asked. This dichotomy was not consciously attended to as a bias initially; it became more apparent later. Using language is a process of choosing, selecting, and interpreting. I was "indoctrinated into certain traditional narratives that set up 'standard expectations' and obligations and that guide our explicit evaluations" (Kerby, 1991, p.13). The helpful/hindering conceptualization is an imposition on people's experiences that may have been somewhat misleading, and certainly framed how I began this research process. The difficulty with placing such a complex experience into one of two categories is shown in some transcripts where participants apologize for not being able to tell me what

they think I want to hear. Framing the work in terms of helpful versus hindering was not a useful way to generate a full narrative, and the more freedom participants had, without being forced to categorize experiences, the more fully they were able to discuss those experiences.

In attending closely to the participants' stories, I began to realize that to better understand hindering experiences in counselling, I had to understand something more about how each person came to counselling. As a result the research questions began to change slightly. Shifting questions, while possibly disconcerting, is a natural occurrence whenever attention is carefully paid to the individual uniqueness of each participant. As Josselson and Lieblich (2003) write, coming to this kind of research with specific hypotheses to test is not possible; rather the research begins in a place of questions and wonders. It is the nature of research that contradictions and confusions arise. Rather than discard this information, it can be understood as indicative of the ongoing exploration.

The Study Design

The study design was intended to minimize the influence of the research process on the counselling process. Participants were asked to engage in personal ongoing reflections on their counselling which would be shared with the researcher during the post-counselling interview so that experiences would be captured while salient and would aid in memory recollection during the interview. In order to refrain from influencing the counselling my involvement with the participants while their counselling was occurring was minimal. However, most participants did not engage in ongoing reflections which meant that their initial reactions to sessions were not available, and access to how a participant's perspective may have shifted over time was lost. The original study design

is valuable. However it was somewhat naïve to think that people would maintain ongoing journals regarding their counselling with little ongoing support. For this design to be effective the researcher needs to be more involved throughout the counselling – this would also allow the participants and the researcher to know each other better and perhaps lead to a greater degree of trust.

Implications for Research

There are many implications for further research that arise from this study. In this section, I will focus on a few key ideas that have emerged through this research process. Overall, it is clear that clients have difficulty giving voice to hindering experiences, not only in the research process, but also in the counselling process. Various researchers and research oriented practitioners are currently working with paper and pencil measures that attempt to increase client involvement in assessment of counselling outcome (Ogles, Lambert & Fields, 2002). The stories shared in this study point to the value of the counsellor being constantly vigilant in finding ways to encourage clients to share their experiences. In terms of research, this is also important. Building safe, comfortable research spaces are necessary to continue this work.

The voices of clients must be pulled forward into the research space to continue to inform our understanding of counselling. Clients' experiences are central to understanding counselling, and they cannot be gained in any other way. Historically, the client perspective has been hidden, and has not been a large part of our knowledge base. This is beginning to change, and studies like this one continue to bring client experiences into awareness such that they can begin to inform our understanding of counselling. The constructivist approach of this study allowed clients to shape the discussion of

counselling process.

Creative ways to continue to encourage participants to share their experiences are needed. The tendency in counselling research to rely on verbal or linguistic (written) means of data collection may serve to limit what is considered. Creating nonverbal representations of experience (paintings, photographs, etc.) would create opportunity for different kinds of knowledge to arise. Clients are the central figures in counselling and respecting their process, experience, and reflections will ultimately change the shape of counselling.

There are many different population variables that could contribute to expanding understanding of clients' experiences of counselling. While there was some variety of age and gender (one male) in this study, there was not a great deal of cultural variation. Encouraging persons of varied ethno-cultural backgrounds to share their experiences of counselling would be very informative for counsellors working in a culturally diverse country like Canada. As well, more involvement from male clients would extend the research.

An interesting finding in this study was how active clients are in shaping the process of counselling. Reflected in their narratives are many comments focused more on process, or how counselling is unfolding, rather than content, or the topic under discussion. This research rebuffs the common belief that counsellors are in charge of the process while clients are in charge of the content. In fact, clients are very involved in and aware of both process and content. Research rooted in supporting the notion of clients as self aware, reflexive agents (Bohart & Tallman, 1996; Duncan & Miller, 2000; Rennie, 2001) needs to continue. Further research focusing more specifically on how clients

contribute to the process of counselling would be helpful. As well, a consideration of how client contributions to the counselling process can be enhanced is warranted. Finding ways to actively involve clients in the process is one area that needs further investigation.

In a similar vein, research attention could be focused on the ways that clients can explicitly contribute to building the relationship in counselling. Research around how clients can become genuine full participants in the relationship, as well as the ethical implications of that, would be valuable. Including counsellors in the study of relationship by investigating dyads adds another layer of information as is reflected in the work of Grafanki and McLeod (1995). The counselling relationship is very complex, and further qualitative research that allows the voices of clients to be heard within it is necessary. The stories of connections or misconnections with counsellors need to continue to be told. As well, an exploration of how the form of the story shapes experience and resulting outcome is important. Connections can likely be made from the counselling relationship to narrative coherence or disunity. There are many aspects to wonder about in regards to the counselling relationship, and soliciting client stories here will likely serve to further challenge current thinking in the area.

Finally, one issue that arose in considering both past research and this study returns again to the nature of clients' reluctance to give voice to hindering experiences. While various studies propose reasons for this, often citing an apparent contradiction with an overall helpful experience (Paulson et al., 2001), it does not appear that clients have been asked about this difficulty in depth. It makes sense to investigate this phenomenon more directly to find out: (1) what clients say about why they refrain from addressing hindering experiences and (2) if clients wish their counsellors to be aware of and/or

address these experiences.

Overall, a continued focus on client experience and how that experience is storied would help to encourage the counselling research community to continue developing a contextual, respectful understanding of the counselling process. Placing clients at the centre of counselling research helps to continue to challenge the "counsellor as expert" model of therapy that is proving to be an ineffective approach (Hubble, Duncan, & Miller, 1999).

Implications for Practice and Training

This research has shown that what clients experience as hindering in counselling is highly individual. By understanding the client's experience of the process of change in counselling more fully, the effectiveness of counselling can be improved. Counsellors can potentially increase their awareness of the impact they have on the client and may adjust their behaviour to be more helpful. Training programs can encourage counsellors to become aware of and comfortable with negative experiences and can work to better equip counsellors to respond effectively to these experiences. This section discusses the findings of the study in regard to both counselling practice and training. Attention has been paid to practice throughout this study, as a way of linking research and practice.

Counsellor Practice

There has been much already written here to give pause for thought to the practitioner. However, it is useful to specifically outline suggestions for those engaged in the practice of counselling. One comment that I heard repeatedly from participants was the value of participating in this study. Participants found that taking time to reflect on their counselling experience served to clarify and consolidate that experience. Rather than

a regurgitation of events, our research conversations became places for making new connections, summarizing their experiences, and placing them within the context of their lives. The value of participating in qualitative research for clients leads me to wonder if there are ways to incorporate this positive result of research into counselling more regularly. Perhaps clients could be informed of this benefit of research and be encouraged to discuss their counselling with someone else. Other options include giving clients a list of general questions that encourage reflection as they leave counselling. The counsellor could also, with permission, send the client a letter or written document of some kind after a period of time has passed (about 1-3 months). This document could include a summary of the counselling, again with questions and comments to encourage personal reflection of the client. Finding ways for the client to reintegrate their counselling experience into their life narrative may be a useful way to encourage the solidification of changes made, as well as help the client to better understand their counselling experience.

Attending to the client's experience in counselling requires a great deal of responsiveness (Stiles et al., 1998) on the part of the counsellor. This can be encouraged in many ways. One way is soliciting client feedback more formally and openly as discussed in Chapter Two. When engaging clients in a collaborative process of information gathering, attention also needs to be given to ethical considerations (Tom & Herbert, 2002). Another way of increasing responsiveness is to engage in reflection on practice as a form of self-development. Reflection over time will show where places of difficulty arise in being responsive, and changes over time can also be charted. Engaging in reflective portfolios (Lyons, 1998) could enable counsellors to learn from their own process, as well as to follow their own progress.

In considering the counselling relationship, this research highlights that counsellors need to be cognizant of power and equality issues in counselling. While generally unspoken, or presenting a verbal acquiescence, clients are aware of power distinctions. Each counsellor needs to consider their own stories of power relationships. Engaging in discussions with other practitioners and reading in the areas of power, collaboration and ethics are useful for stimulating thinking.

Counsellors may wish to consider the idea of authorship in counselling. If indeed counselling is a process whereby "therapists and clients coconstruct stories, create and revise narratives with the hope of finding solutions to personal problems, better coping strategies to meet life's challenges, enhanced growth and personal development, and greater psychological insight" (Lieblich, McAdams, & Josselson, 2004, p.4), then attention needs to be paid to the role of the counsellor. What is the counsellor's role in this co-constructing? Is it as an author, editor, audience or some combination of these? As described in Chapter Four, Granfanki and McLeod (1999) begin a discussion of the role of the counsellor as audience. Counsellors are in positions of power, and we need to be attentive to how we are positioning ourselves in relation to the storying that is occurring in the client's life. There are moral dimensions in unequal relationships that need to be carefully considered (Noddings, 1992).

Taking time to educate clients about the counselling process, what their role in counselling can be, and the counsellor's style of working and openness to feedback may help reduce hindering experiences. Finding out about clients' expectations coming into counselling is also useful (Arnkoff, Glass, & Shapiro, 2002). It is important to keep in mind that many expectations may be unformed or unclear, and can cover a broad range of

areas.

Counsellor Training

That clients experience some aspects of counselling as hindering is important knowledge for counsellors in training. First and foremost counsellors need to be helped to become comfortable with discomfort. Talking about hindering experiences is not easy, and will rarely happen unless the counsellor is comfortable with the discussion. Teaching reflective practices, perhaps through the use of reflective portfolios (Lyons, 1998), would encourage comfort and engagement with hindering experiences and other difficult areas. Wong-Wylie (2003) also highlights the value of incorporating reflection in training and proposes a method for doing so. Students need to be educated about what hindering experiences are, how they arise, and how they can be repaired or healed.

Students of counselling also need to be encouraged to read broadly, and learn from other areas of study. Writings in the areas of education, sociology, anthropology, and philosophy (to name a few) have much to teach about narrative ways of relating to others. Learning to open up thinking and developing views of people that go beyond categorical conceptualizations is vital to encouraging attunement to hindering experiences. Students can consciously strive to open themselves to new thoughts, feelings, and experiences, in the hopes of coming to know other people as they are. If frameworks that allow for ambiguity and apparent contradiction can be developed, a greater awareness of experiences that contain these can develop.

Finding ways to involve client experience in training programs would be an invaluable addition. Most programs already incorporate significant amounts of practical experience in the form of actual client contact. However, clients are no more likely to

provide honest feedback to student clinicians than to practicing counsellors. Incorporating client experience in training can be done in a variety of ways. Mini research projects can be conducted in which ways to solicit client experience are explored. Readings can include writings by clients as well as studies focusing predominantly on understanding client experience. Instructors and supervisors can demonstrate their own comfort with hindering experiences by being candid about these events in their own practice. In debriefing role plays and supervised practice, attention can be given to the relationship development, the client's story of their experience and hindering experiences in general.

Students also need to be trained in outcome assessment. This includes understanding the value of conducting such assessment as an ongoing part of practice, as well as how to include the client as an integral part of that process. A strong focus on the client as expert in both their change process as well as evaluating the progress of their counselling is a necessary perspective for training programs to hold.

Reflexive Comments Regarding My Research Process

In closing this research project, it is important to give voice to my research process as a way of enhancing researcher credibility (McLeod, 2003). Engaging in a research method that does not follow traditional views about what knowledge is, and how best to convey it, has been at times difficult, but has also stretched me in ways that a traditional format may not have. I have been pulled to reflect on how the coherence of my life narrative is revealed in the work I do with clients. I wonder how I can be more present to the narrative shaping of lives that occurs in counselling. My learning process is recursive - it seems I learn and relearn, adding substance and form with each new

encounter with the same "piece of knowledge".

Finding ways to understand each person's experiences led me to varied readings while engaging with the challenge of integrating and expressing my thoughts. Articulating my thoughts helped me notice when I was following a "rule" or limiting my thinking based on conventional ways of working. Over time I notice a shift in my field texts - initially there is a great deal of energy focused on being a 'good' counsellor. Later these questions began to seem less important as I became engrossed in the stories of the clients, wondering how what the client brought to counselling shaped the experience. This research process has encouraged me to become more open to feedback, flexible and responsive. Being in relation with the participants' experiences demanded an acknowledgement of the need for the client to be in a position of power in the counselling relationship. Clients possess much wisdom - repeatedly counselling theory and refined understanding of the counselling process is reflected in their words. This research process led me to strongly value exploration within conversation. Collaboration challenges a quick, assumed understanding of another and allows other possibilities to be voiced.

Prior to beginning this research I cautioned myself to be careful that my personal experience as a counsellor did not cause me to align too closely with the counsellors being discussed. However, in actuality, there were more times when my familiarity with the counselling process led me to be overly critical of the counsellors. In order to balance this, my background training was helpful in giving me some insight into what the counsellor's goals may have been. It was important to remember that many times the participant was sharing more about their process with me than they had with their counsellor.

Another challenge was to allow the stories to unfold without immediately embracing how I might have experienced various situations. The following words by Cottle (2002) describe the conflict I felt:

> In the end, the invitation or the call of the narrative is to hear another's story without immediately responding with our own stories. For in truth, we tend to hear another's story with our own stories, our lenses, as it were, shaping and refining the content and tone of what we are encountering (Lawrence-Lightfoot & Hoffman Davis, 1997) (p. 535).

Rereading the transcripts and reconnecting with participants helped ensure that I was not submerging their stories with my own.

Overall, this experience has shaped my identity and practice as a counsellor. Like the therapists involved in the Sells, Smith & Moon (1996) study reported, my approach to the practice of counselling and my views about the philosophy of counselling have changed in a positive way. Engaging with clients through research rather than counselling has been an enlightening experience regarding the counselling process.

Telling the story of counselling from the client perspective is of value to clients in more ways than improving the quality of therapy. These stories have a strong educational value and can be shared with others who may be considering counselling in the future. They can provide a more accurate, trustworthy picture of counselling than currently exists in the popular media. Clients themselves were able to develop their stories of their counselling experience. They, and anyone who reads their stories, can gain an understanding that hindering experiences are also part of the story, and may be included in one's own story. As Witherell (1991) states,

> the creative use of story and dialogue lends power to educational and therapeutic experiences because of their capacity to expand our horizons of understanding and to provide rich contextual information about human actors, intentions, and experiences (p. 84).

The blend of life and teaching that can be achieved through story telling will allow these experiences to be understood by researchers, counsellors and clients.

Places of silence abound in psychotherapy and finding ways to open up these overlooked or avoided areas need to be developed. Like any profession, psychology has "grand narratives", stories about how things should be, what is allowed as knowledge, what counts as truth. Inevitably in this process, some stories are pushed to the fringes, are disallowed. These stories on the edges are the stories clients know, and it is these stories that need to be heard. Clients must become our teachers, their stories our lessons, and their voices an integral part of the grand narrative of counselling.

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APPENDIX A: STUDY DESCRIPTION FOR COUNSELLORS

Do you sometimes wonder what clients' experience in counselling?

As a counsellor you could play a key role in the collection of my dissertation data. I am interested in finding out about client's experiences in counselling and would like to gather information from clients who have engaged in an actual counselling experience. So... I am hoping you will be able to help!

I am seeking persons who are currently engaged in counselling in and around the city of Edmonton. I would like to work with five clients by following them throughout the counselling process as well as talking with them upon completion of counselling. If you have just started working with a new client then this study is relevant to you. The goal of my study is to further understand client's experiences, and to that end I will be asking a few clients to tell me the story of their experiences. Specifically, I will be seeking a fuller understanding of helpful and particularly hindering experiences. Clients often do not discuss what they find unhelpful about counselling and yet these experiences are very important, particularly as we continually strive to improve practice. I will be meeting with each participant at the outset of counselling to fully explain the study, and then again for interviewing after counselling is completed. It is expected that involvement in this study will enhance rather than interfere with the process of counselling.

This study is being completed in partial fulfillment of requirements for a doctoral degree in educational psychology, specifically counselling, and is being conducted under the supervision of Dr. Barbara Paulson. If you have any questions or are interested in finding out more about this study, please contact myself (Julie Henkelman) in person, by

email at jalgra@ualberta.ca, or by phone at 492-0961 or 438-0386. Questions can also be directed to Dr. Paulson via email at barb.paulson@ualberta.ca

APPENDIX B: STUDY DESCRIPTION FOR PARTICIPANTS

Searching for story: A narrative inquiry into hindering experiences in counselling

The purpose of this research is to find out about client's stories of counselling. People come to counselling for many reasons. However, most of the time people are looking for assistance or information in finding a better way to deal with or understand some kind of problem. The idea is that the counsellor will be of help in some way. Counselling develops in many different ways as the two people begin to get to know each other and find the best way to accomplish the client's goals.

Throughout this process, there are times when the person finds things the counsellor says or does to be very helpful. These are exciting times, and generally very positive. There are also times when the counsellor does not seem particularly helpful or may even seem like they are getting in the way of progress. Or something else about counselling may seem to get in the way of success. At these times it may seem more difficult for the person to reach his/her goals.

As a developing counsellor and a researcher I believe it would be helpful to find out what stories of counselling are told by clients. I am wondering how counselling fits into people's lives, I am wondering about the times when it is helpful and what they are like. I am also particularly interested in hearing about the unhelpful times. The goal of this research is to increase our understanding of how counselling works from the perspective of those people who know best – the clients. This information can be used in training counsellors to improve counselling, and in telling other people what to expect from counselling.

In summary, this research is intended to explore more fully what the experience of

participating in counselling process is like for clients. Throughout counselling, I will be asking you to record your experiences in some way: either by keeping a journal, taking pictures, or another way of your choosing. As well, I will ask to meet with you when you finish counselling. During these meetings, we will spend time talking about what counselling was like for you and how it fits into the rest of your life. Together, we will also explore the helpful and unhelpful times and experiences you may have had in counselling.

I will be recording our conversations, and will use the transcripts to develop a written record of your story at that time. Your level of involvement in this writing process can be negotiated between us at the time so that you are completely satisfied with it. In the end, your story, along with stories of the other participants, will be informed by both my understanding of counselling and knowledge presented in the literature to date. All writing will be shown to you for your further response and input, with the end result being a written co-created expression of your story.

This study is being completed as part of the requirements of a doctoral degree in educational psychology, specifically counselling, and is being supervised by Dr. Barbara Paulson. If you have any further questions or are interested in participating in the study, I can be contacted at 492-0961, or by email via jalgra@ualberta.ca. Questions can also be directed to Dr. Paulson at barb.paulson@ualberta.ca. Thank you very much for considering participating in this study.

Sincerely,

Julie Henkelman

APPENDIX C: CONSENT FORM

Informed Consent for Participant

Research Project: Searching for story: A narrative inquiry into hindering experiences in counselling
Department of Educational Psychology
6-123h Education North
University of Alberta

Principle Researcher: Julie Henkelman (492-0961)
Academic Supervisor: Barbara Paulson (492-5298)

The purpose of this study is to gather information on experiences of clients in counselling. While counselling is generally found to be a helpful experience for people, there are times when the counsellor may say or do things that are unhelpful. It is hoped that by exploring these experiences further, a better understanding of clients' stories of counselling can be developed. Participants will be asked to keep a journal or take photographs throughout counselling and engage in conversations with the researcher after counselling has ended. During these conversations participants will be asked about their experiences of counselling, specifically they will be encouraged to develop their story of counselling. It is expected that these conversations will occur over a number of meetings and may vary in length. Participants may accept or decline to participate and are free to withdraw from the project at any time, without penalty. The information will be used in a thesis project, in which confidentiality and anonymity of all participants will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. As well, access to direct information will be limited to the principal researcher and her supervisory committee.

I have an understanding of:

a) the purpose and nature of the project
b) the expected benefits
c) the tasks involved
d) the inconveniences and risks
e) the identity of those involved in the project
f) who will receive information
g) how the information will be used
h) the right to give or withhold consent for participation
I) the right to withdraw at any time during the process
j) how confidentiality will be maintained

I give my informed consent to participate in the project,

_____ _____

Name of Participant Signature of Participant

_____ _____

Witness/Researcher Date

APPENDIX D: LORI'S STORY - AN ARCHAEOLOGY DIG

Well, it happened like this. I kept stumbling over stuff whenever I went into my backyard. It was like night, you know how when it is dark, even familiar things are strange. So I kept tripping over things, I really didn't know what, I just knew they had been there a long time, and kept getting in my way. I was getting frustrated because it had been happening for so long. I kept trying to find a path through so that I would stop bumping up against stuff and it wasn't working. No matter what I tried, it didn't seem to work. I moved stuff, but then I would trip over other things I hadn't seen. I tried moving to a new place a few times, and things would seem better for a bit, but then it seemed like all those things would reappear, over and over. Man, I was so sick of it. Anyway, I was talking about this a while back with someone I respect and he asked if I had ever considered hiring a professional archaeologist to give me a hand. He even knew of a couple places where people did this sort of thing all the time.

Now, I knew these places existed, and had even visited one when I was much younger - in high school actually. It hadn't been of much help to me then, but I think that was mainly because it wasn't my idea and I didn't want any help at that time. Heck, back then, I didn't even realize I was bruising myself every time I fell. Anyway, so I didn't want to do any exploring, and I didn't trust the guy [guidance counsellor] I was assigned to. So, after that, I had just steered clear of any archaeology types. I figured I could sort through things on my own. I am an intelligent person, and I figured I should be able to handle this sort of stuff. But, after all this time had gone by, I had tried so many different things, and nothing was working. I was really tired of this problem. So, I went to one of the archaeology places [counselling centre]. I was a little unsure, uncertain as to what I

would find, but I figured it was my last resort, and I really wanted my life to be different. I was so tired of trying to navigate through the morass of my backyard.

So what I really want to get to talking about is this archaeological dig that I went on. It turned out to be quite an experience. First off, I met with the archaeologist. She seemed fairly young, and I sort of wondered how much she knew about all this. I knew she was still in training, but everyone assured me that she knew what she was doing. Anyway, I was ready to do this, and decided to give it a try. Boy, was I in for a surprise. The archaeologist, Chantal [counsellor in training], and I really hit it off. We connected right away. She was one of those people who you just know you can be friends with. So that helped. Because like I said, I was a little nervous, a little unsure. But she put me at ease right away. So, I told her what had been going on and the trouble I was having. Even this was a pretty big step for me because I am a very private person about this stuff. In fact, I have gone to great lengths to hide my bruises at times. But like I said, it was a last resort, and I had finally faced reality and admitted that I wasn't able to solve this on my own. But it sure did make it easier that I felt so comfortable with Chantal so quickly.

Anyway, she set to work right away, she showed up with her boots on and her sleeves rolled up. Her solution was to begin to dig up some of the stuff I had been tripping over for so long. Makes sense I guess, considering she is becoming an archaeologist. So we began digging. This turned out to be a long, slow process. Each time we unearthed something, she was really careful about looking it over slowly and carefully cleaning it off - making sure we understood as much as we could about it before setting it aside. Sometimes I would wonder what good all of this was doing. I mean, meanwhile I was still going about my life and still seemed to be tripping and getting bruised. But, we

pressed on. I didn't say much to her about these times when I wondered if what we were doing had any value. Although there was one time near the beginning when she seemed to be pulling on my arm pretty hard, wanting me to dig a ways over to the left and I just didn't want to. I didn't think there was anything too important over there, and certainly not anything that related to what I was interested in looking at in that moment. So at the end of our appointment that time I told her – "hey I felt like you were being pushy, and I know you are the archaeologist here, but it is my backyard, I've lived here for years and I think I know where I want to dig." I didn't really want to be bossed around in my own backyard. Chantal was really good about it. She said, you know for this dig to be successful it needs to be working for you, so next time you notice that something is not quite right, just let me know. Just spit it out, and we will figure it out. That was a relief to hear. That was pretty early on, and from then on I felt fine - it was like she was kind of my deputy or co-pilot or something. I was in charge but sometimes I would be unsure or run stuck and she could take over, or help guide me as I was going along. She would point out possibilities - like maybe this would be a good place to dig today, or about the stuff we dug up - like maybe this jar kind of somehow fits with that vase or something like that. And I could let her know how I felt about what she suggested. But man, I learned so much! It was amazing. Some of the stuff we dug up - I had no idea. And then through talking and thinking about it - I came to so many new realizations, new understandings - it was truly incredible. What I ended up doing was after each dig appointment, I would take some time on my own to try to assimilate what had happened that day, what we had uncovered, what it all meant - just because we were finding so much every time and I needed that extra time. I also started a scrapbook where I put in

some of the things we found, and just other things that came up along the way that seemed important.

This went on for a while, a few months I guess, and then I realized that Chantal would be leaving in a few more months. This really shook me up. I wasn't ready for her to go. We were working together so well, and even though I was learning lots, I still hadn't really changed yet. So I brought it up to her, like I asked her what happens when she has to leave. She said we would talk about it closer to the time. I didn't bring it up again, but the thought stayed with me and you know, as I think about it now, I think it affected me. I mean I wasn't quite as keen to keep on digging with the same intensity. I think maybe I was wondering how this would all get resolved and finished with only a few months and soon enough only weeks left. I didn't quit or anything, I still showed up and everything. Well, except for that one time when I went skiing, but anyway. But for me it just wasn't quite the same. I was worried about the end. But we kept on going, doing what we were doing.

Finally, as we approached the end, it felt like the digging was finished. It seemed like we had gone through every inch of my backyard with a fine tooth comb, and uncovered and looked at everything very carefully. We had quite a collection lined up on my patio. But it was odd, even though everything was out in the open now, and I could see it, I would still bump into and trip over things. My days of getting bruises were not over yet. Chantal even said, okay, now we have it all lined up and out in the open, we need to move on to step two. But then it was over. She left. What is step two? I figured I would just carry on by myself - looking at things, seeing what else I can learn, and maybe, somehow that will be what I need to do to finish this. I just don't want to find

another archaeologist. I liked Chantal so much, and we got along so well, I just think it would be hard to replace that. But still I feel so ... well I feel like a puppy that is running along, feeling the wind, and suddenly the leash is jerked and I am dangling, just left hanging. ... I don't know.

APPENDIX E: TONY'S STORY – A COMPARISON

In working with Tony's transcript, I developed a comparative table that highlights the differences between his experiences with his counsellor, Val, and his friend, Mike. Tony's verbatim words are captured within the tables and my reflections are included between the tables. In this way, the two different experiences are held side by side to enable the reader to easily follow both experiences

VAL	MIKE
By no means did she do a poor job, [she did a] neutral job.	*He's the most effective counsellor that I've ever deal with.*
We didn't have a friendship relationship. [it was] a professional relationship.	*The most helpful is just my relationship with my friend – there wasn't a professional relationship at all.*

Tony indicates that the professional nature of the counselling relationship gets in the way of it being helpful. He is clear that the lack of professional barriers is part of what made his friendship so helpful to him.

She's probably got some problems of her own. So really we're not that different.	*what helps me a lot is, even though he's 50 and I'm 23, our lives have been so similar in what we've had to go through. His problems almost match mine exactly. It's almost like the struggles we have are, the main struggles are exactly the same.*
Even though she didn't tell me, I knew me and her had been through the same system of education our whole lives and had to be at the top of our classes to get into university. I figured, just by looking at the way she dressed and stuff that she probably	*[this is helpful] because he's coming out the other side - he's doing all the right*

did the camping thing in the summer. So I kind of felt connected in that way. *It would have been nice if she had shared her own ... experiences as having gone through exactly what I've gone through - probably faced some of the exact same problems as I am... I did ask her on a few occasions. She told me exactly what I wanted to know but then didn't expand on it or anything. I was kind of hoping she'd kind of expand on it.*	*things in life. Like he has a job and a family but he's an equal to me because I see he still knows how to have fun. I put those two together and then [he] becomes a great person to learn from.* *So the most helpful thing has been the sharing of himself and his experience with me and being real, just caring about me and acting like I'm important and that he wants to be with me.*

It feels like Tony is trying to humanize Val. He boldly states that she must also have some problems in her life, which pulls her closer to him. He also notes various similarities between them – some observable and some assumed. He is trying to build a connection to make it helpful – it appears Tony needs to feel some connection and reciprocity to build a trusting relationship. This makes sense to me as something most people do in their relationships, and makes me wonder at the atypical aspects of counselling. Tony's motivations become very clearly when reading his comments about Mike. Here he quite clearly connects the helpfulness of that relationship to Mike being willing to be known by Tony, to share himself and his own concerns with Tony. Because Mike has shared himself with Tony, Tony has confidence in his role as a helper. Tony declares that he knows Mike is a great person to learn from. Self-disclosure and reciprocity build trusting relationships. In thinking about this conversation I have really begun to respect Tony for being cautious about counselling, for requiring to know a

person before he will fully trust that this person can be helpful to him. As counsellors it is easy to assume that people should trust, and to forget what a personal process trusting another person with your story is.

The most helpful aspect - she didn't judge what I was saying or doing, except for that one time when I brought up the stuff about religion. *It was more like she didn't not understand but she wasn't offended or amazed at the things that I said. It was more neutral.* *It was clear that she didn't have a similar background. She didn't condemn my beliefs at all. Her reaction was "maybe that's a little harsh to think that way."* *It was really good to talk to a female counsellor - she provided a sounding board.* *It was better to get a female perspective on [dating] from where I was coming from at the time than the male perspective ... One of the few times in my life that I've been that honest about how I felt.* *Safe. I definitely felt that. She did a really good job on that. I was able to talk about some things that I thought would be sensitive to her as a female ... That she didn't even blink an eye to.*	*the second thing that was really helpful in all my counselling experiences, is kind of like the opposite of what happened with Val - I've got to know [Mike] really well. So the most helpful thing has been the sharing of himself and his experience with me and being real, just like caring about me and acting like I'm important and that he wants to be with me.* *My friend facilitates that just by sharing his own experiences - even going beyond [the past] and sharing what he's struggling with lately he'd do both kind of at the same time.* *My friend, I really get the feeling like he understands. Especially when there's dead silence on the other end when I'm saying what I'm saying because I know he's thinking, "Well ya, he's talking about me."*

she let me guide the session, ya which I think is good too.	

It is clear that Tony's experience with Val was not entirely unhelpful. The feeling I am left with is that he took what he could get from the relationship – particularly helpful was a femal perspective. It sounds like Tony was exploring various ideas and just seeing another person's reaction to them was helpful to some degree. Again, however, he points out that getting to know his friend really well was more impactful. Here Tony even notes that his friendship goes beyond knowing Mike well enough to trust him and is reciprocal in terms of helping each other with their concerns and struggles. The flavour of being understood is much different in Tony's comments about Mike and Val. Tony's perspective seems to be to take what he can from both relationships. He worked within what Val was willing to offer, occasionally pushing her to see if the relationship could be more connected and then settling for having a female sounding board in a safe setting.

I'm sure if I talked to Val every week my experience would have been even better	*when I talk to my friend I'm always really respectful of him and really eager to learn what he has to say about me because he's just such a great counsellor.*
the person's [motivation], has a big impact because you can't really help somebody that doesn't want to be helped.	*my attitude right before I call him is one of really wanting his help.*
part of it was my lack of effort to go see her. I'd think to myself, "Well	*So I think the next time that I felt like talking to somebody I just called my really good friend.*
	So the attitude of the person getting counselling

maybe there's an easier way to do this," *what a person gets out of something is what they put into it.*	*has a big impact on how much they get out of it.* *The person who is the counsellor can maybe facilitate how much you get out of it*

In describing these relationships, Tony acknowledges his own role in building the relationship, he is aware that his behaviour also influences how the relationship develops, and is clear that he sought out Mike more than he did Val. It seems he matched what was offered to him by Val, and aside from asking her occasional personal questions, didn't work too hard to build that relationship. With Mike, Tony describes being eager to hear Mike's thoughts and actively seeking Mike out at difficult points in his life.

I was hoping for new ideas from a counsellor. but no. *there were some points where I kind of wanted her to be more confrontational if you will. I would have liked it if she asked me more questions.* *I'd feel like maybe if she asked me some more in-depth questions, some more direct questions it would be easier for me to get to the bottom of what was bothering me. ...there's way to be pro-patient but still, still be interrogative* *Not in the same way really. And not to the same*	*A lot of times [Mike] is like, "I have just learned so much from you. That's a great insight." And sometimes I'm able to call him when he's not being honest with himself* *I learned so much from him that he learns a lot from me.* *our relationship seems to break down those invisible [age] barriers that, in our society just keep people distant and scared of each other.* *what goes around really comes*

extent if I did help her in any way. Like maybe I helped her have some realizations about people my age. *I think I tried to [joke around] once. But no, not really. There wasn't much spontaneity which is too bad because I would have liked it.*	*around and I really feel like I've been given so much that I want to give back.*

Here Tony has some suggestions for improvement in his relationship with Val. He clearly stated in our conversation that Val was fairly inactive in their sessions. Both in terms of sharing herself with him, and in seeking to know Mike. He describes wishing she had been more engaged in his process, more willing to challenge him. Whereas with Mike, Tony described to me not being able to avoid himself. Having Mike know him so well means that in talking with Mike about a concern he will not be able to hide from himself. Also, rather than suggestions for improving the relationship, Tony describes again the extreme reciprocity of it. Tony notes that many times Mike learns from him. It is not a one-sided helper/helpee relationship. More accurately it is one of co-learning and co-challenging. I would like to end this section portraying Tony's relationships with both Val and Mike with the following telling remark made in the context of his counselling relationship:

I don't think, no it's not even close to how me and my friend help each other.

When I lay the two experiences beside each other like this, the differences become more apparent. It is not that Val did not do "correct" therapy, but it is clear to me that it was hindering in its neutrality. It is like Tony took what he could given the kind of therapy that was being offered. He did gain from Val a female perspective on his

concerns. However, it appears that her non-directive, non-disclosing style did not fit well with Tony and he did not experience counselling as something of great value or a place where a great deal of change occurred. Tony's experience of his friendship with Mike was very different than this. Here, Tony experienced a relationship built on genuine caring and openness, and here is where Tony reported the most change and learning.